



Emma Wayne Porter

The
Living
Legend

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Dedication

For my beautiful things. All of this, always, is for you.

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Chapter One

Upstate New York

Sunday, December 21

The security system's chatter woke him. Then the pounding began.

Patrick Mancini stomped down the stairs to the door. "Bloody people."

He hated this place. It was supposed to be his safe house, where nobody would ever find him. Yet both times he'd stayed here, he'd had visitors.

The first time it had been a salesman. Last time, a tourist's car had broken down out front.

One would think the twelve-foot stone wall, wrought iron gates, and prominent security cameras would send a message that callers weren't welcome out here in the middle of nowhere. But no—every time he turned around some random git was buzzing the gates for entry.

Now, during the best sleep he'd had in months, someone had bypassed the locked gate and waltzed straight up to the front door.

The pounding had stopped by the time he reached the foyer.

"I don't know who you are or what you want, but this had better be an emergen— Oh my *God*."

Sunlight poured through the frosted-glass-paned door, and either he was hallucinating from jet lag, or that door was smeared with blood.

Ears and eyes straining for input, he went for the access panel beside the door. First he dropped the security system into safety mode. Then,

after a split-second hesitation, grabbed the gun kept inside the enclosure for emergencies.

This certainly qualified.

He ripped the door open, and the man staggering on his front steps began to crumple. It was Jack. Jack Halloway, the only one he'd ever told about this house.

Patrick caught him, fumbling to keep hold of the gun and his friend as his eyes scanned the yard. "What happened?"

"I got run off the road. Then they got me."

"Who? Who got you? Are they still out there?"

"No," Jack croaked, sagging heavily in Patrick's arms.

"Who did this to you? Where are they?"

"I don't know who they were. But they were out cold in a ditch, last I saw."

"Nearby?"

"About twenty miles southeast."

Jack was pulling him down like a stone, and they were fully exposed out here on the porch. Moving as quickly as Jack's injuries would allow, Patrick pulled him inside, still trying to clear a sleep-addled brain.

Hell of an alarm clock Jack made. What the devil was going on?

After he'd deposited Jack on a couch and rearmed the security system, he finally stopped to give his friend the once over.

He'd hate to see the other guy. Jack was getting on a bit, but he was still a good-sized man in excellent condition who knew his way around a fight. Yet the manner in which Jack's left arm protected his side spoke of rib injuries. Hopefully not internal bleeding. He was bleeding externally enough already from a deep gash over one eye, and his hands looked as if they'd been through a blender.

"What happened to your hands?"

“Your damned gate. The points on top. I had to climb over.”

“Ah, man,” Patrick muttered. That gate was in the uglier stages of restoration, but he’d called the workmen off for the holidays so he could have some peace and quiet.

Checking the wounds, he could see metal shavings imbedded deep beneath Jack’s skin.

“Couldn’t you buzz instead of climbing over?”

“I *did* buzz. About a thousand times, but you sleep like the dead.”

“Well, what do you expect after three years of hundred-hour weeks without a vacation?”

“I’d at least expect you to have your phone turned on,” Jack complained.

Good point, that. He’d better call 911. As soon as an ambulance was on its way, he’d call dispatch and get to the bottom of this. But the cellphone was barely out of his pocket before Jack roared, “*No!* Don’t call anyone. Not yet.”

“Don’t be stupid. You need a doc—”

“I know. I know. Help me with this jacket, first. I’m carrying something you’ll need.”

Something he’d need? For what? It better not be work. Both he and Jack worked for the Sanction, but their paths rarely crossed professionally. Patrick was the Sanction’s Acquisitions Specialist—a polite term for *Chief Thief*, while Jack was a member of the Global Council, one of the holiest of holies. What could a suit be carting around that was this dangerous?

Then again, Jack was no ordinary suit. He’d had a white-hot career going in the CIA before the Sanction poached him. Thirty years later, the man was a pro at juggling risks. People like him didn’t suddenly get

careless. Whoever had done this was either very good, incredibly fast, or extremely desperate.

At a rare loss for words, Patrick did as he'd been told. Dried blood caught the zipper partway down, so he yanked, making Jack suck air through his teeth.

"Sorry." Patrick sat down on the coffee table as Jack pulled a heavily padded courier envelope from inside the coat.

It slid to the floor with a thud, and when Patrick reached for it, Jack said, "Leave it. You'll need it later, but— Ah man, my ribs. How far is the nearest emergency room?"

"Fifteen miles."

"Stash my car in your garage, then let's go. We'll talk on the way. Hurry."

Jack sank carefully back against the couch and Patrick got moving, sprinting upstairs to change, then back to the security panel where he released the gate.

While he made for Jack's car, the shock began to wear off, replaced instead by that gut-check warning he'd learned never to ignore.

Jack was in trouble. Patrick couldn't afford more of that. He hadn't been hired into the Sanction like everyone else. He'd been sentenced to it in lieu of imprisonment nineteen years ago. With less than six years remaining on his so-called contract, the last thing he needed was more attention from his boss, William Ormond.

Ormond had become the Sanction's CEO a year after Patrick had been sentenced. Every day since, Ormond had taken great pains to remind him he was no more than an indentured servant who could be sent back to jail at any time for any reason.

Things had finally come to a head last Monday when he'd told the old tyrant he wanted out. Ormond had said, "I'll see you in hell first." The

discourse had not improved from there, and the way things had been left, he knew Ormond would deliver on the prison threat if he stepped one nanometer out of line again.

Jack couldn't afford any heat from Ormond, either. The two men had a history all their own, dating back to a time when they'd both been in love with Patrick's mother. Drafted into the Sanction along with her son, Nina Mancini had lasted an entire year before old, bad habits had returned. She'd died of a heroin overdose eighteen years ago now, but Jack and Ormond's enmity was still alive and well.

Jack didn't believe she'd overdosed on her own, and his fixation on her death had gotten the man into dire straits more than once. So often, in fact, that he'd finally received an ultimatum from the Global Council—on the recommendation of all six lesser Continental Councils—that if he should ever go digging into the matter again, he'd be fired.

Patrick felt for the man, but if this turned out to be an attempt to prove yet another conspiracy theory on how Ormond had somehow killed her, Patrick would dump Jack at the ER and never look back. He was in enough trouble already, and it was way past time Jack accepted the truth.

Jack's car was right outside the gate, clearly sideswiped, and still running. He wasn't sure why Jack wanted it stashed, but he did it anyway.

Back at the house, he found Jack already on his way to the SUV. His hands and ribs were extremely painful. He hardly wanted to move, let alone climb into the passenger seat.

Watching Jack debate over the seatbelt then decide against it, Patrick thought it unfair to suspect the man of stirring the pot again. Especially when there was no reason to suspect any such thing.

Once they were through the gates and speeding toward town, Patrick said, "We'd better talk while we still can."

"You really put your foot in it this time," Jack said. "Ormond has paid the Kretts to kill you."

"What?"

"That fight you had on Monday. Ormond took you seriously enough to put a ten million dollar price on your head."

Ten million. To the Kretts.

"Right. I think that knock to your skull did some damage."

"This is for real, Trick. Ormond would rather see you dead than beyond his control, and the Kretts are exerting a lot of pressure to find out who killed their brother. All he had to do was give them your name."

Not possible. Ormond was an idiot, but he wasn't stupid enough to kill the company's cash cow. Too many questions would be asked. If that weren't a concern, Ormond would probably have done this long ago.

"I know that look," Jack pressed. "You don't believe me, but I'm not making this up. You've gotten too powerful and stepped on his toes too many times. At this point, I wouldn't even rule out the possibility he set you up."

"What? You mean he ordered me to kill Tony Krett so he could sell me out later?"

"That's exactly what I mean. A revenge killing gives the Kretts motive, and with those guys in the picture, no one would even look at Ormond."

Now *that* he would believe. But he still would not accept this. He refused.

Intending to sound off-hand, he asked, "If the Kretts are that eager, why would Ormond pay so much? To make sure I suffer?"

"No. He's paying them to wait," Jack stated flatly. "They're out for blood, but Ormond needs them to wait until Christmas Day."

There had to be a misunderstanding. Or a logical explanation for this, but Jack sounded a bit more serious than he'd like. Deathly serious.

"Wait?" Patrick repeated. "Wait for what? I don't understand."

"Neither do I yet, but that envelope back at the house—there are copies of the e-mails between Ormond and the Kretts. Read them. Then you'll know as much as I do."

Good God. Jack really was serious.

Of all the... Eighteen years. Eighteen years as that cretin's whipping boy, and this was the thanks he got. If it was true Ormond had sold him out, as sure as he was sitting here, the whip was about to change hands.

Trying one last time, he asked, "Are you *sure* this is for real?"

"Read the e-mails. The Kretts have already been paid."

Feeling his blood pressure rise, he gripped the wheel tighter to maintain control, but the anger had a mind of its own. All the contempt and condescension he'd swallowed from the moment William Ormond had taken office was growing claws and fangs, begging to be unleashed.

He could even hear it in his voice as he said, "Then I'll make sure they don't live long enough to enjoy their paycheck."

"Now who's being stupid? There are three of them but only two of us, and what can I do about it? Bleed all over them? They've got a triple-digit body count. Men, women, children, *pregnant* women... They're animals, Patrick."

"Okay, then I'll make a deal with Interpol or someone to have them picked up."

"No one will touch them," Jack argued. "Half the world is too afraid of retaliation to pursue them. The other half can't throw stones because they've hired the Kretts themselves."

The car hit a patch of ice, and Patrick had to steer them out of a skid.

Jack, pressing the towel to his head, slid him a rueful sidelong look. “Watch the skidding. I’m not feeling very well.”

“Funnily enough, neither am I. My slave-master wants me dead, you’re a pulp, and if I make one wrong move I’m back to jail for the rest of my life. Merry fucking Christmas to me.”

“I’m sorry, Patrick. That’s why I asked you not to call anyone. You’ve always been a vengeful prick, and you need time to cool off and figure out how to handle this without getting caught.”

“Handle this? I killed Tony Krett. Either I take the other three out, or I’m a dead man.”

“It won’t work. You might manage one or two. Never all three at once. So the way I see it, there’s only one thing we can do—make Ormond pay for this before you disappear. But we have to be smart about how it’s done.”

Right. Now Jack was speaking his language. “How?”

“Once I explain what happened this morning, you’ll get the gist,” Jack said. “I found those Krett e-mail printouts in a basement office at Ormond’s house.”

“Which house?”

“The one in Baltimore.”

“Since when is there an office in the basement?”

“I don’t know,” Jack said. “At any rate, the e-mail copies aren’t enough proof on their own. We’ll need the hard drive they came from, so I boosted the one from that office’s machine. If the originals are on there, they might be used to slow the Kretts. But the rest of the drive might do a whole lot more.”

“For instance?”

“Ormond went to the Nixon school of management. He records and saves everything, and that drive has to be his black file.”

“Newsflash—we all have black files.”

“Not this kind,” Jack said. “I know he doesn’t report half the threats and bribery attempts he receives to security the way he’s supposed to, and I’ll bet my last dime the incriminating ones are on that hard drive. God knows I’ve looked everywhere else.”

“You didn’t check the drive’s contents?”

“Do you think I’d be in this condition if I hadn’t tried?”

Jack explained he’d checked to make sure Ormond was still in London before he headed for the Baltimore house, armed with a story to get past the housekeeper.

“But she couldn’t have cared less,” Jack said. “Probably hates him as much as we do after working there ten years. She even took off for Christmas vacation after asking me to lock up.”

Patrick snorted, and continued to listen as Jack recounted striking gold in Ormond’s secret basement office. The printed-out e-mails had been stored in a locked filing cabinet, but when Jack had tried to find the originals on a nearby computer, he’d been stonewalled by a password.

Without it, he hadn’t even been able to access the desktop. So he’d removed the hard drive, taking with it a small thumb drive that had been plugged into a USB port.

“It’s an encryption key, I’m sure,” Jack said. “Useless for the password, but it’s necessary to decrypt what’s on the drive. I hauled them both to the New York computer lab, hoping I could crack the password with our systems, except as soon as I’d wired it up, I got this window onscreen that said ‘access attempt reported’. Naturally, I unplugged that sucker and ran, but about twenty minutes later someone ran me off the road. You know the rest.”

“So how am I supposed to crack the hard drive without getting caught?”

