



*The
Heart's
Longing*

Anna Furtado

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by

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"Dreams are like stars...you may never touch them, but if you follow them they will lead you to your destiny." ~ Anonymous

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the dreamers of the world, who by their dreams, fulfill deep longings and make dreams come true.

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Chapter One

THE DREAM JARRED Trinn awake. Her curls lay in tangles around her head. Sweat beaded on her forehead and her chest heaved as she stared into the darkness through large blue eyes. The dream occurred frequently, but she had never remembered any details, until now. She allowed the feelings to churn. A blurred image began to sharpen. A forest, dark and cold. Running for her life. Not so much a flight from something as a running toward--a place--of safety and protection. A word materialized from deep within her memory with strong certainty. Home.

Her breathing calmed and she strained to remember more. Sensations bombarded her. The color green. The smell of sweet spring grass. Warm sunlight on her face upon emerging from the darkness of a woodland. The pull of an edifice built of soft pink, almost-glowing stones. Home. Finally a name came to her. She had no idea who it was, but it was definitely a name that made

her smile. MacGregor. Someone well known to her. Someone for whom she reserved a special place in her heart. MacGregor made her laugh and when he did, she wasn't afraid of the dark places any more. Her heart felt light when she considered him. Her breathing quieted even more. She closed her eyes and saw rolling green hills with low stone walls that marked out boundaries, but she couldn't hang on to the image. It faded from her mind's eye in an instant. Still, she knew MacGregor was there. She longed to go back to him.

A flash of memory flitted across her consciousness and she knew he had been the reason for her search in the forest. But she had almost lost her way. She rubbed her eyes, trying to conjure up the image and it proved unsuccessful. It was gone.

A siren wailed a few blocks away as an emergency vehicle sped down a nearby Jamaica Plain street. She took a few steps from the tiny studio's bedroom area to the kitchenette to get a drink of water and glanced at the clock on the wall glowing neon pink. Two o'clock in the morning. The emotion of the dream was still with her, even though the details had vanished. She raised the glass to her mouth and tasted the sweet, cool liquid. Another fleeting image shimmered and faded. It was more of an impression really. She cupped her hand in a fast-flowing, shallow stream, drinking from it, quenching her thirst. The name came to her a second time--MacGregor.

As Trinn sank down into bed, drifting back to sleep, the question still hammered in her mind. Who was MacGregor? Something else niggled at her. She only had a few more hours to sleep before going back to a job she hated in a place she detested for a man she despised. The sound that came from her throat almost threatened to bring her back to full wakefulness. She pushed the bitter image away. In a few minutes, peaceful sleep came to her as she blocked out unpleasant recollections with the whispered name --MacGregor.

Chapter Two

IN HER TASTEFULLY decorated office in London's St. John's Wood, Sidney Wycombe rubbed the frown from her forehead. The headache was back and the pounding in her chest that seemed to accompany these episodes made her uneasy. As she looked down at her desk, the edges of the rich, dark wood blurred. If Lawrence came into her office and realized she wasn't feeling well again, there'd be hell to pay. She fumbled in her top drawer for the aspirin bottle and dumped four Disperin tablets into her palm. Her hand shook as she brought the pills to her mouth and chased them with two gulps from the glass of water sitting on her desk. The ice-cold glass cooled her palm. Pressing her hand to her forehead gave her momentary relief. She pushed her hand through her dark hair. Maybe she should just call it a day and go home. But what was the point? Going home to an empty house and drawing the blinds wouldn't solve her current problems. It would do no good to lie on the couch recovering from the weakness these episodes left. If she

stayed at work, perhaps the distraction would be enough so it wouldn't incapacitate her, and the loneliness wouldn't engulf her.

She stuffed the aspirin bottle into the drawer at the light rap on her office door. Her assistant, Lawrence Truly, glided through the opening looking half his age with flaxen, tousled hair and a lean, slight body. He dressed meticulously. That was one of the things about him that appealed to her. She also appreciated that he cared about his job and was good at it and, she had to admit, she liked that he cared about her.

As Lawrence walked across the luxurious Persian rug, she put her hand on her chest and asked, "Were you able to get any information?"

He nodded and a smile lit up his face for a moment, but quickly changed to a frown. "Sidney, are you ill?"

She tried to will her pounding heart to slow and waved him off. "No, I'm fine." Resolute, she continued. "Do you have new information?"

His frown mirrored hers and she could almost hear his inner debate. She knew he'd wonder if he should allow her to distract him or if he should pursue questioning her about her health?

"Lawrence, have you found anything out or not?"

He cleared his throat. "The Wells family lives in New England--in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Mr. Wells has been dead for nine years."

This last information confirmed what her own father had told her just before he had died. Gerald Wells would be of no help to her.

Sidney mulled over what he had just told her. Her skin tone and breathing returned to normal. He continued. "The wife, Virginia Wells, has never wanted any part of her husband's historical past. They have a daughter."

Sidney's head popped up.

"As far as our investigator could tell, Miss Wells has no apparent knowledge of her family ties to Briarcrest. The daughter goes by the name of Trinn."

"Trinn? Odd name."

Lawrence smiled. "A nickname. Her real name is Katherine."

"Ah." Sidney matched Lawrence's grin. "'There's always been a Catherine in the family,' father said."

"So it seems."

"What else did the private investigator find out about our Miss Wells, then?"

"Katherine Wells is thirty-four years old. Been in and out of relationships--with women." Lawrence paused. When Sidney didn't react, he forged ahead. "Most recently, a challenging relationship with a woman the investigator said should never have been allowed to go on for as long as it did."

He handed her a manila folder.

Sidney opened it to find a colored photograph of an extremely attractive woman looking out at her from within the borders of an eight by ten glossy. The woman in the picture wore a Mona Lisa smile, as if amused by some secret. Flaxen curls framed a stunning pair of blue eyes. Sidney studied the face staring back at her from the folder and her heart skipped a beat. But this time it was not because of illness. The reaction caught her by surprise. She leaned against the desk, hoping the move looked more casual than it felt. Without a word, she closed the folder and handed it back to Lawrence. "Did our contact provide a way for us to reach Miss Wells?"

"Yes, I put in a call, but all I got was an answering machine. wasn't sure if I should leave a message or not. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What time is it in Massachusetts now?"

Lawrence looked at his wristwatch. "Ten a.m., our time. That's five o'clock in the morning there."

"Do we know what Miss Wells does for a living?"

"Pastry Chef."

Sidney registered surprised amusement. "Doughnuts?"

Lawrence laughed. "Actually, she's a pastry chef for a fine dining establishment in Boston called Creek's, run by the internationally renowned Chef Alexander Creek. It's a restaurant in the five-star Hotel One-Twenty in downtown Boston. She's very good, I'm told."

Sidney raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess. Did we, by any chance, pay for our private investigator to sample a sumptuous meal at this fine dining establishment, including dessert, as part of her investigation?"

"Afraid so."

Sidney grimaced. "How much did it cost us?"

"Including the fifty-dollar bottle of wine, two hundred and twenty-eight dollars."

Sidney whistled. "At least the exchange rate into pounds will take some of the sting away. What other extravagant charges did our investigator incur in getting to the bottom of Miss Wells' story?"

"None, really. The rest of the expenses were all the usual kinds of things. Most of her meals were very modest." He shook his head. "She ate at a pub called What Ales You on Beacon Hill several times."

Sidney frowned and moved her head a little too quickly. As she did, a sharp pain darted through her left eye. She choked back a wince, but it was too late. The ever-perceptive Lawrence was on to her.

"Sidney, do you have a headache?"

She didn't answer.

"Sidney?"

As she raised her head and gazed into Lawrence's steel-gray eyes, she knew she couldn't lie to him. She would have to admit she wasn't feeling well--again.

"Sidney, we need to get an appointment at your doctor's. I can do it for you right now." He started to turn away from her.

"No. I'll be fine. Let's leave it, Lawrence. I need to focus on this." She pointed toward the folder in his hands. "Wait another hour, then try Miss Wells again. Tell her I need to speak with her about an important matter. Ask her if she would consider coming to London--of course, I'll finance her trip. If she agrees, make the arrangements and get her out here as soon as possible. If you have to leave a message, just make sure you impress upon her how important it is she return the call." She gave Lawrence a penetrating look.

"Has something happened? Has Charles done something?"

Sidney hesitated. Lawrence knew the circumstances almost as well as she did, but she worried about his involvement. "Let's just say the situation has escalated from important to urgent now that we know of Miss Wells' existence. I want to get moving on this." Without thinking, she rubbed her left temple.

Lawrence gave her a worried look. "I can call the doctor before I put the call in to America."

Sidney frowned at Lawrence. "Let's not have any more discussion about my health, all right?"

AT SIX A.M., Trinn bolted to a sitting position in bed to answer the insistent ringing of the phone. An hour before, the phone had rung several times, but she couldn't rouse herself from

another dream enough to answer it and the caller had hung up before her answering machine came on.

"Hello?" Her voice rasped, husky with sleep. She glanced at the clock at her bedside. Who would be calling her at this hour? Her grandmother, Estelle, came to mind. She hoped everything was okay.

The voice on the other end had a distinctive English accent. "Hello? Is it Miss Wells? Miss Katherine Wells?"

"Yes, this is Trinn Wells. Who is this?"

"My name is Lawrence Truly, Miss Wells. I'm calling on behalf of my employer, Miss Sidney Wycombe."

Still not fully awake, Trinn struggled to place the names. "I'm sorry, Mr. Truly. I don't recall knowing anyone named Sidney Wycombe."

"I'm aware of that, Miss Wells. However, my employer knows of you and has need of your services."

"Mr. Truly, although I'm flattered by the offer, I don't do pastries outside of my current place of employment. You'll have to get someone else." She hadn't baked outside of her job in a long time. Although she loved to do it, she just didn't have the energy these days. Maybe it was because her work environment sapped her of her passion so all she could do was come home and vegetate after working all evening. Besides, her tiny apartment kitchen really didn't lend itself to any kind of professional baking.

"I assure you, Miss Wells, this has nothing to do with pastry-- although I'm sure you're a very fine pastry chef."

Trinn rubbed an eye with the fist of her free hand. "Well, what does it have to do with, Mr. Truly?"

"My employer, Miss Wycombe, is a solicitor--a lawyer--in London. She has an urgent matter to discuss with you. Your presence is required in London as soon as possible."

That woke Trinn up. "What? Come to London? What's this about, Mr. Truly?" She began to wonder if her friend Liz had put someone up to playing a practical joke on her. After all, just last week at lunch with her, Liz had told Trinn she needed to get away from the stress of her job--and her boss--at the restaurant.

"Take a vacation," Liz insisted over Lemon-tinis. "Get away from all those narcissistic people you work with. You need a break."

"I can't afford a vacation right now, Liz. I'm trying to get my credit cards paid off."

Liz harrumphed. She never liked Trinn's ex-girlfriend, Clarice, and when she found out Clarice had left Trinn deeply in debt, Liz was even less enamored with her. As a matter of fact, Liz had threatened to do bodily harm to Clarice. It was best not to talk about her ex with Liz.

Trinn brought the conversation back to her work situation. "Some days I think Creek's will be okay and other days it's just unbearable, Liz." They both lifted their glasses and sipped their drinks.

"Well, you need to do something. Those people will wear you down into the ground."

"I know, but working at Creek's is the opportunity of a lifetime. I can go anywhere once I've put in my time working there. That's why I can't quit yet, no matter how much I want to sometimes. I've got to stick this out for a bit longer--so I can look stable on a resume and get out of debt."

Liz made a disparaging remark, causing Trinn to move the subject to something less volatile.

"Mr. Truly, is this some kind of practical joke? Did Liz put you up to this?"

Lawrence groaned softly into the phone. "I assure you Miss Wells, I am not messing about. I'm quite serious."

"Well, I can't just pick up and go off to London on a whim, Mr. Truly." She wasn't about to tell him no self-respecting travel site would allow her to put a plane ticket on her overextended credit cards. That was none of his damn business. "I've got commitments here. You'll just have to tell me what this is all about."

"Miss Wycombe is the one who will have to discuss the nature of her business with you. That's why she'd like you to come to London."

Trinn tried not to let the annoyance she felt seep into her voice. A total stranger on the other end of the line was making demands she didn't understand. "Contrary to whatever you may think of me, Mr. Truly, I'm not an independently wealthy jetsetter. Not everyone can just pick up and fly to London at the whim of someone they don't even know."

"The nature of Miss Wycombe's business is far from whimsical, I assure you. And we understand this might not be the best time for you to make the trip--financially. Miss Wycombe has authorized me to arrange for your travel. This won't cost you a pound--or a dollar--in your case. You'll be our guest at a five-star hotel in a quite prestigious London neighborhood. If you'd like, we can even arrange for you to do a little sightseeing while you're here--once you've spoken to my employer."

A free trip to London? At a five-star hotel? Now she really was suspicious of the man on the other end of the line. "Is this some kind of new scam or something? How did you get my phone number anyway?" She ran her fingers through her tangled curls trying to make sense of it all.

Lawrence's breath came through the receiver as a scratching sound. "I promise you this is a legitimate offer. My employer is a very successful solicitor in London. Miss Wycombe would never be involved with anything dishonest."

Trinn heard the indignation in his voice and regretted her accusation. Maybe the man on the other end of the line wasn't a con artist. But how could she be sure? Her gut told her she should hear him out. Then another question crossed her mind. Was this another dream? After all, her dreams had been pretty strange of late.

"Please, Miss Wells, just come to London and hear Miss Wycombe out. If you aren't interested in what she has to say, you can leave on the next flight back to Boston."

Trinn's eyes narrowed. "How do you know so much about me?" she snapped.

Lawrence hesitated before answering. "We know a great deal about you, Miss Wells." Another brief pause followed before he spoke. "Have you ever heard of Briarcrest?"

Briarcrest? Yes, in fact, she had heard of it. After her father died, she had helped her mother clear out some of his things. While going through his desk in the den, she found a box with a label on it. It simply read: Briarcrest. Inside, she found a small notebook. But her mother pulled the book from her hands before she could do more than glance through it, so she never knew what it contained. She did, however, have time to recognize her father's handwriting. Another hand she didn't recognize, she assumed belonged to her grandfather.

Trinn promptly put the incident out of her mind. Time passed and she soon forgot about it--until now.

"I've only seen the word Briarcrest once. I know nothing about it though." She never got a chance to read the contents of the book before it was--destroyed.

Lawrence pushed on. "The situation my employer would like to discuss with you involves Briarcrest." When there was no protest forthcoming from the other end of the line, he asked eagerly, "Will you allow me to make the travel arrangements, then?"

In spite of her piqued interest, Trinn still hesitated. "I don't know, Mr. Truly. I need some time."

"Please, tell me you'll at least give it some serious consideration. That's all I ask. If I may make a suggestion, perhaps your grandmother, Estelle, can shed some light on all of this."

"Nanna?" Trinn wondered how this man knew so much about her family.

"Yes, your grandmother. And I agree with you. You need some time to digest all this. I've given you a great deal to think about. Why don't I call you back tomorrow for your answer."

Trinn's mind whirled thinking about the journal and wondering what her grandmother might know about any of this. Why had no one ever said anything? Trinn had so many questions and

felt she really did need time to mull over what Truly had revealed. And if agreeing to think about going to London would get this guy off the phone, she'd do it. Hell, she might even be able to go back to sleep for a while.

Trinn glanced out the single window in her apartment. The first light of dawn was just appearing, breaking through and exposing a gray Boston morning. Trinn frowned. "One thing, Mr. Truly."

"Yes, Miss Wells?"

"When you call me back tomorrow, the sun had better be up in Boston. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Miss Wells. I'm sorry if I woke you."

"Yeah, well--fine. Just remember what I said."

"I won't call you before eight your time tomorrow."

"Make it nine. I work late."

"Yes, Miss Wells. Good day."

The click at the other end of the line told her Truly had hung up. As her head hit the pillow, the questions swirled around her in a fog much like the one outside her window. Briarcrest. What was it? What did it mean? Her mother would never give her any information, of that she was certain. What did her grandmother, Estelle, her father's mother, know about all this? She made a mental note to call her--no, it would be better to go and see her in person. With the decision made, sleep came easily.

THE SHORT-LEGGED, black dog scampered across the field, his prick ears and thick tail held high. Trinn felt buoyed as she watched him bounce along. Her wide smile faded when a deep voice called to the dog from just over the horizon. No more than a dot against the blue sky, she couldn't make out his words, but the little dog stopped and turned, bounding toward him. When he reached the man, he twirled around before him with great exuberance before he continued across the meadow.

Trinn watched them walk off in the distance until the little dog made a sudden ninety-degree turn and came scampering in her direction. As the dog approached, she noted he seemed to be some sort of terrier. With nothing but a small scattering of shrubs at the edge of the meadow, she dismissed the brief thought of finding a place to hide. The little dog looked friendly enough. When he reached Trinn, he scampered around her, bouncing the same way he had danced around the man earlier. When she bent to pet him he plopped down and sat in front of her, as if on command. He gazed up into her eyes, and it was like he was looking into her soul.

"Hello, little man," she whispered. "What's your name?" The dog looked at her with a discerning gaze. He struck her as a happy sort, but with just a little hint of mischief in his eyes. He made her happy.

Trinn stroked him down the back of his neck. He sat looking up at her, his tongue showing just a little beyond his black doggy lips and mustache. "So, are you going to tell me what you're called, sir?"

The man's voice surprised her coming from only a few feet away. "His name's MacGregor," he said. The name surprised Trinn. Was she dreaming? She couldn't be sure.

"MacGregor, well, that's a great name. What kind of dog is he?"

"He's a highland breed. My family is from the borderlands of Scotland, but we have some cousins who traveled up north for a while and they brought back a few of his kin. When I visited my grandfather a few years ago, I admired their spirit. One of my granddad's bitches had a litter of pups while I was there and he gave MacGregor to me. He's a grand lad, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. He's very friendly."

The man looked at her with wrinkled brow. "Actually, he's not. He keeps to me mostly. These dogs usually like to attach themselves to only one person. It's very unusual for him to take to anyone else as he's done with you."

Trinn bent down to pet MacGregor. As she did, she spoke to the dog. "I'm honored, sir." MacGregor looked up at her and raised his short front leg. She took his paw in her hand and beamed as she shook it in earnest. "Well, I'm pleased to meet you, too."

She looked up at the man and said, "I feel as if I know him. He's quite a character, your MacGregor." At hearing his name, the dog cocked his head to one side, listening attentively.

The man laughed at his dog's antics. "You're a foreigner, aren't you? I don't recognize your manner of dress. Where are you from?"

Trinn looked down at herself, dressed in tan slacks and navy polo shirt, her comfortable white tennis shoes on her feet. Looking back up at the stranger, she realized his dress appeared a little odd, too. His neat, short, cropped black hair stuck out from beneath a Robin Hood-type hat--one of those green ones that came to a point in front. On one side, the hat sported a long pheasant feather. The man wore a kind of vest or smock that slipped over his head and was belted at the waist with a leather tie bearing an intricately tooled design. The deep brown of the vest was offset with a gold brocade trim around the neck and hem. Underneath the vest, he wore a full-sleeved white linen shirt, tied at the neck. His tan leggings disappeared into brown leather boots that stopped at his knees.

"From? I'm from Boston. Well. I actually grew up in Plymouth, but I moved to Boston once I finished school." The man cocked his head reminding her of MacGregor.

"A far move indeed from Plymouth to Boston. It's days and days of travel."

"It's--" She was going to say it was no more than an hour from Plymouth to Boston proper, unless traffic was bad, but as she watched the man, she grew wary of telling him too much. He wore those strange garments and her surroundings were unfamiliar. Where in the world was she? She had to find out. "You said your family is from Scotland?"

The man broke into a wide grin. "Half of my family is from Scotland. The other half is from here."

Trinn whispered an internal thank you for the lead in. "From here?"

The man nodded.

"And here--is where?"

The man gave her a curious look. "Why, here, in England. I live on these lands." He made a wide gesture.

"Lord of the Manor, are we?"

He cocked his head in the other direction.

"You might say. I'm called Catty, by the way."

"Trinn." She stretched her hand out toward him. He stared at it briefly, then grasped her forearm firmly in his hand. She returned the gesture.

"Pleased to know you, Trinn." He said her name as if tasting an untested food for the first time.

At that, MacGregor started to bark and dance around the pair wildly. "MacGregor wants his supper," Catty said. "I'd best say goodbye."

Before Trinn could protest, MacGregor and Catty ran off across the meadow at full speed.

"Wait!" she called, but neither of them looked back. Their forms receded to no more than the tiny dots on the horizon they had been when they first appeared. Then they were gone. Disappointment filled her. "Wait--" Trinn repeated softly, bewildered. It seemed to her as if the word echoed, more and more softly until it, too, disappeared into the miasma.

As she stood, wondering at what had just happened, a deafening din startled her. She opened her eyes to see not a meadow, but her own tiny apartment. Her alarm wailed in her ear.

Chapter Three

TRINN NEGOTIATED THE narrow lanes of her grandmother's retirement complex. She blinked back tears and looked at the digital clock on her dashboard. The numbers were no more than a blur. She blinked again and they came into focus in spite of her tears. It was ten minutes to ten. The end of one of the most dreadful nights of her life. When she reached the small cluster of parking spaces reserved for visitors, she zipped her little blue Civic into the slot. She sat there for a few minutes, willing the tears to stop to no avail. They would run their course, she knew. She had to get it all out before she saw her grandmother. Minutes passed; the tears slowed. When they finally stopped and she felt some measure of control return, she rubbed her face with her hands, opened the car door and got out.

Her grandmother's front porch light was on, telling Trinn she wasn't in bed, even though the hour was late. Trinn took a deep breath and leaned against the wrought iron railing on the tiny porch letting the cool air wash over her. The night sky, dark and clear, held a myriad of stars despite the pollution of the lights from the city.

A full moon hung suspended like a glowing globe. There was lore that said there were more admissions to mental institutions during a full moon. Trinn wondered if her dream job had been sacrificed to the pull of the earth's satellite on the moist gray matter inside her skull. A siren in the distance seemed to confirm her deliberations. She brushed her meanderings aside, more accepting of her fate this time, and she extended her index finger toward the buzzer. However, before she touched the button, the front door swung wide and the happy chatter of several people talking at once met her ears.

Estelle held the door for her friends, a crowd of seniors, men and women, dressed in sweatpants and matching jackets. They all wore various styles of hats pulled down over their ears. Estelle was dressed similarly, with a knit hat in her hand. The visitors stepped across the threshold and went quiet when they saw Trinn.

Estelle met Trinn's eyes. "Why, hello, dear. What are you doing here? Did you manage to talk that awful boss of yours into letting you have a night off?"

"No," Trinn barked. Her anger swelled in her chest. Tears welled up again causing her eyes to glisten.

The crowd of seniors exchanged glances. Estelle said, "Why don't you folks go on without me tonight. I think my granddaughter would like to talk."

A man with kindly blue eyes and a thick brush of a white mustache said, "Aw, Estelle, we don't have many clear nights this time of the year. You're going to miss a great show."

"That's all right, Maurice. I think Trinn needs a sympathetic ear right now. There'll be other nights for stargazing. You go on without me."

The crowd muttered their good-byes and they moved off down the road carrying a telescope, a tripod, and several nylon bags with God-knew-what in them. In spite of everything Trinn felt, the sight of Estelle's cronies evoked a smile.

Trinn glanced at her grandmother. "Sorry to spoil your party, Nanna. But isn't it a little late for you folks to be out?"

"No, not at all. We do this at least once a month if the sky's right for it. It was such a clear night, we just decided to take advantage of it."

Guilt crept through Trinn. She was keeping her grandmother from her friends and a night of fun. "Well, if you'd rather go with them, I can come back another time."

Estelle held Trinn with her penetrating violet eyes. "I could say it's a little late for you to be out visiting your grandmother, too. Something's wrong, Trinn. I can tell. Never mind about them. I can see them anytime. You come on in. I can tell you need to talk." She added with a lilting tone, "I've got your favorite cookies."

Her favorite cookies hadn't been her snack of preference since she was seven years old, but she'd never admit it to her grandmother. Still, she felt warmth spread throughout her body as she followed Estelle into the apartment. The simple gesture comforted her.

Colony Square Retirement Community, on the outskirts of Boston, had a distinctive East Coast décor and charm. The building complex was spread out in long single-story rows to accommodate the over sixty-five crowd and was painted white with black trim to look like diminutive reproductions of classic colonial New England architecture. Inside, however, Estelle eschewed classic maple and gingerbread work. Her home was furnished in ultra modern aluminum and retro-50s fabric. Estelle said the clean lines gave good karma to her space.

Of course, her grandmother's tastes had changed drastically since coming to Colony Square two years ago. After Trinn's grandfather's death, her grandmother rattled around in their old suburban Tudor for several years. Then, one day she announced she was through with all that and wanted a change.

She sold her million-dollar home with all the furniture in it and moved to the retirement community where she furnished her new place in the Danish and retro-clean look. She got involved with a local New Age group and learned about crystals and psychic auras. She took up belly dancing, much to Trinn's mother's embarrassment, and she ran around with--in Virginia Wells' words--a fast crowd of seniors, which Trinn saw as a contradiction in terms until she met some of them. In Trinn's estimation, her grandmother was having the time of her life, which exasperated the hell out of her reserved mother.

"Here you go, dear." Estelle pushed a plate of frosted animal crackers across the kitchen counter to Trinn bringing her back from her own meanderings. A glass of cold milk followed. Trinn climbed up on a barstool and toyed with a pink cookie.

"Thanks, Nanna."

"Now, tell me what's going on, Trinny."

Trinn hesitated, knowing once the words were spoken out loud, the reality would come crashing down around her. Full realization of her current situation would be unpleasant. She had quit her job with a bushel of debt, an apartment to rent, and a car on which she had to make payments. What had she done? There was nothing to do but face facts. Her Nanna Estelle wouldn't judge her. She never did. Trinn took a deep breath. "I quit my job."

Estelle clapped her hands together. A wide smile graced her face. "About time."

Trinn looked up in surprise. "You think it'll be okay?"

"Honey, that place was dragging you down. I wanted to tell you to quit so many times--but you know I don't interfere in your life. Your mother wouldn't like it."

Trinn knew exactly what her grandmother meant. Virginia demanded a non-intervention policy from her mother-in-law as soon as she married Estelle's only child. Of course, the policy didn't apply to Virginia herself when it came to her own family. Trinn's grandmother understood the imposed boundaries, although she didn't like them or agree with them all the time. Estelle Wells had, at one time, been fairly conservative herself. Trinn never could figure out if her grandmother had a life-changing moment causing her to be so different when she moved to this retirement center--or if she had suppressed her real personality to conform to her husband's requirements over the years.

All Trinn knew was one day, Estelle blossomed into a spontaneous, adventurous woman who did as she pleased and didn't care what her family's opinions of her were. Of course, it was never a problem to Trinn. As far as she was concerned, it was wonderful. But even after her grandmother had changed, she didn't interfere with Virginia's family. Non-intervention kept the peace in the family for a lot of years.

Estelle put her wrinkled hand over Trinn's. "Tell me what happened, sweetheart."

Trinn choked back tears. "Well," she sniffed, "I think I've told you about Bernard before." Her grandmother nodded. "We weren't having a very good night in the kitchen. Bernard refused to do his damn job and I got angry with him."

Her grandmother's eyes glistened. "Well deserved from what you've told me in the past."

"I just couldn't take it any more, Nanna. All he had to do was go over to the walk-in refrigerator and get some butter, but if he did, it might be too cold to work with, so he came over and took mine."

"Twit," Estelle spat. "He's done that to you before, hasn't he?"

"Yeah." She hesitated before adding, "I stabbed him with a fork."

The edge of Estelle's mouth lifted and her eyes twinkled. "Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where'd you stab him? I hope you got him in the privates."

"Nanna!" Trinn tried unsuccessfully to suppress a chuckle.

"Well, that little snit deserved it."

"Maybe so, but Chef was furious. And I only got him in the back of the hand. Didn't even draw blood, although to hear him, you would have thought I did. Anyway, after that, Chef told me to go to his office and he read me the riot act. He told me I'd never work in Boston again."

Estelle snorted. "Nonsense. You know what I think of that man. Pompous ass. Besides, what about all those awards you've won?"

"Time will tell if they'll be worth anything. I'll just have to wait and see."

Estelle removed her hand from Trinn's. "So, when's your last day?"

"I've already had my last day. I quit on the spot. Well, I quit after essentially telling my boss what I thought of him."

"Oh, dear," Estelle said. "Well, good for you."

"Yeah. Right."

Estelle gave her a sympathetic look. "It was the walk-in that did it, wasn't it?"

Trinn hesitated. "Maybe."

"Ever since you got locked in that closet as a child, you've always been a little claustrophobic." She paused and looked deeply into Trinn's blue eyes. "You do know it was an accident, don't you? Your mother had no idea--"

"Yes, Nanna. I know," she sighed. "I just have a hard time with closed-in spaces sometimes."

Estelle watched her eyes fill with tears. She pulled her from her seat into her small, but comforting chest.

All Estelle said as she rocked Trinn in her arms was "bastards", causing Trinn to laugh through her tears. In spite of it all, Trinn felt happy for the first time in a long time.

When her tears stopped, her grandmother pulled the plate and glass from the kitchen counter and brought them to a small breakfast table. Estelle sat opposite her and watched with a look of intensity through eyes framed by perfectly coiffed silver hair.

Estelle spoke only after Trinn finished the plate of cookies and drank most of the milk. "Better?"

"Definitely. Now if I could only figure out what to do about the solicitor."

"Oh, dear, Trinn, you haven't fallen in love with a prostitute, have you?"

It took Trinn a few seconds, but once she figured out what Estelle meant, she giggled. "No, Nanna." Another thing her grandmother never did was judge Trinn's choice of women. "I got a call from this man in London this morning." She looked at her watch and frowned. "Very early this morning. He said a solicitor--a British lawyer--wanted to speak to me and it had something to do with--Briarcrest."

Her grandmother's eyes widened and her snow-white eyebrows rose toward her hairline. "Briarcrest? Oh, dear, does your mother know about this?"

"No. Why should she care?"

"Because she doesn't want anyone in the family to have anything to do with it. She thinks there's a curse or something attached to it. I'm not sure where that idea came from because I've never heard such a thing, but, well--you know your mother."

Trinn nodded. "What do you know about it, Nanna? Briarcrest, I mean."

"Not much. Bits and pieces mostly. It was your grandfather who had the connection, you know." Trinn nodded. "Briarcrest has always been important to your Grandpa's side of the family. Apparently, it has to do with a castle somewhere in England. He tried to pass on the knowledge he had, but first your father was too busy with school, and after that, all his time was taken courting a beautiful young woman named Virginia he had just met. He didn't want to spend any time with his dad listening to a bunch of, what he termed, fiction."

"Your grandfather had started a journal and included all the information he found out about Briarcrest over the years, but it was just fragments, not much to go on. There's a long family heritage connected to this castle but the place itself may not even exist any more so I'm not sure what more there is to find out. I do know he said the trail just seemed to end right before World War II. He never could pick up the thread afterwards. There are supposed to be some artifacts

and an allusion to them being hidden during the war for safekeeping, but even your father told me he could never find any more information after that time.

"Grandpa once contacted someone over in England who seemed to know something about it, but the man was very hesitant to divulge any details. Come to think of it, he wanted your grandfather to go over to England, too, but he had just started his business and we didn't have the money for the trip. By the time we could have afforded it, he had lost all contact with the man.

"After your father was married a few years, he did become interested in Briarcrest and asked your grandfather about it. Grandpa gave your father the information hoping to see the search continue, but when your mother found out about it, she wanted none of it. There is an old story that your grandfather had written in the journal. It told of Briarcrest being linked to the Inquisition. Naturally, something like that would scare the bejesus out of your mother, so she told your father to stop carrying on about this whole Briarcrest thing. She threatened to leave him, and take you with her, if he didn't stop his research. Well, of course, your father loved you a great deal, so that ended that."

Estelle patted Trinn's hand across the table. "Your mother isn't a brave woman and new ideas are difficult for her. You know that. She made sure your father never told you about Briarcrest, in spite of the fact that he really had an obligation to do so. He once told me she said no daughter of hers was going to go chasing after things that either didn't ever exist or that shouldn't be dragged up from the past because they might be dangerous."

Trinn stiffened. "I'm a grown woman, Nanna. Mother can't control me anymore. I can't seem to make her understand that."

Estelle's look softened. "It's just how she is, dear. She'll never change."

"You did."

Her grandmother sat up straight before answering. "Maybe I did, and maybe I was always the way I am now, but just didn't acknowledge it. Kind of like those people I hear talking about how they didn't know they were gay until they were in their 40s or 50s-- you know, on those shows they run during Gay Pride week on PBS."

Trinn smiled to herself. Her grandmother had never shared with her about actually watching such things. No doubt she was trying to educate herself for Trinn's sake. It was more than her mother did, burying her head in the sand, as it were, regarding Trinn's sexuality.

Estelle leaned forward, her eyes shining with excitement. "Do you know this lawyer's name by any chance?"

"I believe it's Wycombe--Sidney Wycombe. Does it mean anything to you?"

Estelle pondered the name before she said, "It has been a long time. I can't remember. Your grandfather had it written down in that notebook he gave your father."

"Gone," Trinn said.

Estelle looked horror-struck.

Trinn shrugged. "I found it in dad's desk right after he died. Unfortunately Mother saw me with it. She told me she thought dad had gotten rid of it. She was furious. I couldn't do anything to stop her. I had only leafed through it briefly before she grabbed it out of my hands and threw it in the trash compactor. I'm afraid it went the way of the chicken bones and the dirty paper towels."

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid you'll have to start from scratch if you're going to get to the bottom of this."

"The lawyer, Miss Wycombe, wants me to fly to London to meet with her. I couldn't get any information from the person who contacted me. He insisted I needed to come to London to find out what it's about. They're willing to pay for the trip. All expenses. They'll even throw in some sightseeing." Trinn looked at her grandmother expectantly. "Do you think I should go?"

"I shouldn't tell you what to do, Trinn, dear."

"I know. But that's why I value your opinion. If I didn't want to know what you think, I wouldn't have asked. So, do you think I should go to London and meet with this woman?"

Estelle's eyes sparkled. "It sounds like a great adventure to me. If it were me who had been asked, I would have been on that plane hours ago."

Trinn smiled at her grandmother but couldn't suppress a snuffle. "Yet I am my mother's daughter. My contact, a man named Lawrence Truly, is supposed to call me back tomorrow morning. I think I'll sleep on it tonight." She took another look at her watch. "At least what's left of tonight, and wait for his call in the morning."

Estelle patted Trinn's hand. "That's probably best, Trinny. It never hurts to sleep on a decision like that. But after a good night's sleep, I say go for it. A trip to London might be just what you need after this ordeal."

"Ordinarily, I'd say this is not a good time to do this, since I've just lost my job. But on the other hand, it might be the best time. After all, it's supposed to be all expenses paid from what I understand."

The glimmer in Trinn's eyes spoke volumes.

"Well, dear, I don't want to influence you any more than I have already."

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Trinn awoke to the sunlight streaming through her window. Images from the dreams experienced during the night floated all around her. She tried to hold on to them, but they were like gossamer threads that vanished when she touched them. The clock by

the bedside table said seven-thirty. Time enough to shower before her expected phone call from the UK. What would her answer be? Do the responsible thing and stay? She really should look for another job. Or jump headlong into an adventure and make the trip to England?

The idea of going excited her. However, her excitement tempered when she remembered her debt. Clarice's debt, actually, but she had left her high and dry with a balance on the credit card they had shared when they were together. Trinkets and baubles. Nothing to show for it. Aaargh! She hated Clarice for putting her in this situation.

She stepped into the tiny bathroom and removed her tee shirt and shorts. The warm shower water pelted her body. She should have suspected something was amiss when the first credit card bill came in with a balance much higher than she expected.

Trinn shoved the bill toward her girlfriend and pointed. "Clarice, what's this charge for two-hundred and forty dollars?"

Clarice shrugged. "Oh. I just needed some supplies for work. There was an emergency. Don't worry about it. I'll get reimbursed."

"What kind of emergency supplies can you buy at Neiman Marcus?"

"Part of those purchases was for a couple of new outfits. I may have a chance for a promotion. I wanted to look my best."

The strain on their relationship made Trinn choose her battles. She didn't pursue this one. In hindsight, she should have.

The stream of water ran over her soapy head as memories of Clarice continued to assault her. Trinn no longer had the patience to put up with Clarice's self-absorbed view of life and their relationship. What had she ever seen in the woman? Trinn stepped over the shower threshold and wrapped herself in a soft cream-colored bath sheet.

When the third credit card bill arrived with a hotel charge in Boston, Trinn confronted her.

"What's going on Clarice? Why would you need to stay in a hotel in Boston when we live here?"

An affair. A fling, Clarice admitted. "It meant nothing. Just someone to amuse me. After all, you work horrible hours and there's never anyone for me to play with while you're gone." Clarice pouted. "Surely you can understand," Clarice said.

Trinn knew she actually did expect her to answer in the affirmative. However, Trinn didn't understand. So one day shortly after Clarice's confession, while Clarice was at work, Trinn left. She packed up her car, called in sick at Creek's, and went apartment hunting. After that, she visited a discount mattress store and bought a bed. It was all she needed to start with--just a comfortable place to sleep. The rest would come later.

Trinn decided she just couldn't put up with another confrontation that went nowhere. She simply left a message on their answering machine telling Clarice it was over. She knew it would seem to Clarice the chicken's way out, but to Trinn it was a simple matter of knowing there was no need to discuss it any further. There was nothing left for her and Clarice.

Trinn put her relationship behind her. As time passed, she realized she should have broken it off months before Clarice's admission. Unfortunately, the one part of Clarice that followed her into her new life was her debt. And it wasn't the last she had heard from the woman, either.

Trinn pulled out a long-sleeved tee shirt and a pair of comfortable lightweight sweatpants. Once she was dressed, she put a pot of coffee on and went through yesterday's mail. Most of it was junk and she threw it in the wastebasket without even opening it. The last envelope was another credit card bill. Her grandmother's parting words to her were not to let this stop her from making her decision. If she needed help paying the bill, her grandmother had said, she would be happy to give her the money. When Trinn refused, her grandmother told her she should just consider it an early payment of her inheritance. As Trinn kissed her goodnight, she promised she would think about it.

Trinn tore open the envelope and removed the statement, groaning at the balance. She had figured out if she never charged another thing, and she put every last penny she could scrape together after paying her other bills, it would probably take her another ten years to pay the thing off. Trinn's sigh turned to a groan. Her grandmother's offer was starting to sound like a really good idea.

AS TRINN SAT at her kitchen counter reading the paper and drinking her coffee, the phone rang. A glance at the neon clock told her it was nine o'clock exactly. A wry grin appeared across her face. Prompt, isn't he?

She reached for the cordless phone and walked over to her computer, bringing the screen to life with a movement of her mouse.

"Hello?"

"Ah, good morning, Miss Wells. How are you this morning?"

Trinn recognized the accented voice. "I'm fine, Mr. Truly. And how are you?" She propped the phone against her ear, holding it with her shoulder and typed into the search field. W-y-c-o-m-b-e followed by s-o-l-i-c-i-t-o-r. She hit "enter" and listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

"How I am will depend on your answer, Miss Wells. Have you had a chance to consider yesterday's offer? Will you come to London to speak to my employer?"

Would she? "I'm seriously considering it. But I need some assurance this isn't just some scam. How do I know you aren't some trafficker in human flesh and you'll tie me up and ship me off to some house of prostitution to work as your sex slave for the rest of my life?"

"Have you ever considered writing a novel, Miss Wells? You certainly have the imagination for it."

Trinn smiled. When a list materialized on her computer screen, she clicked on the first entry. The Web site was for a John and Robert Wycombe, solicitors in Sussex. She tried the next entry. It read, "--High Street solicitor, Miss Sidney Wycombe, providing a personal touch in Conveyancing, Family Law, and Wills and Probate." A long string of numbers for phone and fax followed. The address listed was 71 St. John's Wood High Street, NW8 7NL, London. Sidney Wycombe was for real.

"So, have you made a decision?"

"What do I need to do?"

Lawrence replied in a measured tone. "I'll arrange everything for you. You won't need to do a thing. I'll have a limo pick you up at your residence and your plane tickets will be all arranged. I assume that your passport is in order?"

"Yes, I used it for a trip to France during my culinary training. It's still valid." "Wonderful. All you need do is pack your bags. I'll call you back later today and give you all the particulars. All right?" "Um, how long should I plan on staying, Mr. Truly?" "Why don't you pack for a week or two, Miss Wells? We won't know the duration of your stay until you talk to Miss Wycombe."

A week or two? That was a long time. She needed to look for a job. And the credit card bill sitting on the corner of the table wasn't going to pay for itself. "Can't you tell me anything about this?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid. Miss Wycombe will tell you everything when you get here. I'm going to get you on a plane just as soon as I can. Perhaps tonight, if we're lucky."

They ended with the usual pleasantries and she cradled the phone. Tonight? She'd better make some arrangements. Call her grandmother and, oh god, she'd have to call her mother and tell her she was leaving town. What would she tell her? Her grandmother might be able to help. She'd talk to her first.

SIDNEY PACED BACK and forth in her office. With the door open, she could hear Lawrence on the phone, but couldn't determine if he was getting a positive response from Trinn Wells or not. Her heart pounded. She stopped her pacing for a moment and took a deep breath, trying to calm her anxiety. Trinn had to accept the offer. She just had to. If she didn't, Sidney was afraid all would be lost, and the memory of Briarcrest would die. She couldn't live with the idea of

failure. For so many long years her family had searched for a way to preserve the heritage. It couldn't stop with her. She wouldn't allow it.

As she made her way around the room one more time, she heard Lawrence say, "I'll arrange everything for you--." Sidney stopped pacing. Was Trinn coming? She listened as he spoke.

"Just pack your bags. I'll call you back later today and give you all the particulars. All right?"

Sidney matched the grin Lawrence wore as he walked through the door to her office.

"She's coming, isn't she?" Sidney looked hopeful.

He clapped his hands together. "Yes. She's coming. She sounds very tentative about how long she'll stay, but at least she'll be here."

Sidney's knees felt rubbery. She sat in her guest chair with a thud. "It'll be my responsibility to try to keep her here. Good work, Lawrence. I know you worked hard to make this happen."

"Not as hard as I'm going to have to work now. I'm going to try to get her on a plane tonight. I've got reservations to make--plane, hotel, limo. I'd better get going. I just wanted to make sure you knew."

"Thank you, Lawrence. I'm very grateful."

He smiled. "I know."

TRINN'S GRANDMOTHER SQUEALED with delight when she heard Trinn had decided to go to England.

"And don't fret about your mother, Trinn. You're a grown woman. You've every right to have some fun for a few days. Don't let her intimidate you."

"I know, Nanna. Now that I've made my decision, I'm determined not to let her interfere. I'll be firm with her."

"Good. Now you let me take care of the credit card bill. I don't want to hear any objections. You come on over and pick up your money before noon. I don't want to miss my Crystals and Auras class. I'm going to give you two checks. The second is for your trip. You'll need some spending money, you know."

Trinn felt overwhelmed by her grandmother's generosity. "I'll pay you back, Nanna. I promise."

"Oh, pish, Trinny, don't worry about it. I told you, you can just have a portion of your inheritance now. What's the alternative? That you have to struggle and scrape while you wait for me to die?"

You might as well give me the pleasure of knowing it's helped you when you needed it and while I can still appreciate the good it's doing."

Trinn thanked her and said her goodbyes. As she hung up the phone, she felt a little overwhelmed by the details of what needed to be done before she left on her trip. A list swirled in her head. She grabbed a pad and pen and began writing.

A SHORT TIME later, the list was done. Another glance at the neon clock told her she'd better get going if she was going to make it to her grandmother's before Crystals and Auras. A smile reappeared on her face as her grandmother's newfound interest in the New Age movement swirled in her head. Crystals and Auras, hey? You go, Nanna. She wondered if her mother knew about the class. She didn't think so since she hadn't gotten one of those, do-you-knowwhat-your-grandmother-is-doing-now, calls recently. Trinn frowned and added one more thing to her list.

Call mom to say goodbye

That would be interesting.

Trinn removed a deposit slip from her checkbook and gathered up her car keys along with the two envelopes she would drop at the post office on the way back from her grandmother's place. She wondered about Lawrence Truly's plan to call her back with the particulars of the trip. What if his call came while she was out? Well, if Mr. Truly knows so much about me, he probably has my cell phone number. I guess he'll either call my cell or he'll have to leave a message.

Trinn scowled as another question crossed her mind. Should she activate international calling on her cell? She tried to dismiss it, but it would be so easy to make contact with people back in the States once she was in London. She walked back to her list and wrote *call cell service – international calling?* Then she walked out the door.

The next few hours passed in a whirlwind. Trinn stepped through her checklist without much time to think about the fact that she was about to do something very out of character. Responsibility was a hallmark for her. Her mother had instilled it in her. That's why she had been so determined to pull herself out of the depths of the debt Clarice had left with her. She had never been in such a financial state. Sure, she'd never made a lot of money, but she'd always spent within her means, using her credit card only in emergencies, or to buy things for which she had already saved the money. It hadn't been easy, but at least she had been relatively debt free, that is, until Clarice gave her the shaft. She shook her head in an attempt to banish Clarice from her mind.

Following the plan she had laid out for herself earlier in the day, she stopped by her grandmother's and picked up the checks. Her grandmother reiterated how excited for her she was and, hugging her close, wished her a wonderful trip. On her way back to her apartment, Trinn dropped the credit card payment in the mailbox. As she did, she felt a sense of freedom--a feeling that, now, she was ready for her journey.

The newspaper said the weather in London had been 68 yesterday and was to be 70 today, pleasant late summer weather. Today is probably already yesterday there, isn't it? She snickered at her notion, feeling absolutely giddy with anticipation. Accessing the Internet five-day forecast--surely she wouldn't be there any longer than that--showed a chance of showers in the middle of the week, but the rest of the time it looked like London's forecast was for pleasant weather.

Her conversation with the solicitor couldn't possibly take longer than a couple of hours. However, Mr. Truly had promised her some sightseeing, and a few days touring the sights of London would be great. She'd come back to Boston refreshed and ready to find another job. Maybe even a better job than the one she had at Creek's. After all, there were a myriad of fine restaurants in Boston and the surrounding area. She could make a name for herself at any one of them.

She sniffed at what working for Alexander Creek had meant to her. How had she ever believed she'd actually be able to put up with his pretentious attitude? Now it was over.

Trinn glanced at her watch and tried to decide if she should make the phone calls on her list or not. Mr. Truly hadn't called and she was concerned he wouldn't be able to reach her if she tied up her phone. She looked at her checklist. She could start packing.

A few minutes later, her clothes were laid out, ready for the small wheeled suitcase she had wrestled from the closet. It was time to start making phone calls.

Her conversation with her cell phone carrier proved her assumption had been correct. To add international calling to her cell phone, even for a brief period was expensive, but she decided to go for it and told the woman at the other end to sign her up. *Check*. All she needed to do now was finish packing--and call her mother. Trinn groaned. "I'll leave that call until last," she grumbled. The phone rang as she put the last article of clothing into her suitcase. It was Truly.

"Good afternoon, Miss Wells," the now familiar voice said. Trinn glanced at her watch. Two-fifteen. God, what time is it in the UK? She didn't have time to calculate because Truly began bombarding her with details. He sounded tired.

"You are on British Airways flight 214. It leaves Boston at 8:05 this evening your time and arrives at Heathrow at 6:40 a.m. UK time tomorrow. Elite Executive Limo Service will pick you up at your apartment at 5:30 tonight. The driver's name is Gilbert Ortiz. When you get to Logan Airport, bypass the normal check-in counter and go directly to the British Airways First lounge. Just give them your name. They will have your ticket there and will take your bags for check-in. Shall I give Mr. Ortiz this number at which to call you?"

"Why don't you give him my cell number? That way, you'll have it, too. I've activated international calling and I'll be bringing it with me."

"Good. I'll have the driver call you when he arrives at your apartment. He'll come up to help you with your bags."

Trinn finished scribbling the details Truly had given her. "The driver won't need to come up. I've only got one small bag and I'll carry it on the plane with me." A long pause followed. "Is something wrong, Mr. Truly?"

He cleared his voice. "No, not really. I just wondered if you were bringing enough clothes with you for your stay. The weather in London does vary a bit. Be sure to bring a jacket."

"I have one. I'm sure I've packed enough. I don't plan on staying very long. I have business to attend to and need to get back here fairly quickly."

"I see." Truly paused. "Do you have all the travel information?"

"I believe so.

"Do you have any questions?"

Trinn stared at the scribbles on the pad in front of her. "Only one. What happens when I get to London?"

"I'll be there to meet you myself. I'll take you to your hotel and let you get settled."

"How will I recognize you, Mr. Truly?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'll recognize you and I'll introduce myself. Once you get settled, I'd suggest you stay awake as long as you can to adjust to the time and avoid jet lag." Truly's voice cracked almost imperceptibly. "We'll let you have tomorrow to adjust, and you can meet with Miss Wycombe the following day."

"One more question, Mr. Truly?"

"Certainly, Miss Wells."

"What time is it in London right now?" She imagined him looking at his watch.

"It's 7:22 in the evening."

"You sound tired."

"It has been a long day, but I'm happy to say all the arrangements have been made and, I assure you, you'll have upper class treatment all the way. I'm looking forward to meeting you."

"I'm looking forward to meeting you, too, Mr. Truly." She meant it.

"See you in a few hours, Miss Wells."

"I hope you can get some rest in the meantime."

"Oh, I will, don't worry. I'm ready to leave the office after one more quick call to the limo service. Safe trip, Miss Wells."

After Trinn hung up, she stood staring at the information she had written on the pad. First class all the way. Elite Executive Limo, British Airways First Lounge. She was willing to bet she had at least a business class seat on the flight. "Wow." Everything on the list had been crossed off except one item. Call mom to say goodbye. She muttered to herself. This wasn't going to be fun.

TRINN MANAGED TO put off calling her mother for another thirty minutes while she tidied up the apartment. When she finally did dial the number, Virginia Wells answered on the first ring as if she were sitting by the phone just waiting for her daughter to call. Trinn felt the familiar strain engaging in small talk with her mother gave her, until, inevitably, the conversation turned to an underlying thread of disappointment about Trinn's life, especially when Trinn disclosed she had quit her job at Creek's.

Virginia tsked. "Now, why did you go and do that, Katherine?" Her mother almost never called her by the name of endearment the rest of her family used. They called her Trinn because that's what the very young Katherine Wells had called herself. Her father insisted they name her Katherine, maintaining it was an old family name. Her mother agreed, not for its historical significance, but because it seemed dignified enough for her daughter. "You know, I always objected to your father letting you quit college to go to cooking school."

Trinn tried to ignore her irritation as she said, "The Culinary Institute, Mother. It's hardly high school cooking class." Her mother would never understand anything about her aspirations or her problems. She wouldn't be able to comprehend the indignities Alexander Creek's workers, including Trinn, had suffered at his hand. Even though her mother had wanted her to finish college and "make something of herself," she never considered her daughter's accomplishments in the world of culinary arts worth much. Trinn had won several New England area and national awards with her creations, but it was meaningless to Virginia. To her, Trinn was a cook. Mere kitchen help. After a long pause, her mother returned to her original question, her disappointment clear.

"It's a long story, Mother. Believe me, I wouldn't have quit unless it was absolutely necessary."

Trinn heard her mother sniff her disapproval. To her credit, her next remark was a valiant attempt to be more positive. "Well, perhaps it's for the best, dear. Maybe your next position won't have you working night and day, seven days a week. It might afford you the time to have a social life and you can find yourself a nice man--"

"You know that's not going to happen, Mother." Trinn tried not to let the disgust show in her voice. Would her mother never let up? It was bad enough that she denied the fact that her daughter was not a heterosexual, but her blatant attempts to fix her up with every eligible bachelor she came in contact with were embarrassing.

"Well, you can't blame me for trying." The laugh that followed didn't echo someone who was happy with her daughter's life.

Trinn tried to block the response from popping into her mind but it materialized anyway. I could blame you for trying, but it doesn't seem to do any good. She didn't want to quarrel with her mother. Not now. So she didn't answer.

In the resulting silence, Virginia said, "Clarice called me the other day."

It took everything within Trinn to stifle the scream and still more effort to keep from snapping at her mother for fostering a continued relationship with the woman Virginia Wells never liked in the first place. Her mother had denied her true relationship with Clarice when she was in the midst of it, but now, for some reason, she wanted Trinn to embrace it. "Clarice is old news, Mother. We have nothing in common any more. I'm not sure we ever did. I don't understand why you keep returning her calls." Virginia had caller ID. She could easily screen Clarice if she wanted to.

"She told me she just wants to be friends with you. She doesn't understand why you won't talk to her. She's a very nice girl, if it has to be a girl."

Trinn groaned. "We've been all through this. I'm not interested in Clarice. It's over. We have nothing to offer one another and I really don't want to talk about her any more."

"Well, all right, dear. Whatever you want. I just hoped you might give Clarice another chance. She could probably be of help to you financially right now. Since you've lost your job and all."

The words hung in the air around Trinn. Her mother never knew Clarice had run their credit card way past its limits before Trinn found out what was going on. Or that most of the debt was the result of Clarice's affair. Trinn refused to discuss the details of her life with her mother. In this case, it would have been more disappointment heaped upon an already tall mound of disenchantments. However, not telling her was beginning to backfire, because now her mother was trying to push her back to Clarice. She had to put a stop to this.

"I'll manage. There are things about Clarice I've never discussed with you. I really don't have time to get into it now, but let's just say we're all better off without her in our lives. You'll have to trust me on this one. Besides, I've got something else to tell you." She plunged in quickly, before her mother had a chance to offer any more advice on Clarice. "I'm taking a trip." She hoped the information would change her mother's focus.

"Oh?"

Trinn heard the tension in her mother's voice and knew Virginia would envision the worst. The worse would be that she was moving out of the area to look for work. Part of Trinn wanted to let her think it. The other part felt sorry for her. "I'll just be gone for a few days, maybe a week at the most. I'm going to London."

"London? Whatever for?" Trinn heard Virginia's level of apprehension go up a notch.

"Just a little get-away. After everything that's happened, I decided I deserved a break."

