



ALSO BY LINDA ANDREWS

Ghost of a Chance
The Christmas Village
Some Enchanted Autumn
A Knight's Wish



DANCING IN THE KITCHEN



LINDA ANDREWS

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DANCING IN THE KITCHEN

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To:

My family for their tremendous support. My critique partner for keeping me on track. And my husband for keeping me.

CHAPTER ONE

A funerary pallor clung to the aged brick facade of the Fine Arts Building. Despite the bright sunshine and scorching temperatures, students shivered as they hustled through the shadow cast by the Federalist-style building.

Death lived here.

Or more specifically, a fist-sized onyx that held death captive. It was the job of Alistair Eugene Holmes, Guardian of the Living Five, to retrieve the stone before someone unleashed a plague or worse upon this world. It should have been an easy task, a mere five minutes of his time—but then he had detected the subtle shift in the Etherium.

Someone had traveled through time and space to retrieve the powerful gem.

Only one sorcerer was desperate enough to risk being torn apart by the tidal rifts in the Etherium to travel nine hundred years into the future—Perlam. The twelfth-century magician would stop at nothing to eliminate Alistair and the Knights of the Living Five from history.

Straightening his shoulders, Alistair climbed the flagstone steps of the Fine Arts Building. His left hand closed around the substitute black onyx bulging in the pocket of his tan Dockers. The gloom pervading the building meant he had arrived before Perlam. Unless...

Unless the death stone had been planted in the museum as a



trap to draw him into the open. Finding the Living Five's Guardian was key to locating the Knights. A simple plan, really. One where everyone lost but the sorcerer and his depraved master.

Alistair quickly removed his hand from his pocket and smoothed his pants, casting a surreptitious glance at the meandering college students. Despite his being ten years older, his camouflage was more than adequate. He hitched the blue weighted backpack higher up his shoulder, tugged his baseball cap down then opened the door and stepped inside the building. A sharp right turn, six more steps and he pushed open the glass doors guarding the museum.

The odor of fresh paint assaulted his nostrils and stung his eyes. He nodded at the receptionist. She glanced up from her book and raked him from head to toe.

"Backpacks aren't allowed in the museum."

Alistair stopped. He had thought to use the pack as a shield from the camera. When he shrugged, the strap slid down his arm. He caught it in his hand. At least, he hadn't stowed the gemstone in one of the bag's pockets. Relinquishing the pack was a nuisance but not detrimental to his plan. He scanned the bare foyer. The only place to store the damn thing seemed to be in the cubicles behind her.

The woman offered him a wan smile and held out her hand. "I'll take it."

The backpack clunked against the wooden counter, earning him a flash of annoyance. She stuffed the book bag into a cubby-hole, removed a yellow tag from the top of the box and slapped it on the counter.

"Keep the claim slip. It's the only way I know which bag is yours."

Alistair cocked an eyebrow as he surveyed the empty rows of cubicles. Was she expecting a rush of patrons? No matter, he only needed five minutes to make the switch.

"Thanks," he muttered, dutifully tucking the plastic tag in his pocket. He tugged at his shirt, amused at how exposed he felt without the small piece of his disguise. Rolling his shoulders, he shook off his discomfort, turned and sauntered into the museum.



The gallery was deserted. Alistair spared a small smile. Just as he had planned. He glanced over his shoulder. The woman at the entrance looked up from her book. He turned back. He had to steal the Death Stone without using his magic. His racing heart pumped adrenaline through his body. His skin tingled, stretching over his bones.

“Steady, old boy.” Alistair tightened his control. Confidence was one thing; over-confidence could be disastrous. He surveyed the gallery. A flaccid scarlet cord dangled from a silver pole. Its metal head rested in the hallway, pointing the way to the Onyx.

Anticipation coiled within him, bunching his muscles. He shook them loose and began his stroll.

He paused in front of a display case full of twisted glassware, passed another twelve seconds admiring a stained glass lamp and circled a mannequin dressed in a sequined gown. As he picked his way around the room, he timed the camera. Its thirty-seven-second sweeps allowed him plenty of time to slip away. He ambled closer to the camera’s blind spot, knowing the last picture taken would be of him contemplating the nuances of Dadaist art.

The camera moved its watchful eye off him. Alistair consulted his watch. Four minutes and thirty-seven seconds. Not bad. He slipped through the archway.

His sneaker-clad feet glided over the polished wooden planks. The snick-snick of his soles betrayed him. His lips curved at the impending victory. Light glinted off the case framed by the vaulted opening. The black Onyx brooded on a crimson nest. The stone’s power escaped its glass cage. Energy flooded the hall, zapping the hair on his skin. Agony, pain and death buffeted him. The keening of survivors and the moaning of the damned scratched his ears.

The knots of tension in his shoulders loosened. Not that he doubted his success, but Perlam must have seen the five-by-seven-inch picture of the Onyx displayed on the university’s web page. Of course, the opening wasn’t scheduled until Saturday, so anyone unfamiliar with the university might not know about the lax security. He glanced over his shoulder.

As for the university...



His conscience tweaked his resolve. Technically, he was stealing the Death Stone; they would have an onyx, just not the one they had found. Besides, anyone reckless enough to advertise the location of such a valuable stone with a single paltry camera for protection deserved to have it stolen. They were just damn lucky he was the first thief to arrive.

Alistair grimaced. The fools had no idea they housed death under glass. Rage bubbled under his skin. Ignorance couldn't excuse carelessness. The idiotic archeologist who had found the stone actually believed it to be an ancient pagan artifact. How had the imbecile explained the cross-shaped flaw inside the stone? Accident?

Singing drifted out of the room to his left. Awareness prickled Alistair's skin. Was the sorcerer waiting for him? The thrill of a challenge roared in his ears. He shook his head to clear it. Perlam wouldn't be singing.

He halted by the archway and peeked inside. A woman perched on the second rung of a stepladder. Red, black and white paint streaked her faded jeans and oversized man's shirt. The tip of her ponytail hung out of the speckled kerchief covering her head. Her paint-splattered sneakers tapped to a beat different than her song. Her voice rose but cracked before hitting the next note.

Alistair felt something inside him unfurl at her joy. His toes wiggled in his shoes. He smiled at the passion filling the off-key singing. Her vanilla scent teased his nose. He whispered a soft spell, sending her the gift of perfect pitch.

His offering was returned, hitting him in the voicebox and strangling any words he might have uttered. Magic. The woman was surrounded by a magical shield. Alistair looked closer. White light shimmered around her. The energy would be more focused if she was a magician. So, what was she? A dabbler in the occult, casting harmless spells and wearing crystals? Or was she something more sinister?