"I have an idea, but there's something I have to tell you first." Jack sounded weaker with every mile they traveled. "Those e-mails weren't the only thing I found. There was also an insurance appraisal statement for Ormond's California vineyard, and there are items on it I'm sure he wouldn't want anyone to know he had."

"What items?"

"The ring and tile missing from your mother's hotel room the night she died."

Son of a bitch. "You lie."

"Do you honestly think I'd lie about that?"

No. He knew Jack wouldn't, but he didn't want to believe it. The official inquest hadn't been able to explain what had become of the ring and tile, only that it was supposed they'd been sold or traded for the drugs that had killed Nina Mancini.

How the hell had they wound up in Ormond's possession?

On second thought, did it really matter? Ormond had paid someone to kill him. There was only one way to resolve this situation to his satisfaction, and it wouldn't end until Ormond had been made to suffer.

Jack, unaware of the storm brewing beside him, went on, "You can see the appraisal for yourself. I stuck it in that envelope with the e-mails and hard drive. Sorry to dump it all in your lap this way, but with the Kretts in the works, there's no time to be nice about it. Christmas is only five days away, and if there's even a ghost of a chance we can make a case against Ormond, we have to try."

They'd reached the hospital now and as Patrick pulled up to the emergency doors, Jack said, "Go. Do what you can until they spring me."

"I can't just dump you here. And if I take Ormond down, you could go down with him, you know. The Councils weren't kidding when they said they'd fire you."

“Do you think I care about getting fired? I loved your mother, Trick, and we’ve finally found evidence that could prove Ormond killed her. If you can’t finish him for yourself, do it for me. And for her.”

That was all the permission he’d ever need.

He got out in the cold to help Jack inside, but the older man stopped him at the door. “We can’t be seen together or people will ask questions. And I don’t think I need to explain what might happen if Ormond finds out I gave you that hard drive.”

“Right,” Patrick said, humoring his long-time friend, although he already had a plan taking shape in his head. First he needed to know, “About the hard drive—you said you had an idea how to crack it?”

“Well, this is extremely risky, but it’s the only way.”

Jack explained, and Patrick shook his head.

“Are you mad? One of them, I put in jail. The other will go crying straight to Ormond. Forget it. I’ll handle it some other way.”

“There is no other way. The clock is ticking. And I can’t believe I’m hearing this from you, the living legend.”

Patrick grumbled, “Soon to be a proper dead one if I do what you’re suggesting.”

“This is the end for you, one way or another. Even if we nail him and you slip the noose somehow, you’ll spend the rest of your days running from the Kretts and the Dutch authorities. So if you have to lose everything, wouldn’t you rather go down swinging?”

He knew what Jack was saying, and the idea did have its appeal. But it was crazy. Insane. Even more insane than the plans he’d been making. He’d almost certainly be caught.

Sounded good to him. He liked it.

“Get yourself patched up,” he said. “I’ve got work to do.”

Chapter Two

Eveleth, Minnesota

Sunday, December 21

Minnesota's Iron Range was a strange place. Its open-pit mines were mostly abandoned now, but the scars still remained. If one looked closely, they'd notice the hills were straight and uniform, the emerald lakes too round and deep. Step back for a larger view, and it became obvious the land had been formed by mining equipment, not nature.

The effect was unsettling. Abnormal. Just like her life.

Staring over that darkened, man-made landscape from a second-floor window, Kate Crawford braced herself for an argument.

Her brother had shown up early to spend the holidays and do a thorough inventory of the tactical center, but he couldn't have picked a worse time to arrive. She was hardly in a festive mood, having only just gotten home herself after a horrific stint with the FBI. She hadn't slept in two days, and word of her meltdown in front of the FBI director this morning had already gotten out.

Behind her, Alex asked, "Are you ready to have a rational conversation?"

Alex was an Emergency Management specialist. Tall, dark, blue-eyed and gratuitously handsome, he'd been deemed worthless as an undercover operative. He was too noticeable.

She had an even worse flaw: the infamous Ormond grayish-violet eyes. Colored contacts were all she'd need to become indistinguishable

from the next short, dishwater blonde, but it didn't matter. She'd never been considered for undercover work.

No, she'd been earmarked for something quite different. A predetermined course had been set for her, beginning with this stretch in Investigative Services, where she'd stayed eight years longer than many would like. But she didn't care what others would like when the next step was a life sentence as CEO of the Sanction.

Alex, whom she loved dearly despite the fact he treated her like a fragile baby sister—never mind that she was two years older than him—continued his urgent but gentle onslaught. “Look. I heard what happened, and I won't try to sell you that crap about not letting it affect you. There's no way it couldn't. But you can't resign. Not now.”

He was upset by what had happened, both by the situation and how she'd reacted. It wasn't like her to come unglued.

Had he been there to hear Abigail Hunter in person yesterday, he'd understand. The woman had roared as if her very soul were being torn from her throat while she'd clutched her dead daughter's robe.

The robe had been a soft pink. Fuzzy. A child's robe. Abigail Hunter's daughter Tandy had only been four years old. Her headless body had been found less than a mile from home.

Kate felt that clenching in her chest, a scream similar to Abigail's gathering force.

Why? *Why* did these things happen? And how was anyone supposed to withstand them? One dead child was bad enough. But there were hundreds of cases like Tandy's, and the FBI and local authorities were often powerless to stop the killing.

Tandy's case had been the worst of Kate's career, a prime example of everything wrong with the US justice system. It had begun with a series of child killings in Florida, where local authorities and the FBI had

worked themselves into exhaustion to identify a suspect. They'd known they had the right man, made their arrest, and everything should have gone smoothly from there.

Unfortunately, their suspect had a wealthy father, and as soon as he'd been arrested, a team of lawyers had attacked the DA's office. The men and women who'd worked so hard to nail their suspect had watched him walk on bail, then saw their casework washed away by a tidal wave of suppression motions.

Meanwhile, the suspect had been free, his desire to kill growing with each passing minute until he'd come across a young boy riding a bike in his front yard.

The moment that boy's body had been found, the FBI Director had hit the roof. Afterwards, he'd exercised his office's last-resort option to hire the Sanction. Because the eastern half of the States was Kate's jurisdiction, she'd been dispatched to Florida to assess and resolve the case.

For two days, Kate had examined evidence, waded through the defense team's arsenal of briefs, and interviewed the officers in charge. They'd done their job well. Their suspect was guilty as sin. But the defense team was circling a loophole that would leave an excellent chance of acquittal.

Meanwhile, the officers in charge had made it clear they didn't appreciate her presence, and she could hardly blame them. No one but the highest levels of administration even knew the Sanction existed. The Investigations Division depended on absolute anonymity, so as far as the officers in the trenches were concerned, she was an outsider questioning their work.

The secrecy created a lot of resentment, yet it had to be that way. In order to deliver solutions, her division often had to work outside the law,

and while it made them an acceptable, necessary evil to administration, public perception and the world's judicial systems would not be so forgiving. Should it ever become known the Sanction blatantly tampered with evidence to ensure the guilty were brought to justice, thousands of convictions would be overturned, and the operatives themselves could face prosecution.

Her division's work was risky, and although they were only called in on the most extreme cases, the worldwide demand for their services proved how necessary they were.

In this last case, Kate had been under a lot of pressure to snatch another victory from the jaws of bureaucracy, and just when she'd been about to go to the Director with an idea to fake an eyewitness account, four-year-old Tandy had been reported missing. They'd all changed gears, frantic to find the girl before their suspect killed her, but they'd failed, and Kate had stood elbow-to-elbow with the officer who'd delivered the news to the child's mother.

Coming away from the incident, Kate's recommendation would have been swift and final—put four bullets in that monster's head. It wouldn't have been the first time the Sanction had delivered that kind of outcome, but they rarely did so in the States because of the difficulty in covering up an execution, no matter how justified.

In the end, it had been the suspect who'd provided the solution, finally leaving DNA at the scene. No matter what the defense tried, he'd be convicted, but it was small consolation after he had killed again, right under her nose.

This morning, she'd marched into the Director's office and torn up the contract covering the Florida case. She couldn't take this madness anymore. Whatever lofty ideals she'd had of common-sense justice were

history. She was burnt out. Exhausted. Frustrated, jaded, and unable to see past the job.

In her present state, she was more hindrance than help, and even after she resigned, it would be years before she'd feel even remotely normal again. And that's what she wanted above anything. Normalcy. To do normal things like normal people. Live a normal life in a normal house. Maybe find a nice, normal guy, have a nice, normal marriage and normal kids who'd have normal fights over normal issues.

What kept her awake at night was knowing what could happen to normal people, through no fault of their own.

"Are you even listening to me?" Alex turned her around and forced her chin up so he could turn her face this way and that in the light. "God. You look awful."

"Thanks."

He continued his examination, and Kate knew she wasn't the cause of his hostile expression. She and Alex were notoriously overprotective of each other, and with good reason. Their parents had died when Kate had been twelve and Alex ten. And while they were luckier than most, having been left extremely well off financially, the Sanction was a small, stressful world they'd be expected to lead one day soon.

Sometimes—now, for instance—the pressure could become too much. When that happened, they took care of one another, but this time was different. She was hanging by a thread, and she knew Alex could feel it.

He produced a cellphone and hit a speed dial number while shrugging out of his dark brown ski jacket.

"Dispatch code forty-forty, extension one-oh-one," he said into the phone. "Hey, Gladys. Tell Layne if she doesn't call me back within ten minutes, there will be hell to pay."

Alex was in acute take-charge mode, aiming straight for the top of the North American chain of command—their aunt. Layne Crawford, Chairwoman of the North American Council. She was married to their late father's brother Arthur, who was also the Sanction's Operative Support Director.

Thwarted momentarily by Aunt Layne's assistant, Alex was forced to add, "Sorry, Gladys. I didn't mean to swear, but... I know. Forgive me, then find the woman. I need to talk to her. It's about Kate. No, no. She's standing right in front of me, safe and sound. I just need—I don't *care* who she's talking to. Get her attention or you're gonna hear a lot worse than *hell*. Ten minutes, Gladys. I mean it."

He hung up, flipping his phone shut with an authoritative snap. "All right. I need you to listen to me, Kate."

"Why? So you can talk me out of it?"

"Honey, Layne showed a lot of faith placing you here, and you do an excellent job. Think what'll happen if you quit."

"Nothing will happen. I'm so busy with Investigations cases I'm hardly ever here, and the staff certainly doesn't need me. Anyone would do in my place."

"That is totally untrue," Alex said.

As if he'd know. Alex thought being in charge of the tactical center attached to the Sanction's Eveleth facility clued him into everything that went on up here, but the tactical center was only a bunker full of computers, holding cells, and barracks. Important in Emergency Management situations, yet nowhere near as important as the rehab program.

In a joint experiment between the FBI's former Behavioral Sciences Unit and the Sanction, this informal but highly secure facility had been overhauled to treat and protect juvenile offenders whose test scores

indicated they could go on to successful careers in law enforcement. The counseling staff was subcontracted by the FBI. Kate's role in the production was to play dorm mother, and make sure the facility's security standards were upheld.

The rehab program was the only part of her job she actually wanted, yet she'd always suspected this was her aunt's devious way of prepping her for the Sanction Chairmanship. Over the ten years she'd been stationed here, Kate had accidentally learned far too much about how to keep the peace between extremely intelligent, highly strung individuals.

In all fairness to Aunt Layne, Kate knew the woman's motives hadn't been entirely selfish—mostly, perhaps, but not entirely. Layne had wanted someone up here she could trust, and it had been a peace offering at the time to make up for the mandatory stint in Investigations.

Even still, Kate should never have gone along with it. Immersed in her work as she'd been, she'd forgotten to fight against the current, or even realize how deeply they were drawing her into this abnormal life. She hadn't resisted, always assuming someday, someone would come to their senses and get her out of this mess.

But no one was coming to save her. Even if they tried, they wouldn't get far. Her and Alex's great-grandmother had founded the Sanction before World War One, and as dictated by the company's charter, the Global Chairman's office was to be held by a family member in the direct line of descent. Being the oldest made Kate next in line. If she didn't put her foot down, one day soon she'd be CEO of a company she wasn't cut out to run.

Alex should be Chairman. He was strong in all the right ways. Fiercely intelligent, rock-solid in a crisis, and incapable of stomaching political nonsense. And already, Alex was highly respected. He was well

known for his work in Emergency Management, well liked within the company itself, and in Kate's opinion, the logical choice as leader.

Now, finally, she would make sure Alex was given his due. Once she resigned, he'd be the chosen one, so she had all the more reason to quit.