"Don't you think running off to London when you've just lost your job is a little irresponsible, Katherine?"

How could she appease her mother without letting her know what was going on? The last thing Virginia Wells needed to hear was that Trinn was going off to chase after the ghosts of Briarcrest. "I won a trip. It was a couple of months ago. I had three months to claim the prize," she lied. "This seems like an opportune time to do it. It'll give me a little break. Some distance. You know, perspective. When I come back, I'll be ready to plunge back into the job market and get that next great job." Then, because she did love her mother, in spite of Virginia's penchant to control her, she added, "You know, here, in Boston somewhere." She could almost feel her mother relax at the other end of the line.

"I see. Well--." Finally, Virginia Wells sounded resigned. "When are you leaving?"

"In a couple of hours."

"Really! Well, that was quick, wasn't it?"

Trinn wondered if her mother really believed her. "Yes, well, as soon as I called to claim my prize, the whole thing just fell into place and I figured there was nothing keeping me from going. I might as well go for it." An image of Estelle, excited about the adventure came to her, but she knew better than to tell her mother her grandmother had encouraged her to go. Her mother would never understand that kind of spontaneity. Trinn glanced over at the neon clock. They had been talking for forty minutes and Trinn was ready to end the call. "I need to go. I've still got a few more things to do before my ride to the airport comes, so I'll say goodbye."

Her mother hesitated. She always did, not wanting to let Trinn go.

"Mother? I need to go. I've got things to take care of for my trip."

"Well, all right, Katherine. Please be careful and have a safe trip."

Trinn shook her head. Not have a wonderful time or make sure you see a great play while you're in London. Just be careful and try to keep from getting yourself killed in the process.

Trinn suppressed a groan. "I will."

As Trinn returned the handset back to the cradle, she whispered, "Well, that went well. She only tried to fix me up with a man, get me back with Clarice, keep me from taking the trip of a lifetime, and gave me a reverse death wish. That's my mother." She couldn't wait to get out of Boston for a while.

Trinn got up, checked the contents of her suitcase one last time, and wheeled it to the door. She laid her jacket over the case. Her conversation with her mother left her exhausted. She pulled out her cell phone and saw it was still on and the battery was fully charged. She opened the London travel book she had bought earlier in the day. Only the first few words registered before she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Four

TRINN STOOD IN a courtyard of hard-packed dirt. Deep, thick ruts ran down the middle of the opening, evidence of wheels sinking into mud during seasons of rain. Embedded in a thick, cut-stone façade in front of her, stood two massive wooden doors, the entrance to a large old-world castle. A high stone wall enclosed the structure, a large wooden double gate open to reveal a winding road, tracing the edge of a stream.

Trinn put her hand up to shade her eyes from the late afternoon sun. Only a few wispy clouds punctuated the azure dome overhead. She had no idea where he came from, but she was aware of him as he approached and danced at her feet. The little black dog named MacGregor spun around in front of her and barked his greeting. As she bent to calm him, one of the castle doors swung open a little way and Catty poked his head out.

"MacGregor, lad. What's all the fuss? Oh, it's you."

She looked up into the bright golden eyes. "Yes, it is. I had no idea where I was. I'm glad we've had another meeting, Catty." She bent down to stroke MacGregor, who had stopped barking and sat in front of her calmly. "You and MacGregor, both."

"Well, now you're here, you'd better come in. You must need some refreshment after your journey. Have you been on the road long?"

"Uh--not really." Was this the same day of her first meeting with Catty and MacGregor? Or had days, even years, passed?

Seeing her puzzled look, he said, "Well, it is several days since we saw you in the meadow, MacGregor and I, so I assumed you've been traveling. Where are you coming from?"

"Uh--I'm from Boston."

"Ah, so you said. You moved from Plymouth. As I said when you told me, a far journey. So, are you on your way to Plymouth once more?"

"Um--no. I seem to be on my way--here."

Catty cocked his head, a quizzical look on his face. He broke into a wide smile and said, "Well, it's your good fortune, for we welcome pilgrims here." He opened the door wide and gestured her to enter.

She stepped inside and immediately noticed a contrast in temperature. The air outside had been warm, but inside the place was cool, almost cold. Catty wore the same outfit she had seen him wear in the meadow and he seemed to be warm enough against the indoor chill. The green felt hat he had worn when she first saw him was absent, and Trinn now noticed his thick, short black hair. He was quite handsome, this Catty, whoever he was. She estimated him to be younger than she was, perhaps about twenty-five. For a brief moment she wondered, if Mother met him, would she try to fix me up with him? No, she decided. He's a little too--what was the word--effeminate? No, that wasn't right. Delicate? That wasn't right either. Perhaps slight is the word. He wasn't a large man, although he nearly matched Trinn's five feet five inches. She studied Catty's smooth, angular jaw. No, Mother wouldn't try to fix me up with him, thankfully.

She stopped her ruminations as Catty spoke and made a wide gesture toward a long hall. "Well, Mistress Trinn of Boston, welcome to my home. Welcome to Briarcrest."

Trinn's head snapped in his direction. "Briarcrest?"

She gazed down the length of the hall. A thick-planked table spanned half the room, easily accommodating twenty diners. Benches lined either side of the table and two large, ornately carved chairs sat at either end. At the far end of the table, a well-worn stone staircase ascended to a landing above and to the right of the stairs in an alcove on the lower level was a large stone fireplace. A fire burned in the hearth against the chill of the room in spite of the warmth of the day.

"Briarcrest," Trinn whispered wistfully. Her heart pounded in her chest as she tried to take it all in. Was it real? She couldn't believe she was here. Briarcrest. No wonder MacGregor seemed like an old friend.

"Yes, Briarcrest," Catty repeated.

He invited her to sit by the fire and MacGregor jumped up on the bench beside him, laying his chin on Catty's knee. All the while they talked, the little dog watched her through intense, dark, almond-shaped eyes. She couldn't help but feel the dog understood every word they were saying.

Trinn had just asked Catty about the history of Briarcrest, hoping to get a handle on the time period. But just as he started to respond, a man entered the room. He was dressed in brown leggings and a tunic of sage green. He stopped abruptly and several figures wrapped in dark cloaks almost ran into him. When they saw Trinn, the group shrank back and huddled close together.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Master Catty. I--I didn't know you had a guest." He eyed Trinn with suspicion.

Catty rose from his seat and MacGregor followed at his heels. The dog looked back over his shoulder at Trinn as he pranced along.

"It's all right, Alfred," Catty said. "Trinn is a pilgrim who is passing through on a far journey. We must be hospitable."

Alfred leaned in closer to Catty and said in a low voice, "Do you know where she's from and why she's here?"

Catty stared at the man for a long time before answering. "Why, she's from Boston. And I'm certain she's to be trusted. MacGregor has accepted her from the first. You know that isn't like him."

Alfred peeked out from behind Catty and eyed Trinn. "It is true, but I'm not sure it's wise, Master."

The people behind Alfred crowded closer to each other as the two men spoke. Catty, who stood several inches above Alfred, noticed them each pull their cloaks tighter around them. "Why don't you take our friends, here, to the library. It might be better to err on the side of caution."

"Yes, Master Catty," Alfred said. He turned to the group of dark figures behind him and said something Trinn could not understand and the group shuffled after him. They disappeared down a hallway. The smallest figure in the group walked slower than the rest. Before leaving, she turned and made eye contact with Trinn. She was a child, no more than ten or eleven years old. Exotic was the only word Trinn could think of to describe the girl. She had dark, liquid, almost black eyes. They matched her dark hair, a small tuft of which stuck out from beneath the hood of the cloak wrapped around her. Trinn felt a shiver run through her body and wondered who these people were and what they were doing here.

Catty returned to his seat and smiled as if nothing unusual had happened.

Trinn couldn't get the image of the girl out of her mind. "You seem to get a lot of pilgrims stopping by here."

Catty looked in the direction where the people had disappeared. He leaned back in his seat and said, "Yes, we do. Now, more than ever, it seems." His next remark was almost in a whisper, as if he was speaking to himself. "They keep coming and coming."

She wondered briefly what he meant, but didn't have long to dwell on it. A high-pitched noise pierced the quiet. Trinn looked at Catty hoping he would investigate and make it stop, but he ignored it. He seemed buried in his own musings as he stared past her into the fire burning in the massive stone fireplace. As she stared, Catty began to shimmer. Parts of him became transparent. The noise continued. Trinn got up to approach him, but as she did, she felt dizzy, disoriented. She closed her eyes for a second to get her bearings and as she opened them, Catty and Briarcrest Hall disappeared completely. She shook her head and realized she was in her own apartment.

The London tour book lay open on her lap and her cell phone was screeching, insisting she respond. Her chest heaved as she fumbled to retrieve the phone from her belt. "Hello?"

"Miss Wells, this is Gilbert Ortiz. Elite Executive Limo Service with your ride to the airport. I'm parked in front of your building. Do you want me to come up to take your bags?"

Trinn rubbed her face with her free hand. "No, no. I'll be right down." As if to reassure herself, she said, "You don't need to come up. I only have one small bag. I'm not staying in London long." The snap of her cell phone cover ended the call. She glanced around the apartment to make sure everything was in order and walked out to meet the waiting limo.

TRINN FOUND HER bed in the first-class cabin to be amazingly comfortable. Although it was a little narrow, she couldn't get over how much it felt like a real bed and how secluded it was when the flight attendant put up the privacy screen. For the duration of the flight, Trinn slept the sleep of angels without dreaming. The next thing she knew, she awoke to the lights in the cabin slowly increasing in intensity. The flight attendant wished her good morning and handed her a moist, warm facecloth with which Trinn wiped the sleep from her eyes. When they touched down at Heathrow Airport, the orange juice she sipped barely moved in the glass.

As they taxied to the gate, a voice with a charming English accent said, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to London Heathrow Airport. The local time is 6:39 a.m. The temperature in London is currently 59 degrees with clear skies--." They were given baggage carousel information and instructions for going through customs, the seatbelt sign shut off and the plane door opened. Trinn marveled at being in London, but when she speculated as to the purpose of this visit she had to admit, she had no real answer to her question about why she was there.

After having cleared customs, Trinn walked down a long corridor pulling her suitcase behind her, wondering how she would find Lawrence Truly. She chastised herself for not at least getting the man to describe himself. Was she looking for a short, fat man with a thick head of hair or a balding, tall one? She had no idea. She should have asked. She should have--and there he was. The golden haired man dressed in a tailored, pinstriped suit, holding up a sign with block lettering that read T. WELLS.

As she approached him, he smiled at her in recognition. "Hello, Miss Wells," he said holding out his free hand. "Allow me to take your bag for you."

She didn't know why, but she liked him instantly.

Chapter Five

CHARLES ABERCROMBIE STARED at Janet Grimsdell as she sat behind her large mahogany desk. He picked up a gold letter opener from the desk and twisted it in his hand. An attractive woman. But too strong a personality, for me, he reasoned. Of course, she is young enough to be my niece. He pointed the letter opener toward Janet. "Sidney may prove to be a problem, you know. She has her father's determination, I'll give her that."

A frown darkened Janet's face. "Charles, do shut up. Sidney is not the problem. The problem is that place. It consumes her. Once this project is over, I'll have relieved her of her obsession with it and she won't have to focus on it any more. Perhaps she will be able to get on with her life. All of us will be able to get on with our lives." The sun streaming through the window on the warm summer afternoon glinted on the letter opener as Charles twirled it in his hand.

Janet leaned across the desk and yanked it from his grip. "Give me that thing. You're driving me crackers with it. Now, let's go over the plan again."

Charles' eyes narrowed and he snapped, "I'm not stupid, Janet. I know what needs to be done. Let's just leave it to me. I can handle Sidney. I'll get the information from her."

"She mustn't know I'm involved. If she finds out, it will ruin everything."

He nodded. "Don't worry. I won't reveal your precious little secret."

She stabbed at the air in his direction with the opener. "And you're not to lay a finger on her, understand? I won't have you acting like an American gangster."

He sneered at her. "Brutality isn't my style. I've already told you that. As I said before, I know what I'm doing. Besides, why would I want to harm my dear niece?"

Janet said, "Oh, I don't know. Could it have something to do with being shut out of your supposed inheritance by your half-brother? Resenting Sidney for being entrusted with the family confidences instead of you?"

A low growl came from Charles' throat. "You have no right--"

"I have every right. She who has the money calls the shots." She cackled. "In case you haven't noticed, Charles, I, Janet Grimsdell, preeminent lands developer, am the one with all the money." She poked the letter opener in his direction to emphasize her words. "Not you."

She replaced the opener on her desk and tapped one end to adjust it perfectly parallel with the edge of her leather blotter. She brought her hands up, fingers together and stared him in the eye. "So you see, Charles, I'm afraid I'm the one in charge here. You," she pinned him with her dark look, "do as I say."

His jaw tightened, muscles twitching. He didn't like being reminded she was the one with the power. He only recently decided to take her up on her offer to come to work for her. He needed the money. Janet had promised to pay him a tidy sum if he would assist her in obtaining information from Sidney regarding the land she wanted for her pet project. Some idea about a retail center combined with residential living after the style the Americans were so crazy about. Whatever. She was new at property development, but she seemed to know what she was doing. He knew little about it. And he knew even less about why Janet was so obsessed with what Sidney knew about the land she had chosen to develop. The land Janet suspected was connected to the old family lore about Briarcrest. Janet thought he knew all about it.

In fact, Charles hadn't a clue as to what help he could actually be in this situation because he had no claim to Briarcrest. No claim, and very little knowledge. That had been left to his half brother, Sidney's father. When his brother was dying, Charles had surmised he would call him to his deathbed and pass the mysteries of Briarcrest on to him as his heir apparent. But Trevor Wycombe had chosen his daughter, Sidney, instead. She was fresh from university and just starting to practice property law at the time. Charles' thin mustache rose with his upper lip in a deprecatory smile. "Just leave Sidney to me. I'll get your information."

"She's up to something, you know."

"So you have said. But you don't have any idea what."

"No, I don't. All I know is I'm deeply concerned she may come up with a way to register the land as a National Historic Park or something before I can complete my project. If she does plan something like that, I want her stopped. She'll ruin everything."

"I didn't think she could do that. I presumed only the Briarcrest heir has that right. The Wycombes are not the heirs. They are only the caretakers. Keepers, they call themselves."

"Keepers, caretakers--I'm sick of it all. That's what infuriates me about Sidney. She's given her damn life for that place as if she were the heir, but she's not. I have my reasons for wanting to develop that land. Even though I stand to make a tidy sum over it, it's not my real motivation." She stopped abruptly and Charles wondered if she would elaborate, but she didn't. "However, if there were some demonstrable historical significance about the site, she could, in fact, do something to prevent me from developing it."

Janet waved her hand dismissing gossamer perceptions. "As far as anyone knows, there hasn't been an heir for generations. Why doesn't Sidney just give it up? Doesn't she know she needs to get a life? Anyone who knows her would think she has done her best. Done enough, but no. She's married to that bloody phantom place, so she doesn't have time for anything else."

Charles stared at the pattern in the rug in front of him. He'd never heard cool, calculating Janet Grimsdell rant like this, and it made him uncomfortable. He didn't even understand what she was angry about. Not really. As he watched her, he wondered how he could have ever considered her attractive? Best to take his leave before that pounding jugular vein on the side of her neck burst. An image of blood spurting all over the walls, all over him, impelled him. He grasped the arms

of his chair and pushed himself up. "Ehhem. I think I'd better be off if I'm going to make my luncheon date with Sidney. Don't want to be late, do I?"

Janet looked at him as if seeing him through a fog. "You do that, Charles. Just make sure you come back with some information I can use."

He turned his most charming smile on for her. "Don't worry. I'm quite confident my little fishing expedition will yield something we can use." He had no idea what he could pry from Sidney, but he knew he'd have to try.

SIDNEY AND CHARLES sat at a small table at the Harry Morgan Deli. While Charles pushed his matzo balls around in his soup broth, he rambled on about another of his moneymaking schemes. This one was rather vague, having to do with property management of some kind. Perhaps he hoped she'd be interested in the topic because of her own career in conveyance law. Munching on her turkey sandwich on crusty bread, she tried, unsuccessfully, to give him her full concentration. Her mind wandered to what she would say when she finally met with Trinn Wells.

Should she start by telling her about the Wycombe family's roll as the Keepers of Briarcrest? No, that would probably bore her to death. She'd have to take another avenue. Perhaps a request for help was the best approach. Of course she'd have to explain her part in it, but that could come later.

The information that had been passed down in her family was that, although no buildings were left on the land, there was an underground tunnel somewhere. Her father had spent years searching for it without any luck. Sidney, herself, on occasion, went to the countryside outside of Swindon. She walked the land they suspected to be the site where Briarcrest Castle once stood in the hope of stumbling on something. She never found anything either. It had been said that her ancestors knew where the entrance was located, but the answer to that riddle had been lost long ago.

In order to preserve the land once and for all, an heir would have to try to register it with a legal claim. If they were successful, it would stop anyone else from developing it. Desecrating it, Sidney decided. Would Trinn be willing to get involved? She wasn't sure she could be convincing enough. It all depended on her ability to rouse Trinn's curiosity--and being able to impart a sense of the importance of Briarcrest. Would finding out about the artifacts do it? She hoped so. That would be her tactic. She would dangle them in front of Trinn's nose. The lovely blond coiffed face came to her and she responded with a winsome smile.

"Sidney, I do believe you aren't even listening to me." Charles waved his spoon in front of her. "Where are you? You seem very far off."

Sidney apologized, telling him she had a great deal on her mind. "You know how the conveyance business is." She hoped he'd accept her answer as a legitimate excuse.

"Well, speaking of conveyances, I have a friend who has a great idea to develop some land into one of those residential-commercial complexes. You know the sort. They love them in America. Shops on the street level and apartments up above. A regular little community. Everything in one place. Convenient."

"We've already got plenty of those kinds of developments in London. We've had them forever."

"Oh, it's not in London. It's out in the countryside. Near enough to a city, though." Trying to sound as if he had just made a connection, he said, "Say, come to think of it, the land is close to that place, that Briarcrest you and your father's side of the family watch so closely. Do you have any information about that land?"

Sidney's heart drummed in her chest. It was difficult to tell if she was about to have another episodic headache or if she was having an intense reaction to Charles' topic. She stared at him, waiting to see if she developed more symptoms. None came. Finally, her heart slowed to a more normal pace.

"Charles, you know I'm not at liberty to discuss anything to do with Briarcrest." Her face grew stern. "It has nothing to do with you, Charles. If father had wanted you to be involved, he would have given you the information before he died."

Charles' face reddened. "Your father was a fool. As the next male in the Wycombe family, I should have been the one to whom he passed on the information."

It didn't seem wise to point out he was only half Wycombe and he didn't even bear the Wycombe name. Her grandfather had refused to allow his illegitimate son to be called a Wycombe. He had a reputation to uphold and he insisted Charles' mother, his mistress, give the boy her own name. Since he also made it a stipulation for his continued financial support, she had little choice, and Charles grew up an Abercrombie.

Sidney looked thwarted. "Are you saying a female Wycombe is incapable of handling the affairs our family have been involved in for hundreds of years? That's rather archaic of you, Charles."

He spooned broth into his mouth and dabbed his lips with his napkin before continuing. "I've always felt your father wasn't capable of making the correct decision about passing on the information about that place before he died. After all, he was in terrible pain. The medication--"

"His pain and the medication had nothing to do with it, Charles, and you know it. He was perfectly capable of making decisions and he did what he felt was right. I'm sorry you're still upset after all these years that he didn't take you into his confidence. However it doesn't change anything. I am not at liberty to divulge anything about it to you."

In fact, Sidney knew her father had always regretted what little he had said to his younger half-brother about Briarcrest. As a child, Charles was begrudgingly included in the family's summer vacation plans. He and Trevor would often go off down the beach at the resort in Brighton to

play. Once, Trevor had divulged the family secret, assuming Charles knew about it. But he didn't.

Even at a young age, Charles looked for ways to promote himself as a real Wycombe. He let his young half brother believe he knew all about the special family secret. The only thing that kept him from some important details was that Trevor was too young to have been entrusted with them yet. Years later, when Trevor learned Charles had tried to use the information against him to secure a place for himself in the family, he concluded Charles wasn't to be trusted with the responsibilities of the Briarcrest legacy and he chose not to discuss it with his half-brother any more. It was natural for Trevor to turn over everything to Sidney when he knew he was dying.

Charles had no idea of the existence of the artifacts. Sidney's father had told her as much when he entrusted her with the knowledge as the next keeper. The fact that Charles was bringing this up now meant he was fishing for more information. What his real motive was, she had no idea. Perhaps this developer, whoever he was, wanted the information. But why?

"So where, exactly, does this developer want to do this?" she asked.

He feigned disinterest all of a sudden and said, "Oh, I don't know. It's someplace north of Swindon, maybe outside of Cricklade. I'm not sure. It's not really important."

Indeed. Sidney looked at her watch. "Oh, dear. It's nearly one o'clock. I've got to get back to the office. I'll have a client waiting for me."

Charles looked down at his half-eaten soup. "I'll walk you back."

She put up her hand to stop him from getting up. "It's not necessary. Stay and finish your lunch."

He looked down at her partially consumed sandwich. "But you haven't finished your food either, Sidney."

"It's all right. I'm not that hungry anyway. Goodbye Charles. We must do this another time soon." She hoped he wouldn't take the invitation to heart. She didn't really mean it. Now that he had brought up Briarcrest, she understood she must be wary of him. Family loyalty only went so far for a protector of the Briarcrest memory. She was out the door and headed back to the sanctuary of her office before he could open his mouth in an attempt to respond.

TRINN WALKED AROUND her room in the hotel. It was small by American standards, but she had heard hotel rooms in the United States were far larger than in Europe. The place was decorated simply with clean lines and tasteful décor. The room smelled fresh and clean. That's all that mattered to her, because it was not much smaller than her own little studio apartment in Jamaica Plain. Lawrence had told her there was a restaurant and a café in the hotel if she wanted to venture out, but she knew she could also order room service. Before departing, he had left her with his phone number and encouraged her to stay awake as long as she could, taking only a

brief nap in the afternoon. That way, he assured her, she would reset her time clock to British time.

She checked the time on the bedside clock and did a quick calculation. It was only five o'clock in the morning in Boston. If she woke Liz up at that hour, her friend would probably reach through the phone and strangle her. Liz, she knew, was not a morning person. She decided to wait to call her later in the day.

After unpacking her bag and settling into the room, she found she wasn't the least bit sleepy, so she took a shower and walked down to the hotel lobby. The café advertised an English tea, so she went in and ordered. After some English Breakfast tea and a scone with clotted cream and lemon curd, her eyelids started to feel heavy.

It was only two o'clock when she left the café. A walk might revive her and help her adapt to the time change. So, after talking to the concierge, she set off in the direction he had indicated toward Regent's Park. She didn't get very far when she decided she'd better go back to the hotel and take the nap Lawrence had recommended because she was just too tired to go on. Her eyelids closed for seconds at a time as she walked along the sidewalk and her legs felt leaden, making each step more and more difficult.

She barely made it back to her hotel room, crashing on the bed without even removing her tennis shoes. The soft bed seemed to caress her as she lay down on top of the silky comforter. She wanted to ring the front desk and ask for a wake-up call in an hour, but she found she just couldn't lift her arm to reach for the phone. She closed her eyes to the afternoon sun streaming in the hotel window.

When she opened them, she was in Briarcrest's courtyard. This time it was night. Dazzling stars shone overhead, twinkling in an ebony sky, brighter than she had ever seen them. Something about light pollution flitted across her mind as she started to explore the area. The light of the quarter moon hanging above her head didn't illuminate some of the more hidden places. The castle was dark, so she had to surmise everyone was asleep. Carefully negotiating around a corner on the far side of the yard, she sucked in her breath as she saw the shadow of a person lurking on the side of the castle. As she stared, trying to catch her breath, she realized the figure didn't move, even after a long period. Creeping closer, she had to control herself not to laugh out loud. The figure was an upright stone. Not even a carving, but a stone that naturally had the rough shape of a person. Relief washed over her, but it was short-lived.

A scraping sound startled Trinn and she jumped back and melded into the shadows. Several figures emerged from a hole in the ground. In the dim light of a lantern, she recognized Alfred. The others were wrapped in dark cloaks, their faces buried deep within the cloth with only an occasional glint of an eye reflected from the lamplight. One of the dark figures spoke. The language caught Trinn by surprise. It was Spanish.

She'd often heard it spoken among the bus boys and dishwashers in the restaurants. She spoke with them, polishing her high school Spanish. They were pleased that she took the time to try to make conversation with them. Most people didn't bother.

As Trinn stared into the night, trying to make out more detail, a wagon drawn by a thick muscled horse pulled up from somewhere out of the darkness. A teenaged boy sat astride the animal and Alfred nodded to him before turning back to the group. His whisper echoed through night air. "All right, everyone in. Quickly now." He gestured to the rear of the wagon, filled with hay. A cloaked man spoke, gesturing toward the wagon. "*Rápidamente.*"

Who were these people? Her mind went back to the young girl she had seen during her visit with Catty. This appeared to be a different group. As they moved around in the dim lamplight, jockeying for a place to get into the wagon, their hoods fell back, exposing their faces. Trinn saw all but the speaker were women. They chattered to one another softly.

"*Silencio,*" the man chided. He gestured toward the back of the wagon and again repeated his instruction to hurry. The dark figures piled in from every side. In an instant, they had covered themselves with hay and had disappeared. Alfred looked up at the young driver and said, "Off with you now. Don't stop for anything or anybody. Keep your head down and talk to no one. When you get there, someone will take care of 'em." He nodded in the direction of the wagon. "When you're done, you just turn around and come straight back home. You hear?"

The boy nodded and kicked his bare heels against the horse's flank. As the animal began to move, Alfred ran to the gate and opened it. Trinn felt her way along the castle wall and peeked around the corner as the wagon disappeared. When Alfred secured the gate, he turned and headed back in Trinn's direction. She melted into the shadows and held her breath as Alfred passed her. He stopped and turned back to look around. She wondered if he could see her as he looked in her direction, "Who's there?"

He put his lantern on the ground and picked up a stick. He took a step in her direction and growled, "You'd better show yourself, if you know what's good for you." Trinn pressed into the stone wall, hoping she couldn't be seen. Alfred moved a few steps toward her and passed right in front of her. As he did, he thrust out his hand, grabbed into the dark, and caught her by the arm.

He dragged her from her hiding place, his satisfaction obvious. "Ha!" She struggled just a little because his strong, bony grip hurt.

He dropped his makeshift weapon and scooped up the lantern. With a continued firm grip on her arm, he thrust the light into her face, blinding her for a moment. "You!" he barked. "I told Master Catty you were up to something. That's it. I'll not let him make excuses for you this time. I'll take care of you myself."

He shoved her toward the outbuildings at the back of the courtyard, cursing her under his breath as they went. She had no choice but to go along, but she wouldn't go silently. "Help!" The scream echoed in the dark, but no one came to her rescue. He pulled her toward what looked like an old hut of some sort. He opened the door and thrust her inside. She struggled against him until he managed to rip a leather thong from a hook on the wall and bind her hands behind her. He wrapped another tie around her ankles. When he was done, he pushed her down toward the muck. She lost her balance and fell face down. The stench made her wrinkle her nose in disgust. "Please, let me talk to Catty."

"I told you, I'll be taking care of you myself, this time."

"You're making a terrible mistake. I need to talk to Catty."

"My Master is fast asleep this night, without a care in the world, and I intend to keep it that way. You'll stay here and if you don't hold your tongue, I'll bind you silent."

She decided it was best to do as he said.

Without another word, Alfred walked off and left her where she lay. She heard him bolt the door from the outside. Everything went silent. Thinking her only hope of escape might be to get loose of her bindings, she set to work trying to untie them. Cold wetness penetrated her clothing where her body touched the ground. The stench made her gag. She tried not to think what the source of the smell might be. She had to get loose. After struggling for a long time, twisting her wrists in the leather ties, fatigue overtook her. Neither the dampness nor the smell could keep her roused any longer. Nor could her desperation. She didn't know how long she had been asleep when she heard the loud rapping at the door.

Struggling to open her heavy eyelids, she yelled, trying to control the frantic feeling within her chest. "I'm in here. I can't get out. Please help me."

When she finally managed to open her eyes, she could see a bright light coming from under the doorway. She rolled toward it and thrust her hands out in front of her to catch her fall as she tumbled out of bed. It took her several seconds to realize she wasn't tied up--and she was in the hotel. Another dream.

The pounding continued and, as she stumbled toward the door, she heard concern in Lawrence Truly's raised voice. "Miss Wells, are you all right?"

It took a few more seconds as she fumbled with the lock and finally managed to pull the door open. When she raised her hand to shield her eyes from the blinding light in the hall, she stumbled into Lawrence's arms.

She regained her balance and said, "Oh, Mr. Truly, I'm really sorry. I was so sound asleep. Dreaming. Actually, I guess it was a nightmare--."

"I'm relieved to hear that's all it was, Miss Wells. I was ready to call Security. I wondered if someone was in your room with you."

Trinn looked back into the darkness. "No, there's no one in here but me. Me and my strange dreams." She reached for the light switch inside the door and the room brightened.

With a puzzled look, Trinn turned back to Lawrence and asked, "Am I supposed to be somewhere? I understood you to say I wasn't going to speak to Miss Wycombe until tomorrow." Something else occurred to her and she balked. "Oh, my goodness, it isn't morning, is it? I just wanted to take a short nap--"

"No. It's only seven o'clock in the evening. I rang you about twenty minutes ago. The concierge said he saw you go up to your room during the afternoon, but hadn't seen you come down since. I decide to come up and check on you myself and I was just about to knock when I heard you cry out. I got concerned. That's when I started pounding on your door."

Trinn plopped down in a chair. "I'm sorry. I was dreaming. I seem to do that a lot lately. I'm okay now."

Truly stared at her for a few seconds. She gave him a contrite look. "Well, since I'm here, would you care to join me for dinner? We could go downstairs and eat at the hotel restaurant or we could go some place else, if you'd like."

She hesitated. "I don't want to keep you from whatever it is you would normally do."

"As luck would have it, I'm free this evening. I'd like nothing more than to have you join me."

She realized she was hungry. His company would certainly be more pleasant than eating alone. "Eating here is fine. Can you give me a minute to freshen up and make a phone call?"

"Certainly. Why don't I meet you downstairs? I'll go and get us a table in the restaurant."

After Lawrence left, Trinn went into the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and threw cold water on her face. As she dried off with the white, fluffy hotel towel, she looked in the mirror and wondered why these dreams were haunting her so powerfully. Was it the power of suggestion? She tried to remember the sequence of events. Had Lawrence told her this trip had something to do with Briarcrest before or after she met Catty? After.

She had already dreamed of MacGregor back in Boston, before speaking to Lawrence. But Catty had shown her Briarcrest Hall after Lawrence had spoken to her about Briarcrest. So, maybe it was just the power of suggestion. Maybe Briarcrest had even been in her subconscious since the incident with her father's journal. But at that time, she didn't know what Briarcrest was. She still didn't know, did she?

All she had to go on was some sketchy information from her grandmother and these weird dreams. How could the Briarcrest of her dreams be the reason Sidney Wycombe had dragged her to London? It was absurd.

Enough introspection. She was in London to have a good time. True, she had to meet with Miss Wycombe, but she didn't anticipate it taking very long. She'd have her meeting and be off to do some sightseeing before she had to return home. Maybe once she got a good rest and did something fun, she'd find these dreams were no more than stress-induced hallucinations. She threw the towel on the vanity and smiled at her reflection. Yes, she was here for a good time, and by golly, she was going to have it. But first she needed to call Liz to ask her to pick up her mail.

She picked up her cell phone and dialed Liz's cell. She'd have it with her while she was at work. After Liz answered and Trinn explained where she was, giving her the briefest of explanations of

what she was doing there, Liz let out a whoop and told her it was about time she let down her hair and went for an adventure. Trinn asked her to check on her mail and her apartment and to call her grandmother to let her know she had arrived safely. She knew her grandmother would call her mother, saving her from yet another expensive phone call. Of course, her mother wouldn't be pleased she didn't call her herself, but she'd just have to get over it.

After disconnecting her call to Liz, she checked her pockets for her wallet and card key, clicked off the lights, and headed for the hotel restaurant, vowing to spend some time with that London sightseeing book after dinner.

Trinn and Lawrence spent a leisurely evening in the hotel restaurant. "So I quit my job and stormed out of the office."

"Oh, dear. I'm certainly glad you were free to take Ms. Wycombe up on her offer, but I'm sorry you lost your job. Although it doesn't really seem to be a good fit for you anyway."

"Well, fit or not, I need the money. But having just arrived, I'm not going to think about all that. At least for a few days. All I want to do is keep my end of the bargain and meet your boss and see a couple of sights. Then I'll worry about what I'll have to do to earn my next paycheck. I've been jabbering away all night. Now it's your turn. Tell me about Lawrence Truly."

He beamed. "I love classical music. I try to go to the symphony as much as I can during the season. And I'm a bit of an armchair archeologist. I watch anything I can on the telly about it."

"I love that stuff, too. Of course, working nights I don't get to watch much of it. My friend Liz keeps telling me I should get a TiVo, but I just can't afford it right now. Maybe someday."

Trinn's curiosity got the better of her and she asked, "So what's your boss like, Lawrence?"

"Sidney's a great person. She's smart and very professional-- good at what she does. She's a bit of a history buff herself, but you'll find out all about that when you talk to her."

"History buff?"

"Yes, she's very steeped in her own history and the historical perspective of the past. She's very dedicated."

"To what?"

Lawrence wagged his finger at her. "You'll find all that out from Sidney tomorrow. For now, just know she's very devoted. That's all you need to know."

Before she knew it, it was eleven o'clock and they had polished off a bottle of wine. Before parting company, they agreed Lawrence would pick her up at the hotel at nine a.m. the next morning to escort her to her appointment with Sidney Wycombe.

Back in her room, Trinn's tour book sat unopened as she drifted off into a dreamless sleep. As she did, all the wonderful things Lawrence had said about Sidney Wycombe played like a recording in her mind.

Chapter Six

THE FROSTED GLASS of the outer office door read, *Sidney Wycombe, Solicitor*, in bold print. Lawrence escorted Trinn into the reception area and invited her to take a seat on the butter colored leather couch. Before she reached the seat, a woman dressed in an emerald green silk blouse and black tailored slacks stepped into the room. Her dark, shoulder-length hair shimmered in the morning light. She met Trinn's eyes with her own amber colored ones and said softly, "Miss Wells. Thank you so much for coming," as she extended her hand.

Trinn stared into Sidney's eyes and felt as if she were incapable of drawing her next breath. Held by Sidney's gaze, Trinn finally forced herself to extend a hand and speak. Her voice came out thready, faint. "Please, call me Trinn."

Sidney, poised and full of confidence, shook her hand and smiled. "And you must call me Sidney."

Electricity crackled between them. Trinn finally managed a remark about being happy to be there while inwardly she already knew she'd be happy to be anywhere with Sidney Wycombe. To think she had been so resistant to coming to London. Now, she wasn't sure she ever wanted to leave. Sidney gestured toward her office and Trinn led the way. The door slowly closed with an emphatic click, leaving Lawrence standing in the reception area with a quizzical look on his face.

TRINN SAT OPPOSITE Sidney facing the mahogany desk. "Let me get this straight. You're telling me I'm the heir to a place called Briarcrest. A place that doesn't really exist anymore."

"Correct."

"And you want me to help you prevent anything from happening to the land on which this now non-existent place is suspected to have once existed, but doesn't any more."

"Yes."

"And you propose to do this how?"

"We will attempt to register the land as a national listed building."

"How can you do that if there is no building?"

"That's one of the things we'll have to determine."

Trinn had the feeling she was trapped in an old Bud Abbott and Lou Costello skit. The only things that kept her grounded in her current reality were the deep pools that were Sidney's eyes and the butterflies fluttering in her stomach every time she looked into them.

Trinn took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself before speaking. "Listen, Sidney, you haven't told me how I'm supposed to be of help in all this. You're the lawyer. You know about the laws in England. I don't have a clue what the rules are around here. I barely know anything about real estate in the U.S. I'm just a lay person, but it seems to me you aren't going to be able to get something acknowledged as a listed building if there is no building."

Sidney gave her an indulgent look. "There are other things listed besides buildings. There are things like docks and piers, mileposts, monuments and sculptures."

"And Briarcrest has--?"

"There is rumor of a tunnel system. It was used to help save people from a terrible injustice a long time ago."

"Do you know where this tunnel system is?"

"I have my suspicions."

Trinn tried to hide her look of disbelief. "Suspicions."

Sidney nodded.

"Will your government declare a listed building on suspicion?"

"No. That's why I need your help. I don't have any chance of confirmation without you."

Trinn stared at Sidney. God knew she was pleasant to look at. Trinn could have continued gazing into those eyes all day. But this confused jumble of information Sidney presented made no sense. It all sounded like a riddle and she hadn't a clue how to figure it out, unless, of course, her strange dreams had something to do with it. She wondered whether or not she should ask the next question. Perhaps she didn't really want to know the answer. She decided to throw caution to the wind. "What, exactly, do you need me for?"

"To go through the artifacts," Sidney said, as if she should understand.

"Artifacts?"

"Yes. You are the only one who can do it."

"Why?"

"Because you are the heir."

Trinn shook her head, trying to get all the pieces of this puzzle to fall into place, without success.
"Do you have these artifacts?"

"I have access to them, yes."

Trinn gave her a skeptical look. "Then why haven't you looked at them yourself?"

Sidney looked incredulous. "They aren't mine. I can't." She looked deeply into Trinn's eyes and whispered, "I am not the heir-- you are."

The butterflies slammed against Trinn's stomach wall, forcing her from the guest chair opposite Sidney. Trinn ran her hand through her golden locks and paced in front of the desk. "Look, Sidney, you're going to have to stop talking in riddles if you want my help. I have no idea what this is all about." Trinn stopped and looked at Sidney only to decide it was better to keep moving while she continued. "You seem very sincere about wanting to save whatever there is of Briarcrest, but I really don't understand. Whatever is going on here makes no sense to me."

Sidney's chest rose and fell as she took a deep breath. "Shall I start at the beginning then?"

Trinn came to rest with her hands on Sidney's desk. She gulped in a breath of air and steeled herself to look into Sidney's eyes. "Fine. Just pick a place and start. Otherwise, I'm ready to go be a tourist and go home."

No she wasn't. Not when she looked into those eyes she wasn't. She wanted to stay right here, as close to Sidney Wycombe as she could. But she still needed help in order to understand.

Sidney collected herself before she began. "The history of Briarcrest, as much as we know of it today anyway, is that Briarcrest Castle was built by the first Duke of Briarcrest around 1380. It passed to his son, who married a Wellington named Beatrice. Soon after Beatrice became the Duchess of Briarcrest, her husband went off to fight for Edward III in France and was eventually killed in battle. This left Lady Beatrice in charge of a vast holding of lands and Briarcrest Castle.

"She was very successful in administering to the people and her claim on Briarcrest was never in dispute. She had a--companion. Her name was Lady Hilary Aylsham." Sidney paused and looked deeply into Trinn's eyes. They widened ever so slightly at the mention of Beatrice's female companion. Sidney continued, "They lived together at Briarcrest for many years. During this time, they had in their service a man named Henry, and later, Henry's son, Tom. Their last name was Wycombe."

Trinn tilted her head and asked, "Any relation?"

Sidney nodded. "They are my ancestors. Lady Beatrice had no children, so there was no immediate heir to all of Briarcrest. Out of concern for this, Beatrice and Hilary enlisted the help of Beatrice's niece, Lydia Wellington, to become the next heir. Lydia also had a--companion." Trinn sat up noticeably straighter. "An herbalist and member of the Spicers Guild. Some years later, Lady Lydia and Mistress Catherine came to Briarcrest."

"Catherine?"

"Yes. Catherine Hawkins."

Something Trinn's grandmother had told her years before popped into her head. There's always been a Catherine in our family, Trinn. That's the reason you were named Katherine. Your father insisted on it.

"Is she my relative?"

"No, she isn't. Your lineage is traced by the next group of people to take over Briarcrest."

"Who were they?" Trinn now found herself clinging to Sidney's words, fascinated with the story.

"In 1482, there was some trouble in the town Catherine was from. A town called Willowglen. It had to do with some rogue priests who claimed to have come in the name of the Inquisition. Actually, they came on the selfish motives of one of the pair. I'll spare you all the gory details for now."

Trinn recalled her grandmother's remark about her mother's reaction to hearing the Inquisition was related to Briarcrest. This must be the information Estelle had referenced. Trinn suppressed a shiver and nodded for Sidney to continue.

"Catherine had a goddaughter, a young woman named Catherine Lydia, or Cate, as she was known. Cate fell in with a wandering minstrel and ended up pregnant. Let's just say these priests didn't look kindly on her indiscretion and went after her with a vengeance."

"Hooo, that doesn't sound like a pleasant experience."

"No. I'm guessing it wasn't. But there is much more to the story. Since this is an oral history in my family, not all the details may be complete. It is also likely some of the details could be a little distorted. I'm hoping that examining the artifacts will clear up any discrepancies. Anyway, in the course of trying to clear Cate and get her out of the clutches of the people involved, Catherine enlisted the help of a young woman named Fiona, a Scot, who also had ties to Willowglen."

"Are you going to tell me Fiona and Cate also became companions?"

Sidney smiled. "In fact, that is what happened. And in addition, Lydia also became involved in the whole mess and was threatened by the Churchmen in the process. So Fiona and Catherine

were left to try to gain their release when they were imprisoned. It really was a horrible situation from what I understand."

Sidney saw the puzzled look on Trinn's face.

"So if Fiona and Cate eventually got together, how am I their relative?"

Sidney smiled. "Actually, you are Cate's relative. Her son, Andrew Pritchard is your ancestor."

"This is pretty complicated. How is it my last name is Wells--a name similar to Wellington, but I'm related to an Andrew Pritchard? Or is the Wells name just a coincidence that occurred further down the line?"

"No, it's not an accident. Actually, Andrew eventually adopted the Wellington name, since he was heir to Briarcrest."

They were quiet now, each alone with her ruminations. The hum of the building was all Trinn could hear until she said, "Maybe I don't want to know any more about this part of the story right now. It doesn't sound pleasant. What's your family's role in all this?"

"The Wycombes have considered themselves the helpmates of the heirs of Briarcrest for a long time. Henry owed Beatrice a debt of gratitude and he never forgot it. His family was on the verge of starving when Beatrice found them and brought them to Briarcrest. She made Henry her groundskeeper and stable master and the Wycombe's never went hungry from that time on because of that one kind act. We have been loyal to the memory of Briarcrest through the ages. It was actually Tom's son, Alfred."

Trinn's head popped up at the mention of Alfred's name.

"Alfred's family was entrusted with keeping the artifacts. Because of them, we've carried on the memory that has come down through my family." Sidney held her head high and said, "The Wycombe's have been fiercely loyal to Briarcrest." She asked, "Why did you get that look when I mentioned Alfred?"

Should Trinn tell Sidney about the dreams? She'd probably think she was a crazy, gullible American. No, she decided. She should just keep her mouth shut, at least for now. What good would it do to tell her she had met a man named Alfred at Briarcrest Castle in her dreams? Maybe it wasn't even the same person, anyway. And who was Catty? Sidney hadn't mentioned him. She wondered if there was such a person in the history of Briarcrest. "Let me ask you a question first."

Sidney nodded, a grave look on her face.

"Do you know if there's someone called Catty back there in the history of Briarcrest?"

Sidney looked down at her hands, her brow wrinkled. "I can't ever recall anything about anyone with that name. Maybe we can find something through our examination of the artifacts." There was pleading in her eyes when Sidney asked, "You will help me, won't you?"

Trinn's voice trembled as she whispered, "Yes, I'll help."

Sidney blew out her breath. She had been holding it as she waited for Trinn's answer. Now, her shoulders relaxed and she felt some of the tension drain away. There was new hope. Trinn would help. They would save Briarcrest. She felt exhilarated. "And the look on your face?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was just wrestling with this riddle."

They talked about what to do next, but Sidney couldn't keep her mind off the beautiful blond sitting before her. Was it the fact that they might finally bring safe closure to the memory of Briarcrest, or was it the possibility of spending more time with Trinn Wells that thrilled her? She decided it was both. Definitely both.

TRINN ENTERED THE reception area from Sidney's office and waved goodbye to Lawrence as she walked to the door to leave.

A few seconds later, Sidney walked into the reception area and stood in front of Lawrence's desk. He stared up at her. "Well? The suspense is killing me, Sidney. What did she say?"

The morning session with Trinn played in her mind. She had been successful in persuading her to help, but the time they had spent together had filled her with so many emotions. She needed time to think about what had just happened. She needed time to think about Trinn Wells.

"It wasn't easy convincing her, you know." She tried to keep the look on her face from revealing the answer.

"But she said yes, right?"

She could hardly contain her elation. A smile slowly appeared across her face. "She said yes."

Lawrence clapped his hands together. "Brilliant! What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing yet. Trinn's going back to the hotel. We're meeting later for an early dinner to discuss our plans." Her heart fluttered in her chest at the thought, but she knew it wasn't an attack.

Lawrence raised his eyebrows. "Would you like me to join you? After all, I don't want you two to be bored with one another's company."

Sidney smirked. "Oh, I don't think that will be necessary. We won't be bored with one another, I assure you, Lawrence. You just run along and have yourself an early evening, too. Why don't

you call that new boyfriend of yours and invite him out to dinner so you don't sit at home wondering what Trinn Wells and I are doing?" Her expression became more serious and she added, "Just don't you show up with your boy-toy at Orrery's."

His eyes widened when he heard their dinner destination was a fine, Michelin starred, restaurant. "Orrery's, eh?" He sniffed and pointed at her in mock accusation. "Not on what you pay me, Sidney Wycombe. You'll have to give me a raise if you want me to take my dates there."

"If you want a raise, you'll have to do the paperwork. Then we'll talk."

She knew he had no complaints about his income. Sidney paid him well.

"I have enough work to do, Miss Wycombe, thank you very much. I don't need all that paperwork just now. I'll leave that for another day. Meanwhile, I'll go home tonight and open a tin of tuna and have some crisps." He broke into a wide, boyish smile. "Feel sorry for me?"

She started back toward her office before turning to him to answer. "No. I don't." She smiled back at him. "Oh, could you please make a reservation for us at 6:30?"

Lawrence nodded and picked up the phone. "Shall I ask for the corner table at the end of the room--the romantic little spot?"

Yes, as a matter of fact, the romantic little spot would be perfect, but she wasn't about to acknowledge that to him. "That will be fine," she said, trying to keep any emotion from her face. When she stepped into her office and closed the door, she leaned against the door, trying to compose herself. Trinn Wells did something to her that no other woman had ever done.

SIDNEY SAT AT her desk, daydreaming about her encounter with Trinn. So Trinn was skeptical, but she was also adorable. Sidney put her hand on her chest to check her racing heart. This was no health problem; it was a heart problem.

I can't let any feelings for Trinn get in the way of this project. I have to be professional. Otherwise, I might compromise making any progress at all at saving the memory of Briarcrest. With Trinn here, we might be able to succeed.

She blew out her breath. This was going to be difficult.

Sidney didn't like to invoke professional privileges to get reservations to upscale restaurants on such short notice but this was a special circumstance. Lawrence had promised a healthy tip to ensure that they would have the table he requested. It wasn't a problem. Sidney was a good tipper, in spite of the English penchant to do otherwise. The table he had requested sat by itself, looking out through arched windows in the posh restaurant.

EVENING WAS JUST coming on when Trinn and Sidney arrived at Orrery's. The light outside the big window, at which Trinn and Sidney sat, cast a magical glow to their surroundings. The meal was sumptuous and both women had finished the last of the main course and ordered dessert.

Trinn looked up from her plate. "Let me get this straight. You have in your possession artifacts that date back to the fourteenth and fifteenth century? Shouldn't they be in a museum or something?"

While Trinn waited for a response, she dipped into the crème fraiche from the apple tarte tatin dessert they were sharing. She placed her fork in her mouth and closed her eyes in pleasure. "Mmmm. Delicious. A perfect ending to a flawless meal." When she opened her eyes, she met Sidney's and saw longing in them. Her heart sped up just a little. "But this is going to cost a bundle, Sidney. I would have been happy with some pub food you know. I'm pretty down-to-earth when it comes to eating."

"No worries. After all, I wanted to make sure an award winning pastry chef like you had some really fine English food. Can't have you telling everyone in America English food is bland." When she said it, she gazed deeply into Trinn's blue eyes and her own crinkled at the edges in delight. "We can try a pub another night. I know several good ones."

Pleasure washed over Trinn. There would be other meals to share with Sidney. Trinn's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Why Miss Wycombe, I do believe you are coming on to me. She looked down at the apple tatin and studied the cream, twirling her fork around in it until her butterflies calmed down. When she felt she could safely meet Sidney's gaze and could speak without stumbling over her words, she said, "So, what about the artifacts?" She hoped it would be a long explanation. She wanted this evening to go on forever.

"The Briarcrest artifacts were entrusted to the Wycombes when Briarcrest was destroyed. One of my ancestors nearly lost his life to save them. We have been the keepers of the artifacts and the stories for centuries." Sidney gazed off through the window into the fast-approaching dark. "Maybe, when we've secured the fate of Briarcrest, it will be time to do something else with them." She looked back into Trinn's eyes and said, "Of course, you are the heir. It's for you to decide, Trinn. It's not my place--."

Trinn wrinkled her brow. "I don't think that's true, Sidney. After all, you know so much more about all this than I do. Who better than you to make the decisions necessary--"

"No." Sidney held Trinn's gaze. She repeated, emphatically, "It's not my place."

Trinn shrugged her shoulders and gave up this particular approach. It didn't seem to be working. Best to move on for now. After all, she hadn't even seen what these artifacts were. For all she knew, they could have been no more than rags and twigs, meaningless flotsam to anyone but a Wycombe. "All right, Sidney, why don't you tell me all about these artifacts."

Sidney placed her chin on folded hands, elbows resting on the table. "I have an inventory. My father made it when he put the artifacts into the safe deposit box for security."

Curiosity got the best of Trinn and she had to ask, "And before that, where were these things kept?"

"Why, in the family. There was no need to be concerned for their safety until--well, let's just say Father got a little uneasy because there were some family issues. He decided it was best to put them in the hands of professionals for safekeeping."

"In a bank or something?"

"Actually, they are held at a private company. It's more discrete. And they have seven-day-a-week access."

Trinn raised an eyebrow. "Seven days a week? And for years you didn't know who the heir was?"

"Oh, we knew perfectly well who the heir was. In my father's generation, he knew about your grandfather and your father. Of course, he also knew about you, but you were just a child."

"I was never told about any of this, you know."

"Yes, I know. I did some--research. I wanted to know how much you knew and how we should approach you. I knew your grandfather once got in touch with my great grandfather, but that was just before World War II. My great grandfather was killed in an air raid once the bombing started in London."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Trinn said, genuinely saddened by the detail.

Sidney shook her head. "I never knew him. I was born many years after he died. Anyway, my father was already quite versed in his responsibilities to Briarcrest and he was able to take over from his father after his death. The problem was, they lost contact with your grandfather during the war and, afterward, I think your family must have moved, so it took my father a while to track your family down. Things happened slower back in those days."

Trinn nodded.

"My father told me, though, that finding your dad did nothing for the cause. It seems your mother told him in no uncertain terms she wanted nothing to do with Briarcrest when she found out certain things about the history of the place."

"Something about the Inquisition," Trinn stated.

"Not the 'official' Inquisition. Those rogue priests from Spain. Someone with a hidden agenda, so to speak. You'll learn about it when you see the artifacts, I'm sure. I have been told it was all written down both in the annals and in a personal journal."

An thrill that felt like an electric current ran through Trinn's body as she looked into Sidney's eyes. "Journals? From that long ago?" Was it the artifacts or Sidney that made her feel this excitement? The two now seemed closely bound together.

Sidney's eyes crinkled at the outer edges as she smiled. "Yes. Amazing to think of it, isn't it?"

"Really." Trinn took a deep breath trying to calm her pounding heart before she stabbed a piece of cream-laden apple from the plate.

Sidney watched as Trinn placed the fork in her mouth and slowly drew it out past her lips, empty, savoring the last bit of the dessert. Trinn watched Sidney's eyes widen in response to the sensual movement of fork past lips. She couldn't help but smile in response and wondered exactly what was going through Sidney's mind. God, she's beautiful, Trinn thought.

She tried to corral her own libidinous feelings. Trinn inspected the tines as carefully as she could for vestiges of the dessert. When she was done, she asked, "So when do we get to look at these artifacts?"

Sidney lifted her arm and looked at the delicate gold watch encircling her wrist. "It's nearly ten o'clock. We actually have twenty-four hour access, but it might be better if we started fresh in the morning. What do you think?"

"Sounds good. But you said you had a list. Do you have it with you?"

Sidney reached into her blazer pocket and pulled out a small, thin notebook. The leather cover was worn and scarred. Trinn watched intently as Sidney fingered the few tattered, yellow pages, opening to the first one.

When the waiter appeared and asked if they wanted refills of their coffee, Sidney discretely closed the small book before nodding. She waited until he left the table before she opened the notebook and began to read the inventory.

"Annals of Briarcrest, three volumes, 1387 through 1502."

As she read, Trinn leaned closer. She could smell Sidney's scent. It was wonderful.

Sidney continued, "Journals by Fiona Smith, two, some dates sited in text--1482 of particular note; book of drawings, artist uncertain (oral history says they are by Master Andrew); a silver pendant, Green Lady theme; animal skin bag with small mortar and pestle; miniature belt, perhaps part of a child's toy." Sidney looked up from the page and added, "I'm not sure why a child's toy belt would be significant, but there's a question mark after the entry. think that may be an erroneous conclusion as to what the belt is. We'll have to see if we can figure it out

ourselves." Looking back at the book, Sidney picked up where she had left off. "A small tasseled key ring with several skeleton keys (well oxidized); small leather pouch with a lock of dark hair; a forester's felted cap (condition fragile)."

When Sidney finished, she closed the book and both women sat wondering what each item would look like. They tried to picture each one until Trinn asked, "If no one but the heir should look at the artifacts, who made the inventory?"