He shook his head. Thinking of Perlam had obviously affected his judgment. The only evil here lurked in the dark forces spilling from the Onyx. He turned to continue his mission but stilled when she moved. Waves of satisfaction rolled off her as she stretched.



The hand holding the paintbrush dropped to scratch her head. Red smudged the fabric of her scarf. The bristles left a fine trail in their wake as she moved her hand forward.

She stepped back, viewing her sign with its crimson *Madness* and black *Death*. The wooden paint paddle snapped underneath her heel. Startled, she looked down, laughed then turned back to her work. A faint click-click-click floated to him.

Alistair shook his head. No doubt she tapped the wooden handle against her teeth as she appraised the forbidding words. He considered the sign. The letters looked crisp, straight, but then, he didn't have her vantage point.

She pitched the brush into a jar filled with paint cleaner and wiped her hands on her shirttail. Alistair blinked, breaking the hold she had over him. Another badly executed song filled the air. She should have accepted his gift. He shrugged and turned to continue his mission.

The bill of his hat flattened against his face. His reaction to her had been unusual but certainly not enough to cause him to run into a walls. He shoved his cap aside and peered at columns of sinew straining against a starched collar.

"You're not allowed back here, sir." Human-made thunder rumbled down the hall.

Startled, Alistair stepped back as he surveyed the mountain of muscle blocking his path. The barrier was at least six inches taller than his own modest five-foot, eleven-inch frame. The name tag glistening on his shirt proclaimed the mass of flesh to be MELVIN STREET.

Melvin crossed his arms and flexed first one pectoral than the other. "The exhibit doesn't open until Monday. You will have to come back then."

"Y-Yes, of course." Alistair tried to peer around him, but the man mirrored his movements, blocking his view. Gritting his teeth, Alistair retreated to the open gallery and feigned interest in a sculpture made of broken vinyl records. Melvin leaned against the archway.

Alistair felt the over-protective guard's eye every time he moved. Swearing under his breath, he rammed his hands in his



pockets. The sharp edges of the replacement onyx bit into his palm. He could command time and the elements, and yet a paltry heap of flesh stopped him from completing a simple theft.

He moved on to a sculpture made from shiny cans. His reflection twisted and bent. Twenty pairs of eyes accused him.

Think, Alistair, think. His mind blanked, and he searched the steel sculpture for inspiration. A man and woman strolled into the room, snagging his attention. The woman's floral-print dress swayed around her shapely thighs. Her platinum hair cascaded down her exposed shoulder blades. Her peach-tinted lips parted as she gazed admiringly at the man by her side.

Alistair narrowed his eyes as he inspected her companion. Dr. Cooper Dixon, the archeologist who had found the stone. Alistair glared at him. No wonder the man didn't recognize the true nature of the stone. Dressed like that, the man was a poor caricature of a Hollywood stereotype. No doubt he thought the Onyx a pretty bauble suitable only for women's jewelry.

Coughing on his snort of disgust, Alistair turned away from the sight and whacked his toe against another sculpture. Pain zipped up his shin. A curse exploded on his tongue. Who was the moron that set such a massive piece on the floor so anyone could trip over it? He forced himself to be silent. He hobbled to a chair and admired a blue dot smeared on a red canvas while surreptitiously watching the newcomers.

He forced his jaw to relax as the pair disappeared into the inner sanctum. How had such a buffoon unearthed the Death Stone in the first place? It was supposed to be safely hidden in the Twelfth Century. Coincidence? Not bloody likely. The stone had surfaced for a specific reason—Gerand. The name slithered across his musings. The fanatical warlord had been defeated centuries ago, but with the sorcerer Perlam among his minions...

Alistair rubbed his throbbing toe. He could speculate all he wanted once he had the stone. He had been on the verge of an epiphany before those two distracted him.

That's it—a distraction. He stood up and moseyed around the lifesized rock sculpture to peek at the security guard. The mountain's attention was riveted on the woman's swishing skirt. Alis-



tair's cough covered his bark of laughter. Women! If the flesh was weak then Melvin Street should be helpless. The guard speared him with a look. All things being relative, that is.

Closing his eyes, he rocked back on his heels. In his mind's eye, he scoured the campus for the perfect distraction. He found her right outside the Fine Arts Building. Moments after the incantation left his lips, the pretty coed turned on her heel and raced up the steps of the museum. She stood hopping from foot to foot, arguing with the woman at the front desk. Their conversation resounded in the gallery. He grinned as Melvin leaned towards the foyer, shamelessly eavesdropping on the conversation.

"I tell you someone is following me. If you could just call security and have someone escort me to my car..."

Counting patiently, he fingered the edges of the stone column before him. At ten, the guard threw one last harsh look at him then lumbered out of the gallery and into the foyer.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Melvin rumbled.

Alistair slipped under the archway and inched down the hallway. Disquiet muffled his exhilaration. His canvas shoes dragged as if weighted with cinderblocks.

Something was wrong. The keening was faint; the screams gone. Had someone accidentally invoked the power of the death-wielding Onyx? He dismissed the idea as soon as it occurred to him. The stone's energy seemed weaker than before, not stronger.

Dr. Dixon, his companion and the bewitching painter were framed by the archway, directly in front of the stone. Alistair eased into the Death-and-Madness room. Damn! Now, he had no choice. To get the stone, he would have to cast a spell.

He was wracking his brain for an appropriate Temporal Suspension Spell when the threesome shifted out of sight. Stealing down the hall, he arrived in time to watch them march through a door marked EMPLOYEE'S ONLY. Finally, something in his favor. He slipped into the room.

The Onyx nestled in its bed of crushed red velvet. The glass dome surrounding it was intact, but the stone seemed different. Alistair closed his eyes, bracing himself for its deadly power. Nothing happened. He concentrated harder.



This was not the right onyx.

His eyes flew open. A coil of black smoke rose from the stone. Born of the darker powers, it coalesced into a snake. The cobra's hissing taunt reeked of brimstone.

A million deaths or merely twelve
A wizard shall decide the final toll
With the power of the Death Stone,
The past shall forge a new future
On the bones of the old.

Hurling swear words in five different languages at the smoky messenger, Alistair stormed out of the building. He should have just zapped the thing out of there and damn the consequences. He was a wizard, not some hack sorcerer, and could easily have covered his tracks. Yanking on his short hair, he strode from the room. In a day full of black clouds, God had given him a gray lining.

One of those three had stolen the Onyx. One of those three was a sorcerer in league with Gerand.



Hannah Jessup rose to her feet and reached for the ceiling. Vertebra popped as she stretched. Shaggy bangs draped over her eyes, tangling with her lashes. She blew them away then tucked the annoying strands back into her kerchief. Just a little longer, and she'd be able to confine the unruly locks in a ponytail and from there...