Or maybe this was a big cop out. She didn't know, and didn't care anymore. This was killing her piece by piece and if no one else had the sense to let her off the family hook, she'd free herself by any means necessary.

"Just..." Alex started, then said, "Here's what I'll do. When Layne calls back, I'll make her remove you from the roster, effective immediately. Go hide somewhere for a couple weeks. A month. Or at least until the dust settles."

"Dust?"

Alex made a frustrated noise, and for the first time since his arrival half an hour ago, she took a good look at her brother. There was a deep furrow between his brilliantly blue eyes, and dark circles marred the perpetually tan skin beneath them.

"Alex?" she prompted.

"No, no. I didn't mean dust over what happened with the Director this morning. There's some other weirdness going on. Nothing you need to worry about, but it's best you didn't draw any attention to yourself."

"Is there ever *not* weirdness going on?" Kate argued. "I'll resign if I darn well please."

"You can't."

"Watch me. I can't take this anymore."

"I know, honey. And I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait until I say it's okay."

"Oh, now I need your permission, too?"

“Yes, actually, you do, from both the legal department *and* me. If you resign, I’m the one stuck in the hot seat.”

“Come off it. Can’t you be honest just this once and admit the only reason you don’t want the job is because you think you’d be taking something from me?”

“I...”

“Don’t even bother trying to spin that one,” she said. “It’s true. But trust me when I say I genuinely, sincerely, and most emphatically *want* you to have it. I’ll even wrap it up and stick it under the tree if you like.”

“That’s not funny, Kate. The Chairmanship is no joke, and if you—of all people—were to resign right now, there’d be trouble, thanks to this latest crisis.”

“Wait. You said dust earlier. Which is it? Dust or a crisis?”

“Crisis, I’m afraid. A crisis of Uncle William proportions,” Alex said.

Oh hell. William Ormond was the Sanction’s current CEO, a.k.a. the Global Council Chairman, and their uncle from the other side of the family. Alex couldn’t stand him. Kate loathed him, and the rest of the company wasn’t exactly wild about Uncle William, either. He kept the business thriving, but took his title and the Sanction far more seriously than he should.

“What’d he do now?” Kate asked.

“You have to swear you won’t repeat this. Someone took an awful risk to tell me as much as they did.”

“Who? And what did they tell you?”

“Sorry, but I can’t say who. All I’ve been told so far is that Uncle William has his eye on the charter. He wants to change it somehow, but my source didn’t know any specifics yet.”

Great. The gist of the charter was that the Sanction was powerless by itself. They were granted a few internal rights to protect and police their

own, but otherwise they couldn't touch an investigation or action without a request from a recognized law enforcement or peacekeeping entity. Any evidence of impropriety or political favoritism would forfeit their ability to practice inside a region, and open them up to liability and prosecution.

It all sounded very legal and limiting, but in everyday practice, they were much more than a tool for use in last resort scenarios. Many of the Sanction's better known operatives had achieved celebrity status among world-leader circles, and their advice was often more respected than a leader's own advisors.

But there were limits to that respect. If Uncle William altered the charter and undid a century of hard-earned trust, the Sanction would be finished.

Kate asked, "Why would he touch the charter?"

"I don't know. I have no idea what was on the table, so..." Alex shrugged. "What I *do* know is that you need some rest. A month will do you good, and give whatever this is a chance to cool down. Afterwards, if you still want to resign, we'll talk."

"What's there to talk about? We both know you're the one who should be running this company, not me."

"Here we go again."

"Alex," she pleaded, "You know you're the better—"

"No. I'm not, and you're in no state to make a decision. What you need is some time with the kids. That always makes you feel better."

"Yeah. I love being despised."

Her brother laughed. "They don't despise you. They've just learned how to guilt you into submission. But that reminds me—how's Tina coming along?"

"Extremely well, believe it or not."

Alex uttered a very bad word directed at the girl's stepfather, who richly deserved it and more. Tina had been fifteen years old when she'd shot the man in cold blood for fear her five-year-old sister was about to fall victim to his sexual abuse.

Normally such a case would be tagged self-defense or mercifully brushed under the carpet, and this one would have been, too, if Tina hadn't shot him twelve times, stopped to reload, and emptied another clip into him. Twice.

Tina's lawyer had pleaded no contest on the advice of Aunt Layne, who'd pulled every string possible to see the girl remanded to the program's custody. With no mother living to stand in the way, she'd been placed with them fifteen months ago.

Four months after Tina's arrival, Kate had pulled a few strings herself. Tina's sister Lori was now under program custody as well. The arrangement wasn't entirely legal, but it had led to an enormous breakthrough. Once Lori had been safe and free of the foster system, Tina had finally begun to respond.

Alex's question didn't bode well. He might not understand the ins and outs of the program, but he knew how to spoil the living daylight out of these kids. Every time Alex came up to do inventory the counseling staff would be in an uproar for weeks afterwards over gifts he'd left or new hobbies he'd introduced. It would be even worse now that it was the holidays. The staff fought hard to keep things on a nice, even emotional keel but it was rather hard when Alex would show up in a Santa costume and bring the house down.

Alex's phone rang, and when a vicious argument ensued between aunt and nephew Kate was reminded of the dictator gene her brother carried to offset the Santa one.

“No,” he said. “You don’t need to talk to her, Layne. Just take her off the damned roster. She needs a vacation, not a guilt trip.”

Alex shoved her into a desk chair and jabbed an index finger, indicating she should stay put while he took the phone into the hallway.

The yelling continued for quite some time, featuring accusations such as *bleeping* slave-driver, unfeeling witch, and a startling eruption of profanity when Alex was put on hold.

He stepped back inside, pacing while he waited. In the cold, high-ceilinged room he had plenty of room to move.

Someone really should paint this place. She always meant to, but she never had time between Investigations cases and facility duties to do more than litter the place with photographs. So the molding remained a crisp white, the walls an arctic, impersonal blue, and the furnishings an unimaginative pine.

Layne must have come back on the line, for Alex had stopped pacing. Whatever Layne was telling him must be bad. His face had lost all expression, and Alex was always at his most calm when things were at their worst.

He confirmed it after hanging up. “I have to go. Jack Halloway’s in trouble. Someone dumped him at an ER about four hours ago.”

“Jack? What happened?”

She knew Halloway, and respected him deeply. Everyone did. He’d been with the company for ages, and seemed to be the only Global Council member who cared more for the operatives than his seat on the board.

“We’re not sure. Layne just got the call herself and doesn’t know much.”

“Where is he? Who brought him in?”

“He’s in New York, but that’s all we know. At any rate, you’re off the roster, and the tac center audit will have to wait until the new year. I’ll be back...some time. I don’t know when. Cancel tomorrow night for us.”

“Tomorrow night?”

Alex dropped his chin and gave her a tolerant look. “The North American branch Christmas party? Hello, you were on the planning committee.”

“Ah jeez, I completely spaced it off.”

“Cancel for both of us. Lord knows you’re in no shape for a party.”

“I can’t cancel,” Kate said, then groaned. “Layne will scream if I don’t go.”

“True. Go, then. And make sure you talk to her about all this.”

“Won’t that be fun?”

“No. But do it anyway. I need to go,” he said.

“All right. Please be careful, and call me when you know something.”

“I will. Until then, take a nap.”

“Is it possible for us to have a conversation where you’re not continually telling me what to do?”

“I doubt it.” He opened the door. “Go to bed.”

Despite herself, she smiled a little and gave a hand signal reminding him to call her. It wasn’t the gesture she’d have liked to give him, but it would have to do.

Kate stayed where she was and listened to his car pull away, her head a messy swirl of Jack Halloway, Alex, pink bath robes, the Christmas party, and her aunt.

Rubbing her eyes, she sighed. What would she do about Layne?

Kate had a plan for hitting her aunt with the resignation news, but it wouldn’t be pretty. Layne had been in the Bureau’s Behavioral Sciences Unit and an acknowledged expert on interrogation techniques before

she'd been recruited into the Sanction. And if Alex couldn't have a conversation without bossing her around, Layne couldn't have one without poking and prodding at Kate's deepest, darkest fears as if they were an under-done steak.

The scary thing was, it was done out of love. Layne and Uncle Arthur had taken her and Alex in after their parents had died, and their support and affection had been as freely given as it had been needed.

It was rather hard to be grateful for that at times, however. Uncle Arthur was a total pushover where his brother's children were concerned, but Layne was more demanding. With Layne's love came expectations, and you fell short of them at your own risk.

The resignation plan would cause a fight. A huge one, and she supposed Layne would have a right to feel disappointed. Maybe even betrayed, but this had all gone too far. The Sanction was her family's legacy, not her own pursuit, and while she believed in what they did, she was the last one who should be in charge.

Layne wouldn't understand, and after more than forty-eight hours without sleep, Kate didn't understand anymore, either. It was time to get started on the nightly rituals so she could finally shut down.

She left her home and followed the covered walkway leading into the main building where the kids were housed. It had been a train depot way back when. All six buildings in the complex were remnants of a failed mining town, restored and re-fitted for their use.

Inside the depot were ten dormitory rooms where the inmates slept. There was also a common room, kitchen, cafeteria, entertainment center, library, a couple classrooms, and a veritable maze of quiet alcoves. Most of the rehabilitation happened in them, and what didn't go on in there went on in the athletic complex behind the depot.

Keeping the inmates' minds and bodies fully occupied was a must. Idle inmates were ornery inmates as the counselors liked to say, and the kids in this facility were not your average offenders. They all possessed genius-level IQs and certain other attributes that could make them either a great asset to society or public enemy number one.

Right now they were at their preferred limit of six cases. Tina, two gang members, a boy who'd been compiling an explosive device in his high school's boiler room and an arsonist.

Last but not least was their newest arrival, David Brighton. He'd been here almost six months, and he was the first and only one she saw in the common room, draped across a chair, sulking as usual.

The most troublesome of the lot by far, David was one of the smartest but most tempestuous people Kate had ever met, and while he was a threat, he was here more for his own protection than society's. At age sixteen, he'd already used his computer wizardry to perpetrate a string of thefts so daring and impressive the FBI's Internet Crime Unit and the National Security Agency were prepared to go toe-to-toe over the boy's future career.

They'd have to wait. David was nowhere near ready to be let loose into the wild again. Drug dealers and organized crime figures had been his victims of choice, and his life expectancy until certain deals were struck was minimal at best.

He was a strong candidate for success, however. No matter what his history might imply, David had a healthy sense of right and wrong, and could be very charming when he wasn't busy hating them all. Plus he was already handsome enough to stop traffic, which certainly wouldn't hurt any career choices he might make.

At the moment, his curly blond mop hung over his eyes, and his clothing was atrocious. Jeans hung low on narrow hips and the button-down shirt he'd pretended to button was a wrinkled disaster.

Kate approached with a sigh, too tired to engage in the usual battle they had every time she'd been gone a few days.

As for David, he continued to sprawl, one eyebrow raised in haughty annoyance.

"Good evening, Warden Crawford," the boy said in mock respect.

"Hello, sunshine. Make anyone scream today?"

"Two. A banner day. Sorry you missed it."

"Mmm. Where is everybody?"

"Computer training until nine-thirty, so I'm banned for the duration," he grumbled. "You look tired."

"I am."

"Where have you been all week?"

She hated these questions. The kids were led to believe this was a federally run facility. Her Sanction duties were never discussed.

David, unfortunately, already knew more about the Sanction than he should, especially about the operative who'd finally caught the little puke at his own game. The operative in question had also been a thief. Still was, in fact, even though he worked for the Sanction now.

They were very similar creatures, David and his captor. Both very handsome, very charming, and as untrusting as they were brilliant.

"You know I can't tell you anything," Kate said. "So stop asking."

"Fine. Then tell me when I'll get computer privileges."

"Uh...never?"

"You are so totally unfair!"

"I'm sure it seems that way to you, but it makes perfect sense to me. Giving you access to a computer would be like handing a murderer a loaded weapon."

His annoyed look deepened into a scowl. "And just when I was about to offer a shoulder rub. Shot down in flames."

"Do we need to talk about inappropriate exchanges again?"

"Cut me a break. You may be almost twice my age, but you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

She warned, "I don't find this amusing."

"Neither do I. A guy's ego can only take so much, you know. And I'm in a very delicate mental state."

"Which is why I don't find it amusing."

The boy's long lashes made his eye roll impressively dramatic. "Do you have to take everything so damned seriously? I don't mean anything by it."

