

The future and the past collide!

Anthropologist Serenity Steele meets her heart's desire in the form of a short-tempered Regency rake, Nicholas Wycliffe.

Duty or Love? In the year 2020, anthropologist Serenity Steele's research assignment is to travel back into the past--however, she doesn't count on the many attractions of a certain Regency rake. Should she ignore her obligations and stay in the past... or should she leave behind the man she loves?

An Enchanting Dilemma: Nicholas Wycliffe, the toplofty Lord Brockton, has no desire to take a wife, especially a mysterious widow who doesn't live by society's rules. But what is he to make of the enchanting "Mrs." Steele, who not only refuses to discuss her past, she also has the audacity to turn him down when he proposes marriage?

Chapter One

Doctor Axel Rhinehart sat behind his antique wooden desk and sighed at the mess of papers in front of him. Agitation rumbled through his stomach.

By the ghost of Margaret Mead! How could he not be agitated? The Institute, his own beloved United Anthropological Institute, had dropped a can of worms into his lap. The can? Time-travel. The worms? A philosophical debate: did humans have the right to journey into the past?

With the previously impossible now possible in this year of 2020, the Institute delegated the power to play God... to *him*. As Director of Sociocultural Anthropology, *he* got to review each anthropologist's proposal, then select the person who would travel back into the bowels of time.

Axel had one helluva stomach-ache!

And, not only *one* slot had been approved to use the new Time Displacement Wave. Two more were granted. *Three* golden opportunities to explore the habits and cultures of man's past.

He shook his head, displacing some of his long, grey strands of hair. Were these golden opportunities or was time-travel akin to opening Pandora's box? Why was it that he was the only one uneasy with this new technology? Everyone else at the Institute seemed to think the time slots were manna from Heaven.

He, however, feared there might be hell to pay with unimagined consequences.

Sighing again, Axel thumbed through stacks of time-travel proposals. Time to get to work weeding the eligible ones from the ineligible.

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Serenity Steele paced outside the battered mahogany door. Should she disturb Axel or should she wait just like everyone else? Wait until he notified the winners of the “Back to the Past” contest.

Quit joking around, Steele.

Tongue-in-cheek, she'd renamed her fellow anthropologists' quest for one of the three Time Displacement Wave slots. Only the nickname turned out to be decidedly apt. By the number of hours spent on preparing for this project, one would've thought the prize was a billion dollars.

Competition was fierce, but honestly, she was in the running, wasn't she? After all, she had as good a chance as that silly man, Stanhope DeVries.

Conceited peacock!

Serenity pulled on her ear lobe. Should she interrupt Axel or not?

A clatter of heels echoed from down the long corridor. The sound decided her. If she didn't barge in on Axel, then someone else would. Someone like DeVries. She knocked on the door.

“Come in. Come on in!”

Serenity slipped into the director's office and firmly shut the door behind her. The footsteps stopped outside the room, hesitated, then continued on their way with less decisiveness in their stride.

Good. At least she wasn't the only one waiting on pins and needles.

As she surmised, Axel was buried in papers. “Hard at work, I see. Hope I'm not interrupting--much.” She helped herself to a seat on his well-worn couch.

He peered at her from behind his glasses. “Nonsense, Dr. Steele. I've been going steady for two hours straight. It's about time for a break.”

Cracking his knuckles, he sat back in his swivel chair. It creaked, making a noise almost as loud as his knuckles.

“Formal today, aren't we, sir?”

Axel's jolly laugh shook the stacks of paper surrounding him. “Ah, Serry! I can always count on you to coax a smile out of this old geezer.”

She flushed. Axel was forever paying her compliments. He could give men today a lesson or two in chivalrous behavior.

But she should get down to business. “So, how's the time-travel project going?”

“Curious, eh? Don't think I've been twiddling my thumbs here. I *am* whittling down these piles of paperwork.” He wagged his finger at her. “Not without considerable perspiration, I'll have you know.”

It was her turn to flatter. “On you, it looks good!”

“Sweet talker.” With a large white handkerchief, he wiped the top of his balding head.

“All these proposals are worthy, of course. But I've got to make certain the projects and

time periods selected will not only reflect well on the Institute, but also bring kudos from everyone else.”

“And you’re just the person to pull it off.” She relaxed against the back cushions. “No sweet talking this time, Axel. I wouldn’t want your job.”

