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Title: *It's All Greek To Me* (Complete)

Disclaimer: Mel and Janice are characters from "Xena Warrior Princess" and are property of Renaissance Pictures and MCA, Universal. No infringement is intended. Just having a little fun. All other characters but one are mine.

There are lesbian characters in this story. If that's not your cup of tea, switch to coffee and read something else.

Rating: There are some scenes that maybe should be rated R.

Synopsis: After a year of being in Greece, Janice and Mel return to Mel's home in South Carolina to attend a seasonal family tradition. Not everything goes as planned.

Other information: This story is complete, but it's not the end. I have at least one more Janice and Mel story in me. I just can't promise when I'll get it posted, since this one took over a year to finish.

Author's notes: Mel's mother and aunt are my homage to the Sugarbaker sisters (Designing Women). I've read this story over so many times, looking for mistakes, I am satisfied that I've missed some. Also, I sometimes slip into omniscient voice so I may have missed correcting that. Other than that, I hope you enjoy the story.

I want to thank Mary D (AUSXIP) for her comments, corrections and advice.

Spoilers: The Xena Scrolls. FIN never happened.

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Janice Covington was not a deep sleeper. Years of napping with one eye open on her father's and, eventually, her own digs had programmed her to become alert at the slightest sound. It was a self-defense mechanism from spending a majority of her life in situations where she was the only female on site in areas where indigenous male workers and the occasional hired, properly educated, English speaking men didn't see a woman for months and weren't exactly big on consent.

All that changed a year ago when a lovely, statuesque, built-like-a-brick-shithouse, southern belle named Melinda Pappas walked into her life. Melinda's initial presence was unexpected and unwelcomed but by that evening, Janice and the bespectacled beauty had agreed to become business partners. Janice, an archeologist, would continue to excavate sites where she expected to uncover antediluvian artifacts and Mel, an expert in ancient languages, would translate the written texts, if any. While Janice could read some early European and African idiolect, Melinda's expertise was properly deciphering ancient syntax.

Their shared obsession, however, was the pursuit and discovery of more Xena scrolls, which were parchments containing the chronological documentation of the journey of Xena of Amphipolis, written by her traveling companion, Gabrielle of Potidaea. The bard left chronicles of her and her warrior's escapades all over Greece and locations in different parts of the known world at that time. Finding all these anachronistic scrolls was the obsession of Janice's father, Harry, because he wanted to prove their existence and believed the enigmatically powerful Xena was an ancestor of his and therefore Janice's. Upon Harry's death, the obsession automatically passed on to his headstrong, determined daughter. Janice's quest for the scrolls was her top priority, right behind living down the notoriety of being the daughter of "Harry Covington, grave-robber."

Unfortunately, not only did she inherit his passion to legitimize the scrolls, Janice became heir to his reputation, as well. She was aware that her father had occasionally engaged in shady archeological practices to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads but he never, to her knowledge, actually "robbed a grave." That's why, when Melinda came along, not only did Mel validate that the

pursuit of the scrolls was not just chasing her father's chimera, Mel validated Janice, as well.

Although Janice was a scholar in her own right, with a hard-earned doctorate in the male-dominated field of archeology, Mel's presence vindicated Janice's legitimacy. Melinda Pappas was a proper, highly educated, genteel woman with an esteemed, aristocratic bloodline which said to Janice that what she and Harry had dedicated their lives to, was not a foolish pipe dream, that it was a credible pursuit. It certainly wasn't that Melinda had more credibility than Janice but the Pappas name, in the United States, was recognized and acclaimed. Melinda's recently deceased father, Melvin Pappas, was the Nobel Prize winner in 1924 for anthropology and Dean of the University of South Carolina. Her older brother, Ridley, just barely missed earning the bronze medal for fencing in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Her younger brother, John Melvin, was a Navy pilot who flew Douglas SBD Dauntless bombers and was stationed on the distinguished aircraft carrier, USS Enterprise. Her mother, Julianna Pappas, was Columbia's most revered socialite, known for her lavish soirees at their Longcreek Plantation estate, in the elite suburb of Blythewood.

Well-bred Melinda's unwavering faith in the usually ill-mannered Janice became a balm to Janice's damaged soul. In the year they had been professionally partnered, the two women who could not have been more personally incompatible, somehow made it work. To the point where the street smart, closet lesbian Janice had fallen hopelessly in love with the brilliant but, at times, densely clueless, apparently heterosexual Melinda.

Janice knew she never should have accepted Mel's invitation to return to the States and spend the Fall harvest festivities with Mel's family in Columbia. She knew she was courting trouble, but she couldn't say no. Just being around the cultured, adorably awkward, beautiful southern belle made Janice want to be a better person even if her amorous feelings were unrequited. So...here she was.

Their flight into the New York Municipal Airport had landed early that afternoon and they spent the night in a room at The Carlyle, in the city. It was a large, luxurious room with two double beds and was more extravagant than anything Janice had experienced at this point in her life. The plan was to get settled into the

room, go out to dinner, and spend the rest of the evening sightseeing. After a sumptuous meal, both women decided they were too exhausted for a night on the town and, instead, retired early to get a good night's rest before their final leg of the journey, the train ride to South Carolina in the morning.

Janice discovered that being in Mel's company made her feel safer. She didn't know why but she felt a sense of security with Melinda that she never felt with anyone else, not even Harry. So, Janice easily fell asleep with the obviously beguiling Melinda, softly snoring in another bed a few feet away from her, on her mind and Janice's dreams were anything but chaste.

She was nuzzled from behind, enveloped in a gentle but firm embrace by Melinda's enticingly naked body. Janice felt the erect points of Mel's nipples as they pressed against her back. Melinda's hand pushed strands of Janice's long, blonde hair away from her neck, nibbling and kissing the area which caused goosebumps to instantly erupt all over Janice's skin. Melinda then moved her hand down Janice's shoulder and arm and slid her hand to Janice's breast, cupping it through her threadbare t-shirt.

This dream seemed to be better than the others she'd had. The sensations felt so real. As Mel manipulated Janice's nipple, she also slipped her thigh between Janice's, tucking Janice's rear end tightly against her and started a rocking motion that prompted a flood of wetness to coat Mel's leg. Janice moaned loudly and began to breathe heavily. Mel's fingers left Janice's breast and danced sensuously down Janice's torso and settled into folds of liquid heat.

"Oh, Jesus," Janice gasped and covered the hand causing such a delicious friction. That, combined with Melinda pushing forward and Janice pushing back into her, was helping to raise the temperature of the dream. This wasn't going to take long, Janice thought. Except in her fantasies, she never climaxed; she would awaken just before.

No one was more startled than Janice when she reached an explosive orgasm, stronger than anything she'd had with anyone else or even given herself. Just as Janice was moaning, "Oh, Mellllll..." as the tremors were subsiding, the husky voice behind her said, "Yessssss, Gabrielle...".

Janice's eyes popped open and suddenly she was wide awake. She lay motionless for a moment while she tried to calm her breathing and realized, it was not a dream, the body behind her was real and she had actually had sex with...

Janice scrambled out of bed and turned on the room light. Her expression resembled a deer caught in headlights. "You're...you're not Mel."

"And you're not Gabrielle," a shocked Xena responded.

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Janice paced, trying to ignore an uninhibitedly naked Xena who sat on the side of the bed. Xena looked around at the lavishly decorated room. "What am I doing here?"

Janice stopped and looked at Xena, the archeologist's eyes automatically zeroing in on the warrior's exposed breasts. Janice tried to speak, had a couple false starts and grabbed the white bathrobe draped over one of the two chairs in the room. Regardless that it was Xena's spirit, it was still Mel's body and since Mel wasn't there to give her permission to look, she felt protective of Mel's modesty. She threw the bathrobe at Xena. "Please put that on. You're too distracting, otherwise," Janice told her and swallowed audibly as Xena rose to her full, imposing, gloriously nude height and slid into the plush housecoat, belting it around her waist. "What *are* you doing here? What happened to bring you here?"

"I have no idea. Last thing I remember, I was snuggling up to Gabrielle and then I was with you." Xena chuckled when a sudden blush colored Janice's cheeks and a look of panic returned to Janice's visage. "Come on, it wasn't that bad, was it?"

Janice turned away and took a deep breath, her body still tingling from the powerful climax. "No, it was...it was...that's not the point." She whirled back around, frustrated. "You shouldn't be here. We're not on a dig where the scrolls

are involved, we're not dealing with anything involving ancient gods or goddesses, we're on vacation, thousands of miles away from Greece."

Xena shrugged. "It is odd." She sat down on the bed again. "Where are we?"

"We're in New York." Reacting to Xena's blank stare, Janice added, "In America."

"Where is America? You said thousands of miles from Greece. So...Japa? Chin? Brittonia?"

*Of course she wouldn't know America*, Janice thought. "America is a new-ish country, discovered about fourteen hundred years or so after you. If I had a world map, I'd show -" Janice stopped. "Wait, how are you speaking English?"

"Speaking what? What's English?"

"The language you're answering me in."

"I'm speaking Greek. And so are you."

"I'm not speaking...wait, you're hearing Greek?"

"Yes," Xena said, mildly exasperated.

"Weird. We're both speaking and hearing each other in our native languages." She looked away and absently scratched her chin in thought. "If archeology ever fails me, I'm going to investigate Minkowski's space-time continuum theory," she mumbled, more to herself than Xena. Returning her focus to Mel's ancestor, Janice said, "We have to figure out why you're here and Mel isn't and how to get Mel back."

"Yes, because the sooner I can get back to Gabrielle, the better." Xena's smile was downright salacious.

Janice studied Xena momentarily. "So...you and Gabrielle really were lovers? That's why she's so important to you."

“Lovers?” Xena appeared to mull over the word. “Yes, that and so much more. Gabrielle is my friend, my partner, my lover, my conscience, my moral compass...Gabrielle is my everything. I am nothing without her.”

Janice took note of the reverence in which Xena spoke of Gabrielle. “You’re in love with her,” Janice concluded.

“Deeply.” Xena smiled. “See? Not the ‘useless tagalong’ you continued to think even after I told you she wasn’t the last time I got called here,” she admonished.

Janice looked duly chastised. “The last time you showed up it was to stop Ares from escaping his tomb in Macedonia. We aren’t anywhere near any of your former stomping grounds so what could possibly be the reason you’re here now?”

“If I knew, I’d tell you.”

Janice picked up her fedora from the dresser, plopped it on her head and reached for her pack of cheroots. She then remembered Mel’s aversion to the odor of the small, tapered cigars. “Mind if I smoke?”

Xena tilted her head in question. “Opium? Valarian? Sativa?” she asked.

“What? No.” Janice then remembered that a majority of the plants, leaves and seeds dried and smoked in Xena’s time were hallucinogens or antidepressants. She withdrew a brown, stick-like item from a container and displayed it in her hand. “This is just tobacco. It was discovered and cultivated first in Mesoamerica, about fifteen hundred years after you. It’s harmless.”

“Most of what is smoked is a member of the Nightshade family,” Xena said, wisely. “And that is far from harmless.”

Janice looked at Xena, blandly. “So...mind? Yes or no?”

“It’s your health,” Xena said and shrugged.

Janice lit the cheroot, began to puff, and resumed pacing. She passed a mirror and saw Xena regarding her with an amused expression. Then she saw her own reflection in a flimsy undershirt, panties, hat and chewing on the end of her cigar. She addressed Xena's mirror image. "What? It helps me think."

"The hat or the smoking?"

"Yes."

Xena waved the fumes away. "Mel must really love you to allow that pungency."

Janice took the cigarillo out of her mouth. "First, Mel hates it and second, we don't have that kind of relationship. Mel's my friend, not my lover," she said, almost defensively.

"Ah." Xena's eyes cut to the rumpled sheets, then looked back at Janice. "But, clearly, you wish it was different."

Janice was silent and then said, "Yes. I mean, who wouldn't? But Mel doesn't think of me that way."

"Are you sure?"

"Why? Do you know something Mel doesn't?" Janice asked, skeptically but hopefully.

Xena smiled, slyly. "I can't speak for Mel."

"Which brings us back to our dilemma. You're going to have to speak for Mel if we don't get her back before we get to her family home."

"If she doesn't show up, we'll deal with it until she does. I mean, how hard can it be?"



Janice just blinked at her. Xena playing a demure southern belle from South Carolina and convincing her rigid southern family she was Mel? *No way on Zeus' green earth.*

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The phone in the room rang at 10:00 AM, the exact time Mel had requested a wake-up call. The fact that Xena wasn't already up or didn't vault into action immediately, wondering what that irritating noise was caused Janice to investigate after she hung up.

She approached the other bed cautiously but was encouraged to hear the woman occupying it softly snoring and see a smidgen of drool hanging off her lower lip.

"Mel?" Janice said, quietly. She reached over and gently shook the woman's shoulder to no response. She was relieved because she was pretty sure Xena might have thrown her across the room at being awakened by someone's touch other than Gabrielle's. Janice shook Mel a little harder. "Mel, time to get up." Again, when there was no acknowledgment, Janice raised her voice. "Mel!"

Melinda's eyes opened, startled, and she focused on Janice. "What? My goodness, Janice, you don't have to yell."

Janice grinned at the familiar accent and the demeanor. "Time to get up. We have a train to catch."

Reaching for her glasses, Melinda put them on. "Janice, did you sleep in that hat?"

Janice had fallen asleep only a few hours before, leaning up against the headboard and had forgotten to take her hat off. "It was a strange night."

Mel started to sit up when she suddenly realized she was naked. "Oh, my – Janice, where is my nightgown?"

Janice pulled her morning grooming items out of her travel bag and said, "Oh, yeah, about that..."

Holding the sheet to her upper body, Melinda blushed. “Yes?”

Janice watched her friend’s expression and heard her tone. Did she sound expectant? Janice shook that thought out of her head. “I’m going to use the head so that you can get out of bed to get your robe. I won’t be too long, and you shouldn’t take too long either. We have to be at Penn Station by noon to catch our train and we still have to have to check out and have breakfast.”

“But...” Melinda gestured to her sheet covered nudity. She took a deep breath. “We need to talk about it now, Janice.”

Sighing, Janice sat on the edge of her own bed. “What’s the last thing you remember about last night?”

“We got back from dinner, we talked a bit about how exciting Manhattan is, decided to turn in early because we were tired. I distinctly remember having my nightgown on when I fell asleep.” Mel’s voice rose with every word and she clutched the sheet closer to her.

“Calm down, Melinda, your virtue is still intact,” Janice said, a little annoyed at Mel’s intimation that Janice may have been the culprit regarding Mel’s mysterious nudity. “For some reason, which I have yet to figure out, Xena showed up last night.”

“Xena? Oh, my.” Mel silently contemplated that news. Then she focused on Janice. “And the first thing she did was take off my nightgown?”

Janice looked away to hide the blush. No way would she tell Mel one of the first things Xena did. “I guess she wasn’t used to sleeping with clothes on.”

Mel pushed her glasses up on her nose. “Why did she show up? What did she want?”

“I don’t know, Mel. Neither of us could figure that out. But she’s gone now so, let me get ready and then you can have the lavatory all to yourself.” Janice stood up and moved to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

She could still hear Melinda when Melinda exclaimed, “Xena. Oh, my.”

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Most trains out of town left from Grand Central Station but the noon train to Columbia departed from Pennsylvania Station, which was located underneath Madison Square Garden. The journey would take a little more than 18 hours, with all the stops along the way, so Mel spent the extra money to reserve a berth in the sleeper car for the trip down to South Carolina and the trip back to New York. Whether or not the trip involved any sleeping, the accommodations were much more comfortable than staying in a regular seat for the long ride.

The train started moving as Janice and Mel settled into their compartment. Mel, dressed in pearls, a conservative, navy blue skirt with matching shoes and top (cleavage covered, of course), primly seated herself. She looked out the window at the passing scenery.

Janice was dressed in neatly pressed, cinnamon-shaded, gabardine slacks and an apricot-colored, button-down blouse. To Janice the pants were brown, and the shirt was orange-yellow but Mel decided which outfit Janice should wear that would be suitable for an introduction and, with Mel, colors had various, fancy names. She wanted to make a good first impression with Mel’s family but not enough where she agreed to wear a dress. Gone – at least for now – were the khaki work clothes, the boots, the leather jacket, and her fedora. They were packed and would make their southern debut at some point but not today.

“You okay, Mel?”

“Yes. Not really. I am a bit nervous.”

“Because of bringing me home?”

Mel turned away from the window and shot Janice an annoyed look. “No, Janice, I’ve told you – several times now – that I am proud to introduce you to my family.” She pushed her glasses up. “I’m just concerned they may not be obliging to you.”

“In what way?” Janice asked, curiously.

“Well...it’s nothing personally to do with you, Janice, but I think they blame you for keeping me away from them for a year. It’s frustrating that they still don’t believe, even with my education, that I have a mind of my own and can make proper decisions for myself.”

“That’s ridiculous. They’ve known you since birth and think that? I’ve known you for all of one year and I know that isn’t true at all.”

“Yes, but you had no presumptions of me because I showed up in your life unexpectedly. You knew nothing about me and never treated me like a fragile southern flower. You just trusted I’d pull my own weight on the sites and do whatever you needed me to do.”

“And you did.”

“My family, I do love them so, but they don’t think I’m cut out for anything but being a debutante and marrying an appropriate husband and having a gaggle of children.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Mel. If they really felt that way, why would they allow you to go to college?”

“My mama was adamant that we all go to the university because my daddy was dean, and we could get a college education for free.”

“Why was that a determining factor? It’s not like your family couldn’t afford tuition.”

“Mama used the combined tuition money and donated it back to the school as long as they renamed the Department of Archeological Studies building after my daddy.”

Janice nodded. “Do you think if tuition hadn’t been free, you would have been pushed more to marry and start a family?”

Mel shrugged. “I don’t know. My mama did seem to be quite determined that all three of us would get at least a bachelor’s degree. And I was the only one of the three of us to follow in my daddy’s footsteps with translating. The boys didn’t seem interested. But the talk always around me began with, ‘Well, when you have children...’”

Janice sat opposite her, realizing they’d never discussed this topic before. “Do you want that, Mel? To get married and have kids?”

“Maybe someday. I don’t know. I do know I’m not ready for any of that now. I am living the life I want to live, and I don’t want to give it up.”

“Nor should you have to,” Janice concurred.

“Just be prepared for me to get the full spinster treatment from everybody. I am almost 26, Janice. In some circles, I’m already an old maid.”

“You are far from an old maid,” Janice said, shaking her head and chuckling.

“Thank you, Janice. But my Aunt Suzanna will be relentless and don’t be shocked if she tries to set you up for marriage, as well.”

“I don’t believe she’ll have much success there but thanks for the head’s up,” Janice said, smiling warmly at Mel. She stood up. “Since you do not like my cigar smoke, I’m going to find the lounge car and have a few puffs. Did you want to come or are you okay here?”

“I think I’ll sit here and relax. If I get bored with the scenery, I brought some New York Times crossword puzzles with me to work on.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a bit.”

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While Janice sat in a half-moon-shaped booth by herself, enjoying her cigar, sipping a cup of hot coffee, she replayed the past 24 hours in her mind. She relaxed into the distended, red vinyl, banquet-style seat and thought of last night. After her thorough daydreaming of the erotic activities, she concentrated on why Xena would show up. It made no sense. There had to be a reason but none she was aware of that were obvious.

Her mind then went back to the sex. She took a deep breath and blew it out. She had a hard time getting passed the knowledge that she’d had been intimate with Xena, Warrior Princess’ spirit in Mel’s body.

“Must be a really good thought,” a male voice said, interrupting her blissful recollection.

Janice snapped out of her reverie and looked at the handsome man who had spoken to her. “Why do you say that?”

“Your ears are an adorable shade of pink.” The man smiled.

Janice laughed hollowly, embarrassed at being caught. One hand automatically went to cover one of her ears, only exposed because Mel had braided her hair that morning. “There’s nothing about me that’s adorable, just so you know.” She took a long drag on her cheroot and blew the smoke upward, into the man’s face. Janice then held the cigar between her teeth and spoke around it. “Something I can help you with?”

The man sat down, uninvited. “Nope. Just trying to pass the time. Where are you headed?”

“I don’t give out that information to total strangers,” Janice told him, her tone still neutral.

“Well, then let me introduce myself. My name is Chet, I’m from Little Italy in New York, my family owns three successful businesses in that section of the city and I’m on my way south to meet a friend.”

Janice studied him with a mixture of annoyance and amusement. “I don’t recall asking.”

“An introduction doesn’t make us strangers anymore,” he said, grinning, an expression that made him seem boyish.

“Little Italy, huh? Isn’t that the Italian mob section of New York?” she asked pointedly.

“And what would you know about the Italian mob, young lady?” His tone bordered on patronizing, even with that charming little grin intended to take the edge off.

Janice bristled against his condescension but noticed he didn’t deny her question. “That’s Doctor Young Lady to you,” Janice said and went back to ignoring him.

“Doctor?” Chet said with surprise. “I’m impressed. Please pardon my faux pas.”

“Your *faux pas*? An Italian speaking French with a New York accent. Interesting,” she said, refusing to pay any more attention to him. When he didn’t leave, she looked up at him again. “So...again...can I help you?” she asked, wondering why good-looking men always seemed so assured of their welcome with women regardless of whether or not they were invited into the woman’s space.

Chet studied her briefly, then said, “I noticed you were the only other person in here smoking, although I have to say, I’m surprised that it’s a cigar but I thought, since it was, I’d ask if you wanted to try one of my imported cigars from my family’s tobacco farm in the excellent fields of the Lazio region of Italy. I’m trying to give it a good reputation.”

