

Giving Janice's hand a little squeeze, Mel reached up and casually undid the knot on the bathrobe's belt. "Well, I'm glad to hear it. Would you mind handing me my unmentionables, dear?" she said and let the bathrobe fall off her bare shoulders.

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At seventeen minutes past eleven, Mel walked onto the platform of Thessaloniki's Central Station, wearing dark brown shoes, skin-colored nylons and a chocolate brown skirt with a matching jacket over a cream-colored, long-sleeved blouse. She had her hair in a bun, and her regal stance and purposeful stride attracted plenty of attention from the other travelers.

The only thing spoiling her perfect exterior was the bandage wrapped around her left hand, a lasting legacy of the search for Cecrops' emerald.

Janice was walking a few steps behind her partner, greatly admiring the rear view of Mel's brown skirt. She was wearing what she always wore - work boots, khaki pants, a tan shirt, a short leather jacket and her indispensable fedora that she had pushed a bit back on her head. She had reluctantly given in to Mel's pleas to put the Webley Six and the bull whip in the duffel bag.

When Janice heard the porter groan loudly as he was pushing the cart with their luggage, she chuckled and decided to help the unfortunate man by putting a hand on the cart's handle bar.

Not seeing Sir Lawrence or Audrey Dickinson, his secretary, anywhere, Mel walked down to a small but opulent waiting room that had been built halfway down the platform - for those guests who weren't interested in waiting in the noisy, filthy, busy environment - and peeked inside.

Sir Lawrence Philpott was sitting on a plush, antique chair, crossing his legs in a very proper fashion and seemingly dictating a letter to Audrey. The Vice-Consul was wearing the same dark gray suit he'd worn the day before, but it appeared to be a different hat.

As Janice reached her partner, she put a hand on the small of Mel's back, just to cop a feel of the tall beauty. "Are they in there?"

"Yes, they are. Jan, dear?"

"Yes, dear?"

"If that hand slides down any further, I'm afraid the Gendarme will have you arrested before we even get to see the Orient Express," Mel said and opened the door to the waiting room.

"Nah, they'll understand," Janice said with a broad grin, looking at Mel's figure.

Huffing and puffing, the porter pulled the luggage cart to a stop and took off his cap to wipe his sweaty forehead. '*Will there be more, Miss?*' he said in Greek.

'*No, thank you. That's fine. Here's a little something for your bother, my friend,*' Janice said and slipped the porter a few folded-up notes.

Looking at the money, the porter's face lit up in a smile, and he bowed to Janice before he hurried back up the platform to service the next customer.

Janice put her wallet back in her pocket, chuckling over the fact that someone could be so happy for what amounted to a three dollar tip. Looking around the platform, she could see a few other people waiting for the train, but nothing really caught her eye.

Just as she was watching, the tracks below the platform began to rumble, signaling the arrival of the world famous train. In the distance, she could hear the familiar sound of an engine whistling, but it was still too far away to see it.

Grinning, she spun around and opened the door to the waiting room.

"Oh, hello, Doctor Covington. We thought you weren't going to join us in here," Sir Lawrence said and put out his hand.

After duly shaking the Vice-Consul's hand, Janice sent a quick "Hi," and a wink at Audrey who responded by blushing. "Oh, I was, Sir Lawrence. I just wanted to catch the last fresh air I will be getting for several days."

"Oh, I can assure you that the air inside the train is perfectly fine, Doctor," Sir Lawrence said with a polite laugh.

"I'm sure it is. Mel, the train is about to roll into the station. You've been talkin' all morning about wantin' to see it come in..."

Mel shot up from the bench she had been sitting on and adjusted her glasses. "Oh! Thank you! Come, Audrey, dear, you must see this!" she said and dragged a somewhat befuddled Audrey with her.

The two women hurriedly left the waiting room and moved down the platform to get the best viewing position before others could snatch it; their high heels click-clacking loudly on the tiled surface.

Moving at a slightly more sedate pace, Sir Lawrence got up from the plush chair and straightened his jacket. "Doctor Covington, I'm not suggesting that we should assume the same giddy disposition as our charming Lady companions, but seeing the Orient Express arriving is actually quite the spectacle. Shall we?" he said and opened the door.

"Well, okay. Why not, Sir Lawrence," Janice said, shooting the Vice-Consul a broad grin.

The arrival of the famed Orient Express was more sweeping and grand than Janice had thought it would be, and as the eight-axle long-distance locomotive slowly slid past her - with excess steam shooting out of the overruns and sounding very much like a mechanized dragon - she found herself suitably impressed.

The train was made up of ten wagons - a short mail car nearest to the coal tender, four sleeping cars, two lounge cars, a restaurant car, and finally, on its own at the rear, an armored wagon.

The cars as well as the locomotive were painted in royal blue with gold trimmings, and even from the outside, it was clear to see that no expense had been spared anywhere. Most of the windows in the sleeping cars had their curtains drawn, but those in the lounge cars were all illuminated by extravagant lamps.

Clapping her hands in excitement, Mel skipped back to Janice and bumped shoulders with the archeologist. "Oh, darling, isn't this excitin'! That's the Orient Express!" she said into Janice's ear to make herself heard over the hissing steam.

"Yeah. Looks pretty good from down here."

"Oh, it looks much, much better than merely 'pretty good'. This is something I'll cherish forever, Jan!"

Looking up at her partner, Janice could see that Mel wasn't exaggerating - her eyes were shiny with the excitement and there were little red blotches on her cheeks. Smiling, Janice hooked her arm inside Mel's and gave the tall translator a little squeeze.

No sooner had the train come to a stop before the doors were opened and pursers swarmed out of the wagons and onto the platform. Moments later, the relatively quiet platform had been transformed into a beehive of activity, with some people coming out, others going on board, and porters tending to all of them with luggage carts.

"Sir Lawrence Philpott and company? Sir Lawrence Philpott and company?" a slightly plump purser - with gold tresses on his dark blue uniform - said loudly as he walked along the platform, reading from a piece of paper.

"That is I, Sir!" Sir Lawrence said and raised his gloved hand in the air.

The purser came up to the little group and bowed deeply. "Good day, Sir Lawrence. Ladies. I'm Panagis Minardou, the chief purser. I have been informed that you have something for the armored wagon?"

"We do indeed, my good man," Sir Lawrence said and tapped Audrey's shoulder. The young woman quickly dug into the bag she was holding and found an envelope containing the priceless emerald. "Ah, and there we have it. Now, Miss Dickinson, it's-"

Shaking his head, the chief purser raised his hands in the air and took a step back from the envelope. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Sir, but you need to come down to the armored wagon to sign it in."

"Oh... I see. Well, Doctor Covington here knows all about it, so it's best if you arrange it with her," Sir Lawrence said and transferred the envelope from Audrey's petite hand to Janice's callused one. "Come, Miss Dickinson, let's find our compartments so the train won't leave without us... Miss Pappas, do you wish to come with us?"

Adjusting her glasses, Mel put on an apologetic smile. "Thank you, Sir Lawrence, but I'd rather stay with Doctor Covington for the time being, if you don't mind?"

"Of course not. All right, we'll meet you in the train, then, once we're settled in," Sir Lawrence said and began to move down the platform to get to the nearest door.

"But your luggage...?" Mel said, pointing at a small pile of luggage belonging to the Vice-Consul and his secretary, but Panagis just waved his hand in the air which attracted the attention of a porter.

"That will all be taken care of, Miss," the chief purser said, instructing the porter on which people he should follow.

"Oh... I see. How extravagant," Mel said, turning around to face Janice.

The adventurer pushed her fedora back on her head and stared at the valuable envelope in her hand. "Yeah. I just hope they serve some good chow. I'm kinda hungry."

Mel's left eyebrow began a slow climb up her forehead that didn't end before Janice had pushed the fedora back in place.

Returning to Mel and Janice, the chief purser invited them down to the armored wagon.

After having helped Mel up into the armored wagon, Janice let out a long whistle when she got a look at the interior. The car had been divided into three equally large sections: an open space with a small desk and a chair on either end and a mammoth safe surrounded by a sturdy metal fence in the center.

"Whoa, nobody is gonna run off with that huge thing, huh?" Janice said, leaning against the door.

"We certainly hope not, Miss," the chief purser said, finding a bunch of keys in his pocket.

"It's Doctor, actually."

Turning around, the chief purser bowed slightly to Janice, a gesture that made her skin crawl. "I beg your pardon, Doctor."

"Aw, Jeez, think nothin' of it. And please don't bow to me. You make me feel like a slave driver."

Hearing that, Mel turned around from studying a small map on the wall to shoot Janice a slightly disapproving glare.

"Yes, Doctor. The valuable, please," the chief purser said and held out his hand.

Once the exchange was completed and the emerald under lock and key, the chief purser moved his hand towards the nearest desk to let Janice understand that she should go over there.

"I need you to sign here, please," Panagis said, holding a pen and a piece of paper ready.

"Do you need my signature too, Panagis?" Mel said, turning around.

"No, Miss. Just the person who brought the valuable."

"All right..."

Janice quickly scribbled her name and then watched how the chief purser tore off the top page of the notepad, put it into an official envelope and put that in a rack.

"So that's it?" Janice said and pulled Mel over to her.

"Yes, Doctor. If you will excuse me, there are other clients at this stop who need my service," the chief purser said and started to bow - but then remembered Janice's words and stopped halfway there.

Putting her hand on Mel's elbow, Janice sent the chief purser a crooked grin. "Sure thing, friend. Come on, Mel. Let's find our compartment."

"No... wait... what about our luggage?"

"That will all be taken care of, Miss," the chief purser said, smiling.

"Oh... right. Of course. Silly me."

Upon entering the dining car, Mel immediately came to a dead stop and reached out to put both hands on the walls of the narrow walkway. "Oh look, Jan! Isn't this amazing!" she said, taking in the splendor of the restaurant.

"I'll have to take your word for it, honeybuns," Janice said, only seeing Mel's broad back.

"Oh, but they have everyth... what? Oh, pardon," Mel said and moved aside to let Janice have a peek at the treasures. "Look, the tables are all set with gold cutlery and crystal glasses. And the napkins are made to resemble little swans!"

"Yeah. Kinda neat."

The dining car was sparsely occupied; only three of the thirty or so tables were taken. At one of the tables at the far end of the car, a man in a black suit was busy reading a newspaper and smoking a cigarette.

"Jan... Jan!" Mel whispered, repeatedly poking Janice on the shoulder. "That man down there... isn't that Richard 'Dick' Brennan...? The star actor?"

"Where?"

"Down there at the far end...?"

Shrugging, Janice rubbed her shoulder and began to move down the aisle. "Mmmm... could be. Let's go say hi."

"No, no, no, no," Mel whispered, tripping along behind the adventurer.

"Hell, yeah," came Janice's predictable reply.

Once they were at the table, Janice could see that Mel had been right - the man reading a newspaper was indeed Richard Brennan, a much-lauded actor usually found starring in courtroom or newspaper dramas, or similar movies that could utilize his Big City charm and clean-cut looks.

In his late thirties, Richard's eyes were clear and strong - as was his jaw - and his hair held so much Brylcreem that it looked like a shiny blackbird had landed on his head.

"Hi de ho, fella," Janice said and pushed back her fedora.

Briefly looking above the newspaper and seeing a hat, Richard Brennan just stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and let out a grunt that was supposed to be a 'hello' - or possibly a 'scram'. He picked up the coffee cup that was sitting on the table, but when he noticed it was empty, he put it back down and pushed it away.

Grinning at the movie star's behavior, Janice pushed Mel ahead of her and cleared her throat. "Fella, there's a very nice, charming, swell-lookin' dame right here who's dyin' to get your John Hancock to add to her collection."

Grunting again, Richard folded down the newspaper, expecting to shoo a mule, but when he caught a glimpse of the tall, blue-eyed, dark-haired beauty in front of him, he hurriedly threw the newspaper onto the table and shot up from his seat.

"Oh, hello there," he said in a voice so thick with butter that it was almost dripping onto the floor.

Coughing, Janice practically had to swallow her tongue in order to stop herself from letting out a belly laugh.

Richard took Mel's right hand and raised it to his lips. After giving it a quick kiss, he held onto it while he gazed deeply into her blue eyes. "And your name is...?"

"Mel... inda."

"Melinda, what a charming name for such a charming lady. Are you and your boyfr..." - suddenly realizing that the person in the fedora wasn't a boy but a girl, he looked past Mel's shoulder and caught Janice's grinning face. "Ahem. Are you and your, uh... chaperone here on business or pleasure?"

"Business, I'm afraid, Mr. Brennan," Mel stuttered.

"Oh, you don't have to feel nervous around me, Melinda. I'm as noble as they come. You wanted my autograph?"

"Yes, p-please."

After scribbling his name on a napkin, he put away his pen, folded up the paper and handed it to Mel.

"Th-thank you, Sir."

"Oh, that's nothing. Listen, Melinda, it just so happens that I have a set of brand new promotional photos down in my compartment, which is number twenty-one, by the way. Perhaps we could meet there later...? I could show you a new script I've been offered called 'Midnight Gambler' where I'm slated to play an attorney. I'll bet that would excite you," Richard said, once again buttering up his voice.

Trying to find an easy way to shoot the movie star down, Mel just nodded and put the folded up napkin in her purse. "Th-thank you, Sir. I'll, uh, consider it."

"Good. It's been a pleasure talking to you," Richard said and kissed Mel's hand again.

As Mel and Janice walked away from the dining car and into the first of the lounge cars, Janice let out a half-choked chuckle. "Holy mackerel, babe, you sure know how to snare 'em in. You practically had him on a leash!"

"Oh, shut up, Jan!"

"Yes, dear. Where's our compartment again?"

Adjusting her glasses, Mel looked down at their ticket while she was walking past a set of leather chairs belonging to the lounge car's piano bar. "It must be down the other end of the sleeping cars... it's number-OOOF!"

Suddenly and without warning, an elderly, reed-thin man in a slightly crumbled off-white suit often used in the Tropics, stepped away from his bar stool and bumped directly into Mel. As he discovered that the tall woman quite literally wasn't a pushover, he took a step back and shot her a look of outrage.

"I say, woman! Watch where you're going!" he said in an antiquated upper-class English accent. The man appeared to be in his late sixties, with white hair and a long, pointy vandyke beard, and his watery eyes were behind a pair of round, metal spectacles.

"How about you watch where you're going, Joe!" Janice growled over Mel's shoulder.

"Joe?! How dare you, woman?! I'm Professor Emeritus Charles Wainwright... of quite some repute, I can assure you!" the man said and tried to move past Mel, but only succeeded in bumping into her again.

"That's twice, Joe. Do it again an' you'll get a bonus prize... my boot up your-"

Spinning around, Mel put a hand across Janice's mouth to curb the profanity she knew was coming. "Jan, dear, let's move on. There's no point in getting thrown off the train before we've even left Thessaloniki, is there?"

"Hrmpf!"

Finally allowed to walk past the tall translator, Professor Wainwright sent the two women - Janice in particular - a nasty glare with his watery eyes, grumbling loudly to himself about the horribly lacking moral standards of modern women.

"Can we please continue onwards to our compartment now, Jan?"

"Sure, sure. You never said the number."

"It's number eleven. I believe Sir Lawrence and Audrey are in number two. It's quite shocking, isn't it? I mean, I could understand it if they were married, but..."

The last seat in the lounge car was occupied by a man in a dark blue, pinstriped, broad-shouldered Christian Dior New Look suit who was reading a French book and smoking a cigarette in a king-sized, ebony holder.

Just as Janice walked past the man - listening to Mel droning on and on about Sir Lawrence and Audrey sharing a compartment - he looked up and sent her a casual glance before looking back down.

It took Janice nearly eight steps to work out that it had actually been a woman. Stopping dead in her tracks, she turned around and stared at the figure.

The person's dark hair was cut like a man's, but on closer inspection, Janice was able to see that the ear, the neck and the profile were far more feminine than masculine. While Janice was staring, the woman looked up and locked eyes with the adventurer. Moments later, they exchanged a knowing grin.

"Jan?" Mel said, returning from the pathway between the carriages.

"I'm here, I'm here... boy, you'd think we were back home in Frisco," Janice said and hurried after her partner.

"How so?"

"I'll tell you later. Where did you say number eleven was?"

"Oh, quite some distance away. We need to go through two of the four sleeping cars to get there."

Groaning, Janice took off her fedora and wiped her forehead, just like she always did when they were working a dig. "Oh, man! Jeez, we're gonna need a donkey cart for when we have to go down to the Goddamned dining car! Better yet, we should bring some Brandy and some hardtack in case we get lost along the way! Hey, perhaps we-"

"Oh, hush, Jan. Don't you realize how magical this is? Oh... Oh, the train is starting now!" Mel said, suddenly setting off in a run to get to a window so she could witness the train leaving the Thessaloniki station first hand.

Having been caught in the middle of a barb when Mel took off, Janice just shrugged and plopped her hat back on her head.

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Thirty minutes later, Mel put down the travel plan she'd been reading and looked around their luxurious sleeping compartment.

Like with everything else onboard the Orient Express, it was predominantly held in royal blue and gold, even down to the wrapper on the sweets that were in a small glass bowl on the table.

Roughly ten by ten feet in size, the compartment had a plush carpet on the floor, and the walls and the ceiling were adorned with golden stucco. One side had a chair, a desk, a wash basin and a small closet, and the other a larger closet and a bench seat that could be converted into two bunks when the need arose.

Clearing her throat, Mel leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs in a very lady-like fashion. "You'd think the employees of the railroad would know the time table for departures, wouldn't you?"

"Mmmm?" Janice said absentmindedly. She had taken off her boots and was reclining on the bench seat, busy reading a pulp detective novel she had dug out of her duffel bag.

"Well, when I was looking out of the window before, I saw two men dressed in dark blue uniforms run along the platform and jump up into the armored car where a third man was waiting for them."

"Mmmm?"

"It struck me as odd, that's all."

After flipping the page in the book, Janice put her hand back behind her head. "Mmmm. Maybe they couldn't tear themselves away from their ladyfriends. I'm very familiar with the pull of those super-sexy Greek bombshells, you know."

Snorting over the poor joke, Mel took off her glasses and began to polish them.

After a few seconds, Janice put down the book and glanced over at her partner. "They jumped into the armored car?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm."

"They were employees, Jan, wearing official uniforms. This isn't the Wild West. I'm quite sure they weren't there to rob the safe."

"No, but... ah. Whatever," Janice said and went back to her book.

Mel put her glasses back on and squinted to see if she had been able to get all the muck off. Satisfied with the result, she leaned back in her seat. "What are you reading, dear?"

"Adventures of Sally Swackhamer, P.I. Issue ninety-eight, 'Death And A .45'," Janice said and held up the book so Mel could see the colorful cover-art of a redheaded woman with an impressive bosom holding a revolver and stepping on a man's chest.

"Oh dear, Jan... I don't understand how you can read that sort of thing."

"Are you kiddin'? This is great stuff. If Xena were alive today, she'd read about Sally Swackhamer."

"Jan, with all due respect... no, she wouldn't," Mel said and tapped her knuckles on the small table.

Grinning, Janice flipped the page. "I guess you'd know. Hey... what does it actually feel like when you're... uh, inhabited by her?"

"Well, I... I don't really feel anything. I just see myself do whatever it is she's doing," Mel said and shrugged.

"Mmmm. I wonder why Gabrielle has never visited me...?"

Knock, knock!

Getting up, Mel put down the travel plan and walked across the plush carpet to answer the door. "Probably because she had great taste, dear."

"Hardee har har! Excuse me while I laugh myself silly," Janice said, looking at Mel's rear as she crossed the floor.

Opening the door, Mel was met by Audrey holding a small tray of chocolates.

"Hello, Miss Pappas. We had so many chocolates in our compartment that I thought I'd bring you some," she said in her charming English accent and wearing a broad smile.

"Hello, Audrey. Come in, come in. We have plenty of chocolates, too, actually, but you're always welcome for a little talk," Mel said and ushered the secretary inside.

"Thank you. Hello, Doctor Covington."

"Hey, toots," Janice said and put a bookmark into Sally Swackhamer's latest adventures before swinging her legs over the side of the bench seat.

"Have a seat, Audrey," Mel said and pointed at the chair next to the desk.

Audrey put down the tray and folded her burgundy skirt so it wouldn't crease too badly when she sat down. As she leaned forward, her matching jacket parted, revealing that she was wearing a steel gray blouse underneath.

Sitting with her knees to the side like she had been taught, Audrey folded her hands in her lap and looked down at her feet.

As Mel sat down on the bench seat, Janice wrapped an arm around her waist and wiggled her legs to show that she couldn't reach the floor when she wasn't wearing her boots, earning herself a little smile.

A pregnant pause followed, and Janice began to wonder if Sir Lawrence had sent the secretary to spy on them. "Audrey...?"

"Y-yes?"

"Are those chocolates for eatin' or just for lookin' at... or what?"

"Oh, n-no... here you go, Doctor Covington," Audrey said and handed the tray to the two women.

"Thanks, darlin'," Janice said and unwrapped an éclair. "Mel?"

"You know I can't resist chocolate," Mel said and took another sweet.

After popping the éclair into her mouth, Janice chewed on it for a few seconds and then jumped off the bench seat to go to the closet.

Cocking her head, Mel locked eyes with the unusually quiet secretary. "Audrey, is there something specific you would like to talk to us about?"

"W-well, yes. How... uh... how did you, uh... oh, there's the travel plan," Audrey suddenly said, interrupting herself. "Have you had time to read it? Oh, I'm so excited to see all those different countries!"

The sudden change of topic made Mel scrunch up her face, and even Janice moved back from the closet to see what was going on.

Deciding to go along with Audrey's change of mood, Mel nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, I have, and I am very excited, too. I can't wait to see Budapest and Vienna. I have heard they're very pretty cities."

"Munich and Stuttgart are just piles of rubble," Janice said from inside the closet where she was trying to find her Webley Six in her duffel bag. Finally finding it, she took her cleaning kit, backed out of the closet and slammed it shut with her heel before walking back to the bench seat.

"Really, Doctor? Even all these years after the war?" Audrey said.

"Yeah. At least, they were the last time we were there... when was that, Mel? Back in forty-eight?"

"Yes, we came through Munich Airport in 1948 on our way to Athens."

Audrey nodded to herself, remembering her own experiences from France in the late summer and early fall of 1944 when she had been a nurse following the British expeditionary force off the beaches at Normandy and into the heartland of France. "Dreadful business, war."

"Dreadful," Mel echoed, looking at Janice expertly cleaning her revolver.

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"... the end," Janice said and closed the pulp novel. Turning around on the bench seat, she put her socked feet up against the wall to the next compartment and began to whistle slightly off-key.

"Already?"

"Yeah."

"Did she get her man?"

"She got her man in the chest and her gal in bed," Janice said, drawing patterns on the wall with her right big toe.

Momentarily putting down the book she was reading, John Steinbeck's *The Log from The Sea of Cortez*, Mel adjusted her glasses and shot Janice a pointed look and an arched eyebrow. "Ahem."

"Well, it happens. Happened to us, hon."

"It wasn't that. Good Lord, Jan, we're only three hours into our journey. You'll go stir crazy if all you have to do for the rest of the time is to draw patterns on the wall with your feet!"

"Oh, I don't know... there are plenty of things you and me could do on this bench seat... or in the bed once its made. Hey, which reminds me, what time is it?"

"Just after half past three. Why?"

"Well, in that case, do ya wanna go down... or up... whatever, anyway, go to the lounge car to grab a cup of coffee...? Maybe we could meet some of the other guests...?"

Smiling, Mel put away the book and got up from the chair. "Sounds like a very good idea, Jan. I could use some coffee. Ugh, let's hope that rude Professor isn't there," she said, putting on her chocolate brown jacket.

"If he is, I'll handle him," Janice said and quickly put on her boots. "All ready," she continued, bouncing to her feet.

"Oh, does that mean you're finally planning on going somewhere without that old hat of yours?" Mel said, putting her index finger on her lips.

Chuckling, Janice put on her leather jacket and her indispensable fedora. "Nope," she said, pushing the hat back on her head.

Once they reached the bar in the first lounge car, they found a small, hand-written note asking the guests to proceed to the second lounge car because of technical problems with the plumbing.

Shrugging, Janice put her hand on the small of Mel's back and led the tall, gracious Southern Belle into the next car.

The second car was the one with the piano, and a group of people had assembled at the bar, listening to a piano player singing all the latest tunes while keeping perfect time to the train's perpetual *gada-gong, gada-gong* as it ran along the tracks.

The first person Janice spotted was the woman wearing the New Look suit. She was sitting at the bar, holding a cocktail of some kind and once again smoking a cigarette through a holder.

Next to her - and trying to chat her up - was a Greek man in a paint-splattered smock who was drinking a mineral water straight from the bottle.

'You'd have a better shot at buttering up a fire hydrant, chum,' Janice thought as she and Mel walked down the aisle towards the piano bar.

Next to the man in the smock, a short, distinguished looking man was sitting on a bar stool that was too tall for him. Dressed in gray and with gray hair, he was clutching a briefcase to his chest, almost like he was afraid someone might run off with it if he let it go.

No sooner had Mel sat down on one of the bar stools before the man in the smock lost all his interest in the other woman and practically threw himself at Mel.

'Aphrodite!' he shouted loudly in Greek, making all the guests turn around to stare at him - and forcing the piano player into hitting a false note right in the middle of his jazzed-up rendition of 'Some Enchanted Evening'.

'I beg your pardon?' Mel answered in Greek, looking over her shoulder to see if there should happen to be a scantily clad Love Goddess sitting next to her.