He acknowledged her comment with a grunt. “Tall order, I agree. The idea is to show that...” Lifting his glasses, he read from yet another official paper. “...The institute is enhancing the world’s general knowledge and providing invaluable information for today’s overcrowded, overstressed planet.”

The sheet fluttered back to the desk. “Public relations is working overtime on this baby. And that lofty sentiment translates into the Institute’s wish to get even more slots with the Time Displacement Wave.”

He didn’t sound pleased, and Serenity couldn’t blame him. Everything was politics these days.

She drummed her fingers on the arm of the couch. “Well, I can’t fault the board of directors for being excited. The thought of going back to pre-colonial Africa....”

Taking a deep breath, she crossed her legs and hoped she looked... and sounded nonchalant. “Um, have you come across my proposal yet?”

In her mind, she had everything crossed: her fingers, her toes, her eyes.

Please let my project be chosen!

“Fishing for information, Serry? No, don’t apologize. If it were me, I’d be doing the same thing. In fact, every anthropologist on the payroll has strolled in to see me once or twice already.”

He held out his hands. “On the record, I’m still reviewing candidates.”

She braced herself for what was coming next.

“Off the record,” he continued, “I’m afraid your paper on the Ashanti doesn’t carry enough political clout.”

Serenity blew out a long, cleansing breath. Darn.

Her dreams to do an in-depth ethnography just sailed smartly out Axel’s virtual reality window. It was uncanny how the VR window was able to pick up a person’s thoughts. Rather symbolic that she now saw a virtual reality view of the lost savannas near the Volta River on the western coast of Africa. Since war had destroyed much of its untarnished beauty ten years ago, this artificial panorama was the only way she’d ever see it.

Darn, darn, darn.

She inhaled deeply. Recover. She *had* to recover.

“You’re right, of course, sir. I’d *hoped*, but deep down, I knew the outcome. My proposal doesn’t have the same backing as, say, Jamison’s submission for Nazi Germany.”

The virtual reality window behind Axel’s back now shifted to a medieval bridge in

Heidelberg, Germany.

He nodded. "True, but I also discarded that proposal. Nazi Germany's too volatile and too recent. Why, we have a few participants of World War II still alive, though it's the twenty-first century."

Learning of her coworker's rejection didn't ease her own disappointment one bit. Nervous energy pulsed through her veins. She walked over to Axel's weather-beaten desk and picked up his prized moon rock. Should the rock be classified under geology or lunalogy?

Get over your disappointment, Steele.

"But you know Dr. Jamison, Serry. He's determined. He submitted another proposal. This one has possibilities, though."

She raised her eyebrow, and replaced the stone. "Oh?"

"Yep, it's for visiting Peter the Great." Axel perused the fat file folder to the right of him. "This one should allow us some understanding of present Russian behavior. And Lord knows we can use the help."

Serenity had to laugh. "You really *are* a politician, aren't you? Think of all the brownie points the Institute will make with the Russian Secretary-General of the United Nations. I'm impressed."

Axel scribbled a few notes on the file cover. "I learned some diplomacy during my sixty-three years on planet Earth." He gave her a wink.

So Jamison's proposal would get the go-ahead. She sighed. Well, that was all right, just as long as Stanhope DeVries stayed out in the cold.

Axel pointed his old-fashioned pencil at her. "Also, you might not be aware of this, but I have to take into account the Displacement Wave's time restraints. A span of no more than six hundred years backwards is allowed. Anything out of that range is in the experimental phase--and therefore forbidden. Thank the stars for small favors."

How odd Axel sounded. What was troubling him? Serenity peered over him to look at the project's cover page. "Peter the Great's reign ended in 1725. So it's within the time frame."

Axel wiped his forehead again. "Listen, don't tell Jamison the good news. Nothing's official--yet. He's anxious enough as it is. Been by my office four times today."

Her old professor shrugged. "And why not? It *is* every anthropologist's wish to study a culture in its past pristine state. Who'd pass up an opportunity like this?"

Serenity frowned. "My lips are sealed. But I detect a note of cynicism, Axel. What's wrong?"

He set his glasses on the desk, then rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You know me too well, Serry. Playing God scares me. The Time Displacement Wave is new--brand new technology. I hadn't expected the federal government to respond to our petition so quickly. After all, the sheer volume of applications has to be phenomenal. I figured they'd reply months from now, or maybe years."

“But you didn’t take into account the current emphasis on understanding man and man’s past.” She grinned. “You realize, I use the term ‘man’ loosely!”