“Why offer it to me? I’m not anyone who could influence the sales of your product.”

Chet shrugged. “Word of mouth. You recommend it to someone; they recommend it to others and so on and so forth.”

As much as Janice wanted to send this gentleman on his way, there was something about him that was engaging. Janice had an innate sense of men who were threatening. She’d encountered enough of them. Although, she remained on guard, Chet really didn’t seem foreboding. She decided there was no harm in accepting his offer. “Sure, I’ll give it a try.”

Chet extracted a cigar, wrapped in cellophane, and handed it to Janice. “Great. Can I also buy you a drink?”

Janice sniffed the cigar in its wrapping, noticing it’s unpleasant fragrance, an odor a bit harsher than she was used to.

Chet noticed her expression and smiled. “The smell can be a little off-putting but once it’s lit and you take those first couple of puffs, it’s like nothing you’ve ever experienced before.”

“We’ll see,” Janice said. She placed the cigar into the inside pocket of her lightweight, cottonwool, Moto jacket. “It’s 10:30 in the morning,” Janice countered, in response to his question. Not that drinking alcohol that early ever bothered her before but never with someone she’d just met. Again, she decided, ‘why not?’. She could use a shot of bourbon to stop her jitters about meeting Mel’s family. She would not get drunk, but a little alcohol couldn’t hurt. She focused back on Chet. “Sure. Bourbon, neat, if they have it.”

Chet stood up and winked at her. “Be right back.”

Janice guessed Chet to be a little over six feet tall, thin but sturdy. He had short, black hair, brown eyes with flecks of green, a bright, easy smile and a tanned complexion. She surmised, the way his suit fit, it was custom made and he appeared to be professionally groomed. He had an air of superiority and wealth



and a niggling familiarity that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Then she remembered he reminded her of one of her professors at Dartmouth; The female students swooned over him, and the male students called him Romeo. She ran into him twice off campus, once in Hanover and once at Lake Sunapee and both times he flirted shamelessly with her. By then she was cemented in her desire for women but if she had played for the other team, she would have been drawn to him.

She wondered if he was the type of guy Mel would be drawn to. He was certainly attractive and polished enough.

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Before Janice knew it, three hours had gone by, and four tumblers of bourbon had been consumed. It was a good thing her tolerance to alcohol was so high. She barely even felt tipsy. As she bid goodbye to Chet, she stayed at the booth, finishing up her last glass.

She felt Mel's presence before she heard her. "I've been looking for you."

"I'm so sorry, Mel. I got talking to this guy and lost track of time. But I did tell you I was coming here."

"Who was that man who just left?"

Janice suddenly noticed the deeper, huskier tone of Mel's voice. She turned to look at Mel for the first time since she'd slid in beside her. The look was hard, suspicious. And Mel wasn't wearing her glasses. *Shit.* "Xena?"

"Yes. Who was that man?" she repeated.

"He was just some guy. Said his name was Chet. Gave me one of what are supposed to be really good cigars. Not my type but he was obnoxiously charming." She turned her body toward Xena. "Why are you here again? What is going on?"

“I don’t know. I was about to brush Argo and suddenly I’m here on whatever this moving contraption is, dressed in these really restrictive clothes. Something keeps propelling me back here. The last time it was obviously to fight Ares. This time, I haven’t a clue.” Her eyes were still glued to where Chet had exited. “That man, Chet, you said? I didn’t see his face but there was something familiar about his retreating form.”

“Did you study Comparative Perspectives at Dartmouth seven years ago?”

Xena tilted her head and briefly studied Janice curiously. “Are you speaking to me in code?”

Janice breathed out a snort. “Obviously not. Could it be Ares in another body?”

“No, I don’t get that Ares vibe from him. Besides, didn’t you collapse the temple and trap Ares?”

“Yeah but he’s a god, so who knows what he’s capable of.”

“I do,” Xena said. “Still...I don’t feel Ares.”

Janice slid to the other side of the booth and stood up. “Let’s go back to our compartment,” she suggested. “We need to figure this out before we get to Mel’s house.”

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Janice shut the private room door after Xena entered. “So – “

“What is this...thing...we are in?” Xena asked as she looked out the window at the passing foliage.

“It’s called a train. It’s a bunch of cars -”

“Cars? What’s cars?”

*Oh, boy.* “Cars are vehicles, um, in this instance, they’re, uh, okay...” Janice took a deep breath and released it. “What we’re standing in right now is a train car. When you came to get me in the lounge car, you had to walk over the hook apparatus that keeps all the cars together.”

“I had to walk over three of them.”

“Right. A train is many cars, connected through devices like that, moving on a prebuilt track, being pulled by a locomotive – an engine car that runs on steam.” At Xena’s skeptical expression, Janice said, “It has to do with coal, steam, pressure, pistons...” Janice sighed. “Think of it as caravan wagons being fastened to each other and the caravan leader is in the first wagon with several powerful horses pulling that wagon, at the same time, pulling all the wagons behind it. It’s like that except instead of horses pulling several cars like the ones we’re in, it’s propelled by...” This was where Janice ran out of metaphors to describe it. “...magic.”

“Magic?” Xena seemed even more dubious.

“Sure, why not?” Janice answered, watching Xena fidget with the long skirt Mel had on.

“How do you manage wearing these clothes?” Xena asked, irritated.

When Janice saw Xena’s hands, moving toward the seams, Janice quickly spoke up. “No! Xena, please. Don’t rip another one of Mel’s skirts. I’m *still* hearing about the last time.”

Xena’s hands stilled. “Okay but if I have to fight, these seams will cease to exist.”

“If you have to fight again, hopefully we all won’t cease to exist,” Janice mumbled. Xena sat and Janice paced. She stuck one of her half-smoked cigars into her mouth. “It’s not that I don’t feel honored to be in your company, but we’ve got to get Mel back before we get to Columbia.”

“Why? I mean, what’s wrong with me waiting it out until I find the reason I’m here?”

“We’re going to stay with Mel’s family. Mel’s mother, Mel’s aunt and her brothers, people Mel grew up with. You don’t think they’ll notice something’s amiss?” Janice asked.

“Perhaps a little bit,” Xena said.

“A *little* bit?” Janice repeated, incredulously. She had faced all kinds of threats by humans, animals and deadly objects and dealt with them as necessary but meeting Melinda’s family with an imposter who knew less about southern culture than Janice did? That thought terrified her.

“Tell them I hit my head.”

“You hit your head,” Janice repeated, then stopped moving. “And that will convince them that dainty, awkward, regionally accented, prim and proper Mel, is you? There is not a dainty or awkward bone in your body. You’re imposing. The only time Mel has ever been imposing was when you took over her body.” She continued her pacing. “No, we *have* to get Mel back. I mean, what happens if they can’t hear you speaking English, like I can? What happens if -” She stopped in front of Xena, who appeared to be slumped, asleep on the seat. Janice reached down and started shaking her shoulder. “Xena? Xena, wake up. Jesus H. Christ, now what? Xena?”

Just then, blue eyes opened, blinked a few times, and focused unsteadily on Janice. “Janice? What’s going on?”

“Mel!” Janice screamed, never happier to hear a southern drawl in her life. She removed the cigar and gave Mel a rib-crushing hug. “Thank you. Promise you won’t go away again. That’s an order,” Janice said and squeezed her once more before letting her go.

“If that’s the reception I’m going to get every time, I’m not promising anything. Of course, I can’t promise anything anyway but it sure is nice to be appreciated.” She smiled and sat up. “At least this time I have clothes on.”

Janice decided wisely not to mention Xena was about to destroy another skirt of hers. She sat down opposite Mel. "What happens when Xena takes over? What do you experience?"

"You're not going to smoke that in here, are you?" Mel asked, in a tone that made clear it wasn't a question.

Janice had forgotten she had been holding it. "No, I just need it to concentrate." She stuck the end of the unlit stogie in her mouth.

Mel lifted her hand to push her glasses up but there was nothing there. "Janice, where are my glasses?"

"You can't answer without your glasses?" Janice practically yelled. Then she scrubbed her face with her hands, calming down. She caught a glimpse of Mel's hurt look. She reached for Mel's glasses on the table, handed them to her and said, "I'm sorry, Mel. I'm all discombobulated. Neither Xena nor I can figure out why this is happening. Xena's ruled out anything to do with Ares, she said whatever is going on, this doesn't have Ares' energy. But she's showing up without warning and I'm *really* concerned she's going to show up at your family event."

"Oh, my, that would be a little bit problematic."

"*A little bit?* What is it with you two and the damn understatement?"

"I have no idea what that means, Janice. I don't know what Xena says or does while she's inhabiting my body. It's like I'm in a dreamless sleep."

"You mean, like unconscious?"

"No, I mean a dreamless sleep. If I meant unconscious, I would have said unconscious," Mel explained, patiently. "And you don't need to curse."

"Actually, I do, Mel, I fucking do need to curse because if Xena shows up once we get to South Carolina, guess who has to explain to your family it's really not you?"

“Just tell them I hit my head.”

Janice’s left eye twitched.

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Janice woke up, blinked the sleep out of her eyes and looked at her watch. Almost 4:30. Two more hours until they pulled into Columbia’s Seaboard Air Line station.

She’d had concerns about both she and Mel using the same berth – not because she feared anything sexual, especially not from Mel and Janice was pretty sure Xena would check who she was intimately caressing next time before getting frisky. But Janice had concerns about her own subconscious actions while she slumbered. Whenever Janice was in bed with anyone, and she allowed that woman to spend the night or if Janice didn’t get up and leave right after sex, she tended to pull the person closer, locking her into a possessive embrace while she slept.

Janice and Mel had never spent a night in the same bed. They shared a tent with separate cots, they shared hotel rooms with two beds, but never the circumstances they were in now. Janice needn’t have worried as she barely slept at all, even though she was exhausted.

When, still asleep, Mel rolled over tightly into Janice’s side and placed her hand over Janice’s left breast, Janice knew Xena had returned. “Sonofabitch!” Janice bellowed, frustrated, which woke Xena up.

Xena’s eyes shot open, and she quickly assessed the situation. She was also frustrated. “Again?”

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“This is a nightmare!” Janice said, pacing the small room. “Any other time I would be thrilled about you being here because of the historic information I could glean from you but in this set of circumstances, I need Mel. I don’t care how much you two look alike, you can never pass as Mel. Jesus H. Christ, this is a disaster.”

“What is a Jesus H. Christ? That’s the second time you’ve said that.”

Janice looked at her, eyes wide, then she pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead as though attempting to ward off a headache. “Oh, boy.” She sat down on the bed. “Jesus Christ is a person, a god, really. He’s...” Janice tried to think of something she could compare Jesus to that Xena would understand. “Jesus is the son of the one God mostly everybody believes in now.” Then something clicked. “Kind of like Eli or if Eli had a son. Mel is very devoted to this guy, Jesus. There are churches or what you used to know as temples of worship specifically to honor Jesus and the one God. But there are several denominations of this religion, and they all fight over which religion loves Jesus the most and is the one of truth faith. Mel is of the Baptist denomination and -”

“What’s a Baptist?” Xena asked.

“Ah,” Janice said, “That is a question I can answer from an archeological standpoint. During the Minoan era in Greece, western Crete, just above the bay of Souda is the city of Aptaera.”

“Yes, Aptaera was named after Artemis and it’s a sacred place.”

“Right, and on the day of the summer solstice, which is the longest day of the year, and supposed to hold mystical importance, a Greek couple decided to have a naming ceremony for their newborn child.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the ceremony. The parents light a fire on the altar, circle the altar three times with the child, calling out the name they chose for it. They put some oils on their hands from the lamps lit for the ceremony, and during the purification ritual, they trace the baby’s head and body with the oils.”

“That is baptism, which is an ancestor of baptizo, which means ‘to wash.’ Well,” she hesitated, correcting herself, “it predates John the Baptist but not the Jewish culture spoken of in Leviticus.” She looked over at Xena, who stared at Janice politely but had clearly lost interest. “And that means nothing to you.” She drew a deep breath. “Anyway, baptisms evolved from something like that to being

completely submerged in water to a sprinkling of holy water on the head, where different faiths and sections branched off from those religions, adapted the ceremony to fit their doctrine.”

“What is holy water?”

“It’s water that has been blessed by a priest or the clergy.”

“Is Mel a priestess? Does she baptize people?”

“No. That’s the job of the preacher, who runs the church. And Baptists preachers don’t just sprinkle water on your head, your whole body gets dunked into the drink.” Janice was about to add that John the Baptist submerged Jesus fully during that ritual but if Xena didn’t know about Jesus, John the Baptist, or the Old Testament, it would mean nothing to her.

Xena paused thoughtfully and then said, “Just to give you a name?”

Janice chuckled. “No, that part has changed. Now you get baptized to acknowledge your identification with and acceptance of Christ dying for your sins, and your living union with him.”

“Sounds restrictive and controlling,” Xena commented.

“Well, it’s religion, so...” Janice remembered something she thought Xena should be aware of. “By the way, you’re going to see a lot of crosses on tops of churches, in jewelry and in other things, like wall decorations, so don’t get concerned.”

“Why? Why would anyone revere crucifixion?” Xena shuddered at the memory.

“It has to do with Jesus. Jesus was crucified as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would anyone worship a symbol of someone’s torturous method of death?”



“It wasn’t a thing until about six years after Christ died. Christians, the followers of Christ, started wearing the cross as a symbol of their devotion.” Janice saw from Xena’s expression that she was still confused. *Join the club*, Janice wanted to say. “It’s complicated and I’m really not the person who should be explaining it to you because my view of organized religion is not neutral.”

“Then how do I learn about Mel’s religion?”

“If you stick around long enough to make it to Mel’s house, I’m sure there will be a Bible or two hanging around, maybe even in Latin. I’d suggest starting with the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.”

“So, what does the ‘H’ stand for?”

It was a minute before Janice realized Xena meant the H in Jesus H Christ.

“Herman.”

“Herman,” Xena repeated, as though she was committing it to memory.

“No, not really. There are different explanations but since it is only used when people are frustrated or surprised, I don’t think it’s an actual biblical term. Also, don’t say that in front of Mel’s family. It’s considered blasphemous to take Jesus’ name in vain which Baptists will not tolerate.”

“Then why do you say it?”

“Because I’m not Baptist. Or any religion. And I curse. A lot. Hopefully, I’ll be on my best behavior while I’m there.” Janice took out what was once her father’s pocket watch and checked the time. “Damn it. Ninety minutes until we pull into Columbia.” Janice got an idea and started to swing the chain back and forth “Maybe if you fall back to sleep, you’ll wake up as Mel.” Xena’s eyes began following the watch. “You are getting sleepy,” Janice said in what she considered her best hypnotic voice.

“No, I’m not,” Xena responded, alert, and looked up at Janice.

“Goddammit,” Janice swore. She then looked at Xena. “Don’t say that, either.”

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An hour into trying to enlighten Xena about southern culture, which Janice knew nothing about, Xena’s eyes had glassed over. “Just let me wing it,” Xena said, finally, as Janice tried to put Xena’s hair into an acceptable style that wouldn’t embarrass Mel.

“How can you possibly wing it when you are entering a lifestyle you have never seen, much less experienced, before?”

“Come on, how hard can it be? Fitting in with Mel’s family sounds like my experience as Diana, who was a princess -”

“I read that scroll.” Janice stopped and considered what Xena just said. “Yeah, it would help if you could pretend you were Diana being Mel.” She finished Xena’s hair, and they both assessed her work.

“What’s this hairstyle called?” Xena asked.

Janice held out a pillbox hat that matched Mel’s suit and said, “It’s called the ‘you need to wear your hat all the time’ hairdo.

“I hate hats.” Xena mumbled and plunked the round, felt-made, item on her head.

“I hate prissy hats like that. You’d look good in a fedora,” Janice said.

“Then let me wear your fedora,” Xena suggested.

Janice chuckled. “Mel’s mother would have a hemorrhage right there in the train station seeing you in your impeccable suit, perfect make-up and wearing my old, dusty, brown, leather fedora. Now let’s go over some basic rules again.”

Xena drew in a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “Good posture.”

“No, perfect posture,” Janice corrected. “Not that you need to worry about that.”

“Perfect posture,” Xena repeated. “Always say please and thank you and always be polite.”

“That might be a little difficult for you so keep remembering you’re not Xena, you’re Princess Melinda.” Janice folded her arms. “Go on.”

“Good manners, respect my elders. Wear red lipstick, dresses, pearls, and heels if I can stand in them.”

“Yes. Heels are tricky. I know Mel can walk in them, but she mostly wears pumps and flats. Probably because, in bare feet, she already towers over mostly everyone else. Also, according to Mel, her Aunt Suzanna is always trying to match her up for marriage and most suitors don’t like women taller than they are.”

“Oh, a matchmaker. That’ll be fun,” Xena said with no humor in her voice. “Also, avoid drinking to excess.”

“Yeah, poor you. You’ll probably need to get drunk. I’m going to have to drink to excess to keep my sanity. Oh, and if you do drink alcohol, it has to be brown liquor.”

Xena made a face. “Brown liquor? What’s liquor?”

*Please come back, Mel,* Janice thought, trying to tamp down her panic. “Liquor is a type of drink that’s stronger than ale or mead. Like kykeon.”

“Kykeon? Drinking that makes you see things,” Xena said.

“And so will whiskey or bourbon if you drink enough of it,” Janice said.

“What, exactly, makes it brown?”

“Extracting compounds and pigments from the oak cask it matures in, I believe.”

“Why?”

“Why do I believe what makes it brown?” Janice asked confused.

“No, why only brown liquor?”

“I have no idea. What else?”

“No cursing.”

“That’s a big one. Mel wouldn’t say ‘shit’ if her mouth was full of it.”

“Why would Mel’s mouth be full of shit?” Xena asked in a disgusted tone of voice.

“No, it wouldn’t. It’s...it’s a saying.” Seeing the look on Xena’s face change to puzzled, Janice, exasperated, said, “Come on, we’re running out of time. What else?”

“Good table manners. Always call your parents ‘mama,’ not mom, not mother, and fathers are always called ‘daddy’ no matter how old you get.” Xena looked up at Janice. “You don’t have any of these traits. Why don’t you have to follow any of these rules?”

“Because I wasn’t born and bred as an authentic southern belle.”

“Why can’t we just tell them I hit my head?”

“That won’t solve anything. It just won’t be believable. We’re not going to say that,” Janice stated as her eye began to twitch.

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“She hit her head,” was the first sentence Janice uttered when she deboarded the train and encountered Mel’s Aunt Suzanna.

Thankfully, Mel had frequently shown Janice photographs of her family which made it easier to recognize Mel’s mother’s youngest sibling. Suzanna, who at approximately 50 years of age, was a stunning woman, a little taller than Janice, with sparkling blue eyes a little darker than Mel’s. She had black hair, teased into a bouffant hairstyle, a flawless, creamy complexion, cherry-red lips and a perfect, even smile, just like Mel’s. Janice had been a little surprised, though, when Suzanna recognized her. Suzanna’s face lit up and she waved at Janice, pointing to her, and pulling the sleeve of the man with her. Then it seemed to register what Janice had said.

“She did what?” Suzanna asked Janice as she got closer.

With dread, Janice turned just in time to see Xena making her way down the few stairs that led to the platform. Xena was reaching in front of her, seemingly grabbing for something that wasn’t there. Her stride was halted by her feet raising unnaturally high with each step down she took. She missed a stair and Janice was there to break her fall. She squinted then opened her eyes wide enough to imitate an owl. Janice remembered how she felt when she once put on her cousin’s glasses, how distorted everything was & how it seemed like she was always walking uphill, even if she was walking downhill or on level land. She did not envy the headache Xena would most likely have once she retired Mel’s glasses for the night. Xena looked right at Suzanna and didn’t seem to see her. *Jesus H. Christ, this is already a disaster.*

“Why, Melinda Pappas, what is going on? Are you ill?” Suzanna asked alarmed at ‘Mel’s’ exaggerated movements.

While Xena tried to focus on the direction of the voice, Janice repeated, “You’ll have to forgive Mel, like I said she fell and hit her head on the train.”

“Oh, my Lord, Melinda, are you okay?” Suzanna asked, sincerely concerned.

Xena was still trying to focus. To Janice, Xena's answer came out "I'm fine, under the circumstances" but to Suzanna, it came out as, "Είμαι καλά, κάτω από τις περιστάσεις."

Suzanna and the man with her exchanged glances, then both looked at Janice. "Hitting her head made her speak another language and made her voice deeper?" Suzanna asked.

Janice closed her eyes in patient frustration. Could this nightmare get any worse? "Um...it's weird, she goes in and out of English and Greek."

"She's not even speaking it with her lovely southern drawl," Suzanna said, looking at Xena, skeptically. "Should we take her to the hospital?"

"No, there was a doctor on the train who looked her over and he said it was a mild concussion and -"

"A concussion?" Suzanna turned to Xena. "Oh, my stars and garters, darlin', do y'all need to see Dr. Applekamp? We could have him meet us at the hospital."

Xena looked at Mel's aunt who, to her, was speaking gibberish. She then poked Janice and shook her head slightly. Janice translated Suzanne's words to her.

Before Janice could answer for her, Xena said, "Όχι, θα είμαι μια χαρά. Απλά Απλά χρειάζομαι πολλή ξεκούραση όσο ο τραυματισμός μου επουλώνεται."

Suzanne looked at Janice, who replied, "She said no, she'll be fine. She just needs a lot of rest while this little injury runs its course."

"Well, this is unexpected. And what happened to your hair? Did you brush it with a towel?" Suzanna asked Xena, alarmed. As soon as Xena was standing on solid ground, Suzanna got up close and personal. "Melinda, what have you done?"