From there, she would have an elegant coiffure to go with her new image. A tickle wiggled at the base of her scalp. She scratched her head, wondering why she always felt itchy when she painted.

The better to get paint on you, my dear.

She smiled. It was a long-standing joke among the old-timers at the museum that if Assistant Curator Hannah Jessup was within ten feet of paint or ink, she would have some on her within seconds. Of course, she didn't go out of her way to appear so messy, it just sort of happened. But really—if she had to attract some-



thing, why did it have to be paint?

Its pungent fumes stung her nose, raked the moisture from the back of her throat and burned her eyes. She'd forgotten her fan again. Who knew that painting the sign would cause such a large build-up of fumes in the small room? She pinched her nose then caught sight of her hands. Black, crimson and white paint coated her skin. While the red paint bled onto her skin with her movements the other two cracked.

Hannah grimaced, reached for the red paint can's lid then thumped it in place. It really was ironic. Here she was covered in paint, and the silver top was practically spotless. She peered at her distorted reflection. Black smudged the skin under her eyes, coated the lobes of her ears, making her look like an NFL player with earrings. White speckled her cheeks and cut a cleft in her chin. Red slashed her cheeks.

That reflection didn't belong to the soon-to-be fiancée of the university's most prestigious professor. No, it belonged to a misfit, or better yet...

She touched the wet paintbrush to her nose. A clown. Now all she needed was the rest of the circus. Hannah tapped the end of the brush against her lip. Maybe she should add a big grin. Nah, Melvin would appreciate her facepaint. So would her boss, Bianca Lawrence. Heck, she might even get a chuckle out of the new receptionist. What was her name? Mary? Jane? Hannah shrugged. She hadn't been hired for her memory but her talent. Or for her willingness to do a lot of work for very little pay.

Not that she hated her job. On the contrary, she loved it, especially this part, when all the painting was finished and the room stood, simply waiting. It was the same feeling she'd gotten as a child after the tree was decorated but before the presents were placed underneath, before she had to count them to make sure she hadn't been slighted. The same feeling as when she stood at the top of a mountain before skiing down. It was the exhilaration of potential. The conjuring of spectacular events to come before reality intruded. She hugged herself.

This was why she stayed, why she endured the tedium of the months between new exhibits. Well, maybe not the only reason.



The world wasn't exactly chockfull of opportunities for an English lit major. And, of course, there were the perks. Hannah sighed a smile as she stepped back to survey her work.

Snap!

Her skin jumped, hauling her bones an inch or so in the air. Another wooden stirrer sacrificed to her carelessness. How many did that make this exhibit? Twelve or thirteen? No matter, they were free with each can of ecologically friendly latex paint. Besides, she could always ask for a couple extra on her next visit to the paint store. As for the sign...

Tapping the wooden brush handle against her teeth, she searched the sign for wisps of paint blurring the crisp letters.

"Not bad, if I do say so myself." Her low words hummed in the room. She pitched her paintbrush into the jar of water. Liquid sloshed over the lip and dotted the dropcloth. Hannah ignored it and wiped her hands on the tail of her shirt.

"I just hope Coop likes it." She reached to touch the dry black letters. Dr. Cooper Dixon, the university's answer to Indiana Jones. Warmth flooded her body. Coop. She had fallen in love with him the first time she'd laid eyes on him. Frustration rode a breath of air out of her body. She and a hundred other adoring female students.

Not that he didn't have his share of male students in his coterie. Lean and muscled, he didn't walk into a room, he swaggered. His uniform rarely changed from the multi-pocketed shorts holding the tools of his trade and the T-shirt stretched taut across his broad shoulders. All that was missing from his swashbuckling attire was a whip fastened to his hip and a hat tilted rakishly over his brilliant blue eyes.

But she was different. She knew the man beneath the image. Hannah set the jar of water on her cart and began folding the dropcloth. She had used her unencumbered time from her museum duties to help him out. Not that she slacked her responsibilities, but really, why should she waste hours locked in her office when someone in the department needed help? When *he* needed help. It wasn't as if she were making off with a million-dollar painting. The time spent with Coop was a perk.



A big and important perk.

She chucked the dropcloth onto the cart. Oh, she knew some people considered her rather pathetic, savoring any compliment he tossed her way. Their pity rolled off her like water. They were just jealous. She had seen their faces when he'd shown up at the Christmas party in a suit and tie, noted their envy when he handed her a bouquet of roses. Okay, so maybe he also handed her a folder containing scraps of notes, but that was a sign of his thoughtfulness. The notes had been a cover to prevent any awkwardness between herself and the other single female staff.

Hannah picked at the paint coating her hands. He loved her. She knew he did. Coop was just used to moving slowly, methodically. His artifacts sat buried in the dirt for centuries, waiting patiently for him to dig them up. She just wished he'd speed up their courtship. Her thirtieth birthday was fast approaching.

She had tried to hasten his wooing—inviting him to dinner, introducing him to her parents. Once a week she'd even forsaken her comfy jeans and T-shirts to squeeze into a dress. Her attempt to mold herself into the perfect professor's wife was about to bear fruit.

After scanning the room for stray painting supplies, she looked at her watch. Even if she positioned the pedestals now, she would still have plenty of time to prepare for their dinner tonight. Surveying her stained clothes, she was glad his symposium wouldn't end until then. She would hate for him to see her like this.

Pushing the cart out of the room, she smiled. Coop had said he had something important to ask her. Something that would affect her position at the university. Would he ask her to marry him tonight? Dr. and Mrs. Cooper Dixon. Mrs. Cooper Dixon. Mrs. Hannah Dixon. She liked the sound of that. Wouldn't her parents be surprised? And as for her brothers and sister—imagine a lifetime free of her meddling family fixing her up with loser acquaintances. No more pitying looks at family get-togethers. She danced a couple of steps. At last, she would be free.

"There she is."

Hannah froze. *Please, God, don't let it be him.* Dread weighted her limbs as she turned.



Cooper Dixon's long legs ate up the distance between them. Hannah slouched and hung her head, wishing she could yank the tarp off the cart and hide. She straightened her shoulders. Coop had seen her looking worse; besides, all that mattered was that he was back. She smiled, beaming her happiness at his return. Her cheeks ached holding the greeting. Yet another deviation from her plans. But Coop's early return wasn't nearly as upsetting as the beautiful escort attached to his side.

The woman's long blond hair swayed in tandem with her slim hips. Hannah searched for black roots in the platinum locks. Copper tainted her mouth as she bit the inside of her jaw. Great. The woman was a natural blond. Can she eat an entire three-pound box of chocolates without gaining an ounce, too? Hannah stumbled against the cart. It wasn't fair. With her understated make-up, breezy ultra-feminine dress and trim frame, the woman was everything a professor's wife should be. Everything that Hannah wasn't.