He didn’t respond to her levity. “Right, and that’s when the moral issue of time-travel hit me. Although the government insists the past remains unchanged by the researchers from the present, how do we know if they’re telling the truth? How can they be sure?”

The window now displayed a scene that had no basis in reality. The unmistakable sight of New York Harbor was without the familiar visage of the Statue of Liberty. Instead, a marble sculpture of bearded Vladimir Lenin stood in Liberty’s place.

A shiver of unease zigzagged down Serenity’s spine. Axel’s agitation was catching.

An eyeblink later, Lenin disappeared, and Liberty ruled the harbor as she had for the last 134 years. Serenity would never get used to virtual reality’s thought-sensing abilities.

She released a pent-up breath. “Ouch. I hadn’t thought about changing the past.”

Axel rocked back and forth, causing his swivel chair to create a cacophony of creaks. “Talk about being thrust upon the horns of a dilemma, as if I need more reasons to scratch off the hairs on my head.”

This project was taking a terrible toll on him. Serenity patted his arm to reassure him. “Well, look on the bright side, Axel. Scientists haven’t invented a way to travel into the future.”

“Yet.”

Dropping back onto the couch, she pulled on her ear lobe again. That was a frightening thought.

Axel’s shoulders sagged. “I feel tired. I feel my biological age. Can’t wait to drop everything into the board’s lap. Then *they* get to play God.”

For a moment, his words bounced off the office walls.

The seconds ticked by relentlessly, if digital clocks could tick.

Professional curiosity then got the better of her. “Who else in the running?”

He must not have minded the question, for he answered immediately. “Another possibility is Dr. Velando’s request to do fieldwork in Mexico, at the time of the Aztecs’ first contact with Europeans. This’ll please the Hispanic powers, and provide a case study on how not to alienate the inhabitants of a new land à la Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés.”

She mulled over the scenario. “Sounds good, but potentially bloody. If I remember correctly, an initially joyous reception turned ugly, and Cortés brutally slaughtered the Aztecs.”

“Yep. If his project is selected, Velando will have to watch his butt, pardon my language. In fact, time-travel itself is no picnic. I’ve heard the actual journey’s pretty strenuous.” Axel paused. “Which leads me to ask just what else isn’t the government mentioning?”

Serenity stood and brushed the wrinkles from her skirt. Jamison and Velando. Two

reputable anthropologists. She could live with those selections.

Heading for the door, she stopped to blow Axel a kiss. "Didn't mean to take up so much of your time, sir. I have to make travel plans for my next assignment. Before I know it, two months'll fly by."

A sudden thought then struck her. "By the way, Axel, any ideas on who the third candidate will be?"

He quickly shuffled some papers. "Still working on it, Serry. Let you know. Thanks for the sympathetic ears."

"My pleasure." She sent him a friendly wave, and left him alone with his files.

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After Serry Steele left, Axel gave up the pretext of work. He massaged his closed eyes, to no avail. The writings on his desk still looked like Egyptian hieroglyphs. Perhaps he should call it a day.

Loading up his briefcase, his mind was troubled. Serry, reed slim and beautiful, was one of his favorite colleagues, if not his favorite. And he'd had to lie to her.

Well, not quite a lie, but all in all, Dr. Stanhope DeVries' project, "A scientific look at the lives and customs of Regency England during the Napoleonic Wars," was a shoo-in with the board.

Axel shook his head. He didn't have the heart to mention her rival's project probably would be approved. Her deep green eyes, the color of a mature forest, would flash reproach at him. Bad blood between her and DeVries. When the news got out....

But by the ghost of Margaret Mead, even she would have to agree on the worthiness of the proposal. Who could resist the mystique of Napoleon Bonaparte, military genius? Academia still debated on why Britain's aristocratic class seemed to pay little attention to the French threat in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Of course, the pint-sized emperor finally had been vanquished, but it took the English over twenty years to put a period to that chapter of history. Not to mention the aftermath....

Ready to leave, Axel took one last glance around his office. The virtual reality window revealed his small ranch-style house as it always did. Strange how others claimed they saw fantastic landscapes within the chemically prepared, glass panes. Not him, though.

He shrugged. Perhaps he had no imagination.

The door now locked, Axel proceeded down the empty corridor. As he ambled over to the elevator, an image of the bachelor DeVries with an impossibly high, antiquated cravat rose up before his mind's eye.

