

ONE WILL TOO MANY by PJ Peterson

Excerpt

Julia arrived at the Hotel Montpelier just as Drake drove up. She took advantage of his simultaneous presence to make a proper entrance to the celebration in the Hotel's Grand Ballroom. It had recently been refurbished to its original grandeur from the early 1920's. She admired the beauty of the ceilings with their Art Deco design, recently uncovered by the removal of a false ceiling from a previous "upgrade." The beautiful wood floor with exquisite inlaid mosaics shone from a recent floor polishing. The cherry and mahogany woodwork glistened in the light from the elegant crystal chandeliers which had also been hidden until now.

Julia and Drake were greeted by some of the other members of the restoration committee. Drake was the designated master of ceremonies while Julia's primary duty was to personally welcome as many of the potential donors as possible and say a few words in support of the project. He certainly looked the part tonight in a well-cut black velvet tuxedo. His dark hair was touched with silver—just enough to give him a classy look. He stood tall and proud as he walked through the crowd, nodding to some and saying a word or two to other attendees.

Julia searched the assembled festival attendees for familiar faces as Drake gently guided her to an older man and woman. He placed his hand at the small of her back as he addressed the wealthy couple. "Julia, I'd like to introduce Mr. And Mrs. George Oglethorpe. They have been long-time supporters of the theatre."

Julia stepped forward a half-step and extended her hand. "I'm Julia Fairchild. I'm honored to meet you. I love our theatre, too."

The woman's face brightened as she recognized the name. "Of course! *Dr.* Fairchild. Call me Anna. I've heard a lot of good things about you." She took Julia's hand in both of hers. "You're so young and pretty for a doctor."

Julia reddened. She actually felt a little mousey most days, but conceded to herself that she did 'clean up' nicely for such events. "Thank you. I was blessed with good genes. How long have you and your husband lived in Parkview?"

"My goodness. Forever. Right out of college anyway. George heard about the paper mill here looking for mechanical engineers and applied right away." She smiled proudly at him. "We love the town and were never inclined to leave once we settled in. Isn't that right, dear?" Her husband nodded between sips of his drink. "Are you from here?"

"Not from Parkview. I grew up down the highway on a small farm. My grandma persuaded me to come home and here I am." Julia felt her eyes well up as she recalled warm memories of time spent with her grandparents. "Thank you for your support of our lovely theatre. The restoration committee will be sharing the plans for the renovation during the program."

Julia felt Drake's arm around her waist as he interceded. "Thank you for coming this evening. Please excuse us. I see someone who is clamoring to talk with Dr. Fairchild before the dinner starts."

Drake took Julia's arm and as they turned around, they found Gregory Lantz and his wife Sandy who had been standing right behind them. "Greg! So good to see you here tonight. Thanks for coming." They exchanged nods and handshakes. "Julia is standing in for Karen tonight. She's also supporting the project." Julia smiled and nodded. Aside from the perfunctory smiles, Julia sensed a tension between the men, and she moved a step away from Drake to better observe them both.

Greg stirred his gin and tonic vigorously. "I've talked with some of the members of the board at the bank, but I don't have a definite commitment yet for a donation. I think we can come through for \$50,000. But nothing close to the million dollars that everyone seems to think the bank can donate."

"Greg, any amount would be great. I understand it's been a little tough with the new bank still getting started." Drake Ashford was the president of the older, long-established Parkview National Bank. He was aware that despite heavy advertising and promotions, the new River City Community Bank was not yet meeting expectations. He was also acutely sensitive to the loss of some of his own banking clients to the new bank, where Greg was Vice President.

Greg bristled. "Actually, we're meeting our numbers and seeing new business every day. I would think you would have noticed already." He smirked.

“We’ve noticed a little change, but we’re prepared to handle it.” Drake took a large swallow of his scotch. “Please excuse us. I have some other people to greet. Talk to you later, Greg.” Drake and Julia moved away.

“That man really annoys me,” Drake said under his breath. “He’s so naive. He doesn’t see how Jay is using him. He’s just a ‘yes’ man. But I guess it makes him feel important.”

“What do you mean?” Julia asked, nodding and smiling at some of the faces she recognized. She knew he referred to Jay Morrison, recently divorced and head of the new bank. She felt Drake’s hand shaking as he maneuvered her through the crowd.

“I’ll tell you later. Too many ears here.” He surveyed the guests nearby. “Let’s see...there’s Warren Pontell and his lovely wife Sarah. He’s talked about making a major contribution. His wife was a theatre actress in her younger days. And they have money to burn.” He turned to Julia and wiggled his eyebrows, à la Groucho Marx.

Drake and Julia chatted with the Pontells for a few minutes, using the time to emphasize the benefits of the smaller venue of the “little theatre.” It was designed to be an intimate stage setting with seating for about one hundred fifty people. Until recently, the area had been used for storage and was marginally functional for stage events in its current state.

Julia had found herself daydreaming but tuned back in when she heard Mr. Pontell say, “We’d like to donate \$50,000 for the little theatre. Perhaps you can find a way to let us have something to say about naming it.” He grinned broadly as his wife beamed.

“Warren, that’s wonderful!” said Drake. “I’ll talk with the board of directors about naming opportunities. Let me get back to you on details for your donation. Thank you.”

Now grinning, Drake gently guided Julia toward Adam Johns, an influential man in the local union hierarchy, and his wife. He had started working at ESCO Paper Company right out of high school and had worked his way up from the labor pool to an electrician apprenticeship and then to a journeyman electrician. His constituents considered him to be fair and honest. He had an unofficial status in the union as a leader, although he didn’t have an elected or paid position as such.

Adam tugged at the neck of his dress shirt and pulled at the bottom of his dark blue waistcoat. The jacket gaped over his generous girth. He looked uncomfortable in his tuxedo. Julia was sure her mother would have said something like “putting perfume on a goat,” but most likely his wife had

insisted he dress up for this occasion. He certainly looked impressive at his height of six foot three inches.

“Mr. and Mrs. Johns, good evening,” said Drake as he offered his hand. “Do you know Dr. Julia Fairchild? She’s helping to support the Theatre Restoration project as we all are.”

“We sure do,” said Adam, returning the handshake. “Dr. Fairchild, you took care of my mom several years back. She was real sick but you got her well and she’s fine now. Thanks to you. In fact, she’s going on a cruise through the Panama Canal with her church group this coming week. She’s always wanted to go on that trip.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Johns. I do remember your mom—Violette, I believe? She’s a lovely lady with a lot of spunk.” Julia shook his hand before turning to his wife. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Johns.”

Mr. Johns turned back to Drake. “Mr. Ashford, some of the guys at the mill want to know if you had talked with our union officials yet about the stock trading going on with our pension funds. And if you know anything, they hope you can tell them. And call me Adam. My wife is Linda.”

“Yes, Adam. I talked with a Scott Sowders in Portland. He’s looking into whether those trading fees can be traced back to any individuals. May I call you when I know something more?”

“Sure. You can call me at ESCO. The operator knows how to reach me. Thanks a lot, Mr. Ashford.”

“You can call me Drake, please. I’ll call you soon and we’ll go from there. Thanks again for being here tonight.”

“Hey. It’s an alright party. My wife is always trying to get me to gussy up. It’s more fun than I thought it would be.” He grinned and saluted with his cocktail.

Julia saw the auctioneer heading their way and alerted Drake. “I’ll check my lipstick while you talk with him. Where are we sitting?”

“Main table,” he said, pointing to the center of the long side of the room. He scowled. “Unfortunately, it appears we’re seated next to Jay Morrison, of all people.”