"It's not that no one but the heir should look at them. It's that they belong to you, Trinn. You should be the one, not me. My father decided to do an inventory only because he was putting them into the safekeeping of the security company. They can supply us with a printout of the contents of the box, but father felt he should be responsible for making sure we knew exactly what had been deposited. There were rather extenuating circumstances."

Trinn didn't question the Wycombe motivation. The whole family seemed paranoid about who should look at the artifacts. "So, we know there are journals by this Fiona Smith, and we think Andrew did the drawings. Do we know who the other items belonged to?"

"Possibly," Sidney said. "There is a lot of oral history about the artifacts handed down through my family. We might be able to confirm some of it when we examine them."

Trinn stirred cream into her coffee with a tiny spoon and watched the contrasting colors of deep brown and creamy white combine to make the rich tan color in her cup. While she stirred, she contemplated the opportunity to hold history in her hands--her own history. The people who owned these things were a part of her, either by blood or by some other connection she didn't yet fully understand. It thrilled her to think about being able to study these items. It was an opportunity of a lifetime.

Would they be able to accomplish what Sidney hoped by looking through these historically significant items? She didn't know, yet she could hardly contain her enthusiasm when she looked up at Sidney and said, "Tomorrow morning then? Let's do it."

Sidney broke into a wide grin and put her hand over Trinn's. "Tomorrow morning. Yes. Thank you, Trinn."

The tiny teaspoon with which Trinn had been stirring her coffee was still balanced between her thumb and fingers when Sidney placed her palm over her hand. Trinn looked down and tried to remember to breathe. She hoped Sidney didn't feel her hand tremble when she touched her. Sidney's hand felt warm, her touch soft and wonderful. Trinn looked up into the light brown eyes and her voice only cracked a little when she spoke her shy response. "You're welcome."

Chapter Seven

THE NEXT MORNING Sidney escorted Trinn to a tall, modern building down High Street from her office. No sign announced the name of the establishment anywhere outside the building. As they stepped through the smoke-colored glass doors, Sidney walked up to the shiny stainless steel counter. A chrome box with a slot the size of a credit card sat on a black and white marble top. Just above the opening, an elongated blue neon bar blinked, begging their notice.

Trinn looked up to the massive ceiling high above her head. It, too, was metallic and seemed to be held in place by the gray and white marble walls that surrounded her. She scanned the area. They were alone. She looked over at Sidney, who was now fumbling with a wallet she had drawn from the pocket of her tailored slacks.

Trinn moved to Sidney's side and whispered, "What's the name of this place?"

Sidney rifled through a stack of cards she had removed from her wallet. "MetroLock. Private security. The artifacts are stored here in a safe deposit box."

Trinn tilted her head. "It's very space-age, isn't it?"

Sidney looked up at her and laughed. "You haven't seen anything yet. Just wait." She scowled at the cards in her hands and resumed her search. "However, you won't see anything if I can't find the card. It was right on top. I checked it earlier this morning." Sidney wrinkled her brow. "What did I do with--ah, here it is." She pulled a clear plastic card from the stack and held it up for Trinn to see. The transparent plastic card had a large neon blue, block letter M in the center with no other words or markings on it. A black magnetic strip showed through from the back of the card. Trinn watched Sidney stuff everything except the card back into her wallet and return it to her pocket. She slipped the card into the slit and watched it as the box sucked the card in with a little slurp.

The blue light changed from the throbbing blink to a steady glow. Trinn imagined the mysterious box considering the information coded onto the magnetic strip. After a few seconds, the card popped out and an electronic voice seemed to surround them. It announced, "Ten seconds to enter. Please proceed."

A section of the wall slid open and a previously invisible door to the left of the counter revealed a darkened corridor. MetroLock-blue lights ran along the shiny stainless steel baseboard on the wall opposite them. Sidney turned to her and smiled. "Let's go."

The disembodied voice announced, "Five seconds left for entry." Trinn sprinted past Sidney through the doorway. Sidney stepped through after her. The door slid shut and the two women stood in a narrow hallway.

The voice cut through the silence. "You have been assigned room 4B. Please follow the blue indicator lights to your right for your destination." The blue lights now cycled, blinking in a wave of motion toward the right down the corridor. The light gave just enough illumination to see about ten feet of the path ahead of them.

Trinn looked at Sidney wide-eyed, and said, "Very space-age."

Sidney shrugged and started in the direction indicated by the blinking neon. Trinn followed closely wondering what would happen next.

The lights ended at a door marked with a large blue 4B imprinted on its surface. Around the doorframe, the same blue glow pulsed. Beyond the door, the hall was pitch black. The door to 4B slid open to reveal another stark room.

Sidney turned to Trinn and said. "We'd better step in. We only have a limited entry time here, too." On the other side of the door, bathed in white light from a large fluorescent orb above it, sat a stainless steel table with two chairs that looked like they belonged in a museum of modern art.

Trinn stepped into the room behind Sidney and the doors closed with a soft, breathy sound. The walls inside had no markings or pictures on them. There was, however, a small revolving stainless steel door set in the opposite wall about waist high. Beside it, was another thin, blinking blue eye with a slot below it. Sidney repeated her earlier action, and the card disappeared into the narrow opening. The light glowed steadily until satisfied, then the card slid out of the box with a whirr.

The electronic voice announced they should have a seat and their safe deposit box would be provided shortly. If they had any questions, a phone was available inside the revolving access box to communicate with a MetroLock representative.

Sidney pulled out one of the sculptured chairs and sat down. Trinn stared around the room until Sidney suggested she have a seat and gestured toward the other chair. "It will take a few minutes," Sidney said. "They have to access the box and bring it to the pass-through for this room. Might as well make yourself comfortable while we wait."

Trinn didn't think the chair looked comfortable at all, but Sidney seemed fine in hers, so she pulled the other seat out and sat down. She was surprised at how soft the chair actually was. It seemed to mold to her body. She relaxed and sat back to wait.

The MetroLock facility seemed to Trinn to beg secrecy and quiet. In spite of the fact that they were obviously alone, she felt she should whisper. "Are we going to examine the artifacts here?"

Sidney answered in a normal voice. "It might be best."

Trinn couldn't hide her disappointment. She answered quietly. "Oh."

"You'd prefer not to?"

"This place is kind of creepy, Sidney. I don't feel very comfortable here."

"You don't need to whisper, you know. We're quite alone. No one is eavesdropping on us."

Trinn cleared her throat. When she spoke, her voice was still soft, although she no longer whispered. "It really is eerie."

"And very, very secure."

Trinn looked around the room and licked her lips. "I'm sure it is."

They heard a click and a scrape from the other side of the metal revolving door and the electronic voice said, "Your item is ready for access. Please slide the door open. When your transaction is completed, please use the button on the card reader to summon the MetroLock representative to remove the item to its security location within the MetroLock vault. If you wish to remove anything from your box permanently, please contact the Metrolock representative using the phone in the access box."

Sidney got up and walked over to the pass-through and slid the door open. Trinn saw a large, hard sided case inside, the size of a small airline carry-on. It, too, had the now familiar blinking blue light marking a thin opening for a card below the handle. Sidney removed the box and carried it to the table, placing it in front of Trinn. She pulled the MetroLock card from her pocket and handed it to Trinn. As she did, she looked deeply into Trinn's eyes. It made her feel as if she were looking deeply into Sidney's soul.

Trinn's hand shook as she reached for the card. She quickly put her hands in her lap. "I must be nervous. You do it." She knew it was a lie. It wasn't the box that made her hands shake. It was Sidney.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Please." Trinn gestured toward the box.

Sidney took a deep breath and slid the transparent card into the slot. The blinking light turned solid. The box made a whining sound, and with a click, the latch on the box snapped open. Sidney handed her one of two pairs of white cotton gloves she had removed from the pass-through and gestured to Trinn to access the contents.

When Trinn put out her hand, she felt another tremor. This time she knew it was because she was about to touch something remarkable, something deeply rooted in her past. She felt overwhelmed.

Sidney nodded her encouragement. Trinn pulled on the gloves and opened the container. She pulled out an aged and tattered cardboard box, removed the cover, and peered down onto the artifacts.

The old box and the obvious age of its contents seemed so incongruous with the modern container and their surroundings that Trinn wished she could take them someplace else. Someplace that befitted their age and history. She longed to lay them on a tapestry tablecloth in a fine old house somewhere in the country. Instead, she just shrugged and asked, "Did you bring the inventory list? We should probably check these against it."

Sidney pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket. "I made a copy of my father's book."

"Good idea." As Trinn looked into Sidney's eyes, she felt her butterflies take up their fluttering. "I'll take them out and you can check them off."

"Sounds good," Sidney answered, still holding Trinn's gaze.

When Trinn finally pulled away to look at the box, she had to take a few deep breaths before she could focus on the contents. The first thing she removed was a small, leather drawstring bag. She opened it carefully and peeked inside. A faint mixture of musty smells met her nostrils. When she inserted her thumb and index finger into the bag, she felt an object. She pulled it out. It was a small wooden pestle. The thick rounded end had been darkened from the crushing of herbs. She placed it back into the bag and gently pulled the leather ties closed and looked at Sidney. "Do we know who this belongs to?"

"No doubt it belonged to Catherine Hawkins, the healer."

Trinn placed the small bag into the palm of her hand and felt its weight. The mortar and pestle were made of a very light wood, no doubt making the bag easy to carry. The idea that the woman for whom she had been named had used this bag to heal the ills of people over 500 years before she was born left her in awe. For a brief moment, Trinn was afraid she might cry. But she swallowed back her tears as she watched Sidney place a checkmark beside the animal skin bag on the list.

When she examined the next item, she knew instantly it was in a state of deterioration. The three tassels dangling from a metal key ring looked brittle, as if they would turn to dust in her hand. She looked at Sidney and said, "We should probably put this in a plastic bag to make sure it doesn't crumble to pieces."

Sidney walked over to the pass-through and picked up the phone hanging on the wall inside. After a few seconds, she spoke into the mouthpiece. "May we have a plastic bag? If possible, it should be acid-free. We need it for one of the items in our box." After listening for another few seconds, she hung up and closed the door. It didn't take long before a scraping sound told them the request had been fulfilled and Sidney slid open the door to find a clear plastic bag. She handed it to Trinn who carefully picked up the key ring and placed it into the bag. After removing as much air as she could, she sealed the zipper top and held it up so they could examine the contents.

It was difficult to determine the color of the tassels. Perhaps they had been blue or purple. Now they were more of a faded gray color. Three old skeleton keys also hung from the ring. Two

looked very worn. The third had more angular corners, not showing as much wear as the other two.

Sidney said softly, "The keys of the Rulers of Briarcrest. No doubt they kept some very valuable stores locked with those keys. Of course, what was valuable then might be quite ordinary now." She checked off the tasseled key ring on the list.

When Trinn lifted out a small leather pouch and peeked inside, she found a lock of thick, dark hair. "Wow. Hair. I know hair is pretty resilient and is easily preserved, but I never dreamed I'd be looking at someone's hair from hundreds of years ago." She looked up. "Do you know whose it might be?"

"Fiona's journals might hold more information. The annals probably wouldn't hold such personal information. They held more of the business and family information of Briarcrest. Lands and stock, births and deaths, that sort of thing. We may be able to find something about this later." She pointed to the pouch as Trinn set it aside.

When Trinn pulled the next item from the box, her eyes widened. Although much more weather-beaten than the one she had seen Catty wearing, the felted hat came to a point in front. It looked very similar to Catty's. The feather wasn't the same, though. The one Catty wore in his hat was a long tail feather of a pheasant. This one looked more like a hawk feather because it was thicker and only half as long. She squinted as she examined the battered hat.

Sidney asked, "Is something wrong, Trinn?"

Shaking her head, Trinn said, "No. Nothing is wrong. Whose hat is this supposed to be?"

Sidney scanned the list. "The inventory doesn't say, but remember my father telling me a story about Lady Hilary Aylsham. She used to dress the forester's part. The forester was in charge of the lands and husbandry of the great houses. Hilary prided herself in her horses. He told me the hat among the artifacts probably belonged to her. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered," she stammered. She thought about Catty again. "It reminds me of Robin Hood and his merry men."

Sidney raised her eyebrows. "Not likely Robin Hood had anything to do with Briarcrest. Wrong part of the country and wrong time period. And, of course, there's the part about him being nothing but a fiction. Of course, the people of Nottingham want you to believe he was real." She wiggled her eyebrows and Trinn felt her heart speed up. She peered down into the box one more time trying to gain control and pulled out a small piece of cloth. A shiny object the size of a small pocket watch was inside.

Trinn whispered, "Wow." She stared at the silver figure of a woman whose hair was made up of tiny, intricate silver oak leaves. The silver was slightly tarnished, but the workmanship was obvious. She had seen modern interpretations of the Green Man and Green Lady symbol, but this one was so elaborate and beautiful as to be remarkable. The medallion had a tiny loop at the top,

no doubt for hanging as a pendant. "The Green Lady pendant," she announced to Sidney and handed it to her to examine.

Sidney took it in her gloved hand and held it up by the ring to examine it closely. "It's brilliant, isn't it? Made by a true master silversmith. Perhaps someday, we'll see it polished up and looking as it would have when it was new." She handed it back to Trinn and checked it on the inventory.

Next Trinn pulled out a thin leather strip with a metal buckle on the end. The solid buckle was etched with a sunburst design and it had a prong that stuck out on the end and fit into a hole on the belt. The belt itself was only about sixteen to eighteen inches long. Trinn buckled it and looked at the size. It seemed too small to fit a child, even a very young one. Perhaps it could have been a doll's belt. As she examined it further, it seemed oddly familiar, yet she couldn't place it. Reluctantly, she handed it to Sidney and said, "I don't think this is a child's toy, but I don't know what it is."

Sidney examined the buckle. "The symbol of Briarcrest," she stated matter-of-factly.

"Is it?"

"Yes, a golden sunburst on a field of deep blue. It was used on all the trappings of Briarcrest. Although this one isn't colored, it's still the crest." She handed it back to Trinn and put a check beside it on the list. Trinn added it to the pile, but her eyes wandered back to it over and over.

The last items were all books, some bound more crudely than others. The book of drawings was no more than loose sheets tied together with a piece of leather between two thin pieces of wood. Etched into the front cover was another sunburst. Trinn turned to the first drawing and recognized it immediately. It was of the meadow where she first met MacGregor and Catty. It caused her heart to pound, filling her with confusion, as reality and her dreams blurred together. Suddenly, she felt as though she needed time to think. She shut the book, not wanting to see any more of the drawings.

The next two journals appeared to be stories. The first part was written in a language Trinn couldn't read. As she flipped through the leather-bound volume, she saw small sketches here and there, presumably illustrations that went with the text.

When she picked up the second volume, she discovered she could read it because it was written in English. She fanned the pages of handmade paper and stopped, taken by a picture of a hooded figure. The face was featureless, a black pool of dark ink. She glanced through the large scrolling letters of the text and saw Catherine, Cate, Lydia, and Andrew written here and there. She knew she would want to take some time to read this volume carefully. "Can we take these with us?"

Surprise registered on Sidney's face at the question. "I'm not sure it's wise to remove them, Trinn."

"But Sidney, we'll want to read these thoroughly. It'll take some time and quite frankly I'm not sure I really want to sit in this room-of-the-future reading something written hundreds of years ago. It almost seems like a sacrilege."

Sidney stumbled over her words. "Hmmm. Well." Trinn knew she was protective of the artifacts, but she also wanted to use them to protect Briarcrest's heritage.

Trinn had an idea. "Could we take them and at least make copies? We could put them right back here for safekeeping, but we'd be able to read them later." She wanted to add any place but here, but decided against it, not wanting to offend Sidney.

"Brilliant," Sidney replied. She walked over to the pass-through and picked up the phone for a second time. "Hello. We're going to need access to a copy machine." She smiled at Trinn who sat staring at her. Soft wings beat in Trinn's stomach as she watched Sidney. After listening to the person at the other end of the line for a few seconds more, Sidney added, "Yes, it may take the rest of the day." Another pause, followed by, "Thank you" and she hung up. She came back and sat down. "It'll be a few minutes before they make a copier available to us. Shall we finish going through the books?"

Trinn was fingering the leather belt. "Sure. The drawings are all in charcoal, so we can copy those, too. There can't be any more than about twenty pages. Only the second volume of Fiona's journals is in English. What was her native language?"

"She was from Scotland, but her father was from the same town as Catherine, so I imagine she knew both languages. If we need to have the first volume translated, I can look into it."

"Maybe it won't be necessary. The second volume mentions Catherine, Cate, and Andrew. Let's just copy that one for now." Trinn picked up the annals. "Do you think we'd need all three of these?" She thumbed through the oldest volume. There were lots of accounts of acreage and payments. Finally she came to a statement of the second Duke of Briarcrest's marriage to Lady Beatrice Wellington of Greencastle. "Let's copy the annals from the time of Beatrice's marriage. It starts right here." She indicated the page in the book. "What do you think?"

"Sounds like a good place to start. This is going to take some time." Sidney removed her blazer and hung it on the back of the sculpted chair. As she unbuttoned her sleeves and rolled them to her elbows, Trinn fantasized about watching Sidney undress for her. A shiver ran through her. "Uh--maybe I'd better start looking through these annals to see how much we need to copy." She buried her nose in the old book.

About fifteen minutes later the intercom clicked on and a voice said, "A copy machine has been made available for your use in room 4A across the hall. You have entry to it for the rest of the day. Please use your access card to go back and forth between the two rooms."

Sidney and Trinn gathered up the books and walked across the hall to 4A where they found a high-speed copier waiting for them. They also found a stainless steel cart with a small

refrigerator on the bottom shelf. Half a dozen bottles of cold water sat inside. The top shelf contained reams of paper. Sidney removed two bottles of water and handed one to Trinn.

Trinn reached for the water. "Hospitable robots, aren't they?"

"They aren't robots, Trinn. They're--"

"I know, I know. This place is just so outer space." She held out her bottle and touched it to Sidney's. "To modern inventions."

Sidney gave her a smile that made the butterflies start to bang against her stomach and she smiled back weakly.

TWO HOURS LATER, they had finished the drawings and Fiona's journal. The annals were taking more time since they had to go through each page and decide whether or not it needed to be copied. Both women registered surprise when the door opened slightly and a thin, graying man in a dark pinstriped suit poked his head in, apologizing profusely for the interruption. "Highly irregular," he said in a nasal tone, "but since your endeavor is taking quite a bit of time, I wondered if you might like some lunch brought in?" He wrung his hands as waited for an answer.

Sidney looked at Trinn, who nodded. "Lunch would be greatly appreciated. Whatever is convenient will be fine, right Trinn?"

"Yes, fine. Whatever you order will be just perfect." As if on queue, her stomach growled.

The man didn't seem to notice. His hands stilled and he bowed and backed his way out of the room with more apologies.

Just before they broke for lunch, Trinn turned from the copy machine to find Sidney with her head in her hands, sitting at the smaller version of a stainless steel table similar to the one they had in 4B. When Trinn questioned her, she said the copier fumes were probably giving her a headache. The first volume of the annals was completed, so Trinn suggested they take a break across the hall. When they entered the room, they found two boxed lunches of grilled chicken salad, a small baguette, and a piece of chocolate cake along with a variety of sodas from which to choose awaiting them. The food revived them and Trinn dismissed Sidney's headache. Perhaps it was just the copier fumes as she had suggested.

As they finished up the final volume of the annals, Sidney chatted with Trinn about some of the local restaurants. When she casually invited Trinn to dinner, Trinn accepted immediately. However, when she turned from the copier to look at Sidney, she saw she looked drawn and tired. Trinn said, "Of course, I'd love to go back to the hotel and take a nap before we go out to dinner. Maybe you can go home to rest for a little while yourself."

"I'm sure you're still suffering from jet lag. While you go have a lie down at the hotel, I'll go back to the office."

"You look as though you could use a little rest yourself."

Sidney waved the suggestion away. "I'm sure as soon as I get a breath of fresh air, I'll be fine."

They decided they would store the copies they had made at Sidney's office because they would get a fresh start on them in the morning.

"I'll walk back to the office with you. I could use the fresh air, and the exercise, myself." Actually, Trinn didn't want Sidney to walk back to the office alone. When Sidney didn't protest, they divided the large stack of documents between them and headed toward Sidney's office.

Lawrence gave them a big smile when they walked in together, but the look on his face changed as soon as he saw Sidney. He said nothing, though. When Trinn handed her half of the copies to Sidney, she said, "I'll see you at seven. I hope you'll get a chance to rest so your headache will be better by then."

Lawrence's eyes widened. "Headache? What headache?"

"It's nothing," Sidney said. "We made all these copies. The copier fumes got to me, that's all. I'll be fine now that I'm out of there." She glared at Lawrence. "Believe me, it's nothing to worry about. Thanks for helping with these. I'll see you around seven at your hotel. Have a good rest." Sidney walked into her office and closed the door.

Lawrence looked at Trinn. "Do you really think it was the copying?"

Trinn shrugged. "I guess so. She didn't look well at all earlier. That's why I decided to walk back here with her. I didn't want her to pass out on the street." A concerned look crossed her face. "Do you think she's all right?"

Lawrence said, "She works too hard, that's all. Thanks for watching out for her, though."

Once Trinn left to go back to the hotel, Lawrence went to Sidney's office door and opened it quietly. The office lights were dimmed and Sidney was fast asleep on her couch. He closed the door, shut off the reception area lights and left for the evening, locking the outside door behind him. Tomorrow, he'd bring up going to the doctor.

Chapter Eight

JANET PACED HER office floor battling misgivings about having taken on Charles as her front man for the Briar Wood development project. If he couldn't find out what Sidney was up to, the undertaking might be in serious jeopardy. She couldn't have her plans foiled. She had to be the one who controlled that land. It was the only way she'd ever have any assurance that Sidney would no longer have command of the situation and Janet would be able to carry out the remainder of her plan.

Only once did Sidney ever suggest to her Charles knew something about Briarcrest and from that, Janet had supposed he had known more than he did. Of course, he didn't let on to the contrary until she had already hired him. Now she knew the truth. He knew nothing. But he had promised he would be able to use his relationship and influence with Sidney to gather information for Janet. His lunch with his niece had proved to be a bust, as well. Janet lost her temper and threw him out of her office. That last encounter still made her blood boil.

When he called her a few hours ago to tell her he had another idea of how to obtain information, she almost refused until he mentioned Lawrence. She decided to hear him out. What did she have to lose? She had nothing now, and if Charles' next rattlebrained idea yielded nothing, she'd be right back where she started. But if he were successful--. She answered the knock on her door without getting up from her desk.

Charles tried not to make eye contact with Janet as he entered. He stopped behind the guest chair and said, "Thank you for seeing me, Janet. I think you'll be interested in the idea I have to get the information you want."

"So you said earlier, Charles."

"May I sit down?" He gestured to the chair in front of him.

"Certainly. Have a seat. Let's hear all about your idea, shall we?"

Charles sat and fussed with his tie before he spoke. He cleared his throat.

"I've made some preliminary inquiries regarding assistance in getting the information we're looking for. There are some colleagues who might be willing to assist me. These people have a reputation for being very persuasive. Mr. Truly is a pantywaist. It shouldn't be difficult to get something of value from him.

Janet stared at him for a long time before answering. "Let me get this straight. Your proposal is to send thugs to rough up Lawrence in order to get information from him that he may or may not have. Do I understand you correctly?"

"They aren't thugs. These are professional people."

"And what, exactly, is their profession, Charles? Gangster? Cutthroat? Assassin? Mobster?"

Charles looked stricken. He placed his hand on his chest. "Janet, you wound me. My colleagues are much more credible than that. These men are skilled artisans. They come highly recommended. With their help, I should be able to get the information you want."

Janet stared. "You do realize if you botch this and Sidney finds out about it, it will be the end of your relationship with her. No more hope, as remote as it may be, of gaining access to the Wycombe family secrets. Not to mention what else she may do to you, Charles."

His response was louder than he intended. "Nothing will go wrong. I'm sure of it."

Janet pursed her thin lips contemplating the proposal. "If I consent to this, it will only be with your assurance that you will take the fall if something goes wrong. Sidney can never suspect I have anything to do with it. Is that clear?"

"Janet, I assure you--"

"Is it clear, Charles?"

"Yes. Clear as a bright summer's day." His face grew stern. "But if I'm successful, I expect you'll want to express your gratitude by giving me an advance on my salary. Maybe even a little bonus for a job well done?"

A wry smile materialized slowly on Janet's face. "Charles, you are a dog, aren't you?"

Charles sniggered in response. "I knew you'd come to see it my way. I already have a meeting scheduled to firm up the deal with my new associates."

"Well, why don't we just see how it goes, then we'll talk about compensation. Shall we?"

TRINN FINGERED THE small leather belt. At the last minute, she told Sidney she wanted to--no, had to--take it with her. She didn't know why. It just seemed so familiar to her. Having the belt in her possession seemed necessary to her. Sidney wasn't excited about Trinn taking it, but she finally agreed, reminding Trinn that all of the artifacts did, in fact, belong to her.

Now Trinn sat on her bed in the hotel room and examined the belt buckle. She took it into the bathroom and put some toothpaste on a facial tissue and scrubbed the metal. It took several minutes to wipe away the grime and tarnish, but once she did, it became clear it was finely wrought. Just as something made for a lord or lady should be.

The design was simple and elegant--a sunburst embossed on hammered metal. Silver. Wiping away all traces of the abrasive toothpaste, she set the belt aside and washed her hands. As she picked up the belt to go back into her bedroom, she ran it between her thumb and forefinger several times before she realized the leather wasn't smooth. She slid the belt through her fingers one more time and examined it carefully.

There were impressions in it she hadn't noticed earlier. She took it over to the lamp by her bed. With it angled just right, she could finally see the impressions in the leather. It was some sort of design. A curlicue. She moved the leather, tilting it in one direction and another until she saw another impression. This one was more of a straight line. It looked like a letter I or an L, or perhaps a number 1. She re-examined the curlicue. It could be a small letter a.

She could feel more indentations in the leather, but they weren't deep enough to actually determine what they were with the naked eye. Maybe she'd bring it up to Sidney to see if she had any ideas about it. She placed the belt on the nightstand. A brief nap before her dinner sounded great.

TRINN AWOKE TO a snuffling sound. Her mouth was so dry her throat hurt when she tried to swallow. All her muscles ached where they made contact with the surface on which she lay. The bed smelled of damp earth and rotting--something. She wrinkled her nose and tried to move her hands. A stabbing pain shot through her right shoulder and she realized her hands were tied behind her back. It all came back to her. Standing outside the castle in the shadows, the scraping sound, the people in hooded cloaks, the wagon--and Alfred. She was tied up in the shed.

She had fallen asleep, overcome by exhaustion after she had struggled against her restraints for a long time. She carefully maneuvered her body to a sitting position. She heard the snuffling sound--and scratching at the door. She blinked, trying to orient herself. Was it night still? She peered under the door and wondered if the faint light was real. Maybe it was morning. More snuffling, a scratch, then a whine and a bark. MacGregor.

Should she call to him? What if Alfred was nearby? She decided it was worth the risk. She tried to speak, but her throat was so dry, nothing came out but a soft croak. MacGregor whined softly, and barked twice. Trinn tried to clear her throat. As she did, she heard a voice say, "What is it, MacGregor? Is there a rat in there you want to chase? All right." The door scraped open and bright light burst in burning Trinn's eyes. When she tried to put up a hand to shield herself from the light, a fiery, stabbing pain shot through her shoulder joint and she cried out. Then everything went black.

TRINN AWOKE IN front of the big fireplace in Briarcrest Hall. She recognized where she was immediately and realized she was on some sort of low pallet, covered to keep warm. Remembering the pain in her shoulder, she moved her arms slowly and found her hands were no longer bound. When she turned to look down the length of the room, she found MacGregor sitting only a few inches from her face, looking at her hopefully. "Hi MacGregor," she whispered.

The dog stood up, twirled around in a circle in excitement, and started barking.

"Hush, laddie, you'll wake--" Catty had come from around the corner, trying to silence the barking dog. He stopped when he saw Trinn was awake. "Well, I see MacGregor's trying to tell me you're already awake."

Trinn cleared her throat and whispered, "Yes."

"How do you feel?"

"Parched."

"Oh, forgive me, let me get you something to drink. I've had some tea made from comforting herbs." He poured liquid into a cup on a nearby table. "Can you sit up?"

Trinn tried to prop herself up but her shoulder was sore and she couldn't quite hold her weight. Catty moved quickly to assist her and prop her up until she was able to balance herself in a sitting position. He handed her the cup and she took a sip of the sweet, cool drink. It soothed her throat. She took several more long draughts of the liquid, and handed the cup back to Catty. "Thank you."

He looked at her and tilted his head. At the same time, MacGregor mimicked him. She found it comical, but tried to refrain from laughing not knowing if she were still a captive.

Catty's golden eyes flickered in the firelight. "Can you tell me how you came to be tied up in my storage house?"

Trinn scowled. "I think you'd better ask Alfred that question," she muttered. "I don't even know how I got back here and the next thing I knew, he had snatched me out of the darkness, dragged me into that smelly place and tied me up. When I asked him to get you so we could clear up the apparent misunderstanding, he said you were peacefully asleep in your bed and he wasn't about to disturb you. He left me there for god-knows-how-long."

"Only a few hours. I'm sorry he did that. Alfred gets very protective sometimes. He thinks I'm still a child."

Trinn looked the young man up and down. He wasn't a child, although his countenance gave him a look of innocence. Something about Catty intrigued Trinn. He was--not handsome--almost beautiful. As she gazed into his sparkling eyes, she shivered. What was the pull toward this young man? She tried to shrug off the feeling. "Well, I have to say I'm a little concerned about your Alfred. He thinks I'm here to harm you or something. I assure you, I'm not."

Catty smiled. "I know that."

Trinn looked deeply into his eyes. Flecks of brown, black and green on a background of gold danced in the firelight. She shuddered. These eyes reminded her of another pair. "How can you be so sure?"

He looked at MacGregor. The dog looked up at him and Trinn could have sworn she saw him give Catty a little wink. "MacGregor," he said without hesitation.

Now it was Trinn's turn to cock her head, questioning Catty's answer.

"He's never wrong," he added. "He's the best judge of character there is. If MacGregor says you're a friend, then there can be no doubt."

Trinn looked at MacGregor. He had such happy, hope-filled eyes. "Thank you, MacGregor." The dog walked up to her, sat up on his haunches, and put his paws on her thigh. His pink tongue pushed through his furry black lips. Trinn smiled and stroked his head. MacGregor got down and turned to go back to Catty's side. As he did, Trinn caught sight of something around his neck. A collar. Leather. With a silver buckle. She pointed at the dog's neck. "That's a fine collar MacGregor has."

"Yes, it is, isn't it? The buckle was fashioned in Willowglen. They have a fine silversmith there. Alfred is good with leather. He made that part. See here?" He gently turned MacGregor so his back was to Trinn. "I put his name on it myself using a hammer and dull chisel to make the impressions."

The collar looked new instead of the faded version Trinn had in her hotel room, but it was definitely the same one Sidney's family had assumed to be a small belt. "May I look at it more closely?"

"Certainly," Catty said as he unbuckled the collar and handed it to Trinn.

The silver clasp had the starburst design and a single stationary protrusion with which to fix the collar on the dog's neck. The silver was bright and shiny. Looking at the letters impressed in the leather, she saw they were much more prominent than on the older, more worn collar back in the twenty-first century. She read *MacGregor*. She suppressed her excitement as she handed the collar back to Catty. "It's lovely." She couldn't stop the pounding in her chest. Wait until Sidney heard about this. But the idea brought her up short. How could she tell Sidney she had identified the collar as belonging to a little black terrier she met at Briarcrest in her dreams? Sidney would think she was crazy.

"So," Catty said. "Why have you come back, then?"

Trinn hesitated. "I--I'm not sure. I seem to be looking for something and I don't really know what it is." She decided not to mention any more about the collar, knowing that was only a small piece of the puzzle she was trying to solve. Sidney needed answers about Briarcrest. Perhaps this was the way Trinn would be able to help her get them. "Oh, please be assured I'm not here to spy on you or anything. I just keep ending up here without seeming to have any control over my actions."

"That's what concerns Alfred. I've tried to convince him you are a friend of Briarcrest, but of course I have nothing to go on but my own feelings, and," he nodded toward the dog,

"MacGregor here." The dog looked up at his master at the sound of his name and wagged his tail ever so slightly.

The events leading up to Alfred tying her up made her wonder if she should venture the question that was on her mind. Who were the people who were being spirited away from Briarcrest in the dark of night?

As if reading her mind, Catty spoke. "Alfred told me you may have seen our last guests departing."

She hesitated before deciding there was only one way to figure out what was going on. "I did, actually. I am curious about them. Of course, maybe you don't want to tell me. It's all right if you don't. I don't want to pry."

Catty's look felt as if he were penetrating her soul. His pupils dilated and contracted as he stared. She could almost see the battle raging within him as he tried to decide if he would tell her what was going on or not.

"We are saving lives. Lives and faith."

Trinn squinted, trying to make sense of Catty's statement.

Catty inhaled before continuing. "In Spain, these people are persecuted. Some assumed they had found refuge in neighboring Portugal, but in the end, Portugal was not the friend they hoped she would be. If they do not take on the religion of state, they are demoralized and even killed. Everything is taken from them. No one deserves that kind of treatment. These people have a faith older than Christianity. They deserve to be respected for that, even revered, not persecuted and killed for it."

It all became clear to Trinn in an instant. Spain and Portugal. The late fourteen to early fifteen hundreds. The Expulsion. "Jews," she whispered.

"Yes, Jews."

"What are you doing with them?"

"They come here on ships I finance when it is too dangerous for them to remain. The monarchy there insists they convert to Catholicism. This is repugnant to them. Some convert because their ties are too strong and they want to remain. Most still practice their religion in secret. If they are found out, they are killed. Some would rather flee than risk imprisonment or death. There are ships that offer to take them to safety, but they are worse than the rulers of the two countries. Once the people board the ships, they are robbed and sometimes killed at sea and thrown overboard. We try to get them out safely.

"They are brought here to rest for a few days before continuing on in their journey. Some choose to stay in England. Others go to the East to settle. We have a ship that goes to Morocco quite

regularly under pretext of trade. They are more tolerant there and the people are able to settle without being tormented. When they arrive in England, they are given the choice of where they would like to go. If they want to stay here, we transport them to safer areas to disappear into the local population. If they want to go to the East, we arrange for that."

Trinn plunged a hand through her hair. "Wow. That has to be a dangerous undertaking."

"There are dangers." Trinn saw a look of deep sadness appear in Catty's eyes. It disappeared as quickly as it had come. "There are people in Spain and England who would like to discover how these people are escaping. Some suspect Briarcrest's involvement, but they have not been able to prove it. Dedicated people have been lost." The sadness materialized in Catty's eyes. "That's why Alfred is so mistrustful. He is afraid they will learn the circumstances of our undertaking here, and there will be trouble."

Trinn pondered his words. "And now that you've told me all this, what will Alfred think?"

"It is of little import. Alfred does my bidding."

"Even if he doesn't like it?"

"Even if he doesn't accept what I'm doing or how I'm doing it."

The two were quiet then. MacGregor walked over and sat beside Trinn. He nudged her hand. In response, she stroked him absently, processing what Catty had just revealed. The warmth of the fire and her ordeal earlier made her sleepy. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and when she opened them, she was stroking a pillow lying next to her on the bed in her hotel room.

SIDNEY HADN'T ARRIVED at the hotel to meet Trinn. She was twenty minutes overdue and she hadn't called. A vague sense of uneasiness ran just beneath the surface of her emotions. When she called Sidney's office number, she got the answering service and was told by a very pleasant woman with a thick English accent Miss Wycombe had left for the evening. After another fifteen minutes, Trinn dialed Lawrence's cell phone number. He answered on the first ring.

"Lawrence Truly."

"Hi, Lawrence, it's Trinn. I wonder if you know where Sidney is. We were supposed to meet for dinner tonight, but she's over a half-hour late."

Trinn didn't know what to make of the silence at the other end of the line. "Lawrence?"

"Yes, I'm here. Can I ring you back in a couple of minutes?" He sounded upset.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you--"

"No, no, not a problem. Let me ring you right back."

"Sure." But he was gone before she got her response out completely.

LAWRENCE SNAPPED HIS mobile shut and dashed out the door before the call had a chance to completely disconnect. Luck was with him. As he entered the Tube station, his train pulled in and he jumped on. While the train rumbled along, he prayed he would find Sidney alive and well, only still asleep peacefully on the couch in her office.

It only took five minutes to get from his apartment to the St. John's Wood stop. He ran like a madman down the block and a half to the office and fumbled the key in the street entrance lock. Entering the reception area, he flipped on the light and sprinted to Sidney's office. He stopped to take a calming breath, preparing himself for the worst and clicked open the door.

Sidney lay on the couch as he had left her several hours before. He swallowed, trying to rid himself of a bitter taste in his mouth. He stepped across the room in long strides. He leaned over her. Before he figured out whether or not she was breathing, her eyelids fluttered open. They stared into each other's eyes.

When she spoke, her voice was hoarse with sleep. "What are you doing?"

"Er--seeing if you're alive."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you to die."

"Don't be ridiculous. I was just taking a nap. I had to stand over that copy machine for hours today helping Trinn. I'm just not used to it. That's usually your job." She wiggled her eyebrows at him before adding, "Anyway, I've never heard of anyone dying from making copies although the boredom of standing at that machine for hundreds of pages could have killed me."

Lawrence considered whether or not she was serious. He decided she wasn't. Should he bring up her health again? He knew it might cause a ruckus. He decided to keep to the facts. "You had a headache."

"I told you that was from the copier fumes."

"So you said. But you haven't been to see the doctor yet, so how do I know something awful didn't happen to you. When Trinn called--"

"Oh, my god, Trinn. What time is it?" She tried to sit up, but didn't have room with Lawrence hovering over her. "Lawrence, could you move out of the way?"

"Oh, y-yes, of course," he stammered. "I'm sorry. It's just that I left you asleep hours ago and when Trinn called and said she couldn't reach you, I panicked."

Sidney tried to focus on the watch on her wrist. "Can you tell me the time, please?"

He glanced at his watch. "Seven-fifty."

She sat upright and rubbed her eyes like a child. "I'm almost an hour late. Would you call Trinn and tell her I'll be there in ten minutes. I need to freshen up." He studied her as she stood up, gave her his most boyish smile, and said, "You seem steady enough."

"I told you, I'm fine."

He pulled his mobile out. "I told Trinn I'd call her back, but I wanted to make sure you were okay first."

Sidney walked across the room, reached for the door handle and paused. She turned to face Lawrence. She said, "You said you left hours ago. You don't mean to tell me you came all the way back here from home. "

He gave her an embarrassed smile. "I was concerned, Sidney. I had to make sure you were all right. I wish you'd go and see your doctor about these headaches. Then I wouldn't worry so."

Sidney stared at him. "And now you've got Trinn worried about me, too."

"No. She was already worried about you quite on her own. That's why she called me."

Sidney sounded curt when she said, "We'll talk about this tomorrow." She added in a softer tone, "Call Trinn for me, will you?" She headed toward the loo leaving him standing in her office.

TRINN'S CONCERN FOR Sidney escalated as she waited for Lawrence to call her back. She recalled how pale Sidney had looked while they were at MetroLock earlier in the day and wondered if she should have insisted she see her doctor then. Suppose something awful has happened to her. She might have collapsed on the street coming to the hotel. This made Trinn even more anxious. She couldn't bear to think of such a thing happening to Sidney. How had she gotten so emotional over someone she had just met?

Thinking about Sidney, the tall, dark-haired woman with the fascinating eyes, made Trinn's heart pound and the butterflies in her stomach flutter. There was a connection with Sidney like none she had ever experienced. She sent up a quick prayer, to whomever might be listening, for Sidney to be okay. But the next thing that went through her head was but I'm only here to help her try to solve her little mystery about a place that doesn't really exist, then I'm off to Boston. I'm sure she'll forget all about me as soon as I board my plane. Yet, somehow, deep within her being, she knew that wasn't so. What was going on with Sidney to make Lawrence so concerned

for her well-being? She looked at her watch. It was seven-fifty. She hoped she'd hear from Lawrence soon when the phone rang.

TRINN OPENED HER hotel room door to Sidney standing in the hallway.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Trinn. Please forgive me. I took a nap in my office for a few minutes and I went into such a deep sleep I don't think I would have awoken if Lawrence hadn't come in. I don't know what happened. I'm usually such a light sleeper."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're okay. After this afternoon, the headache and all, you did look pretty pale. I was concerned. When I couldn't get you on the phone--"

"I'm fine. Really. As I said earlier today to both you and Lawrence, it was just the copier fumes."

"Lawrence said you've had these headaches before."

"It's nothing. Lawrence is like a mother hen. Don't let him tell you the sky is falling. He hovers way too much."

"He admires you and cares for you." As I find I'm starting to care for you.

Sidney shrugged her shoulders, looking embarrassed. "Well, it's nothing. Let's go to dinner, shall we?"

"All right. I'm starved. Where are we going?"

"I decided I'd take you for some local fare tonight. Woolsey's Carriage House. That is, if you'd like to try some real English food."

Trinn wondered if she cared what kind of food she ate at all, as long as she could spend this time with Sidney. As she glanced at Sidney, she saw her gazing at her and, for a fleeting moment, she wondered about the look she saw in Sidney's eyes. Was it hunger? It made Trinn shiver. In spite of the tremor, she felt warm. Very warm. Especially in the center of her stomach--and lower. One look from Sidney did things to her no one had ever done to her before. She cleared her throat. "Hu-hum. Well, shouldn't we be going to dinner?"

Sidney slowly let her eyes wander the length of Trinn's body and said hoarsely, "Yes, I suppose we should."

The two women left the hotel lobby and Sidney had the doorman hail a cab. To Trinn's delight, one of the famous London black cabs pulled up to whisk them off for an evening together. As she settled herself in, she looked over at Sidney and the women exchanged smiles. *Perfect* echoed in Trinn's mind as they pulled out of the hotel driveway.

Chapter Nine

TRINN WIPE HER mouth with the thick cloth napkin and watched Sidney put the last forkful of her dinner into her mouth. Ham, eggs and chips. Breakfast food for dinner. Well, except for the chips. Trinn had to admit, she had never had French fries for breakfast. But this wasn't breakfast anyway. It was dinner. An English pub dinner with the lovely Sidney Wycombe. Trinn pulled her gaze from Sidney's eyes. She knew she had a silly grin on her face, but she didn't care. The evening had turned out to be just as perfect as it had started. And it wasn't over yet.

Sidney was talking about the two of them visiting some of the tourist sites together on the weekend. The plan to tour London with Sidney made Trinn unbelievably happy. "Of course tomorrow, I think we'd better hit those stacks of paper we left in my office. There's a lot to read."

"We should divide and conquer," Trinn suggested. "You take some and I'll take some and we can accomplish twice as much as if we looked through it all together. If we find something we think is significant, we can discuss it, make notes, things like that. What do you think?"

"It's an excellent idea, if you don't mind if I help."

Trinn looked askance at Sidney. "Because I am the heir, after all." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"Sidney, these things belong to you just as much as they belong to me. Perhaps they belong to you even more." Sidney opened her mouth to protest but Trinn held up her hand to stop her. "To me, this is all some story, a fantasy tale I'm hearing for the first time. But these things have been a part of your family, your heritage, for hundreds of years."

"But you--"

"--are the heir, I know." Trinn reproached her with a look before adding, "But as the current Lady of Briarcrest, if I can call myself that, can't I request your help in going through the artifacts?"

Sidney's eyes sparkled. "Yes, you can ask. And I wholeheartedly accept. The Wycombes have always been loyal to Briarcrest."

Trinn hesitated a moment before reaching across the table to grasp Sidney's hand. When she did, she felt a jolt at their touch, but she didn't let go. "Sidney, I want you to treat the artifacts as if they belonged to both of us." She looked deeply into her eyes. "Will you do that? Please?"

Sidney's eyes crinkled at the outer edges as she smiled. "Yes. will." Looking a little embarrassed, she whispered, "Thank you."

"No problem." Now it was Trinn's turn to feel self-conscious. She looked down at her plate and cleared her throat. "There are some things I have to tell you. They're going to sound very strange." Looking back up at Sidney, she said, "Just hear me out before you say anything, will you?"

"All right."

Trinn looked around the restaurant. "I'm not sure I want to do it here. Could we go back to the hotel? I'd rather tell you all this in the privacy of my room."

Sidney raised one eyebrow and smiled mischievously. "It's been a long time since a beautiful woman invited me to her hotel room, Miss Wells." Trinn's face turned crimson. The deep-throated sound that came from Sidney, expressed her obvious enjoyment at Trinn's discomfort. Her laughter warmed Trinn down to her toes.

"I--I didn't mean--I just want to talk privately. I--"

Trinn turned a deeper shade of red.

"I'm sorry, Trinn. I was only teasing." Sidney held Trinn's gaze a little longer and, for a brief moment, Trinn saw desire in Sidney's eyes. Was she imagining it? As soon as she questioned it, she knew it wasn't her imagination. It was real. Very real. She looked away and shivered.

THEY ORDERED DESSERT of chocolate cake and a carafe of milk from room service and sat side-by-side on the bed with pillows propped up behind them. Dark crumb dots and brush strokes of chocolate frosting adorned white plates; a milky film coated empty glasses on the nightstands on either side of the bed. Trinn was glad they weren't sitting face-to-face when she started talking about her dreams. She couldn't bear to find that Sidney might decide she was a lunatic who had difficulty identifying the difference between some kind of hallucination and reality. She concentrated on revealing the details of the story she was telling, how the dreams had started and how they had evolved, and about her multiple encounters with a man named Catty, his dog MacGregor--and Alfred.

At Trinn's first mention of Alfred, Sidney's head jerked around toward Trinn. "Alfred? Did you say Alfred?"

"Yes."

"You've actually met my ancestor?" Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "What was he like?"

Trinn met Sidney's gaze. "You don't think this is crazy? You believe I've actually had contact with people from Briarcrest?"

Sidney shook her head. "There are forces at work in the world I believe we are hard pressed to explain. Call it some kind of psychic ability or call it dreams. It doesn't matter. Yes, I believe you've had some kind of intuitive experience. There are too many details that can be confirmed with the lore that has been passed down in my family. Just think, you met a relative of mine from hundreds of years past."

Trinn lifted one shoulder. "Well--don't get too excited. Alfred and I, well, we don't seem to get along very well."

"What do you mean?"

"Alfred is very suspicious of me. He doesn't trust me. He actually tied me up and left me in a storage shed."

Sidney wrinkled her brow in concern. "Were you--or maybe I should say--are you--all right?"

Trinn nodded. "MacGregor alerted Catty and he released me. I still think I need to be careful around Alfred, though. There's no telling what he might do in what he believes is Catty's defense."

Sidney pondered the information and asked, more to herself than to Trinn. "I wonder who Catty is? I've never heard him mentioned in all the stories I've heard."

"Well, he certainly acts as if he's Lord of the Manor, I'm hoping we'll be able to confirm his identity from the material we copied."

"I suspect he's an heir. We'll have to see if the annals mention him. Or if he was of a time when Fiona may have written about him, she may have included some information about him in her journals. Alfred lived during Fiona and Cate's time, but I don't know how long afterward. It's said he died in an accident of some type. That's all I know. I suppose Catty could be the next generation. Of course, Fiona and Cate didn't stay at Briarcrest until the end of their lives."

"Fiona and Cate left Briarcrest? Where did they go?"

"Home. To Glencully. Fiona's home. I'm not sure why they decided to do that, but it's always been known they did leave. They spent their latter years in the Scottish borderlands that belonged to Fiona's family."

Trinn looked at Sidney and twisted her mouth in concentration. "I'm really curious about who Catty is."

"I can't answer that. It's kind of odd he's not mentioned in Wycombe lore. I guess there's a possibility he could be Andrew's son. If he's not mentioned in the documents we copied, we might be able to figure out exactly what year you've been dreaming in and what Alfred's lifespan was in order to try to figure out who he is."

"There's one other thing," Trinn said. She reached over to the nightstand and picked up the leather strip. "This isn't a child's toy, nor is it a belt of some sort."

Sidney's eyes widened. "It isn't?"

"No. It's MacGregor's collar." She handed it to Sidney and said, "There are impressions in the leather. I discovered them when I brought it back here earlier today. I couldn't quite make them out. I knew there was an 'a' and it looked like it also had an 'l' or a '1'. I could feel other ridges, like there was other writing or designs in between, but I had no idea what it said. Then, I took a nap. That's when MacGregor found me in the shed and the man called Catty released me.

I was in Briarcrest Hall, lying in front of the fire recuperating from the ordeal when MacGregor came to comfort me. I was pretty sore from what was probably a night tied up in that shed on a hard dirt floor. Anyway, when MacGregor turned to go to Catty, I saw the collar around his neck. When I asked Catty if I could see it, he removed it and let me look more closely at it. It was the same collar." Trinn pointed to the leather in Sidney's hand. "It looked a lot newer, but it was the very same one. I'm sure of it. And it had, 'MacGregor', imprinted in it. Catty said he did it himself. Turns out the "l" was really the first part of the letter M."

Sidney ran her fingers over the lettering and stopped to examine the silver buckle.

"Catty said the buckle was made in a place called Willowglen, by a silversmith there."

Sidney's eyes widened. "Really?"

"What?"

"Do you remember I told you about a very unpleasant event that occurred during Catherine, Lydia, Cate and Fiona's time?"

Trinn considered her question for a moment. "Something about the Inquisition." A shudder ran through her.

"Willowglen." They both said it together. Sidney added, "It's the name of the town where Catherine grew up and had her herb shop before she moved to Briarcrest."

"Wow. I can't wait to get started on those documents now. What time do you want me to be at your office?"

Sidney was glad to hear Trinn express newfound enthusiasm. "How about at eight? Is that too early for you?"

Trinn looked at the clock radio by the bed. It was almost midnight. Time seemed to speed up the more of it she spent with Sidney Wycombe. She watched Sidney's eyes darken from light brown to almost black as she held Trinn's gaze and Trinn recognized the flicker of desire. It faded quickly when she said, "N--no. It's fine. I'll be there."

"Good." Sidney's reply was thick and hoarse. She jumped off the bed as if she had been shocked. "Well, I'd better go."

Since Trinn could think of no good reason to keep Sidney, in spite of a deep desire to have her by her side, she had no choice but to agree. Sidney left quickly, mumbling she would see her in the morning, without even turning to say goodbye.

THE HOTEL ELEVATOR doors slid open and Sidney stepped in. As she rode down to the hotel lobby, she allowed her body to lean into the wall. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. Her raging libido needed to be calmed down. She took deep breaths hoping they would work. This couldn't be happening. She could never act on these feelings she had for Trinn. Trinn was the heir. Her job was to serve the heir and protect the memory of Briarcrest. "What am I going to do?" she whispered into the empty elevator as it slid to a stop. The doors opened with a soft whoosh. As Sidney hurried out, she mumbled to herself, "Cold shower." The shiver the words elicited wasn't because she felt an icy anticipation, but rather, it was from the fact that she had to detach herself from her feelings for Trinn Wells before she could no longer control them.

SIDNEY PRESUMED SHE had her emotions well under control until Trinn bounced into her office the next morning. She wore a light blue cotton sweater that brought out the color of her eyes and a pair of tight jeans. Her hair was a tangled mass of unruly curls and Sidney had to ball her fists to ward off the fantasies that flashed through her mind. She wanted to run her hands through that hair and kiss Trinn roughly on the mouth.

Throughout the morning, while they went through the copies of the documents from Briarcrest, Sidney had to continually pull her focus away from Trinn, back to her reading. It was difficult to concentrate on the written pages, in spite of the excitement of reading about the people she had long heard about in family stories. Trinn was so beautiful.

Trinn sat in the guest chair opposite Sidney, her shoes off, her legs curled under her, turning pages with a delicate hand. A daydream of that hand doing things that thrilled Sidney until she couldn't sit still any longer had her squirming. Dropping the sheaf of papers on her desk, Sidney stood abruptly. "Um, I need a break. I'll be back."

Trinn blinked at Sidney's back as she disappeared out the door. She didn't even have time for a response. What was going on with Sidney? Why did she keep leaving unexpectedly? She put her copies down on Sidney's desk and wandered out to the reception area and made small talk with Lawrence about the hotel accommodations and the pub dinner they had enjoyed last evening.

Lawrence kept giving her odd looks until, finally, he brought the topic around to Sidney. "How was she last night? Did she seem all right?"

Trinn contemplated the look of desire she had seen in Sidney's eyes on several different occasions. However, since she didn't think that was what he was talking about, she responded with a simple "She was fine." When she remembered the headache, she asked, "Do you mean her headache? She didn't seem to have a problem. I guess it really was the copy machine."

Lawrence stared at Trinn.

"What?" Trinn asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"I don't think so. There's something else you want to say, isn't there? What is it? Come on, Lawrence, spill."

Lawrence hesitated. "Well--it's only that it hasn't been a copy machine all the other times she's had a headache, or dizziness, or has gone pale and looked as if she might pass out." He looked toward the entrance, a concerned look on his face. "I've been trying to get her to see her doctor, but she won't do it."

She raised her eyebrows, stunned to hear Sidney's headache was not a single occurrence. Now it was her turn to stare back at Lawrence while a myriad of questions materialized. She decided to ask the most obvious one. "How long has this been going on?"

"A couple of months."

Her eyes widened. A couple of months? More than a headache? If Sidney wouldn't listen to Lawrence, maybe she could convince her to go to the doctor. Could she? Who was she to try? If Sidney wouldn't take the suggestion from someone like Lawrence, someone who had worked with her for a long time and who seemed to care about her very much, how would she react to Trinn suggesting it? Well, it didn't matter. She'd have to try. "Leave it to me, Lawrence. I'll see if I can get her to agree to see a doctor."

He started to say something else, but stopped when Sidney came in through the reception door from the toilet down the hall. As Sidney closed the door, she realized the two of them had stopped talking. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no. Nothing at all." They said almost in unison.

Sidney raised an eyebrow briefly, shook her head, then headed back to her office saying, "I'll be in my office reading whenever you're ready to join me, Trinn."

LATER THAT DAY, Trinn found the account in Fiona's journal of the happenings in Willowglen and her meeting for the first time with Cate Pritchard. She read it aloud to Sidney. It seemed important to share it with her.