"Yes, you do. Making people uncomfortable gives you a measure of control, and I'd be a fool to cooperate."

"Has anyone ever gotten the better of you? I mean, seriously. You're *cold*."

He might be right. She supposed she was over-sensitive to David because of Patrick, and she'd kept her distance as a result. Being objective was impossible, and despite David's arrogance, he was indeed delicate. Any misstep on her part, and the staff would pay for it.

Problem being, David felt her distance and it bothered him. If matters worsened, she might have to tell him why she didn't spend as much time with him as the others, just so he'd understand she had nothing against him personally.

The time was upon them, she knew, watching the boy fold in on himself. It was a common occurrence around here and always meant backward progress.

“David, I think it’s time I ’fessed up.”

“To what?” he snapped.

“You remind me very much of someone, and the similarities make it hard for me to deal fairly with you. So I’m sorry if I seem cold. I don’t mean to be.”

“Doesn’t stop you from avoiding me, though, does it?”

This was the part that always amazed her about these kids. It didn’t matter how hard they could be or what they’d done, they still ached for approval and attention. The interesting thing about David was that he was refreshingly upfront about his needs.

Or he could be baiting her again. She was about to ask him whether he was when his eyes fixed on something behind her and he uttered a sharp, “Holy *shit!*”

“David,” she scolded, so busy glaring at him that it took her a moment to glance over her shoulder at whatever had him transfixed.

When she saw the man behind her, she very nearly said the same thing.

Chapter Three

“What are you doing here?” David demanded.

Kate watched Patrick ignore the boy completely, closing in on her instead to drop a kiss on her astonished cheek.

“Hi, Kitten.”

She tried to return his greeting, but the sound that came out was more like a squeak.

Typical. Patrick had always made her unspeakably nervous. Widely acknowledged as the rock star of law enforcement, he always seemed to be up to something, and always gave the impression he knew something no one else did.

Usually, both were true, and Kate believed half the work Patrick was contracted to do was completely unnecessary. To certain people, his exorbitant fees were worth it for a chance to bend his ear or ask a favor.

She must be the only one in their circle who actively avoided him. But then, she was the only one who needed to. For the last ten years, *she’d* been up to something. She knew something he didn’t, and could never tell him.

A hot glow of fear and shame burned beneath her skin as she inspected him in short, nervous glances that never quite dared venture above the collar of his black cashmere turtleneck.

Why was he here? Had he finally found out the truth?

“Oh, that figures,” David grumbled. “First he busts me, then he paws my girl.”

“You,” Patrick said, pointing at David, “Shut it. She’s not your girl.”

“She’s not yours, either. She dumped you a long time ago.” At two indignant reactions from the adults, the boy added smugly, “Word gets around.”

Kate rubbed her neck and inspected her shoes, certain her face must be crimson by now. It was bad enough Patrick was here. She didn’t need their history dredged up, too. And when she found out who’d been telling tales, they’d regret it.

Patrick took her elbow and told David, “You wanna take shots at me for putting you in here, be my guest. But never disrespect your keeper, kid. Especially when I’m within striking distance.”

As she ventured a peek at Patrick’s face, her spine straightened, and even David had to rethink whatever jab he’d been about to make.

Patrick Mancini was no one to be messed with in the best of moods, and right now there was fire in those liquid-black eyes. Had he looked at her that way, she would have crawled under the nearest solid heavy object.

When he began to haul her back the way he’d come, she didn’t fight him. A useless endeavor, as she well knew. He had a way of getting what he wanted, rules, boundaries and manners be damned.

And he must want something. He wouldn’t have come here otherwise. They hadn’t been able to avoid each other entirely since the breakup, and left alone long enough, they always descended into the same old argument about why she’d broken up with him.

It was never pleasant for either of them. She hated lying to him almost as much as he hated being lied to, so she doubted he would have come here by choice.

What if he really *had* found something out about his mother?

That eternal wrench of remorse grabbed onto her and twisted hard while she hurried to keep up with him, unsure she’d be able to withstand

another argument. She was tired and caught off guard, and Patrick wasn't dense. All it would take was one wrong word, and he'd jump on it. Then she'd have to hope and pray the bad blood between her and Uncle William wouldn't do her in.

Once inside the walkway leading to her house, she decided this was as good a place to start as any. Better, in fact. Walking beside him was much easier than facing him. She asked, "Why are you here?"

"I need a favor."

That wasn't what she'd expected him to say. Was he holding off until they were somewhere private before the yelling began?

They were halfway down the passage before she realized she might have over-reacted. The only other person who knew the truth had even more reason than she did to keep quiet.

It was likely Patrick still didn't know anything. She'd just had such a horrible few months, and was so paranoid about him learning the truth that she always expected the worst.

"What kind of favor?" she asked.

"I need David. And I need access to the tactical center."

"David? I—but—"

"It's an emergency, Kit. There's a hard drive I need tapped in a secure environment, and he's the man for the job."

Dragging them both to a halt in the doorway, she kept her eyes on the top button of his black wool peacoat. "No he's not. You've got computer experts on your own team, you know. One on every continent."

"If this were information I wanted spread far and wide, that might be an option. But it's not. So I came here where I can contain the situation."

"Contain? My brother's in charge of all thirty tac centers. You think he won't notice you messing around in there?"

“If he does, you can cover for me. It’s the best option, Kitten. And David’s an expert.”

“Forget it. He’s not allowed anywhere near a computer.”

“You can make an exception.”

“No, I can’t,” she said. “There has to be another—”

Patrick stopped her by dipping his head and raising her chin, forcing her to make eye contact, just as her brother had done earlier.

Having no other choice but to look at him, she shied back a bit. The man was completely overwhelming in every way. Painfully handsome with that too-long, wild black hair, the honey-gold skin and bone structure sharp enough to cut diamond.

And then there was the intense black stare that had always been her undoing. But most overpowering of all was the staggering rush of memories. Some so good she could hardly believe they’d ever happened to her, and some so horrifying she’d give anything to undo them.

“I’m not going away, Kit. You can give in now, or delay the inevitable a few more minutes. It doesn’t matter to me. You know how much I enjoy our little talks.”

He’d moved in very close, staring with those smoldering eyes, and if she wasn’t mistaken, he’d threatened her with her least favorite topic if he didn’t get what he wanted.

On any other day, she might have buckled. But she was through being pushed around, and she knew what this was about. He’d done something rash again. Either that, or he was *about* to do something rash, and wanted her to help him do it.

Fat chance, and she needed to get her point across, pronto. Let him know she was suspicious, and show some backbone about it. He’d always claimed his work was the art of managing risks. If she made this

one too costly for him, he'd be gone in no time. She asked, "Is it business or personal?"

"Business."

"Really. How much trouble are you in?"

"I'm not in trouble. But I will be if I can't tap this drive."

Sighing, she shoved his hand away and walked through the door, letting it slam in his face.

He, of course, came in after her. "I'm doing this, Kit. It has to be done."

"Has it escaped your attention that if you get yourself in trouble, you'll—"

"I know," he interrupted. "If I break the rules, they'll ship me back to jail where they found me. But those same people pay me obnoxious sums to break rules each and every day."

"Mixed messages aren't an excuse," she argued, turning on him.

This time it was Patrick who shied back. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm not all right. You come barging in here asking me to lie to my brother and get David in—"

"Asking? Whatever gave you the idea I was *asking*? I'm giving you an order."

"You can order me all you want, but you can't touch David. He can't go near a computer without violating a court order."

"Um, Kit? Remember that whole thing where the Sanction isn't bound by law?"

Giving him a withering look, she said, "Our privileges don't extend to these kids."

"That won't matter if no one finds out. I won't tell anyone, and you know David won't. He'd probably sell his soul for some key time right about now."

“What about me?” she asked. “Why would I cover for you?”

“Because you broke my heart and scarred me for life.”

“Well. I see you still think the entire world revolves around your big fat head.”

“How annoyed you must be that it *does*.”

What a surprise. Arguing already, and in record time.

Why couldn't he give up and go away? Anyone with any sense would know it wasn't possible. Not only would Alex find out, but there was a court order standing in the way, and Patrick was the last person David would ever help.

There was nothing she could do to dissuade him except refuse to argue anymore. “The answer is no. And that's final. Try anything, and I'll call Global.”

“So that's it, then?” he asked. “Your answer is no, and I'm just supposed to go away?”

“I believe that's what I said, yes.”

He stared at her, wondering what had happened to the Kitten Crawford he'd known and coveted all those years ago. He'd expected her to run him around a bit, but not refuse him outright.

A miscalculation on his part. On the plane ride over, he'd spent his time obsessing about Ormond when he should have been reminding himself to behave.

He'd meant to, and should have. She'd broken up with him. Big deal. She hadn't been the first and certainly not the last, but he could at least be in the same room with the others without deliberately provoking them.

Kate was different because she'd lied about why she'd ended their affair. It was maddening. She knew perfectly well he didn't believe her lies, but kept right on telling them.

So here he was, the clock ticking his life away, and instead of keeping his eyes on the prize, he was antagonizing the woman who might be his and Jack's only hope.

They would get nowhere on their case against Ormond without her help. Everyone in the Sanction knew she was the best investigator they had, and somewhere in Jack's crazy conspiracy theories lurked the truth. If anyone could uncover it, Kate could, and his first priority should be keeping her sweet.

A right fine mess he'd made of it so far, and now she'd called him to the carpet.

Time to fake a graceful defeat. It wouldn't do to give in too quickly or Kate would be even more suspicious, and he didn't trust her not to call Global. Ormond would hear of it within minutes, figure out Jack had handed him the hard drive, and they'd both be dead long before Christmas.

An equal but different threat to his plans were her Aunt Layne and Uncle Arthur Crawford. With one word from Kate, those two would be on him, and he could guarantee they'd find out about the Kretts. They'd swat him under a protective order the next instant, and he'd be sunk before he even got started.

The clock is ticking. The clock is ticking.

Looking back on it later, he was quite impressed with himself. It had only taken an hour to get Kate into bed. Without him, sadly, but she'd been so tired she could barely keep herself awake to eat the meal one of the staffers had forced on her.

Meanwhile, her suspicion had worked in his favor. She'd managed to hold off snoring until she'd eavesdropped on all his calls.

First, he'd pretended to contact Interpol, speaking to members of his own crew instead, talking right over their confused questions and

protests. They probably thought he'd gone mad, but it had been worth it. Kate had bought the whole thing, believing he was headed home to London this very moment.

Not long after he'd faked a call to his pilot, Kate had begun to nod off. Then, in a habitual show of manners, begged his forgiveness and showed him the door.

A chilly fifteen-minute wait later, he'd snuck back in to check on her, and she'd been so deeply asleep he could have jumped on the bed without waking her.

A bit depressing, that. There'd been a time when she wouldn't have been so eager to be rid of him. But those days were over, and she was asleep. Once she was rested, he'd have another go at enlisting her help.

Until then, there was David to tackle.

After driving around to the northern edge of the property, he parked, killing the lights and the engine. It was dark now, and dangerously cold. He wasn't looking forward to the jog ahead of him, but he'd hang-glide over hell if that's what it took to get even with Ormond.

Loading his coat pockets up with the hard drive and a few tools to help with the security system, he covered the mile to the back of the gymnasium in no time at all. Pointing his binoculars toward the depot, he spotted his target so easily it was almost disappointing.

David was alone on the ground floor of the depot, watching television. The room was dark, and there was no sign of movement anywhere around him.

A glance at his watch warned it was twenty minutes past eight. Ten minutes until the security system locked this place down for the night.

When he tapped on the glass, David jumped. But the boy got up, walked to the window, and once he'd spotted who was outside, held up a single, eloquent finger.

In response, Patrick raised the clear plastic bag containing the hard drive. He could see in the kid's eyes this risk would pay off.

Getting close enough to the glass that David could hear him, he pointed toward the tactical center. "Can you reach that building from inside?"

"No. The walkway's always locked down."

"Meet me at the doors in four minutes. Make sure no one sees you."

A doubtful standoff commenced, but the lure of the computer won out. David turned around and walked away, leaving Patrick to fly back to the tactical center.

There, he was tasked with hijacking security measures. Hardly an obstacle. He'd designed the tac center protections himself, and his own crews had installed them. Rather than disarming the system, he used maintenance codes to get inside, and a few adjustments later, he was free to approach the depot from the walkway without issue.

It had all gone so smoothly thus far, he was half-expecting what came next. David leaned casually against the jamb and prepared to make himself difficult. "What do you want?"