'No, you! Oh, those eyes! Those cheekbones! That hair! That posture! My name is Melas, the famed painter from Athens. Come, Aphrodite, pose nude for me!'

"A- bah, buh, what?!" Mel spluttered in English, nearly knocking over a small sugar shaker the waiter had placed in front of her.

Feeling the need to interrupt before Mel would turn into Xena all over again, Janice cleared her throat and put her hand on the painter's shoulder. *'I'm sorry, friend, but that'll happen when there are two Thursdays in the same week,'* she said in Greek.

'Oh, but that's such a crime!' the painter said.

The woman in the pinstriped New Look suit stubbed out her cigarette and stepped off the bar stool. "Go cock-a-doodle-doo someplace else, Mister. Stop bothering us," she said to the painter before going up to introduce herself to Mel and Janice.

Sighing, the painter shuffled off back up the aisle, leaving the three women alone with the man in gray who, Janice noticed, appeared more and more nervous for each passing minute.

"Hello, I'm Maria Ford, formerly of cold, dreary Seattle and presently of Montmartre in warm, gay Paris," the woman said and put out her hand.

Up close, Janice could see that the woman was younger than she had first appeared - probably no older than her early thirties. Her eyes, like her hair, were the color of dark almonds, creating a strong contrast to her fairly pasty skin.

Shaking Maria's hand, Janice pointed at herself and then at Mel. "Hello, Maria. I'm Janice Covington, this is my companion Mel Pappas. Are you going home to Paris now?"

"Yes, I was in Athens on business-related research. I'm an author."

"Oh, really?" Mel said, suddenly gaining an interest in the woman. "Of what sort of literature, if I may be so bold?"

"Oh, nothing you will have heard of, I'm afraid," Maria said with a polite laugh.

Behind them, the waiter came up to the bar and cleared his throat. "I'm terribly sorry for the delay. What can I get you?"

"Regular black coffee for me. Mel...?" Janice said, sitting down on one of the bar stools.

"Regular coffee, but I'd like two sugars and a dash of cream, please."

"Your orders will be here shortly," the waiter said and began to find the items he would need.

Shooting Mel and Janice an interested glance, Maria dug into her jacket pocket and found a calling card. "I'm sorry for being so impolite, but I really should get back to my compartment. Perhaps we'll meet at dinner? Oh, here's my card."

Taking the card, Mel offered the author a broad smile and then reached over to slap Janice's shoulder to get her to acknowledge Maria leaving. "Thank you, Maria. We're here for the entire trip so I'm sure we'll see each other again."

"Hi de ho, Maria," Janice said, tipping her fedora.

As soon as Maria had left them, Mel spun around on her bar stool and leaned in towards Janice. " 'Hi de ho!' Jan Covington, I know that proper conduct has never been your strongest suit, but did you forget all your manners? Perhaps we need to rent a house tutor for a couple of months?"

"Aw hell, no. I'd rather eat a barbecued rat than talk to one of those stuffy old birds."

"Then behave!" Mel whispered just as the waiter put down their cups of coffee.

Answering in a similar whisper, Janice added a sly wink for good measure. "Yes, dear, I'll behave. But only for yo-"

A sudden commotion to their right made Janice snap her head around to see what was going on.

The quiet man in the gray suit was suddenly red-faced and agitated, and he was clutching the briefcase to his chest harder than ever.

Leaning in towards another man - a fairly tall, mustachioed fellow in a dark suit who had appeared without anyone at the bar noticing - the gray-haired man spoke in hushed tones, but Janice was able to pick up more than a few German insults flying back and forth between them.

Hearing that the men were speaking German piqued Janice's interest and she tried to listen in on their conversation without appearing to do so. *'They're talking about... a deal... a deal gone wrong,'* she thought, sneaking a peek out of the corner of her eye.

The argument ended with a few strong words, making the tall man in the dark suit spin around and stride back through the lounge car. The gray man drained the last of his coffee and left as well.

Moments later, Janice spotted a passport lying on the bar counter where the man in the gray suit had been standing. She picked it up and raised it the air, hoping to catch him before he went too far, but he was already out of sight.

"Hey, look, Mel, that gray haired Jerry forgot his passport."

After taking a sip of her coffee, Mel put the cup down and dabbed her lips with a napkin. "Oh dear. Which way did he go?"

"I don't know... he could be anywhere by now. Sheesh, why don't I just open the darn thing and see who he is," Janice said and opened it. "Hmmm. Now that ain't right," she continued, showing Mel where it said 'Charles Wainwright'.

"Charles Wainwright... but wasn't that the rude English Professor who bumped into me?"

"Yep."

"But that wasn't him now, was it?"

"Nope."

"Interesting," Mel said and turned around on her bar stool.

Closing the passport and tapping it against her lips, Janice narrowed her eyes and assumed a very thoughtful expression - "Very. Waiter!"

"Yes, Miss?" the waiter said, appearing from around the corner.

"Are you familiar with Professor Wainwright, an elderly British Gentleman...? He has a vandyke beard and round spectacles."

"Yes, Miss, I know who you're referring to."

Putting the passport back down on the bar counter, Janice looked the waiter straight in the eye. "He seems to have forgotten his passport. Will you see to it that it's returned to him?"

"I will, Miss. Thank you," the waiter said and put the passport below the counter.

"Good man," Janice said and began to drink her coffee.

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CHAPTER 2

An hour later, Mel and Janice had returned to their compartment and had resumed their various pastimes - which amounted to knitting for Mel and reading another pulp novel for Janice - when someone knocked on the door.

Knock, knock!

"Enter!" Mel said, quickly waving her hand at Janice to get her to sit properly instead of sprawling on the bench seat.

Panagis Minardou, the chief purser, stepped inside holding a piece of paper that he gave to Mel. "Doctor Covington, Miss Pappas, we're about to cross the border into Yugoslavia. Please have your passports ready, please don't open the window while we're at the border station, and please keep the compartment door open at all times. The border guards will not hesitate kicking it down."

"Oh, my Goodness! Really? What decade are we living in, Panagis?" Mel said indignantly. "That sounds like something the Nazis could have done fifteen years ago!" she continued, taking the piece of paper she was offered.

"I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience, Miss Pappas. It's the Iron Curtain, I'm afraid. Good day, Miss Pappas, Doctor Covington," the chief purser said and left the compartment to continue to the next one.

Studying the note, Mel sighed deeply. "They're looking for contraband, firearms, illegal immigrants and dissidents. Shocking. Just shocking!"

"Firearms?" Janice said and jumped off the bench seat.

"Yes. Oh... Oh! Your Webley!"

Scrunching up her face, Janice began to chew on her cheek. "Well, I have a permit for it."

"Perhaps so, but will they be able to read it?" Mel said and took off her glasses. After holding them still for a few seconds, she began to chew on one of the arms.

"Or more to the point, will those palookas care? Sheesh. I guess we'll have to wait and see," Janice said and went back to the bench seat.

They were soon able to feel the train gradually slowing down, and it didn't take long before it was driving at a crawl, headed for the border and a short, dark gray platform next to the train tracks. Very powerful floodlights had been placed on either side of the tracks to deter anyone from sneaking away from the train, creating an eerie, foreboding atmosphere.

As the train approached the border, the locomotive's whistle sent out several long stabs to alert the border guards of their presence, and soon, a handful of soldiers wearing dark green uniforms came out of a small shed-like building to greet it.

Moments later, the strange seclusion of the luxurious train was disturbed by harsh reality as gruff voices speaking in the local language began to roam through the aisles, going into every single compartment to control the paperwork of the passengers.

When it was Mel and Janice's turn, Mel noticed that she was so nervous that her hands trembled. She tried to calm them by clutching them in front of her chest, but soon realized that it looked like she had something to hide.

Janice was calmer but still felt uneasy over the expected complication. She had decided to play with open cards and held her Webley by the barrel so it wouldn't appear like a threat. In her other hand, she held the permit, opened to the page where the signatures were.

The dour-faced soldier entering their compartment stared blankly at the revolver and the piece of paper, but somehow seemed to understand the connection.

"Passport," he said in very broken English. After checking the documents, he took a step back and looked at Janice. "Officer. Wait," he continued and backed out of the compartment.

"Oh dear," Mel croaked and began to fan herself, but Janice just sent her a reassuring wink.

Out in the aisle, the soldier waved at someone, and soon, an officer walked in, looking so much like an extra in a World War II movie that Janice almost snorted.

The officer was in his late thirties, and he had hard, angular features, dark hair and dark gray eyes. He was wearing a black leather trench coat that came to his knees, black gloves and a slightly comical officer's cap, but the grim look on his face and the hawkish gaze in his eyes ensured that no one felt a need to make fun of it.

"Good afternoon, Ladies. May I see the revolver and the paperwork, please?" he said in surprisingly good English.

"Good afternoon, officer. I have a valid permit," Janice said and handed her Webley to the officer.

"Watch Captain Zoran Jokovic, Miss... Covington. Yes?"

"Janice Covington, that's right, Captain. It's Doctor, actually."

"A female Doctor? How fascinating. I thought Uncle Sam wanted all women to stay home in the kitchen," the Watch Captain said as he studied the permit closely.

"Well..."

Flipping the page, the Watch Captain read the other side before handing it back to Janice. "It's in good order, Doctor Covington. You may keep the revolver."

"Uh, thank you, Captain."

"Good afternoon, Ladies," Captain Jokovic said and gave Mel and Janice a brief salute before leaving their compartment.

Once the officer had left, Mel let out a long, slow sigh that resembled the hissing sound a tire makes when it goes flat. Feeling so deflated that she could hardly stand, she let herself fall backwards into the chair where she promptly flaked out to the point of appearing boneless.

"Hey, no sweat, hon. That went well," Janice said and opened the closet to put her Webley back into the duffel bag.

"We..." Mel started to say, but her voice broke so she had to clear her throat and try again - "Well? You think that went well?"

"Oh yeah... I mean, he didn't frisk us or slap some cuffs on us, did he? Maybe they're saving that act for when we cross into Hungary,"

"Goodness Gracious, Jan! You're not helping!" Mel said and put the back of her hand across her forehead, feeling like she was on the brink of swooning.

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Some time later, Mel shuffled around a bit on the bench seat, first crossing her legs one way; then the other. She was reading the menu the chief purser had given them, but a random piece of information at the bottom of the page was the one that had caught her eye - and the one that had given her a very unpleasant nervous rumble in her gut.

"Uh, Jan...?"

"Yeah?" Janice said, leaning against the window sill and watching the world go by in an impressive blur. They were driving into dusk, but the last remnants of the spectacular sunset they had witnessed were still visible in the sky.

"Ummmm... Jan, dear?"

"Yeah, for cryin' out loud...?"

"You better take a look at the menu."

"Why? Do they only serve steak and kidney pies?"

"Uh, no, they have a lot of exquisite meals, but... uh, there's something you really need to look at," Mel said, adjusting her glasses and gulping quite audibly.

Turning back from the window, Janice snatched the menu out of Mel's hand. "All right, what gives, Sister? You're boppin' like a debutante at the Navy ball!"

"You better r-read it for yourself."

"Mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... seven kinds of soup... eight kinds of beef... six kinds of pork... six kinds of wild game... nine kinds of seafood... ice cream, pudding, flambéed pancakes... whassamatter, doll? I don't see anything out of the ordinary here?"

Assuming a suitably grim expression, Mel steeled herself for the explosion she knew would follow. "Look at the bottom of the page. Where your thumb is."

"Mmmm?" Janice said and moved her hand. "Smoking allowed in the lounge and the restaurant, non-alcoholic drinks served if requested, strict dress code for all gues..." - Suddenly lowering the menu, Janice scrunched up her face and shot Mel a wide-eyed look of shock.

Going back to the menu, she ran her index finger along the last line. "Strict dress code for all guests... Gentlemen must wear black tie or a military uniform. Ladies must wear a dress cut no higher than below the knee, a military uniform or a habit...! What the F-"

"Now, Jan, dear, please calm down. I'm sure we can arrange something...!" Mel said and shot up from the bench seat.

Folding the menu into a paper airplane, Janice sent it flying down the compartment. "Ha, ha... Ha! Ha! A dress! Me, Janice Covington... in a dress! Ha, flippin' Ha!"

"Maybe we can borrow one from Audrey? She's about your size, dear..."

"The hell I will! A dress! Has the world gone mad?! There's not a damn thing wrong with what I'm wearing now!" she continued, grabbing hold of her pants and then her shirt.

"I suppose I could come back with a tray for you..." Mel said, chewing on her fingernails.

"No. Nuh-uh, I don't want you to balance hot soup of whatever all the way back here, sweetheart. You might scald yourself. No, that won't work. I'll just have to starve," Janice said and flung herself onto the bench seat to sulk.

"But everyone's going to be there, Jan..."

"All the more reason not to wear a flippin' dress! Jebediah Criminy, what do they take me for? Some kind o' doll who won't go to town without havin' some paint slapped on her face and her nails done?!"

"Well, they can't know of your preferences, dear."

Sitting up, Janice buried her head in her hands. "A dress?" she said quietly a few seconds later once the initial fire had left her.

"Yes. I'm afraid so."

"Rats."

"I'll make it up to you afterwards, Jan. I promise," Mel said, wringing her hands.

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

Taking a deep breath, Janice changed her mind about speaking and just let it out in a slow sigh. "Nah, that wouldn't feel proper," she said after a little while. "Hell, I've been knee-deep in camel droppings, I've been flattened by a raging bull, I've stitched a wound on Bourbon alone, I've fought the God of War... I can wear a dress for a few hours. But if someone there has a camera, I'm... I'm... I'm gonna run away screaming, Mel."

Mel sat down and wrapped an arm around her inconsolable partner. "Well, Jan, dear, if you did that, I think it would attract even more attention."

"Yeah, you're probably right. So... do you think Audrey would lend me some kind of dress? I need shoes, too."

"Oh, I'm absolutely sure she will. Stay here, I'll go down there and ask right away."

Just as Mel was getting up, Janice slammed a hand down on the tall woman's thigh. "Mel, do it with discretion... please!"

"Jan! Unlike some, I'm discretion incarnate!"

The first thing Janice heard when Mel opened the door to the compartment ten minutes later was someone snickering loudly in an English accent - the second was "Oh Jan, why did you turn off the lights...? I can't find the switch!"

Once the lights were back on, the third thing Janice heard was "Jan... why are you hiding in the closet?"

"Because I'm in my undies here, Mel," Janice said, talking into the narrow gap she had left when she had closed the closet door.

Choosing to ignore the scathing irony of her location, Janice tried to get comfortable in the confined space, but it wasn't easy since their suitcases were poking her in the rear and a coat hanger had moved itself underneath her right arm, tickling her quite severely.

In addition to those problems, the constant movement of the train meant that it was quite difficult for her to keep in one place, and she had to sway left and right to follow the sweeping tide of clothes on the coat hangers.

"Oh, Jan! We're all adults, you don't have to be so shy! Audrey is here with a very nice dress for you."

"Can't she just leave it behind?"

"It's all right, Doctor Covington. I have two older sisters so I already know what a spinster in her undies looks like," Audrey said, sounding like she was practically bursting at the seams from trying to hold back the giggles.

"... Spinster? A spinster...? Hmmm!"

Peeking out, Janice looked at the two other women and the dress Audrey was holding. It was a flowery, very prudish affair with a high neckline and a hem that was nearly at the ankles.

"Hmmm," Janice said again, stepping out of the closet wearing an olive green US Army surplus undershirt and a pair of skin-colored Grandma bloomers.

Licking her lips, Mel adjusted her glasses and then shot her lover a broad, toothy smile. "Oh, my! There's a pun that would go very well with this situation... but I better wait until we're alone. I wouldn't want to confuse anyone."

"That's funny, the same pun just crossed my mind..." Janice said, returning the smile. "Uh, Audrey, thanks a lot for givin' me a helpin' hand. I really appreciate it."

Holding up the dress, Audrey moved ahead and slipped it effortlessly over Janice's head like a seasoned pro. "You're welcome, Doctor. It's the least I can do. After all, if you and Miss Pappas hadn't been at the Consulate yesterday... well, who knows what would have happened to Sir Lawrence and myself."

Working very efficiently, Audrey pulled the dress down so it fit Janice's muscular and slightly boyish body. "Aaaaaand... there we have it. Oh, it's SO charming! Don't you think so, Miss Pappas?"

"It's quite charming, yes. Thank you, Audrey. We'll take care of the shoes ourselves. Meet you in the dining car in a little while," Mel said and shook hands with the secretary.

"All right. Ta-ta!"

"Ta-ta right back atcha," Janice mumbled in a monotone, staring at the mirror on the wall. Once they were alone, she tried to touch various spots on her body to test how it felt through the dress. "You know, Mel, it's weird... over the years, I've helped a bunch o' women out of their dresses... but I've never actually been in one. And, believe it or not, there's a woman in that mirror who's wearin' my face... but she's also wearin' a dress so it can't be me..."

"Why, Janice Covington... I think you're picture perfect," Mel said and came up to stand behind Janice. "If this experience means that you'll want to wear dresses more often, I won't hold you back," she continued before leaning down and kissing the exposed neck in front of her.

"Oh, ha ha!"

"Now, Cinderella, please have a seat so I can put on your slippers," Mel said, enjoying the unusual situation perhaps a little too much.

"Aw hell, those heels gotta be at least three inches! I'll fall flat on my ass, Mel!" Janice whined the moment she saw the shoes Audrey had brought for her.

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Wobbling quite badly, Janice toddled down the aisle towards the dining car at the far end of the train. After a few faltering steps - and two near-drops - she realized that if she used a style of walking she had perfected on an expedition in central Africa where the floor of a cave had been made up of very smooth slate, she could keep her balance - just.

"Jan, dear, a few people would like to get past," Mel said and put a hand on Janice's shoulder.

Sighing, Janice moved to the side to let the more nimble guests move past them. Once an elderly couple had walked past - the man had a deformed foot and was using a cane, and yet he was faster than her, Janice noticed - she sighed again and resumed her slightly odd walk.

"Oh, Jan, I'm sure you won't regret it. I know it must be very awkward for you, but... well, in my opinion, you look wonderful," Mel whispered into Janice's ear.

"Thanks, darling. Are we there yet?"

"No, we still have to go through both lounge cars."

"Rats."

More movement behind them made Mel put her hand on Janice's shoulder again, but this time, the person was able to get past without problems.

"Man, I feel like a pregnant elephant...!" Janice mumbled under her breath. "How in Sam Hill can you walk on heels like that?"

"It just comes naturally to me, I guess."

Suddenly, Sir Lawrence's characteristic voice filled the aisle, quickly joined by a snickering Audrey. "Oh good evening, Miss Pappas, Doctor Covington. How nice to finally run into you. I trust the journey has been pleasant for you so far?" the Vice-Consul said.

Turning around, Mel put on her best smile. "Good evening, Sir Lawrence. It certainly has. Although Doctor Covington has had to break a few personal inhibitions, I'm afraid."

"Mmmm, yes, I can see that," Sir Lawrence said, stifling a chuckle. "Well, we'll see you in the restaurant car."

As Audrey walked past a near-mortified Janice, she leaned in and whispered into the adventurer's ear: "I think you look smashing, Doctor!"

"Thanks, toots," Janice mumbled.

Having finally reached the dining car, Mel let out a sigh of relief and guided the wobbling Janice over to the nearest table for two so she wouldn't have to walk too far. Moments later, a waiter was at the table, taking their orders.

"Good evening, my good man," Mel said, smiling broadly at the waiter who was dressed in the same dark blue uniform the pursers wore, except that he wasn't wearing a jacket. "My companion and I have both decided to order a bowl of Fasoulada soup, Beef Olimpia with burgundy sauce, sweet potatoes and carrots, and finally the Ice Cream Cocktail Surprise. Jan?"

"Mmmm."

Writing the order down on a small notepad, the waiter nodded and then looked back at Mel. "And to drink, Miss?"

"A bottle of red wine, just give us the Chef's Recommendation. And a half-bottle of Sherry for the ice cream, please. That'll be all," Mel continued, slipping the waiter a folded-up bill.

"Yes, Miss. Thank you."

While they were waiting for the food, Mel looked around the luxurious dining car, marveling at the splendor: fifteen tables had been put up on either side of the central aisle; tables seating four on the left and tables seating two on the right. All bore chalk-white table cloths, gold cutlery, heavy, high-quality porcelain plates and there were no less than three different glasses at each setting.

The tables were lit up by two rows of lightbulbs in the ceiling that cast a warm, golden light down upon the guests, adding to the magnificent atmosphere.

As Mel looked around, she noticed that they already knew most of the people at the tables closest to them - the movie star, the American lady from Paris, the insufferable English Professor, Sir Lawrence and Audrey, and finally the man in gray who was still clutching his briefcase - but there were several guests that she

hadn't seen before. One person who wasn't there was the strange Greek painter who had asked her to pose nude, but Mel was quite pleased to see that.

A heartfelt sigh from Janice made Mel look back at her partner. Janice was sitting closest to the window and was practically flattening her nose against the pane to avoid being looked at by the other guests.

Chuckling, Mel resumed studying the others. Closer inspection of the man in gray revealed that there was a thick metal chain from his wrist to the briefcase, and that immediately made Mel's mind go into overdrive.

"Oh! Jan!" she whispered.

"Mmmm?"

"Remember the man in gray who was having an argument with the other man in the dark suit...?"

"Yeah."

"He's handcuffed to his briefcase. That's why he's always clutching it to his chest," Mel whispered.

"Eatin' spaghetti must be a pain in the you-know-what, then," Janice replied flatly, staring out into the late dusk, watching the scenery go by in a dark gray blur.

Looking back at the man, Mel could see that he was sipping a bowl of soup. "He isn't eating spaghetti, Jan, he's enjoying a soup. I think it's the chicken soup."

"Figure of speech, sweetheart."

"Oh... Oh, Janice, I wish you'd snap out of it. Wearing a dress is not the end of the world."

Briefly looking away from the window, Janice let her eyes run down Mel's tall, gracious body. "Not for you, you look like a million dollars even in tattered old rags, but for me... man. I'm gonna be havin' nightmares about this for weeks. And it's so chilly on the thighs! How do you stop your legs from freezin', baby?"

"I cross them, quite simply," Mel said and demonstrated the technique.

Trying to emulate her partner, Janice gave it her best shot, but soon gave up when the results weren't coming. "Don't have room for it over here."

Shaking her head, Mel leaned in to explain that it was better not to cross the legs at the knee, but before she had time to do so, the waiter arrived with their orders.

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After dinner, Mel leaned back in her seat, feeling a strong need to talk to someone about something positive - Janice had spent the entire three-course meal talking about other horrible dinner experiences she'd had over the years.

As Janice was using her fork to stab the last of the fruit in her Ice Cream Cocktail Surprise, she kept reminiscing: "... then there was that time in Bangkok in... when was that... in thirty-four, I think. God Almighty, Mel, you should have seen the things on that menu... all of it had different names, but they were

all just honey-roasted rat. Yuk. But even then I didn't have to wear a dress. And if you ever travel to Kenya, don't order the Mulaka Special, that's just a polite way of saying..."

Sighing, Mel wanted to stick her fingers in her ears, hoping dearly that someone would come and rescue her from the grumpy grouch who had possessed Janice.

That someone proved to be Audrey who came tripping down the aisle - not exactly in a straight line - sending off a flushed, slightly tipsy vibe. When the train bucked on the tracks, she fell sideways onto Richard Brennan's Tuxedoed lap, but the movie star didn't seem to be too bothered.

Giggling, she excused herself and continued on, but she was only able to keep her balance for two more tables before she keeled over again, landing on the vacant chair at the table where the English Professor was sitting. His response was immediate and most ungentleman-like, and it left her even more red-faced.

When she finally reached Mel and Janice's table, she hiccuped and wiped her forehead. "Oh, dear, I seem to be a little inebber... inubri... inebri... drunk. It's the red wine... I don't drink red wine!" she said and began to giggle again.

Feeling sorry for the secretary, Janice got up from her chair and helped Audrey sit down before she fell down again. When she turned around, she found herself face to face with the tall, mustachioed man in the dark suit who had once again snuck up without any of them noticing. A short staring match ensued, won by Janice as the man quickly excused himself and left the dining car.

Not long after, Sir Lawrence came up to Mel and Janice's table. Putting his hands behind his back, he eyed the tipsy Audrey wearily. "Oh dear, Miss Dickinson... you need some strong, black coffee. Miss Pappas, would you mind informing my secretary that it will be a while before I'll be retiring for the night. By good fortune, I've run into an alumnus from my old alma mater, Professor Emeritus Charles Wainwright, and he's promised me a long talk about the good old days over a bottle of Brandy."

"Oh, that sounds exciting, Sir Lawrence. Leave it to us, we'll take care of it. Have a pleasant evening," Mel said and smiled at the Vice-Consul.

"Thank you, Miss Pappas. Good evening, Miss Dickinson. I hope your headache won't be too devastating tomorrow, I need you to take dictation. Good evening, Doctor Covington," Sir Lawrence said and left the table.

Turning to face Mel, Audrey tried to touch her nose with her finger, but missed by a mile. "Dic-" *-hiccup-* "tation? I can't even write my own name right now!" she said and giggled some more.

"Coffee," Janice said and waved her hand to get the waiter's attention.

The next person to pay them a visit was Richard Brennan. Lighting a long, suggestive cigar just as he reached their table, the slick movie star flashed his award-winning crooked smile at the three women. "Hello, Ladies. Would any of you be interested in a night cap in my compartment?" he said, looking directly at Mel.