As she read the account of Fiona's feelings for Cate aloud, she felt her cheeks flush with her own desire thinking of Sidney.

"From the moment I laid eyes on Cate Pritchard, I have not been able to quiet the pounding of my heart. I find it difficult to breathe every time I see that beautiful face and hear that lovely voice. I know I mustn't allow these things to blossom in my mind. I must not allow myself to pursue these feelings, for I have pledged my loyalty to Catherine Hawkins, my father's childhood friend. I admire Catherine greatly and would not want to do anything to jeopardize our newly formed acquaintance. It was she who requested I come to Cate and try to help her so she and her son can return to Willowglen to be with her family. If I should be wrong about Catherine Hawkins and Lady Lydia, she might not look kindly on my feelings for her goddaughter, Cate. And what of Cate? She has a son. It cannot be denied she has lain with a man. What chance do I have with a woman like that? None, I suspect. So I must on both accounts put how I feel aside. Yet I am enamored of that golden hair that shines beneath her cap like rays of the sun and her piercing golden eyes. I am befuddled by her and find it difficult to speak to her at times--"

When she finished reading, the two women sat staring at one another. Trinn finally decided if she kept looking at Sidney, she was going to get up from her seat and go over and kiss her. Since she didn't think such an overt expression would be well received, Trinn returned to reading in silence.

There was nothing remarkable in the next few pages anyway and she spent more time marveling that Fiona's words mirrored her own feelings for Sidney.

The next passage she took note of was Fiona's accounting of her anguish when Cate was brought before the clergymen. Mad, she called them, immoral, idiot priests. Cate had had a relationship with a wandering minstrel who had run off at the news she was going to have a baby. When the child was born with a birthmark, a shock of white hair over his left temple, the priests interpreted it as a sign of his mother's evil tryst. Guilt by association, muttered Trinn, as she related the story to Sidney.

"Fiona said if Catherine hadn't had the presence of mind to pull her from the Governor's Hall that day, she would have perished with Cate in the fire rather than become her rescuer." Trinn exhaled, relieved when she read the account of the troupe from Briarcrest pulling Cate from the fire in which she was condemned to die. When she told Sidney that Lydia had also been condemned, they found the first gap in the information that had been handed down. Sidney had no idea Catherine had come so close to losing her beloved that day, too.

Late in the afternoon, Trinn found the reference that would shed light on Catty's identity. The journal entry was dated months after the incident in Willowglen. Fiona and Cate were well settled in at Briarcrest and baby Andrew had just started to talk. Fiona gave a sweet account of him calling Cate mummy and Fiona mama. He was crawling, and one of the cats, no doubt one

used to keep the mice at bay within the castle walls, had become fond of the young child. Andrew was captivated by the animal as well and had taken to mimicking her. He'd crawl along the floor meowing like the cat and the cat in turn would follow after him everywhere he went. Fiona wrote it was then they started to call him Catty.

Chapter Ten

THE DARK SKY outside Sidney's office window told Sidney it was late. She checked the time. Just before eight. They had been at the journals and annals for almost twelve hours, stopping only briefly to eat the take-away lunch Lawrence had brought them. When Sidney asked Trinn where she would like to go to dinner, Trinn boldly said, "What do you have to eat at your house?"

Sidney's cheeks flushed. "Not much, I'm afraid. I don't cook that often. Just one person, you know. I eat very lightly most nights."

"Well, I'm kind of getting burned out on restaurant food. I was hoping we might eat in. It doesn't have to be tonight though. Maybe on the weekend I could make us something nice."

Sidney looked down at her desk. "That would be nice. We could go to the market and buy what we need and have a nice quiet meal at home." She looked back up at Trinn, her eyes glowing with desire. Trinn looked down at the carpeted floor. The intensity of the feeling dissipated and she looked back at Trinn and gave her a sheepish grin.

Trinn said, "It's a date. Well, uh, not a date-date--um, well, you know what I mean." The carpet attracted her interest again.

"Yes," Sidney replied, her voice thick with emotion. "I know what you mean. I'll look forward to it." She added, "Will you be making dessert?"

They made eye contact. I could be dessert, Sidney reflected. She immediately followed it with a castigating, what do you think you're doing, Sidney Wycombe?

Another wide grin materialized on Trinn's face. "How could I not make dessert?"

The flirtation ended when Lawrence came to Sidney's open door. "I'll be off unless you need anything else." He looked at the two women and cocked his head. "Um, is there something else?"

Sidney pulled her gaze away from Trinn. "No, Lawrence, thank you. I think we have everything we need right here."

He caught Trinn's eye. "Trinn, you will make her go and eat some dinner, won't you?"

Trinn turned away and caught Sidney's gaze. "Yes, I'll be sure she has everything she needs."

He looked back and forth between both women. "Fine. Well, I'll be off then."

EMPTY PLATES AND two red-stained wine glasses sat pushed aside on the tiny outdoor café table. Because the night was balmy, they had decided to eat outside. Steaming cups of coffee sat in front of them. Trinn and Sidney let out a relaxing moan in unison.

"I guess I need to retract the statement I made earlier," Trinn said.

Sidney's eyes danced as she looked at Trinn. "Oh, what statement is that?"

"The one about being tired of restaurant food. That meal was superb. How do you know all these great restaurants?"

Sidney smiled. "I told you. I don't cook much."

Trinn looked Sidney up and down. "How do you eat out every night and still look like that?"

A rosy tinge appeared across Sidney's cheeks. "Actually, I don't eat out every night. Most nights I just eat a light snack at home, but I do have to entertain clients occasionally."

"Is that the category I fall into?"

Sidney cocked her head, her eyes full of question.

Trinn clarified. "Am I just a client?"

Blushing, Sidney replied, "I shouldn't think so. I've never invited 'just a client' to my house, let alone to cook dinner with me."

Trinn leaned close to Sidney. "Good. If you did, I'd be rather jealous right now."

Sidney shivered and blinked at Trinn. She quickly looked away. She had to get her roiling feelings under control. She could not get involved with Trinn. Trinn was the heir of Briarcrest. She had a job to do. Romance was not professional. She had to remain professional. As the conflict rose within her, she picked up the copy of the Annals of Briarcrest that lay on the table. "Um, are you too tired for a little more reading?"

Trinn nodded. "Shall we read together or do you want to split it up?"

"Together, I think."

As if summoned, the waitress appeared and cleared away everything but the coffee. "Ladies, can I get you anything else? Dessert?"

"I'm too full," Trinn said. "But you go ahead if you want to, Sidney."

"No, I'm the one who usually eats light, remember?" She handed the waitress her credit card and said, "We'll pass on dessert."

Sidney laid the stack of papers on the table between them and they read, *Annals of Briarcrest--1453 to 1460*.

Trinn pointed to the copy. "From what we've seen already, this is the period when Catherine and Lydia were at Briarcrest. Some of that time Beatrice and Hilary were still alive, too. I think if I could dream myself into any time period, it would be when all four of them were together. It would be amazing to talk to them. Of course, it's pretty amazing talking to Catty, too."

"I imagine." Sidney turned a page and found an accounting of some of the stores. The list noted several tubs of lard, butter and wheels of cheese. In addition, there was note of an average of at least a dozen eggs a day produced by the hens of Briarcrest. There was also a note that a day of hawking had produced eight hares to be dressed for a gathering the following day. This was followed by a dozen or more pages of similar entries, accounting for the wealth of Briarcrest in supplies received, payments made, and items used throughout the days and weeks listed on the pages.

They read a note that on the feast of St. Apollonius, Lady Hilary's prized mare had foaled a beautiful female with a white diamond on her head. This entry was followed by an entry dated *The Eve of the May Day Celebration* saying Mistress Catherine Hawkins, an herbalist, whom the ladies had met during the Fair in Willowglen the previous autumn, had joined Beatrice's niece, Lady Lydia, for the celebration of the May feast at Briarcrest.

"I think this is Catherine's first visit to Briarcrest, don't you?" Sidney asked.

"There was no mention of her visiting before that. From what little I know about the historical perspective of May Day, it was a major holiday in the pre-Christian calendar. But this was a time ruled by the Church."

"With an iron fist, as a matter of fact. They controlled everything."

Sidney pointed back to the pages. "Let's see what else we can find, shall we?"

Trinn nodded.

For pages and pages following those entries, there were only more accounts. Finally, they came to an entry that reflected great sadness on the part of the writer. Marion, Lady Lydia's nurse, had died at Briarcrest and was buried in a grave beside a large oak tree near other past inhabitants of the estate. Each time they came to accounting pages, they flipped through them quickly, stopping

when they reached narrative. They read an entry for *Christmastide 1459* saying Lydia had returned to Briarcrest from Willowglen and simply stated she was saddened to leave that town and the companionship of her herbalist friend. Later they came across a link between Catherine and Lydia when they read Lydia had been gravely ill and Catherine was her only hope of being saved. As the story went, Catherine had come to Briarcrest to nurse Lydia back to health.

Sidney and Trinn plunged on, turning page after page, until they came to a single entry on a page which read, "When troubles appear, look to the Stone Madonna for protection." In a time when paper was a precious commodity, forcing the hand that filled the pages to write with small, space-conserving script, the blank space surrounding the words seemed odd.

Trinn ran her index finger across the reproduction. "What do you suppose it means?"

Sidney shook her head. "I've no idea."

"Why do you suppose it's on this page without anything else? No reference or anything. Why would the writer squander all that paper on one sentence?"

"You're right. It must have been extremely important, but I have no idea what it could mean. I can't recall anything about a Stone Madonna in any of the lore of the Wycombe family. Maybe it was just someone's prayerful musing. I seem to remember there was a chapel at Briarcrest. Have you seen anything of it on your visits?"

Trinn hadn't, but she mused how Sidney talked about her little trips to Briarcrest as if she just hopped in a car and drove there some evenings to visit friends. "If there's a chapel there, I haven't seen it. But there's been nothing Catty and I have talked about that might suggest it as a topic."

Sidney said, "Let's continue and see if we find anything else to give us a clue."

However, the remainder of the annals were filled with more accounts, more movement of goods, more stores of food, and inventory of animals. When they reached the final page, their coffee cups were empty.

They made their way back to Trinn's hotel on foot. When they reached the lobby, Trinn glanced at her watch. "It's almost midnight. We've got to stop keeping such late hours." She noticed how tired Sidney looked. "How long will it take you to get home?"

"If I go by Tube, about half an hour. If I go by cab, fifteen minutes."

Trinn grabbed Sidney by the elbow and spun her around toward the wide lobby door. "Cab it is."

The doorman opened the door for them as they approached. Trinn said, "Could you please get a cab for Miss Wycombe?"

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled and walked to edge of the driveway. Raising his hand above his head caused a taxi to appear out of nowhere. The man opened the car door, and gestured for Sidney to enter. She fumbled in her pocket.

"I've got it." Trinn said. "Just get in. Go home and get some rest, Sidney. You look beat." Trinn plunged her hand into her pocket and fished out a weighty one-pound coin. She pushed it into the doorman's hand and watched him close the car door. Sidney smiled appreciatively though the window as the cab pulled away from the curb.

As Trinn walked toward the lobby elevator she went over all the new information they were able to get from reading the copy of the annals at dinner. She tried to imagine what Catherine, Lydia, and the ladies, Beatrice and Hilary, were like. She wondered about the curious message written toward the end of the book: When troubles appear, look to the Stone Madonna for protection. What could it mean? How could a statue offer security? Was it nothing more than religious fervor for the Madonna? Probably. Those were times driven by religious passion. Look at what had happened to Cate Pritchard and Lady Lydia. She shivered as the elevator doors slid open. Those were truly disturbing times. Subsequently, Catty risked his life to save the lives of others who were persecuted. "Man," she said softly, "I'd never be up for something like that. I'd never be that brave."

LAWRENCE TOOK A deep breath, clearing his lungs of the stuffiness of the club's interior. He looked over at the young, muscular man standing beside him, admiring his head full of thick, platinum hair and azure eyes. He must have been all of nineteen. Lawrence's brow wrinkled. He felt really old. Even in his youth, his hair had never been that thick, his eyes never that blue.

Why had he come to The Box tonight, he wondered? He recalled the look in Sidney's eyes when he poked his head into her office to say goodnight. Something in that look drove him here. Was it lust or love? He wasn't sure.

His companion smiled tentatively at him. "You have condoms, right?"

Lawrence returned the smile wondering if the youth was so inexperienced he didn't carry his own. Tonight, he didn't care. "I've got a flat full of condoms. Don't you worry your pretty little head."

Lawrence threaded his arm around the young man's elbow and they started down St. Martin's Lane toward the underground. Before they had gone two blocks, Lawrence realized he was being followed. Ah, well, at least I've got this Adonis to protect me. He tightened his grip on his companion's arm. "Do you work out?"

The young man puffed out his chest even more, if that were possible, and answered, "As a matter of fact, I work out every day. Except, I do take Sundays off. But, two days a week, I work on my martial arts in addition to the gym."

Lawrence's grin got wider. He reached over and patted the man's forearm with his other hand. It felt muscular, rock hard. "That's all right, then," he said, looking surreptitiously over his shoulder. "Let's go. The Condom Palace awaits you, my Karate Prince."

Chapter Eleven

LAWRENCE LOOKED AROUND Sidney's office. "Where's Trinn?" The two women had been holed up all morning, continuing to inspect the documents they had copied.

"She needed a break. She decided to go and get us a take-away."

Lawrence walked over to the window and stared at the sidewalk below. The image of a dark figure flashed across his mind--followed by an image of being pursued. Cold sweat broke out across his brow. Struggling to keep his voice even, he asked, "How long has she been gone?"

"I don't know. Maybe twenty minutes or so. Didn't she ask you if you wanted anything?"

The uncomfortable feeling refused to go away. He took a deep breath trying to regain control. "I wasn't here when she left. I just got back from delivering your documents to the clerk's office for recording."

Sidney didn't look up from the page she was reading. "Well, I guess you'll just have to go and get your own lunch, Lawrence. I'm sorry you missed her."

Lawrence stared down at the sidewalk. "Maybe I should go look for her."

He flinched when Sidney spoke into his right ear. "Lawrence, what's the problem? Trinn's a big girl."

He turned to her, debating if he should tell her about being followed the night before, but before he could make up his mind, she registered a surprised look and said, "You look like hell. Too much of a good thing last night?"

"Uh, yes. I don't know what possessed me to do it, but I decided on the cusp of the moment to stop off at The Box."

Sidney raised a dark eyebrow. "Oh. I see." She continued to stare. "But that's not what's causing this worry about Trinn."

"No. It's not." He cleared his throat and turned back to watch the street below them. Should he tell her? Even if it had nothing to do with Briarcrest, even if it had nothing to do with Trinn, she'd still end up worrying about him. Still, if it did have something to do with Briarcrest--. He cleared his throat of the lump that had formed. "It's just that--." As he gazed down at the sidewalk below, he saw her. Trinn was a half-a-block away, arms full of packages, walking briskly toward 71 St. John's Wood High Street. He relaxed but he still had to look farther up the street. The thugs who had been following him were nowhere in sight. He started over. "It's just that she doesn't really know her way around very well. I was afraid she might get lost."

"Lawrence, it's one thing to mother me to death. It's quite another to try to do that to Trinn. I really don't think she'd appreciate it."

Seeing his opportunity, he said, "But you do."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Only on some occasions."

"Like when I insist you go to the doctor?"

She gave him a look that told him he was overstepping his bounds. "Lawrence--"

The door to Sidney's office swung wide and Trinn stood there flushed, juggling bags and a stack of take-away boxes. "Could someone give me a hand? I almost lost these things coming up the stairs."

Sidney and Lawrence rushed to her side. In a jumble of hands, the packages almost went tumbling anyway, but the pair finally managed to extract some of the burden from Trinn without dumping everything on the floor.

"I got you something, too, Lawrence. I hope it's okay. I didn't know if you'd be going out."

He beamed at her. "No. I'm not going out. Thank you. That was considerate of you."

SIDNEY AND LAWRENCE sat opposite Trinn at the small table sometimes used for impromptu meetings in Sidney's office. The remains of their sandwiches sat in wrappers littering the table along with bags of crisps and empty drink cans.

Sidney's brow furrowed as she said, "Look, Trinn, I just don't think it's a wise idea.

Trinn played with her napkin, folding and unfolding it. "I think it would be fun. Besides, I may recognize something that would confirm the identity of the correct area. After all, you think you know where Briarcrest was located, but you don't know for sure you have the exact spot, isn't that right? You said so yourself at dinner the other night."

"That's true, but--" Sidney gave her a concerned look. She didn't like this idea at all.

"No buts. I'm going." Trinn's look dared Sidney to argue. "If you can't take me there, maybe Lawrence will." She batted her eyes at him. "Won't you, Lawrence."

He gave Sidney a pleading look. "Don't put me in the middle of this discussion. Eventually, one of you will make me choose sides in this argument and I'll implode if that happens."

Sidney appreciated Lawrence's loyalty but she couldn't resist teasing him. She fluttered her eyes at him. "Argument? Who said anything about an argument? All we're doing is having a little chat about whether or not it's a good idea to go traipsing around the English countryside trying to figure out the location of the Briarcrest estate, when, as Trinn has already pointed out, we aren't even sure if we have identified the right area. I had hoped the documentation from Briarcrest would give us some clue, but so far it hasn't, so I don't think there's any reason to go looking for something that may well be a waste of time." No, this wasn't a good idea at all.

Lawrence looked back and forth at both women. A scowl appeared across his boyish face. "Wait a minute." He pointed at Trinn and said, "Why did you say you'd be able to recognize something. You don't even know where Sidney thinks it is. How would you be able to do that?"

Trinn raised an eyebrow and looked at Sidney.

Sidney's heart skipped. Why was this woman so unbelievably attractive? She tried to appear nonchalant as she shrugged. "Go ahead and tell him. He knows pretty much everything else I know about Briarcrest. We've had long conversations about it over the years. He knows how committed I am to doing whatever I can to preserve the memory, and possibly the site, if we can identify it. He may as well know what's been going on from your perspective."

When Trinn first told Lawrence the story of her dreams, he laughed and told her it was a joke.

He stared at Trinn. "You're pulling my leg, right?" He turned to Sidney. "She's making this up, isn't she?"

"No. I believe it's all true."

He squinted at her. "You're in this together. She's made up this fantastic story, and you think it would be fun to get me to believe it."

Sidney didn't respond. It was true. She wasn't the type of person to believe such tales, but it was easy to believe Trinn. She had been skeptical at first, but the story about MacGregor's collar finally convinced her. She looked over at Trinn. "Would you like to show him the collar?"

Trinn had taken to carrying it with her everywhere she went. She pulled it out and thrust it toward Lawrence. "At first we wondered if it was part of a child's toy. Maybe a belt for a doll. It turned out that I had actually seen the collar before, in one of my dreams. It belongs to a little black dog. His name is MacGregor."

He turned the collar over and over, staring at it. "How do you know it's the same collar? Maybe it's just a similar one."

She took it back and held it so it was stretched taut between her hands and angled it back and forth ever-so-slightly. "See those indentations?" He nodded. "They spell the dog's name. MacGregor."

His eyes widened and he grew quiet. Finally he said, "So you might be able to identify some feature on the landscape, then, because you've actually been there in dreams?"

Sidney slapped his arm. "Lawrence, don't encourage her."

Trinn held Lawrence's gaze. "Yes, I might."

Sidney tried to discourage the conversation from continuing. It just didn't seem wise to allow Trinn to go exploring an area she wasn't sure was the right spot in the first place. "Don't get any ideas in your head, Trinn. It could well be nothing more than a waste of time."

"I think we should go tomorrow," Lawrence offered. "I'll take you."

Panic welled up in Sidney's chest. She couldn't say why. "Lawrence! I said, stop encouraging her."

"Why should I? She may be able to provide us with much needed information. What harm can a little ride in the country do? If she can't find anything, we've lost nothing."

"Except for a day."

He heard the irritation in Sidney's voice as she folded her arms across her chest. She didn't want Trinn to go, but if she couldn't prevent it, she would at least go with them. She'd have to clear her calendar.

"Yes, except for a day. But you said you estimated you'd be finished going through all the documentation by late this afternoon, didn't you? And you have to be in court all day tomorrow, don't you?"

Sidney's eyes widened. "I do? Oh. It's the fifteenth, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Yes, it is. And I'm afraid you have to be there. It took months to get that appointment, so you can't cancel out at the last minute. It'll take months to get another one."

He turned back to Trinn and gestured toward her. "And what will poor Trinn do to keep herself occupied all the while you're playing solicitor, Mizz Wycombe." He drew out her title for emphasis.

Sidney rolled her eyes and twisted her sandwich wrapper until it was no more than a thick cord. At the moment, she wished it was Lawrence's neck. She wasn't going to be able to stop this from happening and she wasn't going to be able to go with them. She picked it up and poked the air with it in their general direction. Frustration made her sputter. "All right, but promise me you'll be careful. Please."

With no discussion Lawrence and Trinn said in unison, "Promise me you'll make a doctor's appointment."

"That has nothing to do with this conversation." Sidney looked from one to the other. Neither of them said a word. Sidney exhaled. "This is a conspiracy, isn't it?"

They turned to one another and smiled.

Sidney raised her hands in front of her, palms out. "All right. I give up. Have it your way. Lawrence, I expect to be out of court by 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon. If you can get me in at my doctor's afterwards, I'll go there straight away from court. Meanwhile, you two can go off into the English countryside and play detective. Just make up your mind which of you is Rosemary and which is Thyme."

Lawrence and Trinn giggled at the inference to the female gardener detectives well known on both sides of the pond.

"What if they can't fit you in tomorrow?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

"Tomorrow or the deal's off," Sidney insisted. "I want it out of the way and over with, so I don't have to hear about it any more. I've got big plans for the weekend." She looked at Trinn and smiled innocently, but the look in her eyes was far from guiltless. She was looking forward to spending the weekend with Trinn, cooking and getting to know one another. Yes, she could hardly wait for the weekend to begin. However, first there was a court date, and now, there would be a doctor's appointment, too.

Lawrence argued, "Sidney, I'm not sure--"

Trinn cut him off, putting her hand on his as it rested on the table. "We'll take your deal, counselor."

"But Trinn--" Lawrence whined.

She leaned over and said through clenched teeth, as if Sidney couldn't hear, "Take the deal, Lawrence. We'll worry about next week only if we have to." Her look told him the negotiations were closed.

He sniffed. "I'll see what I can do." He gathered up all of the bags and wrappers as he got up from the table. He threw them into the trash bin. "You just don't know how difficult you make things. It's easy to tell me something must be done by such-and-such a date and time and I make

it so as if by magic, but it's just never that easy, you know." He pointed at Trinn. "You. Be ready at eight a.m. I want to get out of the city early so we can enjoy the ride. I'll pick you up at your hotel then. Clear?"

Trinn blinked a few times before she answered, "Yes sir, Mr. Truly."

He turned on his heel and left the room.

Without another word, the two women returned to Sidney's desk and the few remaining pages of journals they had left to go through. An hour later Lawrence returned. He walked up to Sidney and pointed to her. "You have an appointment with your doctor at 3:15. Be sure to be there because I had to do a lot of begging to get you in." He turned to Trinn. "The car hire office doesn't open until eight a.m., so I'll pick you up at 8:30. Be ready." Both women just nodded.

When he left Sidney's office, closing the door behind him, Trinn finally let out her breath. "I'll bet he doesn't get like that very often, does he?"

"You're right. He doesn't. But when he does, I just do what he says because he's probably at his wit's end with me and he's probably right. I know I frustrate him sometimes."

Trinn leaned across Sidney's desk. "Hmmm. I'll have to keep that in mind."

Sidney blinked. "That I frustrate him?"

"That getting to the point of laying down the law to the lawyer means that she finally might actually listen."

Sidney waved off the idea. "Don't count on it. You'll get more response because you're the heir than by just trying to push me around."

"Well, I guess I'd better keep that in mind, too."

As Sidney stared into Trinn's eyes, she imagined she could see deeply into her soul for an instant. Then, it was gone. The deep blue eyes bored into her and she felt a burning in her chest. She put her hand on the spot where she felt the warmth. Who was looking into whose soul, she wondered? She took a deep breath to ward off the intensity of the feeling and changed the subject. "So, what do you think we should cook this weekend?"

Trinn smiled at her. "Well, first things first. We need to buy food, so I have a shopping date." She emphasized the last word.

"Oh?"

"After that, I have a cooking date."

"I see," Sidney said.

"And then, I have a dinner date."

Sidney nodded and smiled, happy to be part of this banter. She felt light and happy. It had been a long time since she felt that way.

"But of course, it's not a real date. It can't be," Trinn added.

"I see. And why not, Mizz Wells?" Sidney used Lawrence's earlier pronunciation of her title.

Trinn stared, but said nothing for a few beats. "Let's just say it's because I have to make sure you keep your place."

"Because you're the heir."

Trinn refused to let Sidney go and continued to hold onto her gaze. Her yes was no more than a whisper.

Now Sidney was silent. The battle to maintain her noble gallantry raged. If only I didn't need to maintain my distance and objectivity. If only I could figure out how to bring the project to a conclusion, I might be able to pursue this attraction to Trinn. But for now, I must maintain control. Trinn is the heir.

The tension between them was thick. Trinn looked down at the papers in front of them and cleared her throat. "Well, I guess we'd better finish this."

Sidney responded with a hoarse voice, "Yes." If Trinn had still held her gaze, she would have seen Sidney's eyes glistening.

IT WAS THE middle of the night when Trinn opened her eyes. She assumed she was still in her bed in her hotel room. She smelled a distinctly smoky odor, and wondered for a moment why the smoke alarm in her room wasn't going off. That caused her to sit up quickly and, when she did, she realized she was not in her hotel room at all.

"Briarcrest," she whispered. As she looked down at the cell phone clipped to her waist, she wondered if it still worked in another time and place.

The display read 1:00 a.m., which seemed about right, but she couldn't know for sure. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and realized she could see the room by the light of the dying fire behind her. Squinting to see down the length of the hall, her first consideration was of Briarcrest's chapel.

The words written on the page of the annals echoed in her mind. *When troubles appear, look to the Stone Madonna for protection.* If she could locate the chapel, she might find the stone

Madonna and it might contain a clue as to what the cryptic message in the old book meant. Perhaps it would help Sidney in her quest.

She looked around to make certain she really was alone. She got up from the cot and moved cautiously around the room, searching for what, she wasn't sure. She passed the large double doors she already knew went into the private gardens and continued down the length of the great hall.

The only other openings she found were the ones opposite the garden doors, which led to the kitchen and pantry, and the heavy entrance to the great hall from the outer courtyard. She tried to return to her cot but felt as if she were being pulled toward the garden doors.

Could the chapel be separate from the main hall, she wondered? As she approached the doors, she glanced over her shoulder. Even though it seemed apparent everyone was sleeping, she felt uneasy. The dying fire did little to warm the room and she shivered as she reached for the carved wooden handle grips. The hinges creaked as she pulled a door open. She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Only the small glow from the fireplace lit the area nearby. Nothing stirred. Trinn shrugged and slipped through the opening.

The sweet odor of flowers met her nostrils outside. The night air swirled around her in a breeze that left her chilled. She could barely see a hand in front of her in the moonless night. She stretched out one arm to prevent herself from running into anything as she groped in the dark. Following the building wall with her other hand, she came to an opening.

She thought about her cell phone and lifted it from her waistband. As she opened it, the light came on and illuminated about a foot of space in front of her. Not as good as a flashlight, but better than nothing. When she looked around, she realized she was in a stone alcove standing before a large wooden door with an ornate cross carved into it. Across the door, in a banner of wood that spanned the cross, were etched the words *Chapel of Our Lady of Briarcrest*. The thrill of hope rushed through her. When she tried the door, it opened easily.

The air all at once smelled musty, earthen, damp, and stagnant. She walked further into the room and caught just a hint of spice. Incense. It was gone as quickly as it had come to her, replaced by the odor of dust and musty cobwebs. She raised the cell phone higher and made out faint details. Several columns on either side of a center aisle held up the ceiling. The room was empty with only a few benches strewn across the floor like old felled logs in a stale forest. Everything looked washed out and gray from disuse.

She crept across the floor, avoiding the benches, some lying on their sides, one overturned upon another, until she reached the sanctuary. She swept the area with her phone and spotted a statue in a niche, chest-high, and to her left. Her heart beat faster as she approached it and she put out her free hand. As she brushed a layer of chalky dust from the two-foot high statue, she realized it was carved out of wood, disappointing enough, but the statue was male, not female. An old, balding man in long, dull robes. He touched his chest over his heart with two delicately carved, dusty fingers. Some male saint she couldn't identify.

She turned her back to the niche, and did another sweep of the area. A matching alcove on the opposite wall stood empty. She approached it, and pointed the phone's display toward the shelf, tracing a line in the crumbling gray surface with her index finger. If there ever was a statue here, it had been removed long ago.

Deciding there was nothing more to see, she made for the door. When she reached it, she snapped her cell phone shut. The display dimmed to standby mode as she clipped it back on to her waistband. She opened the chapel door.

Moving along the wall, using her right hand as a guide, she knew the garden door leading back to the main hall was only a few feet away. When she felt the thick carved handles, she gripped one firmly and started to pull. She slipped through the doorway and felt something grasp her shoulder in a vise-like grip. She froze in place, her heart pounding in her ears.

The words were raspy, almost guttural. "What do you think you're doing lurking around here in the dark of night?"

Terror wrapped around her voice giving it a thin, pathetic sound. "Alfred." She tried to calm herself before speaking. "I--I couldn't sleep. I hoped some fresh air might help."

"No doubt you hoped prayer might help, too. I saw light in the chapel."

"Um, oh. You saw that? Well--" Words failed her. She wondered what Alfred would do to her if he had seen the cell phone. Fool. Why did you turn that thing on? Accusations of witch burning crossed her mind. Anything the people of this time didn't understand was cause enough.

"What did you do with it?"

"With what?" If she played dumb, maybe she could buy some time.

"With the candle."

Relief washed over her. Think. Quick. Say something. "I--I--lost it. It burned out and I dropped it. Inside. In the chapel."

He released his grip and stepped in front of her and stared without speaking. Trinn shivered at his penetrating look.

Without warning, the door back to the main hall opened slowly and MacGregor stood there, looking up at them both with bright, intelligent eyes. MacGregor barked once, his sharp voice commanding--something. Trinn didn't know what, yet she was grateful for his presence.

She shivered as the events of her last encounter with MacGregor when she was in trouble went through her mind. The shed. The leather bindings. MacGregor finding her. "It's cold out here, Alfred. Let me pass." He scowled. "I'm still weak from my last meeting with you. I need to lie down."

He still stared.

Her heart continued to pound in her ears. She worried that it was so loud Alfred would hear it, too.

"I don't trust you." He stabbed his finger into her chest. "If I ever have the slightest inkling that Master Catty's life is in danger, I'll set the dogs on you and I'm not talking about MacGregor here. I'm talking about the mastiffs in the kennel and, believe me, they won't leave much meat on your bones by the time they're through with you."

She gulped. MacGregor forced his way between the two of them, giving her some measure of courage. "You have nothing to fear from me, Alfred. I am exactly what Master Catty says I am. I'm a pilgrim, just passing through. And I've become a friend to Catty because of his hospitality and friendship. I would never do anything to harm him. Please. Believe me."

He took his hand away and spat on the ground, barely missing her foot. "Just remember my warning, Trinn of Plymouth, or whoever you are." He turned and disappeared into the darkness.

She stood there, listening to his footsteps fading as he padded across the dirt yard. When she couldn't hear him anymore, she pulled with door open wider and followed MacGregor inside. The fire did little to warm her. "You've got to be careful," she told herself. She plunged her head into her hands. "If you do something stupid, one of these times, MacGregor might not be able to rescue you." She sat there for a long time, finally dozing. When she lifted her head, she was sitting on the side of the bed in her hotel room and dawn was breaking over the rooftops of London.

WHEN LAWRENCE KNOCKED on Trinn's hotel room door, she answered quickly. She was dressed in tan shorts, a blue polo shirt, and tennis shoes with navy socks. She raised an eyebrow when she saw Lawrence dressed in a suit.

"Am I overdressed," he asked.

"Am I underdressed?"

"Not at all. How about if I take off my tie?"

"That would make me feel better. Are you sure you're going to be comfortable dressed like that for a day in the countryside?"

"I'll take off the tie." Pulling at the knot, he skillfully removed the tie, rolled it up and put it into his jacket pocket. He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. "Better?" His broad grin warmed Trinn.

"Much."

"Ready to go?"

"If we can stop for breakfast along the way."

"I know just the place. We'll be there in an hour. My treat."

Trinn checked her pocket to make sure she had her room key and the pair headed to the elevator. Lawrence guided her to the car park where he opened the passenger door of the tiniest car Trinn had ever seen. She stopped before climbing in and stood on tiptoe to look at the back of the car.

"Something wrong?" Lawrence asked.

"Do you need me to help you wind the key?"

"Very funny. Get in or I'll leave you behind."

As Trinn climbed into the little car, she decided, although she wished Sidney could be with them, she was really looking forward to the day with Lawrence. Besides, where would Sidney sit in this tiny two-passenger wonder? She smiled as she dropped down into the seat. There was always her lap.

True to his word, at exactly one hour from the time they left the hotel, Lawrence pulled into the gravel car park of The Crown and Oak Leaf restaurant about five miles east of Swindon. As they entered the restaurant, a small sedan with mottled blue paint and a dented front bumper pulled to a stop on the side of the road several yards away from the establishment.

When they walked in, the room was empty except for a waiter wearing a wrap-around apron who sat on a barstool reading a newspaper. He looked up, smiled, and indicated they should sit anywhere they liked. They chose a circular booth with a diamond-paned window of leaded glass above it. Outside, a park spread before them, with summer grass glowing in the sunlight and a light breeze ruffling the trees set against an aquamarine sky dotted with cloud wisps.

Trinn munched on her last bit of meat on the plate, marveling at the quality of what the English called bacon. She stared out the window, enjoying the view and breathed deeply. She had been in England over a week. Warring within her were her concerns about a job, money, and her apartment, on the one hand, and how very much she was enjoying her stay, her growing friendship with Lawrence, the mystery that was Sidney Wycombe, as well as the enigma of saving the elusive Briarcrest.

Lawrence pushed his plate away. "Hmmm. I knew this was the right choice. Did you enjoy your fry up, Trinn?"

She turned away from the window and her struggle. "Oh. Yes. It was great, Lawrence. Only, between Sidney taking me to great restaurants at night and now this, I'm going to have to go on a diet when I get home."

Lawrence frowned. "Well, let's not worry about that right now, shall we? Let's just enjoy our day in the country. If there's time, we can swing around through some of the lower Cotswolds towns before we head back to London. Give you a real flavor of the English countryside."

"Sounds wonderful. I'll go where ever you take me."

"Ready, then?"

He took out a ten-pound note and left it on the table, then held out his hand to help Trinn slide out of the booth. As they headed out the door, the waiter raised his hand and called, "Thanks, mate."

As Lawrence folded himself back into the little black car, Trinn asked playfully. "Did you remember to wind the key?"

Lawrence rolled his eyes, looked over his shoulder, and backed out of the parking space, pulling onto the meandering road that would take them back to the M4. When they were about a quarter of a mile up the road, the battered blue car pulled out behind them.

TRINN INHALED THE scent of the clean air and tender green grass. The knoll they were standing in was storybook perfect. Undulating green marked off by large boulders, artfully placed here and there, trees rippling in the warm breeze, a patch of wildflowers in a basin up ahead of them--it all made Trinn feel relaxed and peaceful. What beautiful country, she reflected. "Where shall we go, Lawrence?"

"You tell me. You're the one who said she might recognize something."

Trinn scanned the area with new eyes. Did anything look familiar to her? She tried to remember standing out in the open, first seeing MacGregor and then Catty. Did it look like this? It could have. But so did a lot of other areas they passed getting here. "Are there any buildings left here that might be related to Briarcrest?"

"There are a couple of walls. They might be foundations or they might just be boundary markers. The structures haven't been studied, so the origins are uncertain. That's why we aren't sure if this is the right location."

"Can I see them?"

"Sure. It's a bit of a hike. Are you up for it?"

Trinn frowned at Lawrence's dress shoes. "Are you?"

He shrugged. "Your wish is my command, your ladyship."

Trinn rolled her eyes. "Stop it. You're starting to sound like Sidney."

"She's dedicated, you know. Deeply committed. They all were." His look told her how serious he was.

"I know. And, I appreciate it. I just wish I knew more. Could help more."

"Your being here is a great help. Before you came, Sidney was at her wits end. Thank you for coming and for being willing to help out."

"It's not a problem. I'm intrigued. It's a fascinating story. You, both of you, are so dedicated to it. I--I only hope I have something to offer."

Lawrence bored into her with his gaze. "You have a lot to offer, Trinn. You, well, Sidney, she's--."

Trinn frowned, questioning him with a look.

"She's had a difficult time since her father died and she and Janet--well, maybe I shouldn't be telling tales out of school. Not really my business I suppose."

He started walking toward a grove of trees in the distance. Trinn had to take long strides to catch up with him.

"Who's Janet?"

"Someone who should have had Sidney's best interest at heart, but instead was a conniving greedy bitch that refused to understand Sidney's dedication to her work."

Trinn tilted her head. "Why don't you tell me how you really feel?"

He stopped and gave her a penetrating look. "Whatever you do, Trinn, please don't hurt her. She's had enough pain in her life."

The depth of Lawrence's concern for Sidney was apparent. Trinn's smile turned serious. Her voice came out no more than a whisper. "I won't, Lawrence. I promise."

His look softened. As they resumed their trek, he mumbled, "Thank you."

They continued on in silence until they reached a ruined wall only about 3 feet in length. It might have looked like no more than some randomly piled stones, but Lawrence told her this was one of several like it that might have been part of a structure. Trinn couldn't see it. She looked around. "Where are the others?"

"One is right over here." He pointed a few yards away. "The other is a bit more of a hike."

"Let's look at both of them." She looked down at his shoes. "Are you up for it?"

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Let's go. This way." He started toward the direction in which he had gestured earlier. Before Trinn followed him, she glanced around the area of the first pile of stones trying to determine if anything looked remotely familiar. It didn't.

When they reached the second set of stones, she looked around. Nothing struck her as recognizable. This is probably a dumb idea, she decided. Nothing is the same as in my dreams. Of course, I guess a lot can change in, what, five hundred plus years? A frown materialized on her face when she turned to say something to Lawrence and she found him flat on his back in the grass with a large, bleeding gash on his right temple.

"Lawrence! My god, what happened?"

He tried to sit up, but she pushed him back into the grass. His eyes rolled back in his head.

"Lawrence--Lawrence--."

He opened his eyes briefly. "I donno. I--something hit me. I don't know--." His eyes rolled back and she caught him just in time to prevent him from re-injuring himself on a rock. She lowered him gently down to the ground.

"Lawrence please don't die on me out here in the middle of nowhere."

Chapter Twelve

SIDNEY STOOD IN front of her office window, where Lawrence had been the afternoon before, gazing down onto the street below as he had done. It was five-thirty in the evening. They should have been back before this, unless of course there was an accident on the motorway. She paced in front of the window, wondering what to do. She had tried Lawrence's mobile, and Trinn's, and neither had answered.

If only I didn't have that court date. If only I hadn't gone to the doctor. Maybe I should have chucked it all and gone with them. It was futile to speculate, she knew, but she was so frustrated at not knowing what had happened to them. She toyed with calling the police, but she didn't want to jump the gun, embarrassing Lawrence and possibly risking Trinn's wrath.

"HOLY HADES!" BEADS of sweat formed across Trinn's forehead and upper lip. "Now I know why you wanted this tiny wind-up car." A large truck had just passed them on the narrow, two-lane road, nearly running Trinn into a ditch.

Lawrence looked over at her and said, "I don't think you can use holy and Hades in the same expletive. The incongruity police will penalize you for that." He removed the handkerchief he held against his wound and looked at it. It was covered in fresh blood. He mumbled his own curse and let his head fall back against the headrest.

"Keep that against your head and make sure you apply pressure. I don't want you bleeding to death on me. Oh, crap, here comes another truck. What are they doing on this godforsaken road to nowhere?" She pulled over as far to the left as she could and slowed almost to a stop to let the truck going in the opposite direction pass. As she pulled back out on to the road, her brain screamed at her that she needed to get over to the right side of the road. For some reason, she couldn't make her brain understand that they were in England, and if she drove on the right, she'd be involved in a head-on collision sooner or later. She glanced over at Lawrence and gave him a worried look. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Right as rain. If this stupid thing would only stop bleeding, you wouldn't even need to be driving. I keep telling you I don't need to go to hospital. It'll be fine."

"I'm not listening--la la la la. I can't hear you. You need stitches. That's the only way that thing is going to stop bleeding. What would Sidney say if I let you bleed to death?"

"You'll take his place?"

"What?"

"What."

"What do you mean you'll take his place? You're not making any sense. Must be that knock in the head."

"I'm making perfect sense. That's what Sidney would say. Since you were responsible for my demise, it's only right that you should have to take my place and become Sidney's lovely assistant." He smiled sheepishly. "I hope you're up to it."

Trinn frowned, but didn't take her eyes off the road. "Don't even joke about that. Oh, god, here comes another car."

"Steady. Just stay to the left and you'll be fine. Let him move over too." A car whizzed past them and Trinn was amazed they didn't get hit.

They reached an intersection and Trinn stopped. "Which way?"

"Left."

Trinn wrinkled her nose. "Why did it have to be left?"

"Actually," Lawrence said, "left is easier. You go from the left lane to the left lane. It's like your right turn."

"I know, but it's into the setting sun. It'll be harder to see the cars coming at me." She grimaced as she slowly made the turn. "If I had any idea I would have had to drive during this trip, I would never have consented to come to this blasted country."

Lawrence chuckled. A wince followed. "Don't make me laugh. My head is throbbing."

Trinn took a hand off the wheel to point at a road sign. "Is that a hospital sign? That red sign with the 'H' in it? Does that mean the same as in the US? 'H' means hospital, right?"

"Yes, the same. Hospital is up ahead. Emergency. Tired. I'm going to take a nap now."

"No. No you're not. I don't know much about medicine, but I do know if you have a head injury, you're not supposed to go to sleep. You stay awake."

Lawrence closed his eyes as he whispered, "Okay."

She reached over and grabbed his arm. "Lawrence, wake up!"

Trinn heard her phone ring. She didn't feel confident enough to try to unclip it from her belt as she was driving. With Lawrence threatening to fall asleep, perhaps even falling into unconsciousness, she didn't want to pull over either. Instead, she sped up, comforted by the Accident and Emergency sign with an arrow pointing into a driveway.

SIDNEY PACED AND stared out the office window. She checked her watch again. Five forty-five. It seemed like hours since she had last checked the time, but only fifteen minutes had passed. She saw the little black car drive up and park in a no parking zone. Trinn got out of the driver's side. "Finally," Sidney said. Trinn seemed healthy and had all her limbs. Concern grew as she saw her help Lawrence out of the passenger side of the car with his head bandaged.

Sidney quickly negotiated the space between her office window and the reception area to open the door just as Trinn and Lawrence struggled to enter through the doorway together.

Concern returned to Sidney's face as she took Lawrence's other arm and helped guide him to the couch. "What happened?"

Lawrence looked up at her and smiled. "It's clear my head is harder than the immovable object with which it was met."

"Why didn't you call? I was worried sick."

Trinn came to Lawrence's defense. "They wouldn't let us use our phones in the hospital. And when I tried to go outside, I couldn't get a signal. I'm not sure why. Once they discharged Lawrence, we just decided to head back to the office, hoping you'd still be here." She held Sidney with her look. "I'm glad you were."

Sidney blushed and looked down at the floor until she could recover. "Well, er, anyway, tell me what happened."

Trinn obliged. "We were walking along in the country and I turned around to say something to him and found him on the ground, flat on his back, with a gash on the side of his head and blood flowing out like there was no tomorrow. We don't really know what happened, except he, obviously, was hit by something."

"I was so worried--" Sidney choked, unable to continue.

Trinn went on with her explanation, needing to purge herself of the story to get some relief from her own concern. "When I reached him, his eyes were rolling back in his head. He spoke to me, but I could see he was out of it. He blacked out a couple of times. When he finally came to and stayed there long enough for me to help him walk, we got to the car and I drove him to the hospital."

Lawrence burst out laughing. "You should have seen her. She was petrified. It was a hoot."

Both women glared at him and he stopped talking, the smile replaced by a contrite look.

Sidney looked back at Trinn who went on with the story. "He managed to stay awake long enough to point me in the direction of the hospital. They said he might have a slight concussion. They cleaned him up and gave him fourteen stitches. The doctor said it looked like he was hit by a rock. He found dirt and debris in the wound and the cut was pretty jagged. I can't believe how much he bled."

Lawrence held up one finger and said, "Blood is thicker than water."

Sidney raised a dark eyebrow. "He's babbling."

"I'm afraid it's the shock. They used Novocain to stitch him up, but they said it would be very sore when the numbing wore off. He's also got a terrific headache from being hit. They said he shouldn't drive. I'll tell you, driving at night, in London is an experience I never, I repeat, never want to have again. If you've got anything to drink around here, you'd better cough it up because I need something strong and alcoholic now."

Now it was Sidney's turn to laugh. "All right, all right. I've got some sherry in my office. I'll get it right away."

"Get me one, too," Lawrence piped up from his position on the couch.

Both women said in unison, "I don't think so."

Sidney returned a few minutes later with a glass of sherry in each hand and a blanket and pillow under her arm.

Trinn took the pillow and gently guided Lawrence into it on the couch. He looked exhausted. She took the blanket and spread it over him. Both women walked over to the two guest chairs by Lawrence's desk and sat down. Sidney handed Trinn one of the sherries.

Trinn took a sip of the amber liquid. "You were worried about us, eh?"

Sidney sipped her own drink and tasted the burning sweetness as it met her tongue. She held it there for a while before she swallowed. "Of course I was. Lawrence is a valued employee. You are a friend." She didn't look at Trinn when she said it, afraid she might see her blush. She looked into Trinn's eyes and said, "I don't want anything to happen to you. You should know that by now."

They continued to hold each other's gaze, not speaking until they had finished their drinks.

"Why don't you go back to the hotel? I'll stay with Lawrence."

"Don't be silly. I'll stay. You go home. You've expended a lot of emotion in your concern for us tonight."

"And you haven't?"

"Well, I'll be okay."

Silence once more as Sidney mulled everything over. She looked up into Trinn's eyes and seemed hesitant as she spoke. "We could both stay."

"Oh?" Trinn raised a golden eyebrow.

"The couch in my office opens into a bed." Her heart pounded in her ears. What was she thinking? Get in bed with Trinn? She didn't know if she would survive.

"Okay," Trinn whispered.

TRINN AWOKE IN the dark to the sound of someone yelling on the sidewalk outside. For a moment, it seemed as though she was back in her apartment in Boston. Then she remembered Lawrence lying on the ground--and the blood. Finally she remembered that, fourteen stitches later, he was pronounced fit enough to go home as long as he was monitored for the next 24 hours. She smiled, glad he would be okay. She decided to get up to go check on him, but when

she tried to get up, she couldn't move. She was trapped. Caught under an arm wrapped around her waist. Sidney's arm enfolded her.

Her heart started to pound. Did they--? No. They hadn't. She remembered now. They pulled out the couch and threw a blanket over the sheet already on the mattress. As Trinn removed her tennis shoes, she said, "So, you were worried about me, eh?"

They had their backs to one another. It was easier to be truthful.

"Yes, Trinn. I was worried. I know I wanted you to come to London to help me resolve the issues about Briarcrest, but since you've been here, I've grown fond of you. I was terribly worried."

Trinn turned to Sidney, but she didn't reciprocate and the conversation ended as both women fell into bed, exhausted. Now, she needed to go check on Lawrence, and she couldn't figure out how to extricate herself from Sidney's embrace without waking her. She slid slowly from underneath her arm, trying to stay parallel to the bed until she nearly fell onto the floor. She finally cleared Sidney's hand just in time to be able to stand up or else she would have fallen with a thud, waking the woman beside her. As she took a step toward the door, she heard the familiar voice, tinged with sleep.

"Where are you going?"

Trinn turned toward to couch. "To check on Lawrence."

Sidney sat up and rubbed her face. "I checked on him a little while ago. He's still sleeping like a baby, all cuddled up in the blanket with a smile on his face. I guess he's not in too bad shape."

"That's a relief." Trinn came back to the couch and sat on the edge of the mattress. She couldn't stop thinking about being wrapped in Sidney's embrace.

Sidney said softly, "I'm sorry, Trinn."

Trinn turned to her, just able to make out the outline of her features in the dark. "About what?"

"I shouldn't have touched you. I apologize. I didn't know I was doing it in my sleep. Come back to bed. I'll try to keep my hands to myself, I promise."

Trinn knew she didn't want to hear that promise from Sidney. "I didn't get up because of you. I really did want to check on Lawrence. Being held was nice. I haven't been held in a long time. I miss it."

"You're a beautiful woman, Trinn. I can't believe you don't have someone in your life. You deserve someone special."

Trinn's laughter was tinged with disdain. "Yeah, well, I just can't seem to find the right person."

"You will. One day."

What if I already have and she doesn't want me? Trinn shivered in an attempt to ward off that idea. "No, I don't think so." She got back under the blanket and moved close to Sidney.

"Sidney?"

"Yes."

"Will you hold me? Just hold me?"

Trinn wondered if Sidney would reject her since she took so long to respond. Finally, without a word, she pulled Trinn close. Trinn nuzzled into her neck and smelled her spicy perfume. Sidney's pulse beat rapidly against her cheek. She nestled closer, contentment filling her as she drifted off to sleep against the now wide-awake Sidney.

TRINN PADDED DOWN the long hallway she knew led to Catty's study. How she came to this knowledge, she had no idea. What she was looking for, she had no clue, except that she had a vague feeling that by going there, she might learn something to help clear up the mysteries of Briarcrest in order to help Sidney. When she reached the doorway and looked in, she saw a tiny man, dressed in black with a long, gray beard, sitting at the huge writing table. He was hunched over a paper, scribbling furiously, his intense little black eyes fixed on his script. His head was covered by a black shawl draped over his shoulders and was fixed in front at his chest. The shawl matched his long robes. Trinn jumped back, hoping he hadn't noticed her. A thin, accented voice crossed the room and reached her ears.

"Come, come. Don't be afraid, my child. Come in."

Trinn peeked around the doorframe to meet the intense black eyes. The old man extended a gnarled hand and waved her into the room.

She closed the space between them slowly, drawn by the man's gaze. When she finally stopped in front of him, he watched her, boring into her very soul.

Finally he spoke. "You are searching for something, aren't you, my child." She heard nothing but kindness in his voice.

An adamant denial flitted through her mind, but she dismissed it. She couldn't lie to this gentle old man. "Yes," she whispered.

"And what is it you are seeking?"

She hesitated. Wondering what was it she was looking for indeed? As she looked into the kindly eyes, her answer seemed so much bigger than she would have said it was. "The answers to questions."

"Ah." He placed his quill carefully on the desk, sat back in the ornate chair, and pressed his fingertips together in front of his chin. "It is a noble endeavor, my child. But you must be prepared to receive the answers. That is, if you truly want to hear them."

"I--I think I do."

"Thinking is not enough. You must know for certain."

She had the sense they were talking about something deeper than this house, this Briarcrest, and the Briarcrest in her future. In that instant, she knew he was talking about her life, and maybe her life as it intertwined with Sidney's.

"I do know. I am certain." I think.

"Then what is it you want, child?"

She rehashed everything that was a struggle, every desire, every longing. She did want the truth. Life was so difficult, so lonely. She had quit her miserable job and come to this country on a whim. Searching. She realized she had been searching for a long time and she was tired. "I want to find my place in the world." Words welled up inside her. She felt them bubbling to the surface of her consciousness and she couldn't seem to prevent them from reaching her lips. "I want to find someone I can share my life with. I'm tired of struggling. I want peace and love. The kind of love that supports and sustains you in difficult times and makes you ecstatic in good times."

The old man's fingers pulsed against each other as he watched her. "You want to find home. Look into your heart, my child. Perhaps you will find you already have what you are seeking."

Home. The word made her think of Sidney. Noble Sidney. Strong Sidney. Sidney, whose singular purpose of saving and preserving Briarcrest and its memory kept her from acknowledging what seemed to be growing between them. Trinn whispered, "What if that someone won't let it happen?"

He ran a hand down his long beard and said, "Then you must find the answers you seek about this place," he gestured around the room, "and use your discoveries to gain your heart's desire."

"Easier said than done," Trinn mumbled.

"No, my child, easier done than said. If you open your heart to it."

Her eyebrows twisted in confusion. She didn't like his riddles.

Before she could ask another question, Catty came bounding into the room. "Ah, Jacob, I see you've met Trinn, your fellow pilgrim."

"We have not introduced ourselves by name, but we have had a most interesting discussion. Trinn is a seeker of deep meanings in life, a diviner of secrets."

A look of concern crept across Catty's face and was gone in an instant. "I see."

Trinn looked at the old man and said, "I interrupted your work, Jacob. I'm sorry. I'll leave you. Perhaps Catty has something to discuss with you." Trinn quickly backed out of the room. As she reached the doorway, she said, "Please, excuse me, both of you."

She slipped into the hallway and ran into the main hall toward the doorway that led to the enclosed garden. When she stepped outside, she looked around, feeling anxious as she remembered her last encounter with Alfred. To her relief, the garden was empty. When she reached the circular path that led around a shallow pool, she stopped and sat on a bench.

Would she ever find the answers she was seeking? Would she ever figure out how to help Sidney save Briarcrest? Perhaps more importantly, would she ever find the key to unlock Sidney's heart? It was all so overwhelming. She plunged her face into her hands and wept.

AS SHE TRIED to pull herself together, Trinn felt someone gently shaking her shoulder. She opened moist eyes to find herself staring into the amber eyes of Sidney Wycombe. The room was bathed in the half-light of morning.

When Sidney spoke, her voice was full of concern. "Are you all right? You were whimpering in your sleep. I decided I'd better wake you."

Trinn sniffled and took comfort from Sidney's touch. "I've been to Briarcrest. I've met a very wise man. He told me things I didn't quite understand. I just felt overwhelmed."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Alarm ran through Trinn as if she had been shocked with a prod. No, she didn't want to talk about it. She wanted to bury herself deep in Sidney's arms and never leave. She wanted to kiss those lovely, full lips. She wanted to make love--to become one with this beautiful woman comforting her. All she wanted was to feel her strong embrace, to be reassured by her at this moment, and forever. But talk about it? No, not now. Maybe not ever.