Axel withheld a chuckle. Perhaps he *did* have an imagination. Regency England, surely that must have been a fascinating era of time! No doubt DeVries would enact the part of a "rake" for his cover during the fieldwork. Fastidious and egotistical, he'd certainly fit in among the vain dandies who fawned over the prickly Prince Regent.

In fact, most of the Institute staff complained about DeVries' condescending manner. The man wouldn't win the Mr. Congeniality award, that much was certain! Nor would he be missed once he departed for the past.

Truth be told however, DeVries was a brilliant anthropologist. Axel had no fears about sending the man back in time.

The elevator doors slid open, ending his reverie. Jamison, Velando, and DeVries--a solid trio. Axel's role in this accursed time-travel business was coming to an end.

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Days later, the time-travel dilemma came back to kick Axel in the seat of his pants. Seated at his desk at the indecent hour of seven in the morning, he finally cleared off the last of the paperwork concerning the Time Displacement Wave projects; he was *that* eager to wash his hands of the affair. Fortunately for him, the Institute's board of directors approved all three recommended proposals, as did the federal government. Everything was now set in stone.

A sigh of satisfaction escaped his lips. Life was beginning to return to normal.

Several rattles at the door interrupted his contentment. Who wanted to see him at this time of day? Pushing his glasses back on the bridge of his nose, he called out, "Come in. Come on... in."

His eyes bulged at the sight of Stanhope DeVries hobbling into the office... on crutches.

"Rhinehart, we've got to talk." A disheveled-looking DeVries maneuvered to the couch, set his crutches against the wall, and carefully sat down. With a heavy thud, the crutches fell over.

"Damn things," he muttered.

Rarely at a loss for words, Axel's voice now took a temporary vacation. He stared at the man and the slightly bulky cast emanating down from his knee.

DeVries straightened out his leg, wincing as he completed the action. Silence stretched ominously in the office.

"I, er, I had an acc-accident." The normally precise DeVries never stuttered.

Obviously, today was a day for exceptions. Axel sank his face in his hands. This was serious. "So I see."

"Spent the whole damn night in the emergency room, waiting to be seen." DeVries fluttered his hand as if to minimize his condition. "It's just a trivial accident, really. I fell down a flight of stairs, and broke my leg. Stupid of me."

By the anxious look on the man's lean face, Axel knew there was more. A broken leg, in this day and age, was no great cause for concern. With medicine's ability to initiate rapid regrowth of bone osteocytes, a broken femur would be completely mended in twenty-four hours.

No, there was more. Axel picked up his moon rock to examine its craggy surface. "What aren't you telling me, DeVries?"

A fierce debate raged within the anthropologist. His grip alternately loosened then tightened against the padded top of the crutches. Finally, he spoke. "I also tore the anterior cruciate ligament in my knee. Surgery's scheduled for tomorrow and recovery may take up to six months." DeVries scratched at his morning stubble. "The fool orthopedist is *wrong*. I can manage--"

Dropping the rock, Axel felt his stomach plummet. "Let's see your medical report."

DeVries fished inside his elegantly tailored jacket and pulled out some papers. It was a shame to see the stylish suit take such abuse. He made a move to rise, but Axel forestalled him. The man probably felt clumsy enough as it was.

After getting the report, Axel scanned it. He swallowed the lump in his throat. The news was as he feared; the only treatment available for a partially torn ligament hadn't changed since the 1980s: arthroscopic surgery to staple or suture the ligament. Full recovery could even take longer than six months.

He set the papers on his desk, as far away as possible. "You realize your trip is scheduled two weeks from now. There's no way you can recuperate in time. No way at all. And we can't request a different location for someone else's fieldwork. Regency England it is. Either that or lose the time slot."

Losing the slot was unthinkable. The board would never go for that. A substitute for DeVries would have to be found. Deep in thought, Axel drummed his fingers.

DeVries' voice took on a wheedling tone. "Look, Rhinehart, by two weeks I'm sure I'll be able to walk without these damn things." He gestured to his crutches. "Maybe I'll just need a cane."

"You know the rules, DeVries. The traveler must be in excellent physical condition. No, we have to convince one of your colleagues to take your place."

But who? Who fit all the criteria?

"Damn!" DeVries yanked on his expensive tie, now hopelessly rumpled from the night's misadventures. "I can't believe my rotten luck. The chance of a lifetime, and someone gets to steal this opportunity right from under my nose. I--"

"Of course! She's the logical replacement."

"Who is? Who are you babbling about, Rhinehart?"

Axel opened his file drawer and removed the folder on Serenity Steele.