"Well, Sir, I'm very flattered. Ten years ago, I would even have been interested, but I'm afraid it's just not possible now," Mel said, smoothing out a non-existent crease in the starched, chalk-white tablecloth.

"Oh, no, really? Ten years ago, you wouldn't have said yes anyhow. Back then, I was just a sweaty average Joe, picking oranges on the family orchard in Southern California," Richard said with a sly grin.

"Yeah? You didn't serve your country, then?" Janice said, earning herself a muffled 'tut!' from Mel.

"Oh, I volunteered after Pearl, but I got 4F'ed, believe it or not. Flat feet. Shhh, don't tell my agent, he'll never let me do another war movie," Richard said and knocked off the ash into the ashtray on Mel and Janice's table.

Failing to come up with an excuse that would appease the movie star, Mel just decided to cut to the chase. "Thank you, Sir, but no thank you."

"Oh, you're breaking my heart! All right, a Gentleman knows when the game is lost. Good evening, Ladies," Richard said and leaned down to kiss Mel's hand, but she pulled it back before he could reach it. Instead, he settled for flashing her another of his crooked grins.

Just before he left, he shot Janice a curious glance. "I can't wait to see what you'll be wearing at breakfast, pal. You need a better tailor. That thing is just hangin' on you like a circus tent. Good night, everybody."

Groaning, Janice bumped down onto the chair at the next table and buried her face in her hands.

Just as the waiter walked past with Audrey's coffee, Charles Wainwright left his table and the two people almost bumped into each other. The Professor let out a few colorful curses and then stomped off up the aisle.

Narrowing her eyes, Janice thumped her fist into the table, making the salt and pepper shakers - and Audrey - jump around. "Jeez, I hope that old scrooge gets his just rewards one day."

"Jan!" Mel said shocked, adjusting her glasses.

"Well excuse me, but he's annoying as hell! Have you heard him say one, single positive thing?"

"Hmmm!" Mel said, thinking about the endless stream of negativity emanating from Janice during the meal.

A shadow fell over the table, and when Janice looked up, she locked eyes with Maria Ford who was holding an unlit cigarette in her holder. "Hello again. Do any of you have a light? I seem to have misplaced my lighter."

Janice began to pat herself down, but then realized that she was still wearing the dress. "No, I'm sorry."

The author was wearing what Janice's father would have called a Frontierwoman's Dress, a tight, black, double-breasted garment that fanned out into a short, loose skirt that came to just above her knees. Beneath that, she was wearing a pair of black pants that blended in so well that Janice had to look twice to see that they weren't part of the dress.

"I do!" Audrey said, digging into her purse. Stretching up, she tried to light the cigarette, but the flame danced about so severely that she was closer to setting the holder alight than the cigarette.

"Let me," Janice said and snatched the lighter out of Audrey's hands. "Here you go, Miss Ford."

Inhaling, Maria leaned her head back and let out an impressive smoke ring. "Thank you, Janice. And please... call me Maria," she said with a most inviting sparkle in her eyes.

"You're welcome, Maria," Janice said and handed the lighter back to Audrey who instantly giggled and put it back into her purse. As she looked at Mel, she noticed one of the perfectly shaped eyebrows slowly creep up the perfectly shaped forehead.

"Listen... I have two decks of cards in my compartment. Could I tempt you gals to a game of four-hand Argentine Rummy?" Maria said, smoothing down the hair above her right ear.

Knowing that Mel probably wouldn't find it particularly funny, Janice opened her mouth to respectfully decline, but before she had time to say more than "Mmmm, well-" Audrey leaned in to slur:

"Argentine Rummy? What on Earth is that?"

"I believe it's called Canasta in the United Kingdom," Mel said.

"Oooh! I love Canasta! I'd very much like to play!" the secretary said, squealing in a very excited fashion and bouncing up and down in her seat.

"All right," Maria said and let out a new smoke ring. "And you, Miss Pappas? Janice?"

Looking at Mel, Janice was surprised to see that the Southern Belle seemed to be more accepting of the offer than she had thought she would be. Establishing a silent connection by looking deeply into each other's eyes, they agreed on joining the card game, if only for a few hands.

"Maria, we'll gladly join you if you can accept that my Rummy is even worse than my Poker... and that's deplorable," Mel said and sent the other woman a charming smile.

"Oh, but of course. No problem. I'm up in compartment seventeen in car two. How about meeting me there in ten minutes or so? In case you want to slip into something, uh... less comfortable," Maria said and winked at Janice.

"Not a bad idea, that. Hi de ho, Maria, we'll be there."

With the author out of earshot, Mel leaned forward and signaled that Janice should do the same. "Jan, she's on the prowl," she said once their heads were close.

"Oh, I know. That's why I thought you wouldn't want to play...?"

"Well, uh..." - Mel looked around and lowered her voice even further - "Not only would it be rude of us to turn her down, I'd much rather be submitted to the advances of a kindred spirit than to be in Richard Brennan's oily company."

Leaning her head back, Janice let out such a loud belly laugh that everyone near them turned around to see what was going on. "That's my Mel Pappas!" she said, giving Mel's hands a little squeeze.

"Uh, beg' pardon... what does 'on the prowl' mean in this context?" Audrey said, draining the last of her coffee.

"What it always means, dear," Mel said, returning the squeeze Janice had given her.

Audrey scrunched up her face and opened her mouth to speak, but nary a sound came out. "Oh..." she said after a little while, slowly beginning to connect the dots in her fuzzy mind.

Getting up from her chair, Janice reached down and took off her high-heeled shoes so she'd be able to walk freely. "Tell you what, Mel, I'm just gonna go back to our crib and change into my regular duds. Why don't you and Audrey go up to Maria's compartment in the meantime? You're safe, I think she's got her sights set on me."

"All right, that's a good idea. Come, Audrey, I'll help you get there," Mel said and took Audrey's hands in her own.

._*_*._

On her way down to compartment seventeen - once again fully dressed in her work boots, khaki pants and tan shirt - Janice happened to walk past a compartment where the door was slightly ajar. Light shone out into the aisle, but it was the sound of two male voices that caught her attention.

One belonged to Sir Lawrence, but it was the other one that made Janice stop and eavesdrop - it was a younger voice, meaning that it didn't belong to the stuffy old Professor Sir Lawrence had said he was going to talk to. The voice spoke in somewhat broken English and it was curiously muffled, almost like the person was trying to talk through a scarf.

For some reason, Janice felt in her gut that something was wrong, so she knelt down and pretended to tie her bootlaces. As she was busy doing that, she could pick up a handful of scattered words, '*Vienna*', '*a score to settle*', and '*not the other one*,' but none really raised any red flags.

After a scant minute, the voices stopped and the door was closed from the inside, making Janice jump to her feet and hurry down the aisle so she wouldn't get caught eavesdropping.

In her haste, she almost went past compartment seventeen, but the easily recognizable sound of Audrey giggling made her pull to a halt and knock on the door.

'Enter!' Maria said.

Walking in, Janice took a last precautionary look up and down the aisle before closing the door behind her.

"Hello, Janice. We thought you had forgotten about us," Maria said, shuffling a deck of cards. Mel, Audrey and Maria were sitting at the table beneath the window - Mel on the bench seat, Maria on the chair and Audrey on top of one of Maria's suitcases that was so low she had trouble looking up on the table.

"No, I... ah, never mind. Have you started yet?" Janice said and moved over to sit next to Mel.

Distributing the cards, Maria shook her head. "No, we're just starting now."

"Good. Hey, we're four gals at a card game... I think there's a joke about that. Actually, I'm sure there is... what was it? Hmmm... Oh yeah, 'one was a saint, one was a sinner, one was a patsy and one was a winner.'"

Picking up her hand, Mel leaned in and bumped shoulders with her lover. "Jan?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Nobody gives a darn. Shut up and play."

"Yes, dear."

An hour later, Audrey's euphoria and enthusiasm had turned into despair and drowsiness and she was resting in a fetal position on Maria's bench seat.

Since a three-hand Argentine Rummy wasn't particularly fun to play, the game had turned to Poker, and there were little piles of matches torn from the promotional Orient Express matchbooks in front of all three players - Janice's was the biggest, followed by Maria's.

"Fold," Mel said with a sigh as her hand was once again fit for the scrapheap.

"Last hand, okay?" Janice said, peeking above the rim of her cards.

Maria's only answer was a brief nod. Putting down the cards, she reached for her pack of Queen's Favorites only to remember that she had already smoked the last one. "Oh... you wouldn't happen to have a cig I could borrow, would ya?"

"Sorry, Maria. I gave up smoking when Mel threatened to withdraw my kissin' privileges," Janice said with a dark chuckle.

"Oh! Wouldn't want that, would we?"

"Nope. I'll raise ya twenty," Janice said and threw two headless matches and one where the sulfur was still attached onto the pile in the center of the table.

Licking her lips, Maria went through her options but finally gave up when she ran out of permutations. "Nah, I'll fold. You got it, Doc. You win the pot," she said and threw down her cards, three threes and a pair of jacks.

"Awright! Lucky me, huh? Okay, that's five matches with heads and ten without... that's, uh, a cool hundred bucks!"

"What were your cards, Jan?" Mel said and tried to sneak a peek.

"Oh, nothing much, just a six, a seven, an eight, a nine and a ten, all Diamonds."

"You lucky devil," Maria said, shaking her head. "Where did you learn to play Poker like that?"

Scooping up the cards, Janice knocked them against the table to get them straight and then inserted the stack into a cardboard case. "My Dad taught me."

"I see. So he approves of you?"

"I gave him no choice," Janice said with a crooked grin. "My Mom had already split by then, so... well, it's been him and me for most of my life."

"My father has disowned me," Maria said somberly.

The words left a dark cloud hanging over the compartment, and for several heartbeats, the only sounds heard were Audrey's light snores and the train's perpetual noises; the engine chugging away out front and the wheels singing against the tracks.

"I'm really sorry to hear that, Maria," Mel finally said, adjusting her glasses.

Shrugging, Maria got up from the chair and threw the crumbled up cigarette pack into the trash can. "That's why I moved halfway around the world. I needed a clean break. Ah, I'll live."

Knock, knock

'Room service, Miss Ford. We're making the beds now.'

"Hang on for a second, please!" Maria said and looked at her wrist watch which read a quarter past eleven. "Damn, already? Who's going to wake up Audrey?"

"I'll do that," Mel said and got up from the suitcase she had inherited from the secretary. First she tapped gently on the sleeping woman's shoulder, but it wasn't enough to wake her up. Then she pulled her arm, but even that didn't work. "Hmmm. Jan, I need your help, please. You take her arms, I'll carry her legs."

"Sure thing, babe," Janice said and grabbed Audrey's arms, but it was to no avail. No matter how hard they tried to get the secretary off the bed, she just slipped back down, as nimble and fluid as a big cat.

When Mel raised Audrey's legs, her rear end and torso stayed on the bed; and when Janice tried to lift her arms, they couldn't get her head to follow.

"Uh-huh... okay. Now what?" Janice said, scratching her hair.

"She doesn't weigh too much... I'll just have to do it this way," Mel said and moved her hands in under the sleeping Audrey. With a heave-ho, she lifted the secretary off the bed, cradling her in her arms like a huge, sleeping baby.

Staring wide-eyed at the unusual scene, Maria went up to Mel and tried to feel her biceps. "Wow, you're stronger than you appear. You've got that lifting thing down pat." Turning around, she continued: "All right, you can come in now!"

As the purser entered the compartment, he stopped dead in his tracks at the strange sight of a grown woman resting in the arms of another grown woman, but shrugged it off and concentrated on his job. After unlocking a special drawer at the bottom of the closet, he took out the things he would need to make the bed, and then proceeded to the bench seat.

Working quickly and efficiently, he converted the bench seat into a bed, but stopped before he went any further. "Miss Ford, do you want me to lower the second bunk?"

Looking at the soundly sleeping Audrey, Maria made a face, but then shrugged. "Uh, well... yeah. I guess I should keep an eye on her tonight. If that's all right?"

"Of course, Miss Ford," the purser said and turned a key to release the top bunk. After lowering it into a horizontal position, he made that, too.

"Purser, have you been in compartment eleven yet?" Janice asked.

"Not yet, Miss. No one answered the door," the purser said, finishing up by fluffing the pillows and clicking the ladder into place.

Finding her wallet, Janice slipped the purser a bill. "Well, would it be too much trouble if we went back there now?"

"It would be no trouble at all, Miss."

"All right, let's do that. Mel, I'm just gonna go back and unlock so we can get our bed made. Are you and Maria good to get Audrey settled in?" Janice said, standing in the doorway.

Nodding, Mel sent her partner a little smile. "Of course, Jan. We'll take care of it."

Putting his keychain in his pocket, the purser stood up straight and folded his hands in front of him. "Miss Ford, we'll be stopping briefly at Belgrade just after two in the morning, and we'll be crossing the border into Hungary at around seven. I strongly advise you to be up and dressed by then and to have your passport ready. Breakfast will be served in the dining car from six."

"All right, thank you. Thank you very much," Maria said and ushered the purser out of the compartment.

After closing the door, Maria leaned against it and began biting her lower lip. "And now for the next problem."

"What's that, Maria?" Mel said, gently lowering Audrey down on the bottom bunk.

"Undressing her for the night."

"Uh... well... uh... we'll just loosen her shirt. That should be enough."

"She's wearing a blouse," Maria said flatly.

"Oh... so she is, I hadn't even noticed. Oh dear," Mel said, fanning herself to stop a sudden blush from spreading.

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CHAPTER 3

With a deep groan, the Orient Express slowly began to gain speed as it rumbled out of the central station in Belgrade. The many switches in the range made the wheels sing their traditional *gada-gong, gada-gong*, and the wagons creaked and groaned as they turned in a way they weren't accustomed to from the open track.

The many unusual sounds worked their way into Janice's sleep, and she soon stirred and cracked open an eyelid to see what time it was - a quarter to three in the morning, according to the little alarm clock on the desk next to the bed.

Yawning, she snuggled back down into Mel's warm grasp, hoping that she'd get back to the dream that had involved herself and the tall translator frolicking around on a grassy meadow dressed only in their birthday suits.

Moments before she fell asleep again, a soft, metallic clink was heard from somewhere in the compartment, and she became alert. In the few minutes she had been awake, the train had reached the open track and the groaning cars had settled down into their regular noises.

Looking out into the dark compartment, Janice couldn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary, and she eventually came to the conclusion that it had been someone walking past their door.

Clink-CLINK!

Now Janice knew something was amiss and she rapidly turned her head to look at the compartment. Her eyes soon caught movement in the narrow gap underneath the door, and it didn't take her long to connect the dots - someone was trying to jimmy open the lock.

"Son of a bitch," she growled and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Mel smacked her lips a couple of times, but rolled over onto her other side, away from the drama.

Standing up, wearing only an undershirt and her bloomers, Janice padded across the carpet on bare feet, ready to clobber whomever it was trying to gain access to their compartment. Ruing the decision to store her Webley in the duffel bag, she looked around to see if there was anything she could use as a weapon - the only thing available to her was the Sally Swackhamer pulp novel, but that would hardly leave a paper cut.

Clenching her fists, she moved closer to the door; her eyes transfixed on the door handle that had begun to move, seemingly on its own accord.

When the door suddenly creaked open, she jumped forward, grabbed hold of the door and tore it fully open.

On the other side, a man dressed in black clothes and with a black mask covering his face let out a surprised yell and stumbled head-first into the compartment, directly into Janice's waiting fist.

Firing off a right hook at the unknown man's jaw, Janice let out a triumphant whoop when she felt her knuckles make firm contact. A split second later, the man took a swing at her, but she evaded it easily and went in deep to try to yank his mask off - unfortunately the move backfired and she found herself on the receiving end of a punch to the gut that tore the wind out of her.

On the bed, Mel flew into a sitting position, alerted by the sounds of the struggle and her partner's yells and groans. "Jan? Jan?! Jan, wh-what are you doing? Who's that you're fighting?" she said, frantically patting the bed and the table next to it to find her glasses.

Wheezing too hard to answer, Janice rammed her heel down onto the man's foot to get a reprieve, but her bare foot didn't make much of an impact on what felt like leather boots. Undaunted, she grabbed the man's head and tried to slam it against the inside of the door, but the unknown man moved faster and spun around at the last moment.

With his speedy maneuver, the man was able to tear himself free of her grip, and quickly used his newfound liberty to force the door open again, sending it on a collision course with Janice's nose and forehead.

Howling in pain, Janice clutched her brow and took several staggering steps backwards, ending up with a bump on the chair at the desk.

Exploiting the confusion, the assailant quickly ran out of the door and vanished into the semi-darkness.

"Oh, no you don't! You dirty, no-good, rotten bast-" Janice roared and jumped up from the chair. In two heartbeats, she was at the door, but there was no sight of the man. "Mel! Stay here and lock the door! I'll knock when I get back!" she shouted and disappeared out into the aisle.

"But Jan! You're only wearin' your bloomers!" Mel howled, but the adventurer was already long gone.

Storming down the aisle, Janice hastily checked all the doors she went past to see if the man had ducked into one of the compartments, but they were all locked, save for number eighteen where an elderly man stood in the doorway dressed in a dark green bathrobe.

As Janice sprinted past him wearing next to nothing, his eyes nearly bulged out of his head. Closing the door, he mumbled quietly to himself, lamenting the fact that the gals hadn't been as liberal when he had been a strapping young lad.

Janice flew through the glass door, around the corner and onto the narrow pathway between the sleeping cars. Feeling the chilly wind sweep around her bare legs convinced her to give up the chase, but she leaned against the outside of the door for a few moments to catch her breath.

"What the hell was that all about...?" she said out into thin air. "No flippin' way that was a random burglar. No way." Punching her fist into her open palm, she turned around and began to walk back to compartment eleven - however, she only made it three steps before she was intercepted by a night purser running towards her with a blanket that he hurriedly swept around her body.

"No, uh! Hey, what... what the hell! Get this damn thing off me for cryin' out loud!" Janice said angrily, unwrapping herself and threw the blanket on the floor.

"But, Miss! It's just to cover your modesty!" the night purser said, wringing his hands and trying to look anywhere but at the semi-dressed woman in front of him.

"My modesty don't need no damn cover, thank you very much! Let me tell you about needin' cover... a couple of years ago in Kenya, a baboon the size of Babe Goddamned Ruth forced me out of the outhouse at high noon with my cheeks flappin' in the breeze! That's needin' cover, not standing in my bloomers in the middle of the Goddamned Orient Express!"

"But...!"

"Did you see the son of a bitch I was chasin'?"

"N-no, Miss..."

"Then I wish you a good night, Sir!" Janice said and stomped off down towards her compartment.

Inside the compartment, Mel hurriedly closed her bathrobe and found a shoe so she was ready in case the assailant decided to come back. She hadn't been able to find her glasses, so she squinted at the door for all she was worth, ready to strike with the speed of a cobra.

Knock, knock

'Mel...? Mel, open up, it's me.'

"A-are you alone?"

'Yes, and I'm freezing my patootie off! Open up, will ya?'

Sighing, Mel unlocked and opened the door.

Hurrying inside, Janice jumped up into the bed and crawled under the blanket to try to regain some warmth in her legs and rear.

"Jan? Can you see my glasses? I wasn't able to find them in the confusion," Mel said, looking into the mirror at the shady figure she thought was her partner.

"Mel, I'm over here... I ran past you and jumped into the bed," Janice said, shivering. When Mel still didn't show any signs of spotting her, Janice let out a brief chuckle and scratched her hair. "Hey, you're looking at yourself in the mirror, baby... I'm over here. In the bed."

"Oh..."

Stumbling her way through the compartment, Mel finally found the edge of the desk and leaned against it. "Jan, what was that all about?"

"Beats the hell out of me, toots. Oh, hang on, I've found your glasses... they had been knocked on the floor in the mess," Janice said and hung over the side of the bed to pick up the black frame.

Once she had given them a quick rubdown on the blanket, she swung her legs out of the bed and walked over to Mel. "Lean down, baby. Here they are," she said as she pushed the glasses up Mel's nose.

Letting out a sigh of relief - for Janice returning in one piece rather than for finding her glasses - Mel grabbed hold of her partner and pulled her into an embrace.

Janice wrapped her arms around Mel's waist and gave the tall translator a strong squeeze. "I don't know what went down there. It was a beefy guy, dressed in black. He was kinda strong, but I got the better of him. He was damn fast, though. He was gone in a flash... didn't even catch a glimpse of him."

"The only thing we have of value is the emerald... but that's in the armored car. Do you think that's why he was here?"

"I don't know, honeybuns. I do know one thing, though. This wasn't no random burglary. We have an enemy on this train."

Pulling back, Mel looked at Janice with a startled expression on her face. As she spoke, her eyebrows slowly moved closer to each other like they always did when she was nervous. "Oh Good Lord, Jan! Do you think it's got something to do with Sir Alastair? And that other fellow, the Italian?"

"Well, they were arrested two days ago for several, serious offenses... I can't imagine the Gendarme releasing them so soon... or at all, even." With those words, Janice jumped back into the bed and held the blanket open for Mel. "You comin'? We still got a few hours to kill before the next border crossing."

"How can you even think of sleeping now!"

"Ah, he won't be back."

"Oh..."

"Not tonight, anyhow."

"Jan! Oh, I have it. I just need to..." - Mel grabbed the heavy chair and wobbled down to the other end of the compartment where she dumped it up against the door with a muffled bump - "Done. Now I can sleep safely."

._*._*._

At a quarter to seven, Mel returned from refreshing herself in the restroom at the end of the car. Unlocking the door to their compartment, she chuckled when she saw Janice sprawled flat on her stomach on the bed, with her head up against the far wall and her feet almost off the side of the bunk.

Putting on her chocolate brown jacket and closing the lower three buttons, she went over to the bed, sat down next to the soundly sleeping Janice and began to tickle the adventurer's calves, knees and thighs.

The results weren't slow in coming: at first, Janice just reached down and swatted Mel's hand away in her sleep, but when Mel kept up the sweet torture, Janice growled and turned over onto her back.

"All right, what gives, Sister?" Janice said through a wide yawn, catching Mel's long fingers in hers.

"Good morning, darling. We're about to meet another of those charming border patrols, so I thought you'd want to get dressed beforehand."

"Oh, is that all? Darn... here I was, hopin' you wanted to have a little roll in the hay," Janice said and fell backwards onto the bed.

Getting off the bed, Mel put out her hand and pulled Janice back up into a sitting position. "We only have fifteen minutes... and besides that, I prefer to wait until we're alone."

"We're alone now, ain't we?"

"No, Jan, we're not. There's someone right next door. Come on, please get dressed. The first border crossing was nerve-racking enough... I don't need any added thrills," Mel said and adjusted her glasses.

Breaking out into a big yawn, Janice got up from the bed and jumped into her khaki pants. After zipping them, she put on her tan shirt but let it hang loose. "Good morning, baby," she said and got up on tip-toes to place a nice kiss on Mel's lips.

"Morning," Mel said. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"... what?" Janice said, looking down at herself.

"The dress code, remember? You have to slip into Audrey's dress again, otherwise we might not be able to get any breakfast."

"Ah, okay. You know what I say, honey?"

"No?"

"Screw the dress code!"

"Oh, Jan..."

"This is 1951, Rosie the Riveter earned us women a right to wear pants!"

"Well... all right. But could you at least button your shirt...? No, on second thoughts," Mel said and reached down. Using her skilled fingers, she began to button Janice's shirt to make it stand out a little less.

After doing the third button, her hand accidentally slipped in under the shirt and began to caress Janice's firm, taut stomach. "Oops. Oh dear, my hand slipped," she continued in a whisper, leaning down to kiss her partner again.

Unfortunately, the caress didn't have the effect Mel had hoped for as Janice took a half-step back and bared her teeth in a pained grimace.

"Oh... wh-what's wrong, Jan?"

"It stings!" Janice hissed. Unbuttoning her shirt again, she pulled her undershirt out of her pants to see what had caused the pain - it quickly presented itself in bright Technicolor: she had a perfect set of dark red knuckle-prints across the center part of her stomach. "Well I'll be damned... that's where the son of a bitch hit me last night. I didn't feel it until now."

"Goodness me, he hit you?"

"Yeah. Coulda been worse... he coulda been wearin' brass knuckles."

"Oh, darling," Mel said and knelt down in front of Janice. Moving slowly, she leaned in and placed a tender kiss on the bruise to make it heal faster.

Smiling broadly, Janice helped Mel back on her feet and answered the kiss with one of her own - on Mel's lips - but the magic moment was broken by one of the pursers knocking on the compartment door.

'Miss Pappas, Doctor Covington! We're about to cross the border into Hungary. Please have your passports ready, please don't open the window while we're at the border station, and please keep the compartment door open at all times.'

"All right, all right!" Janice said and tore herself free of Mel's loving grip. "Damn, that man's gotta work on his timing!"

._*_*._*

Half an hour later, Mel and Janice walked into the dining car to get some breakfast. They said good morning to the usual crowd - A fresh-looking Maria and a hung-over Audrey, Richard Brennan who instantly offered Mel a seat at his table, the Greek painter who was trying to chat up yet another woman, Professor Wainwright who did his best to ignore them, and finally Sir Lawrence.

As they said good morning to the Vice-Consul, Janice shot him a dark, mistrustful look, but if he felt stung, he didn't show it.

At a table all by himself at the far end of the dining car, the tall man in the dark suit was drinking a cup of coffee and reading a German newspaper. When he spotted Mel and Janice come closer to him, he emptied his cup and hurriedly left the table.

Instantly narrowing her eyes, Janice leaned in towards Mel and pulled her down so she could whisper into the tall woman's ear. "There's that fella again... he's got something to hide... look, he's running away every time we come close."