Both women looked up when Sidney's office door opened. Sidney pulled her hand away as Lawrence walked into the room. His eyes were still full of sleep, looking like a tousled child with his hair sticking up from his bandaged forehead. "Oh, you're both here." He looked embarrassed. "I just wondered if I were alone. Well, I--" He looked from one woman to the other, a confused look on his face. "Um, shall I go and get us some breakfast? I'm starving."

Trinn jumped up and smoothed her wrinkled shirt. "No. No. You go lie down, Lawrence. I'll go get us something." She looked from the young man to Sidney. Looking at Sidney made her blush. "J-Just tell me who might be open at this ungodly hour of the morning."

Sidney stood up from their temporary bed. She hooked her arm through Trinn's. "Tell you what. Let's go together." She turned to Lawrence and said, "And she's right. You should be lying down. After we get some breakfast, we'll talk about getting you home and settled so you can rest."

"I'm fine," Lawrence piped. "I just have a slight headache. It's not a problem. I'll be fine. Just pop off a few aspirin and I'll be right as rain. Ready to go back to work--"

"Lawrence." Sidney interrupted. She gave him a stern look. "It's Saturday. No working today. You have two days to rest. And you had better rest because I need you back here, bright as a penny, on Monday. Is that clear?"

He nodded. The movement made him wince. He walked over to the now-vacant couch and plopped down holding his head in both hands. "I'll--I'll just wait here."

AS SIDNEY AND Trinn waited for their take-away order, Sidney said tentatively, "If you want to talk about what happened this morning, I mean, when I woke you, I'd be happy to listen. You seemed so upset."

Trinn didn't know how to respond, so she said, "Maybe some other time. I don't think I completely understand what happened myself. I need to think about it a bit more before I'm ready to talk. Okay?"

Sidney gave her a worried look. "Okay. Just know I'm happy to listen."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Soon after, take-away in hand, they quickly walked up St. John's Wood High Street in silence. Trinn couldn't get the conversation with old Jacob out of her mind as she searched for an answer to his riddle, wondering what secrets she might be able to divine.

Chapter Thirteen

SIDNEY AND TRINN walked Lawrence to his apartment door. The women's insistence he allow them to bring him food was met with a stern look that told them he preferred to be left alone. They left him standing in his doorway, promising he would rest all weekend and if he had any problems, he would call Sidney. Now it was late Saturday morning and the pair decided to stop at a nearby café for a coffee in order to regroup.

As they sat sipping their brews, Trinn went over the events of the past few days. Her last dream still unnerved her. Did the message the old man, Jacob, gave her really have something for her to carry into her present--this present?

Sidney watched from over her coffee cup. "Tuppence for your thoughts."

"Hmmm?"

"Tuppence for--oh, never mind. You just seemed far away, that's all. You must be thinking about something very important, or very worrisome. Are you all right? You aren't ill are you?"

"I'm fine." Trinn's mind wandered to Sidney's own health issues. "But that reminds me, what did the doctor say? I'm sorry. With all the excitement about Lawrence getting hurt and having to actually drive on the wrong side of the road, I forgot all about it."

Sidney countered, "It may be the wrong side of the road to you, but to us, it's the right side."

Trinn waved her comment aside. "The doctor?"

"Yes, well, he did some tests. Everything seems to be in order. He said I was as healthy as a horse. If the tests come back negative, he'll put it up to work-related stress."

Trinn looked at her sideways. It seemed too easy to dismiss the symptoms, but what did she know? She was a pastry chef. An outof-work pastry chef with responsibilities back home and no money to pay her bills. She couldn't keep presuming on her grandmother's kindness. She had to think about getting back to Boston. She didn't want to leave Sidney, of that she was sure. It saddened her to know it would have to happen, and soon. "Sidney, I really should think about getting home. I need to find a job. I've got rent, a car payment, other bills--"

"If you'll give me the information, I'll make sure we pay your next month's lease payment and any other expenses that may be due. You've been a big help, but we've so much more work to do to get to the bottom of all this--"

"I can't let you--"

"Yes, you can. Please. Consider it payment for your time. I still need your help, Trinn."

Trinn decided not to argue. It would help if she didn't have to worry about her rent right now. And she would really like it if she could stay in London a little longer, with Sidney. She smiled at the idea. "All right. I'll give you the information on Monday. I'll need to get my friend to get the details for me." Relief washed over her. She wouldn't have to leave just yet. "Now that we've taken care of my problems, let's get back to you and your health. Are you sure you feel okay?"

"Yes, believe me, I feel fine." Sidney said. She dismissed the line of questioning with a wave. "So, what would you like to do today, Ms. Wells? I'm at your service."

The remark made Trinn tremble with goose bumps. At my service, heh? Hmmm. Before her mind wandered into a fantasy that would leave her heart pumping madly, she contemplated what she might want to do other than ravish Sidney Wycombe. Frustrated sexual tension always made her feel like creating something. "Bake a pie."

Sidney raised a dark eyebrow. "Bake a pie?"

"Yes, I haven't baked since, well, since I left Boston. I miss it. Wouldn't you like to have a nice homemade apple pie?"

The eyebrow rose higher. "Very American."

"I hear we stole the idea from you but we've certainly made it our own, so, yes, very American. I'd love to bake one for you. Of course, since I'm at the hotel, I'd have to do it at your place. We were supposed to have dinner at your house anyway, weren't we?"

"Of course," Sidney said with a chortle. "However, I probably don't have the right ingredients. We'll have get them when we go shopping."

Trinn brightened. "Well, okay then, let's do it."

Sidney's laugh penetrated Trinn's flesh and made her shiver. She loved to hear Sidney laugh. It made her happy. Being with Sidney made her happy. As a matter of fact, she now realized coming to London on a crazy whim had made her feel better than she had for months, perhaps years.

Sidney left a coin on the café table and got up from her seat. She gestured toward the opening in the wrought-iron fence that surrounded the outdoor seating area. "Shall we then?"

"Are you sure it's all right? I mean, I sort of just invited myself to your home to make a mess in your kitchen, but I promise I'll clean up after myself."

Sidney looked deeply into Trinn's eyes. "Trinn. It's more than okay." She looked away briefly, as if what she saw, and felt, was too deep, too emotional. When she looked back, the raw emotion was gone from her eyes. "It will be fun. I'm not a baker myself. Perhaps you can teach me."

Teach her? Oh, yeah. There were things she'd like to teach her. Well, that probably wasn't going to happen. Damn you Sidney Wycombe. Damn you and your noble cause. "Yeah, maybe I can show you a few pie pointers."

THEY HAD ALL the groceries put away and a chicken waited in the refrigerator, ready to be cooked after the pie was done. Trinn discovered although Sidney wasn't a pastry chef, she did indeed appear to be an excellent cook. She had offered to do the main course while Trinn

concentrated on dessert. Sidney explained she was a perfectly capable cook. She just didn't like to cook for herself alone.

As Trinn had rolled out the dough for the pie, she chattered on with various anecdotes about experiences related to her baking efforts. "I had an old girlfriend once--" She wrinkled her nose remembering her last months with Clarice when she should have known something had gone horribly wrong in the relationship, but chose instead to believe everything was status quo. "Well, the relationship had probably already ended, but I was pretty naïve. We had just had a big fight over god-knows-what. I can't even remember. I just remember being furious with her. She had walked out on me as I ranted on about whatever we had been arguing about and she left me in the kitchen fuming. A few minutes later she came sauntering back in and walked up to the refrigerator. Without a word, she pulled the door open and started rooting around looking for something to eat."

Clarice found a plastic container in the back of the refrigerator and pulled it out, slamming it down on the counter. She banged a drawer open and yanked out a knife. She removed a box of crackers from the cabinet over her head and pushed the door shut with a lot more force than was necessary. Trinn's own anger disappeared as she watched with amusement. Clarice removed the cover to the container and proceeded to spread the light colored spread across a few crackers. When she popped one in her mouth, she saw Trinn staring. "What?" She mumbled through the mouthful.

"Nothing."

Clarice swallowed and glared at Trinn.

Trinn's curiosity got the better of her. "How do you like that?"

Clarice stared at her for a moment, popped a second cracker in her mouth and chewed. After she swallowed, she said, "Fine. Pretty good for cheese spread." She grew quiet as she savored the snack before she pronounced, "Tasty, as a matter of fact."

Trinn silently prayed for self-control before she simply said, "Yeah. Well, I'm glad you like it."

After eating another cracker spread with the contents from the container, Clarice put everything away with lots of bumping and slamming and left the kitchen without another word.

"I never told her. The plastic container had gotten shoved to the back of the refrigerator and was forgotten. It held some frosting from a cake I had made months before. It had to have been pretty bad if she supposed it was cheese."

Both women roared with laughter. When they stopped, Trinn found light brown eyes penetrating deeply into her soul. The ache for Sidney took her by surprise.

Later that evening, they lingered over dessert, remnants of crust and filling on their plates. Dinner had been pleasant and leisurely. Finally, around ten o'clock, Trinn stretched and got up

from her place at the table. "Well, I'd better help you clean up. Then I'll have to head over to the hotel."

They were quiet as they stacked and rinsed dishes, placing them into the dishwasher. Just as they finished up, Sidney said, "You know, I don't want you having to take the Tube to go back to your hotel. I could drive you, but, well--why don't you just stay here tonight? I can lend you something to sleep in."

Trinn's heart pounded as they made eye contact. Thinking back to the evening before on Sidney's office couch, she knew she'd accept the invitation. Her voice trembled a little as she responded. "If you're sure it's no trouble."

Sidney brightened. "No trouble at all, Trinn." She wiped her hands on a towel and hung it back over the rack on the side of the kitchen counter. "Let me go get you what you need. I'll leave everything in the loo for you. I'll put some fresh towels out in case you want to shower. When you're done, I'll take a turn."

Or we could do it together, danced through Trinn's head. At least she hadn't said it. She muttered her "thank you" as Sidney left the kitchen.

JANET STARED AT Charles from across her highly polished desk. The man was a bumbler and an arrogant prick. "Charles, do stop brooding." She hated brooders. Sidney was a brooder. All right, she didn't exactly hate Sidney, but she hated her brooding. It must run in the family.

"I'm not brooding. I'm--I'm a reflective man. You have to understand that."

Reflective? Janet would never have classified him as reflective. "So, what are you so thoughtful about? Do you have some information for me?"

"Not really."

"Not really? What does that mean? You might? You might not? You definitely do? You definitely don't? At least be certain about something for god sake."

Charles rolled his eyes. "Well, there's been a little mishap."

Janet frowned. Her facial expression changed to one of enlightenment, something dawning. Her look turned quickly to one of darkness. "Have you done something to Sidney? Because if you have--"

"Sidney's fine. She was in court most of the day Friday. No, the problem is with that little assistant of hers, the little girl named Lawrence."

Janet raised an eyebrow. She knew Charles had no use for Lawrence and, if truth be told, she didn't have much use for him either because she resented his meddling and protection of Sidney. However, she didn't feel he should be called such derogatory names either. Still, she chose to say nothing about Charles' attitude. "What about him?"

"There was a slight misunderstanding on the part of the people who were following him. Lawrence was injured."

She stood up, glaring at him. "Charles, I told you from the beginning there was to be no violence. If Sidney finds out that I'm connected to this in any way and someone she cares about gets hurt, it will spoil everything." Her face reddened as she spoke. "Tell me what the hell happened. And it had better not make me any more unhappy than I already am."

"There's nothing to worry about. I sweet-talked a nurse at the emergency room--"

"Emergency! Oh, this is worse than I imagined. This is not making me happy at all, Charles."

"Kindly let me finish, Janet. This sweet little poppet told me Lawrence was fine and he had no idea how he got hurt. Neither did the woman who was with him."

"Woman? What woman?"

"I don't know. Some woman who's been spending time with Sidney. An American."

Janet sat back down. "Why is this the first time I'm hearing about this woman? I sent you to get information, Charles. Did you not think this was significant information? What the hell's wrong with you?"

"There is nothing wrong with me, Janet. Just calm down. I've been doing my job. I've been gathering information. I suppose that's what this little meeting was all about; for me to report what I know."

Janet took a calming breath and sat down, staring at the top of her desk.

Charles resumed his narrative. "This woman's been spending lots of time with Sidney. I'm still trying to get information on who she is."

"An heir." Janet whispered. "It couldn't be. She would have done something by now if that were the case."

Charles ignored her and continued. "She and Sidney have become great chums. They do everything together."

Janet's head jerked up. "What do you mean everything?"

"Well, they've been spending time in Sidney's office. At least I presume that's where they are. I tried to be prudent and not to go into the suite to see, but I do know she's been to her office quite a bit. Then there are the dinners--"

"Why haven't you told me about this before, Charles? Are you not capable of figuring out what might be significant information?" She leaned forward, a menacing look on her face. "Or are you withholding information deliberately?"

"I--I didn't see the harm--I mean, I assumed you'd want me to wait until I knew more. It's been difficult, Janet. You want me to keep a low profile, but you want information. It isn't easy, you know. I've been following them. Trying to figure out what they're up to. That's why I needed to bring in some associates. I can't be in two places at once. I needed other people to be able to follow that milquetoast and the other woman if they went their separate ways. Which they did, by the way.

"They went to the land and snooped around on Friday. That's where my associates were, out of sight, of course. One of them felt they were in danger of being discovered, so he--"

"He what, Charles?"

"He--he threw a rock and knocked Lawrence Truly in the temple. There was considerable blood, and the woman he was with ended up driving him to the hospital. They put in a few stitches and he's fine now."

"You idiot!" She popped up out of her seat, her face almost purple with rage.

"Calm down, Janet." He mopped his brow. "I'm positive they weren't seen."

Janet took several deep breaths and her face turned a lighter shade of crimson. "All right, then. What were they doing on that property?"

"I don't know. Looking around, I guess. There's nothing for them to see there, just lots of grass and weeds and few trees and shrubs. Maybe a stone wall or two. What's the harm?"

"What's the harm? Their presence is exactly what concerns me, Charles. The stone wall or two you speak of may be our downfall. If Sidney has any evidence they are of historical value, we'll be in deep dung. Do you know what she was doing in court on Friday?"

Charles brightened. He knew the answer and he knew it would make Janet happy. "She was doing some conveyancing business. I checked it out thoroughly. She spent most of the afternoon filing and recording paperwork for some business owners in the area. Her business had nothing to do with Briarcrest."

Janet bit the inside of her cheek while she considered what Charles had just said. Perhaps he was right. Maybe there was nothing to worry about. Although, she couldn't help but think that long

hours and dinner dalliances with this mystery woman might be a potential hindrance to her plan. But she'd deal with that later.

"Well, it seems I'll have to speed up my little plan just a bit. I was going to wait until next month to put up the Briar Wood development sign and fence off the land to keep trespassers out. I think I shall have to make arrangements to have it done sooner. I'm moving forward with the development. Once that's done, Sidney will have nothing else to do with this possible site of Briarcrest. She won't have anything to preserve, so she can move on with her life. And I intend to be right in her path when she does move on."

Charles gave Janet an eager look. "And I'll be getting my commission as we agreed?"

She let him squirm for a few seconds, saying nothing, staring into his beady little eyes. "Yes, Charles, you'll have your money. Even though you've hardly earned it. Now, leave me to do my work. I have arrangements to make. Lots to do to be ready to move at the beginning of the new week. But I do want one thing from you, and see if you can do it right, this time. I want to know who that woman is and what she has to do with anything about Briarcrest."

She decided she wouldn't ask Charles to find out if Sidney were romantically involved with this woman. She'd have to find that out some other way. Indicating the door with her head, she signaled the interview was over. He sprang up from his chair and left without a moment's hesitation.

TRINN SAT ON the edge of the guest bed trying desperately to keep from getting up and going into Sidney's bedroom at the end of the hall. Sidney had given Trinn some lightweight sweats to sleep in along with a new toothbrush. After Trinn had taken a shower and changed into her sleeping attire, she had found Sidney in the kitchen, dressed in a similar outfit.

Her long black hair fell in waves down her back as she moved about the small neat kitchen, emptying the dishwasher.

"Thanks for the nightware. The shower was great. Just what I needed."

"You're welcome." Sidney glanced over her shoulder at Trinn, but quickly returned to putting away dishes. "Do you need anything else?"

"No, can't think of anything." Trinn wanted to say she wanted to cuddle up beside Sidney as they had in the early morning hours, but decided against it. Sidney didn't seem to want to engage her in anything other than small talk. Maybe she was just tired, Trinn thought.

When she finished putting things away, Sidney had gone to bed with a simple good night. Now, Trinn, back in the spare bedroom, stared up at the ceiling, almost invisible in the darkness. It was difficult, but she had to admit the truth. She was falling for Sidney. Falling hard. And there was nothing she could do about it.

She switched on the light on the nightstand next to the bed and sat up. She plunged her face into her hands. What was she going to do about this? Nothing, she told herself. Sidney's not interested. If that were a certainty, why did they seem to have such a wonderful time any time they were together? Why, sometimes, did she catch glimpses of something in Sidney's eyes that said she, too, felt something deep and abiding for Trinn? Was she just reading into the situation what she wanted to see? Was it all a figment of her imagination?

She got up and paced. All she had to do was walk down the hall and into Sidney's bedroom and she'd know. If Sidney told her to leave, that would be the end of it. Or would it? It might be the end of it for Sidney Wycombe, but it wouldn't be the end for her and she knew it. She plopped back down on the edge of the bed. Maybe she should just calm down and wait. Maybe something would happen to break down this wall of nobleness Sidney seemed to have built.

Trinn clicked the light off and got back into bed. Staring into the darkness once more, she wondered what she could do to get Sidney to admit how she really felt.

SIDNEY READ THE same sentence in her book over and over. If anyone had asked her what had happened in the story, she wouldn't have been able to relate it. She slammed the book down and closed it with a groan. She stared up at the ceiling. God, Trinn Wells is beautiful and great fun to be with. They had had such a wonderful day together, first shopping, then cooking, and finally enjoying their meal together. Even cleaning up the kitchen had been enjoyable.

Everything she did with Trinn was pleasurable.

Sidney reached over and turned off her bedside lamp and scooted down under the covers. I could love that woman. The idea jolted her with surprise. Don't even think it, Sidney. She breathed softly into the dark room, "If you weren't the heir, Trinn Wells--." She dared not finish her sentence aloud. Her heart felt heavy. Time passed slowly until she drifted off into restless sleep.

TRINN SAT IN the Briarcrest library with Catty and Jacob. Her head buzzed and she closed her eyes to try to digest the conversation. They were talking about events in Spain that had forced the Jews from their homeland.

She was aghast at the cruelty of removing people from their homes, confiscating their wealth, and sending them off in ships to places they knew nothing about. Jacob had been telling them that if his countrymen were able to sell off their property and possessions before leaving, they did so at great loss.

They had tried to negotiate with the King and Queen, but a monk, a Prior from the convent of Santa Cruz named Torquemada, interfered with the discussions and they were forced to leave. Rabbi Jacob was among them. He was grateful to have heard about gaining passage on one of the

ships Catty had put at their disposal. It meant he and his family might actually be able to escape without harm.

Anger welled up within Trinn as she listened to the injustice of what was happening to the Jews in Spain. She tried to recall what she knew about the Spanish Inquisition and Torquemada, in particular, but her reflections were interrupted. Her eyes flying open as Alfred rushed into the library shouting.

"Master Catty, there are men at the gate trying to force their way in. They look to be Spanish." Alfred's face was white with fear. "You must hide Master Jacob." He licked his lips as he looked from Catty to Jacob and, finally, to Trinn.

Catty already had the rug rolled back in the corner of the room and had taken a lamp from the desk and thrust it into Jacob's hand. He lifted an almost invisible door in the floor and said only one word to the old man, "Quickly," as he gestured toward the opening. Jacob's lower torso had already disappeared into the floor when Catty looked at Trinn and said, "Trinn, you'd better go, too." He looked her up and down and added, "I think your manner of dress might cause you some trouble with these men. They are not to be trusted."

Trinn realized under the circumstances, it was probably best not to argue. Her heart pounded in her ears as she followed Jacob down a very slim stone staircase. When she reached the bottom, she could see the light from the lantern getting smaller as Jacob moved down a narrow tunnel. As she hurried after him, the door snap shut above her and for a moment she felt the panic of claustrophobia, which stopped her in her tracks.

She took several deep breaths in an attempt to shake off the feeling. This was no time to be paralyzed. It was time for action. The orb of light got smaller. Soon Jacob, with his lamp, would disappear completely before her eyes. The tightness in her chest and the fear dissipated and she willed herself to push forward, hurrying to catch up with him.

SIDNEY DIDN'T SAY much over breakfast. The two women sat with their coffee and toast, Sidney browsing the *London Times* for distraction. Trinn wondered if she had done something to upset her. Maybe Sidney was one of those people who just couldn't carry on a conversation before she finished her morning coffee.

Trinn watched Sidney as she turned the page. She glanced down and read upside-down *News of the Countryside*. Sidney raised her drink and stopped half way to her lips.

"Something wrong, Sidney?"

She looked up at Trinn. The color drained from her face.

"Sidney? What's wrong?"

She turned the paper at an angle and pointed to a black and white picture that took up a quarter of the page. A large sign with bold lettering was centered in the photograph.

"I--This--" Sidney looked down at the paper. "We have a problem. A very serious problem." Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped back into her chair.

Trinn jumped up from her seat and ran over to Sidney. She caught her as she tipped sideways in the chair, and prevented her from slipping off.

"Sidney, oh god, Sidney. What's wrong?" She tapped Sidney's cheek with the tips of her fingers. "Sidney. Sidney wake up."

Sidney's eyelids fluttered and her hand flew to her forehead. She looked up at Trinn with a vacant look.

"Sidney, are you all right? God, you scared me to death." Trinn recalled an article she'd read on the signs of a stroke. She demanded, "Sidney, speak to me. Can you talk?"

Sidney took in a deep breath and grabbed the table in front of her with both hands. "I think--I'm okay. I--what happened?"

"I'm not sure. I think you fainted. What's going on? You were telling me there was something wrong, but you never got it all out before you passed out. Are you sure you're okay? You still look a little pale."

"I'm fine." Sidney stared at the paper spread out on the table in front of her. "Oh, no. It's true," she whispered.

"What's true? Sidney, talk to me. You're worrying me. First Lawrence, now you. Please, don't do this to me. What's going on?"

Sidney looked at Trinn. Trinn could see she looked more focused. Relief washed over her.

Sidney said, "Could I have--could you get me a glass of water?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry." Trinn ran the tap and filled a glass she pulled from the cupboard. She handed it to Sidney. She drank as if she had been walking through a desert in the middle of summer. She put the glass down on the table and lifted the newspaper. She pointed to the picture. The caption read, "Briar Wood Development Project. Phase One: Twenty semi-detached homes projected to open North of Swindon within twelve months time."

Trinn's eyes widened. "Holy crap! Is that--"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. The site we suspect is the land that was Briarcrest castle and holdings. This can't be happening. Who--"

Trinn watched Sidney start to go white and grabbed her shoulder. Sidney's eyes grew distant. "Sidney, take deep breaths. Stay with me. Don't pass out. Please." Sidney blinked several times and looked at Trinn.

"Maybe we'd better not talk about this right now, Sidney. I don't want a repeat of you fainting on me."

Sidney's voice sounded thin and weak as she pronounced, "I'm okay this time. I am."

"I don't know, Sidney. I'm concerned. I know this is serious, but don't you think this reaction might have something to do with all the other symptoms you've been having? Maybe we should call your doctor."

Sidney waved the suggestion aside. "No, it has nothing to do with anything other than this was a shock." She pointed to the newspaper. "I can't imagine how this has happened. I've got to find out who's at the bottom of this. I've got to stop them." Sidney stared at Trinn. "Maybe you shouldn't be involved in this. Maybe you should go h-home. It might get difficult."

"What? You mean to tell me you brought me here and got me involved this deeply to tell me to go away just because things might get a little difficult now? Do you think I'll just leave that easily? What about all that talk about needing my help? What about that, Miss Barrister? Are you throwing me out just like that?"

"No, I--I just want to make sure you're protected. I have to, Trinn. You're the--"

"The heir, I know." Frustration threatened to blow the top of Trinn's head right off. How could she make Sidney stop this knight-in-shining-armor act? It was getting ridiculous and she wasn't sure how much more she could take. Either she was a partner in this adventure or she wasn't. It was time for an ultimatum. "Look, we need to stop this. Either I'm in this or I'm not. And as far as I'm concerned, I'm in it and I'm not leaving. I want to help. Please, Sidney, let me. You don't have to protect me. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

Sidney grew quiet. Trinn watched color return to her cheeks. Finally Sidney said, "I will never stop protecting you. You are the heir. It is my duty. However, I would still appreciate your help. I'm sorry I said you should leave. I'm afraid I panicked a little. I apologize. I shouldn't have let that happen."

With Sidney's agreement to let her stay and a return of the color to her face, Trinn felt the anxiety lift from her shoulders. She decided not to argue any further. She would deal with this need to protect her as time went on. "All right, what do we need to do?"

"Find something to keep this developer from going forward with this project. We've got to find something that will allow us to file for a listed building status for that land."

Trinn scowled. From previous conversations, she knew Sidney was looking for something that would tie the land to historical events that would prevent anyone from destroying the significance of the property. She had talked about buildings and possibly tunnels.

An ever-widening grin appeared on Trinn's face. "Would something like the discovery of a tunnel used to hide Jews fleeing from the Spanish Inquisition help?"

Sidney opened her mouth and closed it with a loud click of her teeth. "How would we do that?"

"Well, last night I went into a tunnel with a man named Rabbi Jacob who had come from Spain, fleeing the Inquisition."

Sidney shot up from her seat, swayed a little, then sat down. "Oh, my goodness, that would certainly do it. How--where--what-- tell me."

"I'll tell you as much as I know, but there is one teensy little problem."

"What's that?"

"I don't know if we're going to get out alive."

Chapter Fourteen

THEY SPENT THE morning trying to form a strategy to gain the information they needed to pinpoint the location of the tunnel. There was a possibility it still existed. The only problem was finding it. If Trinn could find some kind of location marker, it would be a big help. But there was also the concern she wouldn't even survive her time in the tunnel with Jacob.

What would happen to Trinn in the present if something happened to her in the past? They had no way of knowing. To add to Sidney's difficulty, there was no way she could offer Trinn protection in the past the way she could in the present.

Trinn had a tablet in front of her on which she had written brief notes about each of her dreams. "It seems these dreams continue as if I'm reading a story. Each time I dream, I either pick up right where I left off, or I jump ahead a little in time, but not by much. When I was tied up in the shed, I came right back to being tied up until MacGregor found me. When I met Jacob in the library, he was still there in the next dream."

"Also, from what you've told me about using your mobile as a flashlight in the chapel, there are certain things from the future that work in some way. Maybe you could bring something back with you for protection."

"Like what? An amulet?" She made a face. "That wouldn't do any good."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a weapon."

"A weapon! No, I don't think so. The only weapon I know how to use is a rolling pin and I'd be hard pressed to explain carrying one around in my belt, wouldn't I?"

"I'd still feel better if you had some protection."

"Well, even if we figured out how to make sure I had something, we still wouldn't know if I'd end up with it back there, anyway. So what's the use?"

"It wouldn't hurt to try."

Trinn gave her a disapproving look. "What do you suggest? Got any fifteenth century daggers lying around the flat?"

Sidney furrowed her brow at her. "This is serious, Trinn. So far you've managed to get out of every bit of trouble you've gotten into, but there may come a time when you can't."

Trinn considered what Sidney was saying until something struck her. "That's it. That's the key. I have managed to get out of every bit of trouble I've gotten into and do you know how?"

Sidney shook her head.

"MacGregor. That little black dog is the key. He's my protector."

"Don't be silly."

"No, listen, he was there when I was tied up. He showed Catty where I was and Catty freed me. He showed up when Alfred was about to do god-knows-what to me when I came out of the chapel. MacGregor won't let anything happen to me. I'm sure of it."

Trinn waited for Sidney to protest, but it didn't happen. Sidney stared down at her hands as time ticked away. When she looked up she said, "You have to go back."

Trinn raised a blond eyebrow. "What? Wait. You trust MacGregor?"

"What choice do I have? We need to fight these people, whoever they are. We can't allow them to build new homes on that land. They might dig up important artifacts and dump them in the trash heap, destroying them. The only chance I can see to stop the development is by finding something on the property of historical significance. We know there are no buildings and the few

stone walls that exist are a bit questionable without some major archeological dating. But if we were to locate a tunnel--"

"I have to go back." Trinn knew it with certainty now. "But how can I go back? I can't just fall asleep on demand, you know. And when I fall asleep, I don't always dream. There's no guarantee."

"Well, we can't be certain you'll dream, but you'll never dream your way back to Briarcrest if you don't fall asleep at all."

"I'm not tired." It wasn't the whole truth. She hadn't slept very well the night before as she struggled with her feelings for this dark-haired beauty sitting before her. But she couldn't admit that.

"Fancy a jog? There's a park nearby. We could go for a bit of a run."

A look of sternness appeared across Trinn's face. "After you just had some sort of fainting attack? I'm not letting you go out for a run. If there's any running to be done, I'll do it by myself. Alone. Without you. While you rest. Clear?"

Sidney was silent for a few seconds. A smile slowly crept across her face. Without a word, she got up and went into the hall. Her silent exit and her rattling around in the cupboard in the hall brought Trinn to her side. She arrived just as Sidney extricated a small set of adjustable dumbbells from behind a stack of boxes. Trinn was surprised Sidney so easily picked up both sets with all the weight plates intact. Sidney gave her a smug look as she turned and pronounced, "Free weights."

Trinn looked puzzled. "What are you going to do with those?"

"I'm not going to do anything with them. As you said, I probably should rest. I'll just sit and watch as you use them."

Trinn's eyes widened. "Me? Oh, no. This is not my thing. My arms will fall off."

Sidney carried the weights past Trinn into the living room. "Come on," she called over her shoulder. "You'll get exercise. It'll get your heart rate up. You'll get tired. You'll have a nice lie down and you'll be sleeping like a baby in no time."

Trinn followed Sidney into the living room, protests streaming from her mouth. Sidney turned around and handed Trinn the weights fully loaded with 25 pounds each. As she held them out, she said, "Come on. Take them. Start pumping."

"Sidney, I'm a wimp. No way can I lift, what, 75 pound weights?"

Sidney continued to hold out the weights, her arms parallel to the floor. "They're only 25 pounds and you'll be fine. You must have built up some muscle kneading dough after all this time. Still, if you're such a wimp you won't be doing it for very long anyway. Take them."

A deep sigh punctuated Trinn's resignation and she grabbed the weights, which immediately plunged toward the floor with Trinn still holding them. Sidney jumped back just in time as one missed her right foot. She looked down at the weights and back up at Trinn. "You weren't kidding about the wimp thing, were you?"

"I tried to tell you." Trinn pointed toward the weights. "If you want me to pump that iron, there will have to be considerably less of it."

Sidney shook her head. She knelt down and removed half of the plates from each dumbbell. Trinn looked on.

"I don't think that's enough," Trinn said when she stopped.

Sidney gave her a confused look. "If you say so." She shrugged and added a plate to one of the dumbbells.

Trinn shouted, "No, I didn't mean you haven't put enough on. I meant you haven't taken enough off."

Sidney spoke slowly. "Trinn, you're a healthy young woman. Ten-pound weights are not going to kill you. You want to work up a bit of a sweat or the exercise will be pointless."

Trinn stared at the weights at her feet. "Ten pounds?"

"Yes, ten pounds."

"Each?"

"Yes, Trinn, ten pounds each. A mere twenty pounds. The size of a very small dog."

Trinn mumbled, "A small dog in my book is one of those seven-pound wonders like a Chihuahua or a yappy little Yorkie." Twenty pounds was a hefty dog as far as she was concerned.

"Just try it. You might be surprised at what you can do."

"Can't I just start with one plate on each dumbbell?"

"First of all, you need two plates each or you don't have a dumbbell. One plate needs to go on each end. The smallest plates are 3 pounds. That means the smallest weights are 6 pounds each. You'll probably have to pump them for an hour. Trust me. You'll have to handle them for a shorter time if you go with the 10 pounds on each one. Since you have such an aversion to exercise, I would think you'd want to get it over with sooner."

"I don't have an aversion to exercise. I jog, which, if you'll recall, I offered to do a few minutes ago without any complaints. I'm just not into the weight-lifting thing. I don't want to get those big ugly bulges in my arms and chest."

Another chortle came from Sidney's throat. "Trinn, first of all, you aren't going to bulge after one session. Second of all, I'm just trying to keep you safe. You're the heir. It's my responsibility."

Trinn looked deeply into Sidney's eyes and knew she cared for her profoundly. Was it only because of this adventure they were on, this quest to save Briarcrest? Or was it more than that? It was Trinn's turn to exhale. Resigning herself to her fate, she reached down and lifted the weights. "One," she counted. She lifted the weights over her head and winced.

"Come on. You can do it. There's a good girl."

"Two." Sidney watched the weights rise and slowly come back down to Trinn's sides.

She stopped counting after forty-five because counting was depressing her. Her movements slowed. When she was only able to lift the weights to ear level, Trinn dropped them with a thud. Fifteen minutes had passed since she began the workout.

Sidney smiled and handed her a glass of water. "Brilliant job!"

She was too tired to care about Sidney's praise as she staggered over to the couch thinking, "How could a workout of your arms make your legs so shaky?" She gulped the water down and wiped her brow with her free hand. "Yeah, I know, I'm such a stud-muffin."

All the effort was worth the sound of Sidney's laughter at her remark.

"What now, oh, knight-in-shining armor?"

"Now you rest for a few minutes. Then I'll bring you a nice cup of tea and you'll relax and fall asleep. And I suggest you call for MacGregor as you fall asleep. You may need him."

Sidney was right. She had a difficult time keeping her eyes open after a few sips of the hot, sweetened tea. Her heavy lids just wouldn't cooperate. She heard a voice in the distance as she lay on the plush couch. It was Sidney's voice, but she seemed to be miles away. "Try to find some kind of landmark we can use, and don't forget to call MacGregor."

She tried to get the name out, but it was so difficult. Her tongue felt thick, too fat to form words. She tried, but all that came out was "Mahgr-gah," and everything went dark.

TRINN AND JACOB walked along the shadowy tunnel. They had no idea where they would end up. Suddenly, Trinn heard scratching noises coming from somewhere behind them. She put her hand on Jacob's arm to stop him and listened, trying to identify the sound.

"Rats?" Trinn tried to keep her voice even when she said it. The phrase bubonic plague skittered across her mind and caused her to shudder.

The noise was coming toward them. Her voice rasped as she whispered. "Do you think we should run for it, Jacob?"

The old man listened. "No, I do not feel this is a sound we should be concerned about. I think perhaps Señor Catty has sent us an escort. Just as he said it, glowing eyes appeared in the darkness of the tunnel behind them. Then the eyes morphed into a familiar head. MacGregor. His ears were back as he ran at top speed, nails scrabbling on the flagstone floor. He gamboled toward them, a happy dog with a purpose. He skidded to a stop in front of them.

Had she actually seen a smile on his lips? She knelt down and ran a hand through the wiry black hair on the back of his neck. "Thanks for coming MacGregor. Do you know the way out of here, boy?"

He gave a little yip, which concerned her because she didn't know if the noise could be heard in the library. She whispered to the little dog, "Lead the way, MacGregor, but best to keep the comments to yourself, okay, boy?"

MacGregor stepped around them and pranced in front, tail upright like a proud mast held high over his back. He only looked back once to see if they were following and, satisfied they were, he moved with what seemed to Trinn to be great confidence and purpose, as if he really did know where he was going. Trinn hoped he did.

SIDNEY SAT IN a chair waiting for her laptop to boot up. Across from her, on the couch, Trinn slept peacefully. She hoped she could take her tranquil expression to mean Trinn experienced the same calm in the past. When her computer connected, she put the name of the developer into the search engine. It was a company she'd never heard of--SWIM Associates. She hit enter and looked over at Trinn's sleeping form. She looked sweet in slumber. A shiver ran down Sidney's spine. Don't think about her that way. She wondered if she were in any trouble as she slept. Sidney consoled herself with the fact that Trinn's expression was one of relaxed ease. She's fine. She hoped she truly was.

When the Internet page returned a list of links with SWIM references, she scanned them for potential information that might help her. Swim Schools was a frequent entry. She discounted them. Swim meets was another to be disregarded. She navigated to another page, and another, and another. Nothing. She pursed her lips wondering if she should continue.

She glanced at Trinn. What else would she do while she slept? She didn't want to risk doing anything that would make noise and wake Trinn. She clicked another page. SWIM Associates with a London post office box address appeared at the top of the page.

When she clicked through, she found a no-frills web page that read:

SWIM Associates has been established as a successful property company, which will strive to deliver unparalleled service to those interested in sophisticated country living in homes built using sound construction ethics and practices with well planned layouts and pleasing finishes. The living complex will be further enhanced by the addition of shops and restaurants.

This next exciting new development undertaking of SWIM Associates is projected to be the Briar Wood complex just outside of the area of Swindon, with close access to the Cotswold's and easy entry to the cities Oxford and Bristol. Phase One of the project will consist of 12 semi-detached homes with exclusive features. Phase Two will include combination shops and living spaces within a small local New Town area. The Principals of SWIM Associates have a growing reputation for ensuring well-designed homes built to stringent standards.

More information on this awe-inspiring project will be forthcoming. Contact: SWIM Associates P.O. Box 234, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3PX

"Strange," Sidney reflected. Scant information with no real address. The absence of a phone number also struck her as not quite right. Where was the slick marketing page for this company? And why make people contact a post office box instead of a prestigious London office? Usually developers were more than willing to have people call in advance of a project to get the enthusiasm and buzz going before the building project was complete. They were not opposed to potential investors contacting them. So why so secretive about this particular project? She copied and pasted the address back into the search engine. When the results came back, she whispered into the darkened room, "Even more strange."

There was no information on P.O. Box 234. There was for P.O. Box 123, and it was a Charity Shop for Cancer Research. She raised a dark eyebrow as she tried to think of another way to find out just who SWIM Associates was. She decided not to risk waking Trinn by calling directory enquiries. She'd have to do that later. She jotted down the web address for SWIM Associates and placed the piece of paper in her wallet.

MACGREGOR LEAD THEM through the tunnel until they reached a small chamber. The room opened out and, by the light of the lamp Jacob carried, they found a few stacked crates. MacGregor jumped up on one of the crates and lay down.

Trinn turned to Jacob and said, "I guess we're stopping here."

"Good. My old bones need a rest. Let's sit over there." He gestured to a crate that would hold the two of them. He put the lantern down on the floor and they climbed up and made themselves comfortable, resting their backs against the wall.

After a brief silence, Jacob spoke. "So, Trinn of Boston-and-Plymouth, have you found what you are looking for in this place?"

"I may be on the trail of the information I need, but I'm hoping to find a landmark. Something that will tell me exactly where this place is."

He cocked his head and gave her an inquisitive look. "Why would you need to do that? You know where it is. It is here." He gestured around him.

"Well, it's a little complicated. We know where it is now, but, um, later we won't know where it is anymore. I have to find something that tells me where it is now, so I can find it later."

"You are right Trinn of Boston-and-Plymouth, it is very complicated. Not many would understand. However, I think I do."

"You do?"

"I will tell you, if you make a promise to me. You must promise you will answer truthfully."

She looked into eager, dark eyes. "I'll try."

"I have done a great deal of thinking about you since we talked a while ago. I have a suspicion that, not only are you not from this locale, you are also not from this time."

"How did you--"

He shrugged. "It is a gift. I discern things. Besides, I have lived a long life and have seen many things. I have come to understand that for seekers, nothing is impossible. You are here to find something that will be of great value in the future. I can only hope your reasons are unselfish."

She wondered how she would answer this man. After a brief hesitation, she said, "In my time, there is a woman. Her ancestors came from this time. She is actually related to Alfred. She has a noble cause. She wants to protect and preserve the memory of this place. I'm trying to help her because, for some reason, I have been given this, this--I guess some would call it a gift, too, to be able to come here to find the answers we seek."

His penetrating eyes held her gaze for a long time. "And what answers do you seek?"

"I want the same answers she wants. I want to help her."

"Why?"

"Because. I care for her."

"You care for her? If I find a cat is injured who keeps mice from my house and my barn, I would care for him until he was well and could return to his duties. Is this what you mean by caring for this woman?"

She hesitated. "Er, not really. What I meant was, I care deeply for her."

"Ah." He spread his hands open and folded them back together. "You love her." He wouldn't release her from his look.

"I--Yes, I think I am falling in love with her."

"And does this woman return these feelings?"

If he doesn't have a problem with me being in love with a woman, I guess I don't have a problem telling him about it. "She's very noble. She has this cause, this place, to save. She's vowed to protect it and the heirs of the families who have lived here. She is convinced I'm one of those heirs. Therefore, she doesn't feel she can compromise her position."

"And love. This would compromise her position?"

Trinn shook her head. "I don't see it. No. But she believes it-- strongly."

"Because you are the heir."

Trinn blew out her breath. "Because I'm the heir." God, I'm sick of hearing that phrase.

He caught her eye and held her in his gaze. "You know, Trinn of Boston-and-Plymouth, there is another thing to consider. Sometimes, things are not always as they appear."

She shook her head. This time as if to fling off cobwebs that prevented her understanding. "I don't know what you mean."

She never got the chance to hear his answer. At that moment, MacGregor got up from his resting place and began running in circles, barking frantically.

Panic rose within Trinn, afraid the noise might bring the Spaniards to their hiding place. She tried to quiet him, but he would not hear it. He ran to the opening in the room opposite the one from which they had entered. It was like he was trying to rouse them. Perhaps it was time for them to move on. She helped old Jacob up from his seat and spoke into his ear to be heard above the din. "I think we'd better go so he'll quiet down. Quick. Let's follow him."

As soon as they took up their positions behind MacGregor, he stopped barking and resumed his trek. As they hurried on in silence, the cool air in the tunnel made Trinn shiver as it gently blew against her sweat-coated back. She considered Jacob's remark as they moved along. What did he mean by "sometimes things are not always as they appear"? Did it have to do with the past? This past, or did it apply to the future. Her future, and Sidney's? Darn, she didn't like riddles.

They reached another staircase, identical to the one they had used to come into the tunnel. No more than blocks stacked one upon another, just wide enough for a foot, the stairs ascended to a hatch above. MacGregor stopped and ruffed once, as if trying to tell them something. Then he looked up. Trinn and Jacob instinctively stepped out of the way when the door above them moved. Blinding light streamed in through the hatch causing both of them to shield their eyes. A

shadowed head emerged into the hole and they heard Alfred's voice, irritation evident. "About time you lot showed up. I've been waiting." Jacob blew out the lantern and left it at the bottom of the steps as he gingerly negotiated them holding on to the wall for balance.

Trinn looked at MacGregor and asked, "Can you climb, young man, or should I carry you up?"

MacGregor tilted his head at her question and Alfred called to him. "Come on up, lad." MacGregor bounded up the steep steps as if he had done it many times.

His enthusiasm delighted Trinn. She followed him up the stairs, although she, too, had to steady herself using the wall against which the steps were stacked. When she reached the top, Alfred thrust a hand out to her and she hesitated only for a second before grasping it and letting him pull her up the last two steps to solid ground. "Thanks, Alfred."

Alfred muttered a reply she didn't understand. Best not to ask him to repeat himself. She didn't want to annoy him any more than she already had. He looked around, presumably to make sure they weren't being observed, then he gestured them to follow him. MacGregor seemed to know where they were headed and ran ahead of Alfred.

"Perhaps he's done this before," Trinn remarked.

When they reached the stable, Alfred motioned them inside. Great, Trinn decided. Now we're going to hide in the muck of the animals.

However, Alfred went to the back of an empty stall and pulled open a door that blended into the wall. It was almost invisible. He gestured them inside. "There's lanterns inside and flint for lighting them. You won't have to be in the dark. It's plenty secure. Just best to keep talk to a minimum, especially if you hear noise out here."

Jacob muttered his "gracias" and Trinn her "thank you" as they passed Alfred and entered the narrow room secreted behind the animal stalls. Trinn grabbed a lantern and flint on a shelf just inside the door before Alfred closed it, leaving them in utter darkness.

"Jacob?"

"I am here." He sounded close.

"Take my hand. I want you to hold the lantern so I can light it." She waved her hand around, hoping to meet with Jacob's. Finally, she felt his fingers on her arm and she slid the lantern into his hand. She struck the flint pieces together and saw the spark, but she needed to be closer to the wick for the light to catch. She stepped closer and repeated the process. This time, the wick caught and flared. A circle of amber light surrounded their immediate area. "Thank you."

Jacob replied, "*De nada.*"

She raised the lantern high to get a sense of where they were. The room went on into the darkness in both directions. She walked a few steps in one direction and found some boxes. "Jacob, there are some boxes to sit on over here."

The old man approached and sat down, exhaling loudly. "I am glad for the chance to sit down. My heart is pounding. Maybe I'm just, how do you say? *Inquieto*?"

She knew the word. The restaurant kitchen workers used it when there were whispers of immigration raids. *Inquieto*. Anxious, uneasy. "Don't be concerned, Jacob. I'm sure Catty will make sure those thugs leave as soon as possible. Maybe they're already gone. Let's just sit here and hope for the best." She thought about Sidney. Time ticked away. She had no idea how long. Her eyelids closed. She slept, until suddenly, she jumped awake and found she was in Sidney's living room.

SIDNEY AND TRINN brought each other up to speed. Trinn regarding her time with Jacob and Sidney with the information she had found online. Trinn wondered aloud, "What do you suppose

'SWIM' stands for? It sounds like an acronym for something.

"I haven't a clue. Maybe it's someone's name."

"Or a famous swimmer that wants to remain anonymous?"

Sidney raised a dark eyebrow.

"Okay, I'm being silly, but I just have a feeling there's meaning in the name. But like you, I don't have any idea what it could be."

Sidney shrugged. "Did you have any luck in locating a landmark when you came out of the tunnel?"

"Oh, rats. I was so concerned with getting up those stairs without falling off besides being worried about Alfred's annoyance at me I forgot to notice. I'm sorry. Maybe I can go back and have a look around. I don't think the door in the stable has a lock on it. I could probably get out and investigate before anyone comes back for us."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"Um, probably not. I guess I should wait for Catty or Alfred to come back for us." Trinn yawned.

"It doesn't look as if you need to lift some more weights to go back to sleep."

"No--no, I'm fine. I'm sure I can go back to sleep without them. I'll just snuggle down here on the couch--." She closed her eyes and mumbled, "I don't suppose you'd want to cuddle up with me?"

Sidney smiled, wondering if Trinn knew how very tempting the invitation was. She bit her lower lip. Just get those ideas out of your mind, Sidney Wycombe, she insisted to herself.

Trinn didn't need an answer. Sidney watched her for a while and saw her breathing become more shallow and even, and knew she had drifted back to sleep. An afternoon chill had descended, so she tiptoed over to the couch and draped a soft throw over Trinn's body.

TRINN'S HEAD JERKED back and when she opened her eyes, she met Jacob's in the lamplight. As she stretched, she said, "I need to go out."

"I don't think that's wise, Trinn. You should wait until they come to get us."

"I'll be careful. Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

He raised a shoulder. "As you wish."

She walked along the wall pressing on the boards, looking for the door through which they had come. Finally, a group of planks gave enough to let in a crack of fading light. She pushed a little more and slipped out the opening, closing the door behind her. She counted stalls, hoping she'd be able to find the opening and use it on her return.

She peeked around the door of the barn to find an empty yard. If she ran for the tall rock just ahead of her, she could hide from view there. It was in the vicinity of the hatch through which they had exited the tunnel.

One more look around confirmed no one seemed to be about and she scurried toward the stony pillar. When she reached it, she searched around on the ground for the hatch. If this was where they had emerged from the tunnel, it was difficult to tell. She stepped a few paces to the north and looked around, but could see nothing.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something move and jumped. When she turned toward the shadow, she found it was nothing more than the rock toward which she had run. It looked like a person. She tilted her head as she studied it. But from this angle, it looked like a mother holding a child. "The Stone Madonna," she whispered. The quote flashed through her mind. When troubles appear, look to the Stone Madonna for protection. "The Madonna marks the tunnel!"

Once she retraced her steps, she knelt down at the back of the rock and felt around on the ground. What appeared to be a random pile of leaves didn't yield to the sweeping motion of her hands. The leaves seemed to be fixed in place. As she patted over the surface, she found an iron ring hidden among the leaves. When she pulled, the bulky hatch opened and she found herself staring down into the tunnel. She closed it and looked up at the statue.

The Stone Madonna offered protection in the form of a tunnel. The irony of a birth canal flitted through her mind for an instant. A huge grin appeared across her face. Sidney would be pleased.

If the Stone Madonna still existed on the Briarcrest property, they might find the entrance to the tunnel and the property would be saved from Mr. Swim and friends, whoever they were. She checked to make sure she hadn't disturb the camouflage. Her hand went to her belt and she pulled her phone out of its pouch. It came to life as she flipped it open. She selected the camera feature. As she snapped a picture of the statue, she heard voices in the distance coming closer.

She recognized Catty as one of the speakers. "I assure you there will be no more trouble from the Spaniards. They are gone completely."

The other voice, a man's, wasn't familiar. "Whatever were they after?" Anxiety filled her chest as she realized how vulnerable she was out in the open. She took a quick measure of the distance from her location to the stable. By her reckoning, she'd never be able to make it back without being seen. Her hand went toward the hatch ring and she wondered if she'd have to go back into the tunnel to avoid detection, but when the unfamiliar voice spoke and Catty responded, she could tell they were walking away from her. She breathed a sigh of relief. Before she released the ring, she felt MacGregor's wet nose against her hand.

Chapter Fifteen

JANET DIDN'T LOOK happy. The sequined evening gown she wore looked stunning on her, but he just couldn't see what his niece ever saw in the woman. Okay, so she was built. He stared at the large gemstone necklace dangling just above her cleavage. Her words drew him back to look at her face. "You know, I left a very prestigious party to meet with you, so this had better be good." She frowned at him.

Charles looked her over once more. Nice package, but terrible personality. No, he didn't see what Sidney ever saw in her at all. But perhaps that's why they were no longer together. Ah, well. Best to get the commotion over with.

He handed her the picture he had taken of Trinn outside Sidney's office and watched her expression change from mild annoyance to troubled. He'd best give her the information, let her yell and him, and let her get back to her party as quickly as possible. "She's from Boston."

"Boston? England or America?"

"America. She's well known for her pastries there. A graduate of a culinary institute and has some acclaim."

The scowl on Janet's face made him hesitate. "Although she's currently out of a job."

Janet's head snapped up. "I've never known Sidney to be so enamored with sweets she'd actually hire a pastry chef. There has to be another motivation for Sidney to have taken up with this--" She looked at the picture with distain. "--this person."

"There is one other thing."

She raised an auburn eyebrow. "Yes?"

"She may have some connection with--." Had he made a mistake coming to Janet with the information? It was all rumor and speculation. The person he had contacted didn't seem to know much.

She had only been an acquaintance of Trinn's at the culinary academy. On a hunch, Charles had started down the list of students in Trinn's class. Marilyn Turnbull only recalled one conversation she'd ever had with Trinn Wells. It had happened when Trinn found out Marilyn's mother was from England. She had asked Marilyn about some place called Briarcrest. When she said she had never heard of it, Trinn had requested Marilyn ask her mother about it.

However, they never had another conversation because the next day, Marilyn had gotten a call with the news that her mother had been killed in a car accident and Marilyn had been so devastated at her loss she never returned to the academy.

"Connection with what, Charles? Speak up, man."

"She may be connected with Briarcrest."

He watched Janet turn white and saw her wobble ever so slightly. She grabbed for her desk and sat down.

"No. It can't be. I understood she'd given up looking for an heir."

"Heir? You mean that's actually possible? I assumed all that was poppycock."

Janet shook her head. "So did I."

She sat staring at her hands long enough to make Charles uncomfortable. He was just about to excuse himself when Janet looked up at him, her eyes glowing with fire.

"She mustn't be allowed to stop this project."

"How could she do--"

"I don't know. All I know is she mustn't be allowed to interfere. I will not have this project threatened. Follow the American. I want to know her every move."

Charles brightened. "I've already been having her followed. She was the one who was with Truly when he had his unfortunate accident the other day. They were at the site."

Janet paled a little. "Then it's as I feared. Sidney knows something. Something that could jeopardize the project. We've got to stop her or everything will be ruined." She looked desperate.

Charles' eyes widened. He'd never seen Janet look so wild. "Now look here, Janet, you're the one who said no one would be hurt in all this. I don't know if I want to get involved in anything against the law. I wouldn't do well with incarceration."

The fire in Janet's eyes intensified. "I don't care what measures you have to take. At a minimum, scare her enough so she gets back on the next plane to Boston and never returns to England. If that means your business associates have to rough her up, then fine. Just make sure she's out of the picture. Is that clear?"

Charles stared back. "Very."

She turned her chair to face the window that looked onto the dark night outside. Charles took it as a dismissal. As he left Janet's office, he wondered how in the world he would be able to scare Trinn Wells out of London for good. Then he had an idea.

TRINN CALLED MACGREGOR'S name and heard the dog skittering across the planked floor before she saw him. For a brief moment, she felt a little disoriented and couldn't figure out if she was in the stable, in the tunnel, or somewhere else entirely. She rubbed her eyes and looked around and discovered she was back in Briarcrest Hall, sitting opposite Catty and Jacob at the long, oak planked table that ran along the hall's length. The dog almost slammed into the table trying to stop and she put her hand down to help him, meeting his big grin and enthusiasm head on.

"Easy there, MacGregor." Jacob and Catty joined in her amusement. When she looked up from petting the dog, she saw another group of pilgrims tramping down the hall, following behind Alfred, each enfolded in dark cloaks. The scene had become commonplace. Jacob and Catty got up from their seats and approached the group.

Catty gave instructions to Alfred and he and the group disappeared toward the library as Trinn watched them go. Jacob accompanied them. Trinn wondered what it would be like to be able to amble through that library, looking for the journals and annals as they were in this time. Wouldn't that be something? Trinn shivered with excitement. Who knows what else I might find that we don't have access to in our time?