"I need this drive cracked."

"You're a bolt short of a lock if you think I'd help you."

"Look, kid. We only have about forty-five seconds before the system stops ignoring the door you're holding open, so there's no time to compare lengths. Either you do this or you don't."

"What's in it for me?"

"Nothing. I don't have any sway here."

"And Kate? Does she know about this?"

He wasn't sure how to answer that question. He didn't know the boy well enough to guess which buttons to push, so he opted for the truth. "No. She'd kill me if she found out, but she's asleep."

The boy debated for a few seconds, then nudged his way upright and let the door close behind him. “I couldn’t see the drive very well through the window. Any modifications?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t even really looked at it. All I know is, the person who gave it to me couldn’t access it, and when he tried to tap the thing, it alerted someone somehow.”

“Oh great. What kind of equipment do I have to work with?”

“Probably more than you need. These tac centers’ hard- and software are audited every three months, and upgraded religiously.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything,” David said.

“Too bad. If there’s something missing, you’ll have to improvise because I won’t be able to get it for you.”

“Nice. How much time do I have?”

“None.”

The tactical center didn’t look like much on the main floor. There was a big kitchen, dining room, a couple bath- and bedrooms, with more of the same upstairs. The sublevel floors were far more impressive. The first sub-floor held a situation room, two holding cells, an interrogation room and storage for safety equipment.

They bypassed that floor to the second sublevel. Concrete, glass, and metal everywhere they looked, and when they reached the computer room, David stopped dead in his tracks.

“Holy...”

Patrick smirked and let the kid stand in slack-jawed awe.

The room was good-sized, about twenty by fifteen meters. Even still, the four walls were covered floor-to-ceiling in computer equipment, and work stations took up most of the floor space.

Feeling he’d just let the proverbial kid loose in a candy store, he said nothing as David took a tour of inspection. A change came over the boy

not much later. The awe had given way to something else, and he moved faster and faster through the room until he finally asked, “Where’s the rest?”

“The rest?”

“These are just the toys. They must have a workroom or storage for parts and tools, and I’ll need stuff.”

“There are a couple rooms on either side of the elevator shaft. Let’s go.”

They had a look around. By the time they returned, David was abnormally quiet, and looking a bit intimidated. But he parked himself at a work station and asked, “Do you know the password for this terminal?”

“No. Is that a problem?”

“Shouldn’t be. I’ll work around it while you tell me about the disk.”

Patrick gave him a fairly accurate version of events, unsure what might or might not be important.

“The access signal it sent out is called a boot tag,” David said. “Extremely rare these days, even in the more hard-core markets. Definitely too big a pain for the instant gratification crowd.”

“But can you tap it?”

“I’m not sure. Once your guy separated that drive from its machine, he might have screwed us royally unless the code key’s on that thumb drive.” He pointed to the small, green plastic device Jack had mentioned.

“My guy said I’d need it to decrypt the drive.”

“Okay. So that’ll unlock the data once we’re in, but hashing the password on a secured drive like this will take forever. Days. Weeks, maybe.”

“How can it take that long? Passwords are your specialty. The NSA uses your hash code system, for God’s sake.”

“Yeah, they confiscated the whole thing and aren’t paying me a dime for it, but *I’m* the one doing time for theft. Does this sound fair to anyone?”

Patrick said, “Oh, it’s fair. It cost them seven figures to upgrade their systems after you showed all your little hacker mates how to get past their old ones.”

“They still can’t prove it was me.”

“Yes, actually, they can, and you should be grateful all they did was take your hash code system.”

“Lucky me,” David muttered. “But I don’t know what you expect me to do, here. I can’t rebuild that hash code database from scratch. It took more than a year to compile all that coding. And if you don’t know squat about hash codes, then how the hell’d you bust me?”

“Were you deaf in court?”

“It’s hard to hear over the freight train when you’re being railroaded.”

“You were hardly railroaded. Your arrest had nothing to do with the hacking prep-work. You got caught because of what you did when you broke into those Mob guys’ houses. Very amateurish, I have to say. I’d thought I might have found myself a worthy adversary for once, but you left trace evidence in nearly every room. I was quite disappointed.”

“I was only fifteen.”

“By the time I was fifteen, I’d already pinched forty-million dollars worth of diamonds from a Dutch customs warehouse.”

It had been the series of jobs that had gotten him busted, too, but the boy didn’t need to know that.

David said, “You suck.”

“Whatever. Get to work.”

“How? With what? And are you sure this system is completely closed? I mean, they’ve got a shit-hot satellite connection line. If I take that thing live, you’re sure we can’t send anything unintended outside this facility?”

“I wouldn’t have come here if I wasn’t sure. These servers are...I can’t remember the exact term they use, but basically what it means is these terminals can only talk to other Sanction terminals, or select US, Canadian, and Mexican government systems. Including the NSA.”

“You mean I have a dedicated connection to the NSA?”

“Yes. Dedicated. That’s the word.”

“Well, God. Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

It took David fifteen minutes to bypass the tac center computer’s password protection, complaining all the while that the Sanction didn’t safeguard their terminals very well.

Another hour passed before the kid had everything set up, determined the thumb drive could decrypt the hard disk’s contents, and had established his maiden legal connection into the NSA’s system.

“Problem,” the boy said. “I’m gonna be missed soon.”

“How soon?”

“Christmas break starts tomorrow, but it’s still lights out at ten. Right now, it’s nine forty-five.”

“All right. Who’s in charge when Kate’s not available?”

“That Wyatt dude. Total softy.”

“Some high-security facility she’s running,” Patrick commented.

“You’re cracked if you think they have to worry about us running away. Mostly they worry about people’s parents or whoever coming up here to cause trouble.”

Surprised, Patrick asked, “You wouldn’t break out of here if you could?”

“No way. This place is a vacation compared to jail. Or home,” David said, fiddling with something. “But about Kate—did you hear about Tina? The one who shot her stepfather?”

“No.”

“Long story short, if Kate catches us and tries to cause trouble, threaten to call Child and Family Services about Tina’s little sister.”

“Huh?”

David gave him a deceptively angelic smile. “Just tell her. She’ll back off so fast she’ll leave skid marks.”

“Let’s hope it won’t come to that. Can I trust you enough to leave you alone for a few minutes?”

“Dude, I’m on a mission here.”

Explaining David’s absence turned out to be laughably easy. Everyone at the facility knew who he was, and that he’d been the one to bring David in.

“I know it’s not really allowed,” he told the night-duty staff, “but I thought I’d pay him a visit. You won’t mind if I keep him at Kate’s for a while?”

It almost made him feel guilty, the way they all responded as if he were Father Christmas or something. They invited him to park his car in a garage, and after retrieving it he made a quick run across the yard to make sure Kate was still asleep.

Very asleep. This was beginning to border on the insulting.

He’d been gone longer than he’d intended, but David was hard at it when he returned, pausing only long enough to ask, “Are you absolutely certain this place isn’t monitored?”

“I never said it wasn’t monitored.”

“So someone will find out we’ve taken one of the terminals offline?”

Patrick looked at David's setup. The control terminal was connected to the NSA, but a second terminal had been disconnected so that Ormond's hard drive could be hooked into the machine instead.

"They'll know," he said. "But don't worry about it."

"Don't worry? The NSA added this new randomization scrambler that—"

"Could you please use words I'll understand?"

"Jeez. The problem is, this is taking longer than I thought and Kate's holding the scorecard on my computer privileges. If she catches me down here, I'm screwed."

"I'll deal with Kate. Less talking. More hacking."

"I work better with noise," David said. "Tell me a story. Why'd Kate dump you?"

"None of your business."

"You want this drive cracked or not?"

"Listen, you little—"

"Relax," David said. "I'm a kid without a father. I need guidance and wisdom from my elders. So what'd you do? Cheat on her?"

There was no way he was having this conversation. He didn't like the kid's persistent interest in Kate, for one thing. For another—because of Kate's lies—he had no idea why she'd really ended it.

The kid didn't need to know that, either. However, he took offence at the idea he might have cheated on Kate.

"No. I didn't cheat on her."

"Had she been cheating on you?"

"I don't know. And shut up. This is none of your business."

"Then she dumped you for someone else. Tell me so I can get it out of my brain. I'll work faster."

“Christ on a cracker. They should place you with Layne Crawford and special you in interrogation. You’d have a sterling career, annoying people into talking.”

“No way, bro. That woman scares the shit outta me.”

Patrick had to laugh. Layne scared the shit out of him, too, but he rather liked the old bat. Her husband Arthur, too. When they’d sprung him from that prison cell nineteen years ago, both the Crawfords had made it quite clear they didn’t trust him and expected him to flunk out of the Sanction Academy. Anyone else might take that in a bad way, but he’d never been one to discount the value of knowing exactly where he stood.

He asked David, “When did you meet Layne?”

“Right before I came here. She calls me about once a month to make sure I’m behaving. Says the FBI has their eye on me.”

“Internet Crime, I’d wager. Nice gig.”

“That’s what they tell me. Which is another reason I don’t wanna get caught.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take the heat for this one.”

If things went wrong, he wouldn’t be around long enough to take the heat for anything, but it wasn’t as if the Sanction was some mindless outfit. They’d know who was responsible for everything that had happened here tonight. Neither Kate nor David would be blamed.

Even if things went right, he’d wind up in jail. The Sanction wouldn’t be able to hide the fact he’d received stolen property from Jack, and the Dutch had been very clear: if he ever broke the law again without Sanction authorization, he’d go back to jail with time added to match the offense.

By the end of this, he'd have violated the conditions of his release several times over. He was violating it right now as a matter of fact, defying the court order barring David from using a computer.

It occurred to him then that if he went to jail, he'd be an easy target for the Kretts. The Sanction wouldn't protect him. Not after Ormond got done spinning the story to his liking. And given the veil of secrecy surrounding the Sanction and its operatives, nobody else would stand up for the former Chief Thief, either. Rats had a tendency to flee sinking ships, and those same people who were the first to call when they were in trouble would be the first to turn their backs once he became a liability.

To avoid jail, he'd have to do as Jack suggested, and simply disappear, leaving behind everything he'd worked to achieve.

There was no outcome that looked good for him. As unfair as it was, he'd always known it could come to this. The more successful he'd become, the more he threatened Ormond's position, and if it had to end this way, he'd make sure Ormond went down right along with him.

For a moment, he felt the same stab of doubt he'd felt on the plane. How could they do in five days what Jack had failed to do in almost two decades? Jack was convinced Ormond had somehow made Nina Mancini's murder look like an overdose, but what if Jack were wrong?

No. Dammit, no. Now was not the time to get cold feet. That insurance appraisal statement proved Ormond had lied to the American authorities, and where there was smoke, there was fire.

David frowned at something on the screen, and talk was sparse while he scribbled an entire page of unintelligible scrawls.

The kid had a gift for this. He knew what he was doing and was getting it done for no other reason than he loved to do it. Patrick knew how that felt. Theft was his purpose. His passion. Working for the Sanction with all their technology and resources had taken rather a lot of

fun out of it, but he'd discovered a sort of pagan joy in stealing from bad guys.

Probably too much joy. If he hadn't been addicted to the rush of fear over being caught, he might not be in this mess.

Staring at the back of David's head, he wondered how long it would be before the boy's passion got him killed. He'd already had one close call with the Mafia. And if the Mob didn't get him eventually, the Sanction probably would. Layne had already put the boy on the radar by bringing him here to Eveleth, and there was no way someone this talented would escape Ormond's interest.

Ormond would draft him. They'd all use him. Chew him up, then spit him out and stash him under the rug if he ever became too powerful.

Feeling a bit more sympathetic, he didn't put up a stink when the kid asked, "If you're Arabic, how come you sound British?"

"I'm only a quarter Arabic, and I've lived in London most of my life."

"Oh. And you do mostly intelligence theft crap, right?" David asked, and at his nod, commented, "Guess you could pass for a native in the Middle East and stuff."

"In a pinch, yes. But they can spot the Jewish and Italian."

"Walking *jihad*."

"Hardly. How do you know so much about me?"

"The staff," David said. "They must believe we're deaf. And they talk about you like you're a god."

Fabulous.

David said, "I'm serious. You should hear this one story they got about you stealing the Hope Diamond."

"That's been grossly exaggerated. The underwriters paid me to test the Institute's security system, and I found one nasty little glitch."

“Pretty funny, you testing and designing security systems on the side.”