"Maybe he just doesn-" Mel said, but Janice had already left her side and was walking very fast down the aisle to catch the tall man.

"Hello, Sir! Excuse me, Sir! Sir, I need a word with you... Sir!"

Striding away from Janice, the tall man suddenly found his path blocked by a waiter holding a tray of croissants. The two men almost bumped into each other, but the tall man moved with cat-like agility and swerved out of the way at the last moment.

Hurrying along, Janice predictably fell foul of the waiter and several precious seconds were lost negotiating a safe passage past him. Once she was clear of the waiter, she took off down the aisle, but the tall man had already vanished into thin air.

Rubbing her brow, Janice let out a sharp sigh and punched her fist into her open palm all over again.

As she returned to the dining car, she was met by a wall of murmurs and plenty of confused looks by everybody there, and she knew she had to explain what was going on. Clearing her throat, she put her arms in the air to ask for a bit of silence.

"Sorry to upset all you fine folks with that little pursuit, but I had a couple o' questions for that man. Unfortunately, I didn't get to ask 'em before he left. You see, last night, my companion and I were attacked in our compartment..."

The murmurs turned into cries of outrage, and Richard Brennan jumped out of his seat and rushed to Mel's side at once. "Oh, Good Heavens, Miss Pappas! Are you all right? If you need a safe haven, my bed is always available to you," he said, patting Mel's hand like he was afraid she would faint on the spot.

Blushing furiously, Mel tried to pull out of his grip, but he held on too tightly. "Uh, I... no, actu-"

"Nah, Mel wasn't hurt at all, but thanks anyway, Dickie-boy," Janice said, grinning. "No, whoever it was didn't count on me puttin' up a fight. He ran off without gettin' anything."

'That's what happens when women travel unaccompanied!' someone said at the back. The crowd at the front spread out to reveal Professor Wainwright looking even more surly than usual.

"Yeah, whatever, Prof. What I'd like to know is... did any of you hear or see anything out of the ordinary this morning, just after we left Belgrade?"

The murmurs returned, nearly all of them in the negative. After a brief while, Maria put up her hand and got up from her chair. "Well, Doctor Covington, I had trouble sleeping... my temporary roommate's snores were a bit loud... and I think I heard the commotion. But I didn't open the door so I didn't see anything. Sorry."

"No problem, Maria. There wasn't anything you could have done, anyhow. Anyone else?"

When no one appeared to have heard anything, Janice shrugged and moved back to Mel.

Looking pensive, Sir Lawrence wiped his lips on a napkin and moved his chair back. Getting up, he took the hastily scribbled note he had been reading and slipped it into his jacket pocket without anyone noticing.

"Doctor Covington, Miss Pappas, it must have been a frightening experience for you. Please accept my warmest sympathies," he said, putting his hand on Mel's elbow.

Overpowered by a higher source, Richard Brennan looked crestfallen and shuffled back to his table to finish his coffee.

"Thank you very much, Sir Lawrence. The truth is that I didn't catch much of it. Janice took care of everything," Mel said, adjusting her glasses. She pulled a chair back to sit down, but before she could do so, Sir Lawrence tightened his grip on her elbow.

Leaning in, he lowered his voice so only Mel and Janice could hear him. "I'm afraid we have to go into the armored car and verify that the emerald is still there. I think we all know what the assailant was after."

"Yeah," Janice said, nodding.

A short while later, Panagis Minardou, the chief purser, led the two women and the Vice-Consul into the armored car. Using his set of master keys, he quickly unlocked the sturdy metal fence and then the safe itself.

It took all his strength to swing open the heavy door, but when it was fully ajar, it was evident that everything inside was in good order.

"We need to see the emerald, please, Panagis," Janice said, standing at the other side of the fence.

Reaching into the safe, the chief purser used the index card to find the proper tray, opened it and brought the envelope out into the light so all three visitors could see that Cecrops' emerald was still inside it.

"Hmmm," Sir Lawrence said, absentmindedly running his index finger across his upper lip. "That's something, at least."

Feeling confused, Mel couldn't get the dots to connect in her mind, and she looked back and forth between the safe and the rack where the index cards describing the type and the location of the valuable were kept. "How strange. I guess whomever the attacker was didn't know the procedures here. We didn't even know where the emerald was because we didn't have the index card," she said, pointing at the shelves that were quite full with rows and rows of identical index cards.

Janice nodded in agreement. "Yeah, something smells fishy here. And when something smells fishy, it's typically beca-

A shadow dancing across the wall stopped the adventurer mid-stream. Seemingly coming from somewhere behind them, the shadow slid closer, almost like someone was trying to eavesdrop.

"Jan? What? What's wrong?" Mel said, suddenly feeling completely confused.

Taking a deep breath, Janice spun around, stormed out of the armored car and thrust out her arms to grab hold of whomever was trying to listen in on them - it proved to be a young woman with shoulder-length black hair who was wearing a blue and white toga-like dress. The young woman squealed like a frightened child and tried to break free of Janice's unrelenting grip, but she wasn't strong enough.

"Gotcha!" Janice said sternly, forcibly dragging the woman back inside where Mel and Sir Lawrence were waiting for her, standing gobsmacked and wide-eyed.

"Wh-what on Earth is going on, Jan?" Mel said, clutching her hands to her bosom.

"A spry little spy is what, Mel." After pushing the young woman up against the fence, Janice grabbed hold of the toga and leaned in towards her. "Who are you and why were you spying on us? Who sent you?"

'I d-d-don't speak English!' the young woman said in Greek in a voice that trembled so badly that she could hardly make herself intelligible.

'Who are you?' Janice said in Greek, surprising the young woman.

'Ramina!'

'And why are you spying on us?'

'M-m-my uncle has several p-p-paintings in the s-s-safe! He... he... I was afraid you were going to st-st-steal them... and...'

'Paintings? Your uncle is the nutty painter in the smock?'

'Y-yes... He...'

'Shut up, I need to translate,' Janice said in Greek before switching to English. "Sir Lawrence, her name is Ramina. She's apparently the niece of a painter we bumped into earlier. Remember him, Mel?"

"Oh, yes! I won't forget that in a hurry," Mel said and adjusted her glasses.

"Well, according to Miss Spy here, he's got a few paintings in the safe, and she thought we were about to steal them."

"That's an outrage!" Sir Lawrence said and let out an impressive huff.

Suddenly feeling sorry for the frightened young woman whose eyes darted around the room looking at the three strangers, Mel reached over and put a calming hand on Janice's arm. "Jan, she's petrified. Please let her go."

"One more question, toots." *'Did you have anything to do with the crap last night?'* Janice said in Greek.

The young girl's only response was a wild shake of the head.

Letting the young woman go, Janice dusted off her hands and walked over to stand next to Mel. "Yeah. I believe her. This is something else entirely."

'What kind of pictures are they, Ramina?' Mel asked in Greek.

'N-nudes.'

'Oh, Goodness me...! Not of you, I hope?'

'Oh, n-n-o! Of my mother!'

Narrowing her eyes, Mel suddenly felt the need to find the painter and make a connection between his cheek and the inside of her palm. *'Your uncle has made nude paintings of his sister... and he has his young niece with him while he's trying to get other women to pose nude for him?'* she said in a voice that suddenly gained a steely, yet velvety undertone.

'Y-y-yes...'

'Hmmm. How old are you?'

'S-sixteen.'

'Hmmm.'

Feeling the anger brewing in her partner, Jan wrapped an arm around Mel's waist to try to calm her down before she could fly off on a Xena-induced crusade. "It's not illegal, Mel."

"It should be. It's disgusting!"

"Well, that's an argument for another time, but there's nothing we can do about it right now. Sir Lawrence?" Janice said, hoping that the Vice-Consul would back up her statement.

"What are we talking about, exactly? The young girl is speaking in such a proletarian dialect I couldn't understand more than half of what she said."

"Nude paintings."

"Oh... Miss Pappas, I'm afraid the Doctor is right. It's inappropriate, but legal."

"All right, but I think I shall have a word with the girl's uncle. Perhaps I can make him realize that he's headed down the wrong path," Mel said in a deceptively calm voice.

"Uh, yeah. Okay. Let's do that together, Mel. In a little while. Let's go get some breakfast and some strong, black coffee first," Janice said, took a firm hold on Mel's elbow and led her and the young girl out of the armored car.

Locking the fence behind him, Panagis put his set of master keys into his pocket. "Will that be all, Vice-Consul?"

"Yes, thank you, my good man. I almost forgot you were here," Sir Lawrence said with a slightly arrogant smile playing on his lips.

._*_*._

Still seething, Mel held a mug of black coffee in her hand while she weighed the pros and cons of giving the painter a piece of her mind. "I still think we should seek him out and... and... and... and clobber him!" she said, chugging down a long swig of coffee.

"Baby, that's just your inner warrior talking," Janice said and caressed Mel's arm.

"I know, but it's... it's... Ugh!"

Taking a French roll, Janice quickly split it in two and spread a healthy layer of strawberry jam on her part. "You want butter on your half, hon, or just jam?"

"Both, please. And I'd like blackcurrant jam."

"Okie-dokie."

After buttering up the other half and applying plenty of blackcurrant jam, Janice put the French roll down on a plate and pushed it across the table.

"Thank you. Even with all the excitement, I'm actually quite hungry," Mel said and went to work on the French pastry.

"No wonder. Your eatin' for two," Janice said with a wink.

Chuckling, Mel wolfed down the French roll and reached for a napkin to wipe the excess butter off her fingers.

Looking rather green around the gills and red around the eyes, Audrey moved away from her own table and came over to Mel and Janice where she sat down with a bump on one of the available chairs. At first, she didn't speak, but then she seemed to momentarily snap out of her stupor and put her elbows on the table. "Good morning," she croaked.

"Morning, Audrey. How's your head?" Janice said, wearing a broad grin.

"Oh, it's there all right."

"Glad to hear it. D'ya want a French roll with plenty o' butter?"

"Oh, God, no! I've taken a couple of headache tablets. They should work sometime within the next hour... or two," Audrey said, speaking in a peculiar slow and deliberate fashion.

Leaning over, Janice put a gentle hand on the back of Audrey's head. "What you need is a Bloody Mary. That always works for me."

"No, no... no, thank you, Doctor. I don't want to die just yet... has Sir Lawrence left...?"

Craning her neck, Mel looked around to see if the Vice-Consul was there, but he was nowhere to be found. "Yes, I think he has, Audrey. Oh... the dictation?"

"Yessss. Oh, he's going to kill me..."

"Nah, he's okay. A little stuffy, but generally okay," Janice said and mussed Audrey's neck.

Getting up, Audrey sighed deeply and used the back of her hand to wipe a few beads of cold sweat away from her forehead. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck, Audrey," Mel said.

"I wish ya fair wind, toots. And remember... that doesn't mean that you should break wind!" Janice said, sending the secretary a thumbs-up.

"Jan! Your manners! We're in the dining car!"

"So?" Janice said and split the next French roll.

Huffing, Mel adjusted her glasses and took another swig of her coffee. "Well! I'd rather you didn't talk about bodily func-"

'HILLFFE! Hilfen Sie mir, bitte!' a male voice suddenly shouted in German right behind them, making Mel jump up and spill the entire contents of her mug of coffee onto her dress, the chalk-white tablecloth and her half of the remaining French roll.

"What the flying F-...?" Janice said and scooted away from the table so she could see what the hullabaloo was about.

The man in the gray suit they had met a couple of times came staggering into the dining car, clutching his head and yelling in German that his briefcase had been stolen. The metal chain that had been between his wrist and the briefcase was still attached to his arm, but it was hanging loose, appearing to have been picked open rather than cut in two.

"Oh, Good Lord! Jan, we must help him!" Mel said, wearing most of her coffee down her front. The two women quickly left their table and ran to help the unfortunate man.

"Grab his arm, Mel. Here!"

Mel did as instructed, and together, the two women were able to get the man in the gray suit down on a chair. As soon as he was sitting down, he started shouting that he had been robbed and tried to get up again, but a firm grip on his shoulder by Janice convinced him to stay on the chair.

The commotion had attracted the attention of several guests and waiters, and Janice quickly spotted the one who had brought them their coffee and rolls. "You! Get the chief purser! Get Panagis! We got a Goddamned crook runnin' loose on this Goddamned train!"

The slang proved to be too much for the waiter to understand, and he just shrugged and began to move away, but Janice ran after him and forcibly turned him around. '*Hey, I strongly suggest you get Panagis, your chief purser, down here right away. Do I make myself perfectly clear?*' she said in Greek.

'*Yes, Miss,*' the waiter said and ran off to find Panagis.

Shaking her head, Janice returned to the man in gray who was being treated by Mel.

"He's got a bump on his head, Jan. It's just a little one, but it's right on his eyebrow so it must hurt a lot."

"Has he said anything?"

"Oh, he's said plenty in German, but nothing at all in English."

"Hmmm," Janice said and knelt down in front of the man. "Hallo. Deine name? Was is' deine name? Verstehen Sie me?"

'*Ja, ja, ich verstehe, Fräule-*'

'*In English, bitte.*'

"I understand. My name is Ernst Wilhelm von Bülow... I work for the Commerzbank... I h-had important documents and securities in my briefcase from our branch in Athens. I'm a... a... *Kurier*."

"You're a courier? Of important documents?"

"Ja."

Whistling, Janice looked up at Mel who adjusted her glasses as she digested the information.

"Did you see who did it, Mr. von Bülow?" Janice said.

"Yes I did. He was tall... and... *kräftig*, uh, strong? Big?"

"In a dark suit? Eine dunkle Jacke... Anzug?"

"Ja! And... and he had a... I don't know the word... on his nose," von Bülow said and touched his nose.

"Son of a bitch... son of a bitch! Son of a Goddamned bitch!" Janice roared out into the dining car, making Mel jump all over again. "It's the fella in the dark suit! And I'll bet he was the one who wanted to pay us a

visit last night, too, Mel. What the hell have we gotten ourselves into here!?! This sounds like something Al Capone could have been involved in!"

More action behind them made Mel spin around, but it was only the movie star who arrived with the chief purser.

As always, the star was impeccably dressed, although he had changed out of the black Tuxedo he had used at breakfast and into a gray casual suit. "Have no fear, good people, Richard Brennan is here to save the day!" he said and put out his arms like he wanted to sweep everyone up into a group-hug.

"Oh, swell," Mel mumbled, looking at the dark brown stain all over her front.

Hurrying over to Mel, Richard put his hand on her shoulder and leaned in to give her blue eyes a close study. "Miss Pappas, what have you been up to now? Who is this man? Has he been bothering you?"

Adjusting her glasses, Mel took a half-step back to get some distance between herself and the movie star. "No, Mr. Brennan, he's the victim of yet another attack."

"Oh, no, really?"

"Yeah," Janice said and moved over to greet the chief purser. "Mr. Minardou, there's a burglar running free on the train."

Wringing his hands, The chief purser became quite pale, and for a brief moment, it looked like he was going to pass out. *'Oh, no... that was the last thing we needed... we've just been told that we're being diverted away from Budapest. There was a fire in the yard, you see. We're being sent directly to Vienna,'* he said in Greek.

"Oh... okay. Mr. von Bülow has given us a pretty good description of the attacker. He's a tall man, always wearing a dark suit and he's got a big mustache. We've seen him several times around the train. What's his name?"

"Well, Doctor Covington, I d-don't think we can..."

"His name, please, Panagis?"

Looking down, the chief purser wrung his hands even harder, but finally let out a deep sigh that made his shoulders slump. "Harry T. Truman. Compartment eighteen."

At first, Janice thought Panagis was pulling her leg, but when the look on the chief purser's face remained completely sincere, she knew that they had both been fooled. "Come again...? Harry T. Truman? Like the President?"

"... which President, Doctor Covington?"

"Of the United States, Panagis. Harry S. Truman. The sitting President, you know? Often wears a funny hat and round spectacles..." Janice said, shooting Mel a curious look.

"Oh... I... I didn't know," Panagis said with a shrug.

"Ah, who cares. It's just a phony name, anyhow. I think it's high time to pay Mr. Truman a visit in his compartment. You comin', Mel?"

Sitting down next to the injured man, Mel shook her head. "No, I better look after Mr. von Bülow."

"All right, that's a good thought. I-"

"I'll go with you, Doctor!" Richard Brennan said, puffing out his chest.

"Thanks, Dickie-boy. We might need your callused fists if he puts up a struggle," Janice said with a wide grin, looking at the movie star's silky-smooth hands and perfectly manicured fingernails.

"Mr. Truman! Mr. Truman, this is the chief purser! We need to speak with you!" Panagis said, knocking loudly on the closed door to compartment eighteen.

Not a sound was heard from the other side of the door.

After knocking again and waiting for thirty seconds, Panagis found his master keys and opened the door. The three people quickly filed inside and began to look high and low, hoping to find proof of the mysterious man's involvement in the various crimes, but soon came to the conclusion that if Mr. Truman had stolen the items from von Bülow's briefcase, he hadn't put them in his compartment.

"Hmmm," Janice said, scratching her head.

"This reminds me of a movie I made in forty-three," Richard Brennan said. "It was a spy story called 'The House On Langton Street'. You've probably seen it, Doc...?"

"Huh? Nope."

"Oh..."

A tall figure in a dark suit suddenly turned up in the doorway to the compartment and put his hands on the doorframe. "Hey! What's the meaning of this?" he said in a deep, pleasant voice.

"Mr. Truman, I presume?" Janice said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Yes. What's it to you?"

Walking closer to the tall man, Janice began to study his features closely to see if she could recognize anything from her nightly attacker. He appeared to be in his early fifties and he had a friendly face that sent off a calm vibe, unlike the attacker who'd had a nasty, edgy feel to him. His prominent nose and mustache didn't really match either, but the clincher was that he didn't have a bruise on his jaw where she had slugged him in the fist fight.

"Oh, plenty. Why do you always run away from us when we want to talk to you?" Janice said, scrunching up her face when she realized that this guy wasn't her midnight prowler.

"That's a long story, lady. Look, what gives you the right to ransack my compartment? This is my stuff!" the man said and brushed past Janice.

"The same that gave you the right to steal Mr. von Bülow's briefcase and the valuable documents he was carrying in it!"

"I did nothing of the kind! I'm a simple businessman taking the train from Athens to London... I'm not some kind of burglar!"

Crossing her arms over her chest, Janice walked over to stand in the doorway so Harry T. Truman couldn't escape them again. "Burglar? Nobody said nothin' about burglars. But it's funny you should mention it, Buster. What were you doing last night just after we left Belgrade?"

"I was sleeping in my bunk, dammit!"

"Uh-huh? Well, personally, I think you were sneaking into my compartment to do God knows what with me and my friend," Janice fibbed to get a reaction out of the man.

"Mmmm? What do you have to say for yourself?" Richard Brennan said, once again puffing out his chest.

Harry T. looked up in shock and put his index finger in the air like he wanted to excuse himself. "Okay, back it up just a tiny bit. I was nowhere near your compartment, Lady, and quite frankly, I resent such an accusation!"

Nodding, Janice put down her arms to appear less intimidating. "All right, I believe you, pal." Closing the door behind her, Janice quickly crossed the room and sat down on the chair next to the desk.

"Yeah, and- huh?" Richard Brennan said, looking like a giant question mark.

"I gave the attacker one hell of a punch on the jaw. Harry T. Truman here isn't bruised. Wasn't him."

"Told you so," Harry mumbled, scratching his mustache.

Standing up straight, Panagis dusted off his hands and cleared his throat. "Doctor Covington, you will have to excuse me. With the train being diverted to Vienna, the time table has been changed quite severely. I have a great deal of things I need to do."

"Of course, Panagis. Thanks for your help. Sorry to have disturbed you for nothing," Janice said and put out her hand.

"It's my job, Doctor Covington," the chief purser said, shaking Janice's hand before hurrying out of the compartment.

As she watched the purser leave, Janice began thinking about the things that just didn't add up - the passport she had found with Charles Wainwright's name in it; von Bülow's positive id of the man she was now standing in front of; and the identity of the attacker who was still - worryingly - roaming free.

"What's your real name, Harry? Don't tell me it's Truman," Janice said.

"No, it's... well... Otto Dietrich." Sighing, Otto went over to the bunk and sat down on it.

"Dietrich? Like the German superstar actress?" Richard said.

"Yes."

"Otto... that's a perfectly good name, pal. Why d'ya change it?" Janice said.

"Because after the war, nobody wanted to do business with a man called Otto Dietrich. I was born in Berlin, but my folks moved over to the US in 1908 when I was nine years old."

"Fair enough. I think we're done here," Janice said and got up from the chair. "More or less... Charles Wainwright's passport. How did that come to be in your possession? Wasn't that the reason why you and von Bülow argued in the dining car?"

"Yes. I had found it in a chair in the first lounge car. I couldn't find the Professor so I showed it to Mr. von Bülow."

"Mel and I were there as well. Why didn't you show it to us...? Or gave it to one of the pursers for that matter?"

"Well, I had already spoken briefly with Mr. von Bülow when we were waiting for the train to arrive in Athens," Otto said with a shrug.

"Right. But why did he get upset?"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask him."

"Oh, I will. One more thing... are you sure you didn't mug von Bülow to get his documents? He gave us a positive ID of your mustache."

"Wasn't me, Lady. And that's all you're going to get out of me from now on."

"All right. Come on, Dickie-boy, it's time to ske-daddle," Janice said and pulled the movie star out of the compartment.

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CHAPTER 4

At three minutes to four in the afternoon, the Orient Express drove slowly into Vienna's historical Westbahnhof, the West Central Station. Up at the front of the train, the locomotive was hissing steadily as it released its excess steam, and the many switches made the wheels sing their perpetual *gada-gong, gada-gong*.

In their compartment, Mel had the window down as far as it would go and she was practically hanging over the sill to take in all the sights of the historical city - fortunately for her and all the other interested spectators, the nice part of the city was on the correct side of the train.

Holding firmly onto her glasses so they wouldn't fly off in the stiff breeze, Mel turned her head to the right and waved at Audrey who was hanging out of the window in compartment number two. When the secretary had waved back, Mel turned to the left and repeated the gesture at Maria who was a handful of windows further down the train.

"Oh! Marvelous! Jan, you really should come up here and see it!" Mel said, sticking her head inside for a brief moment.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Janice said and clambered up on the table to get a better view. "Yeah, it's nice," she said and clambered down again after looking out of the window for a few seconds.

"Silly you! Jan, please remind me... what did Panagis say about this stop?"

"He said that because of the mix-up in the timetable, we'll have to spend three hours here in Vienna before we can move on. Something to do with the track ahead being busy or some such," Janice said and admired Mel's shapely rear as it wiggled back and forth.

"Oh, how wonderful. We are going to see the city... aren't we, Jan?"

Grimacing, Janice tried to find a way to tell Mel that she'd rather stay onboard the train to get to the bottom of the strange deal involving the attacks, but all she could come up with was a half-baked, "Uh, well-"

Knock, knock!

'*Saved by the bell,*' Janice thought and went over to the door.

In the meantime, the train had entered the station and was driving along at a crawl. Closing the window, Mel jumped off the bunk wearing an almost giddy look on her face.

As Janice opened the door, the first thing she saw was a very similar giddy grin on Audrey's face. Next to her was Sir Lawrence, dressed in his travel suit.

"Good evening, Doctor," he said and walked into their compartment. "I have a little proposition for you."

" 'Evenin', Sir Lawrence. A proposition?" Janice said and closed the door behind their guests.

"Yes. You see, I've been told that we're to stay here for three hours and that's a perfect opportunity to see more of this charming city... one restaurant, in particular. Oh, the food in the dining car is adequate, but the Austrian cuisine is legendary."

"Oh, we'd love to come with you, Sir Lawrence!" Mel said, nodding enthusiastically.

Smiling for once, Sir Lawrence turned around and pointed his gloved index finger at Mel. "That's the plan, Miss Pappas! We'll all go. Miss Dickinson, too. I feel she needs a bit of fresh air."

"I certainly do, Sir Lawrence," Audrey said meekly.

Grimacing again, Janice knew she couldn't say no to the offer, so she shrugged and went over to her jacket and her indispensable fedora.

"Oh, Jan... couldn't you leave your hat here for once...?" Mel whispered.

"You... you don't want me to wear my h-hat...?" Janice replied in a matching whisper.

"You'll stand out like a sore thumb, that's all."

"Don't I always?" Janice said out loud and plopped her fedora down on her head. After putting on her leather jacket, she tugged at the collars and swept the leading edge of the hat with her finger. "All set, toots," she said, winking at both Mel and Audrey - who responded by giggling.

"Excellent! Miss Dickinson and I shall go at once. We'll wait for you on the platform," Sir Lawrence said and left the compartment with Audrey in tow.

As he and Audrey walked out into the aisle, Sir Lawrence immediately turned right, making Janice furrow her brow and wonder why the Vice-Consul didn't take the shortest route to the nearest door. She was about to make a comment on it when she realized that Mel had spoken to her. "Pardon, hon?"

"I said, I think we should invite Maria as well. She might feel left out if she sees the four of us leaving without her."

"That's a good thought, sweetheart. Let's do that on the way," Janice said and put her hand on Mel's elbow.

A brief while later, Mel, Maria and Janice walked along the platform, trying to catch up with Sir Lawrence and Audrey who were a good fifty yards ahead of them.

Just as they reached a flight of stairs that led up from the platforms, Janice felt her nape hairs stand on edge, and she spun around to look back at the train.