Xena stood still while Suzanna circled her.

Janice held her breath. What now? "What do you mean?"

“You’re tan!” Suzanna stated, accusingly, looking at Xena’s skin tone.

After Janice translated, Xena looked at Suzanna, confused. “Αυτό είναι το φυσικό μου χρώμα.”

Janice decided not to do a verbatim translation. Xena had said ‘this is my natural color’ but it wasn’t Melinda’s natural color. Melinda had gotten a nice tan throughout the year, but it was so gradual Janice never really noticed it until now.

Before Janice could work up a response, Suzanna said, “Has a year of being a heathen made you forget everything? We never let the sun taint our porcelain skin.” Suzanna shook her head. “Hopefully you haven’t done too much damage.”

“We spent a lot of time in direct sunlight while on our digs,” Janice said quickly. “She really tried to protect herself from getting tanned or sunburnt but it’s difficult when a lot of our digs are in a sunny, desert-type environment.”

Suzanne nodded and said, “We’ll just keep you moisturized every hour of every day and hope that helps. But your mama’s going to have a fit.” She grinned again, while Janice converted her English to Greek. “Don’t you have a hug for your favorite aunt? Give me some sugar, darlin’.” Suzanna opened her arms wide and before Xena could move, Suzanna had enfolded her into a nearly crushing embrace. Suzanna froze mid-hug. “Melinda? Are those muscles I feel?” Suzanna asked, cautiously, squeezing Xena’s biceps.

“She wants to know why you have muscles,” Janice told her, not exactly sure how Xena would react to being pawed by Suzanna.

Xena started to look indignant from being manhandled and at the slights from Aunt Suzanna. Before Xena could respond, again Janice jumped in, “Not really muscles but what we do can be hard, physical work and that does have, um, consequences.”

Suzanna then focused on Janice. “Oh, Darlin’, your pictures got nothing on you. You’re just cute as a button!” Suzanna gushed, engulfing the prickly Janice in a hug.

Janice felt herself released from the embrace. *I’m not ‘cute as a button unless that button is made from a thorn.* She frowned and faced the middle-aged, well dressed, black man, who looked back at her with a thinly disguised smirk. Clearly, he was all too used to Suzanna’s enthusiasm. “Which family member are you?” Janice asked the man, with a straight face.

“I am Edison, Miss Janice. I’m the family driver & handyman.” He gave a little bow. “Can I get your bags?”

Janice looked down at the satchel she had of which she had a firm grip. “No, thanks, Eddy, I’ve got it. You might want to get one or two of Mel’s bags, though. Why someone needs four suitcases for a four-day trip is beyond me.”

“Just four bags?” Suzanna asked, not expecting an answer. “How spartan of her.”

Edison walked over to Xena. “May I please take your bags, Miss Melinda?” he asked, politely.

“Θέλει να σας βοηθήσει να μεταφέρετε τις βαλίτσες σας,” Janice told her.

Xena looked at Edison as if he had two heads. “These? No, thank you, I’ve got them.” She proceeded to hoist a suitcase under each arm, bent down and picked up the other two by their handles. She took a step and stopped. “Ga – Janice, can you please take these glasses off me before I kill myself?”

Janice took a step forward and removed the specs from Xena’s face.

“Thank you. Now where do I take these?” Xena asked.

“She asked where to take our bags,” Janice told Suzanna. Edison pointed in the direction of the parked Cadillac.



“To the family car of course, Melinda,” Suzanna said, looking at her niece’s sudden strength, horrified.

Thankfully, Edison pointed toward a candy apple-red Town Car. Both he and Suzanna’s jaws dropped when ‘Melinda’ effortlessly carried her clearly heavy luggage to the vehicle and waited for them. “Hoo whee, Miss Suzanna. Miss Melinda sure has changed.”

Suzanna paused then turned to glare at Janice, as though looking for someone to blame. “She sure has. Well, don’t worry. She’s home now so we’ll get her back to being the Melinda she was before she ran off.”

*And ruin all my hard work to make her less of a debutante?* “Wow,” Janice said, deflecting the conversation, “Is that the new Series 60?” She followed Xena to the car. She admired the chassis and whitewall tires. She poked her head into an open window and looked around. “Damn! I mean, gosh darn. Bedford Broadcloth upholstery. Leather up front. Rear-mounted radio. What’s she like to drive, Eddy?” Janice said, admiringly.

Edison chuckled as he opened the trunk and gestured to Xena to put her luggage there. “You like cars, Miss Janice?”

“I like impressive cars, Eddy. But since I drive an old ’29 Dodge Brothers truck, any car newer than 1930 is impressive,” Janice said and smiled.

He closed the trunk and opened the back door for Suzanna and ‘Melinda’ to get in. Edison continued to stand by the back door. “There’s enough room for you, Miss Janice.”

She noticed Xena studied how Suzanna seated herself inside the vehicle and Xena mimicked her perfectly, which was difficult with the limited movement her skirt allowed. *Good job.* “No, thanks, I’ll ride shotgun, if that’s okay with you, Ed.” She got into the passenger side as Edison sat behind the wheel. She would have asked if she could drive the sleek automobile, but she did know enough about the south that there would be a scandal if she, a white stranger, was seen driving a negro around in the Pappas family car. She didn’t agree with and never understood that

kind of 'politics' but she reluctantly adhered to them so she wouldn't rock the family boat. The situation was already precarious with not knowing when or if Mel would return.

As they got underway, Janice turned around to look at Xena, who was fascinated by watching the scenery go by. "You doing okay, Mel?"

"Better with my glasses off," Xena answered, preoccupied with this form of transportation, as well.

Suzanna asked what Xena had said and after Janice translated, Suzanna spoke up and said, "I find that peculiar. You've been terribly nearsighted since you were nine years old. Why do you suddenly see better?"

"It's probably the concussion," Janice answered instead. "It's not that she can see better, but right now the glasses give her a headache. Isn't that right, Mel?"

Xena looked away from the window long enough to say, "Ναι, αυτό είναι, Janice."

"Melinda, I just have to say that you don't seem exactly happy to be home," Suzanna said, hurt clearly audible in her tone.

Xena turned to answer Suzanna, clearly reading Suzanna's inflection and expression, cutting Janice off before she could speak. "I do apologize, Aunt Suzanna, I'm thrilled to be home, I just have such a headache that's affecting my mood." She smiled, reached her hand over and placed it on Suzanna's hand. "It's been a long night. I'm sure once I get a nap, I will be fine."

Suzanna waited for Janice to interpret before she squeezed Xena's hand. "Your mama can't wait to see you," Suzanna gushed. "We never thought you'd stay away a whole year."

"That's my fault, I'm afraid," Janice said. "I kept digging up new artifacts and since Mel is one of the best translators in the business, I kept her busy."

“Then I’m glad you let her come home for the Harvest Festival. It just wouldn’t be the same if Melinda didn’t get back here in time to make her famous caramel apple cake.”

Seeing the look on Janice’s face, Xena asked Janice for the Greek version of what Suzanna had said. Once Janice told her, she and Xena locked eyes. Mel never said anything about having to cook. Finally, Janice, not being able to help herself, smirked and said, “Um, gee, Mel, I can’t wait to taste that.” Xena didn’t seem to need a translation of that and glared at Janice. “I mean, if you’re up to it,” Janice added hastily.

“Oh, there’s nothing to it. You’ll love it. Melinda has won many contests with that recipe of hers. Melinda, why don’t you give Janice a small history of Columbia, since we’ll be driving right through the heart of the city?”

Xena looked at Janice, who again interpreted for her. Janice took mercy on Xena’s silence. “That’s okay. We have plenty of time, right, Mel?”

“Why, yes, Janice, hopefully we do,” Xena said, evenly.

Suzanna looked back and forth between the two women. “This foreign language thing is annoying. No offense, Melinda, but it’s just odd,” Suzanne spoke up.

*You have no idea*, Janice thought. She decided to keep the focus off ‘Melinda,’ so she brought up whatever could occupy the conversation until they got to the house. “So, Eddy, tell me more about this car.”

“It’s a Derham model. It’s got 150 horsepower, front suspension with coils, hydraulic brakes. It’s a gem to drive.”

“I bet.” She looked back at Suzanna. “Where’s Mel’s mother?”

“Oh, Julianna is at church. She directs the choir. She also organizes Reverend Stonecipher’s calendar, which is what she had to do this morning. She should be home soon, maybe even by the time we get there.”

“Great,” Janice said, pasting a fake smile on her face and turning to look directly out of the windshield. “Can’t wait to meet her.”

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They drove past a sign that said Welcome to Blythewood and then, according to a wooden street post, they turned onto Longcreek Plantation Drive. The car pulled into a long, winding, tree-lined driveway and finally stopped in front of a massive French-style Chateau and what must have been the Pappas family home.

Janice exited the car along with Xena and Suzanna, while Edison removed the suitcases from the trunk. Both Janice and Xena were awestruck at the sheer size of the dwelling. “Wow. This house is huge,” Janice observed out loud to no one in particular.

“This isn’t a house, it’s a castle,” Xena said, her mouth hanging open, appearing just as awestruck as Janice.

After Janice translated, Suzanna playfully swatted Xena’s shoulder. “You always called it a castle, darlin’,” Suzanna said. “Castles are a little bit bigger than 30,000 square feet.”

Janice’s jaw dropped even further, if that was possible. “Thirty *thousand*?” Janice repeated. “This seems almost as big as the White House.”

“Not quite,” Suzanna said, chuckling. “Add another 25,000 square feet and maybe.”

Janice admired the exquisite, European style, limestone masonry with iron railings, upstairs balconies and the terracotta clay roof. “How many bedrooms?”

When ‘Melinda’ didn’t answer, Suzanna said, “Fourteen. And before you ask, there are 24 bathrooms.”

Janice turned to Xena, forgetting for a moment that she wasn’t Mel. “You grew up here? Is there jousting in the back?”

Suzanna started to giggle. “Oh, Janice you are just too adorable.”

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“I am *not* adorable, Goddammit,” Janice mumbled to Xena as they followed Suzanna into the foyer.

“Actually you *are* kind of cute,” Xena said.

Janice abruptly stopped and Xena ran into her back. Janice turned to face her, noticing the grin. “Keep it up, Warrior Princess,” she whispered, harshly, “I’ll insist you make Mel’s famous caramel apple pie.” Xena moved around Janice, and they entered the kitchen through a hallway cloakroom and mud room.

“And then I’ll make you be the first to taste it.” Her attention was instantly directed to the huge kitchen. “This is enormous!” Xena exclaimed, in apparent amazement.

“She says it’s big,” Janice said, just as impressed.

“Melinda! This is the same size it’s always been,” Suzanna said, ready to playfully swat Xena on the shoulder again but Xena just stepped out of Suzanna’s hitting range. “Maybe it looks bigger because you’ve been away so long.”

“You could fit our entire Greek apartment in here,” Janice stated. She took particular notice of the modern décor and the absolute newest models of all kitchen appliances. There were marble countertops, a two-tone glass-marble mosaic backsplash and the floor was covered in porcelain hexagon pavers. There was a wooden butcher’s block of considerable size in the middle of the room, two stoves – one gas and one electric, a refrigerator with a separate icebox and two deep sinks. A king-sized breakfast nook, with a booth big enough to comfortably seat 4 people on each side, sat in front of a substantial bay window. Janice could not imagine ever getting used to this much wealth. She knew whatever she made would go right back into financing her digs.

“Ophelia?” Suzanna called.

“Right here, Miss Suzanna,” a lovely, dark-skinned woman answered as she made her appearance through the side door. “I just fed the dogs.” Ophelia looked at Xena and her dark eyes immediately became warm, and a pearly-white smile split her face. “Miss Melinda, welcome home.” Ophelia walked to Xena and grasped her hands with her own. “You look well.” Then her eyes widened. “Miss Melinda B. Pappas, did you get a tan? Your mama’s going to throw a fit.” Ophelia leaned in closer to Xena and whispered. “I think it looks wonderful on you.” She backed away and winked.

Xena looked at Ophelia blankly and poked Janice to remind her to translate. After Janice did, Xena said, “Ευχαριστώ, Οφηλία, χαίρομαι που γύρισα σπίτι,” thanking Ophelia and telling her it was good to be ‘home.’

“Miss Melinda?” Ophelia hesitated. “What’s going on?” She looked at Suzanna, then Janice.

“She’s speaking Greek,” Suzanna told Ophelia and shrugged.

Janice stepped up to Ophelia and extended her hand. “Mel fell and hit her head on the train and sometimes it causes her to talk in a different language. She saw a doctor on the train and she’ll be fine once she heals from her concussion. Hi, Ophelia, I’m Janice. Mel and I work together. Nice to meet you.”

“Why, hello, Miss Janice. Welcome to the Pappas home,” Ophelia said, pleasantly, as she shook Janice’s hand. Ophelia focused back on Melinda. “Y’all should go get freshened up before Miss Julianna gets home. Can I get y’all some breakfast while you get settled upstairs?”

“No, thank you, Ophelia,” Xena said, as Janice interpreted the conversation, “I’m not hungry.”

“Just milk waffles, then?” Ophelia asked.

Xena looked like she was about to restate what ‘not hungry’ meant, so Janice jumped in. “We’d love some coffee if that’s okay. We may feel hungrier later.”

Suzanna and Ophelia exchanged concerned glances and Suzanna said, "Melinda, when did you start drinking coffee? You've always drank tea."

Janice smiled, sheepishly. *Of course, Melinda drinks tea and Xena has no idea what coffee is.* "I meant me, sorry. Tea would be great for Mel." She pulled on Xena's wrist, ushering her forward. "Come on, Mel, let's go get situated." She turned to Suzanna. "Where is the room I'll be staying in?"

"The east guest room. Melinda can show you. It's on the way to her room." Suzanna said.

"By the way, Miss Melinda, I'm looking onwards to you making your special fried pork chops for tonight's family dinner," Ophelia said.

Janice had to stop wondering if this visit could get any worse because she began to feel the Fates were taking it as a challenge. Janice told Xena what Ophelia had said.

Xena looked at Ophelia, then at Janice. "Fried pork chops," Xena repeated.

"They sound delicious," Janice said, as she gently pushed Xena toward the staircase and tried to ignore the spasmodic movement of her left eye.

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Once they got upstairs, they went in search of which rooms had their luggage in them so that they parked themselves in the properly assigned bedrooms. Just as Janice spotted her travel bag next to a large, pink canopy bed, Xena followed her and shut the door.

"If she wants me to cook, you're going to have to build a fire in the backyard and let me go hunting," Xena whispered harshly to Janice.

“Oh, yeah, I can see it now, you coming up the driveway, covered in blood, with some kind of beast over your shoulders, yelling, ‘Mama, I’m home.’ That would certainly get the tongues wagging that Mel had completely lost her mind,” Janice said.

“Can you cook?” Xena asked her.

“Yes, but trust me, you wouldn’t want to eat it.” Janice noticed the lascivious smirk Xena tried to hide. Janice rested her hands on her hips. “Why is everything a dirty joke with you?”

“Why do I think you really aren’t offended?”

“I’m not. But of the two of us, I’m the one who’s supposed to have the dirty mind.”

“Well, clearly, you’re slacking.”

Ignoring Xena’s remark, Janice said, “Maybe Mel has a recipe for those pork chops and that pie somewhere. If not, we can use your head injury as an excuse.”

“You mean the head injury excuse we would definitely not use because it wouldn’t be believed?” Xena put her hands on her hips.

“Hey, what do I know?” Janice said and shrugged. “Go find your room so maybe you can take a rest before Mel’s -”

“Melinda! I’m home!” a refined, honeyed voice called out from downstairs.

“Mother gets home,” Janice finished. A new sense of dread came over her.

Xena shook her head. “Can this get any worse?”

Janice slapped her hand over Xena’s mouth. “Don’t ask that!”



She removed Janice's hand. "Janice, what is wrong with your eye?"

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After calling back that they would be right down, Janice went to the bathroom to relieve herself and wash her face and Xena proceeded to Mel's room to hopefully do the same. She was glad she didn't have to show Xena how to use a modern toilet, recalling Xena knew how to navigate the receptacle, as was recorded in Gabrielle's scroll, which Mel roughly translated to be called, 'Malady and Tartarus.'

When Janice was finished, she waited for Xena to join her to go downstairs. It seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time, so Janice went in search for her. She found Xena in a spacious room, sitting at a vanity, brushing and pinning up her jet-black locks.

"Janice, what happened to my hair?"

"Mel!" Janice rushed to her and enveloped her into a hug from behind. Janice looked skyward. "Thank you, God!"

"Since when did you start believing in God?" Mel looked at Janice in the mirror.

"Since one minute ago." She released Mel. "I'm so glad you're back. Your mother just came home. She hasn't seen you yet so thank you for fixing your hair but you need to know, she's going to reprimand you for getting tanned."

Mel studied her reflection in the mirror. "Oh, my. I do have a slight tan. I didn't even notice." She looked back at Janice. "What else have I missed?"

"Your Aunt Suzanna and Edison picked us up at the train station. And we met Ophelia when we got to this castle you grew up in."

Mel laughed. "I always called this a castle when I was growing up. What else?"

“You’re expected to make a caramel apple pie and fried pork chops for tonight’s dinner.”

Melinda refreshed her lipstick. “I figured I’d have to do that,” she said, with a smile.

“Then do me a favor and write the recipes down in case Xena comes back again.”

“Oh, my. That means y’all still haven’t figured out why she’s here. Okay. Anything else?”

“Um...just that you’ve been speaking fluent Greek since you got here.” Janice said. Off Mel’s questioning stare, Janice said, “Don’t worry, I told them you hit your head on the train and you were seen by a doctor, also on the train.”

“I thought we weren’t going to tell them that,” Mel said.

“Melinda! What are you doing up there?” Julianna Pappas roared from the bottom of the stairs. “I’ve waited a year, that’s long enough.”

Janice could see that Melinda was clearly thrilled at hearing her mama’s voice. Mel stood up and checked her appearance one more time. She turned to face Janice. “What is wrong with your eye?”

As they left Melinda’s room, Janice said, “It’s a tic, Mel. I’ve developed a *tic* because of the tension of trying to pass Xena off as you. If she comes back again, don’t be shocked if my whole body starts twitching. Your family should really have a hey day with that.”

Melinda stopped, concerned. “Has anyone here treated you poorly?”

“No, no one has but I’m terrified of your mother.” They continued down the long hallway.

“Oh, Janice, you have nothing to worry about. On the other hand, my mother may have eaten a Yankee or two for dinner.” Melinda winked at her.

“Great. On tonight’s menu, fricasseed Janice.” They reached the top of the staircase and started toward the bottom.

“Janice, honestly, you’ll be lucky if you get a word in edgewise.”

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“My darling girl, you look wonderful,” Julianna Pappas said. After she hugged her daughter, she put her at arm’s length for a discernable parental inspection. “I was warned about your tan but I don’t think it’s done too much damage. Suzanna told me you had an accident on the train, though. Are you sure you don’t want to see Dr. Applekamp?”

“No, mama, I’m fine,” Melinda said.

Julianna tilted her head, looking surprised. “I understood you were speaking a foreign language.”

“She was!” Suzanna and Ophelia chorused from the kitchen.

“I go in and out of it, mama. It’s really nothing to worry about.”

“Well, I’m glad. I wouldn’t want you to be anyone other than the Melinda I know and love.”

“I have missed you so,” Mel said, her eyes glassy with tears.

“Well, you’d never know it for as long as you stayed away,” Julianna said, kidding. Or Janice hoped Mel’s mom was kidding. Julianna then turned to Janice. “And you must be Dr. Covington,” she said, affably. She took Janice’s both hands in her own. “I knew your daddy.”

“Please don’t hold that against me,” Janice said, nervously.

Julianna's beautiful face broke into a wider smile. "Your father was a rogue, that's for sure and I cannot speak to his grave robbing reputation because we never saw that side of him, but I do know he was always honest with Melvin and was a great help to Melvin's research. I'm so very pleased to finally meet you."

Janice was utterly charmed. "Thank you, Mrs. Pappas. I'm glad to finally meet you, too."

Julianna let go of Janice's hand. "Why don't we go to the kitchen and have some breakfast? Then we can talk about your adventures. Are you hungry?"

"Not really, Mama."

"Okay, just milk waffles, then. How about you, Dr. Covington?"

"Janice, please, and now that I smell bacon, I'm starving."

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They crossed into the kitchen and were greeted by Suzanna and Ophelia. Suzanna was at the oven overseeing fresh buttermilk biscuits while Ophelia was at the stove cooking eggs, bacon, fried potatoes, grits and gravy for the biscuits.

"Hi, Aunt Suzanna," Mel said, enthusiastically, as though seeing her for the first time. She reached for an apron. "Can I help?"

"Now you sound and act like my Melinda again. I was telling your mama about your accent and your voice and just how different you were."

"Did you like my Greek?" Melinda asked, smiling.

"I like your English much better," Suzanna said and winked at her.

Janice tuned out the conversation and leaned against the counter, observing Melinda in her own element; she saw a confident model of southern hospitality. It

only made her more attractive to Janice, which Janice hadn't thought possible. Melinda sure came from an elegant bunch.

Suzanna carried that beauty pageant air about her. Her mannerisms were regally overexaggerated and she spoke distinctly at a volume which guaranteed everyone in the room would hear her. She carried herself with pride and with a stance of grace and practiced vulnerability that probably made her quite popular with southern gentlemen. Janice had a feeling that Suzanna was different in the company of women than she was in the company of men. *Hey, if it works for her, who am I to be the judge?*

Julianna Pappas was a stunning woman. She shared all physical characteristics of Mel except for height and eye color. Mel's mother was a petite, exquisite woman, with a pale, peach complexion, brown eyes that seemed to miss nothing and cheekbones to die for. She was an aristocratic, refined, southern lady. Mel had advised Janice over the past year that Julianna was intellectual, feminine, articulate, and downright fearsome if she was on a tear. Julianna was more outspoken than most southern belles but since Julianna decided she would not remarry after Melinda's father died, there was no need for her to pretend she was a lesser, subdued being to be bride-bait for a new suitor.