"Despite her clownish appearance, Hannah is my right arm." Cooper tapped Hannah's red nose. Scarlet paint tattooed the pad of his index finger. He winked at her then turned to the woman at his side. "If I were in a different field, I would have to study the forces that attract paint and ink to Hannah. If you need anything, she can get it for you."

The woman nudged his side and jerked her head toward Hannah.

"Oh. Yes. Introductions. Olivia Palmer, I would like you to meet Hannah Jessup. Hannah, this is Olivia." Coop's dimpled smile encompassed both women.

"Nice to meet you, Hannah. Cooper has told me so much about you." To Hannah's surprise, the immaculate Olivia offered her hand and smiled when Hannah's paint-crusting one closed around it.

Hannah groaned. Why did Olivia have to be nice? Why couldn't she be petty and shallow? Guilt swamped her, drowning her earlier uncharitable thoughts. Of course, she wouldn't be so jealous if the other woman hadn't slathered herself all over Coop like barbecue sauce on ribs.



“I hope you don’t mind my taking your place.”

“My place?” Hannah’s tight throat barely coughed up the words. Her heart pounded on her ribcage, disrupting her breathing.

“Yes. Your place as Cooper’s assistant on the dig this summer.” Olivia freed Coop long enough to pat Hannah’s fists. “I’m afraid I wheedled into his good graces and pledged to work for free. It’ll look great on my resumé to have an internship with Dr. Cooper Dixon.”

Hannah’s stomach cramped. Surely, such blatant flattery wouldn’t work on Coop. He had promised to take *her*. They were going to be married, weren’t they? She glanced at Coop. She couldn’t have read the signs wrong. He had said he had something important to ask her. She blinked, hoping to clear the confusion. Was this a joke? Was Olivia taking her place on the dig...and by his side?

She glared at him. Why didn’t he untangle himself from the leech? Why was he just standing there with his arms crossed and that goofy expression on his face. *Say something, dammit!* Her nails dug into her palms. Coop’s expression changed. His eyebrows collapsed into a V between his eyes. Balled fists hung from his stiff arms. Finally! Now he would tell Little Miss Olivia what he thought of her idea. *As if she could take my place.*

“Death and Madness. *Death and Madness!*” Cooper Dixon’s baritone boomed down the hall. Melvin peered through the archway. Hannah shook her head, and he turned back to the permanent exhibition. “Who the hell called my exhibit ‘Death and Madness?’”

He pointed to the letters. Righteous indignation shook his frame. Hannah backed into the cart. The wheels squeaked, drawing his attention. He pinned her with a glare.

“The board of trustees,” Hannah croaked, pointing to the stenciled lettering under the foot-high letters. “We managed to keep your original title, too.”

“Abandoned Occults of the Southwest,” Olivia read. “Not a bad title, but hardly one to garner as much attention.”

Hannah gritted her teeth when Olivia patted Coop’s arm. *She*



wanted to offer him comfort, to explain.

“Who wants that kind of attention?” he spat. “Years of scientific research reduced to a carnival sideshow designed to attract a bunch of blood-and-gore-loving freaks,” he complained petulantly. “I can’t believe you allowed them to do this, Hannah.”

Hannah opened her mouth, but no words came out. She was the reason his title was there at all.

“Don’t blame Hannah, Cooper. I’m sure she did her best. I know how these things work. The board was looking for a way to draw more attention. I’m sure they thought such a bloodthirsty title would help to raise more money for your next dig.”

Cooper turned to Olivia, and Hannah watched the tension drain from his shoulders.

“Come, you’d promised to help me find a hotel close to campus,” Olivia continued.

“A hotel? Yes.” Gone was the vehemence in Coop’s voice.

Hannah watched the exchange. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. Air dried her mouth as her jaw loosened from the shock. Frustration shredded her insides. She had to stop this.

“Coop. *Coop!*”

The couple halted next to the exhibit of the black onyx.

“May I talk to you?” Her eyes flashed to Olivia then focused on Coop’s tanned face. He didn’t seem to get the message. “*Alone.*”

Cooper glanced from Olivia to Hannah and back again. Olivia patted his arm before releasing him. She ran her finger over the glass case housing the onyx.

“Go ahead. I want a chance to look at your latest find. It’s quite beautiful.”

Hannah shivered. That black stone gave her the willies. Its inky depth harbored death and loss of hope, not beauty. Light didn’t even escape its ebony clutches.

She pulled Cooper’s arm and led him to the corner of the room. “Are you having dinner with me tonight?”

He looked at her. Was that annoyance lurking in his blue eyes? Hannah tramped down her irritation. He had better not be annoyed with her. Not after all the extra work she’d done on his behalf.

“Dinner?” He paused as if translating a foreign word. “Sorry, I



told Olivia I'd help her get settled. Can we make it for tomorrow?"

Hannah jerked her head. Since Olivia was taking her place on the dig, why not just take her place at dinner also.

"Sure. Tomorrow."

"Thanks, Hannah, I knew you'd understand." He clasped her hand in his warm grip and ran his thumb along the back. "I'm glad you're not upset about Olivia. I know you've wanted to work in the archeology department for a long time but..." He raked his black hair with his fingers. "Well, she's volunteering. And what with the budget cuts and all, not spending any money on your salary will mean I can stay an extra couple of weeks."

"Of course." Hannah inspected the seams between the planks. She'd have to clean the floor. *Can you sweep up pieces of a broken heart, or do you need a mop?* Was there a bigger fool anywhere in the world? Coop hadn't been about to ask her to marry him, he'd wanted her to join his dig.

"I'll make it up to you. I promise." He squeezed her hand then turned and escorted Olivia out of the room.

Hannah abandoned her cart and trudged behind them. She needed to get to her office before someone saw her tears.

CHAPTER TWO

Alistair observed his reflection in the mirror. Old, young. Blond hair, black hair. His nose flattened then thinned. His eyes tilted up then down. He shook off each altered image, leaving only his true self staring back at him. His enemy wore enchantment like a second skin. If Alistair disguised himself with magic, not only would the sorcerer see right through the façade but he would also have identified the Knights' guardian without exposing himself.

The painting woman's image flashed in his mind. Either Dixon, the blonde or the painter had to be working for Gerand.

And one of them had the Death Stone.

While it took all five fist-size stones assembled in a crown to give the wearer immortality, alone each stone could harness some element of nature. History was studded with dramatic social upheavals and shifts of power because someone had wielded the stones for their own purpose. The Emerald had shaken the world and buried a civilization's rival under mounds of earth. The Diamond had once whipped up such a gale an entire armada was wiped from the ocean. By using the Sapphire, a soldier had destroyed his enemies in a great flood, and a merchant had once unleashed the power of the Ruby to awaken a dormant volcano and bury his competition under hot ash and lava.