The steam emanating from the locomotive obscured her vision, but she was positive she had caught a glimpse of someone dressed in black jump off the platform and move between two of the cars - unfortunately, she couldn't tell for sure whether it had simply been one of the railroad workers or if it had been their mysterious attacker.

'Hmmm'-ing quietly to herself, she turned back around and ascended the stairs.

._*_*._

"Where are we going, exactly, Sir Lawrence?" Mel said, so busy looking at all the houses and shops they went past on the pedestrian street leading away from the train station that her neck was threatening to turn into a ball-bearing joint.

"A very highly regarded restaurant called the Griechenbeisl, which translates to the Greek Tavern, I believe. I thought it was quite fitting, and apart from that, it's been recommended to me by his excellency, the Ambassador."

"Oh, I see. An expensive one, I presume?"

"I would think so. Oh, you needn't worry about the check, Miss Pappas. The Consulate will take care of everything."

"Oh..."

Taking her hands out of her pockets, Janice slipped an arm inside Mel's. "I just wanna know if they serve burgers and corn dogs?"

"Jan!" Mel whispered in a rather indignant tone of voice, but Janice just waved her hand to show that she was kidding.

"Well, Doctor Covington, I have a strong suspicion they don't... but on the other hand, I do believe they have a hall called the Mark Twain Room so anything is possible," the Vice-Consul said, breaking out into a faint - slightly condescending - chuckle.

Walking along the pedestrian street, the group of five presented themselves in an impressive arrow-head formation with Sir Lawrence as the natural leader, Audrey half a step behind him to his right; Mel and Janice another step behind that to his left - arm in arm - and finally Maria who was slowly falling behind.

Holding a notepad, she was taking a few notes on the things and people she came across, and writing down a few interesting names from the marquees above the shops. She didn't notice that a man, dressed in black, was gaining on her.

One of the shops they went past was a huge, busy bookstore that looked so inviting that Maria simply couldn't let it slip. "Oh, Janice!" she said, running up to be at a level with the adventurer. "Janice, I'm just going to pop into the bookstore we just went past. I'll find you at the restaurant. Is that all right with you?"

"Bookstore?" Janice said and came to a halt, pulling Mel to a stop next to her. Some distance away from them, the man in black quickly ducked behind a tree.

Leaning down, Mel patted Janice's hand. "Maria, Jan wouldn't notice a bookstore if she stumbled over it. It's all right. Did you hear where we are going?"

"Yes, the Grekken-something. Don't worry, I'll find it."

"Off you go," Mel said with a smile.

"Thanks. I won't be long!" Maria said and turned around to go back to the store.

Snorting loudly, Janice resumed walking. "Wouldn't notice a bookstore if I stumbled over it... gimme a break, Mel! I read books!" she said and pushed the fedora back on her head.

"Sally Swackhamer doesn't count, dear."

"Sure she does!"

After a few steps, Mel reached up and moved the fedora back in place, earning herself a throaty chuckle.

The man in black waited for a few more seconds and then popped out from behind the tree and resumed shadowing the small group.

Mel's head was still practically rotating to take in all the sights as they walked past the many shops, but her curiosity suffered an overload when she spotted a group of British soldiers marching down a street away from them. Not bothering to look where she was going, she collided with a man going the other way even though Janice had been trying to pull her to the side for several seconds.

"Oof! Oh, I'm terribly sorry!" Mel said and adjusted her jacket that had been knocked crooked in the collision.

Smiling at her - in an overbearing sort of way - the man tipped his hat before continuing on down the pedestrian street.

"Hello, Earth to Mel...? You must have seen something spectacular," Janice said as they sped up to catch Sir Lawrence and Audrey.

"Well, it was a group of soldiers marching down a street. They were wearing British uniforms."

"Uh-huh? They were probably on their way down to Schönbrunn, the former Imperial Palace. It's around here somewhere. There's an English garrison there."

Making an excited 'O' with her lips, Mel leaned down and took Janice's hand again. "An Imperial Palace? Oh, that sounds exciting! On our way back to the train, do you think Sir Lawrence would mind if we made a small detour? I'd love to see such a palace."

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind, honey, but I don't know if we can get to see it as civilians. Sheesh, where is that restaurant, anyway? I feel like we've been walkin' for hours...!" Janice said, pretending to wipe the sweat off her forehead.

"Twelve minutes, actually, Jan," Mel said after checking her wristwatch.

"Really? Man, feels like ten times that..."

"Silly!"

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Arriving at the Greek Tavern, Sir Lawrence immediately bypassed a line of people waiting for a table and strode over to the Maitre d'. "Good afternoon, my good man. I'm Vice-Consul Sir Lawrence Philpott, and company. We shall require two tables, one seating three and one seating two. Preferably close to each other," he said, taking off his hat.

Glancing at the line of people, Mel shuffled around on the spot and began to bite her lip. "Jan," she whispered. "Look at all those people in the line... this feels really uncomfortable..."

"Yeah, tell me about it. I don't think it's gonna work. Definitely wouldn't work back home in Frisco, that's a fact," Janice replied in a similar whisper, pushing her fedora back on her head before remembering that Mel hated it that way.

Much to Janice's surprise - not to mention the people waiting in the line - the Maitre d' bowed deeply to the Vice-Consul and ushered him, Audrey and the astounded Mel and Janice deeper into the restaurant.

The Maitre left the small company in the second waiter's capable hands, and he soon found two adjacent tables for them.

Pulling out a chair, the waiter made sure that the Vice-Consul was comfortably seated before turning to the other guests. "We are honored to have such a distinguished Gentleman visiting our restaurant. The menus will arrive shortly. Would you like to have an *aperitif* before dinner?"

"Yes. A bottle of burgundy, please," Sir Lawrence said and unfolded his napkin.

"Yes, Sir," the waiter said and helped Mel, Janice and Audrey with their chairs.

When Mel noticed that Audrey was given the table for two, she adjusted her glasses and moved to invite the secretary over to the main table, but before she had time to say anything, Sir Lawrence cleared his throat.

"Miss Pappas, your charming self and Doctor Covington are my guests. Miss Dickinson is an employee," he said without even taking his eyes off the menu for the many sweet desserts and cakes sold in the restaurant.

Feeling the Old World traditions clash severely with her own opinions and world views, Mel bumped back down on her chair with an expression on her face that told that she didn't know how to make a comeback to Sir Lawrence's statement without insulting him.

Underneath the table, Janice patted Mel's thigh, but even that gesture didn't completely appease the Southern Belle.

The situation was defused by the waiter returning with a bottle of wine and the menus. After sampling the wine, Sir Lawrence accepted it and the waiter quickly filled their glasses.

The Vice-Consul briefly looked in the menu but put it away almost at once. "Waiter, I'd like the Tafelspitz with Rösti and a dash of horseradish sauce." When he noticed that Mel and Janice didn't know what that was, he leaned forward and said: "That's lean, boiled beef with onion-fried potatoes."

"Oh..."

Taking his napkin and unfolding it, Sir Lawrence looked back at the waiter. "And for dessert, two strawberry Knödels with whipped cream, please. Oh, and a bottle of Tawny Port for the Knödels."

"As you wish, Sir. Ladies?"

Shrugging, Janice put away her menu as well. "Sounds pretty good, actually. Mel?"

"Mmmm. Yes, two more of that, please," Mel said in a voice that betrayed that she still hadn't forgiven Sir Lawrence for shunting Audrey off to a side table.

"Make it three, please," Audrey said, nodding.

"All right. Four Tafelspitz with Rösti and Erdbeer Knödels and a bottle of Tawny Port. It will be here shortly, Sir."

A sudden commotion at the entrance to the Greek Tavern made everyone turn and look, but it was only Maria hurrying into the restaurant holding a stack of books. "Am I too late? Have you ordered yet?" she said and took off her jacket.

"Yes, we have, Maria," Mel said, suddenly realizing that Maria had to sit at the side table as well - which didn't improve her mood.

"Well, if the waiter's still here, I suppose I can order now as well. I'll have what they're having," the author said and put the stack of books down next to the free chair.

"Yes, Miss," the head waiter said and made another note on his small notepad.

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"My Goodness, these are delicious," Mel said between mouthfuls of strawberry Knödel. "The sweet strawberries and the whipped cream... oh, it's so refreshing!"

"Perhaps we can bribe the head waiter into giving us the recipe, huh?" Janice said as she distributed a spoonful of cream on top of her remaining Knödel.

"I doubt I could recreate the taste, to be honest. I wonder what they're called in English...?"

Leaning forward, Sir Lawrence dabbed his lips with his napkin. "Dumplings, I believe, Miss Pappas."

"Well, they're unlike any dumplings I've ever had," Mel said and finished off her last Knödel.

Maria pushed her plate away and emptied her second glass of port. "My mother's family was originally from Wisconsin. On certain holidays, she made dumplings similar to these for us, but they typically had a plum filling, not strawberry."

Humming quietly to herself, Maria dug into her pocket and found a silver cigarette case. "Mind if I smoke?" she said and stuck a Queen's Favorite into the holder.

"Certainly not, Miss Ford," Sir Lawrence said. "Actually, I expect the waiter to offer us a selection of fine tobacco in a moment."

"Oh, even cheroots?" Janice said, leaning forward. A few seconds later, she could feel Mel's steely gaze on her. Turning her head, she looked directly into the ice blue orbs that meant so much to her, and broke out into a wide grin. "Sorry. Old habits and... you know."

As Sir Lawrence had predicted, the waiter soon came with a tray loaded with fine cigars, smoking tobacco and cigarettes of all types. Audrey took a Mayfair Kingsize cigarette, Maria grabbed a handful of Queen's Favorites and the Vice-Consul took two cigars; lighting one at once, he put the other in his jacket's breast pocket.

"While you're puffin', I need to find the bathroom," Janice said and pushed her chair back.

Sir Lawrence inhaled deeply and let out a cloud of pale gray cigar smoke that gave his features a dark, even sinister look. Looking down the cigar, he kept a close eye on Janice as she left the table.

Moments later, at the other side of the restaurant, a man dressed in black left his table as well and began to drift almost unnoticeably towards the restrooms.

At the side table, Audrey stared at her Mayfair cigarette like she didn't know what to do with it. After a short while, she mirrored her table-mate and placed it between her lips. "Maria, would you mind giving me a light?"

"Of course not," Maria said and lit Audrey's Mayfair.

Inhaling deeply, Audrey let out a little cloud of smoke - and a huge cough. The cough turned even larger, and soon, she was spluttering for all she was worth.

"You don't strike me as an experienced smoker, Audrey," Mel said, discreetly fanning her hand in front of her nose to get rid of some of the fumes.

"I'm not, really... the Greek brands are too strong for me so I only smoke when I'm home on holiday. The English fags are sweeter and much tastier, anyway," Audrey continued, taking a new puff.

Working in perfect synchronicity, Maria and Mel both stopped what they were doing and just stared at each other. A few heartbeats later, they both turned to stare at Audrey who continued unawares:

"Well, that's my opinion. What do you Yanks smoke? Must be Virginia, right?"

"Uh... first of all, I don't smoke and never have... and secondly... please don't call me a Yank," Mel said, adjusting her glasses.

"Pardon me, Miss Pappas. Oh, it's so difficult to get everything right when speaking to foreigners. Separated by a common language and all that," Audrey said with a smile.

"I'll say!" Mel said and scratched her hair, still trying to figure out what Audrey had meant with the 'English fags' comment.

The bathrooms were located at the far end of the restaurant so Janice had to go past dozens of tables to get there. Several times, she noticed the people at the tables sending her and her clothing curious or even disapproving glares, but she just shrugged and moved on.

When she reached the restrooms, she was faced with a major dilemma - either she had to wait in a fifteen foot line just to enter the Ladies' room, or she had to use the Men's room that didn't have a line at all.

Scratching her chin, it didn't take her long to make up her mind, and she strode purposefully over to the door to the Men's room, accompanied by a few sharp intakes of breath from the women in the line to the Ladies'.

Inside the Men's room - which looked like any other Men's room Janice had ever visited - she offered a quick wave to the elderly attendant who was reading a newspaper, bypassed the urinals and went over to the stalls. The first two were occupied but the third was vacant. Grinning, she went inside to conduct her business.

At the same time, the door to the Men's room opened again and the man in black walked in. Immediately spotting the attendant, the man came to a sudden stop and thrust his gloved hands in his pockets so the elderly man wouldn't begin to ask questions - but then he noticed that the attendant was soundly asleep, having apparently nodded off in the middle of an article.

Moving with the fluidity of a big cat, the man pulled his hands out of his pockets and walked silently into the restroom. In his right hand, he held a switchblade knife with an ivory handle.

Clicking it open and turning it around in his hand so it wouldn't be so conspicuous, he looked up and studied himself in the mirror above the wash basins. The bandage that covered the bridge of his broken nose spoiled the God-like image he held of himself, but the flat cap, the very dark eyes and the three-day stubble on his chin all came together to create a near-perfect, exquisitely styled Man of the World - namely one Ludovico Ricci.

The sound of two toilets flushing behind him made his snap out of his narcissistic daydreaming and return his focus to the job at hand. The door to the first stall opened, revealing an overweight man who was still buttoning his pants even as he stood in the open door.

Making a disgusted grimace, Ludovico concentrated on the other two doors that were still closed.

The split second the third door began to open, a party of five entered the restroom talking and laughing noisily among themselves. As the men walked past the attendant, one of them told a dirty joke in Austrian that made the others laugh even louder.

Furrowing his brow, Ludovico hurriedly closed the switchblade and put it into his pocket, trying to keep eye contact with the doors to the stall through the throng of broad-shouldered men.

Taking full advantage of the noisy visitors, Janice stepped out of the stall and looked at the group of men with a grin on her face. Quickly dousing and wiping her hands at the wash basin, she slipped out of the restroom without the men or the fully awake attendant ever noticing that a woman had been in there - she even remembered to put a dime in the small tray on the attendant's desk.

Three of the men went to the urinals and the two others went over to the stalls, creating such a confusing wall of noise that Ludovico completely lost track of where his target was. When he realized that she was nowhere to be found, he let out a juicy Italian curse and barged through the group of men to go after her.

Pulling her chair out, Janice sat down and put her arm around Mel's waist. "Hey, gang, if you need to go, I can recommend the Men's room. There was no line, it was really clean and it only cost a dime," she said with a beaming smile on her face.

"The Men's room?" Mel said flatly.

"Oh yeah. Well, actually, it said it cost a schilling, but I didn't have one of those, so... ah, a dime's a dime, you know."

"You used the Men's room?" Mel said again.

"Yeah, yeah. Nobody noticed," Janice said and emptied her glass of Tawny Port. Looking across the table, she noticed that behind the cigar smoke, Sir Lawrence had a very strange expression on his face - it was almost like he had seen a ghost, or perhaps had seen someone that wasn't supposed to be there.

Dabbing her mouth with her napkin, Maria pushed her chair back and stood up. "Well, I think I'll take my chances with the Ladies', to be honest. Audrey, would you mind keeping an eye on my books?"

"No problem, Miss Ford," the secretary said and pulled the stack of books toward her so she could look at the titles. Unfortunately, she hadn't counted on most of the books being in French, so after a brief spell of trying to decipher the strange words, she gave up and returned to her half-smoked Mayfair cigarette.

"I can't believe you went into the Men's room, Jan. You could have been hurt!" Mel whispered at her partner.

"Hurt? How you figure that, hon?"

"Well... well! This and that!"

"I wasn't in any danger, toots. Hell, it was less dangerous than crossing the street back home. Would you believe that the toilet seat was down on the can I chose?" Janice said, unable to shake the feeling that - judging by the strangely dark, pensive look on his face - Sir Lawrence knew something he wasn't letting on.

A few moments later, the waiter came back with the tobacco tray, but Sir Lawrence sent him away with a brisk command to get the check.

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Up against the far wall of the restaurant, a supremely annoyed Ludovico Ricci was standing with a scowl on his face and his hands thrust into his pockets, gently caressing the handle on the switchblade knife.

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Walking out onto the street, Mel was surprised to see that it was nearly six o'clock already. The pedestrian street was no less busy than it had been when they had arrived, and in fact, it seemed to be more crowded than before with a large amount of people moving towards the center of the city.

Picking up her ears, Mel soon discovered that the people were going to a free, open air galla concert.

Behind her, Janice came out onto the street and zipped her jacket. "Hey," she said and put her hand on the small of Mel's back. "What's going on out here?"

"They're going to a concert. Oh, darn it, we don't have time for it, do we?" Mel said, looking at her watch again.

"Well, from here, there's a fifteen minute walk back to the station, so... where is the concert takin' place?"

"I don't know."

"Pfff, I wouldn't wanna bet on us makin' it, then. Sorry, hon."

"Oh, shoot!" Mel said and scrunched up her face until her lips had been reduced to a thin line.

Leaning in, Janice bumped shoulders with the tall Southerner. When that didn't seem to improve Mel's mood, she sought out and found her long digits instead. "Hey, how about you and me returning for your birthday? Huh? You and me at a free concert? Sounds good to me. Of course, I always was a cheapskate."

"No, you aren't, darling," Mel said with a chuckle.

A loud snicker from Audrey signaled that she, Maria and Sir Lawrence had joined Mel and Janice on the sidewalk in front of The Greek Tavern, and soon, the group of five set off back towards the train station.

After a few minutes, Sir Lawrence waved Audrey closer to him. "Miss Dickinson, if you will excuse me. I have only just remembered that I need to send a telegram, and I believe we just went past a telegram office. I'm sure you and the other Ladies can find the station on your own...?"

"Certainly, Sir Lawrence. Don't forget, the train leaves in fifty-five minutes," Audrey said, pointing at her wristwatch.

"Oh, don't worry, Miss Dickinson, you won't get rid of me that easily," Sir Lawrence said. For the first time since Janice came back in one piece from the restroom, his face lit up in something approaching a smile, but it was short-lived.

"Of course not, Sir Lawrence."

Slowing down, the Vice-Consul turned around and began to walk back to where they had just come from.

"Where's Sir Lawrence going, Audrey?" Janice said, stopping in the middle of the pedestrian street.

"He needed to send a telegram, Doctor Covington."

Janice furrowed her brow and tracked the easily recognizable figure with her eyes until he was lost in the crowd. "Yeah? Well, he coulda done that down at the station. There was a huge telegram office just when we came up from the platform."

"Oh... oh dear, I didn't notice," Audrey said and wrung her hands. "I should have noticed it... but I didn't know he needed to send a telegram. Perhaps if I run, I can catch him..."

"Nah, he's long gone," Janice said and put her arm around Audrey's shoulder before she could run off. "Let's go back to the train. We're attractin' attention to ourselves here, ya know. Three dynamite dames and a tough gal... Austria ain't never seen anything like us," she continued, pushing her fedora back on her head.

Audrey snickered loudly and blushed bright red, but she still snuggled down into Janice's strong grip, earning herself identical raised eyebrows from Mel and Maria.

Clearing her throat, Mel took Janice's free hand and led them back down the pedestrian street. "Well, actually, Jan, that's not quite true. History records that several Amazon tribes lived in Eastern Austria for several centuries. Of course, it was called Noricum and not Austria back then."

"So the Amazons aren't just a myth, then?" Maria said, walking at the front of their little party.

"Oh, no, Maria, they were as real as you or I," Mel said. "Now I will admit that, over the course of time, certain erroneous customs have been attributed to the Amazons."

"Like cutting off their right boob?" Janice said, poking Mel in the side.

"Uh, yes. Exactly. Gabrielle's scrolls clearly indicate that every Amazon she ever met was in good health... I mean, they had both... uh... you know what I mean."

Snickering again, Audrey hurried in front of Mel and Janice to walk next to Maria. "Oh! If we had lived back then, do you think we would have been Amazons?" she said, hooking her arm inside Maria's which surprised the author greatly.

Mel and Janice looked at each other with a knowing gleam in their eye, but chose not to confuse their companions by speaking of their special connection to the past. Instead, Janice grinned and shot Audrey a little wink. "I'm sure we would, Audrey. In fact... who's to say we weren't...?"

Lighting a Queen's Favorite, Maria inhaled deeply and let out a cloud of blue smoke. "I didn't expect you to talk about reincarnation, Janice. I didn't even know an archeologist would believe in such things."

"Oh, you know, Maria... the Xena Scrolls have given me a deep insight into many wondrous things... and opened my eyes for even more," Janice said and gave Mel's hand a loving squeeze.

A breezy fourteen minutes later, the four women arrived back at the historical Westbahnhof and crossed through the main hall on their way over to the stairs.

"Jan, there's a shop over there selling postcards. I want to buy one of the Imperial Palace since we didn't have time to see it," Mel said and pulled Janice and the others over to a small souvenir and gift shop that had several tall stands with postcards of all sizes.

"Good idea, hon. You wanna do that? I'm, uh, fresh out of change."

Shooting her partner an amused glance, Mel began to turn one of the stands to find the right postcard. The stand carried three different sizes: small, medium and rectangular, and up at the top rung, there were a wide range of fold-outs, containing eight, ten or fourteen colorful snapshots of the city and the region.

Deciding on a medium-sized postcard of Schönbrunn and a ten-photo fold-out called 'Traditional Vienna', Mel gave them to Janice. "My German isn't good enough," she said, adjusting her glasses.

"Oh, all right. But only because I love ya," Janice said and shuffled into the shop.

Snickering nervously over the term of endearment, Audrey took a deep breath and forced herself into asking the question she had been holding back for several days. "I... uh... Miss Pappas, there's something I... uh..." she said, suddenly very conscious about what she was doing. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you..." she continued even though her throat was trying to tie itself into a knot.

"Yes, Audrey?"

"Wh... how did you kn... uh..." Gulping loudly, Audrey wanted to slap herself black and blue for being so silly - but no matter how hard she tried, her tongue simply didn't want to cooperate. "I mean... wh-when did you know that it was the r-real thing between yourself and the D-doctor...?" she finally managed to say.

"Oh, Goodness me, Audrey... the real thing...?" Mel said and adjusted her glasses. "Oh, my Word. Well, I... it took us a little while."

"R-really?"

Nodding, Mel began to reminisce about the first months she and Janice had spent together after returning from Macedonia. It had been a very rude awakening for the sensitive Southern Belle, and there had been several occasions where she had contemplated walking away, but she had stuck with it - and gradually, after a few months, their differences had been whittled away; replaced by a deep-seated love that only became stronger after overcoming the early problems.

"Yes, it took us a few months," Mel said out loud. "May I be so bold and ask-"

"In your presence... I- I mean all of you, I feel something inside me that I can't explain... and that... and that doesn't really fit the picture I have of myself," Audrey said quietly, sporting a blush that covered her entire head from her scalp to her chest.

Chuckling, Maria put a gentle hand on the secretary's back. "Mmmm, Audrey, I think I know what you're talking about."

"R-really?"

Nodding, Mel stepped forward and offered Audrey a comforting touch as well. "So do I. Don't feel ashamed over it. Instead, consider it a... like a first step into a larger world. I spent so long trying to live up to other people's expectations of me that I hardly even lived at all. But look at me now."

"Oh... yes."

"I believe we've all felt that at one point in our lives. On the other hand, Janice might not have. She was probably born with a fedora on her head and a cheroot in her yap," Maria continued, quickly having to act innocent when Janice came out of the souvenir shop with a small paper bag.

Even Mel had to laugh at that image, but tried not to let show too much.

"Talkin' 'bout me, are we?" Janice said, nudging herself up against Mel.

"Yes, dear. We were just mentioning how delightful and ladylike you are."

"Uh-huh?" Janice said and pushed her fedora back on her head. "Well, you better believe I am, toots. I'm a regular Doris Day, ain't I?"

"You certainly are, darling... unequivocally so."

"Too right. Come on, let's get back to the train. Ladylike or not, I don't think they'll wait for us," Janice said and strode off at the head of the group.

Looking at Audrey - who was still sporting a blush - Mel chuckled again and put her hand on the secretary's shoulder to lead her back down to the platform.

The moment they stepped off the stairs, Janice knew something was wrong. Panagis, the chief purser, was pacing back and forth next to the locomotive, constantly looking at the stairs like he was waiting for someone to return.

As soon as he spotted Janice and the others, he hurried over to them and began to wring his hands, seemingly unable to get a word across his lips.

"What's wrong, Panagis? Is Mr. von Bülow all right?" Janice said.

The chief purser looked so uncomfortable that Janice wondered if he was on the brink of a heart attack. His usually olive-toned complexion had paled quite considerably, and there was a line of little beads of sweat along his entire forehead. "H-he's fine... it's not that... oh, Doctor Covington... Miss Pappas, I'm afraid your compartment has b-been... has been..."

"What? Get to the point, man!" Janice growled, clenching her fists.

"Vandalized... I'm t-terrib-"

"Oh, for the love of...!" Janice yelled, making several people turn around and stare at her. Letting out a throaty growl, she stomped off down the platform to see for herself.

Gasping loudly, Audrey clasped the closest hand she could find - which happened to be Maria's. "What about compartment two?"

"Or mine, number seventeen?" Maria said.

"Th-they're both un-touched," Panagis stuttered.

Stepping forward, Mel put a calming hand on the shoulders of her two companions and shot Panagis a dark, accusing look. "What has happened to our belongings?" she said, towering over him like the Colossus Of Rhodes.

"N-nothing has been harmed as such, I don't think, except... uh... b-but the suitcases have been emptied on the floor, and..."

Suddenly moving forward, Mel frightened Panagis into taking a big step backwards. "I have several priceless books in my suitcases. If they've been ruined, we'll sue the shirts off your backs," she hissed in a voice that didn't sound like Mel Pappas at all.

"Your b-books appear to be all right, b-but you b-better come see for yourself, Miss Pappas..." Panagis said and spun around to get away from the irate woman.