“Nothing funny about it,” Patrick said. “It’s quite lucrative.”

“I didn’t mean funny funny. I meant ironic funny.”

“I know what you meant. People always joke it takes a thief to stop a thief, but it’s true. It’s also exactly how you got caught.”

“Yeah, it is. I hate you, by the way. But I was real sorry to hear about your mom.”

Good Lord. Was there anything these people didn’t gossip about?

Typing furiously all of a sudden, David said, “My dad did the same thing. Well, not exactly the same—he got drunk and drove his car into a lake. Is your father still around?”

“I don’t think...”

“Ah, come on. Just tell me.”

Sighing first, Patrick said, “No. He died before I was born.”

“What happened?”

“He was a test pilot. Took up a prototype fighter and came down the hard way.”

“Oh God, man. I’m sorry.”

He shrugged a shoulder. It could’ve been worse, he remembered his mother saying. It was better Paulo Mancini had died young than kill her daily, risking his life that way. Which didn’t explain why she’d still poisoned herself to forget him for the first eight years of her son’s life. At least she’d managed to get a few clean years in before the end.

And that was *precisely* why Ormond needed to pay. He’d used a woman’s weakness against her, making her own son believe she’d killed herself with drugs.

How could he have ever let himself believe that? In one of their final arguments, she'd sworn on her life she hadn't been using. He hadn't believed her, and he'd give anything to have that moment back.

David said, "Okay. We're in. What do you need off this thing?"

"What? You're done already?"

"Yeah. Didn't turn out to be half as bad as I thought once I got past their stupid... Never mind. You wouldn't understand anyway."

"Right. And screw the FBI. I'll have my people call your people."

David grunted. "You'd better have dental."

"Full coverage. But on to the next thing—I don't know what we're looking for on this drive. Documents. Databases. It could be anything, so we've got a problem."

From the doorway, Kate said, "You've got a problem, all right."

Chapter Four

“David, get up to the dorms. *Now*,” she ordered.

She wanted to scream when the boy looked to Patrick for direction.

“Go,” Patrick told him.

Wasn’t that just like Patrick? He’d busted the kid a year ago, yet somehow managed to con David into doing his bidding.

David said, “Remember what I told you.”

“Go,” Patrick repeated.

“Just let me do one more—”

His hands went for the keyboard and Kate threatened, “If you touch that computer, so help me God you’ll be cleaning toilets for the next six months.”

David—being David—considered for a moment, shrugged, and started typing.

Patrick swiped a hand down his face and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Hey,” David said in a placating voice. “I didn’t do all this so that you’d lose the data. When the hourglass disappears, you should be able to work this terminal like you were sitting in front of the original machine.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

Kate contained herself. This wasn’t really David’s fault. It was Patrick’s, and she refused to fight in front of the boy. But they’d fight. If he wasn’t off facility grounds within the hour she’d...

Well, she wasn’t sure what she’d do. He’d already gotten what he wanted. Too late now to make threats she wouldn’t dare carry out.

On his way past her, David said, "Sorry, Kate."

She gave him her best lowering look, then switched to glaring at Patrick until she heard the elevator begin to clang its way upward. "What are you trying to do to me?"

"I'm not doing anything to you. No one will ever find out about this, so I don't understand why you're so mad."

"Because someone *did* find out. Alex just called to ask why one of the terminals was offline."

"Oops. What did you tell him?"

"Never mind what I—"

"Kitten..." he warned.

"I told him the power had gone out and the terminal must not have rebooted itself. He'll know that's a lie if he checks the logs. So not only did you lie to me, I've now lied to my brother. Plus you deliberately went behind my back, talked David into violating a court order, and you don't understand why I might be mad?"

"There's nothing to worry about. This is a safe system and I was with him the entire time. He didn't do anything wrong."

"You were *not* with him the entire time. According to the staff he was alone for a good twenty minutes while you put your car in the garage and heaven knows what else."

"I went to check you were still asleep. That's it."

Shameless. Utterly shameless. Didn't he understand what he'd done? "What if he sent an e-mail? There are still people out there who want him dead, and this kind of slip-up is exactly what they need to find him."

"He couldn't have. There's no connection to anything but the Sanction or the government."

"Allegedly. You can't tell me he's not smart enough to find a way around that."

Patrick shook his head. "He could, but he wouldn't. He was too worried about getting in trouble with you to do anything that foolish."

"Not worried enough to tell you no. What did you offer him?"

"Nothing."

"I find that very hard to believe."

"It's true nonetheless," Patrick said. "He's just like me. He did it because—"

"Oh, he's *exactly* like you. Always wanting what you can't have and willing to do anything to get it, never mind the consequences or who gets hurt in the process."

"Ah, and now we come to it. It's not David you're angry about, it's ancient history."

If she hadn't been so tired, she would have thrown something at his head.

Then, to add insult to injury, he said, "I suppose I shouldn't have said that aloud. You always did hate hearing the truth."

"No, I hate hearing your version of the truth, which has very little to do with reality."

"Of course. It's the old *he-said, she-said* debate. Naturally, *he* is always wrong, and *she* is always right. There couldn't possibly be more to it than that."

Taking a deep breath, she sank into a desk chair. She was too tired for this, and he didn't know how right he was when he said there was more to it.

She hated this. She hated lying. It was wrong. And worse, he'd convinced himself he'd been hurt when she'd broken up with him, which was a lie if ever there was one. She might have taken a sledgehammer to his pride, perhaps, but nothing more.

Why wouldn't he let it go? It didn't matter anymore. The only thing that mattered was whether David had managed to get a message outside the tactical center.

There was no chance they'd find out on their own. Someone else would have to be called in, which meant she'd be unable to hush this up.

Patrick asked, "Did you consider simply asking him whether he sent anything out?"

"He'd deny it if he had. We'll have to call someone in and make sure he didn't."

"I wouldn't recommend that."

"I don't care what you recommend," Kate said. "His safety is my only concern."

"Go ahead, then. Call someone in, and I'll call the authorities about Tina's little sister."

She could feel the blood draining from her face. How? *How* had he found out about that?

David, of course. "You wouldn't dare," she challenged.

His smirk told her otherwise.

She said, "If you do, I won't be the only one hurt. Lori has nowhere to go except the foster system, and those girls don't deserve to be separated again because of you."

"David doesn't deserve what you're threatening, either. So let's go ask if he sent anything."

After considering the alternative, she took him up on that and wasn't horribly surprised when they found David still inside the tactical center, helping himself to a can of soda from the kitchen.

Patrick did the honors. "Kate's worried you might have sent an e-mail while you were alone. Put her mind at rest so she'll stop hating me."

"Are you nuts?" David asked, looking at her. "If you knew what happened to the last dude who tried to tap that hard drive, you'd know why I wasn't taking any chances."

"Oh my God," she cried, turning on Patrick.

He had the grace to wince. "Thanks a lot, kid."

"What have you gotten him into?" she asked. "Who had that hard drive and what happened to him?"

Patrick shot David a sharp look, and the boy said, "There's nothing to worry about. I swear. No one could circumvent the satellite fail-safe. Not even me."

"Wha... How would you know that?" she stammered.

"Don't get mad. I had to make sure, so I checked and found out it's a custom job. No idea who coded the signal encryption system but it's so tizz-ight I think I might have cried a little."

"Stop talking," Kate said. She knew defeat and futility when she saw them. "It's way past curfew. Get to your room."

Never one to go quietly, David asked, "You still mad at Patrick?"

"Extremely."

"Good," he said, winking at Patrick on his way out.

"If you're not in your room in two minutes, you're in for it."

"Yeah yeah, Mom," he said, waving a careless hand behind him.

"You see?" Patrick asked. "No harm done. You can breathe now. And you should go back to bed yourself."

"Why? So you can take him to a strip club or something?"

He didn't answer, only stared until she was forced to ask, "What?"

"Is that honestly what you think of me? That I'd involve him on a whim?"

"Yes."

“Well I didn’t. I had no choice but to use him and the tactical computers. They’re built to do what he did with them and as soon as I’ve gotten what I need, I’ll be gone.”

“Typical,” she said. “You have no real way of knowing whether the consequences will show up on my doorstep, but you’ll take what you want and disappear.”

“I can call in some thugs if you like.”

“I like. Call them. Now.”

Surprisingly, he did as she asked, and when he’d hung up, said, “My regulars are prepping a job in Chicago. It’ll take them a couple hours to get here. I’ll still be around by then, I’m sure.”

She bit back any number of comebacks, choosing instead to ask, “So who did tap that hard drive, and what happened to him?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Because the less you know, the better off I’ll be.”

“You’re not funny.”

Leaning against the fridge, he observed, “You used to be a lot nicer to me.”

“Only because I didn’t know any better. I’m not going back to sleep until the thugs have arrived and you’re gone. So whatever you’re looking for on that hard drive, find it and leave.”

“You’ve been spending way too much time with Layne,” he said.

Whatever she might have said in return was interrupted by her cellphone, and Patrick took a quick hop sideways as the clip holding it to her belt snapped in two and went shooting off in his direction, smacking into the refrigerator with a forceful pop.

Karma, she thought, was a beautiful thing. Too bad it had terrible aim.

Her caller was Alex again. Hopefully he had more to report this time.

“Hey,” he said. “Get that terminal straightened out yet?”

“No. I have some other things to take care of first,” she lied, narrowing her eyes at Patrick. “Anything new to report?”

“Yeah. None of it good, though. Jack’s in surgery, but I got a chance to talk to him before they put him under. He doesn’t remember what happened. The last thing he remembers is driving down the road to a friend’s house, and a car veering into him.”

“I thought you said he’d been beaten up.”

“We figure they ran him off the road, then they fought,” Alex said. “His injuries are more consistent with a fight than a car wreck, and the doc said there were metal shavings in his hands.”

“And that’s significant because...”

“Because they’re probably defense wounds, and the shavings might have come from the assailant’s weapon,” Alex said.

“Not necessarily. He could’ve cut his hands on something during the accident, then picked up the shavings from the cars or on the pavement.”

“Maybe, but the doc says otherwise. On to even worse news—Jack can’t remember who brought him to the ER, either, and there’s nothing on the surveillance system. Camera directly over the emergency entrance, but the system’s been wiped.”

“Wiped?” she asked.

“Someone took a magnet to it. Small town, county hospital. Cheap equipment, so the wipe completely fubarred the entire setup.”

“Sounds like a professional to me.”

“Agreed, only it doesn’t make much sense if it was,” Alex said. “Why nearly kill him and then dump him at an ER?”

“Who knows? I don’t suppose they did a tox screen?”

“Couldn’t operate without one. Blood alcohol was negligible, and nothing else on board along the lines of mood or memory inhibitors. They say the memory loss is probably trauma induced and temporary. With a little time, hopefully he’ll be able to give us some answers.”

“Good luck. Oh—why are they operating?”

“Just to get the junk out of his hands. No big deal, but they’re in there pretty deep.” Alex said.

“Ow. Well, tell him I’m thinking about him, and let me know how he does.”

“Sure thing. Now go back to—”

“Alex, if you say that one more time, I’ll scream.”

“Sorry.”

He hung up, and Kate found herself under scrutiny from a pair of dark, dubious eyes. “You’re even talking back to Alex now,” he said. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Go away.”

“Right after you tell me what that was all about.”

She mimicked, “The less you know, the better off I’ll be.”

“Cute.”

“No it’s not, really. Jack Halloway was dumped at an ER this afternoon. He’s in pretty rough shape.”

“*What?*” Patrick barked. “Why wasn’t I called?”

“Do I look like dispatch to you?”

“No, thank God. What happened?”

“Nobody knows. Jack doesn’t remember much. He was in a car accident, they think, then beaten up. They can’t find his car, and now they’ve taken him into surgery to have metal removed from his hands.”

“You said it must have been a professional. Do they have a description of the other car?”

“No,” she said. “They’ve got nothing until he can remember what happened.”

He pulled out his phone, and Kate grabbed his hand. “Stop it. Alex is on top of this and you’ve got enough trouble of your own to deal with.”

“Jack is my best friend.”

“I know he is. But he’s being taken care of, and you’d only be a distraction. Now kindly go downstairs and get back to work. I have to tighten up security.”

“I’ll do it,” he said. “It’s my system.”

“Suit yourself, but be quick about it.”

“Can’t wait to be rid of me, can you?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to answer that,” she told him, turning her back and praying she wouldn’t have to talk to him again before he left.