When Catty returned to the table, MacGregor padding along beside him, she considered asking him for access to the library, but she never had a chance. A group of people entered Briarcrest Hall through the front door and a commotion erupted. Catty stood and shouted in welcome,

starting down the hall to greet his guests. Trinn was relieved it wasn't another visit from the unwanted Spaniards.

The group met somewhere in the middle of the hall. Catty thrust out an arm in greeting to each one. A tiny, beautiful young woman dressed in finery, stepped out from behind the group of men. The woman held a bundle in her arms. A look of delight quickly crossed Catty's face but vanished, replaced by a look of terror. As the woman quickly negotiated the space between them, Catty looked back at Trinn and mouthed, "Oh, no."

Catty cleared his throat and his voice cracked when he greeted the woman. "Lady Margery, I did not expect you. What brings you to Briarcrest?"

Before she could answer, one of the men, older and well dressed, stepped out from the group. He gave a slight bow to Catty before speaking. "My Lord, as I said earlier, I hope this is not an imposition."

Catty gave him a tentative smile. "Lord Butterfield. You, and Lady Margery, of course, are most welcome. When we spoke in the courtyard earlier, I hadn't realized your daughter accompanied you." Catty looked back at Margery. "Forgive me, Lady Margery, I was just so surprised to see you."

Lady Margery smiled sweetly. "You're forgiven Master Catty. I hope you really are glad to see me."

Catty didn't answer.

Lord Butterfield said, "I would have liked my daughter to accompany me to spend some time in the town buying whatever young ladies like to buy from these places. Instead, she insisted we come here. She seems to think you would not mind if she presumed upon your hospitality while I am gone on my business." He paused, seeming to wait for comment from Catty, but when he got none, he continued. "If it's not possible, of course we will understand." He looked at Margery, whose gray eyes had turned dark and brooding. Ignoring his daughter's mood change, the man forged ahead. "We will push on to Willowglen together if it is too much of an inconvenience to you."

Catty looked bewildered. He glanced at Margery, but looked quickly away finally keeping his eyes on her father. "Lord Butterfield, I regret to tell you I have pressing matters to deal with at the moment and will not have time to entertain the lovely lady, much to my disappointment, of course. I hope you will understand."

Margery stepped in front of her father and looked into Catty's eyes. "Are you not pleased to see me, Catty? I hoped you would be. After all, the last time we were here you seemed to enjoy my company."

Catty drummed his long fingers against the large silver belt buckle at his waist and Trinn noticed beads of sweat forming above his upper lip even from a distance. He answered with a slight

tremor in his voice. "I--I'm always happy to see you, Margery. It's just that this time, well, I have commitments. I won't be able to spend much time with you. I have things that must be attended to. I--"

"Oh, nonsense, Catty. You can only work so many hours in a day. You must take some leisure time in the evening. I'll be fine until then. We'll have a nice supper and you can tell me all about your endeavors." Margery's intense eyes bored into Catty and she purred, "It will help you relax."

Trinn could only speculate what that meant as she looked Margery up and down. She couldn't stop the smirk that appeared on her face. Margery was petite and quite lovely, filled with self-assurance and determination. The gold and deep blue of the brocade dress she wore mimicked the colors of the Briarcrest standard suspended from the ceiling in the main hall. She wondered if Margery had chosen the dress on purpose and decided she probably had.

Her long, shiny outer frock hung over a smooth yellow tunic underneath. The deep blue brocade of the garment framed ample breasts covered in the butter-colored cloth underneath, accentuating their outline. Peeking out just above the horizontal neckline was a hint of cleavage, gently swelling on either side to a sensual fullness. Trinn saw Catty lick his lips as he gazed at the spot. Trinn found herself breathing a little more heavily herself as she contemplated what Margery might do to help Catty unwind. She shook off the fantasy. It looked as though Margery wouldn't be staying anyway.

That was when Margery looked at her father and said, "Well, father, if Catty doesn't want my companionship, perhaps he will allow my son and I to presume on his hospitality for a few days anyway. I am weary of shopping and I would rather just stay here." She glanced at the bundle in her arms, then pronounced, "We will wait here until you return, Father."

Lord Butterfield sighed. "But, dear, Lord Wellington has no time--"

Margery interjected, her brow furrowed, "I'm not asking for his time if he has none to give, Father." She turned back and gazed deeply into Catty's eyes. He returned her look, fingers now stilled and white as he gripped his belt buckle.

Margery continued, "Only a place to sleep for a few days for my child and I. Would that be acceptable, Lord Wellington? Catty? Could we stay for a few days?" Trinn tried to suppress a smile as she saw Margery bat her eyes. "I promise I'll stay out of your way. And my sweet, little boy is very well behaved. We'll be no trouble at all if that's what you want."

Catty's cheeks turned bright pink and he stared down at his fingers as if they didn't belong to him. He pulled back the baby's blanket and stared at the child. The baby had a head full of blond curls that matched his mother's and he slept contentedly. Catty cleared his voice. "As you wish, Lady Margery. You and your son are welcome. Please, avail yourself of the hospitality of Briarcrest for as long as you wish."

Margery broke into a wide grin. "Then it's settled." She turned to her father and said, "Father, I know you are anxious to push on to Willowglen for your meeting. I'll not keep you. I'll look forward to your return in a few days."

Margery's father looked at Catty. "Are you sure?"

Catty and Margery had made eye contact and looked as if they wanted to be alone. It took a few seconds for Catty to pull his eyes away from Margery and look back to Lord Butterfield. "Yes, yes. That's fine. It won't be any trouble. Margery is welcome as is her child."

Butterfield kissed his daughter's cheek, then signaled to the men in his company and turned. The men followed, taking the length of the hall in long strides. When they were gone, the hall quieted. Margery looked up into Catty's still blushing face and said, "I'll take the room I had last time, shall I?" Catty nodded, not taking his eyes from her. Margery looked to the top of the stairs. "We'll go and rest if you don't mind. It was a long journey."

Catty's voice was deep and hoarse when he spoke. "I'll have some refreshment brought to you. Would you like some help with the child?"

"Thank you, that would be most kind." Margery headed for the stone stairs leading to the upper floor.

Catty shook his head. "Margery." She turned toward him, a tiny foot poised above the next step. Her gray eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed with anticipation. He continued, "Be my guest at dinner tonight."

Her face lit up with the delight she must have felt. "I'd be happy to." Her foot came in contact with the step and she continued her climb.

CHARLES ENTERED THE smoke-filled back room of the Horse and Lantern Pub. The acrid odor of booze and body odor made him wrinkle his nose. He hoped he could get back in Knuckles' good graces and get the hell out of this awful place as fast as possible. He longed for the comfort and more pleasant smelling upscale restaurants he liked to frequent. True, of late, he could barely afford a night out, but that would all change once he got paid by Janet Grimsdell. Now that she had started her project in earnest, he hoped that day wouldn't be too long in coming.

Once his eyes adjusted to the hazy darkness, he spied Robbiethel-Lark's golden hair in a corner booth. As he approached, he cleared his throat then addressed the men. "Gentlemen."

Knuckles gave him a disdainful look and went back to cleaning his bitten nails with the tip of a steak knife. Robbie shoved over on the bench seat to make room for Charles. At least he wouldn't need to sit with Knuckles. He still wasn't entirely sure he didn't have something contagious and hated to be in close proximity to the coughing, wheezing man.

Charles slid in beside Robbie and took the bull by the horns. "I'll come directly to it, boys. I may have been a little hasty in banning Mr. Knuckles here from interacting with my client's interests."

Knuckles looked up from his cleaning, a look of surprise on his face.

Charles' words seemed to hold his interest as he continued. "It seems the situation now warrants some intimidation methods presume Mr. Knuckles can provide.

Knuckles gave him a self-satisfied grin, revealing several missing and decaying front teeth. It pained Charles to look at the man. He looked over his shoulder under the pretense of looking for a server. When he caught the eye of a short woman who didn't quite fit in her barmaid's outfit, he signaled her over to the table and requested a cognac. After she left, Knuckles put the steak knife down on the table, cracked his knuckles, and said in a raspy voice, "Wha' kinda intimidation you lookin' for, gov'nor? Knuckles can supply wha' ever you want." He ground a fist into the opposite palm.

Charles tried not to cringe. "Now, we don't want anyone hurt, you understand." Janet may not care what happened to this woman, but he had no intention of going to jail over this whole matter. The pay Janet offered would never compensate him for his freedom.

Knuckles smile turned to a scowl and he nodded, grudgingly.

"I mean it. No throwing rocks. No breaking skin. No really rough stuff. All we want is for a certain person to be frightened enough to want to leave London and never want to return. That's it. No more, no less." He made eye contact, scanning first Robbie, then Knuckles. "Am I making myself understood?"

Both men nodded, though Knuckles only did so after Robbie shot him a look.

"Right then." Charles pulled out his mobile and pressed a few buttons before waving the screen in front of each man's face. "This is the person you need to work on. You've seen her before. You recognize her, don't you?"

Both men nodded.

"She's your target. But mark my words, gentlemen. If there are any marks or evidence of assault of any kind, I will be forced to withhold payment for your services. The apprehension imposed on her must be purely mental--and the result must be that she leave London and return to her native America. You'll have to watch for an opportunity to do your work with the utmost care."

Knuckles spoke up. "Don't you worry, Mr. A. I can be pretty scary when I want to be. I'm not always the genteel aristocrat I appear to be on the outside." He looked over at Robbie and the two men guffawed, causing Knuckles to have a mild coughing fit. When he gained control of himself, he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his jacket. "You just leave it all to Robbie and me. We'll take care of your little American and we won't leave a mark on her. The last place on earth she'll want to be when we're through with her is anywhere in the UK, right Robbie?"

Robbie smiled and nodded. "That's for sure. And don't worry, Mr. Abercrombie. You have my word she won't be harmed physically."

Charles stared at Robbie. "Make sure you keep your word. I'll hold you to it."

The barmaid appeared with Charles' cognac, which he downed in one gulp and got up from his seat. "I'll be in touch, gentlemen."

TRINN KNEW IT had been several days since Margery's arrival. There was talk of her leaving the next day. Trinn sat with Catty gazing into the fire long into the evening. She watched him caress MacGregor with long, slow strokes, a far-away look in his eyes. He raised his ale-filled goblet to his lips, drinking deeply. Angular features, quite refined for a man, struck Trinn as she looked at him. He was taller than everyone in his household, yet he couldn't have been more than five-four or five.

Although he seemed strong enough, muscular enough, for one who practiced with sword and bow often, his edges struck her as soft, blurred--comforting. And then there was Margery.

Catty seemed more than taken with her and she with him, yet he had tried to encourage her to go to Willowglen with her father rather than stay at Briarcrest. She knew Catty had dined privately with Margery during her stay, but she also knew nothing else happened between them. She knew, because Margery had told her, of her desire, and of Catty's too noble attitude toward her. Margery expressed her longing to be with Catty. When Trinn tried to bring it up to him later, he reiterated his belief that Margery didn't understand. There were things he couldn't explain. He dismissed the idea.

What were these things that prevented him from opening himself to a relationship with someone who cared about him? Why would he throw away a chance for happiness? Was it his commitment to this sort of Renaissance Underground Railroad he was running?

It was obvious he had feelings for Margery. No doubt the young woman was looking for some sort of declaration of those apparent feelings for her. Not too much to ask of a potential lover, to be proud of one's feelings for the object of one's affections.

Did Trinn want that from Sidney? The realization jarred her. Was that why she often felt so nervous and out of sorts around Sidney? It didn't make any sense to be attracted to someone and yet feel an undercurrent of annoyance with that person all the time. Not that Catty behaved like that. Catty just seemed downtrodden and depressed when Margery wasn't in the room. When she entered, he brightened, but still kept her at bay. Was it an act? And what, really was Trinn looking for from Sidney? Perhaps there was little difference between her and Margery. She went back to staring at Catty, but her mind no longer lingered on him.

He glanced over at her and smiled tentatively.

"You look as though you are mulling over some deep ideas, Trinn-of-Boston-and-Plymouth. Tell me what you are thinking."

Trinn hesitated. Was it Catty's fledgling relationship with Margery or was it her own with Sidney she was reluctant to speak about? "Before I tell you, let me ask you a question."

Catty nodded, his short, dark hair rippling as his head moved.

"Do you care for Margery?"

He looked deeply into her eyes. "I do. Very much."

"Do you trust her?"

He answered without hesitation. "Margery would not want to see people hurt. If she found out about my work she would understand."

"Do you love her?"

He continued to hold her gaze. "You ask many questions when you said you only had but one to voice. Will there be more?"

She smiled, a twinkle in her eye. "Perhaps."

"All right. I do have feelings for Margery. She's a beautiful woman. She's warm and witty. It pains me to be separated from her. It has always pained me to be separated from her. When I heard she had married, I was sorry to hear it, for my own sake. Now, her husband is dead and she has a child. And she is here. Still--."

"Why did you want her to go?"

A look of surprise registered on his face. "I cannot ask her to stay. There are elements at work here you know nothing about, Trinn. I--I just cannot."

Trinn was the one now taken aback. Not from Catty's objection, but because his words sounded so similar to words Sidney had spoken back in the present time. Why did Sidney insist on making decisions about their relationship without Trinn when her attraction was so obvious? If she was attracted to her, shouldn't they consider their options together? But no, Sidney Wycombe was so damn noble to her cause of protecting the heir of Briarcrest she wouldn't even talk about what was going on between them.

Trinn considered all this and decided to speak up. "Maybe those factors aren't solely for you to control, Catty. Maybe if Margery knew what the problems were, she would have solutions you haven't even considered. Why don't you give her a chance?"

Catty looked down at his hands. Trinn followed his gaze and she wondered about his hands. The fleeting thought that they appeared very delicate looking, in spite of the calluses, passed briefly through her mind like a dandelion puff on a summer breeze. And why, she wondered, would someone who needed to do little manual labor have calloused hands?

She looked back up at him in time to meet his gaze. He had a look of deep sadness and longing. "I just cannot." Almost in a whisper he said, "I couldn't bear the rejection. And I assure you any advances would be refused."

Trinn studied Catty's face, his angular jaw, his muscular shoulders, evident even through the shirt and tunic he wore. "You underestimate Margery. She cares for you deeply."

"No. It is an illusion. An illusion that must not be encouraged."

Trinn felt her impatience growing. Would he let the love of his life walk out on him? Who was rejecting whom? And how could she let Sidney withdraw from her? The similarity of their situations stunned her. Growing desperate to make Catty understand what he was doing would only hurt Margery and himself in the long run, she said, "Don't throw away the chance to have someone in your life that cares deeply for you. It's a great gift. If you throw it away, you'll regret it."

Fire flashed in Catty's eyes and he looked as though he no longer cared about controlling it. "There are already many things about Margery I regret and I am well aware of what those things are. I do not need you to point such things out to me. I assure you, if I made advances toward her, I would be rejected."

She felt confused by his remarks, but she pushed on, anxious to save Catty from making a terrible mistake, and all the while wanting to ensure she and Sidney would not fall into a similar trap. "What can be so bad that she will not understand? Nothing can be that bad. Nothing."

Catty snapped, "I am not who she--who you--think I am. That's the problem."

"You mean you're not the Lord of the Manor here? I think not. If you weren't, would Albert defend you the way he does?"

Catty looked at her with grief-filled eyes. "He would. Without a doubt, he would."

"Then what? Why?" It came out louder and at a higher pitch than she intended.

Catty shook his lowered head. "Please, Trinn, do not ask me any more."

"Why? Help me to understand." She put her own goblet down and got up from her seat by the fire.

She knew it was the moment of truth in an instant. From the journals she and Sidney had read, she knew there was one way to tell if Catty was Andrew Pritchard or not. She walked over to

him and gently took his face in her hands. For a fleeting moment, she considered Margery and grew concerned. If she saw her acting so intimately with Catty, she was sure she would run Trinn through with the dagger she had seen the small woman take from her waist to spear meat and root vegetables at the few meals they had eaten together. She took a deep breath and dismissed the idea.

Catty gazed into her eyes, looking innocent, vulnerable, a little curious. She pushed her hands through the hair at his temples. She looked first at one side, then at the other, examining it all the way down to the scalp. There was no sign of a white patch. Her question came out in a whisper. "You aren't Andrew Pritchard, are you?"

CATTY RETURNED TRINN'S stare for a long time. "It's true. am an imposter." He looked around the room, wide-eyed, making sure they were still alone. Finally, he whispered, "I--" His head dropped and he mumbled into his chest. "My name is Eleanor."

Trinn felt her own eyes widen. Catty looked up at her. He--she looked defeated. "Although I love Margery deeply, I know she would not want--." Her voice turned to a whisper "--a woman."

Trinn looked at her, heart pounding. A woman? No wonder she constantly questioned her androgyny. She felt relief to have this puzzle piece fall into place. "Just because you are a--" Catty stopped her with a warning look. Trinn restated, "Just because you carry a secret, doesn't necessarily mean Margery would reject you. There are lots of women who are attracted to--to, well, you know."

Catty raised a dark eyebrow.

"All right. Maybe not so many where you come from, but where I come from women do love other women. Freely. Well, at least more freely than now, well--." The words died on her lips. How could she explain this? She decided she couldn't. "Just take my word for it. There will come a time when it is much more prevalent. Well, maybe that's not right either. Somehow, I can't imagine it doesn't happen in this time as much as in mine. We just have the freedom to be more ourselves." Eleanor gave her a confused look, but said nothing. Trinn continued. "Does Margery know?"

Her eyes widened. "Of course not. Margery has lain with a man. Her husband. She has a child. This is why I said there were problems. This is why I cannot--"

Trinn held up her hand. "I have a feeling Margery is attracted to you because of who you are beneath your skin." She bent down close to Eleanor's ear and whispered, "Whether you are male or female won't matter to her. I'm certain of it." When Catty did not respond, she straightened up and continued. "But what I really want to know is who are you and why are you here? Oh, and maybe the biggest question is why it is that, if Alfred knows you aren't who you say you are, why does he protect you?"

She looked up into Trinn's blue eyes for a long while before answering. "You'd better sit down, Trinn. This tale will take a while."

SOMETHING WOKE SIDNEY in the middle of the night. From the chair where she had nodded off, she watched as Trinn slept. Her face had a look of intense concentration. Sidney couldn't help but wonder what was going on back there in time. She watched Trinn's even breathing. A shiver ran down her back. Trinn looked so innocent, so trusting. Had she done the right thing bringing her here and getting her involved in this way? If she had met Trinn Wells in another time, would she have been willing to allow her feelings for her to rule her heart? Her heart raced. Oh, no, she thought, not another attack. Please. Not now. But it wasn't an attack. She looked back at Trinn and knew it was Trinn Wells that made her feel this way. She tried to focus on her own breathing in the hope that consideration of Trinn's lovely face, her alluring body, her golden curls, would not bring with them such passionate sensations. She closed her eyes. The thrill subsided. She drifted off to sleep. But Sidney slept in the present, while Trinn's slumber took her back five-hundred years into the past.

ELEANOR SPOKE LONG into the night with Trinn only interrupting her to ask for clarification now and then. As she told her story, the reason Alfred protected her so valiantly became apparent. She was his daughter.

Alfred had several sons, all grown, with their own families established. Although their loyalty was certain, none of them took any interest in becoming Keepers of Briarcrest. When Eleanor became involved in the castle intrigue, and the mysterious goings-on escalated, they wanted even less to do with it. People coming at all hours only to disappear in the middle of the night never to be seen again didn't sit well with her brothers. Although they would never betray the confidences of Briarcrest, or their own family members, they would simply rather not be a part of whatever strange things were happening.

Eleanor was Alfred's youngest child with quite a number of years between her and the last boy. Her mother decided she was a willful child and she grew frustrated with her before she came to her teens. Alfred, in order to keep his wife's irritation to a minimum, kept Eleanor with him as he went about his work at Briarcrest. She grew close to her father and became fast friends with Andrew. Lady Lydia, Beatrice's niece, had a soft place in her heart for Alfred, and now, in her final years, she took the young Eleanor under her wing. She saw that Eleanor Wycombe received an education side-by-side with Andrew.

The two children were inseparable causing Fiona and Cate to wonder if the two might eventually marry, but it was not to be. Eleanor treated Andrew more like a brother, and, eventually, Andrew found another woman and fell in love, marrying her instead.

Eleanor and Andrew had grown up listening to the tales their elders told about Cate and Lydia's rescue in Willowglen years before. Inquisition was a word that both angered them and struck fear

in all their hearts. When news of the Inquisition of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella reached Briarcrest, everyone agreed something must be done.

Fire had erupted in Eleanor's eyes as she talked about the injustice, the exile from the only country the Spanish Jews had ever known, the public humiliation, loss of income, or detention in dungeons, even death. As escalation of the expulsion became evident, Andrew, the real Andrew, invested in a ship and established a means of rescuing countless Jewish families under false pretenses.

Once they arrived in London, they could choose to make the overland journey to Briarcrest, where from there they went to Northern England to start a new life. Others accepted safe passage for Turkey or Morocco, arranged and paid for by Andrew.

Eleanor had rejoiced with Andrew when he found the love of his life and married. She continued to work side-by-side with him in his rescue efforts. However, they grew concerned for the safety of the others at Briarcrest when the intrigue started. Catherine and Lydia were no longer alive by then, but Andrew grew concerned for Fiona, Cate, and his now pregnant young wife. They all helped in the effort where possible, but it was not their fight and Andrew knew it.

While Eleanor and Andrew contended with Spanish spies and mercenaries sent by those in the government who didn't want to see the Jews escape to a better life, they worried over how to protect the rest of Andrew's family. Several times, Spanish military came looking for Andrew, and for evidence of what they said were his traitorous dealings in Spain, but they never found any because Andrew was very careful. His efforts to protect his friend, Eleanor, ensured she escaped certain death, particularly on one occasion. However, Andrew was not as lucky.

While traveling back from the southern borderlands near Fiona's ancestral home where Andrew and Eleanor had met with a family who would take in some of the travelers on their way north, Andrew had been accosted on the road and his throat had been slit by an assassin. That particular day, Eleanor had not ridden with him because he knew something was amiss, and he refused to allow her to accompany him. Upon hearing the news of his death, Andrew's wife died in childbirth shortly thereafter. The child was small and sickly and only lived for a few days.

Eleanor spoke softly, wringing her hands as she told the tale, watching distant painful memories play before her eyes. "With so much death and sadness surrounding them, Cate and Fiona were heartsick. They decided they would leave and never return to Briarcrest, the pain of Andrew's death and his absence in their lives too much for them to bear.

"I begged them to allow me to continue Andrew's work. They tried to discourage me, but I wouldn't hear of it. I wanted to carry on, to honor Andrew's memory. I offered to move our enterprise out of Briarcrest, but Cate and Fiona knew it was the safest place to be. Believing that I would be protected within the walls of Briarcrest Hall, they insisted I stay. Before Cate and Fiona left Briarcrest for good, they secured the allegiance of those who served in the great Hall for me, telling them I was now Keeper of Briarcrest.

"Just before Fiona and Cate left for the northern country, we devised a plan. I would leave Briarcrest with Fiona, announcing I was to be married to a wealthy merchant from Fiona's part of the country. We traveled to a wayside inn where Fiona cut my hair and gave me Andrew's clothes to wear. Fortunately, we were nearly the same size. Unfortunately, I reminded poor Fiona of him so much she could not keep the tears at bay. But this, at least, gave us hope our plan would work. Of course, as you found out, I am missing one very distinct characteristic Andrew possessed--a patch of white hair on my left temple.

"When Fiona and I returned to Briarcrest, we claimed Andrew had survived his injuries and he lived and we celebrated his, my, return. The servants knew the truth, but as has been the custom in this house for a very long time, those who serve here would never reveal it. Thus, I became a Keeper."

"Keeper of Briarcrest?"

"Yes, that is what we have been called since Catherine and Lydia's time. The Keepers of Briarcrest."

Trinn searched through the information she had stored in her brain regarding Briarcrest. There was nothing written about "keepers," but that didn't mean it wasn't part of the oral tradition. "But why didn't you call yourself Andrew?"

"I couldn't bear it. Nor did I want to be the cause of more pain for Cate and Fiona in their last days at Briarcrest Hall. Instead, I took Andrew's childhood name, Catty. He had insisted it was a childish name and he didn't want us to use it even before he finished his schooling. I felt by using it, it honored Andrew. He would have smiled at hearing it, I'm sure, and would not have minded since he had matured well since his younger days.

"Once I was established in the house as Catty, Cate and Fiona saw to it that Briarcrest was mine. Then they packed up and moved back to Fiona's little cottage in the north. I hear from them. Living with the memory that Andrew gave his life for our cause still saddens them, but they are content to be away from the daily memories of living with him in this place. And the work of saving lives, for Andrew's sake, goes on."

Trinn took a long draft of her ale. "And Alfred? He actually agreed to this ruse?"

"Of course not. He never liked me to be a part of it, even from the start. He knew full well how dangerous it was. But he is loyal, just like all the other Wycombes who came before him." Eleanor's eyes took on an almost golden caste.

Trinn noticed the endearing crinkles at the outside edges of those eyes as Eleanor added, "Anyway, I am Alfred's most willful child. He knows I would not give up the idea. His only choice was to stay close and offer what help and protection he could. It gives him some measure of comfort knowing he is near and he is looking out for my interests." She stroked MacGregor's ears and he relaxed into her hand.

Trinn pointed to the dog. "Was MacGregor really from the north?"

Eleanor smiled at the little black dog and he looked up at her, eyes and ears alert. "Yes, he belonged to Andrew. Although Andrew always said he liked me better than he liked him. On any given day, if he disappeared, he knew he would find him with me. Now, he seldom leaves my side and I am grateful for his loyalty." She scratched the dog's neck, just above his leather collar, and the dog pulled his lips up in a contented smile. "Of course, I've noticed he has an affinity toward you, Trinn. He thinks you're special. I can tell."

"And I think he's special, too. More than you know." Trinn got up from her seat opposite Eleanor and sat beside her on a bench in front of the fire. Staring into her eyes, she said, "Catty, you must tell Margery this. She will understand. And, she will keep your secret. I'm sure of it."

"No!"

"What if you knew she felt the same way about you? What if she suspected--"

"She can't. No one must. It must remain a secret." Her tone changed to a whisper. "Otherwise, my life is in danger."

"If I'm not mistaken, your life is already in danger."

"But not from--this." She extended her hands to indicate her person.

"True. Not from that. But danger lurks still. Why not have someone close who will stand by you no matter what happens. In addition to Alfred, of course."

"That's just it. Say we do develop--a closeness. What if something does happen? What then? Would I want someone like Margery to experience the anguish Cate, Fiona, and Andrew's young wife did? They were distraught by his murder. I am sure that is why Andrew's wife died, and why his child came into the world without a will to live, too. No. I can't. Even if I weren't rejected, and I'm still not certain I wouldn't be, I couldn't ask it of Margery."

"Because you do care."

"Of course I care. Very much, but I still cannot."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Trinn sat wondering how to overcome this impasse when they heard a voice drift down from the stairway above them. "Why so dismal, you two?"

Both women looked up to the landing at the top of the stairs to see Margery, her golden hair loose around her shoulders, her body wrapped in a soft robe tied around the waist. She didn't

wait for an answer before she started down the stairs. Trinn and Catty watched her descend, Catty swallowing nervously as Margery come closer.

Catty looked into her eyes. "It's late. What are you doing up, Margery?"

"Couldn't sleep." She sat on the bench beside Catty and put her hand on his arm. "What about you two? Trying to resolve the problems of all of England?"

Catty's cheeks flushed. "You might say."

Margery frowned. "You need your rest, you know. You work too hard. I don't understand what you're up to in this place, but I know it's important enough for you to need to rest when you can." She turned to Trinn. "And you." Trinn raised her eyebrows. "You and he put your heads together and you lose all track of time. That's apparent."

Trinn stuttered, feeling like a child under Margery's gaze. "I--I didn't mean to--"

Margery's face softened. "It's all right Trinn. Catty needs a friend, I know. I'm glad you have become one for him." As she patted Catty's arm, his face reddened.

Catty sprang up from his seat. MacGregor jumped down, ready for his master's next move. When Catty stretched and yawned in a dramatic show of fatigue, Trinn screwed up her face in confusion.

"You are right, Margery, as usual. I am tired. I should go to bed. I bid you both a goodnight." He quickly scaled the steps two at a time on long, lithe legs. When he reached the top of the steps, he disappeared down the hall without another word.

Trinn and Margery sat staring at one another. After a few minutes, Trinn cleared her throat. "Well, I suppose I should retire as well."

She saw pleading in Margery's eyes as she turned to leave. "Don't go. Please. I'd like to talk to you."

Trinn whistled softly and sat back down.

Margery's voice softened. "I'd like to ask you about Catty."

Trinn shifted from one foot to the other. "I haven't known him for very long. I don't know what I can do to be of help."

"You can help, Trinn. He has confidence in you."

"I don't think--"

"He does. Don't deny it."

She looked Trinn up and down and Trinn wondered whether her strange manner of dress caused Margery any concern. Perhaps not. After all, she was dreaming, wasn't she? Did dreaming in the past have the same non-existent rules as ordinary dreams did? "What would you like from me, Lady Margery?"

Margery gave her an intense look, boring right through her. "Do you have feelings for Catty?"

Ah, that was it, then. She was afraid she had competition. Trinn's tension lessened. Margery's question was easily answered and she knew Margery would like her response. She continued to make eye contact. "I am not in competition with you for Catty's affections, Margery. I like him as a friend. I do think he's very handsome, but, well, let's just say I have my eye on someone who lives elsewhere."

Margery brightened. "Oh, good." She smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry if I made you uneasy. I had to know."

"No problem. I understand completely."

"You do?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then perhaps you can tell me what can I do, Trinn. No matter how hard I try, I can't get a response from him. Yet I can't help but feel he really cares for me."

Trinn didn't know if she should reveal Catty's true feelings to Margery or not. In the end, she could only hope she was doing the right thing. "What if I told you he does care for you deeply?"

Margery brightened. "Really?"

Trinn nodded. "But circumstances, well, you've been married and you have a child and Catty feels there are other things, too, that prevent him from being able to--"

Margery whispered, "Is it because Catty is a woman?"

"What? No. I mean, wait. You know?"

Margery smiled. "Yes, I know."

"But how?"

"It is evident our Catty, or Eleanor, doesn't remember we met years ago, when the real Andrew was called Catty and Eleanor roamed these halls with him getting into all manner of trouble. We were only children. I was terribly jealous of Andrew. The real one. Knowing he got to be with her day after day. My father was a friend of Catherine Hawkins. We stopped here to visit her in her later years on our way to Willowglen on business. My father is right. I always did love to

shop. So he often took me with him on these trips." A dreamy look appeared in Margery's eyes. "I've been in love with Eleanor Wycombe since we were young things."

"He--she told me everyone who knew Catty was gone. That they no longer frequented Briarcrest Hall."

"She's forgotten. Or perhaps she chooses not to remember. There was always a strong pull between us, even all that time ago. After Catherine died, my father felt he had no reason to come back here. I grew up. He arranged a marriage for me. I was against it, but what recourse did I have? My husband was a decent man. And our little Winston is a gift I shall never regret. My husband died before our son was born. My father took me back into his household just before my son's birth.

"I've only been back here to Briarcrest once as an adult. It was about two years ago. I secured my new husband's agreement to allow me to travel with my father and I asked my father to stop here on his way to Willowglen. Imagine my surprise to find Eleanor posing as Andrew. Oh, I knew immediately who she was. My father didn't see past her disguise, of course. He pays no mind to matters that have nothing to do with trade.

"I went along with the ruse. It didn't take me long to figure out part of the reason for the secret had to do with Eleanor's safety. So I never said a word. I would never want to risk any harm coming to her. But I can't deny I still feel the attraction we had for one another years ago. And I think perhaps this ruse can be used to our advantage.

"My only worry was there were some feelings between the two of you, what with your dressing like a man yourself." She looked Trinn up and down, "And Catty being so friendly toward you."

Trinn looked down at her dark pants and blue cotton shirt with its button-down collar. Everyone seemed unaware of the way she was dressed in these dreams. She wondered if perhaps everyone saw her as dressed the same way they were, but Margery now made it clear that was not the case.

All she could think of to say was, "Uh, I'm not from around here."

"I know. Catty told me you were from Boston and Plymouth. He thinks that's why you dress the way you do. I do not. I think there is more to your story. But I keep my opinions to myself."

Trinn raised her eyebrows, but decided not to comment. "What will you do, now? About Catty, I mean."

Margery rubbed her hands together nervously. "I wonder if you'd mind helping me."

SIDNEY AWOKE WITH a pain in her neck and shoulder. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, then massaged her shoulder to ease the discomfort. The glow of the laptop screen on the table beside her illuminated Trinn's face. She slept peacefully on the couch. She touched the

computer's mouse to stop the screensaver and looked at the time. 4:55 am. Trinn's hand jerked in her sleep. She shifted her position on the couch with a moan and she settled back into a peaceful slumber. Sidney considered the comfort of her own bed, yet, for some reason, she didn't want to leave Trinn alone.

She's there, she realized, walking those halls, talking to the people of the time. She longed to be with her as she moved to the recliner on the other side of the room. Trying not to make noise as she lifted the footrest, she settled herself into the more comfortable seat. Trinn had been there a long time. She hoped everything was all right.

Trinn's face looked peaceful enough in the soft light. It must be a true indication of what was happening in the past. Sidney would just stretch out for a while to relieve the pain in her neck, then get up and make some coffee, but she quickly drifted back to sleep.

AGAINST TRINN'S BETTER judgment, she listened as Margery proposed that Trinn reveal she knew Catty was a woman and that she was attracted to her. She insisted she had to know if Eleanor had feelings for her before her father returned. And if she had a chance to win her affections once and for all.

Trinn tried to reason with Margery, to tell her it was none of Trinn's business that she shouldn't get involved in their personal lives. Yet she couldn't help but think about the fact that Eleanor had revealed herself to her earlier and now Margery was pleading for her help. The burden of the confidences shared by these two women left Trinn deeply moved. Yet she struggled with what to do about it all. She was there only because she needed information about Briarcrest that would help Sidney's efforts, and she had found what she needed. The landmark for the tunnel entrance. She was not there to influence their lives. She pondered the Prime Directive from *Star Trek* trying to figure out if the policy was applicable to her situation. It was no use. She couldn't figure it out. It was time to go. She needed to get out of her dreams and get on with her life.

Yet how could she not help these two? How could she leave them to their own devices? If she did, they might never get together. The idea saddened her. But maybe they weren't meant to be together anyway. When the bell tolled, she jumped with surprise.

SIDNEY LEAPT FROM her chair when her mobile rang with a chime that sounded like Big Ben. She tried to silence it before it awakened Trinn, but it was too late. She saw her eyes flutter open. "Hello?" She headed for the kitchen hoping Trinn would go back to sleep.

The voice on the other end of the line sounded breathless. "Sidney, it's Lawrence."

She yawned. "Oh, hello, Lawrence. How are you feeling?"

He spoke quickly. "I'm fine, fine. Couldn't be better. Sidney, where are you?"

She walked into the kitchen and pulled out a chair. "I'm at home, you goose. Where else would I be?"

"Uh, Sidney, it's eight o'clock. Monday morning. You have another court date today--in an hour as a matter of fact. You're usually here early when you have to go to court. When I didn't see you I decided I'd better check on you. Are you all right?"

Panic set into the pit of her stomach. She looked at the clock on the microwave. It read 8:02 a.m. "Damn! I had no idea it was that late. I'm fine, Lawrence. Um. Could you call George and inform him I may be a few minutes late. Tell him to play for time. He's perfectly capable of coming up with a diversion. He knows the court very well, so he'll be able to figure something out. I've got to make sure Trinn--"

"Trinn?" Dead silence. "Oh, have you two been playing all weekend?"

She didn't like the way he said the word playing. His implication was clear. "No. We've been working. Get your mind out of the gutter, Lawrence, and make that call. I'll see you in a few." She hung up.

As soon as she snapped her mobile shut, her mind blurred with the details of what she needed to get done. She had to get a shower, find something presentable to wear, and get to her office as fast as she could.

SIDNEY FOUND TRINN wide-awake in the living room and informed her that she had to get to the office. She and Trinn scrambled to get dressed. They left the house and sprinted down the street without much conversation. Sidney glanced at her watch when they arrived at the Tube entrance. They had a few minutes to spare. The coffee vendor had no line, so she walked over to the window and brought back two steaming cups of brew. Sidney handed Trinn one of the cups.

Trinn thrust her hand out eagerly to take it. "Thanks. I'm sorry I slept so late, but there was a lot happening. At Briarcrest, I mean."

"So you said. What did you find out?"

"I found the Stone Madonna."

Sidney's eyes widened. "You did?"

"Yes, and it is significant. She marks the entrance to the tunnel. We may have our landmark."

The look on Sidney's face went from eager to disappointed in a split second. "Oh, I wish I didn't have a court date today."

"Can you get out of it? Postpone or something?"

A guttural sound came from her throat. "I wish I could, but this is a very old client and we've waited months for this. I can't back out now. It would take many more months to get back in the queue. As it is, he's probably at the courthouse right now pacing, wondering where I am, and I still have to stop at the office to pick up my paperwork before I meet him.

Trinn wondered about the possibility of finding the Madonna and the tunnel entrance. "Maybe Lawrence and I can go--"

"No. I don't want you two going back there alone. After I'm through in court I'm going to arrange to have someone take us there tomorrow. It will just have to wait another day. I don't want to go without security. Besides, what harm can twenty-four more hours do? We've waited this long." She searched Trinn's eyes. "Promise me you won't do anything foolish."

Trinn hesitated. It would be a terrible disappointment not to go to the Briar Wood site and search for the stone Madonna. If she and Lawrence were able to find the entrance to the tunnel today, wouldn't that allow Sidney to take action more quickly, maybe by the end of the day? That should help. Yet the pleading in Sidney's eyes made her reconsider. "Look, all I want to do right now is go back to my hotel, take a shower, and get some clean clothes on." Sidney nodded. "Are you free for lunch or should we just plan on meeting for dinner?" She hoped she had successfully deflected Sidney's request for an assurance she wouldn't go to Briar Wood until she could figure out what she really should do.

The train arrived and the two women entered the crowded car, finding a spot where they could hang on to the safety rail while they rode along.

Sidney returned to their earlier conversation. "To answer your question about meeting, the answer is dinner, I think. I'm not sure if I'll be finished by lunch. If I finish earlier, I'll ring you up, though. Shall I call your mobile or will you be in your room?"

"Call my cell phone. I may do some shopping or just go hang out with Lawrence." Or I might be somewhere in the English countryside.

Chapter Sixteen

TRINN FELT REFRESHED from a shower and a fresh change of clothes as she walked into the reception area of Sidney's office. She had her proposal ready for Lawrence. When he saw her come in, he smiled widely and said, "You look refreshed. I love that shirt."

Trinn blushed. "Why, thank you. It's one of my favorites. How's your head by the way. I forgot to ask you when I was here earlier because you and Sidney were in such a snit about getting her ready for her court date."

His hand went to the wound, but he stopped before he touched it. "I'm fine. It's a little sore, but I'll live." A look of concern crossed his face. "She's always in the office long before me when she has a court appointment. She likes to be well prepared and centered. I hope she does all right. It's just not like her."

"She'll be fine. When I walked her to the Tube, I told her to relax and take some deep breaths. She calmed down and looked the picture of serenity when she boarded. You worry about her too much."

"I'll have to take your word for that. As far as worrying about her, it's in my job description. But I'm glad you were there. You're a good influence on her." He gave her a penetrating look.

"Well, uh, thanks." She didn't know what else to say.

Finally, he turned back to sorting paperwork on his desk. "So what do you have planned for today?"

Trinn took a deep breath, preparing to make her proposal. "I have an idea, but it involves you."

He gestured to the stacks of paper spread over the surface of his desk. "I'm afraid I can't play today, Trinn. I have too much work to do."

"This has nothing to do with play. I have information regarding Briarcrest that needs to be verified. If we can do it, we may be able to stop the development that Sidney told you about from proceeding."

His eyes widened. "Does Sidney know you have this information?"

"Yes. I told her on the Tube, but we didn't have much time and I didn't go into any detail. Plus she was just a little distracted." She wasn't about to tell him Sidney had tried to get her to promise not to go to the site. "If we can go out to the Briar Wood site, I'm sure I can find the Stone Madonna."

"Stone Madonna?"

"The Stone Madonna marks the entrance to an underground tunnel. If we can find the statue, chances are good we can find the tunnel. Oh, I forgot to tell Sidney about this, but I took a picture of it with my cell phone."

Lawrence's eyes widened even more. "How could you have taken a picture of something you still need to find?"

"Not now, silly. I took it back there--then--whatever."

He looked incredulous. "You took a picture with your mobile

over five hundred years in the past?" Trinn contemplated his disbelief, then answered, "Wow, I guess that really is an amazingly big deal, isn't it?" "You know, there's a possibility it doesn't work if you bring it back here. Have you checked?"

She pulled out her phone and pushed a few buttons. After scrolling through a list of pictures, she stopped and stared, a look of astonishment on her face. She handed the phone to Lawrence and said, "You don't know how happy I am you're wrong."

He stared at the picture. It was grainy with shadowed edges, like some picture taken in the early days of photography, but the statue was clear. Shades of dark gray and deep violet outlined the features. It looked like a woman in a headdress and flowing robes holding a baby. She had done it. She had brought a picture back five hundred years into the future.

Lawrence plopped down into his chair and stared at the phone. "How is this possible?"

Trinn shrugged.

"And you say if we can locate this stone on the property, it will mark an underground tunnel?"

"Not just any underground tunnel. A tunnel that was used to hide and move Jews during the Spanish Inquisition."

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow."

Lawrence closed the phone. "We have to go."

"Shall I go rent a car? I can get one at the hotel."

"No need. I still have the rental from Friday. I drove today. I was planning to return it this afternoon. Let me just call the rental agent and tell him I'm keeping it for another day."

While Lawrence spoke to the rental agency, Trinn's phone rang. "Hi Sidney."

"Hi, there. Guess what? I have to be back in court at two o'clock, but I'm free until then. I can be back at the office in fifteen minutes. Want to go to lunch?"

For the first time since she arrived in London, Trinn hesitated about spending time with Sidney. Then she came to her senses, deciding she and Lawrence would just have to leave after lunch. They would have plenty of time to drive out to the Briar Wood site, locate the Stone Madonna,

verify the tunnel location and get back before Sidney was through with her day in court. "I'd love to meet for lunch."

Lawrence hung up from his call about the car and heard her make the lunch date. He mouthed, "What are you doing?"

She mimed, "Sidney." Then she spoke into the phone. "I'll be waiting at the office for you. See you soon. 'Bye.'"

Lawrence frowned. "What's going on?"

"Sidney's coming here so we can go to lunch. She has to be back in court at two. We'll have to delay leaving."

He stared at her, debating his next words. "She doesn't know we're going, does she?"

"No, and I don't want her to know."

"Trinn--"

"Look, Lawrence, I'm a grown woman. I can go where I want, when I want."

"Yes, but--"

"No buts. We're going. At least I'm going. If you don't want to come with me, I'll find some other way to get there. And Sidney doesn't need to know." There would be no more discussion.

Lawrence pointed a menacing finger at Trinn. "You two make me crazy, you know that?"

"I'm sorry you feel that way. Now, are you coming with me or do I need to find another way to get there?"

"I can't let you go alone. Sidney would have my head. I'm in. We go after lunch."

"Good. And do I have your word you won't tell Sidney about the plan?" She could see the debate going on inside as she waited for his answer. She felt sorry to have to ask him to keep her secret, but she was convinced it was important.

Finally he nodded his ascent. "You have my word." Then he muttered, "I hope she has to hurry back to court so I don't have to talk to her."

THE OFFICE DOOR flew open and Sidney rushed in looking flushed. She flung her briefcase at Lawrence, pulled Trinn up off the couch and said, "Come on. Let's go to the deli down the street. I want to hear everything about that dream."

They left him standing with his arms wrapped around Sidney's briefcase, his mouth agape, staring at the door. He didn't even have a chance to ask them to bring him something to eat.

At the deli, they ordered sandwiches and found a corner seat. As they waited for the orders to be delivered to the table, Sidney said, "I've been so distracted all morning. My client looked as if he might hit me on the head with his briefcase once or twice. I couldn't get what little you told me about the Stone Madonna earlier today out of my head. So--" Sidney looked around before leaning closer to continue. "What about it? Tell me everything."

Trinn nodded.

Sidney's eyes shone with anticipation. "It marks the entrance to the tunnel?"

She nodded and pulled out her cell phone.

Sidney frowned as she handed her the phone. "What's this?"

"That, my dear, is a picture, taken over five hundred years in the past--of the Stone Madonna."

Sidney tried to process what she had just heard. She smirked and handed the phone back to Trinn. "Good one, Trinn. Very funny."

Trinn thrust the phone back at her. "Take another look. This is not a joke."

Sidney registered the serious look on Trinn's face and understood what she was saying was important to her. Sidney took back the phone and stared at the image.

"Do you recognize that stone? It's somewhere on the property. At least it was about five hundred years ago."

Sidney continued to stare at the picture. "How is this possible?" she whispered.

Trinn broke into a slow smile. "Pretty awesome, isn't it?"

Her companion nodded. "You really have been there."

"Of course I've been there. You mean to tell me all this time you thought I was making this stuff up?"

"No. Not that. It's just that this really makes me realize the truth of it. You really have been there--to the actual place to which my entire family has dedicated itself for generations. It's a little overwhelming." Sidney's eyes glistened.

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, Trinn. I didn't mean to get emotional over this." She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and took a deep breath. "So, all we need to do is locate this stone and we may be able to find the tunnel."

"And you'll be able to have the property declared a listed building." Trinn took in the eager look on Sidney's face.

Sidney's brow furrowed. "But we don't have anything to support what the tunnel was actually used for, do we?"

"I can tell them I was in the tunnel with Jacob. That we were actually fleeing from--oh. I see what you mean. I can't tell anyone that, can I?"

Sidney shook her head. "Best not to bring that up. They might think we're both a little crackers." She gave Trinn a sheepish smile.

Trinn started to say something else, but stopped before the words escaped. Finally, she realized what Sidney was implying. "I guess that might land me in the loony bin, huh?"

Sidney apologized for the inference, but Trinn understood.

"Do you remember if there was any reference to those activities in the annals or in Fiona's journals?"

Trinn pondered her question, but she couldn't remember any.

"Then we'll have to figure out how to support what we know. Somehow. Let's think about it. Maybe we can skim through the copies of the annals and the journals tonight. Otherwise, we'll have to put our heads together and think of some other way."

Sidney liked the idea of putting their heads together. Maybe even putting their lips together. A young woman interrupted her thoughts when she delivered their lunch.

After the waitress left, Sidney asked, "Were you able to find out if Catty is Andrew Pritchard?"

Sitting back in her chair, "Ah, see, there's the other thing."

Sidney lifted an eyebrow. "What other thing?"

"Catty--the Catty I've been talking to--is actually not Andrew Pritchard at all."

"Do we have the wrong time, or is he an imposter?"

"The time is right. Sadly, Andrew Pritchard is dead. Catty is really a woman named Eleanor." She watched Sidney's eyes grow larger still.

"Why would someone--.? Who would--.?" Her face contorted.

Trinn filled Sidney in on Andrew's activities, his protectiveness of Eleanor, his death at the hand of a Spanish assassin, and Eleanor's taking on the role of Lord of Briarcrest in Andrew's place. By the time she finished, Sidney had only one question. "But who is she?"

"Her name is Eleanor Wycombe."

Sidney repeated the name in a whispered, "Eleanor Wycombe? Then she's my ancestor." She looked up into Trinn's eyes, recognition dawning. "She's Alfred's daughter." Her eyes filled with wonder.

Her response warmed Trinn. "Yes. That's why Alfred is so protective of her. It's not Catty he's protecting, although I'm sure he would if Catty were still around, but she's his own daughter. His baby."

Sidney bowed her head, trying to assimilate the information. "Wow."

"Yes. I was pretty wowed myself. I was also wowed that Margery knew."

Sidney's head snapped up. "Margery? Who's Margery?"

"Margery Butterfield-Holmes. She's some upper class merchant's daughter. He was an old friend of Catherine's." It amazed her to be talking about these people as if they were old friends, but then, she supposed, they were. "Anyway, he dropped Margery off at Briarcrest on his way to Willowglen on business. Catty, Eleanor, didn't really want her to stay, for reasons I didn't understand at the time. But Margery managed to get her to agree anyway. She seemed to make Catty uncomfortable.

"Margery cares for Eleanor."

Sidney smiled. "As in loves her?"

Trinn blushed. "Yes. She loves her."

Trinn related everything she had found out about Eleanor, how she had come to impersonate her friend, Andrew Pritchard, in the name of preserving Briarcrest, and all about Margery and her son.

She ended her narration about Margery with, "Now she's at Briarcrest pursuing Eleanor."

Sidney said, "Well. A happy ever-after story then."

Trinn's laughter held no joy. "Maybe. But only if this Twenty-First Century pilgrim is brave enough to confront Eleanor with the fact that Margery knows her secret and that she cares for Eleanor as much as Eleanor cares for her." Trinn shook her head. "I feel as if I'm in high school

and Tiffany wants me to tell Brittany to tell her boyfriend Conner to tell his friend Jason she likes him and to try to find out if Jason likes Tiffany."

Sidney registered surprise. "That happens in America, too?"

Trinn didn't want to get distracted. "Yes, but what about the past? I shouldn't get into the middle of this. This has nothing to do with me. I shouldn't even be there. I've tried to encourage them to talk to one another directly, but they're both too scared to do it."

Sidney looked into Trinn's eyes and wondered if her reasons for not wanting to get involved with Trinn romantically were the same as Eleanor's. Was it really her noble cause that prevented her from taking Trinn in her arms, or was it her fear of being used and rejected? She blew out her breath. "Maybe you're right. If we have the information we need, maybe it's best to let them work it out for themselves."

Trinn groaned. "Why would I need to go back indeed? What purpose would it serve? These women have to work out their own problems. Everybody does." She glanced at Sidney and couldn't help but wonder if finding the Stone Madonna and obtaining listed building status for Briarcrest might finally enable them to pursue a relationship.

Suddenly, the look on Sidney's face turned to horror and she sprang up from her chair. The ice in her cup flew across the surface of the table. "You have to go back!"

Trinn jumped up, pushing the ice around with a napkin. "What? Why?"

Sidney joined her in corralling the cubes. "You have to make sure Eleanor and Margery do get together."

Trinn's eyebrows disappeared beneath blond curls on her forehead. "First you say don't get involved and now you're telling me to go back to play matchmaker?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I've just remembered another story from our family's oral history."

"What is it?"

"Margery Butterfield saved Eleanor Wycombe's life."

Most of the ice was back in the cup. They both sat down and Sidney continued, "I don't know any details. All I remember is my father once told me a story about Alfred's daughter, Eleanor. That's why I know her name. He said the details of her particular situation had been lost over the years, but somewhere along the line Eleanor's life was in danger and a woman named Butterfield, a wealthy merchant's daughter, saved her life."

"He said the Butterfields were owed a debt by the Wycombes because of this. The only reason he told me the story was because he was investing in some business a Butterfield had wanted to start in Bath just a few years before he died. He asked me to draw up the papers. After reading through the information, I had serious questions about whether or not it was a wise investment. Father said it wasn't any of our concern whether or not the business succeeded. What mattered was that a Butterfield had come to him for help and he couldn't refuse. So. Will you go back and make sure my ancestor and Margery Butterfield get together?"

Trinn grimaced. "I suppose I'll have to at least think about it, won't I? But I'm not going back to your office and doing laps to allow me to go to sleep this afternoon. Give me some time and maybe I can take care of the situation tonight. If I decide to go back. Let me think about it, okay?"

Just as Sidney nodded her agreement, Lawrence appeared behind her and pushed her briefcase in front of her face. "It's 1:30. You'd better dash or you're going to be late."

She glanced at her watch and leapt up. "Where has the time gone? I've got to go. I can't let my client think I'm not serving his interests." She eyed Trinn's half-eaten sandwich and added, "You stay and finish your lunch. I'm off. I'll see you tonight. Will you be at the office when I get back?"

"Yes. I should be there, and I'll be ready to eat another meal, no doubt."

Sidney smiled and headed for the door.

Trinn watched Sidney head down the street with long strides.

Lawrence cocked his head. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

"No. I didn't. Do you think she would have run out of here to keep her appointment if I had?"

Lawrence shook his head while staring at the remains of her lunch. "Are you going to finish that? I'm starved."

She wrapped the sandwich in the paper lining and pushed it into his hands. "Eat it on the way. We need to get going so we can get back before Sidney does."

THEY RODE IN silence for a while, Trinn wondering what they were about to do. Finally, she turned back to the past. All she had done during her visits with Catty so far was to gather information, not manipulate events. What Sidney was asking her to do was another thing altogether. What if she didn't interfere and Margery and Eleanor never got together? Perhaps Eleanor would die.

That filled her with an overwhelming sadness. Could she allow that to happen? If Eleanor died, how would the Wycombes continue on to keep the memory of Briarcrest alive? Maybe Sidney wouldn't even exist in the present. But how could there be an heir directly descended from Eleanor Wycombe if she spent her life with Margery Butterfield? Then she realized the descendants of Briarcrest would have stopped a century before had Beatrice not been creative enough to pass Briarcrest on to Lydia and Catherine. Likewise, when the latter two women passed it on to Cate and Fiona. And now that Catty, the real Andrew Pritchard Wellington, was dead along with the rest of his family, there was no other heir but the last woman to hold Briarcrest, Eleanor Wycombe. Margery had a child, a resourceful way to pass on the memory, the land and holdings, and, eventually, the artifacts. If they hadn't, they wouldn't have the relics today.

So Eleanor and Margery must have gotten together after all, Trinn reasoned. They got together and Eleanor lived and Margery's son carried on as a Keeper of Briarcrest. And they kept on until Sidney came along. All right, she decided. I'll go back tonight and see if I can get those two to at least talk to one another about what they're feeling. But first, we have more important things to do.

"A pound for your thoughts." Lawrence's voice jarred her back to the car.

"A pound? Must be inflation, eh?"