Standing in the doorway, Janice mouthed obscenities that would've stripped the gold stucco off the walls if she had said them out loud. The compartment was a mess - everything had been dumped on the floor; their clothes, their books and even the pillows from the bed had been thrown about disrespectfully.

The first thought through Janice's mind was that it was Otto Dietrich's way of getting revenge for having his own compartment searched earlier in the day, but she didn't want to believe that about him.

Sighing, she moved into the compartment, being very mindful of where she set her feet so she wouldn't accidentally crush anything.

When she closed the compartment door and turned on the lights, a dark shadow on the closet to her left made her eyes grow wide for a brief moment before she recognized the shape - it was the dress she had borrowed from Audrey but had forgotten to give back. Held in place by the closet door, the dress had been torn quite badly, and a kitchen knife had been rammed through it at the exact spot where the heart would have been if someone had been wearing it.

Behind her, the door opened and Mel, Audrey and Maria peeked in. Mel let out a long sigh at the sorry state of the compartment, but it was nothing compared to the angry outburst Audrey let out when she saw the tattered remains of her dress. A second later, she saw the knife and fainted on the spot, landing softly on a pile of clothes.

"Someone is gonna pay for this," Janice growled as she knelt down to help Audrey. Looking up, she locked eyes with Mel and sent her a silent promise that they would get to the bottom of the whole mess.

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CHAPTER 5

"Well, that was the last of it... finally," Mel said and worked the locks on the suitcase. "Thank Goodness my books were unharmed... not to mention the scrolls we found in Kalithea."

Grumbling, Janice held up the completely demolished issue ninety-eight of Sally Swackhamer's adventures - the pulp novel had been torn almost in half. "Can't say the same, toots. Damn, what did Sally ever do to anyone...? Now I have to buy it again," she continued and chucked the book into the trash can at the foot of the desk.

Mel fluffed the pillows on the bench seat, sat down and crossed her legs. "Jan, we need to talk about what happened here tonight. Who do you think did it?"

"Well... not Otto Dietrich a.k.a. Harry Truman. I'm sure of it. After getting a good look at him down in his own compartment, I don't think he'd be able to do something like this. No, this was someone else."

"Hm."

Licking her lips, Janice sat down next to Mel and began to run her hand up and down the Southern Belle's endless thighs. "Mel, did you notice anything strange while we were eating? With Sir Lawrence, I mean."

"Why, yes, I did, as a matter of fact. His demeanor changed completely after you had returned from the restroom," Mel said, stilling Janice's hand. "Are you suggesting that he might be involved?"

"I'm not suggesting anything at the moment, baby... it just struck me as odd, that's all. Also leaving us to find a telegram office... bogus, if you ask me."

"But why...?"

"The emerald. Think about it, toots. Think about how big it is... you said yourself that it could buy us the Empire State Building." As Janice spoke, she began to muss Mel's neck.

"Hmm. That's true. Jan, please stop. I'm not in the mood," Mel said, reaching up to still Janice's hand again.

"I'm sorry, love. Hey, how about going down to the lounge car? I could definitely use a drink."

"That would be a very welcome distraction," Mel said and rose from the bench seat.

The second lounge car was buzzing as it invariably was at twenty to nine in the evening. The piano player was entertaining a group of well-dressed, interested listeners sitting in the leather arrangement, and the bartender had plenty to do at the bar where all the stools were occupied.

Once he saw Mel and Janice enter the lounge car, the piano player played the immortal introduction to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony - Fate - earning himself a round of laughter.

Even Janice thought it was worthy of a chuckle, but Mel couldn't see the fun at all. "Darling, I'll just have a seat here," Mel said and sat down in one of the leather armchairs.

"All right. Keep a chair free for me, okay? What can I get you?"

"Southern Comfort. Make it a double, please."

"You got it, honeybuns."

Janice had hardly left Mel before Richard Brennan straightened his bow tie and made a beeline for the tall, graceful translator. "Good evening, Miss Pappas. I've heard of your ordeal and I just wanted you to know that my heart goes out to you. It must have been awful," he said as he sat down in the other armchair.

"Thank you, Mr. Brennan. Much obliged," Mel said and crossed her legs in a very ladylike fashion.

"Oh, I can see that you're down. Well, it's no wonder. If there is anything... anything at all I can do to cheer you up, please let me know, and I'll do it," the movie star said, turning his trademark charm up to eleven.

As the piano player went into a faithful rendition of "There's No Business Like Show Business," Mel squirmed in her seat, being too polite to shoot the movie star down in flames, but at the same time, hoping that Janice would return in a hurry to do it for her. '*Cheer me up! I can well imagine what he means by that... it involves nudity and plenty of moaning and groaning...*' she thought, biting her cheek.

Her prayers were answered when Janice returned from the bar holding two glasses and two napkins. "Hey, Dickie-boy, how's it hanging?" she said as she put the items down on the table.

"Oh, just fine, Doc. Say, do you have a lead or a battle plan...?"

After pushing a third chair over to the table, Janice sat down and crossed her legs at the knee. "A battle plan? Now you mention it, I do, actually. And I might need your help."

Looking back at Mel, Richard Brennan moved forward on his chair and broke out in a wide grin. "Oh, really? I'd be delighted to give you a helping hand!"

Mel just blinked a couple of times and took a swig of her drink.

"Well, what I had in mind is that we knock on the door of every single compartment. Sooner or later, we'll run into the bad guy. I mean, he can't hide from us forever. There's a limited number of places he can be..." Janice said and suddenly looked up as a shadow fell over the table.

The shadow proved to be Otto Dietrich who had once again snuck up without any of them noticing. "I'd like to help, too, Doctor Covington."

"All right. How d'ya get my name?"

"It's amazing how much the waiters will tell you if you slip them a hundred-Drachma bill."

"Heh. True. Thanks, Otto, we can use all the help we can get," Janice said and took a swig of her Scotch.

"Oh, I have just had the greatest idea...! Let's split up into two teams... the Doc and Otto... and you and I," Richard Brennan said, leaning forward to reach out to Mel.

A mumbled "Mmmm," was Mel's only answer before taking a large gulp of her Southern Comfort.

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"All right, that leaves us with sleeping cars number one and two," Janice said and crossed the third sleeping car off her list. "Jeez, I wouldn't be surprised if we discover that the son of a bitch has been right under our noses the whole time. We shoulda done this ages ago. Mel?"

Mel rubbed her brow, trying to get her headache to lift - a headache that had started when Melas, the pushy Greek painter, had shown her a nude sketch he had made of her as an homage to 'ethereal beauty' as he had put it; not long after that, the headache had been compounded when Richard Brennan had offered her a quick neck-rub in his compartment.

"Mel?" Janice said again.

"I'm fine, just a little under the weather. But I agree, Jan."

When they reached compartment eighteen, Otto Dietrich went ahead and unlocked it, intent on letting Janice inside. "Here you go, Doctor. You may give it a thorough search if you like," he said, standing in the doorway.

"Naw, that's all right, Otto. No bad guys in there. Let's move on to the next one," Janice said with a grin.

She briefly checked Maria Ford's compartment seventeen, but apart from Maria herself being hard at work on a portable typewriter, it was empty. Compartment sixteen proved to be empty as well, but the next one, fifteen, was more interesting for Janice.

'This is where I heard Sir Lawrence speak with someone,' she thought, remembering back to the earlier incident.

Knocking on the door proved fruitless, and after waiting for nearly two minutes, she sent for Panagis and his master key.

When the chief purser arrived, he did so with the key and the list of passengers. "Doctor Covington, according to the official list, this compartment should not have been used at all on this trip," he said as he put the master key into the lock.

"Well, let's see..." Janice said as the door whooshed open. "Hmmm, all right, that didn't come flying through the window," she continued, pointing at several empty bottles of alcohol on the floor and an ashtray with a small mountain of cigarette butts on the desk.

"Oh dear!" Panagis said, making a horrified grimace. "Now we have to clean it thoroughly before we return... oh dear!"

Stepping in, Otto sniffed the air. "Doesn't smell like American tobacco to me."

Taking a few sniffs, Janice nodded. "You're right, that's a European blend. Panagis, who has a key for this compartment?"

"I do. This is the only master key, Doctor Covington," the chief purser said and held up the key he had on a chain.

"Hmmm."

"I doubt it would be too hard to get these old locks to open. Given the right tools, I think even Elmer Fudd could do it," Otto Dietrich said, studying the locking mechanism on the door.

"Elmer Fudd, huh?" Janice said with a grin. "Perhaps we're up against Elmer Fudd's evil half-brother, who knows... it definitely wasn't Elmer himself who paid me and Mel a visit the other night. Let's move on."

Compartments fourteen, thirteen and twelve gave no clues as to the identity of the attacker, and neither did Mel and Janice's own number eleven.

Standing at the pathway between the sleeping cars, Janice had her hands on her hips and a bleak look on her face. Sighing deeply, she turned around to find Mel.

"Honey, I don't know what the hell I'm doing. This is a wild goose chase," she said, reaching out for her partner.

"We still have a sleeping car to go, Jan. Cheer up, I'm sure we'll have a bit more success than we've had so far."

"Yeah, but... I just can't shake the feeling that they've already given us the slip, you know?" Pulling Mel closer, Janice leaned in and whispered: "Maybe he split after turning our compartment upside down, or maybe Sir Lawrence sent back some kind of message tellin' the midnight prowler to make a run for it."

Behind them, Richard checked his watch to find an excuse for leaving the chase-that-wasn't. "Hey, Doc, I'm sorry, I just remembered I promised to sing a song or two back in the piano bar. I wish you all the best, but..."

"That's okay, Dickie-boy. We'll catch you later," Janice said and waved at the movie star, knowing that it would at least make Mel feel better. "Otto, you're free to go, too, ya know."

"Thanks, but I'm staying."

"Suit yourself. Come on, Mel, let's take the last ten compartments. Maybe we'll get lucky... though I doubt it," Janice said and led Mel across the pathway between the cars.

Compartments ten and nine were empty as well, but number eight gave Janice a bad feeling. A knot began to form in her gut and she reached down to open the flap on her holster.

"Do you smell it, too?" Mel whispered, pinching her nostrils.

"Yeah. The same kind of tobacco we found down in compartment fifteen. I think we just got ourselves a live one," Janice whispered back.

Leaning in, she put her ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything. Through the narrow gap beneath the door, she could see that the lights were on, but because the light in the aisle was stronger, she couldn't see if anyone was moving around. Taking a deep breath, she raised her hand to knock.

Knock, knock

"Hello? Is anyone in there?"

The question was answered with a small explosion; the unmistakable sound of a weapon firing. A split second later, a bullet hole appeared in the door, exactly between Mel and Janice.

Yelling in surprise, Janice pushed Mel out of the way and then ducked for cover on the other side the door. Drawing her Webley, she let herself fall down on the floor and got ready to shoot. "Can you open the door?" she whispered to Mel who nodded in return. "Be careful, baby! Please be careful!"

"When have I ever not been careful, Janice Covington!?" Mel whispered back, quickly reaching out to turn the door handle. The second the door opened, another shot was fired at it, followed by a colorful Italian expletive.

Putting a hand on the door, Janice quickly swept it open and fired twice into the compartment, missing both times. A new shot came at her from the compartment, and the next thing she knew was that she was pelted with hot glass - fragments from one of the lightbulbs in the ceiling.

"Dammit!" she shouted, brushing the warm glass off her arms and hands.

"Are you all right, Doc?" Otto asked from his position behind Mel.

"I'm fine, dammit. Hey you in there! Throw that Goddamned gun out here right this minute! We've got ya covered, pal, and there ain't no way you can escape! Not this time!"

Janice's command was answered by another three rounds fired blindly at her, one of which smashed the big window on the other side of the aisle.

"Damn, this fella is gettin' on my nerves," Janice growled, slamming her fist into the plush carpet.

When she heard the shooter's weapon click several times, she jumped up and raced into the compartment with her Webley ahead of her. She came to a screeching halt when she realized that the man who had been shooting at them was none other than Ludovico Ricci. "What in Sam Hill...?" she said out loud, not believing her eyes.

Exploiting the brief pause, Ludovico kicked the Webley out of Janice's hand and jumped forward. Moving with the speed of a striking snake, he grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him, elbowing her across the jaw when she got close enough.

The loud *THWACK!* and a muted groan made Mel look inside. When she saw that Janice was metaphorically hanging on the ropes, an unnatural calmness fell over her, and she clenched her fists and jumped into the compartment.

Thinking that he had just been handed a juicy target on a silver platter, Ludovico pushed a dazed Janice away from him and began to slide towards Mel with a slimy smile on his face.

"You broke my nose, bitch... now I'm gonna break your neck!" he said in a voice muffled by the bandage he had across the bridge of his nose.

"Think again," Mel said in a velvety voice. Crouching down slightly, she never took her steely gaze off Ludovico, not even when Janice spat out a mouthful of blood and scrambled away from the Italian bruiser.

Wiping her lips with the back of her hand, Janice spat out some more blood and coughed a few times. "Mel?" she said in a croaky voice.

"No."

"Didn't think so. Hey, fella, you shoulda come out when I asked ya to. Now you're in a world of hurt!" Janice said, flicking a few drops of blood at Ludovico.

"You're crazy! You could have ten women against me and I'd still kill you all!"

"Uh-huh. Whatever..."

Jumping over to the closet, Ludovico dug into his jacket pocket and found his switchblade knife. Quickly clicking it open, he began to swing it in wild arcs in front of the two women to get them to back off.

Sussing out his timing, Janice roared "let's end this!" and went in deep between swings, showering the bruiser in punches and trying to get the knife out of his hand.

Grabbing onto his arm, she began to wrestle with him; dancing back and forth inside the small compartment, the two people bumped into everything there was to bump into, and soon, the compartment was as untidy as Mel and Janice's had been earlier.

"Stop, Janice! He's mine," Mel commanded in a strong voice. As soon as Janice stepped aside, she performed a forward flip that made her come down on Ludovico from above with both feet ahead, kicking him violently in the chest.

The unexpected attack made the bruiser fly backwards and crash through the window. As he fell out of the train, he screamed like a child and tried to hold onto the window sill, but it was to no avail - moments later, his fingers slipped on the smooth metal and he disappeared out into the night.

"WHOA!" Janice shouted, running over to the window. Standing in a pile of rubble, she tried to look out of the window but had to duck inside at once when the train entered a pitch black tunnel. "Holy smokes, Mel! That took care of that little problem!"

"Wh... what? Wh-where am I...? Oh... Oh, I'm so dizzy," Mel slurred. Losing her balance, she keeled over and landed on the floor with a bump and a scrape.

"Mel! Mel, I've got ya," Janice said and hurried over to her partner. Kneeling down, she picked up the woozy Southerner and cradled her head in her arms.

"It's n-nice to h-have a helping hand, but I w-wish she would tell me when she left so I could find a seat in time..." Mel slurred, shaking her head slowly to get all the fireflies out.

"Would somebody mind explaining to me what the Hell just happened...?" Otto Dietrich said, peeking around the corner of the compartment door.

Chuckling, Janice gave Mel a little squeeze before looking up at the tall man. "Mmmm, yeah, it's a long story, but I'll let you in on it... sometime."

"Come on, hon, lean on me," Janice said and pulled Mel close as they were staggering down the aisle to get back to their compartment.

"Oh, I can walk!"

"Of course you can... you can also lean on me. Hey, you'll lean on me and I'll lean on you... how's that for-"

"Oh, Janice, are you all right?" Maria Ford suddenly said, running up the aisle to intercept the two ailing women.

"Uh, yeah, sure, Maria. It's just a little blood. Mel got roughed up, though."

"Oh, uh... come on, lean on me," Maria said and tried to pull Janice towards her.

Chuckling, Janice shook her head. "Thanks, but no thanks, kiddo. I've got all the support I need right here... if you catch my drift?"

"Oh... sure." Maria's face briefly fell, but then she shrugged and took Janice's free arm in her own. "Ah, you look like you could need an extra hand, so... what the hell."

The next person to offer his assistance was Richard Brennan who came tearing through the aisle so fast that his heavily Brylled hair was on the brink of moving in the wind. "Miss Pappas! Are you all right?" he said, going straight for Mel's free arm.

"Holy jumper, we got some admirers on this train," Janice grumbled, clinging on to her partner.

"Thank you, Mr. Brennan... we're a little knocked about, but we're mostly fine," Mel said as she and Janice were helped into their compartment and over to the bench seat.

"And the attacker? What about him?" Maria said.

"Oh, you can forget about him. He's most likely dead," Otto said, never getting any further than the doorway.

Flicking his wrist in a carefully rehearsed move, Richard Brennan pulled a white handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and began to dab Mel's forehead.

"Uh, Mr Bren- oh... uh, I'm fine, thank you!" Mel said and grabbed hold of the handkerchief.

"Is there anything you need? Anything at all?" the movie star said.

"How about a little peace and quiet...?" Janice said.

"That's a good idea, Doc. Why don't you make yourself comfortable here? Just lie back and forget about all this nonsense... then Miss Pappas and I will do the same down in my compartment. A pretty good deal all-around, really," Richard said and smoothed down his hair.

'I gotta hand it to him... if nothing else, he's certainly persistent,' Janice thought, allowing a brief grin to play across her lips.

"Do we have a deal, then?" the movie star said, misinterpreting Janice's grin.

Snorting loudly, Mel handed back the handkerchief and adjusted her glasses in an indignant fashion. "No, Mr. Brennan, we do not! Now if you will take your leave, please! We need some rest. It has been a terrifying ten minutes."

Richard Brennan grimaced and put the handkerchief back into his pocket. "I understand, Miss Pappas. If you change your mind, please don't hesitate to swing by my compartment. My door is always open for you."

Sighing, Mel tried her best to put on a polite expression, but the smile never quite reached her eyes. "Thank you. Now, if you please..."

"I'm going, I'm going, I'm gone!" Richard Brennan said on his way out of the door.

"I need a shot of something strong, so I'll be taking a hike, too. Can I get you anything from the bar, Doc?" Otto said, straightening his black suit.

"No, thanks, chum. We're fine," Janice said, giving the tall man a thumbs-up.

Just when Mel and Janice thought they were to be left alone, Maria knocked on the doorframe and let herself inside. She quickly sat down on the chair opposite the bench seat and crossed her legs. "I'm happy that you're both all right... and, God, I'm friggin' ecstatic that this nightmare is over. Now I can sleep safely again. No more midnight attackers," she said and lit a Queen's Favorite without bothering to put it into her holder.

Seeing the smoke rising from the cigarette made Janice furrow her brow. Something was nagging at the outer fringes of her mind; she wasn't sure what it was, but it had something to do with the full ashtray and the smell down in compartment fifteen - a smell that she had noticed during the fight as well.

"It is over... isn't it?" Maria said pensively, looking at Janice's dark look.

"Mmmm? Yeah, sure. Sure it's over, Maria. You don't have to worry about it. Man, I'm looking forward to some R and R... Ribald Raunchiness," Janice said with a grin.

"Good. Well, okay, I'll get out of your hair now," Maria said and got up from the chair. "It's actually a great story. Perhaps I should figure out how to put into the book I'm working on. Maybe I'll title it 'Adventures On The Orient Express' or something like that," she continued and let the cigarette dangle from the corner of her mouth.

"You never told us what kind of books you've written, Maria," Mel said.

"Well... adult literature for women. Let's call it that."

Blushing, Mel quickly ducked her head so she wouldn't accidentally catch the smoldering gaze she knew Janice would be shooting her. "Oh... I see. Good night, Maria."

" 'night. See ya at breakfast," Maria said and left the compartment.

" 'night, Maria!" Janice said loudly. "Wow, who knew, huh? Anyway, that's for later. First of all, I need to go back to compartment number eight. There's something I need to take a second look at," she continued and got up from the bench seat.

"Oh, now...? I'm too tired to go with you, dear."

"That's all right. Just slip into something comfortable... I won't be long. Then we can... uh, talk all night if you want to."

Groaning, Mel waved her hand to dismiss her partner. "You're incorrigible, Jan Covington."

Ten minutes later, Janice was back in compartment eight, holding several items in her hand. Looking at them, she wondered if the things she had found or those she hadn't found would prove to be the most interesting in the long run.

She had found a crumbled-up pack of Russian cigarettes and a handful of butts that matched the brand, and combined with the empty bottles of alcohol - one of which had been a well-known brand of Vodka - she had a pretty good inkling that her old adversary Vitali Komaroff had not only survived getting shot at point blank range, but was actually somewhere on the train.

"I should've known that Joe Palooka had such a fat head that gettin' shot in the turnip wouldn't have much effect... damn," she said quietly to herself.

Sniffing the air, she caught a whiff of Vitali's characteristic smell, even though the shattered window had freshened up the air in the compartment quite considerably.

"Mmmm," she said out loud and began to move back to her own compartment.

After locking herself in, she noticed that Mel had nodded off after all the excitement, and she tip-toed across the plush carpet and sat down on the chair to take her boots off.

Before she could make it there, Mel stirred and sat up. "Oh, I must have dozed off..."

"Yeah."

"Did you find anything?" Mel said, stifling a yawn.

Sitting down, Janice quickly unlaced her boots and put them on the floor next to the bed. "Yes, I did. Vitali is here."

Narrowing her eyes, Mel sat up straight and ran a hand through her hair. "The mad Russian? What's he doing here? Didn't you kill him a couple of days ago?"

"I shot him, yeah, but he obviously made it somehow. It's definitely him. There was also something I couldn't find."

"I'm too sleepy for riddles, dear."

"I couldn't find Mr. von Bülow's documents down in the other compartment."

"Oh... but what does that mean?"

"Well," Janice said and crawled up onto the bench seat. "It means that someone else took 'em. Who, I have no clue. It could be anyone."

"It could be Otto Dietrich after all," Mel said, running her fingers down Janice's cheek.

"Yeah."

Sighing, Mel moved down on the bench seat and pulled Janice with her. They lay silent side by side for a few minutes before Mel took a deep breath. "Darling, did you tell Panagis yet that Ludovico is dead?"

"Not yet, baby. I guess he'll have a few questions when he sees the busted windows."

"Mmmm. What about Sir Lawrence?" Mel whispered.

"What about him?"

"Is he a crook?"

"Yes."

"Jan... I-"

Putting her fingers across Mel's lips, Janice moved over to her left side and raised herself up on her elbow. "No, I'm sure of it, baby. He's as guilty as Ludovico and Vitali. But we can't prove it just yet. He's a Vice-Consul. You saw in the restaurant how much clout that title has. Before we put him under the spotlight, we better be damn sure that we have our house in order."

"And Audrey? She's such a charming young woman. I... I can't believe that she has anything to do with it..."

When Janice didn't speak, Mel drew a sharp breath and turned towards the adventurer. "Surely you're not suggesting...? Jan, I need to know... if this matter comes to a head... would you give Audrey the benefit of the doubt... or w-would you sacrifice her?"

"Honey..."

"I need to know. Please."

Closing her eyes, Janice ran through a few possible outcomes in her mind's eye but came to the conclusion that she didn't like any of them. "Honey, if it came down to a question of you or her... yes. I would sacrifice Audrey."

"Oh, God, Jan..."

"I'll protect you to my dying breath, Mel Pappas. I know you're capable of looking after yourself, especially when your relative is in town... but you're the woman I love. Don't ask me not to protect you."

"Thank you..." Mel whispered.

"I don't wanna talk about that now. I don't even wanna think about it."

"But isn't there something we could do to stop it from getting to that point?" Mel said and swung her legs over the side of the bench seat. Rubbing her face, she quickly got up and began to pace back and forth in the narrow confines of the compartment.

"Well... there is something we could do. We could take the bull by the horns and take possession of the emerald," Janice said and sat up.

"What good would that do...?"

"We'd know at all times who had it and that it hadn't left the train, and we'd be able to call the intentions of the people asking for it."

Adjusting her glasses, Mel shot her partner a scathing look. "Jan Covington, do you honestly believe that Panagis would simply open the safe because we asked politely?"

"Who said anything about askin'?"

"But...!"

"No, honey, we aren't going to do a dynamite job on it... although a blowtorch would've come in handy... just kiddin'," Jumping off the bench seat, Janice wrapped her arms around Mel's waist and gave her a little squeeze. "Let's go down there, give the apple tree a good shake an' see what falls down. Huh?"

"Oh, Jan!"

"Come on, toots. Gimme a kiss for good luck before I start my new career as a safecracker..."

"But your jaw...?"

"Kiss. Now."

Sighing, Mel leaned down to do just that.

On their way down to the armored car, they ran into Panagis Minardou who was sitting by himself in the mostly deserted restaurant car and drinking a cup of coffee.

Stopping with a screech on the plush carpet, Mel grabbed hold of Janice and began to turn back. "Oh! Look! Panagis! No, I can't do this... I'm not cut out for a life of crime... I won't last a week behind bars in Alcatraz!"

"Women don't get sent to Alcatraz, hon... calm down, everything's gonna be all right. Just follow my lead," Janice whispered, fixing Mel's lapels on her chocolate brown dress jacket.

"Oh... if you say so."

"I do. I'll do the talking," Janice whispered and moved closer to the chief purser. "Ahem. Good evening, Panagis. May I ask you what time it is? My watch seems to be off."

"Good evening, Doctor Covington. It's a quarter past eleven," Panagis said, looking at his own watch.

"Thanks. Uh, I'm afraid that I have some bad news for ya. Have you cleaned up compartment fifteen yet?"

"I have a few men on it. Is there another problem, Doctor?"

"Uh, yeah. Miss Pappas and I just took a evenin' walk and it seems that down in compartment eight, there's a busted window... actually, a couple a' windows."