David was more repentant than she’d expected, and as much as she hated to admit it, the surprise reunion with his digital mistress appeared to have done him a world of good. He was more animated than she’d ever seen him, talking a mile a minute, giving her a blow-by-blow account of the battle.

“That hash code database was unreal, Kate. Sometimes not even I can believe how good I am at that stuff.”

Stifling a sigh, she sat down. He reminded her so much of Patrick at the moment she could hardly stand it.

Back in the good old days before she’d had her illusions shattered by Uncle William, she’d been at the London training facility situated next door to European HQ. There, she’d had a bird’s eye view on the resident alpha everyone referred to as Trick Mancini.

Even before she’d moved to London, she’d heard about him countless times from Layne and Arthur. They’d seen a great deal of promise in him,

and without ever having laid eyes on Patrick, Kate had already been half in love with the tragic but heroic figure they'd painted.

All the odds had been against him, yet despite his rocky start in life and the Sanction, he'd evolved into a superior operative. He'd been the best at everything. An Olympic-caliber athlete, fearless, and preternaturally smart about his work. He loved what he did, his success rate had been flawless, and Patrick would come home from jobs so wired his feet wouldn't touch the ground for days.

Oh, but how she'd envied him that. Nothing ever made her feel that way.

Except him, of course, and she hadn't been unique in that respect. Falling in love with Trick Mancini had been the done thing. He was a consummate flirt, and there hadn't been a female within fifty miles left unaffected by his looks or bad-boy charm.

Being young and stupid with a head full of Cinderella fantasies, Kate had fallen harder than most. And Patrick had made matters worse by singling her out from the crowd.

She'd never forget how that had felt. He'd been this spectacularly handsome and talented powerhouse who could have had any woman he wanted. But he'd chosen her—albeit secretly—and *stayed* with her for eighteen months. She'd been the first to land him for more than two weeks, yet she hadn't cared about his past. To this day she didn't think it was possible to be more in love with someone than she'd been with him.

In her more realistic moments, she'd known Patrick was no Prince Charming. He was more like the Prince of Darkness, and it would have been hard to miss the obvious: She'd one day run the Sanction. Her future and high-ranking family made her the Sanction's most untouchable operative, and Patrick had always been as eager to taunt disaster as she'd been unwilling to face facts.

Regardless, they'd been very close. Their personalities were polar opposites, which kept things fresh and interesting, to say the least, and the attraction had been unreal. They hadn't been able to keep their hands off each other. Ever. And of course dating outside the Sanction when you couldn't talk about your work was an endless, stressful web of lies for those who dared. Relieved of that handicap for once, she and Patrick had been content to stay in, make love, and enjoy what little time they were able to spend together.

But they'd had their own worries. The affair had called for utmost secrecy, and Patrick might have reveled in the risk he took being with her, but she'd been terrified of what might happen if they were found out. She would have been shipped back home to Virginia, and he would have been jailed by Uncle William on misconduct charges.

Or worse. Patrick had never admitted as much, but there'd been rumors of a confrontation in which Uncle William had dry-fired a handgun at Patrick's forehead, promising the gun would be loaded next time if Patrick ever laid a hand on her.

The night Uncle William finally found them out, he'd admitted the rumor was true. "It was a preventative measure," he'd said, and when asked why something so drastic had been necessary, Uncle William had forced her to break off the affair, imparting a secret that ruled her life to this day.

It was a hard secret to keep. A debilitating burden to carry, and she'd lost count how many times during those arguments with Patrick she'd almost blurted out the truth.

Breaking it off with him had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. He'd been her first love, and if she were honest, she'd admit to a few problems letting go, too. She'd still been in love with him long after it had

ended, and he made forgetting him rather difficult by continuing to hound her on the subject.

But it was over. What she'd done, she'd done for Alex. And while she and Patrick would never have lasted, Alex was her brother for life.

She really wished she hadn't yelled at him on the phone. She knew better than to live each day as if it would be someone's last, but after ten years living in constant fear of some sinister secret rising up to do harm, bad habits were hard to break.

David asked, "Are you okay?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Because you look like you're about to keel over."

"Two days of no sleep will do that. But I'm fine." She shook her head to clear it. "Are you un-wired enough to be left on your own?"

"Don't go yet. Now that I'm done gloating, I've got some bad news."

"Oh God. What did you do?" Kate asked, feeling the bottom drop out of her stomach.

"Chill. I didn't do anything except the stuff you already know about. It's just that Trick won't know how to disconnect that drive from the control terminal."

Great. They had to get that terminal back online, but it couldn't be done until Patrick was finished. David would have to be brought down there again unless he could walk her through the procedures, and she doubted her computer skills were up to the task. "We'll deal with that later."

"It's not a real good idea to wait. What if there was an emergency and they had to fire up the tactical center?"

"I know you had fun tonight, but don't push your luck."

"I'm not bucking for more play time. I'm serious. As soon as he's done, we gotta get that place cleaned up."

"That's as may be, but I don't like how you're acting. You remind me of an addict jonesing for their next hit. And if you think I'll let you back down there so you can slip something past me, you're wrong."

"I wouldn't do that," David said, getting up to stalk the corners of the room like a caged animal. "I was scared down there. Really scared."

"Why would you be scared?"

"Because it's been a year for me, and that's an eternity in technology. I only had about twenty minutes to check that system was truly closed. Not much more to diagnose the drive's customizations. I mean, I knew there was no chance of anything getting stray, but I couldn't stop thinking what might happen if it did. We know those people I ripped off are watching, and they would've found this place. I'd be dead, and so would you, the staff, and the kids. You got Lori here. Pretty much everyone else could handle themselves if it came down to it, but not her. She's only six."

Wow. That was the first time she'd ever heard him express concern for anyone but himself. Well, except for Tina, but hormones didn't count.

Looking at him with new eyes, she could see David had come much farther than he'd ever let on. He cared. He wanted to protect those around him, and Layne would make a lawman out of him yet.

"Okay," she said, careful not to make a big deal of what had just happened. "I understand what you're saying."

"Yeah. I'm a chicken shit."

"You are not," she said. "And if you're that concerned about it, I'll speak to Patrick and make sure he doesn't break anything down without you there to supervise."

David stopped in front of her with his arms crossed over his chest. "Thanks. But before you talk to him, there's something I gotta know. And you gotta tell me the truth."

“What’s that?”

“Was this a test?” he asked.

Not understanding the question, she gave him an inquiring look.

He wagged a finger between her and the general direction of the tac center. “You two didn’t set this up, did you?”

“Why on earth would we do that?”

“He made a joke about hiring me, and asked me about breaking out of here. And that drive... Well, I just thought maybe the FBI wasn’t the only one who had their eye on me.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. He didn’t know the NSA was also waiting in the wings, and she’d be the last one to tell him right now, all things considered. “It’s possible Layne might be evaluating you for the Sanction.”

“Layne’s not the one I’m worried about. If this wasn’t a test, why would Mancini be looking at...” he paused. “Maybe I’d better shut up now.”

“Just tell me. I can’t possibly get any madder at him.”

David shook his head. “Sorry, Kate. I need to think about this.”

“You know you’re scaring me, right?”

“Don’t be scared. It’s probably nothing. And I don’t mean to be bossy or anything, but could you go talk to him about the lab, please?”

She stared at him, taking in his thoughtful frown.

What was going through that head of his? Did he really suspect Patrick had come here to test him? Possibly fool him into offending again, or incriminate himself in another crime? Or maybe see how well he worked under pressure?

Perhaps David had the right idea, examining Patrick’s motives more closely. And maybe she should, too.

“Hey Kate?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry about tonight. And about the last few months. Ever since I got here, I’ve been... I don’t even know what I’ve been. But I promise no more wise mouth. No more of the inappropriate stuff, either.”

Kate blinked at him, unsure how to receive what he’d said. It sounded way too good to be true. Did he think it was time to mend his ways if the Sanction was looking at him?

Then he said, “I can tell you think I’m sucking up, only I’m not. I mean it. You won’t have to worry about me being a douchebag anymore.”

Try as she might, she couldn’t suppress a laugh. A little inelegant as far as apologies went, but she’d take it.

David asked, “He’s the one I remind you of, isn’t he?”

“Very much so.”

“Ouch. But you know what? It helped, watching you get mowed down by him. I used to think I must be really stupid to get caught by some sellout, has-been thief, but he’s sure got a way about him. I don’t even know why I went along with him. I just...did.”

“Believe me, I can relate. And okay, so your confidence has been restored by seeing His Royal Sinus squash me flat. Way to point out the silver lining. Thank you ever so much.”

He laughed. “Any time. But I want you to know something.”

“What’s that?”

“From here on out, no matter what happens, I’m on your side.”

“Uh... Dare I ask why you’d say that?”

“Probably not,” David said. “Just remember I said it.”

After a few highly worried thoughts, she nodded, and at his tentative move in her direction, figured it was safe to give him what he appeared to need at the moment.

It was the quickest and most chaste of hugs, and his meekly humble look afterwards started the alarm bells ringing all over again. He might mean every word he'd said, but this change was a little too sudden to be believed.

They said goodnight, and the very first thing she did was alert the night staff to keep an especially close watch on David. She didn't like the things he'd said. There'd been nothing specific to warn her of what might happen, but she didn't need specifics to take precautions.

After leaving her usual trail of breadcrumbs through the dorms so everyone would know she was home, she peeked in on Tina and Lori.

Both were completely sacked out, but David's fears were getting the better of her. He was right. Any intruder would have something to fear from Tina, but Lori was an innocent.

Ugh. David had her totally paranoid, and she had to stop this. Nothing would happen. Patrick had a way of making the mundane seem like an emergency, and David had already begun to figure that out. By morning, the whole thing would be forgotten.

Kate retreated to her quarters, going over the rest of what David had said. She was glad his confidence had been restored, but this run-in with Patrick was only more proof that resignation was a must.

She couldn't handle the likes of him, and she couldn't say she'd fare any better putting the skids to anyone else. She'd never been the kind of person someone would look at and say, "Now *there's* a force to be reckoned with."

Maybe if she were more like the others, things would be different. The games they played came naturally to them. It was harder for her, because she knew the harm those games could do, and her hesitance to take part made her the weak link in the Sanction's chain.

At no time had that ever been more evident than tonight. Yes, she was utterly exhausted, but she should have known better than to fall for Patrick's performance earlier, let alone believe she'd run him off.

Lord. She'd gone to sleep, believing him. There was tired, and then there was brain-dead. And he was still in the tac center doing exactly as he pleased.

She shouldn't be hiding here in this house, licking her wounds. She should be on the phone to Global. Or at least down in the tactical center, doing everything in her power to get rid of Patrick. But there was something holding her back. Many things, if she really dared acknowledge them.

First was the wish to keep away from him. Every time she thought of him, that nagging voice inside said he was entitled to know the truth of what had happened to his mother. And even now, when she knew he was probably doing something he shouldn't, she could hardly stand to occupy the same room for fear he'd see the secret in her eyes or hear it in her voice.

Secondly, she had no desire to draw Uncle William's attention. It had been a peaceful eighteen months without any form of contact with him whatsoever, and when it came to Patrick, her uncle's hypocrisy knew no rival. Uncle William hated Patrick. Envied the younger man's looks, charisma and prowess down to the very core of his virulent being, yet at the same time, no one understood the value of Patrick's star power better than her uncle. Patrick made him look good, and if she were to call into Global and put that legendary power in jeopardy by questioning Patrick's activities, Uncle William would make her pay for it.

And then, of course, there was the distinct possibility Patrick might be taking on someone who considered him a grave threat, leaving him no other choice but to retreat here to the deepest recesses of the Sanction

where he could safely and quietly investigate. He did, after all, live every day with the very real possibility of being sent back to prison. Should he come up against the wrong person, there'd be nothing anyone could do to save him.

She supposed the real problem at work here was her own guilt. Her family had put him in that position. They'd done much worse besides, and she'd been lying to him about it for ten years.

Whether Patrick knew it or not, she owed him. And turning a blind eye to that hard drive was the least she could do. There might be more to it than she wanted to know, but bottom line, she trusted Patrick's judgment.

By coming here, he'd shown he still trusted her too, and that made her feel even worse.

Resign. There was no other way. She needed out of this company before it cost her more than her self-respect.

As soon as Patrick was gone, she could get back to freeing herself from this madness.

New York

Sunday, December 21; 11:30 p.m.

The North American headquarters building was quiet as Layne Crawford sat at her desk, staring at nothing.