Mel had shared stories of her mother's blistering tirades on 'unladylike' topics like politics, the first and second amendments and would not tolerate rude, bullying, misogynistic behavior. Melinda said her mama had a razor-sharp tongue mixed with a fiery wit that sent many of her targets scampering for safety. Because of her rapid-fire spiels, she had earned the nickname of Tommy Gun Pappas (never said to her face, of course) and most suitably eligible, older divorcees, widowers and bachelors in town were afraid of her. Janice could understand that. She rightfully guessed Julianna Pappas possessed a fearless passion of her convictions that no man was ever going to tear asunder.

And then there was Mel. *Sigh*. Janice just could not find enough words to describe Mel's staggering beauty, even hidden behind those thick, black glasses. Everything about Mel was perfect. Her opinion of Mel had come a long way from when they first met, when she thought Mel was a bumbling, uncoordinated, entitled rich girl.

Or maybe she was still that and Janice didn't notice it anymore. *Oh, man, I've got it bad.*

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Breakfast was finally served, which Janice noticed was done with everyone's help, including hers. Ophelia had put Janice in charge of the fried potatoes. A task Janice was sure even she couldn't screw up, as long as she didn't let them burn. Everyone took turns from their own cooking and baking to check in on her so Janice was pretty sure the finished project would be consumable. They certainly smelled delicious.

Janice was given a little history of southern fried potatoes, such as how they had to be cooked, why they had to use a cast iron pan, which kind of potatoes worked best, in which spices and oils they needed to be fried, etc. It was a recipe she would probably never use but the conversation surrounding the dish was inclusive and prompted Janice to feel like a welcomed part of the household.

Just as the breakfast meal was placed on the huge, dining room table set up like a Swedish smorgasbord, the door Janice and Xena had entered the house through earlier opened then closed, followed by the excited voices of young children. Suddenly a boy and a girl, approximately six and eight-years-old, respectively, ran up to Mel, throwing their little arms around her, calling her Aunt Melly. She lovingly corrected them and when their father followed them into the kitchen, she said, "Ridley, you know I do not like that nickname. I'm not ten-years-old anymore."

"Well, good to see you too, Melly." He approached her and gave her a hug. Ridley was an inch or two taller than Mel and was a masculine version of Mel's mother. His kids were both miniature models of him.

Mel hugged him back and turned to Janice. "This is my stubborn older brother, Ridley," she said, then indicated the two kids who had yet to let her go. "My niece, Amelia, and my nephew, George, who have gotten so big I almost didn't recognize

them.” The children giggled and Mel said to them, “And this is my friend and colleague, Dr. Janice Covington.”

Janice shook Ridley’s hand and then focused on the kids. She held out her hand to Amelia, who shyly accepted the greeting and then to George, who hesitantly reached over and clasped Janice’s hand. As Janice pumped his hand up and down, she said to him, “Are you nervous?” George shook his head, No. “Then why are you shaking?”

Everybody, including Amelia, groaned but George seemed to find it uproariously funny. He continued to shake Janice’s hand in an exaggerated manor until Julianna said, “Come on, everybody, the food’s getting cold.”

As everyone gathered around the table, grabbed a plate, and started filling it with food, Ridley said, “Jeez, Mother, I haven’t had a chance to visit with Melly.”

“Then you should have arrived earlier,” Julianna admonished him. “And you know how I feel about taking the Lord’s name in vain, including shortening swear words, especially around my grandchildren.”

Ridley bowed his head. “I apologize, Mother.” He then looked at his children. “See, even daddy’s not too old to get yelled at.”

“I did not yell, Ridley,” Julianna said and smirked.

“Did daddy say a bad word, Nana? He says Jeez all the time at home,” Amelia said, as her father filled her plate with hot food.

Ridley’s shoulders slumped at being squealed on. “Sugar, you and daddy need to have a talk about tattling.”

“You will do no such thing,” Juliana said to her son, giving her granddaughter a sweet smile.

“Where is Roberta?” Mel asked her brother. “Roberta is Ridley’s wife,” she clarified for Janice.

“She’ll be over later. She wasn’t feeling too well this morning,” Ridley said.

“Oh?” Suzanna said, perking up. “Is there a possibility that -”

“It’s more of a probability,” Ridley said, quickly, looking at his curious children. “But we’re not saying anything yet.” A slight tilt of his head toward Amelia and George clued in Suzanna that this was a non-subject in front of his kids until Roberta’s pregnancy could be confirmed.

“About what?” George asked his father before Amelia could.

“About what’s for supper tonight, right, Ridley?” Janice caught on and tried to help.

All eyes were then on Janice, where Ridley really seemed to look at her for the first time. “That’s right, Jan,” he said, relieved. “Can I call you Jan?” Ridley asked.

“I feel about being called Jan the same way your sister feels about being called ‘Melly,’” Janice told him, with a smile in her voice.

“Jan it is then,” Ridley said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“Ridley! You are still such a scamp,” Mel said.

“Daddy’s a scamp!” Amelia and George chorused gleefully.

“Alright, settle down. That’s enough,” Julianna said, firmly but not without affection in her tone.

The occupants at the table ate their food in companionable silence until George spoke up. “Doctor Jan, can you look at my belly? I have a boo boo there.”

“I’m not that kind of doctor, George.” Janice told the child, politely.

“Could you look at it anyway?” George asked.



“There’s no need, George,” Ridley said. “It’s just a scrape and a bruise you got jumping off the roof of the shed.”

“He did what?” Julianna, Suzanna and Mel asked Ridley at the same time.

“Come on, he’s a boy,” Janice said and chuckled. “What’s more normal for a boy than jumping off things, pretending he’s Superman.” Janice looked at George. “Were you wearing a cape?”

George nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Did you jump to the plain ground or was there something on the ground to soften your landing?” Janice asked.

“Yes, ma’am, there was a lot of hay on the ground,” George told her.

Janice looked around the table. “See? He’s just being a normal little boy.”

“Well, Janice, two years ago, this normal little boy jumped off the shed and broke his arm in two places,” Julianna said.

Janice nodded, then looked at Mel. “Ah. So, he inherited your grace,” she said, winking at Melinda.

Ridley burst into laughter that earned a stern look from his sister. “You know what? I like you, Jan, even if you are from those colonies up north,” Ridley said.

“Why, thank you, Ridley,” Janice said, and stuffed her mouth with a forkful of southern fried potatoes.

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Janice helped Ophelia with the breakfast dishes while the Pappas family visited in the front room.

“You really don’t have to do this, Miss Janice,” Ophelia said, as she handed Janice another dish to wipe.

“Of course, I don’t have to, but I want to. Let them all enjoy each other without Mel having to worry about whether I’m comfortable or feel like I’m being ignored or whatever she would find to fuss over.”

“Yes, Miss Melinda can be a mother hen. Especially when it comes to her younger brother.”

“I’m shocked,” Janice said and grinned. “When is he supposed to get here?”

“John Melvin should be arriving this evening. I guess he had a time of it trying to wrangle leave right now. He’s bringing a superior officer with him because the only way he was allowed time off was if he brought his lieutenant-commander with him.”

“Isn’t that considered blackmail?” Janice asked and smiled.

“Seemed so to me but John Melvin really didn’t seem to mind, as long as he could come home for the Harvest Festival. From what Miss Suzanna says, John Melvin’s guest is handsome, upstanding, comes from money and would be a perfect match for Miss Melinda.”

Janice tried not to react although the thought felt like a gut punch. She cleared her throat. “Yes, Mel has forewarned me regarding Aunt Suzanna’s matchmaking proclivities.”

“She never stops,” Ophelia said. “She matched Ridley and Roberta and several others in the community. She matched John Melvin with Reverend Stonecipher’s oldest girl, Charlotte, but that didn’t last only because with John Melvin’s Naval career, Charlotte didn’t want to leave Columbia to move other places. I wonder if she regrets it now that he’s stationed in Hawaii.”

“I guess some girls just want to stay close to their fathers. I did until mine died.”

“No one would have thought Miss Melinda would have ever left but then Mr. Pappas passed, and it seemed she couldn’t get out of here fast enough. No one expected her to be gone so long, either.”

“I can tell you she really loves what she’s doing as a part of the team.”

Ophelia rinsed a pan and handed it to Janice. “Misses Julianna and Suzanna thought she might come back after her little vacation overseas to settle down, marry and start a family.”

“I don’t think that’s what Mel wants right now, though,” Janice said, gently. “I haven’t heard her say at any time that she wanted to come home permanently.”

“Well, then, maybe the introduction to John Melvin’s friend might be more to her liking. She could travel all over the world with him being in the Navy.”

*But that’s not what **she** wants,* Janice’s mind screamed.

“Do you have a beau, Miss Janice?”

*Only once and it definitely wasn’t to my liking.* “No. The type I attract aren’t really husband material.”

“All rogues?”

“More like unacceptable for polite society.”

Ophelia patted Janice on the arm. “You’re a beautiful woman, Miss Janice. Someone worthy will eventually catch your fancy.”

*She already has.* “Thank you, Ophelia. You’re too kind.”

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“You could have joined us in the front room,” Melinda said to Janice, as they sat on the veranda. Melinda was drinking a sweet tea while Janice enjoyed the refreshing fizziness of a Blenheim Ginger Ale.

“I know but I had a nice visit with Ophelia. By the way, Ridley is a character.”

“Ridley is a brat. He means well. He’s just never outgrown picking on me.”

“Aren’t all siblings like that?”

“I do not have that kind of relationship with John Melvin.” Melinda was distracted by a car coming up the driveway. She broke into a radiant smile and stood up. “Speaking of my baby brother...” Melinda enthusiastically waved. “They’re early.”

Although Janice was looking forward to meeting John Melvin Pappas, she did not feel the same about whoever he was bringing with him since the family seemed to believe the youngest son’s guest was the perfect match for the woman she loved.

The yellow taxi stopped at the front door, to the left of the veranda. Two men in their dress blue Naval uniforms emerged from the back seat. They both wore an identical two-piece uniform of a double-breasted, gabardine suit jacket and matching trousers. Their jackets each had six adorning gilt buttons bearing an eagle clutching an anchor. Their rank insignia was worn around the lower sleeves. They stood tall and handsome, with a definite military bearing.

Before they put their uniform caps on, Janice noticed one had dark hair and the other was blond. She wrongly pegged the blond as the guest until after they retrieved their luggage from the trunk of the cab and walked toward the veranda. Then Janice remembered photos Melinda has shown her and knew Melinda’s brother was the blond.

Janice’s mouth dropped open and she shot out of her chair to join Melinda at the railing. As the officers got closer, Janice said, “Chet?”

Chet looked up, surprised. “Janice?”

Both Melinda and John Melvin gaped in confusion as Chet reached the porch and drew Janice into a short hug.

“You know each other?” chorused the siblings.

“We met on the train. Mel, this is the guy I told you about that I sat with in the Club Car, who gave me that expensive cigar.”

“Which clearly you have not smoked,” Chet said with a smirk.

“How do you know that?” Janice asked.

“Because if you had, its magnificence would have been the first comment out of your mouth.”

“Did he also tell you how modest he is?” John Melvin said, as he gave Melinda a hug.

Melinda turned her attention to her younger brother. “Were you on the same train as we were?”

“Clearly Chet was but he had more leave than I, so he visited his family in New York first. I flew into the Charleston Naval Base where Chet met me this morning and then we came here.”

“And you took a cab from Charleston?” Janice asked, thinking that had to be a substantial expense.

“Not even Chet is that frivolous with his money, although Chet is loaded,” John Melvin said and nudged Mel in the ribs. “We took the train to Columbia and the cab from the train station.”

“You should have said something. Edison wouldn’t have hesitated to go get you,” Melinda said.

“I’m sure Edison has much better things to do. Anyway, Melinda, this is my commanding officer but, more importantly, my good friend, Lieutenant Commander Chet DeGuilliano.”

Melinda took a step back out of her brother’s embrace and stuck her hand out towards Chet. “It’s nice to meet you, Lieutenant Commander DeGuilliano.”

“Melinda, I’m charmed. Please call me Chet,” Chet said, not letting go of Melinda’s hand. “Your brother has shown me photographs but they do not do you justice.” He gently brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it along her knuckles. Mel giggled like a schoolgirl and Janice rolled her eyes, turned away and pantomimed gagging.

Melinda turned to Janice who, not wanting to get caught making faces, put her head down to compose herself, then turned back to face Mel. “Since you two have already met, Janice, this is my brother, Lieutenant John Melvin Pappas. John Melvin, this is my colleague, Dr. Janice Covington.”

“Lieutenant,” Janice acknowledged.

Melinda’s brother shook Janice’s hand. “John is fine,” John Melvin said. There was a twinkle in his eye. “Doctor, huh? That’s impressive.”

“It is,” Chet said. “She corrected me in the first minute of meeting.”

“Well, you called me young lady and that upset me because I’m not young and I’m definitely no lady,” Janice said, maintaining an amiable tone.

“How old are you?” Chet asked.

“Lieutenant Commander, you never ask a lady their age!” Mel admonished, scandalized.

“She said she wasn’t a lady. I never would have asked your age,” Chet said to Melinda, sweetly.

“Looks like I brought home a snake charmer,” John Melvin said, clearly amused by his commanding officer’s end of the conversation.

“Are you calling me a snake, John Melvin?” Melinda asked and crossed her arms.

“Are you charmed, Melinda?” Chet asked, looking directly in her eyes.

Janice rolled her eyes again at Melinda acting toward Chet like a typical teenager with a crush, as if whatever his allure was, worked on her without even trying. Although Janice didn’t want to admit it, that was most likely the main reason something about Chet made her feel itchy. To be honest, Janice wasn’t comfortable with him on the train because she predicted he was exactly the type of guy Melinda would be attracted to, hoping Melinda wouldn’t come looking for her so Melinda and Chet wouldn’t meet. And now, here they were. Janice didn’t believe in kismet unless, of course, it involved her and Melinda’s destiny, but providence did cross her mind at this point.

“Let’s go inside,” Mel suggested, as Chet moved her hand into the crook of his arm. “Mama and Aunt Suzanna will be thrilled to see you and how so handsome and grown up you look,” she said to her brother.

“They’ve seen me in my uniform, Melinda. You’re the only member of the family that hasn’t before today. But it’s not much different from my Annapolis uniform.” As they walked to the front door, John Melvin offered his arm to Janice, who hesitated before she took it, unused to such polite, gentlemanly behavior. After a good, close-up look at the blond haired, blue-eyed, incredibly good-looking, youngest Pappas child, Janice decided that if she liked men, she might be physically attracted to John Melvin. But she didn’t so she wasn’t. Besides, even though Mel constantly gushed about him, as far as she knew, he could be as big of a jerk as she perceived Chet to be.

As they stepped over the threshold, Suzanna tilted her head toward the kitchen and said, “Oh, my, Julianna. You should see two striking couples who just walked into our house.”

Mel and Chet's grins could have lit up the room, while both Janice & John Melvin looked embarrassed. "Aunt Suzanna, don't start," John Melvin said, good naturedly.

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Janice counted her lucky stars that Xena had stayed away so long. On the other hand, there's no way she could see Xena swooning over some smarmy, rich, good-looking guy, no matter how captivating.

Janice had survived the afternoon and thanked the chaos that was the family reunion. Everyone was regaled with stories that involved mostly John Melvin and Chet, although Melinda was able to pipe in with one or two of her and Janice's escapades in Greece. Mel did tell of when they first met, conveniently leaving out the part about Mel channeling Xena and fighting the God of War. Of course, Mel only knew what Janice told her about the experience because her 'dreamless sleep' during Xena's occupation of her body left Mel with no personal memory of it, just the bruises and a ripped skirt.

Julianna and Susanna were horrified. "You were confronted by Nahzees?" The sisters' heads swiveled back and forth between Melinda, who was seated on the sofa with John Melvin and Janice, who was seated opposite her, closer to Chet than she liked. "You could have been killed!"

"Mama, it only happened that one time. We've had no trouble since," Melinda said."

"It only happened once?" Julianna roared. "Once is more than enough. Melinda Beaulieu Pappas, you will not go back there," Julianna commanded.

"Of course, I will," Melinda said, defiantly. "It's my work."

Janice was about to speak up in Melinda's defense and then said, "Wait, Beaulieu? That's what the B stands for?"



“Yes, it’s my maiden name. What did you think it stood for?” Julianna asked Janice.

Janice shrugged. “I don’t know. Beatrice? Bernice? Belinda?”

Julianna raised an eyebrow, suddenly looking remarkable like an older Xena. “You think I named my daughter Melinda Belinda Pappas?”

Before Janice could think of a comeback for that, she said, “It wouldn’t be Beaulieu as in Beaulieu-Freeman? That Beaulieu? Old Silas whiskey?”

“Yes, my grandfather started that company,” Julianna said.

“My grandfather should have invested in that company for as much Old Silas as he drank,” Janice said. Everyone laughed and Janice hoped they had moved on from the subject of Melinda not going back to Greece with Janice. For Janice, that was not option she would entertain.

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Ridley had dropped by again with the kids and this time Roberta was with them. Janice thought Ridley’s wife was glamorous, with her fashion sense, silver screen star looks, and victory rolled hairstyle, but she didn’t contribute much to the conversation. Instead, Roberta helped Ophelia with snacks and refreshments plus kept a stern eye on her children.

Every time Janice asked if there was anything she could do to help, Roberta reminded her that she was a guest who should just relax and enjoy herself. Relax? That would involve copious amounts of Old Silas. Enjoy herself? Only after the Old Silas kicked in.

It was good to see Mel relax and enjoy herself, though. Mel retained her seat next to her youngest brother the entire afternoon, fawning over him, leaving no doubt which sibling was her favorite. Clearly John Melvin felt the same about his sister.

Janice learned a little more about Julianna, too, through a few narrations from her children. Julianna was raised in the blue-blooded affluence of Columbia's high society. The governor was a classmate of her father's, so Julianna and Suzanna visited the mansion often as children. As a young adult, she was the talk of the town, driving around in her father's Rolls Royce Silver Ghost, a horseless carriage, when women weren't allowed to drive. And much to Grandma Beaulieu's chagrin, instead of just settling down and getting married to one of the many appropriate suitors her mother had lined up for her, Julianna went to France and studied for two years at the Sorbonne. She got homesick and returned to Columbia to attend the University of South Carolina and got a bachelor's degree in mathematics. In her junior year, she met and scandalously eloped with a dapper student working on his master's degree in Ancient Languages named Melvin Pappas. Normally once women got married, they were denied a higher education but not Julianna. Her father's annual donations to USC were enough to make the school look the other way. That didn't mean Mel's mother stayed grateful, quiet, or obedient; Julianna was the first woman student to rebel at the tradition of women being dismissed early one day a week to do male students' laundry.

Once Julianna had her own children, she understood how her mother felt robbed of the glory and satisfaction of a full southern wedding. Thankfully, twice divorced and once widowed, Susannah had three weddings, enough to make up for what Julianna had denied her. Also, the Pappas family were as loaded as the Beaulieu family, which eased her mother's disappointment. Some.

Adding to the discussion around marriage and children. John Melvin said he was glad the engagement to Reverend Stonecipher's daughter had not worked out.

"Why?" Suzanna asked. "Charlotte is still such a sweet girl."

"And I loved her but we both would have been miserable. The Navy is my life. Being a pilot is my dream come true. She never wanted to leave Columbia. We never would have been able to work that out," John Melvin explained. "When I am ready to commit to a marriage, I need a wife with a sense of adventure."

All eyes turned to Janice. "Well, this isn't awkward at all," Janice said, uncomfortable at suddenly being the center of attention.

“Now, now, let’s not pick on my friend Jan, here,” Ridley spoke up. “She doesn’t strike me as the marrying kind. I think she prefers the honeymoon over marriage.”

“Ridley!” Mel nearly shrieked, hiding a deep blush behind her hands while Janice actually laughed.

Roberta walked behind the chair Ridley was seated in and swatted his shoulder. “That’s enough out of you,” Roberta chastised.

“Ridley George Pappas!” Julianna’s tone was scolding. “Janice and Commander DeGuilliano are going to think I didn’t raise you right.”

When he heard a dirty-sounding chuckle coming from the direction of John Melvin and Chet, Ridley then had the wherewithal to look chastened. “I was just teasing. I’m sorry, Janice. I apologize, Mama.”

Janice tried to wipe her grin away. “Don’t worry about it, Mrs. Pappas. I’ve had a lot worse things said to me.”

“Not in this house you haven’t,” Julianna said, still glaring at her oldest son.

*Well, not yet, at least,* Janice thought.

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After dinner, where Melinda fulfilled her obligation to cook her special fried pork chops (which Janice had to agree were delicious) and bake her famous caramel apple pie (even more delicious), everyone moved to the screened-in section of the back deck and sipped on their teas of individual sweetness. Janice had spoken to Ophelia about brewing tea and letting her and Chet put sugar into their own beverages.

Ridley, Roberta and their kids left about an hour after supper as Amelia got cranky, George wouldn’t stop whining about how tired he was, and Roberta was pale.