"Busted...?"

"Broken."

"Oh!" Panagis said and shot up from the chair. "I better check on it at once. Thank you for alerting me, Doctor," he continued, hurrying down the aisle - away from the armored car.

"No problem, pal," Janice said and offered him a quick wave as a goodbye.

"Janice Covington, you are going to hell for that lie alone," Mel said flatly once the chief purser was out of earshot.

Grabbing Mel's elbow, Janice hurriedly pulled her further towards the pathway between the restaurant car and the armored car. "Wasn't a lie! I just didn't give him all the details, 's all. Come on, let's hustle."

Doing what she said she'd do, Janice reached out and gave the bars of the sturdy metal fence a good shake - unfortunately, nothing fell down. "Hmmm," she said, leaning down to give the lock a close-up study.

"Can't we at least turn on the lights, Jan?"

"No. Someone might see us."

"This is just... ugh," Mel said, looking at the rack where all the index cards were kept.

"Mmmm," Janice said again. "Hey, Mel, lend me one of your bobby pins, huh?"

"Are you going to ruin it?"

"Probably."

Sighing, Mel reached up and pulled a pin out of her hair. Without support, her hair couldn't stay up in the carefully styled bun and cascaded down onto her shoulder. Since the masterpiece was already beyond repair, she shrugged and took out the other pins as well, creating such a spectacle that Janice stopped and stared breathlessly at her.

"Oh, baby... I wish you had your hair down more often. With your hair up, you're a knockout, but when it's down... sweet mercy!" Janice said and bared her teeth in a mock sneer.

A deep blush spread out over Mel's cheeks and she began fumbling with her glasses to have something to do with her hands. "Uh... thank you. Now will you please get on with it... I don't want to spend too long in here. Someone might fi-"

"Shhh! Somebody's coming!" Janice said and pulled Mel over on the other side of the safe where they crouched down, out of sight of the entrance.

"Ohhhhh! I knew it! I knew-HHMPF!" Mel howled, but was instantly muffled by a hand across her mouth.

A dark figure entered the armored car and began to sneak around so quietly that it bordered on being a scene from a silent movie. Reaching into a pocket, the figure took out a metal tool that briefly gleamed in the sparse light.

'A picklock. That's a professional,' Janice thought, still holding her hand on Mel's mouth.

It didn't take the darkly-clad figure more than ten seconds to open the metal fence, and soon, the person was hard at work trying to get the safe itself to open.

Looking around, Janice soon spotted a light switch on the wall behind and above them. Leaning in towards Mel, she performed a series of hand gestures that told the tall translator to hit the light switch once Janice was in position.

When Mel nodded, Janice crawled as quietly as she could along the metal fence until she reached the gate. The sounds coming from the attempt at opening the safe camouflaged her breathing, but she still decided to hold it, just in case.

Nodding at Mel, Janice put her hands on the gate. The split second Mel hit the light switch, Janice jumped up and slammed the gate shut, locking in the dark figure.

Otto Dietrich froze in place with his gloved hands resting on the safe's knobs. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly, knowing that the game was up.

"Hello, Otto," Janice said, tapping her knuckles against the fence.

Chuckling darkly, Otto turned around to look at Mel and Janice. "Hello, Doctor Covington. Miss Pappas."

"Fancy meetin' you here. Out for a midnight stroll, are we?" Janice said and pushed her beloved fedora back on her head.

"Something like that, yes. You know, I could ask you the same thing."

"That's right, you could. But there's no point in doin' so 'cos we ain't gonna answer."

"Doc, where do we stand?" Otto said and leaned against the safe.

"Depends on you. I have a few questions for ya. If the answers satisfy my curiosity, we'll see."

Sighing, Otto scratched his hair. When he couldn't see a way out of the mess, he shrugged and began to take his gloves off. "All right. Shoot."

"Did you rob Mr. von Bülow?"

"Yes."

"Mmmm. Did you knock him down?"

"No."

"BS, chum."

"Jan!" Mel said out of the corner of her mouth. "That's rude! He already said no!"

"Let me handle the interrogation, toots. Why d'ya do it and where'd'ya hide the documents?"

Turning around, Otto pointed at the safe. "Well, the documents are in there, the safest place on the train. When I got onboard in Athens, I put a worthless trinket in there to get a card and to see how Panagis worked the various latches and locks. From there, it was a piece of cake. And I didn't knock von Bülow down. He fell. There's a difference."

"But why did ya rob him?"

"Well, I wasn't going to at first. We had agreed on a deal, but he suddenly wanted more money."

Nodding, Janice sent Otto a crooked grin. "That's what the argument was over... at the bar not long after we had left Thessaloniki? Right?"

"That's right, Doc. When I told him I didn't have the amount he wanted, he got agitated."

"Agitated! Hell, he was about to blow a fuse!"

"Yeah, well... All in all, I'm just a handyman for hire."

"Oh, so it's industrial espionage?" Mel said, sitting down on a chair in the corner of the armored car.

"My lips are zipped, Lady."

Clearing her throat, Janice walked over to the rack to take a look at their index card. "Two more questions to go, Otto. One, since you like takin' moonlight walks, were you the midnight prowler?"

"No, Doc, you gotta believe that. I'd never, ever break into a place where I knew a woman was sleeping... or two, in this case. Ever," Otto said, shaking his head vehemently.

"Good. I'd hate to think that we killed a man tonight over nothing. Two, what were you going to do with the emerald?"

Otto stood up straight and narrowed his eyes. After a few seconds, he cocked his head and looked at the safe. "There's an emerald in there?"

"Mmmm. Yeah. In Sir Lawrence Philpott's tray."

"That's news to me, Doc."

Chuckling, Janice tapped the card against the rim of her fedora. "Oh, sure it is. I'll bet you already have a buyer lined up."

"I'm telling you the truth. I only looked in my own tray. The Maltese Falcon could be in that safe for all I know."

"Hmmm," Janice said, crossing her arms over her chest, pondering the unexpected development.

For nearly a minute, the only sounds heard were the noises made by the train. With the locomotive so far away, the wheels singing against the rails overpowered the other noises and created a harmonious backdrop to a hard thinking Janice.

"All right, I believe you," she said, breaking the tension. "And now we have a job for you, Otto."

"I'm all ears."

"Open the safe and take the emerald."

"I'm... I'm sorry? You want to steal your own emerald?" Otto said, once again narrowing his eyes.

"It's not our emerald, it's Sir Lawrence's. Well, actually, it's Cecrops'," Mel said, feeling left out of the conversation.

Nodding, Janice moved back from the gate. "Yeah, but Sir Lawrence is in cahoots with the crooks. Oh, and just to prove that I'm not going to shoot you in the back... or anywhere else, for that matter... I'll even let you pick the gate open before you do the safe."

Snorting, Otto Dietrich went over to the gate and picked it open even faster than he had done the first time. "Gee, thanks a lot, Doc. That wouldn't prove a damn thing, though... Miss Tall, Dark and Deadly over there doesn't need a gun," he grumbled, pointing his thumb at Mel.

"Oh, I'm perfectly calm now," Mel said and adjusted her glasses.

"Well, good for you," Otto said and returned to the safe. After working hard for a minute or so, he manipulated the locks on the door into disengaging. With a muted groan, he took hold of the heavy door and swung it open, revealing all the little trays.

"That's my tray there," he said, pointing at one in the bottom right corner. A few papers were visible through the hole needed to pull the tray out of the safe.

"And the emerald is in the fourth tray from the left on the top row," Janice said as she walked past the metal gate. "This one," she continued, pulling the tray out of the safe.

Putting it on the small desk next to the rack where the index cards were kept, she quickly pulled the lid off the wooden box and grabbed the envelope.

"It's still here, Mel," she said, feeling the priceless gem through the paper.

"Good. Where should we hide it?"

"Why, in my hat, o' course," Janice said and took the emerald from the envelope, earning herself a wide-eyed stare from Otto Dietrich. She plopped the gemstone into the hat, and then the hat onto her head. "All done. Let's get back to our compartment. Now we can sleep tight. Nothing more is gonna happen until tomorrow."

"That's one hell of a rock, Doc..." Otto said, scratching his neck.

"It is, ain't it? Thanks for the help, Otto. We appreciate it," Janice said and slapped Otto's shoulder.

Groaning, Mel rolled her eyes and looked towards the heavens, praying for divine support. "Good Lord, I won't be able to catch a wink of sleep tonight..."

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CHAPTER 6

The next morning saw a fresh-faced Mel and an out-of-sorts Janice being congratulated by all and sundry as they sat at a table in the restaurant car, eating breakfast.

By the time the sixth different person had given Janice a slap on the back or on the shoulder for taking care of business regarding the midnight prowler, the corners of her mouth were pointing so far downwards they were practically touching the carpet. Her face was grayish and she had dark circles under her eyes - courtesy of Mel sleeping so solidly that she had snored all night - and the last thing she wanted was to have anyone at all slap her anywhere.

Oblivious to Janice's discomfort, Mel took another French roll, split it down the middle and spread a thick layer of butter on both halves. "I can't believe how easy it was to cross into Germany compared to some of the other border crossings we've experienced on this trip."

"Mmmm."

"Why, the border patrol officer even said 'thank you' and 'good morning' and what not. Here's your roll, dear."

"Not hungry. Need more coffee."

"Eat your French roll, dear. Breakfast is the day's most important meal," Mel said and found the jar with the blackcurrant jam.

"Mmmm."

"Audrey is coming towards us. Please be gentle with her," Mel whispered around a bite.

That information made Janice sit up and pay attention. Taking her cup of strong, black coffee, she took a long swig and wiped the excess liquid off her upper lip with the napkin. Narrowing her eyes, she waited for the secretary to come down to their table.

"Good morning, Doctor. Miss Pappas," Audrey said with a smile in her voice.

"Mmmm," Janice said.

"Good morning, Audrey. How is Sir Lawrence?" Mel said, pulling out the chair next to her.

That invitation proved to be too much for Audrey, and she hurriedly sat down and put her elbows on the table. "Oh, could you spare a croissant or something? I've only had tea and biscuits this morning and I'm starving already!"

"Of course. Help yourself," Mel said and pushed the tray towards the secretary.

"Thank you. Sir Lawrence is fine now, but he was a bit upset last night. I think it's because the villains were so close to us the whole time. I mean, we've walked past compartment eight so many times to get down here... Brrr... I shudder to think about what could have happened," Audrey said and went to work on a chocolate croissant.

Deciding to put out the bait, Janice leaned in towards the secretary and shot her a conspiratorial look.

"Audrey... can you keep a secret?"

"A secret...? Oh! Oh yes, I can!" Audrey said, nodding so hard that her hair was bopping up and down.

"Good. Mel and I believe that the prowler wasn't working alone. We believe that he had an accomplice that is still here somewhere."

The news made Audrey's cheeks turn quite pale and she dropped the chocolate croissant which landed on the plate with a soft *phlum*. "Oh, no... really?"

"Yes. But we also believe that we're on the brink of catching the second criminal. It'll happen before we reach Munich... that's less than three hours from now. Audrey!"

"Y-yes?"

"Don't tell anyone," Janice said and gave Audrey's petite hand a warm squeeze with her own callused one.

"I w-won't, Doctor. I won't! My lips are sealed... oh, what if Sir Lawrence asks me about the prowler? He's my master, if I refuse to answer, he'll be most annoyed with me... he might even give me the sack."

Deciding to add a touch of old-fashioned Southern drama to the situation, Mel took Audrey's free hand in her right and Janice's free hand in her left, creating a triangle that wouldn't have looked out of place at a seance. "Oh, that's all right, Audrey. Sir Lawrence is a nobleman. If we can't trust noblemen, who can we trust?"

Nodding, Audrey's cheeks quickly regained some of their color. After the three women had let go of each other, she wolfed down the remains of the chocolate croissant.

A few minutes later, Audrey excused herself and hurried up the aisle, away from the breakfast table.

"She's going straight to Sir Lawrence," Janice said, chuckling into her coffee.

"Probably... but that doesn't necessarily mean she's not a good person, Janice."

"Oh, no. Sure."

"It doesn't!"

"I agree with you, babe... but she bought it, hook, line and sinker," Janice said and swallowed the rest of the coffee before pushing back her chair.

Leaning back, Mel crossed her arms over her chest. "That she did," she said quietly.

Audrey was so determined to get back to Sir Lawrence that she didn't have time to notice that she had two shadows; one was her own and the other belonged to Janice who was trailing her at a distance of thirty feet.

When Audrey reached the door to compartment number two and began to knock on it, Janice ducked in behind a corner at the other end of the sleeping car's aisle. The moment Audrey was let inside, Janice sprinted down the aisle, coming to a halt next to the second compartment.

'Oh, Sir Lawrence, I have good and bad news, I'm afraid!' Audrey said, forcing Janice to clamp her hand over her mouth to stop a loud chuckle - Audrey hadn't even waited for Sir Lawrence to ask her before she blabbed the secret.

'Oh? What's that, Miss Dickinson?' Sir Lawrence said.

'Well, I just spoke to Miss Pappas and Doctor Covington and they said that the terrible man who fell out of the window wasn't the only prowler... they also said that they're almost ready to snatch the second criminal!'

A bump akin to something falling off the table came through the door, followed by a most ungentleman-like curse.

'Oh, your book, Sir... let me get it,' Audrey said, but Sir Lawrence shushed her at once.

'Forget the book! Audrey, what did they say? I need to know exactly what they said!'

'Well, what I told you, Sir. I believe Doctor Covington's exact words were that they were on the brink of-'

'That damned bitch!'

'But Sir Lawrence!'

Staring at the door, Janice narrowed her eyes and grumbled a few choice words, returning the favor the nobleman had just sent her.

'We need to move sooner than I had planned. It's time to take those two... those two... women out of the picture.'

'Sir Lawrence, I... but...'

'Silence, Audrey!'

'But...'

A sudden slap echoing through the compartment - quickly followed by a pained cry from Audrey - made Janice clench her fists and bare her teeth in a sneer. "Ooh, that son of a bitch... now I'm really gonna tear him a new one...!" she mumbled to herself.

'You're coming with me! It's time to end this,' Sir Lawrence said, bumping around inside the compartment.

A shiver racing up and down Janice's spine alerted her of approaching danger, and she quickly withdrew from the position at the door and ran towards the mail car. She had only just ducked around the corner when Sir Lawrence yanked the door open and looked out.

His face had turned beetroot red and he looked like he was on the verge of having a coronary. Satisfied that the aisle was empty, he stepped out of the compartment holding a small-caliber pistol in one hand and Audrey - by her collar - in the other.

The secretary had a large palmprint on her rosy cheek and it was clear that she was sobbing. When Janice saw that, her nostrils flared and she clenched her jaw to stop herself from growling.

Sir Lawrence stomped off down the aisle, but soon stopped at compartment six where he thumped the handle of the gun against the door. "Oi! Wake up in there! It's time to act! Johnny? Are you awake?"

At first, Janice furrowed her brow, wondering who on Earth Johnny might be - but then the door was opened and the easily recognizable figure of the man she had known as Sir Alastair Brougham-Tibbett appeared. *'I should have known that was a phony name! His most Esteemed Pile of Steaming...!'* she thought, shaking her head angrily.

"What the hell's going on?" 'Sir Alastair' said, leaning on his hardwood cane - all of a sudden, he was speaking in a much flatter English accent than the upper class one he had used at first.

"That little bitch of a Doctor has worked it all out. We need to eliminate her and that tall crumpet on the spot. Where is Vitali?"

"On the can, gov'nor."

"Get him the hell out of there! We need his muscle."

While Sir Lawrence and Johnny were talking, Vitali Komaroff came lumbering up the aisle from the toilet at the far end of the car wearing his customary dark-green uniform. When he saw the commotion, he furrowed his brow that still sported the three-inch abrasion courtesy of Janice Covington and a bullet from her Webley.

"What? Problems?" he said in his characteristic broken English.

"You can say that again, you worthless ne'er-do-well!" Sir Lawrence said in a thunderous voice. "Because you and that Italian lothario couldn't kill a little woman the first time of asking, she has jeopardized our entire plan!"

"I find her. I kill her now!" Vitali said, pulling a knife from his waist.

"All right," Sir Lawrence said, suddenly remembering that he was still holding down a very wide-eyed Audrey. "Now, what should we do with you? Miss Dickinson, you have served me well. Unfortunately, the time has come to terminate your appointment. Oh, I'm afraid you won't be able to use your severance pay."

Hearing that, Janice knew what was coming and whipped her hand down to reach for her Webley - but realized that she had left it in their compartment because she didn't want to make a scene in the restaurant car earlier.

"Wait, gov'nor... we might need a hostage," Johnny said, putting a calming hand on the Vice-Consul's arm.

"We have more than enough hostages to choose from. Snatch the tall translator as soon as you find her... also the woman author. The little, annoying freak who always wears men's clothing," Sir Lawrence said, looking at his right hand man. "No, Audrey has heard too much, I'm afra- AARGH!"

Audrey suddenly reached up and tore her long fingernails down Sir Lawrence's face, drawing blood with all five fingers. Sobbing wildly, she managed to break free from his grip and began to run up the aisle, up towards Janice's position.

Clutching his bleeding face, Sir Lawrence spun around and fired his gun at the fleeing woman; once, twice, three times. The third shot hit her in the upper back and she went down hard, landing just next to Janice - only one step away from safety.

Audrey coughed a few times and tried to get up, but it was clear that her strength was failing her. Giving up, she bumped back down and began to sob quietly. A pool of blood soon formed underneath her, but she just looked at it with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

Janice held her breath even though her heart was hammering away in her chest. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and help the charming Audrey, but she knew that if she did it while Sir Lawrence and the others were still standing in the aisle, it would be nothing short of suicidal.

After waiting for nearly thirty seconds, she peeked around the corner and saw that the criminals had left. Taking a deep breath, she quickly jumped out from her hiding place and knelt down next to the injured woman.

"Audrey! Can you hear me?" she whispered, not wanting to draw attention to herself.

"Y-yes..."

"The bullet has gone in directly above your right shoulderblade, uh..." Looking up, Janice spotted three bullet holes on the wall at the end of the aisle; one of them had a corona of blood circling it. "Okay, it went clean through. Can you get up?"

"N-no... I can't feel my right arm," Audrey said in a mix of a whisper and a groan.

"Okay. Shit. I can't stay, Audrey... Maria can't fight for herself. I need to help her... I promise that I'll get someone down here to help you at once."

"Oh, God, no... please don't leave me...!" Audrey croaked, trying - but failing - to get up.

"Audrey, I can't stay... I promise that I'll get someone to help you. Stay calm, everything's gonna be all right... I promise," Janice said and got up.

Audrey's terrified sobs cut through her like glass, but Janice knew that if she didn't hurry back to Mel, she would have three victims to cry over instead of just one.

On her way back, she ran into her own compartment and dug into the duffel bag. Not wanting to waste time on putting on the holster, she simply stuck the Webley down the waist of her pants after checking that it was fully loaded.

A quick check in Maria's compartment number seventeen proved - judging by the mess on the floor - that she had been taken, too.

Gritting her teeth, Janice tore back out of Maria's compartment and went straight for the restaurant car.

The eerie silence that greeted her as she stepped into the second lounge car told her that she had made it there in time - she surmised that if there had been a shooting incident, the guests there would have been hysterical.

Entering the restaurant car, Janice drew the Webley and began to move slowly down the aisle.

Mel and Maria sat at the table the furthest down towards the armored car. Vitali was covering them with a revolver and the man Janice had known as Sir Alastair was sitting on the other side of the aisle with a pistol. Sir Lawrence was nowhere to be seen.

Along the way, Janice looked at some of the people she had been mingling with over the last few days - the movie star who couldn't hold her glare, the German banker, the English Professor who shot her a look of barely hidden disgust, the Greek painter and his niece and finally Otto Dietrich.

As she went past the professional thief, he pushed his chair back and walked up to her.

"Siddown, Otto. This ain't your fight," Janice said in a steely voice.

"It is now."

"All right... but don't get in my way."

"I won't."

Stepping to the side, Janice quickly looked back at the other people. "One of those sons of bitches down there shot Audrey, the young redhead. She's badly injured... up in the first sleeping car. Get Panagis and a first aid kit and help her."

Much to Janice's surprise, Professor Charles Wainwright got up from his seat and turned towards her.

"I'm a GP. I'll help her," he said and quickly left his table. Realizing that there might be a few headlines in it for him, Richard Brennan followed the Professor.

"Good... whatever the hell a GP is," Janice said and continued down towards the end of the car.

Once there, she trained the Webley at the former Sir Alastair and offered him a mock salute. "Hello, your Ladyship. How's your finger? Still severed, I hope."

Thumping the butt of his cane down into the carpet, Johnny mumbled a quiet "Bitch," before he calmed down and concentrated on keeping the pistol pointed at the adventurer. Turning his attention to Otto, he narrowed his eyes and moved the gun to cover both of them. "Who the hell are you? Her knight in shining armor?"

"Something like that."

"It's your funeral, gov," Johnny said with a shrug.

Janice turned to look at Mel and Maria - the author was pale and seemed to be frightened witless, but there was an unnatural calm about Mel that Janice knew all too well.

"All right, since we're all here, let's go have a chat with Sir Lawrence in the armored car," Johnny said and got up from the table. "Vitali, get the crumpets moving."

Vitali didn't need to be told twice. Leaning down, he grabbed Maria by the arm and yanked her so harshly to her feet that she whimpered and nearly fell down on her knees.

Growling, Janice moved her Webley forward, but a quick 'oi' by Johnny made her stop.

"No, Doc, let's not shed any blood just yet. Why don't you holster that thing?"

"Why don't you shut your trap?"

"Why don't we stop bollocking around and take a little walk into the armored car?" Johnny said and waved his gun.

Mel got up from her seat and moved out into the aisle. "Do what he says, Jan. It's not the time," she said, shooting Janice a steely look.

Knowing that Mel outnumbered her two to one, Janice nodded and began to shuffle up the aisle, following Vitali and Maria, but leading Johnny and his pistol.

Once they reached the armored car, Janice noted that Sir Lawrence had Panagis in there as well. The chief purser's nose was bleeding profusely and he had a large bruise on his cheek, but other than that, he seemed unharmed.

"Ah, good day, Doctor Covington. Welcome to our little party," Sir Lawrence said and made a mock bow. "Who's your friend?" he said once he spotted Otto.

"My name is Otto Dietrich," Otto said, looking at the many weapons in the relatively narrow space.

Snorting, Sir Lawrence adjusted his grip on his pistol. "A jerry? Well! All that's missing from our little United Nations is an African... but I suppose you white Yanks wouldn't want anything to do with one of those... eh?"

Shoving Maria aside, Vitali walked around the sturdy metal fence and moved over to stand behind Sir Lawrence. Johnny quickly followed him, keeping Janice and Otto covered at all times.

Trying to analyze the situation, Janice weighed the odds: three opponents, all armed - against three innocent bystanders, at least one of which was scared out of their mind, and finally herself and Mel's secret visitor. *'Hmmm... not exactly the world's best starting point. But I've been in worse situations.'*

Mel moved over to Maria and put a warm hand on the terrified woman's shoulder. "Stay calm, Maria. We're not dead yet," she said in a velvety voice that didn't sound like Mel Pappas at all.

Even in her frightened state, Maria furrowed her brow and turned to look at the tall Southerner standing next to her. Just as she opened her mouth to inquire about the accent, Sir Lawrence grabbed Panagis by the collar and forced him to open the metal fence.

His trembling hands had trouble inserting the master key into the lock, but he soon managed and swung the gate open.

"Excellent, my good man. Now the other one," Sir Lawrence commanded and shoved the chief purser over to the safe.

"Once you have the emerald, what are you gonna do to us?" Janice said, stressing the first part of the sentence.

Otto and Mel both noticed the emphasis and began to get ready for action.

"Oh, Doctor, you're about to suffer a tragic accident. All of you, as a matter of fact. You see, one of the brakes on the armored car was hanging and it caused a terrible, all-consuming fire... alas, there were no survivors," Sir Lawrence said, looking over his shoulder as the door to the safe whooshed open.

He quickly grabbed the tray with the envelope and threw the lid down on the floor. When he took the envelope, he realized instantly that it was empty, and he looked at Janice with a flash of anger - and panic - in his eyes.

"Where is it?" he hissed, holding up the empty envelope.

"Ain't it there? Aw, shucks, Buster. What the hell is the world comin' to?" Janice said in a sarcastic voice.

Moving ahead, Johnny looked into the tray and then at Sir Lawrence. "Maybe somebody moved it to one of the other trays, gov'nor...?"

"Empty them all! Now!" Sir Lawrence barked.

Panagis went to work at once, but it was soon clear that the emerald wasn't in any of the trays.

"... Bloody hell, gov," Johnny mumbled and worked the action on his pistol.

Feeling her heart starting to pound hard in her chest, Janice tightened all her muscles and got ready to jump into action - however, before she had time to do so, the situation developed in an unexpected direction.

"Where's that bloody emerald?" Johnny said, aiming his weapon at Sir Lawrence's back.

Sir Lawrence's face turned beetroot red as he spun around and saw the gun. "Johnny... put that away! Have you gone mad? They're trying to trick us... they have it, it's so obvious!"

"Where is it...? I won't ask you again!"

Baring his teeth in a wolf-like sneer, Sir Lawrence clenched his fist and shook it at the man who held him at gunpoint. "You worthless fool! You incompetent son of a who-"

Johnny calmly pulled the trigger and shot Sir Lawrence in the chest at point blank range.