Lawrence smiled. "Of course. I wanted to make it worth your while."

"I was just thinking about things, you know, like how we're going to go about locating the Stone Madonna and all that."

"How should we do that? You know if Sidney were here she might be able to tell us where to look. She's much more familiar with the property than I am. She might even remember the stone we're looking for. After all, how many tall stones can there be on the property that look like a person?"

"She didn't seem to remember it at all. Be that as it may, she's not here and I'd like to be able to tell her we found the exact spot so she can move forward with all this before those SWIM people do something that will make her really unhappy." She grew quiet.

"What are you thinking now?"

"I'm thinking about Sidney, and how she seems, well, not really unhappy, I guess, just sort of--sad."

"Lonely?" He kept his eyes on the road.

"Maybe. Do you think that's it?"

He looked over at her. "Yes. Yes, I do." Looking back at the road, he continued, "I'd love to see Sidney find the love of her life, someone who would truly love her for the rest of her life. She deserves that. She deserves someone to settle down with and make a life with. Someone who won't hurt her." Lawrence frowned.

He added, "That bitch who used to call herself her girlfriend only wanted to use her and when Sidney wouldn't give up her dedication to Briarcrest and bend to her every whim, it was the end. It devastated Sidney. She's just so naive sometimes. Still, I never believed Sidney loved her. Not really. She just wanted her to fill that hole she has in her heart. You know, the hole that can only be filled by a person's soul mate? We all want that, don't you think?"

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, as they drove on in silence.

When they were a few miles from the site, Trinn asked, "What was Janet's last name?"

"Who? Oh, the bitch? Grimsdell, why?"

Trinn considered his answer before she responded. "I just wondered. I had this crazy idea she might have a last name of Swim."

Lawrence pursed his lips. "No, nobody I know has a last name like that. Peculiar isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, since you've shot that premise down, I'm going back to my acronym theory. What could SWIM stand for?"

"Swings with Income Money? Strong Women Issue Maxims? Sweet, Witty Imps Monkey-around?"

Trinn put her hands over her ears. "Okay, okay! Enough already. You don't know what it could be either. I get it."

"Well, we may find out once we find that tunnel, eh? If we do manage to find it, that should bring the big cheeses out of the woodwork, I'd imagine. Somebody's certainly going to be very unhappy. Here's our turn, hang on, as I recall, the first part of this road is pretty bumpy."

As they approached the gravel road, they noticed a new wood and chicken wire fence, only partially completed along the border. When the car reached the turn, they spotted the new sign that had been erected at the entrance. It read, "The new home of Briar Wood Development. Authorized development personnel only. For more information, contact SWIM Associates Development Project." There was no phone number.

Lawrence looked over at Trinn. "Authorized development personnel only."

"Yeah. I guess we're trespassing."

"Do you want to turn around?"

"No way."

He grinned before accelerating onto the gravel road.

Further along the path, they stopped and got out to look around. Lawrence shaded his eyes against the afternoon sun. "Where should we begin?"

"I don't remember anything that looked like the Stone Madonna in the area we were in when we were here before, do you?"

"No. I don't. I think something like that would have elicited at least a comment from one of us."

She nodded. "Where on the property are we? Do you have any idea?"

He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and unfolded it to reveal a copy of a hand-drawn map. "Sidney did this. I found it in her files and made a copy. Might come in handy." He traced the gravel road with his finger and stopped. "I estimate we're about here. It looks like we're on the west side of what Sidney thinks was once the Briarcrest estate. You can see she's drawn a border around the edges of the property. Of course, it's all speculation from what's been handed down in her family. But it's a start."

"That means we should probably head east."

"That would be my guess."

Trinn noted the location of the afternoon sun and they started in the opposite direction, negotiating the grassy area with ease. She hoped they would be successful, and quickly. It was already 3:30 in the afternoon. Sidney would be back in her office by 6:00 and they were an hour away from London.

They wandered around for almost an hour before they spotted a large standing stone in the distance with only a few shrubs here and there preventing a direct path to it. When Trinn saw it, she took off running at top speed. Lawrence, in dress shoes, had no hope of keeping up with her, but he trotted behind as quickly as he could.

By the time he reached her, she had her cell phone out and was studying the picture, comparing it to the stone.

He looked over her shoulder, and then looked at the stone. "What do you think?"

Trinn made a face. "It's shorter than I remember, by at least six or eight inches."

"It could be the build up of soil over time. You know, those archeological layers they go through when they are excavating."

Trinn looked skeptical. "So you think if we dig down 6 or 8 inches, that's where the hatch will be?"

"That would account for no one ever having found the tunnel and good reason for it to still exist."

She held the phone up in line with the stone. "I took this from the front. The opening to the tunnel was directly behind it. The rock seems a little more worn than it was then."

Lawrence nodded his agreement.

"But it looks like--." She shifted her position to line up with the angle of the picture. "It looks like this is the front."

She walked to what she determined to be the rear of the standing stone. Her brow furrowed. "We need something to dig with."

Lawrence looked around for a digging tool. He touched his hand to his stitches.

"Are you all right?" Trinn called.

He hesitated. "I'm fine. It's just that being back here is making me a little nervous." He looked around, but this time, his eyes followed the tree line."

Trinn followed his scan. "I'm pretty sure we're the only ones here."

"I'm going to take your word for it."

"I guess we should have thought about bringing something to dig with."

"Well, since I don't have a spade on me, why don't we go back to London and come back tomorrow with some equipment?" She didn't have to stretch her imagination to know what he hoped her answer was. She shook her head in response and walked off, looking down at the ground. Every few feet, she kicked at the grass.

Lawrence clucked his tongue and moved away to join the search. Trinn concentrated on the ground as she moved around in a slow circle toward some bushes in the distance. When she had pulled away from him enough that he thought she wouldn't see him, he pulled out his mobile and sent a text message.

Trinn bent down and picked something up. Smiling broadly, she lifted a dented hubcap above her head and Lawrence waved at her as he placed his mobile back in its holder. She walked on a little more and picked up a thin, broad board. Lawrence had already removed his jacket and hung it on a nearby bush, when she approached.

As he rolled up his sleeves, Trinn held out both implements. "Choose your poison."

He looked back and forth between the two, pursing his lips. He chose the board. "I'll dig, you scoop."

IN FIFTEEN MINUTES, they had the soft peat soil loosened and moved into piles surrounding the hole. They estimated they were at least eight inches down, but still they found nothing. Lawrence wanted to give up and leave the area. He kept looking around, licking his lips nervously. Trinn realized he was reacting to his most recent experience on the property and felt badly, but she kept scooping.

He made a second attempt to get her to stop. "Maybe this isn't even the right spot. Maybe it only looks like the stone."

Trinn gave him a look that told him she didn't believe he believed that for an instant.

He shuffled his feet. "Well, maybe you're wrong about what's the front and what's the back of this thing." He eyed the stone.

Trinn stopped moving dirt. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to decide whether or not you're mistaken." He pointed toward the stone.

Trinn blew out her breath in exasperation. "Look. We've already had this conversation. Even with five hundred years of wear and tear, it's obvious we're at the rear of the Stone Madonna.

He mumbled his displeasure. "All right, maybe just a few more inches."

He plunged his board into the soil with all his might and hit something hard. He pushed some more and felt the resistance. Trinn heard the sound. They both stopped and looked at each other. "It's probably just a rock," Lawrence said.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling of excitement that was building inside him. He chopped at the soil, loosening it more and Trinn scooped the clumps of dirt and threw them over her shoulder. After more jabbing and ladling, they exposed a small portion of a dark, flat surface. They stared at each other for an instant.

"This is no rock," Trinn pronounced.

They set about enlarging the hole. It didn't take long to find the perimeter of the wooden hatch--and the rusted metal ring attached to it.

Trinn wondered aloud, "Do you think this is really a five hundred year old door? It doesn't look all that deteriorated. True, the metal is rusted, but look at the wood."

Lawrence knew he had the answer. "This soil is peat. It's boggy. This type of soil preserves whatever's in it very well." He grabbed the ring and pulled up, but it didn't budge. They set about cleaning around the edge of the door, trying to free it of dirt and debris that might be wedging it, making it difficult to open it. As they concentrated on their task, two men approached them from behind and grabbed them.

Chapter Seventeen

TRINN STRUGGLED AGAINST the grip that held her wrists behind her back. She watched in horror as the unkempt man in the leather jacket tussled with Lawrence. For an instant, Lawrence broke free, but the thug grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him toward him, knocking him in the head. Lawrence's eyes widened in pain and he slumped forward.

Robbie bellowed, "Knuckles! No punching. If you've killed him, I'll do you in myself."

Knuckles looked up as he held Lawrence like a rag doll. "Aw. I'm sorry Robbie. I didn't mean it. He just made me so mad."

Lawrence came to in his arms, shaking his head.

"See, he's awright. No harm done."

Trinn saw Lawrence had blood on the side of his face. He must have felt it trickling at the same instant and put his hand up. When he took it away, he saw the blood on his fingers and he passed out.

Trinn was beside herself with worry. "You big oaf. Put him down." She twisted in Robbie's grip and looked into his eyes. "Let go of me, you asshole. What do you think you're doing?"

Robbie responded, "Only what we've been told, love. Only what we've been told."

"Whadda we do with 'em now, Robbie?"

Suddenly, Robbie looked unsure. "Uh--under the circumstances, maybe we'd better call the boss. We don't want any slip-ups this time."

Trinn knew Robbie was distracted and she made another attempt to escape. He almost lost his grip on her. Pushing her out in front of him, he held her at arm's length and slapped her.

Her hand went to her face. "Hey! Knock it off." She kicked him in the shin.

Robbie responded by whipping her around and putting her in a neck lock, holding her in the crook of his arm, exerting just enough pressure to make her understand he meant business. She tried to relax, hoping he would do the same.

He looked down and saw the hatch. "Hey, Knuckles, over here. Give me that bugger. Lift this door open. Maybe we can stuff them in here while we sort things out."

Knuckles hefted Lawrence under one arm, dragging him over to Robbie. He shoved him into Robbie's free arm then bent down and tugged on the iron ring without results. "It's a right heavy thing." Straddling the hatch, he grabbed the ring with both hands, and gave a loud grunt as he pulled. The seal on the door cracked and gave way a little. He bent his knees and pulled, sending dirt and debris flying in all directions, exposing the opening. He knelt down and plunged into the hole up to his shoulders. "Dark as night down there."

Robbie asked, "Can you tell how deep it is?"

Knuckles pulled his head out and pushed his hand into his pocket, producing a ring of keys. Thumbing through them, he found what he was looking for. A tiny flashlight. He turned it on and stuck it down the hole as far as he could reach, looking in. "Not very far. There's some very narrow steps." He got up and backed into the opening, one leg disappearing to just below the knee. "They're made of stone. Plenty sturdy, I think."

Robbie shifted Trinn and grabbed her by the waistband of her pants. "In you go, love. Just for a little while. We'll be back in a jiffy."

She sneered at him, but decided it best to cooperate, carefully backing down into the tunnel. When she reached the bottom, she saw Lawrence's limp form being lowered from above. He was several feet from the ground when they let go and he fell the rest of the way. Trinn broke his fall as best she could, preventing his head from knocking into the stairway. Then everything went black.

CHARLES SAT IN Janet's office. For once, they were having a normal conversation. When Charles' mobile rang, he hesitated until he recognized Robbie's number. He listened for a long time, beads of sweat forming on his brow. When Robbie finally took a breath, Charles railed at him. Janet glared at Charles.

Suddenly, Janet got up from her plush leather chair and grabbed the phone out of Charles' hand. "Hello? Hello. Who is this?" she snapped.

The voice on the other end responded in a cockney accent. "It's Robbie-the-Lark. What's it to you, lady?"

"Mr. Lark, tell me exactly where you are."

She listened to the response on the other end, her look growing darker with each word.

After a long pause, Janet said, "Mr. Lark, Mr. Abercrombie does as I say, since I am his employer, though probably not for long if these kinds of things continue to happen. I have little patience for how this situation is being handled, sir. Now tell me, where are you?" She listened, her face reddening. "No, I will not give Mr. A the phone. You will deal with me." She sputtered, the next words coming out garbled and incoherent.

Charles reached over and gently removed the phone from her hand. He was surprised she let it go so easily. He put the phone to his ear to hear a long string of profanity coming from the other end. Charles said, "Robbie, listen carefully."

TRINN FELT ALONG the floor until she located a wall and dragged the unconscious Lawrence to it. She tried to revive him, but he only mumbled an unintelligible response. She took out her cell phone and turned it on. When the display glowed, she dialed 999, trying to reach emergency help, but got a, "No Service Available", message and she blew out her breath in frustration.

At least the phone would serve as a flashlight. She pointed it toward the stone steps and climbed back toward the hatch. When she reached it, she closed the phone to conserve the battery. She used her shoulder for leverage and pushed against the door with all her might, but it didn't budge. Clearly, the thugs had put something heavy on it. After two more attempts and a bruised shoulder, she turned the phone back on, climbed down the steps and checked on Lawrence.

He was out cold, but still breathing. As she glanced around the area, the walls of the tunnel began to close in on her. She took some deep breaths. This was no time for her claustrophobia to overwhelm her. "Come on, Trinn. Get a grip on yourself. You've been in this tunnel before. It'll be fine." She took in several more deep breaths and tried to relax. The walls receded and the feeling passed. She focused on trying to figure out what to do next and on breathing in and out.

SIDNEY WALKED UP the flight of stairs to her office to find it in darkness. Since it was after five o'clock, it didn't surprise her Lawrence had already left. As she unlocked the door, disappointment washed over her knowing Trinn wouldn't be there either. In the reception area, she noticed her file on Briarcrest was on her desk. She didn't remember leaving it there, but shrugged thinking, you're working too hard, Sidney, and that's causing your memory to fail you.

She picked up her mobile to check messages and frowned when she saw that she had eight. One might be from Trinn. She scrolled through them. "This can wait until tomorrow." She moved to the next message. "Sales call. Delete. Sales call. Delete. Tomorrow. Tomorrow." She stopped. "Haven't heard from you in a while," she proclaimed and moved on. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Lawrence." She clicked on the text message from her assistant. Her heart pounded as she read: @ briarcrest w Trin lookg4 madonna -bak 2nite.

She groaned in frustration and said to the phone, "I told you not to go to Briarcrest, Trinn. Why couldn't you have waited?"

She looked at the time on the phone. Five-fifteen. She dialed Lawrence's mobile number. It failed to connect. She tried Trinn's with the same result. As the sun dipped behind the tall buildings in the distance, Sidney wondered what she should do next. They wouldn't have much light left. When they got back, she'd give them both a talking to they'd never forget.

She decided that traffic on the M4 could make them late. The site was more than an hour away. She decided she'd give them a little more time before she really started to worry. With nothing to do but wait, she decided to see if she could find any more on the SWIM Associates group. As her computer whirred to life, she took off her jacket and hung it on the back of her chair. She typed in SWIM Associates.

Her search yielded only the curious information she had gotten in her apartment the evening before. After pulling the piece of paper containing the Web address out of her wallet, she had an idea. She logged on to the Web host for her business web site and navigated to the Who Is search page. When she got there, she typed in the Web site address and waited for the information to be returned. What she saw there made her turn pale.

TRINN SAT BESIDE the semi-conscious Lawrence, the cold wall at her back. She flipped on her cell phone and held it up in front of his face. He flinched from the light, which Trinn took to be a good sign. "Lawrence, wake up." She entertained the idea of slapping him in the face the way they do in movies, but decided against it not wanting to risk hurting him further. "Come on Lawrence, please wake up."

He opened one eye half way. "Trinn, I've got a terrible headache. Just let me sleep, okay?" His words were a little slurred, but she took comfort in the fact that he made sense.

"I don't think you're suppose to fall asleep when you have a head injury. Try and stay awake. We should really try to find another way out of here."

"Oh, no. Not me. I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here and resting my poor aching head." Both eyes popped open and he said, "What are you doing in my bed, Ms. Wells. I'm quite sure I didn't invite you." He leaned--or fell, she couldn't tell which-- closer to her and whispered, "I'm a ho-mo-sexual, you know."

Trinn signed. So much for making sense. "I didn't know. Not for sure, but it's okay. I don't have a problem with it. I'm gay myself." She knew he already knew that, but she hoped it would help his disorientation.

He looked surprised. "Are you? I would never have known. My boss is gay also. You know her, don't you?"

She reminded herself he had been assaulted twice in the past four days. "Yes, I know Sidney." She mumbled, "I'd like to get to know her better, but she won't let me."

"Ha!" he yelled. "I knew it. You do have feelings for her."

He seemed to be making a little too much sense now. If he remembered this conversation tomorrow, she would be very embarrassed. Assuming, of course, there was a tomorrow for them.

"Lawrence?"

"Yes, Trinn?"

"Come on, try to stand up. Let's see if we can find another way out of this place. I can't get the hatch open. Those thugs must have put a rock on it or something. I can't budge it."

"All right. Help me up and I'll see if I can help you." He stumbled even as she pulled him up, taking his weight.

She wrapped her arm around his waist and urged him forward into the tunnel. "Come on. Let's see if we can find another way out of here." She opened her cell phone, and the light winked on. When her eyes adjusted, she started down the tunnel, urging Lawrence on beside her.

They stumbled forward for a while, but it got more and more difficult for Trinn to prop him up and to get him to put one foot in front of the other. The tunnel suddenly opened up into a small, familiar room and she urged him over to the wall and sat him down.

"I don't think you can go any further, Lawrence. You'd better stay here. I'll go explore a little more."

"Good idea." He sounded as if he could barely get the words out. "I'll--just--sleep."

She resigned herself that she couldn't stay and keep him awake. "You do that."

He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around his chest. Her cell phone went into sleep mode and she hit the button to reawaken it. One more check of her companion told her he was already asleep. She flipped the cell phone closed.

After resting for a few minutes, she turned the phone back on and walked to the opposite end of the room from where they had entered. There were two passageways before her. She remembered the one that led back to the library. She had no idea where the other one went. She hoped luck was with her and she wouldn't get hopelessly lost like some sacrificial Minoan in a maze, and plunged ahead.

Wherever the tunnel went straight on, Trinn closed her cell phone, put her hands on the walls on either side of her and walked on blindly. If she felt the tunnel turning, she'd turn the phone back on and re-orient herself before moving on. She moved cautiously, not trusting the integrity of the

ancient structure. After about twenty minutes, the tunnel ended. She stared at the door overhead, another entrance into what was once Briarcrest Hall, no doubt.

There was no way she could reach it, though, because there were only remnants of a broken wooden ladder at her feet. What was left of the deteriorated rungs were splintered and mottled with dark spots. She picked one up and rubbed it. It felt like charcoal, crumbling between her fingers. It was time to make her way back to Lawrence. When she finally stumbled into the area where Lawrence lay sleeping, she buried her face in her hands and wept.

The good cry seemed to cleanse her of the disappointment, but it left her drained. She checked on Lawrence, putting her wrist up against his forehead to see if he had a fever. He didn't. He moaned at her touch and she took it as a good sign. At least he was still alive.

She slid down the wall beside him and sat on the floor. Cool drafts of water invaded her mind. Why hadn't they remembered to bring some with them? How long could they stay alive without it? She couldn't remember. Fatigue overtook her. She closed her eyes and dozed off.

SIDNEY TAPPED HER finger on her desk, listening to the phone ringing on the other end.

"Superintendent Hobbs speaking."

"Nigel, it's Sidney. I need a favor and I need it quickly."

"Well, hello, Sidney, it's nice to hear from you. I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"Please, Nigel, I'm desperate."

"Sidney, what's wrong?"

She told him, and when she was done, he said, "I'll send a car for you. Be ready in ten minutes."

"Oh, don't worry. I'll be outside waiting."

She grabbed her jacket and dashed from her office, letting the door lock automatically. She checked her watch three times while she paced on the sidewalk, but time ticked by interminably slowly. Finally, a police car wound its way in and out of traffic and pulled up at the curb where she stood. Without a word to the driver, she pulled the door open and jumped in. As soon as the door slammed shut, the car sped away, this time, with siren blasting.

THE HELICOPTER LIFTED off and took a westerly direction out of London. Nigel rifled around in a duffle bag as Sidney looked on. The noise of the chopper blades made it difficult to carry on a conversation, but she pointed and shouted her question to him. "What are you doing?"

He continued to rummage around, finally pulling out a helmet with goggles and other instrumentation on it. He leaned in close to her ear. "Night vision. Might need it soon. We'll be losing light."

Sidney looked out the helicopter window. He was right. The light wouldn't last more than an hour or so with visibility vastly reduced within the next thirty minutes. She nodded and wrung her hands.

Nigel watched her and bit his lip. Leaning in close, he said, "Don't worry, Sidney. We'll find them."

JANET GRIPPED THE passenger seat and jammed her feet into the floorboard of the car. "Slow down, you idiot. Do you want to kill us?"

Charles looked over at her and smiled. He liked the feeling of power sitting in the driver's seat gave him. He was in control for once, not her. He didn't slow down, but rather accelerated just a little more. They turned onto the gravel road and he approached Robbie's car, parked in the middle of the path ahead of them. He slammed on his brakes. Stones spewed out the back and Janet slammed her palms against the dashboard to keep from ramming it with her body.

She gave him a steely stare when the car finally stopped. She wrenched the door handle and jumped out of the car. Charles leapt out and followed her, heading for the two men jogging toward them in the distance.

When they met up with Knuckles and Robbie, Janet ignored the hacking Knuckles was doing and growled, "Where are they?"

Robbie gave Charles a look of annoyance.

Charles glared back at him. "Tell her, you feeble-minded dolt."

Robbie scuffed his foot in the dirt, refusing to look at Janet. "Mr. A, I swear, we didn't mean to hurt him."

"Answer her. Where are they?" He hoped the two men weren't alone because the other two were dead.

Robbie looked up. "We found a place to put them where they couldn't escape. They're fine. Well, the girl is fine. The other one is a little worse for the wear." He looked back at Knuckles who had finally recovered from their sprint. Knuckles shrugged and stepped behind Robbie as if seeking his protection.

Janet stepped into Robbie's personal space and shouted. "Do you realize if any harm comes to them, you will find yourself on the wrong side of a jail cell for quite a few years? As it is, you've

not only hurt them, you've also confined them against their will. Kidnapping and detainment. Serious offenses. The best we can do is get them out of there, try to convince them it was a case of mistaken identity, and get them patched up.

"Maybe I can talk the woman into getting away from the likes of you by getting on a plane and going back to her safe little abode in America, thereby doing the job at which the two of you have failed so miserably."

The muscles in Robbie's jaw twitched, but he said nothing.

Charles decided it was the first intelligent thing Robbie had done in a while. "Take us to them."

Robbie nodded in the direction they needed to walk and the four of them set off. Janet railed on about the stupidity with which the entire operation had been handled and insisted they had all better hope she could convince the parties involved it was all a terrible mistake or else someone was going to end up in jail and it wasn't going to be her. Charles couldn't help but be glad that at least he wasn't the one who was the object of Janet's ire this time. As they listened to her rant on, they didn't notice the noise of the approaching helicopter.

TRINN AWOKE IN bed at Briarcrest. How was she to get Catty and Margery together? The first light of dawn broke over the treetops. She swung her legs over the side of the bed. The chill in the air enveloped her and drove her to dress quickly.

Down in the main hall, quiet surrounded her. The embers in the large stone fireplace were still alive, so she stirred them and added some logs, which soon burst into flame. Holding her hands out in front of her, she welcomed the warmth of the new fire. Footsteps on the stairs made her turn to see who else had arisen. Catty descended the staircase to join her.

A kitchen maid soon brought out a pot of warm, spiced water with sliced apples floating in it. Trinn thanked the young woman and poured a cup for Catty and herself. A short time later, Margery joined them and Trinn noted uncharacteristic dark circles under her eyes.

The three of them drank in silence for a while. Trinn looked around making sure they were alone. She breathed deeply before launching into the speech she had been silently rehearsing. "Look you two, there's only one way to say this, so I'm just going to do it."

They both gave her a curious look.

"You've each told me things you should tell one another."

Catty gave her a warning look.

Margery leaned over to Trinn and whispered, "I asked you to measure his feelings. This is not what I had in mind."

Trinn spoke louder now. "Be that as it may, you two need to talk to one another. Talking to me will solve nothing. I'm no Cyrano."

"Who?" Margery and Catty chimed together.

"Cyrano de Ber--Oh nevermind. It's after your time."

They looked at each other and shrugged, confusion evident on both faces.

Trinn ignored them and pushed on, determined not to let them distract her. "All I know is Margery has feelings for Catty, well, not Catty exactly." She looked pointedly at Eleanor. "The real person you are, Catty." Eleanor's eyes widened. "Yes, it's true. She knows. And it will be up to her to tell you how she knows and what it means to her."

She turned to Margery and pointed at her ample bosom. "And you need to stop waiting for someone else to mediate for you. If you care about, well, Catty, here, you'd better just tell him to his face-- and tell him you aren't put off by his circumstances, quite the contrary."

MacGregor bounded into the room and jumped up on the seat beside Trinn. Just in time, she concluded. She looked down at the little dog, then back at the Eleanor and Margery as they stood before her. "MacGregor and I are going for a walk. When I get back, I want to know you two have talked, And I mean really talked. Is that clear?" She looked from one to the other and repeated the question. Both of them reluctantly nodded their agreement. "Good. Let's go MacGregor." She walked down the length of Briarcrest hall and went out into the main courtyard with the little dog at her heels.

MacGregor was a black blur as he tirelessly chased a stick Trinn threw over and over for him. MacGregor could have gone on longer, but Trinn tired out long before he did. When she came back into the hall, she found Margery and Eleanor sitting side-by-side on the bench in front of the fire. They were holding hands but pulled away when they saw her.

Trinn walked up to them, grinning broadly. She took their hands in hers, and put them together. "Don't pull away on my account. I'm glad to see you're working this out." She felt a small measure of smugness. Done. Just needed to take the bull by the horns and make a demand. If she had realized it was going to be this easy, she wouldn't have worried about it.

She contemplated leaving the two of them alone, when Alfred came running into the hall. Struggling to catch his breath, he could barely get his words out. "Master Catty. Kingsmen. From Spain. Different ones. A messenger from the ship. They'll be here soon.

They mean to kill you. You must leave."

Catty sprung up from his seat. Grabbing Alfred's elbow, he ushered the older man aside. He tried to speak softly, however Trinn and Margery could still hear him. "Not in front of our guests, Alfred. Let's go into the study, shall we?" He cocked his head and herded the older man toward the hallway.

After they disappeared, Margery looked at Trinn and said, "I don't know about you, but I've just begun to break down that wall of her--er--." She looked around the room. They were still alone. "--his, I mean. I'm not about to let him leave now." Margery started toward the hallway.

Trinn looked around as if someone else might give her an answer of what to do next. What else was there to do? Stand in the middle of Briarcrest Hall and wait for these Spanish warriors to show up? She looked down at her clothes. They were not the dress of late fifteenth century inhabitants. "I'm in."

She dashed after Margery.

When Margery ran into the study with Trinn close at her heels, Catty and Alfred were still in animated discussion about what they should do about the approaching Spaniards. Margery approached Catty and threaded her arm through his possessively. Trinn looked around the room and asked, "Where's Jacob?"

Catty pointed to the spot on the rug where she knew the opening to the tunnel was located. "I sent him down there. Don't want to take any chances."

MacGregor trotted into the room and sat beside Trinn.

"And are we all following him?"

"Yes, we are," Alfred growled.

Trinn watched as Margery's face went pale. "Wait. I have to go get Winston. I can't leave him. Who knows what will happen next. I must have my son."

"I'll go with you." This statement from Catty yielded a look of scorn from Alfred.

"No you won't. I'll go get the child. You all go now." He, too, pointed to the spot on the floor."

Margery started for the hallway. Catty followed. Alfred brought up the rear, growling back at Trinn, "Take the dog and go below. We'll be right back."

In the distance, Trinn heard pounding at the door to Briarcrest Hall and muffled shouts from outside. "Come on, boy. You and I are going back into the bowels of the earth." She felt under the rug and lifted the hatch just enough to squeeze through and planted her feet on the narrow steps. She pulled the waiting MacGregor into the opening and let the hatch fall shut, hoping the rug came with it lest the hiding place be detected.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Trinn lowered MacGregor to the ground. She couldn't see a hand in front of her, but she heard the dog's movements somewhere out in front of her. MacGregor either stopped moving, or left the area, she wasn't sure which because when she stopped to listen a second time, she heard nothing.

"Well, you might be able to see in the dark, but I can't. Not without help." She fumbled for her phone at her waist and opened it. It cast a muted blue light a few feet in front of her, enough for her to find the opening through which she needed to go. MacGregor stood in the doorway as if he didn't understand why she wasn't moving. Trinn smiled. "Come on, young man, let's go find Jacob." The dog turned and headed down the tunnel ahead of her.

A short time later, they encountered Jacob coming toward them carrying a small lantern. Trinn closed her phone and clipped it back on her waistband as Jacob approached. He stood in front of her staring at the phone for a long time before he decided to speak. Finally, he pointed and said, "I must know about this magic stone you carry on your belt. The light it casts is like no other I've seen."

Trinn cursed to herself. It probably wasn't a good idea to let someone in this time see modern technology. As soon as she could do it without Jacob seeing her, she would remove it from sight and slip it into her pocket. "I only had it on because I was desperate to see in this pitch darkness. I didn't really have a choice, or I would have had to stay at the entrance or risk breaking my neck." She looked down at the phone then back at Jacob's face. He licked his lips with interest. "It's called a cell phone, but it's probably best not to call attention to it."

Jacob held his lantern a little higher to get a good look at Trinn's face. "Yes, I suspect that might be wise. But tell me, what else does it do, this sell-fun? Is it only for light or does it have more enchantments?"

She took in a deep breath while debating how she should answer his question. "In my time, we are able to communicate with each other using this device." She pointed in the general direction of her abdomen. "You can call anyone who has one and speak to them. We have these, that we carry with us, and others that stay in our homes."

He pondered what she was telling him, then, the concept seemed to dawn on him. "You mean to tell me if Master Catty and I each had one of these stones, I could talk to him from down here while he was out of sight up there?" He pointed toward the tunnel roof.

Trinn nodded. The less said the better and she decided not to tell him people could even be thousands of miles away.

It didn't matter. Thousands of miles or a few yards, Jacob still had the same reaction. "Wondrous." His eyes sparkled in the lamplight.

In an effort to change the subject, Trinn told him Margery had gone to get Winston and the group would be joining them in the tunnel momentarily. She suggested they make their way back to the tunnel entrance in the library to give them any help they might need getting down.

Jacob walked beside her holding up the lantern to light their steps. Neither of them spoke until they reached the stairway. They stopped to listen for any sign that someone was in the library. Trinn hoped the next face she saw in the entrance would be friendly and she stood, looking up, willing it to happen.

After a while, she heard Jacob's thin voice. "May I--may I see it?"

She knew exactly what he was talking about. She pursed her lips. Jacob was a scholar, which made him naturally inquisitive. She knew his curiosity was part of his nature. "What the heck." She pulled the phone from her waist. "Here."

He handed her his lamp and cradled the phone reverently in his hands. Because it was in sleep mode, the display was dark. While examining it, he discovered he could flip it open, and when it did, the phone burst to life with light. He sucked in his breath and Trinn watched his eyes get bigger. He stared at the display and touched the screen with the tip of his finger reverently. "Are these runes of some type?"

She chuckled. "I guess you might call them that. We call them icons."

"Eye-kons?" He seemed mystified.

She let him have some time to digest whatever it was the phone seemed to mean to him--until the hatch swung open and a head plunged down into the hole. To her great relief, it was Catty. She glanced at Jacob and saw he no longer had the phone in his hand.

"Give us a hand, will you Trinn?" Catty had climbed half way down with a bundle in his hand. It was Winston. He handed the baby down to her and scrambled back up. Next he helped Margery descend. Finally, Alfred and Catty came down closing the hatch behind them. When they assembled on the ground, Catty said, "Trinn, you take Margery and the baby with you and Jacob and go to the large chamber. In one of the crates there, you'll find weapons. I suggest you arm yourselves. Just in case--."

"But where are you going?"

"Alfred and I are going back up to the main hall and try to reason with those swine. They were very near to breaking in the door when we came through a few minutes ago. I suspect they've accomplished their task by now and are swarming the hall."

Trinn looked at him in disbelief. "Perhaps you shouldn't go up there. You might be found out. Or worse still, they'll find the entrance to the tunnel if they see you come out of it."

A harsh "bah" came from Alfred's throat. "He won't listen to reason. Thick headed. Always was." He swiped his hand in the air as if to dismiss Catty's proposal.

"Look, Alfred. Someone's got to try to reason with those daft buggers. They might destroy the hall when they find it empty. I told all the kitchen help to scatter, so hopefully they all got out, but what about Briarcrest itself? We can't let them run amok up there."

Alfred, several inches shorter than Catty, pulled himself up to his full height and said, "I think even the ladies of Briarcrest would say you're more important than the bloody hall."

Catty stared him down.

Margery stepped between them, holding on to Winston. "Just calm down you two. There must be another way. Don't you think they'll just give up when they find no one at home?"

"Not likely, Margery. They're mercenaries. They'll want something for their trouble, after all."

She stared into his eyes. "Then let them have it. It's better than them getting you. Listen to Alfred. He's making sense. You're not."

Catty tightened his lips. "You don't understand. I've sworn to protect the memory of the ladies of Briarcrest and of Andr--"

Everyone stared at each other. Trinn realized it was probably the first time Eleanor had let the truth slip. Her eyes were wide with fear at her mistake. She closed her eyes and shivered. "Well, I'll just go round the back through the other passage and spy on them without them seeing me, then."

No one dared argue. Catty led the way down the tunnel without another word. When they came to a side tunnel entrance, Catty advised them to move on without him. He pointed in the direction they should go. "Everyone get to the large chamber and make sure you stay safe."

Margery put her hand on his arm. Trinn saw pleading in her eyes. "Please, Catty, don't do this. Stay safe. Stay with us."

"I have to do this. If there's anything I can do to keep them from destroying the place, I have to at least try. I promise I'll be careful."

Alfred stepped forward. "I'll go with you."

"No. You stay here. You are the one who will need to defend these people. They are my guests. I will not have them harmed."

Alfred let out a groan of frustration. Catty pointed in the direction of their destination. He turned and headed down the other tunnel. As Alfred led the way, Trinn heard him grumble under his breath, "Mother was right. Willful child."

AS THE HELICOPTER landed in a grassy clearing, Nigel and Sidney spotted several police cars making their way up the gravel road. Two policemen got out and walked around examining the abandoned cars parked in the roadway.

Another policeman came toward Nigel and Sidney. He held out his hand when he reached them and Nigel shook it. "Detective Sergeant Peters. It's an honor to meet you, Superintendent Hobbs. Do you have any information about where the people you're looking for may be located?"

"No. All we know is they were on the property this afternoon and they aren't answering their mobiles. Either one of them." He turned to Sidney and said, "This is Miss Sidney Wycombe. The people we're trying to locate are her law assistant, Lawrence Truly, and a friend, an American named Katherine Wells."

Sidney shook the detective sergeant's hand. "She goes by Trinn. I'm really worried about them. I have reason to believe someone may be after them."

"Well, we have people surrounding the area. No one will be able to get out without one of my people spotting them."

A young policewoman walked up beside him and he nodded to her. "Report?"

"We've identified the cars, sir." She glanced at a small notepad she held in her hand. "The junky one belongs to a Robert Blackburn. London reports he has been in and out of trouble for years. Involved in stolen household goods and pub brawls, low level stuff. Has been in detention twice. The other car belongs to one Charles Abercrombie--"

"Uncle Charles?"

Nigel looked at Sidney. "You know him?"

"Yes, he's my uncle--my father's half-brother. Why is he involved in--oh, no. Nigel, could he be fronting for Janet?"

Nigel looked confused. "Janet? Who's Janet?"

"Um, can I talk to you in private, Nigel?"

He nodded and they walked a few feet away from the local police officers. He nodded as she told him what she knew and what she suspected. He turned back to the waiting detective sergeant and said, "We're looking for at least three people, two men and a woman, possibly more. They may be holding Truly and Miss Wells hostage. The victims may even be hurt. And there may be an underground tunnel involved, so stay alert. Have everyone spread out around the perimeter and start walking inward."

Peters nodded and got on his mobile.

TRINN SAT WONDERING what she could do to help Catty, while she fidgeted with a dagger with a gold gilded handle Alfred had handed her. She glanced over at Margery, who paced back and forth over the entire length of the room, a worried look plastered across her face. How would these two ever get together if something happened to Catty, she wondered. MacGregor seemed to be the only one who wasn't worried. He slept peacefully on one of the wooden crates with his head on a rolled up tapestry.

Trinn jumped to her feet. "That's it. I can't take it any more. I'm going after him."

Alfred jumped between her and the tunnel doorway. He gave her a sinister glare. "No you're not. You're to stay here."

He was smaller than her. She knew she could take him. But he was wily and she didn't trust him. Still, she had to take her chances. She couldn't let any harm come to Catty. She put her palm on Alfred's shoulder and pushed him just enough to make him stumble out of the way. As she headed for the entrance, she said, "Don't forget, Alfred, Catty said you are the only protection these people have."

She didn't look back until she was a few yards into the tunnel. No one followed her. She put her hand on her cell phone and realized Jacob still had it. "Damn. How the hell am I supposed to see where I'm going?" Still holding the dagger, she thrust both hands out beside her, fingertips grazing the narrow walls. Carefully, she negotiated her way down the tunnel searching for Catty.

It seemed as if she were fumbling forever and she considered turning back several times when she finally saw a dim light shining on the ground up ahead. She sped up her pace a little and, as she came closer, she realized the light came from overhead and a wooden ladder stretched up toward an opening. Another passage somewhere into Briarcrest. She approached with caution in case one of the Spaniards should be looking down from above. She peeked up, but no one was there. Above her, in the distance, she heard thuds and bumps, punctuated by shouting. She decided going up the ladder was her only hope of finding Catty. Dagger in hand, she climbed with caution toward the opening.

AS DARKNESS BEGAN to settle over the Briar Wood site, Sidney felt helplessness and frustration descend on her. She could barely make out the form of Detective Sergeant Peters speaking to Nigel in the distance. As Nigel turned and walked back toward Sidney, Peters pulled his phone out of his pocket and put it to his ear.

Without thinking, Sidney pulled hers out and scrolled to Lawrence's mobile number. The ringing sounded in her ear as she prayed he would pick up. When no one did, she hung up and selected Trinn's number. This time, there was an answer.

JANET TRAILED ALONG in her dress shoes, trying to keep up with the men. They reached the edge of the crater Trinn and Lawrence had dug earlier. When she finally caught up to them, Janet reached for Charles' arm, breathing with difficulty. A large boulder sat on a wooden door. Janet took a deep breath, indicated the rock, and commanded, "Move it."

Knuckles and Robbie looked at Charles. He nodded toward the boulder and the men stepped down into the shallow hole. Knuckles grunted as they lifted the rock and slung it out beyond the

hole together. It landed with a deep thud on the grassy perimeter. Knuckles started coughing, and as he removed his handkerchief to wipe his mouth, Janet and Charles took a step back.

The men looked up from the hole, awaiting instructions.

"Open it." Janet looked at them with fire in her eyes.

Knuckles made for the ring in the door, but Robbie stopped him. "I'll do it. Save your energy. You might need it when they come out of there."

He stood back to let Robbie pull the thick-planked hatch open with great effort.

Robbie stuck his head in the black hole. "Come on outta there you two."

No answer.

"Come on. We won't hurt you. There's someone here wants to talk to you. She's going to straighten out this whole misunderstanding. Come on, now."

Silence.

Robbie made eye contact with Knuckles. "Give me your torch."

Knuckles fumbled for his key chain and handed it to Robbie. Robbie plunged his head back into the hole holding the flashlight in front of him. When he emerged, he looked at Janet and Charles and said, "They're gone."

JACOB SAT IN a corner with his hands in his lap, his face the model of patience. He watched Margery pacing the floor with Winston in her arms. Alfred had taken up a position at the far entrance with his arms folded, a scowl on his face and a sword at his side.

Jacob shook his head, knowing the older man was disgusted with the whole situation. As he watched Margery, he said, "Lady Margery. Why don't you come and sit down by me."

She stopped and considered his suggestion, but replied she couldn't sit still because she was too worried about Catty and Trinn. She resumed her pacing.

Jacob lowered his head. "God will protect them. Master Catty is doing a great service helping my people. God will reward him." When he looked up, Margery was standing in front of him.

She looked into his eyes and whispered, "I hope you are correct, Master Jacob. For all our sakes."

He patted the seat beside him, hoping he could get her to sit down. This time, she took up his invitation and sat down. They sat in silence until the peculiar sound of bagpipes came from the folds of Jacob's robe. It sounded like an army of men playing the pipes from the North Country. When Margery looked over at Jacob, he was pulling a glowing stone from his cloak. From the stone came the wailing of *Scotland the Brave* and Jacob's face looked as if he had seen a ghost.

He turned the object over in his hand. It wouldn't be silenced. He flipped it open and saw the display spring to life. From inside, he could hear a thin sound, like a person's voice.

"Trinn. Trinn, are you there? Trinn, are you all right?"

Jacob put the instrument to his ear.

"Trinn answer me, please. Trinn."

Jacob's voice cracked as he answered. "Trinn is not here."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Then, "Where is she? What have you done with her?"

"I assure you I have done nothing with her. She is helping Master Catty."

Silence.

"Who is this?"

After considering, Jacob answered. "I am Jacob ibn Mordechai."

More silence.

"Where did you say Trinn was?"

"Helping Master Catty."

"I need to talk to Trinn. It's urgent. Please, can you get her to come to the phone?"

Recognition dawned on Jacob's face. "Ah, sell-fun."

"Yes. Can you get her to come to the phone? Please? I need to speak with her right away."

"I am not sure. She may not be able to--"

Margery pulled the phone away from Jacob and mimicked the way he held it to his ear. "What is this sorcery?"

Sidney's voice came from the speaker. "Sorcery? What are you talking about? Who is this?"

Margery's eyes widened. After a few seconds she found her voice. "I am Lady Margery Butterfield-Holmes. How can you be in this glowing stone?"

"Please, Lady Margery. I have to speak to Trinn. Can you find her and give her the--stone. It's urgent. Her life may depend on it."

Margery pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it.

She looked at Jacob and said, "I have to find them."

He nodded. "Perhaps it would be better if you left the child with me." He saw the hesitation in her eyes. "In my life I have been blest with three sons and seven grandchildren. My grandchildren have also had many children and I have held them all. I know how to care for a child."

Margery considered his qualifications and handed the baby to him. As she closed the cell phone, Jacob said, "Take it to Trinn. She will know what to do." Margery nodded and as she headed for the tunnel opening down which Catty and Trinn had disappeared, she picked up a small lantern.

As she disappeared, Jacob whispered, "God go with you, my child. And God be with all of you."

JANET'S FACE REDDENED as she shouted, "Don't just stand there. Go down and find them. They couldn't have gotten out with that boulder on the door." She pointed at Knuckles, then at the opening. "You. Go with him."

Knuckles made a face and he looked down at his ample body. "Look at me. I'm at least three feet wide and that hole ain't no more than two. How do you suppose I'm going to fit down there? I'd be stuck in a minute. Robbie will just have to go alone. He's the skinny one." He looked at the lanky Robbie and smiled. "Besides, he's a big boy. He can handle one little girl and a pansy of a man. Unless Mr. A wants to go with him."

Charles backed up and put up his hands. "No thanks. This is your department, lads."

Janet huffed in frustration. "Fine. I don't care who goes, but someone needs to go. Now!"

Robbie swung his leg into the opening. "I'll go, but this torch had better last long enough for me to find them and bring them out. That's assuming, of course, they haven't found another way out by now."

All four of them stared at each other, then they scanned the horizon as if they expected to see the two victims somewhere in the distance. They saw no one, and Robbie disappeared down into the tunnel leaving the rest of them there still examining the landscape.

SIDNEY STARED AT her phone as Nigel came up to her.

"They've got their people walking in toward the center point from the perimeter. No one's found anything yet. I suggested to Peters we go up in the helicopter to try to see if we can locate them, but they may not be where we can see them. If you're right about the tunnel, we might never find them."

She continued looking at the phone. "Uh huh."

"Sidney, what's going on?"

She looked up. "You're not going to believe this, but I think I've just spoken to someone who lived in the late fifteenth century."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Sidney, maybe you'd better go sit in one of the police cars. I'm sure Peters wouldn't mind--"

"I don't need to go sit in a police car, Nigel. I have to wait a few minutes and call back. They're taking the phone to Trinn. Some man named Jacob had her phone. I'm not sure why, but I think--" She looked into his light green eyes. "This all sounds very bizarre, doesn't it?"

"It's probably just the stress, Sidney. You should sit down. If you won't go to one of the cars, at least sit here." He pointed to a fallen tree stump.

She was feeling a little dizzy. Maybe she should sit down. As she took her seat, Nigel spoke. "Look, maybe you just got a wrong number. Maybe it was just a mistake."

"No. It wasn't. Jacob mentioned Catty. He's someone I'm familiar with. Actually, he's an ancestor of mine. And Margery was there. I talked to her."

"Who the blazes is Margery?"

"She's, oh never mind. It would take too long to explain."

"Do these people have anything to do with the disappearance of your friends?"

"It's because of them Trinn knew about the tunnel. That's why she and Lawrence came here, against my wishes, of course. I told her to wait until tomorrow when I could arrange for security and I told her we'd come then, but she's stubborn and pig-headed and, and--"

Everything started spinning. Sidney's eyes rolled back in her head for a split second and Nigel put a hand out to steady her. "Sidney. I think you'd better go to the car. This is all too much for you right now. You're either going to the car or I'm calling an ambulance for you."

Sidney shook her head, trying to keep the dizziness at bay. "No. No ambulance. I'm not going anywhere. I have to be here when we find them. We have to find them, Nigel. Please."

"We're working on it. Maybe I should go up in the helicopter and just have a look around one more time." He signaled the young policewoman who was nearby. "Do you think you can walk?"

Sidney nodded and stood up, wavering just a little before she got her legs back under her. He waved the other woman over. "Would you please escort Miss Wycombe to one of the cars to have a lie down? This has been a very difficult time for her. She needs to rest."

The young woman nodded and pointed to a police car a few yards away. "Can you walk miss?"

Sidney nodded and made for the car before the policewoman could grab her arm to help. As she walked away, she said, "Just find them Nigel. And let me know as soon as you get a location."

The policewoman ran ahead of her and pulled the rear passenger door open just as Sidney reached the car. She climbed into the back seat and slumped down, resting her head against the headrest. She took a deep breath and opened her mobile. Please, let her answer.

MARGERY STEELED HERSELF as she climbed the ladder and entered the small storage room. In the distance, she could hear yelling and moaning, and an awful roaring sound. Looking around to make sure the room was empty, she tiptoed quickly toward the doorway that opened into the main hall. As she did, she was nearly bowled over by someone who ran headlong into her.

Trinn grabbed her shoulders. "Margery. What are you doing here?"

She looked at Trinn's face, puzzled by her appearance. Large black smudges covered her clothes as well as her face, and she had a gash on her cheek. "I came to find you. You need to--"

"No. You need to get out of here. It's not safe. We've got to get everyone out. They're setting fire to the castle. The tunnels may collapse."

Margery looked around anxiously. "Where's Catty?"

"Already down the tunnel, I hope. He said he would meet me back down there."

A look of panic surfaced in Margery's eyes. "I just came through the tunnel. Catty's not there."

"Oh god." Trinn looked back into the main hall nervously.

Margery pushed Trinn out of the way. "We've got to find him." She peeked around the corner of the door jam and saw flames throughout the hall.

Trinn grabbed her. "No, we've got to get back down into the tunnel and warn the others. Catty will make his way back."

Margery turned on her. "No! I have to find him. You go back. I'm going to look for him."

Trinn pleaded, "Margery, please." But she could see she wasn't going to get anywhere. She shook her head. "All right. I'll come with you. I can't let you go in there alone."

They made their way into the hall, but were prevented from crossing by a large wall of flame. The soldiers had piled up the benches, chairs, anything they could get their hands on and lit them on fire. Some of the wall paneling had caught and the flames were working their way up to the thick ceiling beams.

Trinn assessed the situation. "We can make it to the front door. From there, we might be able to access the side courtyard and come back in further up the room."

Margery nodded.

The door to the interior courtyard was difficult to open, but Trinn had proved to be right. Fire still burned in small pockets here and there, but they could negotiate the flames and they were on the other side of the pyre the Spaniards had set. When Trinn forced the door open, the flames burned brighter and higher for a time, fed by the air outside. They had to step back and let the heat die down before they dared enter. It was enough to make Trinn almost turn back, until Margery forged ahead of her.

They couldn't get down the hallway leading to the library because of the fire. Just as they were about to turn back, they heard a moan come from the kitchen area and they both ran into the room. Oddly, this room was the coolest in the house. No fire burned except the one in the cooking hearth, but the room had been ransacked. A large table was overturned in a corner. A broken bench lay teetering on the edge of another lying on its side, swaying back and forth.

They searched frantically, but could find no one, until they heard the moaning. It came from under the debris.

Trinn pointed toward the overturned table and they spied a small swatch of Catty's clothing sticking out from underneath it. Margery rushed toward him. Trinn grabbed the bench, and threw it across the room. She tried to lift the table, but couldn't. "Margery, get something to act as a lever and help me move this thing."

Margery looked around and grabbed the huge wooden paddle used for stirring large pots of soups. As she tried to cram the edge under the table, Trinn grunted and lifted. All of a sudden, the kitchen filled with screams. Two goliaths of men jumped through the doorway and, seeing Trinn and Margery, yelled as they lunged for them. Margery lifted the paddle and smashed it into the face of her attacker and he fell at her feet, blood pouring from his nose, his eyes open and vacant. The other one grabbed Trinn and had her in a headlock. Margery whacked him across the back, forcing the air from his lungs, and he let go of Trinn. Trinn lost her footing and careened into the upturned table, striking her head. Then, everything went black.

WHEN TRINN CAME to, both Spaniards were in a heap on the floor and Margery had extricated Catty from under the heavy table. Trinn felt woozy and the light hurt her eyes. As she sat there, with her back against the tipped table, she closed her eyes trying to ward off the pain in her head and heard Margery say, "Eleanor, oh, Eleanor, I was so worried I'd lost you. That big lummox was going to kill you."

"That's all right love. You showed him what for, eh?"

"I did, didn't I? Nothing like a metal pot to the skull to make a man docile."

Both women laughed.

Catty said, "Do you think she'll be all right?" Trinn realized he was talking about her.

"I think so. She took a nasty knock in the head herself, but wood is softer than any pot." The two women giggled.

Trinn opened one eye. "I'm alive anyway. I guess I have you to thank for that, Margery."

Both women turned and looked at her.

Catty crowed, "She's a terrific fighter, isn't she?" He gestured toward Margery. "She saved my life. That blackard was going to run me through with his sword when he saw me under the table, but Margery was quick thinking. We aren't going to hear from them for a while. She's already knocked that one on top in the head twice. Anytime any one of them raises his head, she takes the pot to them." Now all three of them took pleasure in Margery's conquest.

Trinn grew serious. "Are you all right, Catty?"

"Yeah, just a nasty cut on my leg, but it'll be fine with a poultice. I've Margery to thank for my life, though. You've her to thank, too, Trinn. That one there," he pointed to the topmost offender, "almost got the better of you. Sorry about that knock on your head, though. How does it feel?"

Trinn put her hand up and felt a lump and the pain that went with it. She had a slight headache, but she knew she was fine otherwise. "I'll live. Was I out long?"

Catty started to get up from the floor. "Only a short time. If you're all right, we'd best get out of here, though." He hobbled over to the kitchen doorway. "The fire's still burning, but we can still get around it the way you came in. Margery told me. That was good work, Trinn."

Trinn smiled as she pulled herself up using the edge of the table. "Not bad for a twenty-first cent--" She decided she'd best not make that remark and coughed to cover her the rest of her words. When she joined her two companions, they were already looking out the doorway to make sure there were no other attackers lurking.

The blaze still raged in the hallway that led to the library, which would have been the closest entrance to the tunnel. They would have to make their way back to the storeroom to get back to warn the others about the fire.

"Wait just a minute," Margery said. She ran back into the room and picked up a small, thick metal pot. "Just in case."

Trinn nodded. "Good idea."

CATTY AND TRINN helped Margery down the last few rungs of the ladder into the tunnel. They could feel the heat from the blaze radiating from the timbers above their heads. The smell of smoke and ash seeped through the smoldering planks. It wouldn't be long before the entire tunnel was filled with asphyxiating fumes. "We'd best go quickly," Catty urged. Trinn nodded and they took off jogging toward the area where they would find Alfred and Jacob. However, they had only gone a few feet when they heard the bagpipes start to play on Trinn's phone. They all stopped.

Margery pulled the phone from the folds of her tunic slowly and held out the blue glowing phone to Trinn. Margery's face was pale. "This is why I came looking for you. Jacob told me to return your magic stone to you. He said you would know what to do with it."

Trinn's hand shook as she reached for it. She snapped it open and put it to her ear. "Hello?"

WHEN ROBBIE ENTERED the main chamber, Alfred was on him like a shot. He brandished his sword and growled at him. "Who are you and what do you want here?"

Robbie jerked his head back, finding it hard to believe this strangely dressed man would confront him in this way. He didn't have time to deal with him, though, because he needed to find Trinn and Lawrence.

"Never mind me. Where's the bird and that blond bloke?"

Alfred stared at him through narrowed eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. Leave here immediately." He threatened him with his sword and Robbie jumped back, holding up his hands in capitulation.

"Hey, old man, I don't have a weapon, so lets just all be calm, eh. I'm looking for the woman named Trinn--"

Jacob popped out from behind Alfred. "Trinn? What do you want with her?"

Robbie looked at the wizened old man dressed in black, his head covered in a long shawl. For a moment, Robbie felt disoriented, like the room was spinning. He blinked and looked around and the movement stopped. He refocused back on the two men. "You know her, then? Where is she? Where's Lawrence?"

Now Alfred was confused. He shook his head. "Don't know anybody named Lawrence." He stabbed at the air between him and Robbie with his sword, making Robbie flinch back again.