Yet all of those paled when compared with the power of the Onyx. Rage flooded Alistair. It was his job to protect humanity from the stones' fury. And he had failed.

"Gerand." He spat in the sink to rid himself of the foul taste.



The Knights of the Living Five had defeated Gerand in every skirmish and battle for the last eight months. One by one, they had stripped him of the stones so that Alistair could bury them somewhere in time and space.

Yet the Onyx had been found. Had the warlord decided that, since he had absolutely no chance of acquiring the immortality he coveted, everyone else should die, too?

“Is that why his sorcerer was sent into the future?”

Alistair’s reflection remained mute. He turned his head, examining his profile. There was no help for it. He would have to go as himself. Finished shaving, he adjusted his bow tie and checked one last time in the mirror. One professor with a Ph.D. in occult studies coming right up. He slipped on the corduroy blazer and tugged on the cuffs. His attention traveled from his right blue eye to his left green eye before dropping to the contact cases on the vanity. Blue, green or brown?

Cooper Dixon had blue eyes. Alistair’s hand hovered over the blue lenses before picking up the brown.

“If the off-key painter is Gerand’s witch then it doesn’t matter if she’s attracted to Dixon or not. And if she isn’t...”

He shoved the thought aside. He didn’t have time for romance. At least, not with the Onyx missing. Besides, he wasn’t competing with the doctor. He had a job to do. A job that required he be as inconspicuous as possible.

He set the colored lenses over his irises and blinked them in place. When he looked again, two matching chestnut eyes stared back. Silver-framed glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose completed his disguise.

Alistair jerked his briefcase off the bed and headed for the door. At the last second, he swerved into the bathroom and grabbed the blue contacts off the shelf.

“Just in case,” he assured his conscience before shoving the lenses inside his briefcase. The plastic box bounced off the replacement stone before coming to a rest against the side.



Bianca Lawrence bustled across the Department of Fine Art’s



lobby. Her gray linen skirt twisted with her ample hips and her sensible black shoes tapped out her footfalls. Wisps of black hair floated around her oval face. Alistair wondered if the director of the museum had run down the flights of stairs from her third-floor office.

Her hazel eyes raked him from head to toe as she rushed to his side. He ran his finger under his tight collar and smoothed his bow tie flat. What did this woman with the frank, assessing gaze see when she looked at him? Did she see an auditor...or an impostor?

With great effort of will, he stopped fidgeting under her inspection. He was used to deception, used to creating illusions to get people to act the way he wanted, do what he wanted. He eased his white-knuckled grip on his briefcase. But this time was different. This time, he appeared as himself.

He took a deep, steadying breath. He preferred a magical mask when he deceived people. It provided distance. Detachment. Alistair didn't lie, someone else did. As a rule, the true manifestation of Alistair had always been honest.

Now, for the greater good, he had broken his rule. How many others would he break before this was over?

The director arrived, smiling and slightly out of breath, at his side.

"Mrs. Lawrence, I presume."

She slipped her smooth, plump hand into his and placed her other on top. "Dr. Holmes, we are honored by the arrival of a representative of the Papier Foundation."

"I can assure you, the honor is mine." Alistair raised her hand and kissed it. "Please, call me Alistair. I understand things are more casual in America."

A blush coated Mrs. Lawrence's cheeks as she preened under his attention. "Oh, thank you...Alistair. And you must call me Bianca. What a delightful accent. Is it British?"

Alistair nodded, surprised that she detected his accent. Although he had lived the first seven years of his life in England, he grew up in America. A smile played about his lips. He would exaggerate his accent. It wasn't much of a disguise but at least it was something.



“Tell me, how did an Englishman come to work for a French philanthropic institute?”

Alistair swallowed. Damn. Mrs. Lawrence wasn't easily distracted by pretty words or courtly manners. Unless...

His thoughts flitted to other personas he had adopted. Men who were charming and irresistible. He shook off the feeling of inadequacy. The outside might have appeared different, but it was still him underneath. His wits, his intelligence and his charm. He leaned close to the woman's ear as if to impart privileged information.

“I attended the same school as Papier's son.” Straightening, he winked at her. “Of course, my doctorate in occult studies swayed the decision in my favor.”

“Did you say occult studies?” A smile blanketed Mrs. Lawrence's face. “Your timing couldn't be better. Our latest exhibit features items from ancient occults. We call it *Death and Madness*.” Bianca frowned. “Apparently, a majority of the artifacts were used for either funerary rites or spiritual rituals. Dr. Dixon, one of the university's finest archeologists, has put together this display of his more important finds.”

The black cellphone clutching her belt beeped shrilly. She yanked it off its perch and looked crossly at the readout. “Oh, dear. In the excitement of your unexpected arrival, I completely forgot about the college budget meeting. I really can't miss it.”

“I quite understand.” A pinch of annoyance flavored Alistair's tone. While the Guardian of the Living Five would relish the opportunity to snoop, a representative of the Papier Foundation would expect certain considerations, especially in light of the sizable grants presented to the anthropology department. Bianca would undoubtedly be suspicious if he was anything less than pompous and arrogant.

Frowning, he considered his watch. “I'm sure I can find something to occupy my time.”

Mrs. Lawrence's nostrils flared at his feigned displeasure. “Would you mind if I turn you over to Hannah, our assistant curator?” Her smile turned brittle as he deliberately stretched his lips into a cold smile. “She'll be able to show you quite a few artifacts



unearthed thanks to your generous support. In fact, most of the treasures in our latest show were unearthed on digs funded by the Papier Foundation.”

Alistair’s lips twitched. He nodded once to acknowledge her effort to minimize her unintentional insult. “I’m certain that would be acceptable if it wouldn’t interfere with her duties.”

She visibly swallowed his backhanded acceptance of her apology. “No, of course, it wouldn’t.” Her loud protest bordered on frantic.

He feigned interest in the glass display case dividing the lobby while checking to see if any sign of magic clung to his person.

“Hannah will be more than happy to give you a tour, answer any questions you may have and introduce you to Dr. Dixon. You’ve come all this way...”

“I leave the matter in your capable hands.” Alistair waved, trying to dispel her flattery, which clung like stale smoke. “Although I wouldn’t want to be a burden, what with the exhibit opening.”

“Nonsense. Hannah is terribly efficient. Why, I’m sure the exhibit is finished by now. You’ll be the first one to see it.”

He listened with half an ear while Bianca Lawrence sang Hannah’s praises, and surveyed the room with narrowed eyes as they entered the museum. Remnants of black magic coated the lights with gray film. Clouds of evil phantoms snaked around sculptures before darting across the floor and coiling around him. The thief had been here recently, an hour ago at most.