The rest had moved on to drinking bourbon as dusk turned to twilight. Although Janice was still nervous about being accepted by Melinda's family, she felt more comfortable now than she did that morning. Again, she found herself staring at Melinda, laughing, and talking animatedly with John Melvin. It gave Janice a spark of relief though whenever Chet would interject himself into the conversation, which was often, Melinda's enthusiasm turned to politeness. She remembered Melinda once saying that bad manners were worse than poverty and Janice hoped that meant Melinda wasn't really falling for but just being polite to Chet, the squid.

Then talk turned to the South Carolina state fair and Big Thursday which was a huge part of the Harvest celebration. "Are we going to the fair tomorrow?" Janice asked. She hadn't been to a state fair since she was quite young.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," John Melvin said. "It's part of the tradition. Melinda hasn't gone in two years."

"Two?" Janice inquired. "I know last year you were in Greece with me but why the year before?"

"Well," Melinda hesitated, her voice suddenly melancholy, "Daddy was really sick, and I just wasn't up for all the excitement, I guess."

"And," John Melvin added, "I was still at Annapolis so I couldn't take leave until Daddy passed. Then I was allowed bereavement but only long enough to attend the services and then I had to go right back to school."

"I'm sorry, Mel," Janice said. "I didn't mean to bring up sad memories."

"It's alright, Janice. You didn't know." Melinda looked at her and smiled affectionately.

It was just a moment, but Janice's breath almost caught. *Goddammit, this woman's smile is somehow going to be the death of me.* She cleared her throat

and looked around the veranda. "So, tell me more about the fair and Big Thursday thing because I thought all state fairs were on hold during the war."

"Even though we aren't officially in the war, the mayor keeps trying to close the fair under the guise of patriotism and saying it's disrespectful to keep it going while our boys are off fighting," Suzanna said. "But Governor Johnston believes the same as Governor Harley did, that we have little joy in our lives because of the impending war and the fair gives us something nice to look forward to."

"Is Mayor Shortsleeves starting that nonsense again this year? He's all hot air. He couldn't win an argument in an empty house," Julia commented, in mild disgust.

"I take it the mayor isn't a friend of yours?" Chet asked Julianna.

"Technically, he was a friend of my late husband's but only technically. Melvin had to work with him because of the university being so profitable to the city of Columbia but Melvin never trusted him for a second. Matthew Shortsleeves has lied and cheated his way into trying to make everybody believe he is the most trusted man in South Carolina. But everybody knows him and knows he will do anything for a payoff."

"If you confront him on any of his suspicious dealing's, he'll try to throw you offtrack and say stuff like, 'Do you know who I am? I'm the mayor. I donate to the well-respected Columbia Benevolent Society!'," Suzanna said.

Julianna rolled her eyes. "Yes, well, I donate to the arboretum but that doesn't make me a botanical garden." She returned her attention to Janice. "Big Thursday is a peak day of fair week because on that day, everybody who isn't stationed elsewhere, attends the fair, the state ball and then the football game."

"Who are the Gamecocks playing tomorrow night, Mama?" John Melvin asked.

"Clemson Tigers so it should be a good game."

"South Carolina's team name is the Gamecocks?" Chet asked. "What's a gamecock?"

Janice was also curious because the 12-year-old boy inside her had come up with his own explanation that was in no way an acceptable definition.

“It’s a rooster bred and trained for fighting,” John Melvin said. When Chet still looked confused, John Melvin added, “Roosters are also called cocks and cockfighting is a popular betting sport in the south.”

“Sounds barbaric,” Janice said.

“It is. It’s cruel and bloody and I have always hated it,” Melinda said. “Why the university couldn’t have come up with a more appropriate name has always puzzled me. They could have gone with the South Carolina Bucks since the Whitetailed deer is our state animal.” She looked over at her mother. “You’re on the USC board can’t you bring up the possibility of a name change?”

Julianna laughed. “I’m still a silent board member, my darling girl, which means I’m seen and not heard and only important when they want money. If you think I can change the minds of a bunch of randy old men who have their own inside joke about the ‘cocks’ part of the team’s name, you’ve been away too long.”

Melinda looked shocked at Julianna’s blunt statement. “Mama!”

“What? I have learned in my five years of being on the board is that those men are deaf in one ear and can’t hear out of the other and that particular part of their lower anatomy rules over everything else.”

“That’s charming,” Melinda said, sarcastically, and blushed while Janice chuckled again.

“Has anything ever intimidated you, Mrs. Pappas?” Janice asked.

“Yes. Motherhood,” she said, with mock austerity, as she looked over at her two remaining children.

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When Janice knocked on the door of Mel's bedroom, Mel was brushing out her long black hair during her nightly routine of getting ready for bed. "Mel? Can I come in?"

"Of course, Janice."

"What a day, huh?" Janice said, shoving her hands in her pockets.

"Indeed. What do you think of John Melvin?"

"Good looking fella. Where'd the blond hair come from?"

"My daddy. His hair was blond right up until he was about 25 then it thinned and turned dark."

"What did you think of Chet?" Janice asked and crossed her fingers, hoping for a bad review.

Melinda stopped brushing. "Well," she hesitated, mulling over the question, "he is handsome and well-spoken but..."

"But?" Janice asked, trying to keep the hope out of her tone.

"But he does seem a little full of himself."

"Most men are a little full of themselves," Janice responded.

"My mama seemed to like him alright and Aunt Suzanna is happier than a clam at high tide. I'm sure she's downstairs right now, rubbing her hands together in glee, thinking that she's found me a match."

Janice nodded. "And what do you think of him as a potential match?" she asked, hesitantly.

Melinda stopped brushing her hair. “I think he’ll be a good match for some woman who wants to be an arm decoration. Two years ago, that might have been me but not now. I like what we’re doing too much, Janice, to give it up to make other people happy or respectful of my life. If I was looking at being a high society wife, Chet might be the perfect husband but I’m not.

“Ever?” Janice asked, optimistically.

“Well,” Melinda considered, “Certainly not at this time. I really don’t want to be somebody’s wife, where my entire identity is rolled up in my husband’s name and money.”

“You could be like your mom. She seems to have done well with being someone other than Melvin Pappas’ wife. God, Mel, your mom’s a hoot,” Janice said admirably, almost gushing.

Mel’s demeanor suddenly changed. “Yes, I know. She’s been described as a cross between Scarlett O’Hara and a German Rottweiler.”

Janice grinned in agreement of that assessment. “She’s so fucking dynamic.”

“I know, Janice, all right?” Mel said, curtly. “I’ve been told often enough. You grew up in your father’s shadow? I grew up in my mother’s.” She went back to brushing her hair. “Don’t think I don’t love my mama, Janice, because I do, dearly, but I’m tired of the comparisons and expectations of wanting me to be Julianna, junior.”

Seeing Mel’s thinly disguised sadness and vulnerability, it hit Janice. “You’ve never been allowed to shine, have you?”

“I was always expected to compete with my mother, to be her, and I’m not her. And I’ve been reminded my whole life that I don’t measure up.”

Janice’s heart broke for her. “Oh, Mel...” She moved from the doorway to kneel in front of Melinda, gently taking Mel’s hand. “Your mother is a whip-smart, fiery, ballsy broad – I mean, lady. But you’re not her.”



If Melinda could have hung her head any lower, she would have. “I said, I know, Janice,” Melinda said, barely above a whisper.

Janice reached up and lifted Mel’s chin, prompting Melinda to look at her. “But she isn’t you. You are your own woman, Melinda Belinda Pappas,” Janice said, softly, making Mel break into a small smile. “You are a beautiful, brilliant, charming as all get out – when you’re not Xena. You are the epitome of decency and good. You are ever the diplomat and, unlike your mother who, despite her fancy French education, is not familiar with the term *esprit d’escalier*, you know when to shut up. True, you’re sometimes all fingers and thumbs with two left feet and you can be infuriatingly stubborn, especially when it comes to me. You are humble, centered and naive and,” she paused and tenderly caressed Mel’s cheek, wiping away a falling tear, “I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

“Really?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Don’t say that, Janice, we’ve come too close in the past year.”

There was a moment of silence between them as they studied each other. Janice realized she needed to get out of that room, or she would be kissing that beautiful face in front of her. She smiled, gently squeezed Mel’s chin, moved back and stood up. “Sounds like a big day tomorrow. I should get to bed and let you get some sleep, also.”

“Janice?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. I’m so grateful for you,” she said, softly.

“That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me, Mel,” Janice said, suddenly choked up. “Goodnight, Mel,” she said quickly as she returned to her own room.

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Something woke Janice out of a sound sleep. When her eyes adjusted to the dark, she was startled by Melinda sitting on the edge of her bed. "Mel?"

"Guess again," Xena growled.

Janice was now wide awake. "No. No, no, no, you can't be here."

"You think I'm happy about it? Every time I start getting frisky with my soulmate, I end up here," Xena snarled, frustrated.

"I see where that would be exasperating," Janice said, her memory wandering back a few nights earlier, recalling vividly one of Xena's many skills. "I thought maybe whatever the situation was calling you here had resolved itself."

"Obviously not," Xena said, brusquely.

"Hey," Janice, whose eye started to twitch, said. "Don't take it out on me. I'm not the one who keeps bringing you here and I know as much about whatever is going on as you do."

Xena raised a hand in supplication. "You're right." She took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Catch me up on what's been happening."

Janice did her best to recap all the events and conversations of the past two days. "Listen," she continued, "We're going to a fair tomorrow with Mel's brother and this guy, Chet. Mel's brother knows her just about better than anyone so it's going to be difficult passing you off as a brain-damaged Mel."

"Brain damaged?" Xena was insulted.

"You know what I mean," Janice said and waved her off. "We briefly talked about Mel's concussion, but we all thought it was better."

“Meaning you thought that I wouldn’t be back.”

“Yeah.”

“Even though we still have no idea why I keep showing up in the first place.”

“Yeah.” Janice’s shoulders slumped. “Maybe you should go back to bed and in the morning, Mel will be Mel again.”

Xena sighed. “We can only hope.” She focused on Janice after her vision became acclimated to the darkness. “Still got that eye thing, huh?”

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Much to Janice and Xena’s dismay, Mel had not returned by morning. After Janice’s eye stopped convulsing, she went downstairs, ahead of Xena, to announce that ‘Mel’ was not herself again, to prepare everyone for ‘Mel’s’ strange behavior.

“Is it that concussion thing?” Ophelia asked Janice.

“I think so,” Janice said, vaguely. “She’s talking and acting the same way she did yesterday morning, when she got off the train.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Suzanna said. “I’d hoped she’d recovered. At least her mama will be able to experience Concussion Melinda. I don’t think Julianna believed me.”

“Concussions are unpredictable,” Janice said. “The residual effects could last a while. That’s what the doctor on the train said.”

“The doctor on the train said what?” Julianna asked, as she swept into the kitchen. She looked around. “Good morning, all.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Pappas,” Janice said. “Mel isn’t feeling as well this morning and the doctor on the train said that concussions are like that so I just thought I would warn you in advance.”

“Να τους προειδοποιήσεις για μένα.” *It’s to warn them about me,* Xena said, entering the kitchen, with a smile.

Julianna approached Xena and felt her forehead. Xena seemed startled by the action, but Janice had reminded her upstairs, that Mel’s family was very touchy-feely. Since Xena could be very ouchy-bleedy when it came to invading her personal space, Janice made a point to refresh Xena’s memory.

“You don’t seem to be running a fever,” Julianna stated. “Are you nauseous? Dizzy? Seeing okay?” Julianna looked at Xena’s face, surprised. “Melinda, where are your glasses?”

Janice translated Julianna’s question.

“Right here.” Xena held up her hand to display the folded spectacles. “They give me a headache when I feel like this.”

“Melinda... what causes you to speak Greek?” Julianna asked, concerned. “Why do you sound like a Yankee speaking Greek?” Mel’s mother looked over at Janice, accusingly.

“Πρέπει να φταίει ο τραυματισμός στο κεφάλι, γιατί ακούγομαι μια χαρά.” *It must be the head injury because I sound fine to me,* Xena said, pleasantly.

“Well, this is the oddest thing I’ve ever seen,” Julianna said. “You don’t even seem like the same person. I really think you should see Dr. Applekamp.”

“I’ve seen a doctor, moth...” She was poked in the back by Janice. “Mama,” Xena quickly corrected, not that Julianna would have recognized the mistake.

Julianna turned to Suzanna. “Do you see it, too? Her whole bearing is different.”

“Yes, it is,” Suzanna agreed. “She’s strong as a steer, too.”

“Γεια σου, Είμαι εδώ.” *Hello, I’m right here*, Xena said, while Janice continued to interpret the conversation.

“Are you really?” John Melvin had joined the discussion at the bottom stair that led to the kitchen. He strolled to the icebox and removed the fresh orange juice Ophelia had squeezed that morning.

Xena turned toward John Melvin and her breath caught. She looked like she had seen a ghost. “Lyceus?” she asked in a haunted whisper.

“What?” Mel’s younger brother looked at her, confused.

“She said, ‘I see us’,” Janice said quickly. She was then on the receiving end of everyone’s attention. Janice shrugged. “Nonsensical stuff. Concussion.”

Xena couldn’t help herself. She reached over to John Melvin and pulled him into a crushing embrace.

“Whoa, take it easy there, Superman, I don’t need any broken bones. Besides, why the hug? You just saw me nine hours ago.”

Janice saw tears in Xena’s eyes. Could it be possible that Mel’s brother was an exact replica of Xena’s beloved brother whose death for which she had always felt responsible?

“Seriously, Melinda, when did you get so strong?” John Melvin asked, as Xena eased up on the hug.

“That’s exactly what I said yesterday,” Suzanna stated, slapping the countertop, apparently glad for the corroboration.

Xena released John Melvin and wiped her eyes.

“My darling girl, why are you crying?” Julianna asked, gently.

“Must be the concussion making me emotional,” Xena said, getting control of her reaction. “Where’s your friend Chet?” Xena asked John Melvin, needing a subject change.

After Janice translated, Suzanna said, “Now, that’s encouraging, you asking after Chet.”

“He apologized but he was called back to Charleston this morning for some top-secret military business he isn’t able to share with me. He said he will join us later, either for the ball or the game but he won’t be here for the fair,” John Melvin explained.

“That’s a shame,” Suzanna said. “I thought a full day at the fair, followed by the other festivities, would get you two better acquainted.” She looked pointedly at Xena.

Janice tried hard to contain her frown. “I thought you wanted Mel to stay home. If she marries Chet, she’ll have to go with him wherever he’s stationed. That would keep her away for years at a time.”

“Not really,” John Melvin said. “Chet’s rich and Melinda’s not poor,” He winked at Xena. “I’m sure she could get away from wherever he was stationed for a few weeks at least once a year.”

“And if she starts having babies, we could all go visit them,” Suzanna said.

“Are you all done planning out my life for me?” Xena, still speaking Greek, asked, amused. “How about we just get through today?”

“Yes, by all means,” Julianna said, “Let’s have breakfast and get you kids off to the fair. It’s Big Thursday. Make the most of it.” She smiled at her family and stopped when she got to Janice. “My dear, what is wrong with your eye?”

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“I remember when the carnival part of the fair was held on the streets of downtown Columbia,” John Melvin said, as they strolled toward the fairground entrance on Rosewood. “Melinda, remember when great-uncle Max was visiting from Greece, and he went on the Giant Rocket roller coaster with us?” John Melvin began to chuckle about the memory.

“Το ξέχασα, θύμισέ μου το.” *Oh, I forgot. Remind me,* Xena said, looking at Mel’s brother adoringly.

“He’d never been on a roller coaster before?” John Melvin prompted. When it didn’t seem to spark a familiar recollection, John Melvin continued. “And when we went down that first drop so fast, he bit his cigar in half? He complained about the loss of that cigar and was picking tobacco out of his mouth for the rest of the day.”

“Why would he bite his cigar in half?” Janice asked before Xena could.

“Oh, because it scared him senseless,” John Melvin said. “You’ve been on roller coasters before, right?” After Janice nodded, he looked at Xena. “I know you’ve never been fond of quite a few of the rides but with Janice and me here to hold your hand, you’ve got to ride the Giant Rocket and the Caterpillar with us.”

“How do you know I like rides?” Janice asked.

John Melvin grinned. “Aw come on, Janice. An adventurer like you? I bet you aren’t scared of anything.”

“I’m not fond of Nazis,” Janice said, matter-of-factly.

“Who is?” John Melvin countered. He took his wallet out of his pocket. “I’ll pay for us to get in,” he said, hurrying up to the ticket booth.

“What are rides?” Xena asked Janice.

They stood at the entrance and Janice pointed to the mechanical devices on the midway. “Rides are machines that move people in several ways to create entertainment and enjoyment. Some rides move horizontally and align with the

ground, like the train and cars do. They usually spin around in a circle. Then there are vertical rides that take you vertically in the air and then back to the ground again. They move on gravity.”

“Sounds dull. I’m not sure how something so boring sounding can be joyous,” Xena said.

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“Jesus Herman Christ, that was fucking amazing!” Xena exclaimed, joyously, after the roller coaster cars came to a stop.

“What’d she say?” John Melvin asked.

“She said, ‘Oh my goodness, I loved it,’” Janice said, nearly giggling at Xena’s reaction. The warrior was like a little kid. “That was great. It’s been so long since I’ve been to a fair, I forgot how much fun they are.”

“Apparently, my sister has forgotten how much she hated it. I have never seen her take such delight on the Giant Rocket!”

“What’s next?” Xena asked. “Can we ride that again?”

“Let’s go try the Caterpillar now because there’s barely a line,” John Melvin said.

But Xena pointed to the Aerial Joy Ride, a tall tower with sixteen two-seater cars resembling tiny airplanes, suspended from a huge ring. “Let’s go on that one.”

Janice didn’t have to translate as John Melvin saw where his “sister” was pointing. “This is crazy. You’ve always hated that ride, too. Oh, look, there are the bumper cars. Let’s go on them next.”

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“Xena, the original purpose of bumper cars is to dodge them, not conquer every car in the rink. That’s why the original name was Dodge ‘em,” Janice patiently



explained. "The goal is to *avoid* getting hit by any car, not ram into anything that's moving."

"But it was more fun my way," Xena said.

"You made that little boy cry."

"He started it. He hit me first," Xena said, defensively.

"He was a little boy, trying to control his car!"

"Did you see that demonic smile on that kid's face when he kept crashing into me? That kid was Hades reincarnate. He didn't like it when I treated him the way he was treating me."

"And neither did his mother. There were complaints," Janice said, trying to physically stop her eye from spasming.

John Melvin joined Janice and Xena. "Well!" He said, rubbing his hands together. "We're banned from riding the bumper cars again." He saw Janice pick up on that he didn't seem too broken up about it. He shrugged. "It bothers my back. Those cars are too small."

"It didn't seem to bother Wilbur Shaw over here," Janice's head tilted in Xena's direction.

"It's wonderful to see you have such a good time," John Melvin said and leaned into Xena. "Personally, I think those mamas overreacted." He linked arms with his 'sister.' "Come on, Melinda, let's go on the Caterpillar."

"How about we do something calm, like those flying swings?" Janice suggested.

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"Gee, Janice, I'm so sorry," John Melvin said, holding Janice's hair back as she threw up in the rusted metal trash can behind the ride platform. "I never would

have thought something as sedate as the swings would have made you sick to your stomach. You were a real trooper on the more exciting rides.”

Janice’s hands were resting on her knees before she fully stood up. John Melvin handed her a handkerchief on which she wiped her mouth. “Well, that was pleasant,” her expression saying it was anything but. “I don’t know what it was but as soon as those swings ballooned out from each other, my stomach just flipped. And that kid running the ride wouldn’t stop it.”

“Don’t think he’ll do that again. You vomited all over his head from above. He’s going to have to work all day in those clothes. Thankfully you didn’t get any of it on you.”

“Little bastard,” Janice said. Suddenly she looked up at John Melvin. “My apologies. That was unladylike.”

John Melvin chuckled. “I thought you told Chet you were no lady.”

“True,” Janice agreed, “but if I offended you -”

Laughing harder, John Melvin then said, “Janice, I’m a sailor. I doubt there’s any curse word you could say that would shock me.”

Janice relaxed. “I grew up around mostly men doing dirty, smelly, sweaty work. The language could sometimes be a Thesaurus of excretion. I sometimes I forget whose company I’m in when I let curse words fly so freely.”

“Well, I’m okay with it but my mother will wash your mouth out with soap.”

“I don’t doubt it. Where’s Melinda?”

“Remember when we passed that food tent, and she liked what she smelled? She went back to get a plate of gizzard poutine.”

Just the thought of a fowl's fried entrails drenched in a thick gravy over french fries prompted Janice to snuggle up to that rusted barrel and deposit more of her breakfast in it.

Xena approached them enthusiastically devouring the food on her plate. Before she could get within 25 feet of Janice and John Melvin, John Melvin frantically waved Xena away, pantomiming eating, then pointed at Xena and waved her away again while Janice was still throwing up. Xena nodded at John Melvin, finished her food, tossed the paper plate in the trash, walked back to Mel's brother and Janice. When Janice stood up and again wiped her mouth, Xena gently rubbed Janice's back.

"I'm going to go to find her something for her stomach. I'll be right back," John Melvin said.

"Son-of-a-bitch, that was not fun," Janice declared and cleared the phlegm out of her throat, spitting into the garbage can a few times.

A few minutes later, John Melvin returned and handed Janice a paper cup that held a dark liquid in it. "It's Coke and Bitters," John Melvin told her. "It should help."

"Where did you find Bitters in the middle of a fair?" Janice asked, smelling the concoction before sipping it.

"I know a guy who knows a guy," John Melvin said.

The trio walked around the fair for a little while, visiting some of the exhibits before John Melvin brought up the possibility of going on more rides.

"That doesn't sound fun to me yet," Janice said and grimaced.