Using one crutch, DeVries raised himself up to view the file's name. "What? You're considering Steele as my replacement? Impossible. Miss Goody-Two-Shoes? I won't stand for it!"

He probably realized the humor in his remark, for he eased himself back down, then cleared his throat. "What I mean to say, Rhinehart, a man has his pride. Stanhope B. DeVries to be replaced by Steele? God, man! Anyone but her. There's got to be another anthropologist willing to do the job. Steele's specialty is primitive societies, anyway."

Rhinehart frowned. He had little sympathy for the man. After all, DeVries was responsible for Axel's current headache. And the man allowed his personal dislike of

Serry to cloud his professional judgment--a cardinal sin for any anthropologist.

Besides, he recited his name as if he were descended from kings. Stanhope B. DeVries, indeed.

Axel sat back and locked his hands in back of his neck. "Actually, I consider Dr. Steele perfect for this assignment. And, as you should be aware, it's premodern societies, not primitive."

He watched DeVries' green eyes widen and his hands clench into fists. Before the man could speak--or roar--Axel continued, "Yes, she's perfect. Remember, her doctorate detailed family and kinship in one of London's suburbs. I was her professor, you know. Brilliant fieldwork. Her research is still included in college curriculum."

The tightness around his heart subsided. Serry already had experience with British customs. Barring DeVries, she'd be the best anthropologist to cover the socially complex world of Regency England. Perhaps even better than him.

"You can't be serious, Rhinehart. She'll never do it. Look, when she was in London, something happened to Steele, something made her switch her area of expertise to premodern cultures. She'll never agree to time-travel to England."

So that was why Serry abruptly changed her focus; Axel had always wondered about that.

"Well, you better hope she *does* accept the assignment, DeVries. If the Institute loses this slot, you will be *persona non grata* around promotion time."

That threat shut the man's mouth. DeVries glared at him, gathered the crutches, and hopped out the door. "You'll regret this, Rhinehart."

If looks could kill!

"Good luck in surgery tomorrow, DeVries."

Axel ran his hand over his thinning hairs. By the ghost of Margaret Mead, if Serry had a grudge against England, how was he going to convince her to change her mind? And, more important, did he have the right to bulldoze her into taking the assignment?

* * * *

Serenity didn't usually arrive at the Institute before eight, but this morning she entered her office at ten past seven.

"Attagirl, Steele," she complimented herself. "Start the day right. Today's going to be especially productive."

About to settle in behind her desk, she noticed the impatient red light blinking on her answering machine. She listened to the message, then sat back. Axel Rhinehart was the first and only recording. He also never arrived early, but here he was, asking to speak with her first thing. He'd sounded strange, too. Something unusual must be up.

Grabbing a cup of coffee, she responded to his summons and once at his office, got comfortable on the couch.

To her surprise, he sat next to her. "Serry, how would you like to take a trip?"

"But I *am* taking a trip soon. First to Ghana in West Africa, then a follow-up in New Guinea."

Axel sighed. It was a mournful sound. Whatever was troubling him?

"I mean a trip to the past. Back in time."

Serenity's heart stopped. "Back in time? My project was approved after all?" Hampered by the coffee mug, she tempered her excitement by curving one arm around him to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Axel! This is... this is wonderful!"

About to launch into a discussion about her plans, she came to a screeching halt. Axel's normally cherub-pink face had greyed.

"Serry, the three time slots haven't changed. This trip would be back to Regency England."

"I don't understand."

He stood, then half sat against the edge of his desk. The wooden surface groaned. "Stanhope DeVries had an accident."

Axel cut short her expression of concern. "Just a broken leg plus a torn ligament. He's going to be fine except that traveling is out of the question. We need a replacement for him."

Now she understood. Axel wanted her to volunteer to go back to the land of rigid class distinction. She shuddered. No way. No bloody way.

"Sorry, Axel. I have to decline. The fieldwork doesn't interest me." She sipped on the coffee. Its minty aroma failed to soothe her.

"Serry, you've got to reconsider. Just think of the adventure. You'll be a pioneer. This is a one in a billion opportunity."

She remained silent. Billion or otherwise, she wanted no part of it.

He tried again, using a persuasive tone. "We have to thank our stars we're getting this chance. No amount of money on God's good Earth can buy a trip back in time, Serry. But you, you'll meet the giants who made history. You'll meet the British crown rulers. You'll be right there with them."