Oblivious to the dark forces hovering in the gallery, Mrs. Lawrence turned down the hallway leading to the new exhibit. “This way.”

Alistair shivered as an apparition tugged on his collar, intent on snaking down his back. He slid his finger inside his shirt and touched the crucifix hanging around his neck. With a few choice words, he banished the darkness back to Hell then dusted the glittering magic off his hands. Now Gerand’s sorcerer would know he or she was being hunted.

As he followed Mrs. Lawrence down the hall, the previous day repeated itself. The same woman stood in the small room, paintbrush in her hand. There, the sense of déjà vu crumbled. Her at-



tention today was focused not on the stark lettering but on the creamy pillars scattered around the room. A few dabs with her brush, and black scuffmarks disappeared.

He looked around with appreciation. The talented Hannah deserved Mrs. Lawrence's abundant praise—the design was really quite ingenious. The empty room had been transformed into crumbling ruins, the pillars stacked like adobe bricks on the floor. Interlocking pieces formed the remnants of corners. Large crude poles reached toward the ceiling. Dried ocotillo branches framed an ancient window. Red crepe paper floated, courtesy of a fan, from the circle of posts in the center of the room. Alistair smiled at the mock campfire.

“Hannah.”

The painter spun around at Bianca's hail. Alistair stepped back; his gut jiggling. His suspect's name was Hannah.

Her name clung to his tongue like a husky whisper on a lover's glistening flesh. Alistair shook off her enchantment, mentally distancing himself, and forced himself to observe her objectively.

She was appealing. Not a beauty in the conventional sense—her brown eyes were too large, her nose too wide and her bottom lip too full. Her scarlet T-shirt was two sizes too big, her faded jeans were stained and ripped at the knees. A pink sock poked through the hole in her blue canvas shoe. Her attraction lay in the vitality that sparkled in her eyes and lit up her smile.

Alistair shook himself. So much for an objective observation. Desire crept into his limbs. He clenched his muscles, hoping to drive the attraction back. Brute force failed, but cold logic froze the heated emotion. This woman could be his mortal enemy.

“Hannah Jessup, allow me to introduce Dr. Alistair Holmes. He's from the Papier Foundation. Alistair, this is Hannah.”

“Nice to meet you,” Hannah murmured to his tie as she offered her hand.

He grasped it before realizing she still held the paintbrush. The terra cotta paint felt clammy compared to her warm flesh. Electricity zapped his nervous system, thawing the chunks of desire frozen within his soul.

“Charmed.”



The woman was definitely a witch. She pulled out of his grasp. Adrift at the loss, Alistair stared at a reddish streak marring his palm.

“Oh. Oh, I am so *sorry*.” Hannah shook the paintbrush in agitation, speckling his charcoal slacks.

“You must forgive our Hannah.” Bianca snatched the paintbrush out of Hannah’s hand, slapped it onto the cart then wiped her hand on a crumpled paper towel. “She’s an excellent assistant curator, but after the first couple of times she painted, we learned to stay out of her way so we, too, wouldn’t become a part of her art work.” Irritation choked the director’s words.

“It was a pleasure to be part of Ms. Jessup’s canvas.” Alistair blinked. What had possessed him to defend the woman? Insidious thoughts lurked in the forbidden recesses of his mind. Good manners would allow him to worm his way into her good graces, allow him to complete his quest in a timely fashion. There was no other reason. He wouldn’t allow it.

“Yes, well. Hannah, please show Alistair anything he wishes to see while I attend the budget meeting.”

Hannah nodded meekly, but he suspected her polite smile masked irritation at being interrupted.

“I’ll leave you in good hands.” With one last look, Mrs. Lawrence bustled out of the room.

Alone at last. Alistair waded through his sputtering brain looking for a complete thought. An image of him, staring at her like a gawky teenager on his first date, formed in his mind.

“I really am sorry for painting your hand, Dr. Holmes.”

Her throaty voice wrapped around his loins and tugged. He fingered the button keeping his blazer closed. What was next in the humiliate Alistair category? Have the damn button pop off, splay open his coat and expose his evident desire?

He shook his hand in disgust. God, if this was Gerand’s sorceress then his battle was lost before it had even begun. No wonder lust was a sin.

A *deadly* sin.

The thought helped cage his wild desire.

“To be honest, I’m glad you did.” At her look of surprise, he



elaborated. “From her words of praise, I was afraid you might have wings and a halo. It’s nice to meet a fellow human.”

This time, Hannah’s smile warmed her frozen features. He had been wrong. She was beautiful. He blinked. The cage door slammed shut. He mentally turned the key.

“And please, call me Alistair—or Al, if you’d like.”

She blanched at his name. Confusion reigned momentarily before Alistair mentally smacked his forehead. He should have changed his name. Everyone associated with the Knights knew the Guardian of the Living Five adopted the name Alistair. Gerand and his sorcerer would surely recognize his title.

Mentally grabbing another fistful of dirt, he tried to pull himself out of the verbal quicksand.

“Of course, my friends call me Eugene.”

“Al or Eugene.” Hannah’s hoarse whisper filled his ears. Her complexion was pasty, and she gripped her stomach as if in pain.

“Are you feeling ill, Ms. Jessup?” He helped her to one of the square props and pushed her down. “Perhaps you should put your head between your knees. You appear ready to pass out.”

“I-I’ll be fine.” She stared at the wall, seeing something other than the white surface. “Al...Eugene...” A shudder ripped through her delicate frame. “Would you be offended if I call you Alistair? It sounds more...British.”

“If you wish.” He pressed his lips together. There was nothing wrong with his name. She made it sound as if he had committed a crime simply by being named Alistair Eugene Holmes.

“I’m sorry about that. I guess several days of inhaling paint fumes finally caught up with me.” She offered him a stiff smile.

“Perhaps I can escort you outside for a breath of fresh air.” He offered her his hand. She stared at it as if it were a snake ready to strike.

“That won’t be necessary.” She stood up quickly, barely missed whacking him on the chin, then strode to the archway. “Let’s get that paint off you.”

She had entered the room with the Onyx before he caught up with her. He could have sworn her pace increased in this room. Was it guilt or fear that caused her jerky movements? He caught



her elbow, slowing her exit.

“Is this the famous onyx I’ve heard about?”

Hannah pulled out of his grasp and stared at the stone.

“It really is quite beautiful.” He watched her reflection in the glass case.

“It’s evil,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around her waist.

“Evil?” Intrigued, he turned and looked at her.

“It absorbs all the light—not even a glimmer escapes it.”

“So, which is it?” Alistair removed his glasses and carefully polished them. She stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. Was she checking the color of his eyes? Did she know about Alistair’s unique eyes? “Death or madness?”

She opened her mouth to respond.