The elderly man was thrown backwards, landing with a hollow thud against the side of the safe. As he slowly slid down to the floor, a red, grotesque rose blossomed on his white shirt. Sighing, he leaned his head to the side and then keeled over.

Two seconds later, Maria let out a soul-rattling scream that acted as a trigger for everyone. Even before the scream had died down, Janice and Mel jumped forward to engage Vitali and Johnny, respectively.

As Mel high-kicked the weapon out of Johnny's hands, her skirt was torn on both sides - revealing so much thigh that it would have been deemed morally depraved had she been back in South Carolina - but it didn't hamper her progress. After disposing of the gun, she backhanded Johnny across the face, spun around, crouched down and performed a leg sweep on the former nobleman that made him fall directly onto his rear end.

While that was going on, Janice went at Vitali with her fists forward. Showering the lumbering giant's jaw and gut with punches, she managed to drive him back towards the back wall of the car. When his elbow hit the wall, his gun went off and the impossibly loud blast momentarily stunned Janice - not for long, but just enough for Vitali to start a counteroffensive.

Screaming again as the hot lead ricocheted through the car before smashing a window and escaping into the night, Maria grabbed Otto's jacket and used him for protection. Pulling him towards the exit, she was kicking and yelling at him to move faster.

Panagis Minardou took full use of the pandemonium to slip past them, clutching his bleeding nose and cursing loudly in several languages. He stopped briefly to look back at the fighting, but then shook his head and took off up the aisle.

"Hey, lady! Let go of my jacket! I need to help 'em," Otto said, trying to pry Maria's hands off his expensive suit.

"I'm an author, not some kind of warrior! And what was wrong with Mel? Her accent changed... how is that possible?" Maria said so loud that she was practically shouting.

"It's a long story... ugh, come on... ugh! Let go!" Otto said, finally succeeding in getting Maria to release her iron grip. "Thank you! Go back to the restaurant car... this is no place for someone who can't fight!"

"I will! God, I need a cig!" Maria said as she ran across the pathway and disappeared into the restaurant car.

Straightening his lapels, Otto jumped back into the fray and went straight over to Mel who was keeping Johnny under wraps. "Mel... or whoever you are at the moment... I got this one. Go help Janice."

"All right," Mel said and took her foot off Johnny's chest. When they handed over, the former nobleman briefly tried to fight his new captor, but a quick right to the chin settled that issue.

At the other side of the car, Vitali had Janice on the defensive. Using his big paws, he had her pressed up against the wall, delivering punch after punch to her gut. Not all were clear hits, but those that were drove the air out of the feisty adventurer in loud wheezes.

Knowing she had to fight back before it was too late, Janice exploited the fact that the Russian was pinning her torso to the wall by thrusting both her knees upwards. Her right missed, but her left scored a direct hit on the giant's groin, and he took a step back and clutched his abused member. Bending over slightly, he let out a series of strangled, high-pitched squeals that sounded vaguely like a colony of seagulls.

This allowed Janice to break free of his grip, and as soon as her feet were back on the ground, she grabbed his uniform jacket and forced him closer to the wall. His head impacted on the inside of the wall with a loud *CRACK* that left him stunned, but not entirely helpless.

His squeals soon turned into roars and he began to swing his arms wildly in the air, hoping to catch - and crush - Janice, but she was easily able to evade his wild swings.

Jumping to Janice's rescue, Mel gave Vitali an impossibly hard punch to the kidneys that made him fall down onto his knees.

Letting out a long groan, he began to get up so he could retaliate, but Mel was quicker and planted her high-heeled shoe in his face with a ferocious kick.

The big Russian was thrown at the locked back door, breaking the lock and the latches with his weight. Like his associate Ludovico before him, Vitali grappled frantically for grip, but could do nothing to stop himself from falling out of the door and onto the tracks behind the train.

"Oh, Jeez!" Janice said, grabbing hold of the door before it could slam shut again. Standing in the doorway, she stared wide-eyed at the tumbling ragdoll that was rapidly obscured by the darkness, only lit up by the moon's silvery light and the red light from the train's rearward-facing lantern.

Just as it looked like Vitali would stop tumbling end over end, his body vanished into thin air with nary a sound. At first, Janice couldn't fathom what she had just witnessed, but then she realized that they were driving across a bridge - the Russian giant had fallen through the gap between two of the railway ties.

Breaking out into goosebumps all over her body just thinking about the horrible way to die, Janice stepped back into the car and wiped her sweaty forehead with a trembling hand.

Then she spotted Mel lying unconscious on the floor.

"Mel! Mel!" Janice yelled, throwing herself down on the floor. Grabbing hold of the prone woman, she turned her gently over onto her back and began to fan her flushed face. "Otto, what the hell happened?"

"I don't know, Doc... she just seemed to... well, faint."

"Mel... come on... what's wrong, baby?" Janice said and loosened the top three buttons on Mel's shirt to reduce the restraints on her chest. Picking up Mel's glasses that had fallen off when she had collapsed, Janice quickly checked the frame and the lenses for damage, but saw to her great relief that both were unharmed.

A nasty cackle from Johnny only added to the tension, and Janice spun around and shot him such a murderous look that it could've stopped a raging bull - unfortunately, Johnny didn't get the message.

"Ohhh... what's wrong, baby," he mocked, speaking in a high-pitched voice. "Ohhh... wake up, baby. Don't you leave me!"

Otto leaned down and thumped his index finger down onto Johnny's chest. "Shut up, you fool! You'll only make it worse for yourself."

Cackling again, Johnny began to struggle against Otto's grip, but the tall man proved to be too strong for him. Unseen by any of his captors, Johnny's right hand inched closer and closer to his hardwood cane, and soon, he had it in an ideal striking position.

Mel suddenly began to stir, and with a heartfelt moan, she opened her eyes and glanced around the armored car, clearly in a very confused state. "J-Jan...?"

Breathing a sigh of relief, Janice leaned down to pull Mel into a warm embrace. "Thank God. I'm here, baby... welcome back," she said, stroking her beautiful partner's silky-smooth cheek.

"I can't see anything... it's all just a blur...! M-my... my glasses...?"

"I have them right here, baby. Here ya go," Janice said and pushed the black frame up the bridge of Mel's nose.

"Oh... thank you. Where are we?" Mel said, looking around the car.

"What do you mean 'where are we'...? We're in the Orient Express where we've been for the last few days," Janice said, frowning her brow.

"I... was just... I was... somewhere else. Just now... A meadow... A c-campfire..."

"Huh? Mel, we have to talk about that later. Come on, can you sit up?" Janice said and put her hands under Mel's arms.

"Y-yes."

"All right, heave-ho!"

Without much trouble, Janice was able to move Mel over to lean against the wall of the car. Before she got up to deal with Johnny, she caressed the tall woman's cheek again and placed a sweet, little kiss on her lips.

Smiling, Mel returned the favor, and then leaned back against the wall to try to come up with a logical, scientific explanation as to why she had just found herself sitting at a campfire at dusk, wearing strange clothes and looking at a baby-faced, long-haired Janice who had been writing on a scroll with a quill.

"And now it's your turn, Johnny Dickless," Janice said and got up.

Trying to time his attack perfectly, Johnny took a firm grip on the pointy end of the cane, leaving the heavy T-shaped handle free to bash against something - or someone.

Just as Janice came closer to the prone villain, Otto turned his head to look at her.

Johnny knew that he'd been handed a golden opportunity to strike back, and he immediately swung the cane at Otto Dietrich's head - violently and mercilessly.

The heavy handle whacked against Otto's temple, sending him sprawling to the floor. He tried to get up, but his eyes rolled back in his head and he went down again, out cold.

Moving surprisingly quickly for a man with a limp and an injured hand, Johnny snatched his pistol that Otto had dropped and pointed it at Janice, literally aiming to finish her off with the first shot. Cackling manically, he squeezed the trigger with his middle finger.

Unfortunately for him, the handicap worsened his aim, and Janice was able to sidestep the bullet that zinged harmlessly past her - even if it was so close that she could feel the heat against her skin.

In a flash, Janice went in deep and began to wrestle with Johnny before he could shoot again. Fueling her strength with her anger, she was able to force him backwards, and once they had bumped into the safe, she grabbed the hand that held the gun and slammed it repeatedly into the metal door.

Howling in pain, Johnny began to whack his hardwood cane against Janice's shoulders, neck and the side of her face, and it wasn't long before he had regained the upper hand.

Knowing that she had to strike back in a hurry, Janice quickly pulled back and fired off a right hook to Johnny's jaw that made him grunt and slam backwards into the door of the safe. Getting a brief respite, Janice grabbed the cane with both hands and forced it out of his grasp. Once it was free, she threw it over to Mel who quickly picked it up.

"Why don't you give up, you moron! You're the only one left... Do the right thing for once and give up!" Janice said, holding her aching head. The last hit from the cane had given her a splitting headache and she was seeing stars in her right eye. "And drop that flippin' gun!" she continued, trying to kick the weapon out of Johnny's hand.

Johnny's shoulders slumped and he nodded forlornly. Sighing, he looked down to lure Janice close to him - it worked. When she moved in close to disarm him, he grabbed hold of her collar and whipped up his arm to make the barrel of the gun point directly at her heart.

'Oh God, Jan! Watch out!' Mel shouted from somewhere far away, but Janice didn't have time to thank her.

Flooded by a wave of self-preservation and blind hatred, she summoned all her strength, grabbed Johnny's arm with both hands and began to wrestle him around in the narrow confines.

The fighters were fairly evenly matched, but Janice's anger made her more determined and focused, and little by little, she was able to point Johnny's arm back towards his own chest.

Feeling her heart thundering away in her chest and her muscles burn from the exertion, Janice bared her teeth in a demonic sneer when she had finally turned the gun far enough around to take herself out of the firing line. "Give...! Up...!" she said hoarsely, standing so close to Johnny that she could see the red in his eyes.

"Never... bitch...!" Johnny said in a strained voice.

"Then go to hell!" Janice said and found the gun's trigger.

When she pulled it, everything happened at once - standing so close, they were both affected by the gun discharging, and the split second the bullet hit Johnny in the chest, a shower of blood splashed upwards and covered Janice's throat and cheeks in a myriad of little, red droplets. The front of her tan shirt was instantly blackened by residue from the gunpowder, and the gunsmoke made her eyes water.

Staggering backwards, she wiped some of the blood off her face with the back of her hand. Her ears were ringing, her throat was raw from inhaling the cordite and her head was hopping like a Saturday night on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Broadway, but at least she was alive.

The next thing she knew was that she was assaulted by a six-foot Southern Belle with loose, pitch black hair and arms of steel who grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her into a life-affirming hug.

"Oh, my Goodness, Jan! You had me so worried!" Mel whispered, reaching into her shirt pocket to find her lavender-laced handkerchief. Once she had it, she spit into it and began to clean Janice's face.

"Thanks, hon, but I had everything... under... control... Oof! What are you doing?" Janice said, grabbing Mel's arm and holding it away from her.

"You don't think I'll kiss you while you have someone else's blood all over your face, do you? Well, I won't!"

"By all means, keep wipin'," Janice said and let go of Mel's arm.

Once the adventurer's face was squeaky clean, Mel put the handkerchief back in her pocket and leaned down towards the shorter woman. Inches before their lips would have touched, the two women locked eyes and held each other's gaze for what seemed like an eternity, simply content with being alive and in each other's presence. Then Mel closed the distance between them and claimed Janice's lips in a full-bodied kiss that was so rich with love and admiration that it took both their breaths away.

When they separated, Mel smiled broadly and rested her forehead against Janice's. "I love you so much, Jan Covington," she whispered, looking deeply into Janice's husky green eyes.

"I love you, too, Mel Pappas. Ummm... it is Mel Pappas I have on the line, right? And it was Mel who kissed me just now... yeah?"

Chuckling, Mel kissed Janice's forehead and then pulled back. "Silly! Of course it's me. My guardian angel has gone back to her own time."

"One of these days, we're gonna have to look into how that's possible," Janice said and hooked her arm inside Mel's. The two women stepped over Johnny's dead body and moved over to Otto to see how he was doing.

"No, I don't think we should, actually."

"No?"

"No. Some things are better left unexplained."

"Very true," Janice said and crouched down next to Otto. "Hey, are you all right? You can come up for air now."

"Ugh... did anyone catch the number of that freight train...?" Otto Dietrich said as he sat up. Rubbing his sore head, he looked at the chaotic state of the armored car; there were trays and valuables everywhere, two dead bodies were littering the floor, one of the windows was broken and the rear door was flapping in the breeze. "I'll be damned if I'm gonna clean up this mess," he said and clambered to his feet.

Taking a deep breath, Janice sobered up and put her hands on Mel's sides. "Hon, go back to the restaurant car. I need to check up on Audrey... Sir Lawrence shot her."

"Good Lord Almighty, Jan! Why didn't you say so sooner! Let's get to her at once!" Mel said and stomped out of the armored car.

"Yeah, well, we were kinda busy!" Janice said and hurried after her partner.

By the time Mel and Janice reached the first sleeping car, the prone body on the carpet wasn't Audrey - Professor Wainwright had already treated her and had put her in the compartment she had shared with the Vice-Consul - but Richard Brennan.

Coming to a screeching halt, Janice stared wide-eyed at the movie star who was taking up most of the space in the narrow aisle. "What the... what happened here, Prof?"

Professor Wainwright came out of the compartment holding a blood pressure apparatus and a pack of clean bandages. Looking rather scandalized over Janice's tattered appearance and Mel's torn skirt, he waved a hand at the man on the floor. "Ah, he just fainted. I take it he couldn't stand to see blood. Big sissy."

"Me neither... I hate the sight of blood... but it's good for him that we don't have any press photographers onboard... that would have killed his career," Mel mumbled.

"How is Audrey?" she continued out loud as she tried to push past the Professor so she could peek into compartment number two. Even though the professor pushed her back, she was able to see that Audrey was sitting on the chair with a pained expression on her face.

"Oh! I beg your pardon! This is a makeshift hospital and not a smoking salon, Miss!" Charles Wainwright said and moved to block the door to the compartment. "The patient has lost quite a lot of blood, but I've treated the wounds to the best of my abilities. It is my professional opinion that she needs to go to a hospital as soon as possible."

"No shit," Janice grumbled.

"But why is she sitting up?" Mel said.

"Well, lying down would stress her wounds, Miss," the Professor said, speaking slowly as if trying to lecture a child.

"And sitting won't? Look at her face, Sir! Did you at least give her some medicine?"

"Well of course I did! Ahem! The chief purser has informed me that we shall arrive in Munich in less than an hour, and I believe the patient should be able to survive that long," the Professor continued, stroking his vandyke beard.

Taking a sharp breath, Mel frantically adjusted her glasses and attempted another push past the Professor. "Sir! You are not helping the situation at all with such predictions of doom and gloom!"

"Good day, Miss," the Professor said, hurried into the compartment and closed the door behind him. At the very last second, Audrey looked up and sent Mel a pained - but relieved - smile.

"Why, I've never...!" Mel said and let out an impressive huff.

"That old fart..." Janice grumbled. "Ah, forget 'im. Let's go pack up, baby. I have a strong suspicion the police will want to have a word with us once we reach Munich."

Fifteen minutes later down in their own compartment, Janice bumped her forehead against the closet door and let out a long, slow sigh.

"I'm sorry, Jan... did you say that you can't find the emerald...? The huge emerald...? Cecrops' huge, green emerald that was so big that you couldn't hold it in one hand...?" Mel said and almost fell down on the bench seat - the result of her legs suddenly being so weak she could hardly stand up.

"Uh-huh."

"Oh... but what's happ-"

"Someone has taken it. Stolen it...!"

"But... didn't we kill all the villains...? I'm quite sure we did, dear," Mel said and used a trembling hand to wipe her forehead.

"We must have missed one... Dammit, Mel! I didn't need this right now!" Janice said and threw her hands in the air. "Audrey took a bullet for that damn piece of... and you were held at gunpoint... four people have died because of it... oh, F-"

Knock, knock

"Am I interrupting anything?" Maria Ford said, knocking on the doorframe.

The author had changed back into the dark blue, pinstriped Christian Dior New Look suit she had been in when Mel and Janice had first seen her, and even Mel had to admit that she was looking very fine indeed.

"Hello, Maria... uh, no, come right in," Mel said and got up from the bench seat. Smoothing down her ruined skirt, she went over to the author and pulled her into a small hug.

"I just wanted to say thank you for saving my bacon, Janice. You too, of course, Mel. I still don't get what happened to your accent, though..." Maria said and scrunched up her face.

Licking her lips, Mel looked at Janice for guidance but discovered that the adventurer was too upset over losing the emerald to answer, so she decided to come up with a little white lie on her own. "Well, uh, you see, Maria... sometimes when I'm really afraid, my voice changes. It has ever since I was a little girl. No one can tell me the reason why, actually."

"Oh... all right. Well, anyway, I just came to say thanks, and... I hope you don't mind, Mel...?" Maria said and went over to Janice.

Quickly catching on, Mel cleared her throat and nodded her approval. "Uh, no. As long as it's a one-time thing."

"Oh, don't worry, it is," Maria said and placed a little peck on Janice's cheek, right on the corner of her mouth. "Thanks," she whispered, kissing Janice on the other cheek as well.

Grinning, Janice looked up at the pretty author. "You're welcome, Maria. Hey, I'm really popular here, huh?"

Maria put her hands in her jacket pocket and took a few steps back to be at a safe distance. "You definitely are, Doctor. While we're on that subject, how is Audrey doing?"

"Well, she's in a lot of pain, but apparently hanging on. That darned Professor wouldn't let us see her!" Mel said, once again huffing angrily over Charles Wainwright's behavior.

"I hope she pulls through, she's a sweet little gal. All right, I got what I came for," Maria said, pulling her hands out of her pockets. "Well, nearly. Here's a little sample of the kind of books I've been writing for the last few years. I suggest you don't read it until you get home. It's not exactly safe to read at work... or on the Orient Express," she continued, shooting both Mel and Janice a saucy wink.

The book was in a plain brown wrapper, but a quick leaf-through left Mel's cheeks burning fire-engine red. "Oh, I... we... sounds like a good idea. Thank you very much. We really appreciate it. Maria, it has been a real pleasure knowing you these last few days."

"You, too, actually, all things considering. See ya, gals," Maria said and spun around on her heel.

"Hi de ho, Maria," Janice said, eager to take a peek at the book.

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As the train entered Munich's central station, Mel had her head out of the window like she'd had when they visited Vienna. While the train rumbled over the many switches - once again producing the *gada-gong*, *gada-gong* sound that had etched itself into Mel's brain by now - she could see several medical teams, military officers from the US Occupational Forces, several men in dark suits carrying briefcases and finally a whole contingent of German police officers waiting for them on the platform.

"Oh, dear, I see a lot of explaining in our future. The platform is swarming with official-looking people, Jan."

"Mmmm. Panagis must have wired ahead when we briefly stopped half an hour ago."

Sighing, Mel closed the window and returned to Janice who was sitting on the bench seat, fully dressed in her boots and leather jacket. The adventurer had her beloved, indispensable fedora pulled down to cover her face that was still contorted in a deep, dark frown - the result of losing the emerald.

"Darling...?"

"Mmmm, yeah?" Janice said through the hat.

"How do we always get mixed up in these things?" Mel said and took Janice's hand.

Sitting up straight, Janice shrugged and pushed the fedora back on her head. "I don't know, baby. I haven't got the foggiest."

Chuckling, Mel reached up and moved the fedora forward so it sat correctly on Janice's head.

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EPILOGUE

Three days later.

Feeling in a much better mood from being on home soil at last, Mel and Janice strode across the pristine floor of the San Francisco Municipal Airport's passenger terminal to get to the waiting taxi cabs. Behind

them, no less than two Skycaps were pushing luggage carts heavily laden with their large suitcases and the duffel bag.

Just as they walked past the circular information stand in the center of the hall, one of the airport employees took a telephone-like receiver and keyed the P.A. system, prompting a *bing-bong* from the speakers.

'Urgent message for Doctor J. Covington. There's an urgent message waiting for Doctor J. Covington arriving on PanAmerican Flight 423. Please come to the information stand in the Passenger Terminal for your urgent message, Doctor Covington,' the employee said.

Before the message had even been relayed in full, Janice came to a dead stop and turned around to look at the information stand. "Oh, what now? I just wanna go home and sulk for a month..."

"You better take it, dear, it might be important. Oh... it could be news on Audrey," Mel said and covered her lips with a hand.

"Yeah, you're right," Janice said and walked over to the information stand. "Hiya, ladies, I'm Doctor Covington. What's up?"

A good-looking, twenty-something blonde wearing the airport's uniform - a royal blue skirt and jacket over a white shirt, and finally a side cap sitting crooked on her golden-blonde hair - stared rather wide-eyed at Janice and her quaint fatigues, but soon snapped out of it.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Covington. There's an urgent message for you. Here it is," the airport employee said and handed Janice a folded-up note.

When Janice unfolded it, she furrowed her brow when she realized that it simply said, *'Janice, come to the cluster of payphones in the exit terminal, the one beneath the huge clock on the wall. I have something for you. Otto Dietrich.'*

Looking down the other end of the terminal, Janice quickly spotted the cluster of phones - and a tall man in a dark suit standing at the other side of it.

"Otto Dietrich... that son of a bitch..." she grumbled, stuffing the note in her pocket. "Uh... thanks a bunch, sweetcheeks," she said to the airport employee and stomped over to Mel to fill her in on the latest development.

Three minutes later, Janice leaned against one of the payphones, feeling in a decidedly less cheery mood than she had been in only minutes before.

"Hi de ho, Otto. How the hell did you know where we were?" she said to the man standing on the far side of the cluster of phones.

"Hello, Janice. Oh, you'd be surprised to know how much certain people will sing when you offer them a few hundred bucks. Why don't you pick up the receiver...? We want this to look real."

Grumbling, Janice did as told and held it to her ear. "You stole my emerald, you miserable..."

"Yes, I did, but it was the worst mistake of my life. You can have it back."

"... what? Why?"

"I've had it for three and a half days and I've hardly slept at all in that time! I keep havin' these insanely weird dreams... colorful landscapes... people in strange clothes... not exactly nightmares, but still too weird for the likes of me!"

"Oh... uh..."

"And it sings to me!"

"It what?"

"It sings to me! No, I haven't been drinking, Doc. That damn emerald really does sing to me. Every time I take it out of the piece of cloth I have it wrapped in, my head is filled with some kind of asinine song! I've had all I can take. I want out. It's all yours, Doc. I'm leaving it on top of the payphone cluster. Goodbye."

"But, Otto... wait!" Janice said and spun around. True to his word, Otto was already a half a dozen yards away and looking like he wouldn't be coming back in a hurry. "Oh, for cryin' out loud... I can't reach up there!" Janice growled, looking at a small bundle on top of the cluster. Letting out a throaty grunt, she put the receiver back on the phone.

"Mel...! Mel, get over here!" Janice said, waving her arms to try to catch Mel's attention. When it didn't work, she put two fingers in her mouth and let out a sharp, loud whistle that made everyone in the terminal stop and stare at her, Mel included.

"Yes that's right, good people, I whistled... now go back to your own stuff," Janice said under her breath as she felt a hundred and one eyes staring at her.

Informing the Skycaps that they should wait for her, Mel walked back to the telephone cluster, tripping along in her high heels and her recently-stitched skirt.

"I'm sure everyone and his dog heard that whistle, dear," she said quietly once she reached Janice. "What is it? Was it news on Audrey?"

"No, it wasn't. It was news on the emerald."

"Oh...?"

Moving away from the payphones, Janice pointed upwards to show Mel the small bundle. "It's right up there, but I can't reach the damn thing."

"What do you mean it's right up there? How can it be right up there...?" Mel said and narrowed her eyes.

"Because Otto was here and gave it back to us. He claimed that it sang to him and that it gave him weird dreams."

"Oh... how peculiar... and fascinating. Remember when we were outside the cliff formations close to Kalithea? Remember that we felt something trying to reach out to us...? Maybe it wasn't the scrolls at all, but the emerald?" Mel said, adjusting her glasses in a rather excited fashion.

Janice opened her mouth to speak, but at first, she couldn't get a sound across her lips. "Well, I, uh... could be, baby. Your theories are as good as mine... except I don't have any. Now will you please reach up and grab that rock before it goes bye-bye for a second time?"

Doing as asked, Mel easily took the bundle containing the priceless gemstone and held it in her hand. Looking left and right, she carefully moved the cloth aside to see if it really was Cecrops' emerald - it was.

"Okay... now that we have it, what are we gonna do with it?" Janice said, pushing her fedora back on her head.

"Give it to the museums like we said we would. But I'd really like to work on the new scrolls first. Maybe one of them will give us a few pointers on the gem's strange behavior."

Taking Mel by the elbow, Janice turned them around and began to shuffle back to their luggage. "That's an awfully big maybe, honey."

"True, but I won't know for certain until I start working on them. Oh, but before we get to that, I think we should try to get in touch with the hospital in Munich. Audrey was always so kind to us... and, well, I feel like a heel for leaving her behind like that."

"I agree, hon. It shouldn't be too hard. Hey, maybe we could invite her over for Christmas or something...?"

"I'd like that very much, Jan. Come on... it's time for us to go home. You know how excited I get when I have some new material to work on," Mel said, gently bumping into Janice's shoulder.

"Well, yeah I- excited?"

"Very excited," Mel purred huskily. Leaning in, she sent her lover a wink that held a strong promise of spending countless hours together in that most ancient of activities.

Breaking out into a wide grin, Janice nodded vigorously and waved her free arm at the Skycaps to get them on the move.

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THE END.