"I thought you felt better," Xena said.

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Nothing much left in my belly anyway," Janice replied, taking her last sip of Coke and Bitters."

“What would you like to do now?” John Melvin asked.

“Does this fair have a fun house or a haunted house, something like that?”

“Absolutely,” John Melvin said, grinning. “Melinda loves haunted houses.”

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“I do apologize for my sister,” John Melvin told the police officer. “She has a concussion from a fall she took on the train two days ago. I just think she was startled.”

“Of course she was startled. It’s a haunted house!” the police officer replied. “But putting Frankenstein in a head lock and punching the snot out of him is not the proper response. And why is Melinda speaking mumbo jumbo, John Melvin?”

“It’s the concussion Hank,” John Melvin said to the police officer he, his brother and Melinda had known since childhood. “And she just returned from Greece which is why she is probably speaking Greek.”

“Yeah, I remember when she ran away last year. Look at what it did to her. Your daddy would be so upset. What’d she do in Greece? Wrassling? Boxing?”

“Come on, Hank, give her a break,” John Melvin said. “It’s been a rough year for all of us, losing our daddy and all. We’ve all had to make adjustments and it hit Melinda harder than the rest of us. You know what a daddy’s girl she was.”

“Well, now, don’t worry. Teddy Cooke says he won’t press charges. He doesn’t want anyone to know he got the crap kicked out of him by a girl. Especially not one as feminine and refined as Melinda, well, *used* to be.”

“That was Teddy Cooke? Wow, he’s bulked up and gotten taller.”

“Yeah, look, I don’t want to throw y’all out of the fair, so you promise me your sister will behave herself and I’ll let y’all be on your way,” Hank said. “Don’t take

her to any more haunted houses. Or even the Fun House. Especially keep her away from the bumper cars. Take her to the beer garden, that'll calm her down."

John Melvin laughed. He looked over at Janice sitting next to his sister, talking to her. "That'll calm us all down."

"How many times do I have to apologize?" Xena asked Janice, exasperated.

"As many times as it takes to not get yourself arrested. Look, it was an honest mistake, at least on your part," Janice said, her tone conciliatory. "I should have known that people jumping out at you unexpectedly would not be a good idea, so it's my fault, too."

They watched as the policeman and John Melvin parted ways. John Melvin walked toward them. "You lucked out, sis. Frankenstein's embarrassed monster is not going to press charges. Where did you learn to fight like that? They don't even teach us to punch that good in the Navy. Dang, Melinda, you leave as my prim and proper sister and come back as Jack Dempsey."

After Janice finished telling Xena what John Melvin had said, and explained who Jack Dempsey was, she turned to Mel's brother. "I taught her how to fight like that." A glare in Xena's direction stopped the Warrior Princess from releasing a side-splitting laugh at that statement. Janice continued, "We've been working in safe places with very few exceptions, but I felt she should know how to clobber someone if it was necessary. Remember, we do occasionally run into Nazis over there. Nazis aren't big on respect or permission, especially with women so she needed to learn how to defend herself."

"You might have made her a little too jumpy. Tell her she needs to try and control herself, though, or we're going to get asked to leave," he said with a wink to his 'sister'."

"Come on, Joe Louis," Janice said, to Xena. "Let's go find another ride."

"Πολος είναι ο Joe Louis?" Xena asked.

“Did she just ask who Joe Lewis is?” John Melvin, agape, inquired of Janice.

Even though that’s exactly what Xena had asked, Janice said, “No, she said ‘I like Joe Louis.’”

“Really? She hates boxing.”

*Shit.* Janice just smiled and pointed to her brain. “Concussion. What can I tell ya?”

“Γιαγαντιαίος πύραυλος?” Xena asked, enthusiastically.

“Let me guess,” John Melvin said to Xena. “You want to go back on the Giant Rocket again.” As she enthusiastically nodded, John Melvin took her hand and said, “Not before we go on the Caterpillar. I’ve been waiting all day.” He pulled her in the direction of the ride, then turned to Janice. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll pass,” Janice said, putting her hand up a halting motion. “You two have fun.”

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The trio stayed at the fair until late afternoon with no more incidents. As “Melinda” and John Melvin began to run into more and more people they knew, Janice advised Xena to just pretend she had lost her voice. It seemed easier than explaining why someone born and bred in Columbia could not speak English. Janice thought Xena did well pretending to know people and receiving hugs without bristling or punching anyone. Well, except for Teddy Cooke but hopefully that was resolved.

They skipped the annual ball and chose to return to the Pappas estate to have another home cooked dinner. Chet had still not returned from Charleston, so they decided to go ahead to the football game and not wait for him. Ophelia or Edison would let Chet know, if he returned in time to catch most of the game, that he had a place in the Pappas section.

The Pappas family had their own private, small, seating area partitioned off at Carolina Stadium, as watching the Gamecocks play was a family event and the Pappas' name was treated like royalty at the University.

As all the household chores were done, Janice asked Ophelia if she and Edison would be accompanying them to the game and was told that, unless they worked there, colored people were not allowed to attend any of the festivities but there would be a fair specifically for them next week, put on by the Colored State Fair Association.

Janice was fuming when she went upstairs to use the bathroom and then find Xena, who'd preceded Janice upstairs to 'freshen up.' Upon Janice's exit from the lavatory, she ran directly into Xena, coming down the hall from Mel's bedroom.

"I cannot fucking believe the south!" Janice said in a harsh whisper. "I know you don't know anything about our civil war but -"

"Of course I know about the war between the states. For goodness sakes, Janice, what are you going on about?" Melinda drawled.

"Mel! You're back," Janice said, relieved. She enveloped Mel in a grateful hug.

"Obviously, I've missed most of the day. Did I at least have fun?" Mel stepped away from Janice.

"Uh...sure. You had a great time," Janice said, not lying but omitting Xena's close calls with getting arrested. "And, no, we still don't know the reason for her being here."

"I wish we'd find out why she keeps showing up," Mel said. "I'd really like to visit with my family." Mel's tone was a cross between annoyance and curiosity.

"Trust me, it's no fun for me and Xena isn't amused, either. On the other hand, John Melvin and I are becoming great friends, united in passing you off as Mel."

“You mean he knows?” Mel looked shocked that Janice would tell anyone who hadn’t been there when the first soul switch took place.

“No but we ran into too many of your friends at the fair and he’s been quick to immediately take over the conversation. Xena did really well by pretending to be you with laryngitis and letting total strangers touch her...for the most part.” Those last four words came out in a mumble.

“What was that?” Melinda leaned forward, turning her ear toward Janice.

“Nothing, really. It’s just Xena can be a bit peevish with contact. She is every inch a warrior and not a polite, refined, southern belle, but she gave John Melvin control and took her cues from him. Just like you’ll have to do tonight if you run into any of the people we ran into this afternoon.”

Melinda nodded. “This is a nightmare,” she said, frustrated. “I missed the entire day at the fair and all that time with John Melvin.”

“Speaking of that, apparently, your brother looks almost exactly like Xena’s younger brother, Lyceus.”

“Oh, my,” Melinda exclaimed. “How strange is that, Janice?”

“I don’t question ‘strange’ anymore. I hope whatever Xena is doing here is resolved before we go back to Greece. I can’t have a 1900-year-old warrior blowing her top on a Stratoliner, 20,000 feet over the Atlantic because she doesn’t understand aerodynamics.”

“No, that would definitely be a problem,” Melinda said, as Janice gaped at her understatement. “Now, why were you asking about the war between the states?”

“Melinda?” Julianna called from downstairs, “We don’t want to be late for the game.”

“We’re coming right down, Mama,” Melinda responded.



“Oh, thank goodness. Melinda’s back,” the voice of John Melvin said, with definite relief in his tone.

Once Mel & Janice reached the bottom of the stairs, Julianna met them with her arms crossed over her chest. “What’s this I hear about you roughhousing at the fair?”

Janice cut a sharp look to John Melvin who shook his head and shrugged. “I didn’t say anything,” he told his sister’s best friend.

“Say anything about what?” Julianna asked, suspiciously, turning toward her youngest son.

“I have no recollection of anything, Mama, although my knuckles hurt a little,” Melinda said, shaking out her hand.

“Um, what did you hear, Mrs. Pappas?” Janice asked carefully.

“I got a call from Adele Shortsleeves who heard from Annabella Anderson-Gore that my lovely girl here, hit some people while yelling gibberish.”

“Greek,” Janice corrected.

“Well, I know that but Mrs. Anderson-Gore didn’t.” Julianna said.

Melinda, righteously, registered shock. She looked back and forth between her brother and Janice and their guilty silence made her eyes narrow. “Anything you forgot to mention during my ‘debriefing’?”

“Oh, I know,” John Melvin said and snapped his fingers as though he just remembered the incident. “Melinda kept losing control of her bumper car and ran into a few other riders, some were kids. Their parents took exception to that. But it wasn’t on purpose so we didn’t think it would be an issue. Right, Janice?”

“Right, John Melvin,” Janice agreed, impressed at his quick thinking. Neither mother nor daughter appeared to be convinced, though.

“I certainly don’t consider that roughhousing,” Julianna said. “I’m sure she said Melinda really hit somebody.”

“Oh, you know how Annabella exaggerates,” Suzanna said, breezing into the room. “Come on, let’s go or we are going to miss Kick Off. Also, Chet called and he’ll meet us at the game.”

“Okay,” Julianna said and picked up her purse. “But I’m not sure we’re done talking about this,” she said to Melinda and John Melvin, before she turned and followed her sister out the door.

Janice, relieved at believing she had dodged a bullet, found her mood short lived when Melinda leaned into her and crisply said, “*I know* we aren’t done talking about this.”

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The Pappas entourage settled themselves into their reserved seats at the fifty yard-line in the Gold Section at Carolina Stadium. They arrived in time to see the teams get introduced and take the field.

“Wow,” Janice said, looking out onto the gridiron. “The view from these seats is amazing. I’ve never been this close to the players before. I feel as though I should be in on the team huddle.”

“I’m going to get a coke from concessions,” John Melvin announced. “Anybody else want anything?”

“I’ll go with you,” Janice said, jumping up from her chair.

As they walked away, she overheard Suzanna say to Mel, “They’re getting along fabulously. Don’t you think so, Melinda?”

Janice turned back to see Mel look up at her and her brother, then back at her aunt. “It does seem so,” Melinda agreed. Janice thought she sounded sad. Or

maybe Janice just hoped she sounded sad. Once they got out of hearing range, Janice tugged on John Melvin's sleeve. "This gossip your mother heard, do you think that will actually go anywhere?"

He shrugged, as they got in line. "I hope not but some of these old biddies are like porch dogs with a beef bone. They lock their jaws onto it until it's been chewed up swallowed and pooped out so they can sniff through that."

Janice grimaced and said, "That sounds particularly graphic." She heard the roar of the crowd responding to kick-off. Once the noise level dropped, she said, "I just don't want Melinda's pristine reputation to get muddied because of her alternate personality from the concussion." *Or because of her association with me*, Janice thought.

"I wouldn't spend too much time worrying about it. You two will be gone again in a couple days and I know my mama won't stand for anything bad said about my sister. They may not have always got along but she is fiercely protective of Melinda and Melinda's status, especially if it's a threat to the Pappas name. She certainly spent enough time making sure Melinda was as perfect as she could be, especially in public."

*Oh, goody*, Janice thought, her shoulders slumping, *there goes any hopes of a future for Mel and me*.

"Also, if Mrs. Anderson-Gore persists, Mama will put her in her place. Especially since Teddy Cooke promised Hank he would not speak of the incident ever again."

"True. And since nobody was in that Frankenstein room with us when it happened, it's not like any witnesses can contradict him," Janice said. "If Hank hadn't been right outside and heard the commotion, no one would have been the wiser."

"You mean if Teddy hadn't told on himself to Hank and then realized what it sounded like when he said it." John Melvin chuckled. "The look on his face with that monster make-up on."

Janice joined him in the laughter. "What about the bumper cars?" They moved up in line and she waited until she and John Melvin purchased their sodas and were on their way back to their seats.

"No way will Mama believe Melinda ever made a child cry on purpose."

"Yeah, but, I don't want you outright lying to your mother, either," Janice said to him.

"Don't worry. Mama will have an entire conversation in her head, work out the details of what she righteously believed happened and not only will no one be able to change her mind, no one will get a word in edgewise when she tells you her version of what happened. I honestly believe that my mother invented the southern soliloquy."

Back in their section, after the Gamecock cheering occupants of the stadium did their tenth rendition of "Hold That Tiger," and before the end of the first quarter, Melinda leaned over to Janice and asked, "It looks like you and John Melvin are getting close."

"He's a cute guy," Janice said, paying more attention to what was going on downfield, where the Tigers were waiting to score. She then looked at Melinda to see what appeared to be a worried look on the bespeckled beauty's face. "Don't worry, Mel, I think he's great, but I am not attracted to him." When she thought Melinda would respond with a grateful sigh because heaven forbid anyone as common as Janice would marry into the family, Melinda sat back and looked insulted.

"Why? What's wrong with him?" she said, sounding offended.

"Nothing," Janice said, defensively. "He's perfect...for somebody else. He's just not my type. I thought we talked about this."

"Well, we sort of did but I thought maybe you changed your mind with all the time you're spending with him."

Janice smiled and patted Melinda's shoulder. "Like I said, he's a great guy and I think we've become pretty decent friends through all of this, but I can assure you there is no attraction there."

"Maybe Chet is more to your liking?" Melinda asked.

"Nope. Sorry, Mel, but Chet is about as appealing as a shit lollipop."

"Oh, my, that's descriptive," Melinda said, disgusted and amused.

"Speaking of the anchor clanker," Janice said, as Chet approached the group.

"Anchor clanker?" Melinda asked, not understanding the slang.

"Sure, anchor clanker, swabbie, squid. You know, Navy men," Janice told her.

"Hey, everyone. My apologies for missing what sounds like a fun day. Duty called," Chet said, smiling. He was oozing charm as he greeted Julianna and Suzanna. When he passed over John Melvin and Janice with barely a glance, he pulled a chair to sit next to Melinda, raised her hand up to his lips and kissed it, never breaking eye contact. "Melinda. You're looking exquisite, as usual. You must promise me at least one dance at your family's costume party tomorrow evening since I missed dancing with you tonight."

Melinda told him she would, nearly giggling like a schoolgirl again, which annoyed Janice almost beyond reason. She leaned over to John Melvin. "Do you think you could rein in Rudolph Valentino over there? I think he's making your sister uncomfortable."

John Melvin leaned forward to look, then sat back. "I think it's making you uncomfortable," he told Janice and smirked.

Thankfully, Janice had swallowed the gulp of soda she had just taken, otherwise she would have spewed it all over him. "What? What do you mean?"

"Chet's a catch. You're attracted to him, too. I get it," John Melvin said.

Janice stared at him, slack-jawed, then closed her mouth and patted his hand. "Oh, John Melvin. Dear, sweet, John Melvin, I can promise you you've completely misread the situation."

He looked at Janice, surprised, then clearly misread the situation even more. He smiled, brightly. "Janice, I'm flattered and if I wasn't already seeing a woman in Hawaii..." He trailed off, his voice hushed. "I haven't said anything to anyone yet because I don't want to jinx it. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Only if you tell me about her later," Janice whispered to him, conspiratorially.

"Now, Janice, you're family now," John Melvin said and winked at her. "So I can't or I might jinx it."

Janice laughed, while the crowd suddenly screamed about the USC quarterback getting sacked.

"Hey!" Suzanna jumped up, hollering out to the field, "Would it be too much to ask the team to put someone in who could protect our quarterback?!"

"Put in Melinda Pappas!" The shout came from the balcony above them. The family looked up in unison to see Teddy Cooke yelling to the coach on the field while glaring daggers at Melinda.

Janice and John Melvin then saw that the other four occupants of the Pappas section were scowling at them and they sunk down in their seats. She focused on Melinda, whose eyes were slits and lips were pursed.

Both of Janice's eyes began to twitch.

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The stadium emptied out a little bit after 11 o'clock PM. It was a University of South Carolina victory as the Gamecocks won over Clemson 18-14. Julianna, Melinda and John Melvin left in the car Chet rented in Charleston from the Hertz 'Drive-Ur-Self' system to get himself back to Columbia, while Suzanna asked Janice to stay behind and ride with her in the family car headed back to the Pappas estate. It was silence between them, at first, as Edison drove them away from Carolina Stadium. Finally, Suzanna spoke.

"Your eyes seemed to have settled down some. I wonder what causes that."

"I don't know. It only started happening on this trip," Janice told her, knowing well what caused it.

There was an awkward silence, then Suzanna said, softly, "You don't fool me, you know."

"I don't?" Janice was cautious until she found out where this was going.

"Nope. I know a lot of people think my cornbread in't done in the middle, but I've got eyes. And I've seen the look in yours when you're close by each other."

"You have?" Janice said, meekly, in preparation of what she expected to come next.

"Yes, I have. You're not fooling me, Miss Janice." Suzanna put her hand up to halt further commentary. "I know, I know. It's *Doctor* Janice. But you're going to have to downplay that if you have any hopes of anything serious with John Melvin."

Janice started to respond defensively but then it registered what Susanna said.

"John Melvin?" She repeated, surprised.

"I saw the way you looked at him last night when he was standing next to Melinda and I saw you both tonight at the game, getting cozy. I know that look and you, my dear doctor, are in love. Now, if you want to pursue that, you just come to me and we'll start working on a new you. I know the best cosmetic and hairdressing

people in town. As for your clothes, we're about the same size and I have a lot of fancy dresses and skirts I know would do you justice."

*Oh boy*, Janice thought. She pictured herself coming to dinner in a Scarlett O'Hara cinched waist, hooped skirt and her hair in Becky Thatcher ringlets. "I, uh, like to dress comfortably."

"Yes, and that's a problem. You're a beautiful girl and you would attract many more beaus, especially John Melvin, if you dressed to enhance that beauty."

Janice knew the sweet and oblivious Susanna was just trying to be helpful. She blushed at the compliment and cleared her throat, feeling somewhat awkward. "Thank you but...wouldn't I be misrepresenting myself, dressing so femininely when I'm not...well, feminine?"

"Oh, no," Susanna said, grinning. "No, you only do what you must do to bait the hook. Once you've caught your big fish, then you can be as comfortable as you want to be."

"But," Janice started, treading carefully, "isn't that dishonest?"

"Not really. You're just advertising your assets. Once you're married, your husband should be the only one to intimately know your womanly treasures."

"Womanly treasures?" Janice repeated. *Too late for that*. More people than she cared to admit had already followed her "treasure" map to its reward.

Suzanna reached over and patted Janice's hand. "I understand. I've given you a lot to ponder. You think about it and let me know. Do you want me to put a bug in John Melvin's ear?"

Janice, never having heard the expression before, scrunched up her face. "Why would I want you to do that?"

"You know, just to give him the notion it's okay to reciprocate your feelings."



“No!” Janice said a little too abruptly, almost startling Susanna with her tone. “No, no,” she said, more calmly. “If it’s going to happen, I’d rather let nature take its course.”

“Okay. I’m here if you need me.” Suzanna said, reassuringly. “Don’t wait too long, though. John Melvin is the most eligible bachelor in town.” She winked at Janice and directed her next sentence to Edison.

Janice rode in silence for several minutes, afterward. She was going to have a discussion with Melinda about the middle of Aunt Suzanna’s cornbread when she got back to the house.

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Chet and John Melvin had dropped Melinda and her mother off at home and decided to go out with some of John Melvin’s friends to celebrate the Gamecocks win.

It was nearly midnight. Melinda and Julianna got back to the estate just about 5 minutes before Edison drove up the winding driveway and let his two passengers out at the front door.

Julianna and Suzanna bid goodnight and went to their rooms and Janice followed a silent Melinda out to the veranda. “Are you mad at me, Mel?”

Mel turned to face Janice, the light breeze at Janice’s back began moving the wisps of dark strands that had escaped Melinda’s perfectly coiffed hairdo. Backlit by the full moon, Melinda was a vision of loveliness that, once again, took Janice’s breath away. “I was but then I realized you really had no time to tell me what Xena had done at the fair. So, no, I’m not mad, I’m just...exasperated.”

“At me?”

A small smile found its way to Melinda's lips. "No, Janice. As hard as it is to be missing this time with my family, I'm exasperated that I can't be here for you, either. I mean, I've basically left you alone to fend for yourself."

"Oh, Mel, you can't control when Xena comes and goes or what she does when she's here and I'm getting along just fine with your family. And, apparently, Xena can't control when she shows up, either."

"I just would like it to end. Xena's behavior in her time for her life is fine. I'm still fighting the gossip that I ran away from home...at 24. I don't want the reputation of being able to beat up grown men and make little children cry."

"In Xena's defense, that kid was kind of an asshole."

"Not the point, Janice, and you know it," Mel snapped. She took a deep breath and let it out. "Sorry. I'm annoyed and trying not to take it out on anyone."

"How did you find out? We were trying to keep it from you so you wouldn't get upset."

"Teddy Cooke's sister, Dixie, caught up with us when we were getting into Chet's car. Growing up, she and I never got along in school, so she blurted it all out to all of us. Mama looked at me and I couldn't tell her anything, but John Melvin cracked under the pressure of her glare and told her everything."

"No wonder he chose to continue the evening with Chet," Janice said, caught between feeling pissed off at and admirable of Mel's brother's avoidance. "That rogue."

"Then, after that, Chet began to speak disapprovingly of you, saying you were a bad influence on me and I shouldn't be associating with someone like you."

"Someone like me?" Janice asked, surprised, then angry. "What did he mean by that?"