“God, I hate that name. You should have tried harder, Hannah.” Cooper Dixon strutted into the room. A sigh escaped Hannah’s lips, and her stiff facial muscles relaxed.

Alistair jammed his fists into his pockets. Maybe Hannah had stolen the Onyx for this oaf. Dixon couldn’t very well pretend that he hadn’t found the stone; there would have been too many witnesses. But he could have convinced someone who loved him to steal it for him. And who better than the assistant curator? Women did strange things for love, and the sale of such a sizable stone would fund Dixon’s dig for many years. What had it taken to get Hannah to make the switch?



“Dr. Cooper Dixon,” he introduced himself. “You must be quite an important guest to be able to see the exhibit before it’s finished. Hannah usually guards the door like there’s a horde of barbarians storming the gate. And if she doesn’t hold you off, that muscle-head of a guard always sees that the fair princess remains unmolested in her ivory tower.” Dixon’s scathing tone raked Hannah’s flesh.

“It’s Melvin’s job to make sure no one comes back here when I’m setting up a new exhibit.” She allowed her irritation to slip out. Ungrateful pig. First, she wasn’t good enough to take on a dig and now he was depicting her as some sort of unhinged artist. “In



addition to protecting us against lawsuits, he also guards your pieces of pottery.” She winced as the acidic words dripped off her tongue. God, she sounded like a woman scorned. Twitching in disgust, she reeled in her raging emotions.

“This is Dr. Alistair Holmes. He’s from the Papier Foundation.” She cringed as Coop gripped Alistair’s hand. Veins popped out on his arm. Their clenched hands trembled. She should stop their civilized wrestling bout. She should, but she didn’t. Part of her wished Alistair would grind Coop’s bones into dust. The sane part needed to protect her job.

“Come to see if you’ve gotten your money’s worth, Doctor?” Coop’s smile didn’t reach his eyes.

Alistair didn’t bother to smile at all. “The foundation prefers to make yearly audits of those who benefit from its largess.”

The wrestling contest finished before Hannah had to break it up. Both men’s hands were red from the ill treatment but neither acknowledged it. She rolled her eyes. Next, they would start beating their chests and grunting. Really, she might have expected Coop to use his size and physique to intimidate, but Alistair? The English were supposed to be civilized.

She watched in amazement as Coop rubbed his hand on his cargo shorts. Alistair’s hands still hung loosely by his side. Briton, one; American, zero.

Coop’s smile twisted into contempt. “Another accountant making sure all the numbers add up. I don’t envy you your job. If you have any technical questions, Hannah will know where to find me.”

“Thank you for your generosity, but I doubt that will be necessary. My PhD is in occult studies.”

Hannah’s was amazed at the flatness of Alistair’s response. The man must possess a bottomless well of patience not to be baited by Coop.

Irritation flickered in Coop’s eyes before being lost in a wave of disdain. He opened his mouth to comment but was cut off by the arrival of Olivia. This time Hannah wore the mask of irritation.

“Hi, I’m Olivia Palmer.”

Hannah watched as the human Barbie slunk in front of Coop.



Olivia was well-named—she seemed to have every breathing male in the palm of her hand. She shoved the hand at Alistair’s stomach.

To Hannah’s amazement, he considered it for several seconds before accepting the gesture.

“I’m taking Hannah’s place this summer.”

Hannah shifted uncomfortably as Alistair’s attention roamed over Olivia’s immaculate figure. What did he see? She looked down at her own shapeless clothes. How did she compare to Olivia’s trendy appearance? She ignored the questions. What did it matter if Alistair probably considered her one step above a bag lady?

“I gathered from Mrs. Lawrence that Hannah was irreplaceable.”

A man she’d just met had complimented her. She smiled. This confirmed her belief that Europeans—and the English, in particular—had sophisticated taste. His diplomatic answer renewed her faith that some people could see beyond the pretty packaging to what lay underneath.

“I meant on the dig. I’m Dr. Dixon’s intern this summer.”

Still grinning, Hannah felt her spirits rise another notch. Did she detect a crack in Olivia’s seductive façade?

“Although Ms. Jessup is an admirable assistant curator, she doesn’t have excavating experience, as Olivia does,” Coop interjected. “I think the Papier Foundation can appreciate the results a well-organized dig will produce.”

Leave it to Coop to put her in her place and re-introduce himself into the conversation. Hannah was sick of Olivia. Had been since the woman promenaded into her gallery yesterday. She flicked her gaze over Coop. He was also losing some of his appeal.

Slipping in front of Alistair, so close she felt his jacket brush against her arm, she commanded his attention. She felt different, more confident. No, that wasn’t right. Her mind groped for the right word. Empowered. She nodded. Maybe she should take charge more often.

“Perhaps you’d like that tour now.” Was that her voice? She sounded breathless. Did power infuse the quality or was it some-



thing else? She wet her dry lips at the admiration shimmering in Alistair's chestnut gaze.

"We're still on for dinner tonight, aren't we, Hannah?" Coop's grumbling extricated her from Alistair's mesmerizing gaze.

"Of course." There it was again. Her words floated out of her throat. It had to be the power trip. What else could it be?

"Good. Olivia and I will be there at seven."

Hannah whirled around, ignoring Alistair's quick retreat to avoid being pummeled by her pivoting frame. Olivia and Coop disappeared through the archway without looking back. Hannah glared at their disappearing backs. She hadn't invited Olivia.

"Great. Just...Just absolutely wonderful," she muttered. How was she supposed to make any headway with Coop in front of an audience? Snatching the handkerchief off her head, she slapped it against her thigh. She felt more than heard Alistair discreetly clear his throat.

Yes, today was certainly her day. She wouldn't be able to flirt with Coop at home because of Olivia, and she hadn't been able to flirt with him at work because she had to babysit Alistair. *Al*. Hannah shuddered. *Al* was that man on *Married, with Children*. He was a shoe salesman. Okay, Alistair was better, but Eugene? Where was the pocket protector and the piece of tape holding his glasses together?

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance..."

She looked at the Englishman. His clothes were of good quality, but there were obviously too many of them. He would wilt in the summer. Of course, he was probably covering up a pasty, scrawny physique. His eyes were an ordinary brown despite how they glowed when he looked at her. He had a nice face, a strong jaw, high cheekbones and dimples. His nose was slightly crooked, but she couldn't imagine him in a fight unless someone picked on him for being such a nerd. The wire-framed glasses fitted his scholarly vocation, but the bow tie...

She glared at the red object. The best she could say was that the thing wasn't ordinary. The worst...

Well, it didn't pay to go there.

He cleared his throat again, and Hannah yanked her thoughts



off his person and to the task at hand.