Axel wiped his sweating forehead with a yellowed handkerchief. Did he realize his hard-sell pitch sounded false?

Well, she had a ready reply. "The British crown rulers? George III went insane; George IV was a self-indulgent hedonist; William IV, a good-natured fool; and Victoria wasn't born yet. Why would I want to meet them? The project would be a waste of my time."

"Ah, there you go again, Serry, demonstrating the two nouns of your name."

"Sir?"

He grinned. "You answered me serenely but with steel in your voice."

“Now who’s sweet talking?” Feeling less tense, she returned his grin. “You know, if my proposal had been approved... of course I would’ve been more than happy to step into the Time Displacement Wave.”

She avoided looking at the virtual reality window. No telling what bizarre scene would appear before her eyes. “Why don’t you ask someone else?”

His answer was quick. “Because you’re perfect for the job. And excellent health is a requirement. Listen, Serry, I know you prefer working with less complex cultures. But the English upper class of the Regency era was a sub-culture in itself. The rules, fixed. The goals, simple. It’ll be a glamorous vacation for you, my dear. Quite a change from your usual fieldwork.”

“It’ll be a year out of my life, Axel. I have no intention to change my plans to suit the Institute.” She folded her arms against her chest.

Rising, he stood in front of her. “The Institute needs you, Serry. You’re young, attractive, very hale and hearty, and in between assignments.” He took a deep breath. “Also remember, you’d be stealing DeVries’ thunder. I seem to recall you two having a few words of disagreement in the past.”

“Who hasn’t?” She wasn’t being flip. After all, she wasn’t the only one who clashed with Mr. High-and-Mighty DeVries. “Seriously, Axel, I’m not enamored of the Regency period and--”

“I can’t emphasize how important this is for all of us, Serry. We *can’t* lose this slot.”

Heaven help her, she felt herself weakening. Her old college professor rarely asked her for anything.

“Serry, I know Stanhope DeVries--”

She cocked her head in warning.

“Pardon, Stanhope *B.* DeVries!” Axel corrected, a smile lighting his lips. “Anyway, I know there’s an undercurrent of antagonism between you both.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“But actually, you and he are a lot alike.”

“Axel! Bite your tongue.”

He rubbed his balding head. “When I suggested you as his replacement, he was livid.”

A grin, slow in coming, spread across her face. “I just bet he was. Total outrage, right? If I agree to this trip, there’d be some healthy competition, wouldn’t there?” She laughed. “I’ll admit to wanting to rub his aristocratic face in prehistoric dirt!”

Axel joined her in laughter but his expression was wary. Maybe that decided her. She couldn’t bear for him to be so worried about losing the Displacement Wave slot.

Holding out her hand for a formal handshake, she sighed. “All right, I can see some advantages. For the record, and against my better judgment, I agree to travel back in time for the express purpose of conducting research and writing a monograph on Regency England. There. Happy?”

He vigorously pumped her hand. "Serry, you won't regret this."

She shook her head. "You're wrong. I regret it already. If anyone else had asked me, I would have turned them down cold."

"I know, Serry. Thanks."

He leafed through some papers, then handed her a heavy package. "Here is some required reading about your trip. Also, I've scheduled you for an orientation briefing at one o'clock today."

"At one? You were that certain I'd say yes, hmmn?"

Taking the package felt like receiving the death sentence. What on earth had she done? Cold panic spread quickly through her veins.

Although she didn't mean to, her gaze drifted to the window. What she saw further iced her soul. Instead of a scene or picture, the glass reflected back at her a vast grey nothingness. As if her future was uncertain.

Heavens! She gave Axel a quick salute to steady herself. "You do know that I'll stand out like the proverbial sore thumb there, don't you?"

"You'll do fine, my dear."

"I'm not convinced. Ah, well. I'd better get up to speed on this. Talk to you later."

She closed his door and, in a daze, returned to her office. She needed to repent her decision in private.

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When Serry left, Axel bowed his head. His heart was heavy with the knowledge that he coerced his favorite colleague. She agreed to the time-travel assignment as a personal favor to him, not for any other reason. Journeying back to the past was no insignificant, little favor. Just what had he done?

Removing his glasses, he massaged the bridge of his nose. He did the right thing, didn't he? He couldn't let the Institute down.

The sting of tears welled up within his eyes, then rolled and trickled down his cheeks. He wiped at the moisture with the cuff of his shirt. Fiddlesticks! He would miss Serry in the months ahead.

But, after all, she *was* coming back.