“He said you were not in our class and associating with you would only make my reputation worse.”

Janice bowed her head, feeling that what Chet said was correct. These were issues Janice said to herself every day. “What did you say?”

“Well, before I could say anything, my mama told him to hush and said she would not tolerate one of her guests talking about another one of her guests like that. Then John Melvin spoke up and said he thought that even though you’re a little rough around the edges, he really enjoys spending time with you and that we don’t judge people by class.”

“What did Chet say?”

“He apologized to Mama but had a smirk that told me he really wasn’t sorry for anything he said.”

“The guy’s a creep, Mel. It makes me wonder why you giggle at some of the smarmy compliments he gives to you.”

“It’s a nervous habit. It’s not new. You saw it several times in Greece. I giggle when I feel trapped and don’t know what to say. Like the time the...um...aromatic...Mr. Karagiannis kept asking me out in front of all the dig crew. My response was to giggle until you told him to -”

“Get his rancid, smelly ass away from my translator and don’t fucking come to the site again,” Janice finished for her.

“Yes. That. And you saying it with a pistol in your hand convinced him.”

“Okay. You’re right. You do giggle when your nervous,” Janice conceded.

They were both silent, staring out at the night sky when Melinda said, “All right. It’s late. Tomorrow’s another big day with the party and I’ll be helping to cook most of the vittles, so I’m off to bed.”

“You didn’t say anything about a costume party, Mel. I don’t have anything to wear.”

Mel smiled. “Of course you do. You can dress exactly how you would dress on one of our digs. Practical for you but it would definitely be a costume according to the people who will attend tomorrow.”

At first, Janice thought she should be insulted but then the thought of wearing her every day clothes changed her mind. “Great idea. I can be comfortable and not have to keep pretending I’m someone that I’m not.”

“Has it been that difficult, Janice?” Melinda asked, sincerely.

“Nah. It’s really been okay. The only thing I have had to adjust to was not as much swearing and barely being able to smoke my cigars. Being respectful to your family has been easy, as they have been respectful to me.”

“I’m glad. Goodnight, Janice,” Melinda said, quietly as she turned and walked inside.

“Goodnight, Mel. See you in the morning.” After Melinda had disappeared inside, Janice added, “hopefully.” She removed one of her cheroots from the nearly new pack and lit it. She puffed a couple times, held it between her teeth and spoke around it. “Chet, you and I are going to have a nice, long chat. I don’t care whose friend or commanding officer you are or where your family comes from or what their hoity toity businesses are. You, my boy, are going to answer some questions.”

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The next morning, both Janice and Mel were thrilled with Mel waking up as Mel. They both hoped it would last. The morning meal was a quieter affair as Suzanna, John Melvin and Chet had driven to Charleston to pick up a couple of cases of Old Silas whiskey from the master distiller.

Immediately after breakfast, Julianna, Ophelia and Melinda went over the plans for cooking and preparing for the party. Julianna had hired a catering service to supplement the food and personnel, and a cleaning and planning service to get the estate in shape.

Janice helped Edison putter around the property, ensuring the exterior was tidy and that the gardeners and landscapers were following Julianna's plan to a T. There were a few temporary employees who were clearly not fond of taking orders from a Negro but after Janice asked them if they wanted Miss Julianna to have to drop everything to come out and repeat what Edison had just told them, they stopped being difficult. Julianna's reputation was legendary in Columbia and no one wanted to get on her bad side. Julianna could say more with a cut of her eyes than a whole debate club's worth of speeches.

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When Janice returned to the house, the decorations were up, and the spirit of Halloween had begun to percolate through the specified party rooms. She strolled down the hall toward the delicious aroma of food cooking. She wanted to check in on Mel to ensure Mel was still Mel but before she could reach the kitchen, she was caught by Julia who turned her around and linked arms with her.

"We need to have a little tête-à-tête," Julianna said to Janice, as she gestured Janice into the office. "I have concerns." Julianna followed the archeologist in and shut the door behind them.

Before Julianna could say anything, Janice put her hand up in a halting motion. "I know what you're concerned about. Aunt Suzanna already talked to me."

"She did?" Julianna asked, definite surprise in her tone.

"Yes and I am not interested in John Melvin."

Julianna folded her arms across her chest. "I almost wish you were. No, I know which Pappas you're interested in and I know it isn't John Melvin. Or Ridley."

Janice wanted to refute Julianna's words. She held her breath while she decided how to react. She could have outright denied what Mel's mother was suggesting but she'd already taken too long to respond for her to be convincing. She released the air from her lungs. "I, uh, I don't know what to say," Janice said, in a tone as neutral as she could muster.

"Thank you for not denying it," Julianna said.

Janice looked her in the eyes. "What's the point? You've already made up your mind," she said, subdued. "I'll, uh, go pack my things and -"

"Don't be so hasty, Dr. Covington," Juliana said, quickly. "Before you go running off, why don't you hear what I have to say?"

Janice hung her head, embarrassed and angry. "I've heard it all before, Mrs. Pappas. That I'm a pervert, a degenerate, an abomination, that your daughter should in no way ever be associated with me after this...I don't think you could say anything that's new."

Julianna uncrossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "You might be surprised."

"I doubt it," Janice mumbled.

Mel's mother patted the back of one of the two chairs in front of a heavy, oak desk. "Let's sit."

Hesitantly, Janice complied and braced herself for a lecture on morality by Tommy Gun Pappas. The thought of Melinda finding out and never wanting to see Janice again was punch-in-the-gut painful. And everything had been going so well. "Okay. Go ahead. Eviscerate me. I'm ready." She looked up to see Julianna sporting somewhat of a smile. *A smile? Shit, this is going to be epic.*

“Let’s get the obvious out of the way first, shall we?” Julianna suggested, her demeanor nothing less than professional.

“If we must,” Janice said, not ungraciously.

“Are you and my daughter involved, romantically and intimately?”

Janice started to shake her head before Julianna finished. “No. I swear to you, we are just friends. The most intimate I have ever been with Melinda is when I helped her wash bird shi, I mean, poop, out of her hair during a dig in Crete. Trust me, it was a bearded vulture and she needed my assistance. She meaning Melinda, not the bird. The bird had already flown away and damn it, I’m babbling. And cursing,” Janice said and wished she had the ability to disappear. She closed her eyes to regroup and tentatively continued. “Look, Mrs. Pappas, I’m in love with Melinda. I won’t disrespect your obvious intelligence by saying anything different. But I have never imposed my will or my feelings on her. I would never put her in a position that would offend her or bring shame upon her. As much as it would kill me, I would cut her completely out of my life rather than have her experience any debasing of her reputation or the Pappas name at my expense.”

“Does she know? That you’re in love with her?”

“No, Ma’am. She’s completely clueless. I do my best to hide it from her. Obviously, not well enough if it only took you 3 days to see it.” There was a palpable silence and Janice wondered why Julianna hadn’t laid into her yet. In fact, Mel’s mother honestly didn’t look the least bit shocked.

Julianna nodded her head. “Interesting.”

“Beg pardon?” Janice tilted her head, not understanding why any of this was ‘interesting.’

“Well, I’ve also seen the way she looks at you. And if I’m not mistaken, the feelings are mutual.”

Janice blinked several times and repeated, “Beg pardon?”

“You are so wrapped up in not revealing your feelings for her that you clearly don’t see the way she looks at you.”

Janice swallowed audibly. “No, she, she’s not...I don’t...what?”

“She is in love with you, Janice,” Julianna stated.

Janice was rarely at a loss for words but her sudden lack of conversational skills seemed to be becoming a habit while in this house. She opened her mouth to say something two different times and closed it without making a sound.

“Now, don’t think just because I’m calmly discussing this with you means I understand your love for each other. I don’t. We’re a Baptist family in every sense of the word and we are a well-known in this state and in our church. Both Melvin and I came from families of prestige, and we have not had a public scandal in all our generations. It takes a lot of work to keep everyone focused on their proper paths to keep our image intact.

“Now, having said that,” Julianna paused for a big sigh, “I’m also practical. The reason we have had no public scandals is because we have hidden them well. The Pappas’ and Beaulieu families have enough skeletons for our closet to form a graveyard.” Julianna stood up and walked behind the desk. “I’m going to have a drink. Care to join me?”

“God, yes,” Janice said, relaxing a little.

“Is bourbon okay?” She asked holding up the decanter half-filled with a dark caramel colored liquid.

“Bourbon is perfect, thank you.”

Julianna picked up a crystal decanter and poured the contents into two tumblers. “My youngest brother, Melinda’s Uncle Ridley, was a homosexual. I loved that boy from the minute he was born. I saw nothing wrong with him, especially when I was younger. I never believed it was something he chose but something he



inherently was.” She returned to the chair, handed Janice the glass and sat back down. “The only thing that provoked me into believing there was an issue was the behavior of my parents and my older brother, Claude, who called Ridley an invert. They constantly spoke of his ‘moral failing’ and tried to turn him into my rude, obnoxious, bully of an older brother because that’s what they believed a ‘real’ man should be.” Julianna stared at the liquid in her glass as she swirled it around.

“Ridley loved dancing, Maurice Chevalier, Broadway musicals & he hated sports,” Julianna continued. “He wasn’t built like Claude; he was slight. He didn’t have Claude’s confidence or, arrogance is more like it. Ridley was just a sweet, lovable, pleasant boy. And the things Claude and Claude’s friends would do to him made my blood boil, while my parents stood by and let them, thinking it was a good way to toughen Ridley up. It didn’t.”

“Did he give in to Claude?” Janice asked.

“Under great pressure, he tried out for our high school football team to please our parents. He played in one practice session. Claude was so used to calling Ridley a sissy and other colorfully derogatory names, especially in front of the other kids at school that Ridley’s teammates took up the mantel. He never made it to his first game. During practice, Claude and his tyrants beat him bloody and to the point where he could not play. My parents blamed Ridley for not ‘changing.’ Ridley cried to me that he didn’t know how to change, how to pretend to be anyone other than who he was. He wanted me to assure him that the rest of his life wouldn’t be like this. I tried but he saw through my words of encouragement. The next morning, one of the workers found him hanging from the rafters of the stable. At first, I was suspicious of Claude but then my mother found a suicide note.”

“Oh, Mrs. Pappas, I am so sorry,” Janice said, sincerely. She was not only familiar with the process of attempting to ‘humiliate’ the homosexuality out of men but with similar results, as well. She had lost more than a few friends that way. It again made her wonder how her mother would have reacted, finding out that Janice was a lesbian. Her father really hadn’t been okay with it but neither did he condemn it. He just requested she not be obvious as some of the countries where they dug had instantaneous death sentences for her “kind.”

Julianna's eyes glistened with tears. "It was horrible. My parents were shocked and, only then, duly felt the shame of what they had helped perpetuate. Not Claude, though. He never shed a tear," Julianna said, bitterly. "He said he was glad the little 'queer' was gone. Suzanna came along a few years after Ridley was born so she really doesn't remember him. He was eleven when she was born, and she was four when he died. He adored Suzanna." Julianna downed her drink in four gulps. "My relationship with Claude was gravely affected after that but when I named my first son Ridley, he cut off all communication with me. Funny thing is, I don't miss him. What I miss is what should have been." She looked over at Janice who had yet to take a sip of her scotch.

"That's appalling. And tragic," Janice said, sympathetically. "Does Melinda know about her uncle Ridley?"

"She knows he existed, that I loved him dearly and he died at 15 but I've never told her what I've told you because I don't want her to be angry with her grandparents. Unlike Claude, my parents realized and admitted their part in it and have never forgiven themselves. On the other hand, Ridley's also one of the skeletons they don't discuss." She watched Janice take her first drink. "I told myself then that if any of my children were ever revealed to be homosexual that I would do my best to support them and love them no matter what. I would never destroy them like Ridley was destroyed by people he believed loved him. I thought I'd dodged that bullet but, here we are."

"So, you're not throwing me out?"

"No." She reached over and placed her glass on the edge of the desk. "I adore my children and Melinda, being my only daughter, holds a special place in my heart. It's always been my dream that she ends up with a husband and a family, that she is taken care of & has a successful marriage like her father and I had. But that's *my* dream for her and clearly not her dream for her. I've never seen her as happy, animated, and fierce as she is when she's around you. She's less awkward, less shy and less Melvin and Julianna's daughter or Ridley and John Melvin's sister and much more Melinda Pappas. You apparently have given her a sense of self I've never seen in her before. She feels important as herself with you. You treat her better than any of her male suitors ever did. I've seen nothing but positive

changes after spending a year with you. And you've been so sympathetic and patient about her head injury whereas the rest of us have been exasperated."

Janice took another sip of her drink, relieved that she and Xena seemed to be pulling off the charade.

"I may not understand the kind of romantic attraction you have for each other, but I have never seen such devotion to Melinda from any of her previous gentlemen callers. You do not have to tell me you would protect my daughter with your life. I love my daughter too much to intentionally break her heart just because I may not agree with her choice of companion, only in that I'm well aware of the kind of obstacles and possible violence you will face."

"Aren't you concerned about what your Baptist friends might say?" Janice asked, curiously.

"I believe accepting my children unconditionally for who they are and loving them no matter what is about the most Christian thing I can do, Baptist or not. I know Melvin and I raised our children the way every other Baptist in Columbia raised their children. The only rule I betrayed was in the continuation of my and Melinda's education. I disagree with their tenet that women should get married to a nice Baptist man right out of high school and create more little Baptists. There is plenty of time for that. Melinda is a decent, God-fearing, woman of faith. She has grown up going to church every Sunday, participated in all the youth group activities and she even wanted to be a Sunday School teacher, but women aren't allowed to do that if there are any men members who can do the job. I disagree with my church that a woman is lesser just because she's a woman and Jesus would turn against her just because of what her heart guided her to do."

"That's really admirably progressive," Janice said, awed. "I wish the world thought like you."

"I think most people have to experience something firsthand to provoke them to think differently than the church's doctrine. Had it not been for Ridley, I don't think I'd be quite so understanding. Also, I doubt that Melinda is going to settle

here when she has the opportunity to be with you, wherever your travels take you. Especially if she has my blessing.”

“Does she? Have your blessing?” Janice held her breath.

“I know it’s unorthodox and if it’s found out, I will be kicked out of my church but...she could do worse than ending up with a doctor. You’re a little shorter than I figured for her but, again, I never expected my daughter to grow to be almost as tall as her father.”

“Hey, there is something to be said for us short girls,” Janice said, smiling.

“One day, women of all ages, shapes and sizes will rule the world. Men have been messing it up long enough.”

“I like that attitude,” Janice said. She paused and asked again, “So she does have your blessing?”

“Yes, if that’s what she wants. Not that I want it blasted all over the state, I mean, we still practice decorum. The biggest obstacle we’ll need to get past is that -”

“I’m a woman,” Janice finished for her.

“No. That you’re a Yankee,” Julianna said with a wink.

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After Julianna’s ‘welcome to the family’ hug, she and Janice parted ways so that Julianna could continue overseeing the party prep.

Janice, who now felt as though she was walking on clouds, could not find an opportunity to get Chet alone to find out just what exactly his game was. It was possible this was how Chet normally ‘got the girl.’ Perhaps he was that type of

man who believed he should be the sole focus in a relationship, therefore eventually alienating his conquest's friends and loved ones from her life.

Still, Julianna pointed out that Mel was searching for someone to spend her life with that was just like her father and that Janice was more like Melvin than anyone else who courted her. So even if Melinda was looking for a husband, Chet wouldn't be her choice. Janice also realized that most of the time women didn't have a choice when all families involved maintained a certain prestige in society.

However, if what Julianna suspected was true, Chet didn't stand a chance.

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Melinda and Janice crossed paths rarely throughout the day because their specific chores kept them busy in different areas. The few times Janice was in Melinda's presence, Janice was nearly giddy and glowing. Melinda noticed and shook her head. Janice's behavior was downright weird at times, Melinda thought with a smile.

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It was early evening and Janice relaxed before she had to get ready for the festivities. It was wonderful to be back in her old clothes. It was the only time she felt really comfortable. She laid out her "costume" and draped her leather bomber jacket over the back of the chair in her room.

She was frustrated at not being able to corral Chet but she was determined to have her say before he and John Melvin left in the morning.

In the meantime, she remembered the cigar Chet had given her on the train. She decided to finally smoke it. She would be sure to tell him how lousy it was, even if she liked it. Janice took Chet's cigar from the inside of her jacket pocket and removed it from its cellophane wrapping. It was a little stinky but then some of the best cigars were. She was just about to stick it in her mouth and light it, when Mel, passing by Janice's room, ran in, quickly grabbed a tissue, reached over, and snatched it from Janice. Mel put the cigar in front of her nose and sniffed.

“What’d you do that for?” Janice asked, annoyed.

“Hemlock,” Mel said, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. She held the cigar out for Janice to smell.

“Xena?” Janice correctly guessed. It was in the eyes and aura. “It smells like a cigar.”

“It smells like animal urine,” Xena told her.

“Yeah, like a cigar,” Janice said again, bewildered.

“You can’t smoke these, Janice, they will kill you. In fact, you need to wash your hands right now.”

“*What?*” Janice said, shocked.

“I’m serious, Janice, wash your hands right now.”

Janice quickly went to the bathroom connected to her bedroom and scrubbed her hands nearly raw.

Xena appeared at the bathroom door. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s one that Chet gave me,” Janice told her.

“How many did he give you?”

“Just one, wrapped up in cellophane.”

“Did he want you to immediately smoke them?”

“He wanted to smoke it with me, but I told him I’d rather wait because I didn’t want him staring at me, waiting for an opinion. I told him I would save it for a

special occasion. But, I got curious.” Janice paused, thinking. “The cigar he pulled out of his suit pocket for himself wasn’t wrapped.” She looked at Xena. “Why would someone I’ve never met want to kill me?”

“Maybe he’s the soul of someone you met as Gabrielle,” Xena said, as she inspected the cigar. “Tell me again everything you know about him.”

His name is Chet DeGuilano, he’s from New York where his family has a couple businesses, and his family also has an apparently successful tobacco business in the Lazio region in Italy.”

“Lazio?”

“Yeah, where Rome is.”

“Rome.” Xena’s eyes became slits. “Is the name Chet short for anything?”

“Yes, Aunt Suzanna called him Chester and Chet politely corrected her and told her it was short for Chez-a-ray.”

“Cesare,” Xena repeated. Then it hit her. “Caesar,” she said, venomously spitting the name out.

“Caesar? As in Julius Caesar? Are you telling me Chet DeGuiliano is really Julius Fucking Caesar and he’s downstairs, in the Pappas living room right now?” Janice’s voice was a harsh whisper, as she didn’t want anyone to overhear her.

“That would make sense. It would explain why I’m here, why I keep coming back,” Xena said, suspiciously.

“What could he possibly want? And how did he find your ancestor out of all the women on this planet?”

“My guess is it has something to do with some kind of deal he made with the Fates. He’s calculating and he probably feels he is still owed his ‘destiny’ that was taken away when he was assassinated.”

“So he chose to come back when the world is at war?”

“Why not? That’s when he’s in his element. It’s the perfect time for him to show up.”

“Do you think he could conquer Hitler?” Janice asked.

“Hitler. The guy Ares would have helped as the God of War had he been let out of his tomb?”

“Yes. Him. Fucking horrible excuse for a human being.”

“Ares?”

Janice looked over at her. “Yeah, him, too.” She contemplated her choices, walked over to the nightstand and pulled out her revolver, then said, “I’m gonna kill him.”

“Oh, no,” Xena said, stopping Janice in her tracks. “You can’t. I was robbed of the pleasure the first time, I *have* to end him. Like I said, it’s the reason I’m here.”

“You can’t murder him, Xena. You can’t do that to Mel. Mel has a pure heart and conscience, and she would never be able to live with the fact that, even as you, she killed somebody.”

“Then we have a problem because you can’t kill him.”

“Why not? He did intend to poison me and I’ve still got the cigar to prove it.”

“And if no one believes you, you go to prison for the rest of your life, leaving Mel alone. That’s not a solution.”

“How can you get rid of him without sending Mel to prison?”

“I have many skills,” Xena growled.



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Janice was angry and concerned about Xena's plan, but she had agreed it was the only way to put a stop to all that was going on. Janice was anxious but she noticed that ever since they figured out the reason for Xena's presence, her eye stopped twitching.

She headed downstairs to see if she could find 'Chet' before the party started. There was still a lot of preparation activity, staff performing last minute tasks, so she didn't feel awkward for being out of costume.

As Chet entered the parlor with John Melvin, Janice hooked her arm around Chet's. "Excuse us," Janice said to John Melvin and escorted Chet into another room that was empty. She shut the door behind him.

"Lovely to see you again, Janice," Chet said, his curiosity and smarmy demeanor seeping through.

"I'll bet. You want to explain to me why you gave me a cigar laced with hemlock?"

Chet took a step backwards, his expression one of feigned indignance. "I did no such thing."

Janice folder her arms across her chest. "Don't lie to me, you fucking snake. I was there, remember?"

"Dr. Covington, such language." Chet's tone was patronizing, his expression now ingratiating. "You keep talking like that and no man will ever want you for his wife."

"That's the least of my worries." Janice said.

“Oh, that’s right. You only have eyes for Melinda. Some things never change,” he muttered. “Don’t worry, Janice, Melinda’s destiny is already planned out. I hardly think the Pappas family will choose you over me for Melinda’s hand in marriage. After all, you can’t legally get married, you’re poor and they will never allow her reputation to be ruined by being involved in a perverted, sordid liaison with a woman. Especially a woman like you. That’s a scandal they would never permit,” Chet said, smugly.

“Have you discussed this with Mel’s mother?” Janice asked, trying to hide a smirk.