"I'm sorry. My mind seems to be wandering. So many things to do, and the opening's on Saturday. I've never been this far behind." She tapped her lip and looked at all the empty stands waiting to be filled. The only item on display was the Onyx, and that was because she couldn't bear to touch the thing.

"Consider me at your service." He sketched a small bow, and Hannah's mood lightened.

"Bianca would have my head if I took you up on your offer." She couldn't help but beam at him. She rarely had help. Heaven knew Coop considered it beneath his dignity, even if it was his show.

"Nonsense. She wanted me to get a better look at the exhibit. What better way than by setting it up? Besides..." He lowered his voice, and Hannah leaned closer to him. "...we don't have to tell her."

"Are you sure?" She glanced toward the hallway. Bianca was already upset because Hannah had painted Alistair's palm. She would be positively ballistic if she learned an official of the Papier Foundation had been used as a porter.

"Absolutely." Alistair rubbed his hands together and winked at her. "With this little preview, I shall be able to ask Dr. Dixon a few pointed questions during his lecture."

A wicked gleam flashed in his eyes. Hannah felt her smile widen. It would serve Coop right to be skewered by one of his peers. "Okay, then, just don't say I didn't warn you."



Three hours later, all the pieces were in place. She watched Alistair wipe his sweaty brow. The blazer was gone, hanging neatly on the back of her chair, but the vest remained. So did the bow tie. She shook her head. She had been wrong about one thing. His body wasn't skeletal or wasted. Judging by the heavy stone statues and the larger urns he had lugged from the basement to the exhibition room, he was actually fairly muscular under all those layers of clothes.

They strolled through the rooms.



"I don't know. I think the squatting man should be a little more to the left." Hannah tapped her lip in thought as she considered the sculpture.

"The squatting man?" Alistair asked, humor coloring his voice.

"Him." Hannah pointed to the thirty-inch stone statue and held her breath. To her surprise, he didn't lecture her on the statue's proper name or status. Another point in his favor.

"I think it's not so much his position as it is the bare wall. Your squatting man is tropical. He needs jungle shrubbery around him, not the starkness of the desert."

"You know, you may be right." Hannah chewed on her fingernail. Coop never would have considered such a thing. He also believed archeological treasures should be considered piece-by-piece, with no distractions. She was the complete opposite. The artifacts were part of people's lives. Viewing them in an everyday context, the spectator experienced the intended impact firsthand. Alistair had the instincts of an artist. Perhaps that explained his tie.

"I believe you have a few potted plants in your office. Shall I fetch them?"

She nodded, and he disappeared around the corner. The man was a puzzle. He wasn't haughty or pompous like the rest of the auditors or academics she had met. He didn't mind physical labor and didn't feel it was necessary to correct everything she said. Plus, he worked silently. Several times, she had almost forgotten he was there. Almost. There was something about him...

He groaned as he entered the room. Hannah hurried to his side and tried to help. He shook off her offer and plopped her dwarf rubber tree plant next to the squatting man and disappeared again. He returned moments later lugging the other one. After arranging the leaves, she stepped back to admire their work.

"You were right. He looks much better staring out from the foliage." She stuck the appropriate notecards next to each piece while he passed them to her.

"Anything else, then?" Alistair wiped his hands on his pants.

"Nope, that's it."

They went down the hall and into the museum's permanent



collection. Hannah strung the scarlet rope across the entrance to the hallway and placed the DO NOT ENTER sign across the top.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let you help."

"You would have been hard-pressed to stop me from touching the pieces. I simply ferried them to their proper place while examining them."

"I don't know how to thank you. Without your help, I would have been here most of tomorrow finishing."

"Ah, well, I must admit to an ulterior motive."

Hannah's heart bumped in her chest. Was he interested in her? Exhilaration pumped through her. She quickly squelched the peculiar emotions. She wanted Mr. Excitement, not Mr. Ordinary.

"You see, aside from sating my curiosity about the pieces, I do have a favor to ask." He removed his glasses and polished the lenses. He studied the floor. "I seem to become turned about quite easily. You Americans prefer the term, uh, lost. I was hoping you could help me find my vehicle."

Hannah patted his arm. Compassion at his obvious embarrassment sent her racing to the rescue. "That's not so unusual. The campus is bigger than most are used to. Where did you park?"

"By a light pole, in the visitor's parking garage."

She suppressed a smile. There were three such parking garages on campus. "Was the parking garage next to a parking lot or was it surrounded by buildings? Did you pass the fountain in the middle of campus?" She questioned him for five minutes before she eliminated all the garages except one.

"Well, you're not far away."

They returned to her office so he could retrieve his jacket. She smiled at him then led him out the back door.

"In fact, you're parked practically behind this building."

They were halfway across the faculty-and-staff parking lot when she heard a strange buzzing noise. Hannah slowed her steps and surveyed the grounds. There were no maintenance men trimming the bushes or mowing the strips of grass. What could be making the noise?

"How very odd." Alistair pointed to a car parked by a trio of



blooming cassia bushes.

Hannah looked closer. Tiny yellow flowers twirled in the air then settled on the car. Odd. There didn't seem to be a strong-enough wind to keep the blossoms airborne.

"They look like...bees."

"They are bees," Alistair confirmed.

Black-and-yellow bodies crawled over the car's hood, their low-pitched drone calling for more of their kind to join them. Hannah shivered.

"Do you know whose car it is?" he asked.

Hannah nodded and swallowed the hive-sized lump lodged in her throat.

"Yes, it's mine." She scratched her arms. God, it was like they were crawling over her flesh instead of her car. "How? Why?"

"Could be the flowers on your hood. Most likely, they're simply swarming and stopped to rest." Alistair grasped her by the elbow and pulled her away from the sight.

"Yes, but why did it have to be my car?"

"Luck. Don't worry, they should be gone in a couple of hours." The air around them was still except for their footfalls and the fading droning of the bees. "Ah, this looks familiar. Yes, there's my truck."

Hannah looked at the 4x4, took in its oversized tires, jet-black color, roll bar and foglights. It looked more like a macho toy than a vehicle for a respectable Englishman.

"I didn't figure you'd drive a truck."

"Seemed appropriate for the landscape. What did you think I'd drive?"

"I don't know, something more..."

"English?"

"Safety-conscious. Like a Volvo or BMW."

"Apparently, I have an unforeseen reckless streak. May I repay the courtesy of your guidance with dinner?"

Hannah shook her head.

"Forgive me. You, the good doctor and Ms. Palmer already have dinner plans."

The mention of Olivia cinched it. It was Hannah's house. She



should do the inviting.

“Would you like to join us? Four’s a much better number than three. It’s not much, but with this being your first night in town, I just thought...”

“I’d be delighted.”

She drew the directions for him on the rumpled map lying on his seat then hurried back to her office before she could change her mind.