At that moment, a loud crack sounded down the tunnel in the area near the library and they saw smoke billowing down the opening toward the room in which they were standing.

"What's that?" Robbie cried.

Jacob turned to investigate, but Alfred refused to take his eyes off the intruder. Jacob said, "Alfred, I think there is a fire. Perhaps we'd better leave."

"No. We wait for the others."

"Alfred. What if they don't come back?"

Alfred chewed on his lip.

Jacob spoke up. "Alfred, I've lived a long life. I am ready to die. But there really is no reason for us to stay and put our lives in danger. Think of the child." He nodded to Winston, asleep in his arms. "Perhaps it is not our time to die, my friend."

TRINN HAD DIFFICULTY hearing Sidney on the static-filled phone while trying to maintain enough speed to keep up with the fast moving Catty and Margery. As they moved down the tunnel, the smoke dissipated and they were able to breath a little easier. "Sidney, you're breaking up. Repeat what you said."

"We don't know where--tunnel is. We need--landmark. Can--tell us?"

Trinn tried to think of something that would indicate the tunnel's location in addition to the stone, but it was all countryside meadow grasses with a few trees and bushes thrown in for good measure. She recalled digging the hole and Lawrence removing his jacket to help her and throwing it over the bush nearby.

She shouted into the phone. "Sidney, look for Lawrence's jacket. He threw it over a bush right by the tunnel. He doesn't have it on, so it must still be there. Look for Lawrence's jacket. Do you hear me?"

The phone went dead. She slowed her pace and saw Catty and Margery increase the distance between them. Staring at the display, she saw the message, "Call Disconnected." She snapped the

phone shut and stuffed it in her pocket. She needed to catch up to her companions, so she took off at a jog down the tunnel.

She reached them just as they approached the intersection that led to the opening where she knew Lawrence waited. No, that wasn't right. It was where Alfred and Jacob waited. She felt disoriented and dizzy and she prayed she wouldn't pass out. She took a deep breath and started to cough. Smoke swirled around her. She looked at Catty and Margery and saw they, too, were engulfed. All three pushed toward the opening that led toward the room. When they stepped over the threshold, they saw Jacob and Alfred, and a tall, thin man who looked as if he was seeing ghosts. Robbie.

SIDNEY'S HEART POUNDED in her ears. She still felt weak and lightheaded, but she had to get to Nigel and Peters to tell them how to find Trinn and Lawrence. When she grabbed for the car door handle, she almost fell out of the car. The door seemed to swing open on its own. Nigel popped his head in. "How are you doing, Sidney? I wanted to check on you before I left."

"No. You can't leave. I know where to find them. Lawrence left his jacket thrown over a bush. The bush is next to the Stone Madonna and the tunnel entrance. They're down there. In the tunnel."

"I wasn't going to leave you. I was going up in the helicopter to see if I could find them. Now that we know what to look for, the job will be even easier. I hope."

Sidney moved to get out of the car, but Nigel put his hand on her shoulder. "I think you should stay here, Sidney. You still look pale."

"No, I want to go. I want to help."

Nigel looked up into the darkening sky. "You won't be able to see anything. It's too dark already. I've only got one pair of night vision goggles."

"I don't care. When you find where they are, I want to be with you. I'm fine. I just got a little anxious about it all. Please Nigel."

He was quiet for a few seconds, then he said, "Okay, let's go."

She jumped out of the car and the two headed for the helicopter.

NIGEL GAVE A thumbs up to the pilot as he donned his goggles and turned them on. He leaned over and yelled above the chopper noise that they should look to the east of the gravel road, since the police had determined that was the direction in which the car occupants had headed. As Nigel watched the ground, the helicopter circled. It only took a few minutes for them to spot two men

and woman standing in the open field by a hole in the ground--and the jacket that had been tossed onto a small bush was only several yards from them.

He pointed below them. Sidney squinted and scanned the landscape. She could barely make out the jacket in the dim light, but she knew they had found it.

Nigel leaned toward the pilot. "Give Peters their position and take us down."

The pilot nodded and contacted Peters. He found an open area in which to land. Just as Nigel left the helicopter with his gun drawn, a dozen police officers appeared out of the more wooded area that bounded them. They had the group surrounded.

SMOKE WAS BEGINNING to fill the whole room and Trinn had trouble seeing. There was something like electricity in the air that crackled all around her. She tried to figure out if it might be the fire coming closer but when she looked up, she saw little lightning sparks crackling in the air. "Catty. Margery?"

There was no answer. The smoke filled her lungs and she coughed in an effort to clear them. Taking a breath was difficult. "Alfred? Jacob, where are you?"

Suddenly, Jacob appeared out of the smoke, carrying MacGregor. "Time for you to go, Trinn. Go back to your future. We are already making our way out of the tunnel. We'll be safe. Catty, Eleanor, they're all safe. The memory of Briarcrest will be preserved. Your friend, the blond man is awake now. We've tied up that other man who invaded our past looking for you. You'll have to take him to your authorities to deal with. Your mission here is over. Go back. It's time to find your heart's longing in the future. In your present." The smoke engulfed him and he was gone.

She held a hand out toward him. "Jacob?" She coughed several times to try to clear her lungs, then everything went black.

"TRINN. TRINN. WAKE up." She opened her eyes to see Lawrence's blue eyes staring at her. He had a frantic look on his face. "You were coughing and moaning. Are you all right?"

As she focused on his face, she saw the trickle of dried blood that ran down his cheek. "I'm fine. What about you?"

He smiled. "I'm a little confused, but better."

"Why confused? Oh, the knock on the head."

"Maybe. But I don't think it was the knock on the head that allowed me to meet your friends."

"My friends? Lawrence, what are you talking about?"

She followed his finger as he pointed to a heap against the wall. Robbie.

"Is he dead?"

"No." Lawrence's grin widened. "Some lady knocked him in the skull with a heavy metal pot, though."

Trinn's laughter filled the room. "Margery."

"Well, she did a good job. After she did the deed, two men found some rope and tied him up. One of them looked pretty banged up, he was limping, but he insisted he was okay."

"Was he dressed like Robin Hood?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, you might say he was."

Trinn smiled. "That was Eleanor Wycombe, Sidney's ancestor. Sidney's going to be very jealous, you know."

He tilted his head. "Why?"

"Because you got to meet her and she didn't. Where did they go after they tied him up?"

He pointed in the direction of the exit. "They all went that way. They had a baby with them, too. It was pretty smoky in here, but it cleared up as soon as they left. They just sort of disappeared."

Relief coursed through Trinn's body. "Then it's true. They're safe."

He eyed her. "Are you sure you're all right? You look pretty banged up yourself."

She looked down at her clothes. They were covered with soot and dirt. She imagined her face must look the same. "I'll be fine. I talked to Sidney on the phone. She said the police were outside. Do you feel okay to walk."

"Never better. Lawrence smiled and gestured toward the way out with a small torch.

Trinn pointed to the flashlight. "Where did you get that?"

"Our friend here. I'll see if I can rouse him." He walked over to Robbie and tapped his cheek a few times. "Come on, mate, rise and shine."

Robbie opened his eyes and blinked several times. "Wha' the--"

Lawrence bent down and grabbed him under the arm. "Here, let me help you." Robbie tried to get up on his own, but lost his balance because his hands were tied. Lawrence steadied him. "Easy now. I think there's someone outside that's very interested to talk to you." He gestured in the direction of the tunnel entrance.

Chapter Eighteen

WHEN THE TRIO emerged from the tunnel, they met three policemen who took charge of Robbie and helped Trinn and Lawrence. The next face Trinn saw was Sidney's off in the distance. She smiled, until she realized how pale Sidney looked. As she scrambled up the last few steps onto the grass, she saw Sidney collapse into a man's arms. She sprinted toward her. "Oh, my God. Sidney, what's wrong?"

Two men in white ran up to them and one of them pushed Trinn out of the way. Peters followed their directions and laid Sidney on the ground. Trinn stood back, overcome with worry. Lawrence came up beside her and wrapped his arm around her. The embrace did little to warm her.

Lawrence asked, "Is she going to be all right?"

The medic looked up for just a brief moment and said, "I'm sure she'll be fine, sir."

Neither of them believed him, but they knew it was his job to reassure them. After what seemed like an eternity, Sidney came round. The medical technicians asked her some questions. When she explained she had been having some strange, undiagnosed symptoms, they decided they should transport her to the hospital just to be on the safe side. "Lucky thing Detective Sergeant called for an ambulance ahead of time. Out here in the middle of nowhere, it would have taken us a while to get here."

Sidney seemed to be doing much better. Trinn felt her body relax a little when she saw color return to her face. In the distance, she saw three men and a woman surrounded by the police. They had them all sitting on the ground with their legs out in front of them. One of the men was Robbie. The other rough-looking character Trinn recognized as his accomplice. A man in a suit was also being held. And a woman, looking very out of place, was dressed like she was going to dinner at Orrery's or something.

"I wonder who that is?" She was talking more to herself, but Lawrence looked toward the group with the police. When he answered, his voice dripped with loathing. "Janet Grimsdell."

"Janet Grim--? What's she doing here?"

Deep furrows lined his forehead. "I have no idea."

Sidney stopped the medics from carrying her off to the ambulance on a litter. She looked at Lawrence and said simply, "She's behind SWIM. I discovered it earlier today. When I got your text message and put it all together, I was afraid there would be trouble. That's when I contacted Nigel." She nodded toward her friend. Her face began to pale so she motioned the men to move on.

Trinn looked from Sidney's receding form to Janet. "I need to go with Sidney. But I want to have a word with that woman." She pointed toward Janet. Looking back to Detective Sergeant Peters and asked, "Will someone bring me to the hospital to be with Sidney?"

Lawrence interrupted. "Don't worry Trinn, we can go together. I'll take you."

Peters stood in front of Lawrence and examined his injury. "I don't think it would be safe for you to drive, Mr. Truly. I'll have one of my officers take you both to the hospital. It looks like some of those stitches will need re-sewing and Miss Wells should be checked out as well."

"All right, but give us a minute."

He took Trinn's arm and guided her toward the group surrounded by the police. The three men and a woman were handcuffed. Robbie was ranting about men attacking him in the tunnel. He said they looked like they were dressed for a country Renaissance Fair. The police nearest him looked at each other and rolled their eyes as if they'd decided he'd lost his mind.

When Trinn and Lawrence reached the group Lawrence blurted out, "Janet, what the hell do you think you're doing? People could have been killed."

Trinn joined in his tirade. She pointed a menacing finger at her. "I don't know who you are, lady, but if you've caused any harm to Sidney, I'll personally see you rot in hell for it."

Janet lifted a sculpted eyebrow at her. "Ooo, the lady has claws." She looked over at Lawrence. "I expect that from you, but this is rather unforeseen." She nodded at Trinn. "I guess my suspicions are true, then?"

Lawrence scowled and crossed his arms. "What suspicions?"

"That Sidney and the American here are more than just acquaintances."

Trinn's hackles rose. "Look, Janice--"

"Janet."

"Whatever. What Sidney and I are to each other is none of your damn business. All I know is you'd best leave her alone. And while you're at it, leave us all alone. Got it?"

Janet sucked in her breath and leaned back, trying to put some distance between her and Trinn.

Lawrence wore a big smirk on his face. "Not so sure of yourself, now, are you Janet? Just can't stand not being the one in control.

Janet twisted and turned away. She looked up at the policeman standing over her. "Can't you make them go away? Isn't there something illegal about intimidating and harassing a prisoner?"

He smiled and shook his head. "That just pertains to us, ma'am." He turned to Lawrence and Trinn and said, "But it's probably better to err on the side of caution. We wouldn't want to jeopardize the case. I'll have to ask you to leave Miss Grimsdell alone." He gave them an apologetic look.

"Fine," Trinn said. "Lawrence, let's get out of here. We've got more important things to attend to anyway."

She turned to leave, but Lawrence caught her elbow to stop her. "Wait. Just one more question, Janet. We've been racking our brains and can't figure it out. What does SWIM stand for?"

Janet's gave them a menacing smile. "Hardly matters any more, does it? It seems it's no longer applicable."

Lawrence raised an eyebrow in question.

Janet mumbled, "It stood for Sidney Wycombe Is Mine."

Trinn and Lawrence stared at each other in disbelief, then turned and made their way back toward the waiting Detective Sergeant Peters.

As Lawrence and Trinn headed back toward the police car waiting to take them to the hospital, Trinn finally responded to the acronym. "SWIM, indeed! I think not."

Lawrence snorted his agreement.

IN THE HOSPITAL emergency room, Trinn got a clean bill of health. They decided Lawrence only needed a few Steri-Strips to help keep his re-injured gash from bleeding. After thoroughly checking out his head injury, they told him to rest for the next few days. He and Trinn decided to check into a hotel near the hospital once they determined Sidney was resting comfortably in her room.

The next morning, when they arrived at the hospital, Sidney was in the process of having a battery of tests, so they reported to Detective Sergeant Peters to give him a full report of what had happened. On the way to the police station, they discussed the encounter with the people

from Briarcrest's past and decided to leave out those details in their account. It just didn't seem like the kind of thing the police would find plausible.

"What if they ask us how we overtook that Lark fellow?" Lawrence asked.

"Well, you have a head injury, and I look as if I've had some kind of trauma myself, so I think we tell them we just don't remember what happened. They've got to believe that, don't you think?"

"Yes. I agree. I don't think we should lie, so memory loss is probably the best course to take."

When they finished with the police, they made their way back to the hospital, where they found Sidney resting in her room.

TRINN HELD SIDNEY'S hand as she lay in bed. Sidney looked into her eyes and said, "I'm so glad you're all right. I was so worried."

"I'm fine. It's you we need to take care of right now. We need to get to the bottom of what's been going on with you and get you better."

Sidney nodded and they sat basking in each other's presence for a long time.

Trinn considered her conversation with Janet and decided Sidney needed to know what they had found out about SWIM. "Did your friend, Nigel, tell you we found out what SWIM stands for?"

Sidney blushed. "Yes," she whispered. "I think Janet's gone 'round the bend."

"You think? When I heard it, I nearly choked. That borders on something like stalking." Trinn tried not to let the possessiveness she felt overwhelm her. "I hope you're planning on staying as far away from that woman as you can."

"I've already got a friend working on keeping her far away from me. That same friend, you'll be meeting her, her name is Amanda Robinson, she's a school chum of mine who has a solicitor's office here in Swindon. Anyway, she's also taking care of the paperwork to get the tunnels a listed building status."

Sidney grew quiet and looked down at her hands before continuing.

"Janet's part in this, I almost understand. But Uncle Charles--" Sidney looked disappointed. "I guess my grandfather and father were right about him. It was always best to keep him out of the loop where Briarcrest was concerned. He'll be spending some time in prison, no doubt. I guess that should sever what's left of the frayed threads that tie him to the family."

They grew quiet, each alone with her own musings. Finally, Sidney spoke. "How do you suppose the mobile worked? Back there, in the past?"

Trinn blew out her breath. "I have no idea. But I'm glad it did. Anyway, at the time, I think the lines were blurring in the tunnel. Some space-time continuum thing probably. Something only a physicist, maybe someone like Stephen Hawking, would probably understand."

Sidney smiled. "He's brilliant, that's for certain, but I'm not sure even he could wrap his head around that one."

Trinn shrugged. "We'll probably never figure it out and I get a headache when I try. Anyway, tell me, what have the doctors been doing to get to the bottom of all these symptoms you've been having?"

Sidney played with a thread on her blanket. "They've done lots of tests. And, well, I had another incident when I was with the doctor. It gave him some ideas of what they might be looking for. He said they'd have some initial results this afternoon, but I haven't heard anything yet."

As if on cue, a handsome, middle-aged doctor entered the room and introduced himself as Simon Woolrich. He asked to speak to Sidney alone regarding her tests.

Sidney's voice reached Trinn's ears as she headed for the door. She sounded uneasy, perhaps a little frightened. "I'd like her to stay." Trinn stopped in the doorway.

"As you wish, Miss Wycombe."

Trinn turned and mouthed her "thank you" to Sidney as she headed back to the visitor's chair beside the bed. When she sat down, she took Sidney's hand in hers and gripped it firmly.

Woolrich continued, "We have seen something on your initial blood and urine tests which may indicate something called a neuroendocrine tumor of the adrenal gland. We'll need to complete a twenty-four hour test to make a more determined diagnosis."

Sidney sat stunned. Trinn felt her hand go icy cold and she decided to take control of the situation.

"When you say tumor, doctor, what exactly does that mean?"

He turned and smiled a genuine smile at Trinn. "Well, you understand this is not yet confirmed. However, every indication is pointing in that direction. These tumors are often treatable with surgery. Make no mistake, it's not an easy surgery and not without risks. Often these tumors sit right on the adrenal glands and during removal we have to be very careful not to stimulate them or we could cause a reaction in the adrenal, which could jeopardize the patient. However, someone who's had a lot of experience in this surgery shouldn't have a problem." He smiled, trying to reassure both women.

Trinn attempted to project a confidence she didn't feel. "And would you be performing this surgery?"

"Most likely. Unless Miss Wycombe elects to go elsewhere for it."

Trinn eyed him suspiciously. He hadn't passed her muster yet. "And how much experience do you have in these operations, Doctor?"

His grin widened. "These types of tumors are not that common, but I'm happy to report I've done twenty or thirty of these operations without incident, Miss--?"

Trinn stuck out her hand. "Wells. The name's Wells. And if you've done that many operations without incident, I'd certainly recommend you to Sidney as her doctor."

He shook her hand, looking pleased. "Thank you, Miss Wells. Miss Wycombe, I'm going to schedule the twenty-four hour test to confirm my suspicions."

Sidney nodded her assent.

"After that, we'll talk some more and set up a plan of action. If you need surgery, I'd be happy to do it." He looked at Trinn and nodded once. "With Miss Wells' recommendation, of course."

Sidney finally smiled. "That will be fine. I'm sure you're perfectly capable. Thank you."

When he left the room, Sidney turned to Trinn and said, "Well, I'm relieved to know we might finally have a name for what's been happening to me. I've got to say this whole thing had me a little frightened. Thank you for staying, Trinn. I don't know what I would have done without you."

Trinn smiled. It felt so good to be sitting here with Sidney, despite what they might have to face in the coming days. She looked into Sidney's sienna colored eyes and knew she didn't want to be anywhere else. "I called my mom and my grandmother this morning. I didn't want them to worry. I told them I was staying here indefinitely. Grandma's going to hire someone to move my stuff into storage, so I can stay. That is, if you want me to."

Sidney gazed back into deep blue pools. "I'd like that very much."

Trinn noticed Sidney's hand had warmed considerably. They gazed into each other's eyes, making contact on a level that made Trinn shiver. Disappointment surged as Lawrence walked into the room and held out a cup of tea to Trinn.

"I wasn't sure you wanted it with milk, so I left it out. Hope that's o--"

Neither woman looked at him. They were too busy taking one another in.

"Ahem. Yes--well--I probably could do with another cup of coffee. I'll just go back and get another, shall I?" When he got no answer, he slipped out of the room, leaving the tea on Sidney's nightstand.

BY EARLY EVENING, Sidney had started her test to confirm the doctor's diagnosis. Shortly after seven, a petite redhead came bouncing into Sidney's room. Sidney introduced her as Amanda Robinson, the solicitor Sidney had told Trinn about earlier.

Amanda didn't mince words. "Two things."

Sidney sat up higher on her bed, a look of anticipation on her face.

"Janet is history. We filed to keep her far away from you. If you see her anywhere near you, you are to call the police immediately. Are we clear?"

Sidney nodded. "No Janet. Got it. Believe me, at this point, that's a big relief. Thank you for taking care of that for me, Amanda."

"Not a problem." Amanda's smile was pixie-like.

Trinn decided she was probably someone who had a wickedly dry sense of humor when she wasn't busy being all business. She watched as Amanda's smile faded, worrying Trinn just a little.

"The second thing may be more difficult. Sidney, you told me you couldn't recall any evidence of the tunnels or their use in any of the artifacts you have. Is that true?"

Trinn and Sidney looked at each other and said yes at the same time. Trinn added, "The only clue we had about the tunnels was the Stone Madonna."

Amanda frowned. "Stone Madonna?"

"It's a standing stone that marks the entrance to the tunnel. It looks like a woman holding a child in her arms. It's a natural phenomenon. If you look at it carefully, you see the shape. However, a casual observer probably wouldn't notice. That's why it took me a while to figure out where the tunnel entrance was.

"One time I happened on the stone in the middle of the night. In the moonlight, it looked like a person standing in the shadows. After that, I never gave it a second thought. It took a while for me to confirm the Stone Madonna was actually this lone standing stone that marked the tunnel entrance."

"And is this Stone Madonna referenced in your artifacts?" She looked at both women and they nodded.

Trinn added, "The annals only contain a cryptic message. That's what started us looking for it. It seemed to be important. It took up one whole page of a book where people normally wrote in tiny script to save precious hand-made paper."

"What did it say, exactly?"

"When troubles appear, look to the Stone Madonna for protection."

Amanda pursed her lips.

Sidney watched with concern. "It's not enough, is it?"

"Circumstantial, at best. We need something else. Are you sure there isn't anything?"

Both women shook their heads. When Trinn looked over at Sidney, she looked drawn. She decided it was time to end the conversation. "Amanda, Sidney needs to rest. They're going to be waking her up during the night as part of a twenty-four hour test. It's going to be taxing enough. I'll try to think of anything else we might use to support the use of the tunnels, but right now, I'm not coming up with anything."

Amanda's lips thinned as she watched Trinn. Finally, she said, "You're right. Goodnight Sidney. I'll stop by tomorrow." She looked at Trinn and said, "May I talk to you outside?"

Trinn hesitated, looking at Sidney, who nodded to her. When she and Amanda reached the hallway, Amanda said, "We need more substantial evidence otherwise this is nothing but a long hole in the ground. Even if we confirm the date of the tunnel it still doesn't prove what it was used for. We'll have nothing to file for listed building status. I know this means a great deal to Sidney, but unless you can think of something to corroborate the reason the tunnels were used, I won't be able to do anything."

Trinn stared at the floor, noticing blue and green flecks in the gray tile. When she looked up, she felt sad to think Sidney's dedication might come to nothing after everything that had happened. "There must be something, Amanda. Let me think about it."

"Well, there's always tomorrow. We have time. If you think of anything, let me know right away." She handed Trinn a business card. "Otherwise, I'll stop by tomorrow afternoon. I just wanted to make sure you understood the situation."

Trinn nodded. "Thanks. I appreciate your not alarming Sidney with this right now."

Amanda smiled and put her hand on Trinn's arm. "You take good care of her. She deserves it."

Trinn blushed. "I'm trying. Although I know this is hard for Sidney."

Amanda removed her hand. "She's not used to being so vulnerable, or letting someone take care of her, but she seems to be willing to let you do that." She pressed her lips together and stared into Trinn's eyes before she said, "Whatever you do, don't hurt her. She's been through enough."

Trinn's eyes blazed as she heard the words. "I have no intention of hurting her, Amanda. I only want, well, I only want what's best for Sidney." She debated her next comment, but finally decided it needed to be said. "I'm not Janet Grimsdell, if that's what you're inferring."

Amanda looked deeply into Trinn's eyes. "I hope that's true. I'm just trying to be a friend."

"I know."

Amanda's demeanor changed. "I need to go. I'll see you tomorrow. If you think of anything that might help the cause, let me know." She glanced back toward Sidney's room. "I know you'll take care of her."

"I will."

Amanda turned and headed toward the elevator. Trinn stood in the hallway for a few seconds, wondering what she could come up with that would help Amanda do the one thing that would finally allow Sidney to get on with her life in a way she had never felt free to do before.

TRINN AND LAWRENCE paced the waiting area, crossing paths every now and then. Lawrence held his ever-present cup of coffee. The tea he had brought Trinn earlier sat, cold now, on the small table in front of the well-worn couch. Magazines were strewn haphazardly across the table surface.

With the completion of the tests, Mr. Woolrich, as Trinn learned they called doctors in the UK, concluded Sidney did, indeed, have a tumor on her adrenal gland and he scheduled her for surgery. They were waiting for him to inform them of the results of the operation. According to the doctor, it could take up to four hours to complete the procedure. Sidney had been in the operating room for five and a half hours. The pacing had started about an hour ago.

Trinn stopped in the middle of the room, her arms wrapped tightly around each other in front of her chest. "You know, hospitals are notorious for not starting their surgeries on time. Maybe they didn't even start until two hours later than she was scheduled."

Lawrence stood facing her. "In which case, we're wearing out the floor for nothing. Is that what you're implying?"

Trinn shrugged her shoulders. "Could be, I guess."

"Okay, you stop pacing first."

Trinn grimaced. "No. You first."

Lawrence put his cup up to his lips and tilted his drink. When nothing came out, he pulled the cup away and frowned. "Well, I guess I need to go to the coffee shop to get a fresh cup." He looked at her hopefully. "Will you sit and rest while I go? I'll bring you a new cup of tea."

Trinn looked over at her solitary cup sitting among the disheveled magazines. "No thanks. I think I've had enough. Take your time, though. It'll be a good break for you."

He smiled his gratitude. "Will you ring my mobile if the doctor comes?"

"Of course."

She watched him toss his empty cup into the trash bin and head toward the elevator. She felt incredibly tired. "Maybe I had better sit down." She sat, but felt antsy thinking about how long Sidney's surgery was taking. "Think about something else, Trinn, or you'll never be able to stay put."

Her conversation with Amanda came back to mind. On and off for the past day and a half, she had done an inventory in her mind of everything that was in the safe at MetroLock. Nothing she could think of pointed toward the use of the tunnels to rescue Spanish Jews, other than the mysterious message about the Stone Madonna. There was nothing. No information to support the history. No evidence to prompt listed building status for the Briarcrest property. The news would devastate the Sidney.

As she came to this conclusion, she also knew she couldn't let that happen. She had to find a way. Think, girl. There must be something you can do. Her mind buzzed with the tiredness she felt. Perhaps she'd be able to come up with a solution after Sidney had recovered from surgery. When she could be certain she'd be okay. When they knew what direction their lives would be taking, separately and together. She hoped the separately part wasn't dominant.

She wanted to be with Sidney. Dear Sidney. Noble Sidney. How could she go on without her? She couldn't, she knew. She'd have to find a way to make everything okay, so she and Sidney would be able to have a life together. But in the meantime, what could she do to help Amanda save Briarcrest for Sidney? If only she wasn't so tired. She closed her eyes and slumped down into the softness of the couch. If she could just rest for a little bit, maybe she could think of something. She put her head back against the back of the couch and fell asleep.

TRINN STOOD IN the Briarcrest courtyard. The great Hall stood in ruins, still smoldering from the fire. Wooden support structures and the roof had caved in and had knocked down portions of the walls. An overwhelming sadness settled on her as she looked at the scene. Were Eleanor and the others safe? She tried to recall what had happened when they were in the tunnel. Everything had converged in the central room. Past and present came together. Eleanor and Margery had

met up with Alfred and Jacob, but Robbie had also been there, and had been immobilized by the two men from the past.

Trinn heard shuffling behind her and she turned to see Eleanor, face and clothes smudged with soot, limping toward her, her leg bandaged, her face despondent. She tried, unsuccessfully, to smile. "Trinn, you've returned."

"Yes. Is everyone all right?"

Sadness fell across her face like a veil. "All except Alfred, I'm afraid."

"Alfred? What happened?"

"We all got out of the tunnel. We were heading for the secret room in the stable. Some of the Spaniards were still rampaging. He told us to go ahead. We didn't see what happened, but it looked like he was forced to confront one of them. I decided to look for him when he didn't come back. I found him by the Stone Madonna." Eleanor couldn't hide the sadness in her eyes as she continued. "The lout ran him through with a sword and left him collapsed in a heap. He died in my arms." The words caught in her throat.

"I'm so sorry."

Eleanor's eyes reflected her appreciation. "Thank you, Trinn." She grew quiet. When she finally spoke, she asked, "What happened back there? In the tunnel? Who were those other men?"

Trinn recalled the incident. "The man Jacob and Alfred tied up was trying to harm my friend, Lawrence, and I. They held us captive in there in my time. They were helping someone who wanted Briarcrest to be used for purposes other than that for which it should be used."

"Briarcrest?" Eleanor glanced at the smoldering ruins. "It still exists in your time?"

"Well all that's left is the land and the tunnels, I'm afraid."

The sadness in Eleanor's eyes returned. "Oh."

"But we're trying to prevent the memory from dying."

Eleanor brightened a little. "That's what Alfred, what my father, told me before he died. He told me 'keep the memory of this place alive'. Does that mean we have succeeded? We've kept the memory alive all the way down through the years into your time?"

Trinn tried to sound confident. "Yes, the Wycombes have been worthy Keepers of Briarcrest. You've done your job, Eleanor. One of your descendants in my time has dedicated her whole life to making sure we preserve the memory of this place."

Suddenly, two ideas struck Trinn at once. She was surprised by both and didn't know which to deal with first. The look on her face must have reflected the conglomeration of emotions she felt.

"Trinn, is something wrong?"

"Actually, I may have just had an idea that will help us. Although Sidney has spent her life working toward keeping the memory of Briarcrest safe, there is a problem."

She tried to explain to Eleanor the difficulty they were up against in the future. After many starts and stops, following one line of explanation and finding that Eleanor didn't comprehend some of the concepts, she turned and took a different tack for her explanation. In the end, she got her point across. If they didn't find some evidence to support the use of the tunnels in saving the Spanish Jews from extinction, the memory might finally be lost, the land used for development, with the tunnels bulldozed out of existence. If Janet didn't develop the land, someone else would come along who would.

Eleanor gave the situation long consideration before she finally offered, "In this time a witnessed affidavit serves as proof that something is so. Is this also true in your time?"

Trinn nodded.

"What if we give you such a statement? Would it help your cause? Would it help you save Briarcrest as it is in the future?"

Trinn brightened. "I--I don't know. I guess it would be worth a try. It would certainly be better than what we've got now, which is nothing."

Eleanor's smile was genuine now. "Then you shall have it, Trinn. Come, we'll have to see if we can retrieve something to write with."

Jacob met them on their way to see if they could salvage anything from the library and he offered to help. Eleanor explained to him on the way what she proposed they do for Trinn. Jacob agreed it should be done.

With difficulty, they reached the library and their hearts sank when they saw the devastation the fire had caused. They had to try to lift some of the timbers to gain access to the cabinet in which Eleanor knew the annals and writing implements were located. Margery joined them to help, strapping little Winston to her breast with a shawl so she could work.

As Eleanor stepped over smoldering debris, she found the remnants of several tapestry pieces, which they were able to use to move the hot wreckage. They could see the cabinet, and it looked amazingly intact. Somehow, the fire had hardly touched it. When they finally accessed it Eleanor opened it and there, for the first time, Trinn saw the annals neatly lining one shelf. On another shelf sat Fiona's journals. Beside them was a fine silver inkwell and several goose quills already cut for writing.

"We must take all of these and the bag in the cupboard below."

When Trinn looked where Eleanor had pointed, she found a large sack. She pulled it from the shelf where it sat and opened it. Her eyes widened. In it, were the green felted cap with the hawk feather, and several other artifacts she had seen before in the MetroLock vault.

While they salvaged what they could from the cabinet, those who served at Briarcrest began to return from their hiding places. They had fled during the invasion of the castle, but now that the fire was out, they started to venture back. They salvaged what they could from the Hall, and in accordance with Eleanor and Margery's instructions, they set up housekeeping as best they could in one of the wooden buildings in the main courtyard. Margery, it was clear, had become a great support to Eleanor.

The servants saw that Alfred had a proper burial and they all attended a quick memorial for him at which Eleanor spoke eloquently of her father's love and support before everyone returned to their duties, trying to arrange their new living quarters.

When Margery's father returned from Willowglen and saw what had happened to Briarcrest, he grew quite concerned about Margery's decision to stay on with Catty but he soon realized Margery was not to be swayed from her decision. He left his daughter and grandson, kissing them both and wiping a tear from his eye, offering any help they needed, and promising to come back as soon as his business was able to take him this way.

Eleanor and Margery were seen walking in the moonlight that evening hand-in-hand. The pair would stay together, that was a certainty. It made Trinn smile to know she had played a small part in their coupling, and she wondered if she and Sidney would decide to stay together, too.

The next morning, Eleanor and Jacob were nowhere to be found for at least an hour. When they appeared, they approached Trinn and Eleanor handed her a piece of paper torn from one of the bound annals.

Trinn took the paper and read it. When she looked up, she had tears in her eyes. She whispered her thanks. "I hope this works. I mean, you've written it here in the past, but what happens when I take it back to my future? Will it disintegrate on the way? Will I just pull out a lump of ash from my pocket when I get back?"

They all stared at the paper in Trinn's hand. Finally, Jacob spoke. "Perhaps it is like your mysterious stone, Trinn." He pointed to her cell phone clipped to her waistband. He looked up at her with a wide grin. "Perhaps, if your stone can work here, and there, maybe this paper can exist in both places."

It made some kind of crazy sense, Trinn decided. Perhaps Briarcrest could be saved in her future after all. Overwhelmed by the emotion of what had taken place, and by the generosity and openness of these good people, she knew the salvation of the Briarcrest memory in the future might just be possible. She thanked them and took her leave.

She searched out a spot on the grounds where she could be alone. She folded the document Eleanor had given her in four and she slipped it into her pocket. She sat down on the ground and rested her back against the side of the stable building. The fatigue was almost unbearable, heavy. She closed her eyes and rested her head on her knees. In a matter of seconds, she fell asleep.

A VOICE WHISPERED softly, "Trinn. Trinn wake up. The doctor is here." When she opened her eyes, the glaring fluorescent lights made her squint. Blinking a few times allowed her to finally focus on Lawrence and Mr. Woolrich towering over her. She tried to read the doctor's face, but couldn't. She extended her hand to Lawrence, who pulled her up to stand beside them.

"Lawrence, Doctor, I'm sorry. I fell asleep."

Woolrich answered, his voice soft, kindly, "This has been a difficult time for you, Ms. Wells. I wouldn't begrudge you a brief nap."

"How's Sidney?"

Finally, a smile from the doctor told Trinn everything would be all right. Lawrence saw his look and understood. He, too, broke into a huge grin. The doctor spoke. "She came through the operation fine. We were able to get the entire tumor without incident, although it did take longer than we expected. I didn't want to risk stimulating a hormone release, so I moved very carefully." He added, good naturedly, "After all, I have a reputation to uphold." He smiled at Trinn and she knew he was referring to her grilling him before the surgery. "Of course, we'll have to wait for biopsy results, but I'm confident they will be negative for malignancy. I feel pretty safe in saying the operation was a complete success."

Trinn and Lawrence beamed at one another. "Thank goodness," Trinn added.

After a few more minutes of discussion about Sidney's time in recovery, giving them details of her expected stay in the hospital, and her general recuperation, Woolrich shook each of their hands and left the waiting area.

The anxious look Lawrence had been wearing faded. He said, "Well, I'm glad to know everything turned out all right. Since Woolrich said it will be a couple of hours before Sidney's back in her room, I think I'll run to the hotel and have a shower. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes. It's not a problem, Lawrence. You go ahead. I'm just going to stay until I can see Sidney."

"Sure you don't want to come with me? You can have a lie down in your room. It'll be much better than trying to sleep on that couch."

Trinn looked over at the lumpy sofa. "It's tempting, but I'd feel better if I were here when Sidney wakes up. You go ahead. I'll tell her you'll be by later."

After Lawrence left, Trinn went down to the coffee shop and got herself a strong coffee that tasted nothing like her beloved Starbucks. Ah, well, hopefully it will be functional and keep me awake until I see Sidney.

She decided to sit at one of the little café tables to have her drink. As she sat staring out the window onto the landscaping outside, she wandered back to her experiences and the ruined Briarcrest. When she remembered the disheveled Eleanor and Margery, and wizened Jacob, she felt a jumble of emotions. She knew Eleanor must have felt a terrible sadness at the death of her father, a father who had kept her close and taught her much, most especially about how to keep the memory of Briarcrest.

She couldn't help but feel gratitude to have known these people, if only in dreams. But was it only in dreams? Or was it in some weird alternate reality? Past and present had somehow intersected for that brief time in the tunnel. How could that be?

She remembered the document Eleanor and Jacob had given her. Dust and ashes, she mused and her heart sank as she plunged her hand into her pocket. But her morose feeling lifted instantly, replaced by hope and elation when she felt a piece of paper folded up in her pocket. Please don't let it be an old shopping list.

It looked old. Very old and brittle. She made sure the table was clean and unfolded it, laying it flat against the surface. She didn't remember it looking this aged when Eleanor handed it to her, what, no more than an hour ago? In the past, the paper had been crisp and new, the writing still glistening with freshness. Now, the paper had yellowed, the creases darkened with age, the writing blurred around the edges from soaking into the paper, the ink dulled. Overwhelmed with the significance of this document, she wanted to protect it. She picked it up by a corner using her thumb and forefinger and carried it over to one of the food display cases. On the other side, a young woman concentrated on transferring cakes and pastries into the case, lining them up in neat rows.

Trinn cleared her throat. "Excuse me. Would it be possible to get a clean plastic bag or something to put this in?"

The woman smiled. She looked at the paper Trinn held. "My, that looks old." There was just a tinge of awe in her voice.

"Yes, and I'd like to try to keep it from getting damaged any more than it already is. Do you have something I can put it in?"

"Yes, I think so. Just give me a minute."

Trinn nodded as the woman put the last two pieces of pastry into the case and disappeared through a door to the kitchen. She returned a few minutes later with a box of plastic bags. As she withdrew one, she asked, "Do you think one of these will be big enough?"

Trinn took it, and held it up to the paper. "Yes, it looks like it will fit fine. Thanks so much."

In her excitement at finding the document intact, she left her coffee on the table and walked outside. She pulled a business card out of her wallet and dialed Amanda Robinson's number, her heart beating wildly with excitement.

Chapter Nineteen

AS TRINN OPENED her eyes and stretched, she glanced out the window in the living room of Sidney's flat. A fine mist still fell outside, making this Saturday afternoon perfect for napping and reading, and napping once more. The clock on the mantel said it was close to two. Sidney was still asleep on the couch with a throw over her, outlining her soft curves. Mr. Woolrich had given her a clean bill of health the day before, telling Sidney she could go back to work.

Trinn considered Briarcrest. She hadn't been back in dreams since Eleanor had given her the document that saved the memory of Briarcrest. She smiled at the idea of Eleanor and Margery making a life together.

Before Sidney had fallen asleep, she had been re-reading the copy of the affidavit Eleanor had sent down the ages in Trinn's pocket. Her reading glasses were poised on top of the paper as it lay on the coffee table. The simple sight of Sidney, lying on the couch, sleeping peacefully, caused Trinn's heart to flutter. She decided to get up and make some tea to prevent herself from walking over to the sleeping Sidney and waking her up with a very passionate kiss.

TWO CUPS SAT on the kitchen counter, tea bags in both. Sidney walked over and peered into the cups. One had sugar in the bottom. A smile crept across her face when she realized Trinn already knew what she liked. At least regarding tea. She wondered what else she might like to have with Trinn and removed the kettle from the stove. The steaming water filled the cups, and she watched the water turn a gem-like amber color. The scent of Earl Grey reached her nose and she inhaled deeply. That's when she saw Trinn enter the room out of the corner of her eye, head wrapped in a large towel, another wrapped around her body. Her very naked body underneath. Sidney's mouth watered at the sight.

"Oh." Trinn registered surprise at seeing Sidney standing there. "You were sleeping soundly when I left. I decided to take a shower."

Sidney let her eyes wander, admiring Trinn from the top of her towel-wrapped head down to her lovely kneecaps. "I see." Her voice sounded hoarse.

Without thinking, Trinn wrapped her arms around her chest. "I hope I didn't wake you with the water running full blast."

"You didn't." Sidney's eyes looked as if they were on fire.

Trinn's eyes widened and she let her arms fall to her sides.

Suddenly, the flame burned out and Sidney turned her back to Trinn. She stirred the tea in the cups much more than was necessary.

Trinn padded up beside her. "Is something wrong, Sidney?"

She continued to concentrate on the tea. "No. Nothing's wrong." She finally looked up and locked eyes with Trinn. "You're very beautiful, you know."

Trinn's face flushed. "But you can't act on what you feel, because I'm the heir."

Sidney pulled her eyes away from Trinn's face and stared back into the teacups as if she would find solace there. "Yes," she whispered.

Trinn grabbed Sidney by the arm and twirled her around until they were facing each other. "When you were in surgery, when I went back to Briarcrest that last time, I had two insights. The first resulted in my bringing back the document from Eleanor and Jacob. The second may be even more important. You see, I realized something back there. Something very critical. I want you to listen carefully."

"You mean there's something you still haven't told me about Briarcrest?"

"Yes, because the time wasn't right."

The flame in the light brown eyes sparked to life. "And the time is right now?"

"Yes. The time is very right now."

"What is it?" Sidney licked her lips, causing Trinn to tremble.

"It's that there's been a mistake. I am not the heir to Briarcrest." Trinn took another step toward her. They were touching. Trinn swallowed with some difficulty before speaking. "The last person to rule at Briarcrest was not Catty, not Andrew Pritchard anyway."

Sidney pulled her eyebrows together. "Yes, I know all that. So?"

"The last person to rule at Briarcrest was Eleanor Wycombe."

"But--"

Trinn put a finger to Sidney's lips. Her touch made it difficult for Sidney to breath. Trinn continued. "Alfred's dying words were that Eleanor must keep the memory of Briarcrest alive. A Wycombe, not anyone related to Andrew or Cate or Catherine or Lydia, was the final heir during that time. Eleanor is your ancestor, not mine. You are the heir of Briarcrest, not me."

Sidney's brow furrowed as she considered what Trinn was telling her. As she battled to assimilate this new idea, she tried not to think about how naked Trinn was under that towel. Each breath felt as if it were heavy, difficult, almost impossible to draw in. "How can I be sure this is how it's supposed to be? If a Wycombe was the heir, why didn't I know about it? Why didn't the other Wycombes before me pass on that information? No. It can't be true."

"It is true and you know it. If all the other things I've found out so far have been right, why would this one thing be wrong?"

Sidney folded her arms, protecting herself against an onslaught of feelings. "I don't know. It just can't be."

"Maybe that's why you needed me to be the go-between. Otherwise, how would you have ever known? Maybe that's the only reason I'm a part of all this. Maybe my only purpose was to be a messenger."

"I--I don't know. I'll have to think about this. But Trinn, could you please go get dressed. I can't possibly think straight with you in that towel."

Trinn broke into a wide grin. "Good. For now, I'll go change. Then we'll calmly drink our tea and talk this through, but I'm not going to change my mind, so you'd better get used to the idea."

When Trinn returned in jeans and a soft, long-sleeved cotton sweater, Sidney wasn't quite sure which was worse, this outfit or the towel. Her mouth watered as she lowered her eyes to the mounds beneath the sweater and contemplated touching Trinn's breasts.

Trinn walked over to Sidney's chair, returning a fiery look. She took the nearly empty teacup from Sidney's hand. "You know, now that I'm not the heir anymore, there's no need for you to be so noble."

Trinn locked eyes with Sidney who blinked innocently. "There isn't?"

"No. There isn't." Trinn put the cup down on the table beside Sidney's chair. "And if you expect such gallantry from me, you are going to be sadly disappointed, Miss Wycombe."

"I am?"

"Yes." She leaned down close to Sidney. "Actually, you may as well know the truth. I have absolutely no respect for you as the heir of Briarcrest."

"You don't?" Trinn's warm breath caressed Sidney's cheek.

"No." Trinn leaned in closer until their lips almost touched. "No respect at all."

Just before Trinn claimed Sidney's mouth completely, Sidney whispered, "I see."

The kiss made Sidney's knees weak and she was grateful to be sitting down. Trinn knelt down on the floor in front of Sidney. When Sidney opened her legs to accommodate her, Sidney felt her wet response. She allowed Trinn to pull her toward her. Sidney closed her eyes. Her lips parted slightly as Trinn kissed her, sending a shiver through her body. She kissed her back, firmly, deeply. Sidney's tongue found Trinn's and they caressed one another with their kiss. When they finally pulled away, Sidney sat back in her chair, panting, her face flushed. "Why, Miss Wells, I do believe you have taken my breath away."

Trinn fanned herself with her hand. "Where did you learn to kiss like that?"

Sidney smiled. "I don't know. Maybe I inherited the ability from my father, the heir of Briarcrest."

They enjoyed the moment, looking into each other's eyes. Sidney pulled Trinn toward her and they kissed again.

TRINN OPENED HER eyes. The bedroom glowed with the light of a full moon. She felt her nakedness under the sheet and remembered her orgasm, her orgasms, actually. Sidney. She rolled over slowly. Sidney lay beside her, her face content, angelic looking. They had made love. Sidney was wonderful. Desire washed over Trinn, but she didn't want to wake Sidney. She lifted the bedclothes, swung her legs over the side of the bed and walked to the window.

The rain had stopped some time in the middle of the night and the sky was clear and crisp. Sidney's bedroom overlooked the small courtyard located at the rear of the house. Two small trees grew in wide brick planters, their leaves shimmering silver in the moonlight, still wet with the rain. A white café style table with two matching chairs sat between the two trees.

Maybe in the morning, she'd serve Sidney breakfast out there, if the weather was nice. She knew she wanted to continue to do things for Sidney. She wanted to help. She was not the heir to Briarcrest at all. Sidney was, but she would help her.

Sheets rustled bringing Trinn back to the bedroom. Before she turned back, she heard Sidney's voice, thick with desire. "Come back to bed, Trinn. I've got something for you."

Trinn's knees threatened to give out at the sound of Sidney's voice, preventing her from making it across the room. She stumbled the last few steps and fell into Sidney's arms. Sidney rolled her on top of her.

Before all body parts were completely touching, Trinn felt her wetness renewed against her hot thigh. "Do you know how quickly you turn me on?" She felt Sidney's chest heaving. Every time

she breathed in, their breasts pressed into each other more. Trinn felt her nipples harden against Sidney's soft flesh at the same time she felt Sidney's pebble against her. She kissed Sidney with a hunger she'd never felt before. Just before she gave in completely to Sidney's touches, images of Eleanor and Margery flitted through her mind and she smiled against Sidney's lips. She didn't need to wonder any longer if she and Sidney would have what Sidney's ancestor and Margery had.

Epilogue

TRINN SELECTED SIDNEY'S number on her cell phone and pushed send. "Hi, honey. What time are we meeting at Orrery's?"

"I made reservations for eight o'clock. Will you be able to make it by then?"

"I think so. It's only six now and I'm just leaving. I should be there in plenty of time. How's the packing going?"

"The last box is packed and the movers have confirmed they will be here at eight-thirty tomorrow morning to take everything to Amanda's office."

"I think that's your office now, too, sweetheart."

"Ah, yes, so it is. Robinson and Wycombe. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"I like Wycombe and Wells better, myself."

"So do I, but woman does not live by love alone."

Trinn chuckled into the phone. "Right you are, love. I'll see you soon. I'm really looking forward to our dinner."

"So am I. Love you."

"Love you, too." Trinn snapped the phone shut and clipped it back on her slacks.

She looked around the room. Individual lamps on cloth-covered tables contributed to the atmosphere of the place. She smiled as she walked to each table and clicked the lamps off. She glanced over at the pastry case and made a mental note they were low on ginger cakes and shortbread.

Trinn walked into the next room. Fluorescent lighting lit this one. A wall of shelves with gifts of teas and sweets, china tea cups and pots lined one wall. Against another wall, a locked display case held the artifacts from Briarcrest.

She walked over to the main entrance and turned the sign in the window to read, "Shut." Never could she have imagined that the annoying phone call from Lawrence received all those months ago would have led her to this.

She and Sidney were ecstatically happy together. Trinn was caretaker of the shop and museum located on the Briarcrest property. Sidney was about to settle into a partnership with Amanda in Swindon, where she would work less hours than she had in her solitary London office. Since the Briarcrest property, with its fifteenth century tunnels, had been declared a listed building, she could rest easy that the memory of Briarcrest would be preserved.

Trinn had moved out of her hotel and into Sidney's flat with her to nurse her back to health. It had been over a year since Sidney's surgery. Soon, they would move into their new home and Trinn would no longer have to commute from London. She had mastered driving on the wrong side of the road to make the Monday through Friday trek to the shop she managed.

Tonight, during dinner, Trinn would tell Sidney her exciting news. Her grandmother was coming for a visit and she couldn't wait to start making plans to show her around. What she didn't know was that Sidney had her own surprise for Trinn. She had purchased a beautiful ruby and diamond ring in an antique shop in central London, and tonight, at Orrery's, she was about to propose.

About the Author

Anna Furtado is the Author of *The Briarcrest Chronicles*, novels set in the Renaissance about women who just can't seem to keep from getting in trouble with Church and local authorities. *The Heart's Desire: Book One of the Briarcrest Chronicles* was a finalist for the Golden Crown Literary Society "Goldie" award. *The Heart's Strength: Book Two* was nominated for several awards. Anna is also a contributor to *The Butch Cookbook*. She has a bi-monthly column on writing technique and the writing life at the *Just About Write* web site, where she contributes book reviews on lesbian fiction regularly. Anna lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her partner and their two Scottish Terriers. Most weekday mornings, Anna goes into a phone booth and changes into her Quality Compliance super-hero outfit and goes off to work in the medical device field.

Other Books in the Briarcrest Chronicles by Anna Furtado

The Heart's Desire

Travel back in time to the early Renaissance town of Willowglen Township. Catherine Hawkins, a spice merchant and healer, prepares for the autumn faire when she is captivated by a woman with the most beautiful eyes. Join Catherine as she struggles to come to grips with her feelings for a mysterious noblewoman and against those who mean to keep the two women from their 'heart's desire.' Can they overcome these obstacles? Find out in Book One of the Briarcrest Chronicles: The Heart's Desire

The Heart's Strength

Revisit Catherine and Lydia as their story continues in Book Two of The Briarcrest Chronicles.

Lydia and Catherine have become the caretakers of Briarcrest. When a letter arrives from Catherine's old friend and former assistant, Sarah Pritchard, Catherine sets out on a journey that is both dangerous and embroiled in conflict.

Catherine encounters an old friend in Willowglen and forges a friendship with his daughter, Fiona. The tall, blue-eyed, raven-haired beauty becomes an important ally when two churchmen from Spain set the town in turmoil claiming the authority of the Inquisition.

Suddenly, friends and neighbors are under suspicion. Lydia joins Catherine, and the two women find that they and all whom they love are at the center of a terrible struggle. One of the priests, the Dark Monk, has long harbored a wicked secret and possesses ulterior motives. Catherine and Lydia are beset by danger at every turn. Each must dig deeply to find strength of heart in the battle against the injustices they encounter. But with religion and society at odds, will they all survive the ordeal?

More Yellow Rose Titles you may enjoy:

The Sea Hawk

by Brenda Adcock

Dr. Julia Blanchard, a marine archaeologist, and her team of divers have spent almost eighteen months excavating the remains of a ship found a few miles off the coast of Georgia. Although they learn quite a bit about the nineteenth century sailing vessel, they have found nothing that would reveal the identity of the ship they have nicknamed "The Georgia Peach."

Consumed by the excavation of the mysterious ship, Julia's relationship with her partner, Amy, has deteriorated. When she forgets Amy's birthday and finds her celebrating in the arms of another woman, Julia returns alone to the Peach site. Caught in a violent storm, she finds herself separated from her boat and adrift on the vast Atlantic Ocean.

Her rescue at sea leads her on an unexpected journey into the true identity of the Peach and the captain and crew who called it their home. Her travels take her to the island of Martinique, the eastern Caribbean islands, the Louisiana German Coast and New Orleans at the close of the War of 1812.

How had the Peach come to rest in the waters off the Georgia coast? What had become of her alluring and enigmatic captain, Simone Moreau? Can love conquer everything, even time? On a voyage that lifts her spirits and eventually breaks her heart, Julia discovers the identity of the ship she had been excavating and the fate of its crew. Along the way she also discovers the true meaning of love which can be as boundless and unpredictable as the ocean itself.

Twenty-Four Days

by Janet Albert

Sometimes life forces us into uncharted territory, as Dr. Miranda Ross discovers when circumstances lead her to seek employment on a cruise line specializing in all lesbian cruises. Although she's single and surrounded by women, she has little time to socialize and even less inclination. She's made promises to herself, promises she intends to keep.

And keep them she does, until she meets the ship's head fitness trainer, Jamie Jeffries. Jamie has the kind of body and good looks most people only dream of and unfortunately, a reputation to match. The buzz on the ship is that she can have anyone she wants and often does.

Miranda fights valiantly to avoid Jamie and the unwanted attraction that seems to have a will of its own. She's strong and determined...but a lot can happen in twenty-four days.

Piperton

by Carrie Carr

Sam Hendrickson has been traveling around the Southwest for ten years, never staying in one place long enough to call it home. Doing odd jobs to pay for her food and gas, she thinks her life is fine, until fate intervenes. On her way to Dallas to find work for the upcoming winter, her car breaks down in the small town of Piperton. Sam's never concerned herself over what other people think, but the small minds of a West Texas town may be more than she bargained for

-especially when she meets Janie Clarke. Janie's always done what's expected of her. But when she becomes acquainted with Sam, she's finally got a reason to rebel.

A Table For Two

by Janet Albert

Ridley Kelsen is convinced she's not destined to find love. The singles scene is old and dating is terribly disappointing. Her closest friend tells her that love comes along when you least expect it and the very last thing Ridley expects when she accepts an invitation to join her friends for dinner, is that she will meet the most beautiful creature she's ever laid eyes on. Will this turn out to be yet another disappointment?

Dana De Marco moves to Philadelphia after her dreams for the future are unexpectedly shattered. Her new restaurant, Café De Marco is located on the city's famous South Street and has opened to rave reviews. It seems as if the pieces of her life are finally falling into place, except for one minor detail...she's unable to let go of the past.

The last thing Dana expects is that she's about to meet someone who will force her to face her demons head on. Does she have the courage to open her heart and love again?

Storm Surge

by Melissa Good

It's fall. Dar and Kerry are traveling--Dar overseas to clinch a deal with their new ship owner partners in England, and Kerry on a reluctant visit home for her high school reunion. In the midst of corporate deals and personal conflict, their world goes unexpectedly out of control when an early morning spurt of unusual alarms turns out to be the beginning of the shocking nightmare that was 9/11.

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