“Certainly not. I’m sure it’s a subject, even if they suspect, that is not one to be brought up in polite company.”

“So you tried to get rid of me by poisoning me?”

“That was Plan A.”

“You have a Plan B?” Janice asked.

“There’s always a Plan B.”

“I could have you arrested right now for attempted murder,” Janice spat out. “I still have the evidence.”

“No one would believe you over me,” Chet said, arrogantly, shaking his head. “I would tell the authorities you did this to yourself to set me up. After all, you’re the one who suffers from the perversion of being in love with another woman and I’m your competition. I’d tell them whatever would appease their heterosexual, misogynistic hearts. I know how to play their game. You don’t. You would be the one hauled off to jail or an asylum. How do you think that would settle with Melinda and her family?”

“Melinda knows me so she would know you were lying.”

“Maybe. But we both know she’s not strong enough to disgrace her family over you.”

“You really are a piece of shit.” Janice was so angry, she felt was shaking. “The good news – for me – is that you’re going to lose. You may think you’re in charge and you have all this figured out but you don’t and you’re not.”

Chet shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“Game on,” Janice told him and left the room.

Guests were starting to arrive so Janice headed upstairs to get into her party clothes.

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Xena entered Janice’s room, dressed in the Helen of Troy attire Melinda had planned on wearing. “Good. You’re back. Did you call him by his real name or tell him I know who he is?” Xena asked.

“No, I wanted to leave that surprise up to you.” Janice said, having calmed somewhat. “I can’t imagine what he was like when he actually held power because he’s a soulless, obnoxious, dick in this incarnation.”

“He was that, multiplied. It’s why he needs to be stopped. Listen...I know my being here hasn’t been easy for either you or Melinda but if this is the decision of the Fates, it could all be resolved here.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the Fates,” Janice said.

“No, I believe in them, I just don’t trust them. So, if it all ends tonight and I don’t come back, I just wanted you to know that it’s been a pleasure. Especially that first night,” she said, smiling salaciously.

“Xena!” Janice admonished in a harsh whisper, “I thought we were never going to talk about that!” Her blush caused Xena to chuckle. When the color of Janice’s

face went back to its normal shade, Janice said, "It's been an honor, Xena. But I hope I don't see you again unless you show up to save Mel's life."

"Which is exactly what I did this time. But I understand the sentiment."

"Thank you, Xena. Now, you go get this party started and I'll be down when I've changed. Hopefully nothing exciting happens before then."

Then a normally bristly Xena pulled the usually thorny Janice into a hug and left without another word.

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Chet confidently walked across the floor, cocky smile in place. He stopped in front of Melinda and gave a slight bow. "Miss Pappas, may I have this dance?"

Xena stared at him for a few minutes before accepting his hand and moving out on the floor with him. He put his hand on her waist, her hand on his shoulder and he held her left hand out with his right hand as they started to sway and glide to the music.

"You dance divinely, Melinda." When he looked deeply into 'Mel's' eyes, he saw such coldness, it made him shiver.

"Do I...Julius?" She asked, in her native language, knowing he understood.

Chet tried to hide his surprise when it hit him just who exactly he had in his arms. "Xena. I should have figured it out when your brother said you were speaking Greek. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to stop you from doing whatever nefarious thing you're here to do in this incarnation. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to court you – I mean, Melinda – ask her to marry me, and get control of the Pappas-Beaulieu fortune. Then I have the means to run for congress, governor

and eventually President. With Melinda as my First Lady. Her family already loves me.”

“They wouldn’t if they knew who you really were.”

“Perhaps not but you cannot call me out without having your family think you’ve completely lost your mind. John Melvin is worried you might never recover from your concussion and Ridley believes you’ve lost some of your class and dignity by traipsing all over the world with your irritating blonde girlfriend. Marriage to me will get Melinda’s credibility back and your family back.”

“Got it all figured out don’t you, Chez-a-ray,” using the Italian pronunciation of his first name.

“Oh, darling, why so formal? I like Chet much better, although I will enjoy Melinda screaming Cesare out in passion.”

“You think Mel will willingly have sex with you?”

Caesar shrugged and smirked. “Willingly or unwillingly, we’ll have to make babies.”

“It’s never going to happen. This country doesn’t need a dictator. You should be over in the Germanic lands, going up against Hitler, if you’re so sure of your path.”

“Hitler is doing fine on his own. He can conquer that part of the world and I will conquer this one. I’ll tell people exactly what they want to hear, promise actions I can never deliver and stay in office, just on my charm alone and good looks alone.”

“Still modest as ever, I see.”

“No need for false modesty. Not when you’re, well, me.” Caesar boasted.

“What kind deal did you make with Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos?”

“Do you honestly believe I would trust them again? No, I made my deal with the Parcae.”

“Aren’t they the Fates with Roman names?”

“No, unlike the Greek Fates, Nona, Decuma and Morta seem to have a better opinion of me.”

“I doubt that’s possible. So what’s the deal?”

“I promised Fortuna Belli I would bring more war and eventually conquer Hitler and the world in her name, for Rome.”

“And many innocent people will die.”

“It’s war, Xena. It used to be your calling.”

“And you want Melinda by your side because why? Because she physically reminds you of me?”

“It’s to be your destiny. It’s a shame Melinda doesn’t have your bloodlust, though. We could conquer this world together.”

“Been there, done that, bought the lie. Why the Pappas’ family? They seem like decent, good people. Why would you want to condemn them to being associated with the likes of you?”

“You think they would not appreciate having more wealth and fame?”

“You mean blood money and infamy.”

“I don’t really care about any of Melinda’s family. They’re just a stepping stone.”

“Even John Melvin?”

“Especially John Melvin. He’s too sentimental. He doesn’t have the guts for what needs to be done.”

“You mean he doesn’t have the hatred or the unparalleled pestilential ego for what you want to be done.”

“ToMAYto, ToMAHto.”

“You don’t think you can be stopped.”

“Not this time and definitely not by you without damaging Melinda or her family.”

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Janice tried to stay close enough to hear their conversation without being conspicuous, but it was getting more difficult with Xena subconsciously guiding her dance partner toward the back patio which was farther away from her access point. Caesar’s hubristic smirk remained in place during whatever conversation they were having, as though Xena posed no threat to him.

Janice was fully aware of what Xena had planned as she was the lookout to make sure they had a moment alone. She finally made it over to the open patio doors to see they were indeed by themselves in that setting. She kept her back to the door so she could divert anyone from going out there until Xena completed her mission.

She then heard Xena say to Caesar, “This isn’t for me, this is for all humanity.” An odd noise came from Caesar. “You remember M’Lila? She taught me this so it’s doubly satisfying. I’ve just cut off the flow of blood from your brain. You’ll be dead in thirty seconds. You will feel an intense pressure in your head. I have paralyzed your jugular. You are immobilized and suffocating. You will lose consciousness due to hemorrhaging and you will die within seconds now.”

Caesar sounded as though he was trying to yell for help but his incapacitated voice box only produced desperately dry whispers. Then nothing. Janice was about to enter the patio to make sure Xena got the job done when a terrified Mel raced by her into the parlor screaming for help.

Before she ran after Mel, Janice stepped out onto the patio and saw Caesar, in a supine position with his eyes fixed and dilated. She had to be sure, so she approached him and encircled his wrist, placing her thumb on his radial artery. There was no heartbeat that she could feel. There was no movement in his chest, no breath coming from his nose or parted lips.

People, led by Melinda and John Melvin, poured out onto the patio, and ran up to Janice.

Julianna broke through the crowd with the man she'd introduced to Janice as Dr. Applekamp, who'd been attending the party. "Melinda, what happened?" she asked as Dr. Applekamp and John Melvin dropped to their knees to attend to 'Chet.'

"I don't know," Melinda cried, anguished. She looked at Janice, a frantic question in her eyes.

"I just walked out and he seemed to be choking and wheezing before he went unconscious. Everything happened so fast," Janice explained, trying to match Melinda's distraught tone.

Julianna turned to one of her guests. "Please call an ambulance."

"No need," Dr. Applecamp stated, solemnly. He looked up at Julianna. "He's gone."

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Several hours later, after the party had broken up and the guests had dispersed, the police and the coroner were called, pertinent people were interviewed,



statements were taken, Caesar's body was finally removed. Ridley stayed and Edison stayed up to make sure the house and the premises were cleaned and all remnants of a gala had been taken away.

Julianna, John Melvin, Melinda and Janice sat in the kitchen and had coffee, rehashing the tragedy that had left all but one of them shocked. The main question was how a healthy young man, in the prime of his life, could die just like that. John Melvin seemed to be the most mournful of the group but that wasn't unusual being that they been acquainted the longest.

After Melinda proclaimed she wanted to try and get some sleep, she hugged her brother for a few minutes, neither saying anything except 'I'm sorry' and 'goodnight.' Julianna kissed John Melvin on the cheek. The next few days were going to be especially rough on him. His return trip to Charleston Naval Base had been postponed while they made arrangements for him to accompanying 'Chet's' body back to Hawaii and then to New York to be buried with his deceased family members.

Everyone went quietly to their bedrooms, but Melinda backtracked and stood at the door in Janice's room. "Janice?"

"Are you okay, Mel?" Janice asked, sincerely. The evening had been confusing and traumatic for her.

"What happened? I don't remember anything until I was suddenly there staring at Chet's dead body. Did...did Xena do something to him?"

Janice wanted to but knew she couldn't lie to Mel. She sat on the bed and patted the place beside her. "Come here and I'll tell you."

Hesitantly, Melinda approached and sat next to Janice.

"Chet wasn't who you thought he was," Janice began.

"He wasn't a lieutenant-commander in the Navy?"

“Yes and no.”

“What does that mean, Janice?”

“It means we know why Xena kept returning and possessing your body. It had to do with Chet. Chet’s full name was Cesare DeGuilliano. If you mixed that name up a little it resembles the name Julius Caesar. Chet was Caesar.”

Melinda just stared at Janice, trying to comprehend what she was saying.

“I know it’s a little difficult to understand but it was Xena’s destiny to stop Caesar and she missed the last time.”

“Stop? You mean I...Xena, killed Chet to repay an old debt?” Melinda couldn’t grasp the enormity of that thought and became indignant. “I know Chet was a self-centered crumb but last I knew that didn’t deserve a death sentence!”

“Melinda,” Janice began calmly, “There was no such person named Cesare DeGuilliano or Chet DeGuilliano. The man who died tonight *was* Julius Caesar. He made a deal with the Italian Fates and their goddess, Fortuna Belli, the fortune of war to return so he could conquer the world, in the name of Rome.”

“What did that have to do with me?”

“Somehow Caesar found Xena’s descendant – you - and decided this was the perfect time to return. He planned on becoming president of the USA, on the backs of your family’s money and influence, then ascend to dictator of the world by beating Germany in war and he wanted you by his side. That’s where Xena came in.”

“What? But, but, that’s unbelievable,” Melinda stated, obviously believing it.

“Says the woman who’s been trading souls with a nineteen hundred-year-old warrior for the past few days.”

“He just didn’t seem like he was that bad of a man.”

“He tried to murder me, Mel,” Janice said, flatly.

Mel’s demeanor suddenly changed. She turned to face Janice. “He *what?*”

“Yeah, remember that cigar he gave me on the train? It was laced with hemlock. If Xena hadn’t recognized the odor and stopped me, I’d be dead right now and you’d probably be on your way to being engaged to the future Hitler.”

“No. No, I wouldn’t, Janice. Not as long as I had a say in it. I know my family would want me to be married to a wealthy, successful man but that’s not my dream.” Melinda locked eyes Janice.

Janice swallowed audibly. “Tell me honestly, what is your dream, Mel?” The electricity that was crackling between them made Janice lose her breath.

“I know this might end our friendship, but you need to know, especially after coming so close to losing you. You’re my dream, Janice. I want to be with you. I’ve wanted to be with you from the first moment I walked onto your dig site in Macedonia. I want to build a life with you.”

Janice’s heart was nearly pounding out of her chest. “I want the same.”

“You...you do?”

“Yes, you oblivious dame! Didn’t you ever wonder why I never had any male companionship the year you’ve been with me?”

“Well, no, I just figured you’ve always been really dedicated to the job. I mean I never sought out male companionship either, but you never suspected me.

“You never had to seek out male companionship because the offer was always there. You’re a man magnet, wherever you go.”

“And I never accepted any invitations. Didn’t that make you suspicious?”

“No, I just thought you wanted to prove you were serious about the profession.” They stared at each other and both broke out into silly grins. “Boy, have we wasted a lot of time,” Janice finally said.

“We could remedy that,” Melinda said, suggestively.

Janice almost fanned herself. “Don’t tease me like that.”

“I’m not teasing,” Melinda said reaching over and taking Janice’s hand, rubbing her thumb over Janice’s fingers.

“Here? In your mother’s house? That’s brave of you. Have you ever, um, done this before?”

“I’ve never been intimate with anyone, Janice.”

Janice nodded in understanding. She brought Melinda’s hand to her lips and kissed it. “I will be honored to be your chosen and as much as it kills me to say this, I’m not comfortable having our first time in your house with your family surrounding us which means we’d have to inhibit our responses.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Neither of us have any idea how loud you might be in the throes of passion and both our bedsprings squeak.” Janice smiled at Melinda’s blush. “And I will not subject myself to your mother’s scrutiny tomorrow morning should any of that happen tonight.”

“That’s a good point. Oh, my. My mother. This will break her heart.”

“I believe talking to your mother about this will be easier than you think.”

“I doubt it, I am not going to say anything yet. I need to get used to the idea myself, first.”

“Could you get used to snuggling with me tonight?” Janice asked.

“My room or yours?”

“Yours. No one would dare just to walk in on you without knocking.”

Melinda stood up, still clasping Janice’s hand. They silently walked to her room and shut the door.

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The atmosphere in the Pappas home was still somber the next morning. Julianna was at her church, Suzanna was uncommonly quiet and John Melvin was already on the phone with Chet’s superior officer, retelling what happened and getting confirmed orders. Ophelia couldn’t stop leaking tears as she prepared breakfast.

“Why are you crying, Ophelia?” Janice asked, as kindly as she could. “You really didn’t know him.”

“He was one of God’s children the good lord called home. I’m sad that it was his time. So young, so handsome, so rich. And I was really hoping for wedding bells next year for you, Miss Melinda. You would have made a beautiful couple and would have made beautiful babies.”

Melinda and Janice exchanged fond looks before Melinda said, “Even if he had not passed away last night, there would be no wedding bells and no beautiful babies. He was just not my type, Ophelia. Besides, I would not be able to go back to Greece with Janice and continue our important work.”

“You’re not getting any younger, Miss Melinda. No offense, Janice, but how will either of you meet appropriate men to settle down with when all you seem to care about is getting dirty and sweaty every day in foreign countries?” Ophelia asked, which prompted an eyebrow raise from Mel.

“You never know, Ophelia,” Janice said. “There are a lot of insanely wealthy shipping magnets in Greece.”

That made Ophelia pause. “But then you wouldn’t be able to live here and give your mama grandbabies to spoil every day.”

“If it’s that important to her, Mama can move to Greece,” Melinda said.

“You know your mother would never leave South Carolina,” Ophelia said, annoyed. “Now you’re just being sassy.”

“You’re right. I apologize, Ophelia. I guess I’m just tired of the insinuation that I *need* to find a husband right this minute or I’m going to shrivel up into spinsterhood. I should get married when the time is right and I’m in love, not on anyone else’s schedule. I have many more years where I can bear children. I’m not in a hurry.”

Melinda and Janice had discussed children last night. If they decided they wanted a family, they would find a way to create one. Right now, they just wanted each other and getting dirty and sweaty. They didn’t care if the world didn’t accept them, they would be discreet and pay attention to the laws in the countries they dug in to not be blatantly disrespectful.

Even though they did not make love last night, they knew that would happen sometime soon. Their cuddling and waking up in each other’s arms was sustaining for now and hopefully until they got back to their own apartment in Greece. Now that they had admitted their deep love for each other, they agreed their connection had been preordained. Melinda did not want to talk about her future with anyone else but Janice.

“You don’t even act sad about what happened yesterday,” Ophelia accused. Apparently, she didn’t want to accept Melinda’s plan for her own future.

“Of course I was affected. He died at my feet. I spent the entire night agonizing over what happened but, like Janice said, I really didn’t know him and the time I did spend with him, I’m not sure I really wanted to get to know him. So, yes, I was

sad that he lost his life and I prayed for him. Honestly, John Melvin needs to be comforted much more than I. He lost a best friend. He lost someone he knew well. Let's all stop pretending he was my boyfriend, fiancé or future husband. He was a stranger to me. It was a horrific experience, but I am giving in the proper amount of grief for the situation."

Janice was mildly surprised at the acrimonious tone to Melinda's voice. But she was more surprised that Ophelia seemed so cross.

Finally, Ophelia sighed. "I just worry about you, Miss Melinda." She set a plate of hot pancakes in front of Melinda and Janice.

"I know, Ophelia." Melinda's now conciliatory intonation matched Ophelia's. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's been a bizarre week, with my odd behavior from the concussion and Chet's sudden death, we're all on eggshells. With what happened yesterday, I realized death can come at any time. I don't want to waste it fulfilling everyone else's vision for me. Please, just let me live my life. Please."

Ophelia grabbed Melinda's hand and squeezed it before returning to the stove.

Just then, Suzanna entered the kitchen, looking sorrowful, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She looked at Melinda and said, "I'm so sorry, darlin'."

Melinda rolled her eyes, ready to run the gauntlet again.

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Bags packed and ready to leave, Janice and Melinda went downstairs to say goodbye. Edison would drive them to their train to head back to New York so they could fly back to Greece. As Melinda spent a long time saying goodbye to John Melvin, when Julianna hugged Janice, she whispered, "You didn't sleep in your bed last night."

Janice's eyes flew wide open. "How do you know that? The doors were closed."

“Melinda’s was, yours wasn’t.”

The conversation was continued in a hushed volume. “We didn’t do anything, Mrs. Pappas, I swear. We talked most of the night,” Janice protested.

“Good to know. I wouldn’t allow my daughter to have unmarried relations under my roof, if her suitor was male, so I feel it’s only fair I shouldn’t allow it when her suitor isn’t male. So you talked? About your feelings?”

“Yes, ma’am, and you were right. The feelings are mutual.”

“Do you intend to make an honest woman of my daughter, Dr. Covington?”

“Your daughter is already an honest woman, Mrs. Pappas. I intend to make her an exclusive one.”

“You do that. Does she know I know?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m sure it will come up.” She hugged Janice again. “You have a safe trip back to Greece and you take care of my darling girl.”

“I will make it my life’s mission,” Janice said, with conviction. She then said her farewells to Suzanna, Ophelia and John Melvin. She once again comforted him on the loss of his friend and promised to stay in touch. “I’m going to help Edison load up the car. I’ll see you out there, Mel.”

Ten minutes later, Melinda joined Janice in the car. She had clearly been crying.

“Can we make it a point to come back here at least once a year? I really miss my family.”

I don’t see why not. And there’s no reason your family cannot come to Greece to visit us.”



The ride to the station was quiet and contemplative. Edison unloaded and helped carry suitcases to the private compartment Melinda and Janice had reserved. Edison said his goodbyes and soon after, the train started to move.

Janice looked at Mel and then at the interior of their compartment. "We have 18 hours to spend on the train. Whatever shall we do?"

"Are you propositioning me, Dr. Covington?" Melinda asked, coyly.

"I'd be a damned fool if I wasn't," Janice responded.

"How romantic," Melinda declared, sarcastically.

Janice grinned and took Melinda's hand, leading her to the berth. She pulled Melinda close and gently pressed her lips against the taller woman's. The kiss was tender. "Are you sure you want to do this here?" Janice asked after the kiss broke. "We can wait until we get back to Greece."

"We absolutely cannot wait that long, Janice Covington! I want you right here and right now," Melinda told her.

"Oooo, I love it when you get demanding."

"Then take me to bed, Janice, before my knees go any weaker."

"Your command is my wish, M'Lady," Janice said, bowing. As the train rocked to a settled rhythm, Janice was about to introduce Melinda to a rocking rhythm of her own. It was going to be a glorious eighteen hours.

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On the flight back to Greece, Melinda slept soundly in her comfortable first-class seat next to Janice. The expression on Mel's face was one of bliss and satisfaction. Janice smiled, confident that Melinda's introduction to sex was pleurably fulfilling. She certainly responded to Janice's touch enthusiastically and was practically insatiable after their initial coupling.

The memory of being a part of Melinda's sexual awakening and coaxing her to her first orgasm caused Janice to involuntarily shiver in an intimately pleasurable way. If she never did anything else in her life, the expression of ecstasy she caused on Melinda's face when Melinda climaxed was one moment she would never forget. Holding a weeping Melinda after she recovered from that orgasm, soothing her southern belle when the resulting emotions were just too much, brought another tender smile to Janice's face.

She never expected Melinda to be so passionately uninhibited and Janice could feel her nether regions becoming warm just thinking about it. Melinda exuberantly committed to reciprocating everything Janice did, and Janice was astounded at what a quick study the translator was. Melinda may have been coltish in her every day life but here was nothing awkward about Melinda in bed. Every time they made love (which at one point felt like a marathon) it just seemed to get better and better.

Make love. Janice had never used that phrase before when recalling her rather randy past. It was always 'having sex' and 'fucking.' With Melinda, however, what they did together could only be described as making love. Janice's entire heart and soul went into the effortless action.

Then Janice realized that she was tired, too. In fact, she was exhausted. She got comfortable and fell asleep staring adoringly at her lover.

Her *lover*.

Melinda Belinda Pappas.

Life was good.

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The End

(Sort of)