This had not been the Sanction's best day ever. Not the worst by far, but still pretty bad. Over the last twenty-four hours, their alert level had been raised by a dispute in Africa, Jack Halloway had been attacked, and she'd been thoroughly chewed out by Alex. Kate was having a worse time than she'd thought, and now there was this late-breaking insanity from Ormond.

His latest brainchild—a vote notice freshly leaked from the Global corporate office—lay on her desk, and could no doubt be blamed for the silence in this building. That document had crushed out all sound with the weight of its sheer stupidity.

What could the man be thinking? Last year had been bad enough, when he'd approved a hire-on to double the amount of operatives worldwide. And now Ormond wanted to amend the charter, allowing the Sanction to initiate actions on its own without a request from someone else.

It flew in the face of Eva Ormond's founding principles based on knowing the company's strengths and its place in the world. They were meant to be subcontractors assisting those who were sworn to serve and protect. They'd never been meant to become a global player in their own right.

Yet here was this notice to the Global Council members, reminding them of the vote on Christmas Day. Very curious timing, she thought, since no one would expect such a catastrophe while a good portion of the world was observing assorted holidays.

That vote could not be allowed to take place, and she knew her phone would begin to ring off the hook once the other five continental council chairs received the news. The others would expect her to stop him by forcing Kate to take charge of the Sanction, and Layne was half-inclined herself to have Kate axe Ormond.

The deed could be carried out easily enough. When William Ormond had been put in office, it had been done on the understanding Kate would succeed him when she came of age. She was supposed to have become Chairwoman on her twenty-first birthday, but she'd put it off for eight years. And now, as far as things stood with the legal department,

all it would take to have Ormond booted was a single phone call from Kate.

However, the likelihood of Kate making that call was slim to none. Kate had never wanted the job, and planned to put Alex forward as the next Chairman. They didn't have time to jump through the legal loopholes necessary to make that happen. And the process would alert Ormond to their maneuverings, so substituting Alex for Kate was out of the question.

Kate would finally have to step up to the plate. Or be dragged to it, kicking and screaming, as the case may be. But how could she even be approached on the subject? Especially now, in the wake of what had happened in Florida.

Every time Layne had broached the topic, Kate claimed the company was doing fine, and they shouldn't fix what wasn't broken. Which was crap. With Ormond at the helm, the entire Global Council had been polluted. The company was anything but fine.

Yet Layne could definitely understand why her niece might balk. Growing up, Kate had been exposed to a lot of things she shouldn't have been. Her father, Troy, had tried to shield her from the worst of it, but when the worst of it had been the child's own mother...

Abominable woman. Claudia Ormond-Crawford had been the most selfish, elitist snob to ever draw breath, and Kate had always held a very dim view of the office based on the way her mother and uncle both had taken advantage of it.

Layne had also noticed Kate was never eager to run up against William Ormond. He'd intimidated the life out of that girl somehow. Thanks to a lousy guardianship agreement, Kate and Alex had spent summers with their Uncle William, and Layne hadn't needed her six

psychology degrees to notice the Kate who came home after those visits was not the same child they'd reluctantly sent.

She'd hoped that placing Kate at Eveleth, where she'd be surrounded by inmates who'd suffered through all types of abuse, would finally help the girl overcome whatever Ormond had done to her. Or at least get her to talk about it.

Ten years later, and *nada*, which shouldn't be a surprise, since both Alex and Kate had taken after the Crawford side. Layne had been married to a Crawford for thirty years, and she knew how they were—reticence and stubbornness had been fused together in them by the force of their will.

Yet trumping all of those worries was fear of retaliation. Ormond was shooting for more power. He'd already shown he was dead serious about getting it by placing that vote on Christmas Day. Should Kate or Alex try to steal Ormond's office, they might not survive.

Something had to be done, but the potential dangers to Kate and Alex would have to be weighed very carefully. And quickly.

Her cellphone rang, and Kate's name came up on caller ID. Bracing herself, she answered, and was very surprised to hear, "Mrs. Crawford, this is David Brighton. Do you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you. What I don't remember is giving Kate authorization to let you use her cellphone."

"She didn't let me use it. I hugged her so I could swipe it from her pocket."

"You stole her phone?"

"I had to. There's something you need to know."

Chapter Five

Eveleth, Minnesota

Monday, December 22; 12:15 a.m.

“Ring, damn you.”

Patrick sat on the tac center’s lobby floor, staring at his phone. He was waiting on a call from the head of Ormond’s security detail, and until it came, he had nothing to do but think.

Thinking was dangerous. All it accomplished was to make him angrier with every second that passed.

Twelve hours ago he’d been in New York, minding his own business and wanting nothing more than to be left the hell alone. But no—along comes Jack to announce their boss wants him dead. Next had come the news Ormond had killed his mother.

For the last nineteen years, the Sanction had been shoving the word *justice* down his throat, and there was one thing he’d dearly love to know right now: Where was the justice for his mother? Jack had been trying forever to tell them she’d been murdered. But had anyone ever listened?

No. They’d told him to shut up about it, or he’d be fired.

Nobody would listen now, either. Ormond would quash the whole thing and continue to get away with murder. And from what he’d found out so far, it appeared Ormond had been working for quite some time to make himself invulnerable.

The hard drive was proof enough of that. The incriminating stuff was there, but Ormond wasn’t stupid. Names, dates, and details had been

blacked out and the documents scanned by a computer, leaving them nothing to work with but a sanitized photo of the original.

Useless. Utterly useless. Patrick could guess at the significance of those documents, yet without corroborating evidence, which they didn't have and couldn't get in the time they had left, the black file angle was a dead loss.

The lone ray of light was the one document Ormond had left untouched, a dark-horse entry to this race because it shouldn't exist. It was a page from an internal investigations file concerning the death of one Nina Mancini.

Back when she'd died, Patrick had been told that under normal circumstances, the Sanction would conduct an internal investigation after the loss of an operative.

"However," the legal representative had said, "because we have such a thorough investigation by the American authorities with such conclusive results, it would only be a waste of time and money to open an internal case."

In all honesty, Patrick hadn't disagreed. His mother had indeed been addicted to one thing or another for much of her life, and Layne had stood guard over the entire affair making sure nothing was missed. They hadn't found a single shred of evidence to refute an overdose, so to Patrick's knowledge, the case had been officially closed.

Obviously, it hadn't been. Right across the top of that file page, in bold, capital letters, it read *INTERNAL AFFAIRS, CASE 8688*. Beneath that, a line that read *RE: NINA MANCINI*, followed by her employee number and the date of her death.

The body of the document was a list of those to be deposed including William Ormond, Troy Crawford, Claudia Ormond-Crawford and Jack Halloway.

After nineteen years coping with Jack's fixation, Patrick found it very hard to believe the man would have concealed an internal inquest from him if he'd known of one. Proof of the inquest would be news to Jack, and he would reach the same conclusion Patrick had: Before they'd deposed Jack, the Sanction had found out exactly what had happened to Nina Mancini, but had buried the findings to cover someone's ass.

They'd known the truth all along, and it made him so damned mad he couldn't see straight. The only reason he wasn't on the phone demanding answers was his knowledge of the system.

If he showed his hand this early, the Global Council would close ranks. Self-preservation would become their one and only priority, and they couldn't protect the bottom line with their CEO exposed as a murderer.

The truth would never come out, and while the Sanction was busy saving itself, Ormond would succeed in getting him killed. Jack would be next, and Ormond would quietly retire without paying the price for what he'd done.

Screw Ormond. And screw everyone else who'd choose the bottom line over their beloved justice. No matter what it took—subversion, threats or scorched earth—the bonfire built to fry Ormond would be lit with that internal affairs file.

Unfortunately, they had to locate the accursed thing first. Every seven years, the Globals cycled their archives, moving old files from Geneva to the States where storage was much cheaper. There were something like twelve warehouses hiding nearly a century's worth of documents, and he had no idea which one might hold that file.

Jack would know, but wouldn't be able to tell him while under constant Sanction watch. Kate might be in the know. Too much of a risk

to ask her. The only other person he dared ask was Jason White, Ormond's head of security.

A long time ago, he and Jason had come to an understanding. Jason's job was not to like or respect Ormond. His job was solely to protect him, and life under the thumb of a pompous, crooked tyrant was much easier to take when they stuck together.

As soon as Jason checked his voice mail, the waiting would end.

Every minute was hell, knowing he shared the blame in his mother's death. If he hadn't had a chip on his shoulder the day Layne and Arthur Crawford had shown up with that contract, his mother would never have been signed with him. And then she would never have met William Ormond.

In his own defense, he'd been fifteen at the time and facing twenty-five to life for pinching those diamonds. The license to steal they'd offered him had seemed like a dream come true, and it could have turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to him.

Instead, it had been the worst, and the consequences for his mother had been fatal. All because he'd thought the Sanction unfair, using her history of addiction as an excuse not to formally hire her.

In hindsight, it might have been an act of kindness, but he hadn't seen it that way at the time. His mother had never caught a break. Everything had always come with a price.

Her beauty and wealthy parents had carried with them a hefty fee. She'd fallen prey to her father's business associates first, then their children when the old man had passed away. Irreparably damaged, she'd burned through her inheritance leading a dangerously wild life until her three aunts—successful antiquities dealers with shops in both Cairo and London—had stepped in. They'd halted her perpetual bounce between

the two cities and cut off all her resources so she could no longer inject them into her veins.

Nina hadn't been under their watch long before she'd backed a delivery van into Paulo Mancini's motorcycle. It had been love at first sight, and the aunts had thought the trouble with Nina had ended that day, when it had really only begun.

Sixteen months later, she'd been left a pregnant widow.

The aunts had done what they could, but they were very busy women. Consultants to the Sanction on international trafficking of stolen property, and accomplished thieves themselves, they'd already had their hands full before Nina's child had come along.

Time had passed, and the aunts hadn't become aware drugs and alcohol had overtaken their niece again until Patrick—eight at the time—had been hauled in by the police. He'd taken a lead pipe to his mother's latest boyfriend and had made rather a good job of it before a neighbor had called the authorities. The man had beaten his mother bloody the day before, and come back to steal whatever he could for drug money.

Horried, the aunts had shouldered all responsibility once more, nursing Nina back to health and putting her to good use doing the grunt work on their Sanction cases.

Patrick, now spending much of his time with the aunts, had begun to pick up a few skills they hadn't intended. And by the age of fifteen, had racked up far more than forty million in ill-gotten gains.

Had he ever tried to fence any of it, the Sanction would never have touched him. But Layne had pinned him beneath her microscope and determined he stole for pleasure rather than personal gain or survival. True to some extent, but mostly he'd done it because he'd had nothing better to do while his mother had been out busting her behind for a company that wouldn't condescend to hire her.

So that day, when Layne and Arthur had made their offer, he'd seen an opportunity to force their hand. They'd needed him. He could do things few other people could, and his youth had been a huge factor. The Crawfords had thought him young and still impressionable, and that his talents could be turned for the good.

How ironic that he now found himself at Eveleth, the place where Layne took young criminal minds and attempted to do the same thing. He should probably be flattered the program had been founded in his image. But right now, he was furious they'd never gone to such lengths for his mother.

Although to be fair, she'd seemed to thrive at first. She'd met Jack, and they'd hit it off immediately. But then, inexplicably, eleven months later his mother had taken up with Ormond. Behind Jack's back, there'd been dinners, dates, and late night meetings, which cast that insurance appraisal's value into serious doubt.

He tried to focus on the facts and how Ormond's possession of his mother's ring and tile could be used against him, but those facts didn't amount to much.

The appraisal itself was straightforward enough. The Ormond family had originally made its fortunes in wine, and William Ormond had inherited vineyards all over the world. Eight years ago, the appraisal had been done when he'd purchased another vineyard adjacent to the one he already owned in Napa Valley, California.

The statement showed Ormond was in possession of two suspect items. One was described as a 14 kt gold band set with a 6.45 carat "unidentified" green stone, given an appraised value of five thousand dollars. The second was described as an antique gilt-framed tile weighing approximately ten pounds and insured for three thousand.

Those items had to be his mother's. How could they be anything else? The important fact, and the one they had to prove absolutely, was that Ormond had taken them from the crime scene after killing Nina Mancini.

On the up side, Patrick knew his mother had still had them three days prior to her death. He'd seen the ring on her finger with his own eyes, and she'd *never* gone anywhere without that tile. There was something about it known only to the two of them and the great aunts, and that secret ensured his mother wouldn't have parted with it willingly. Mom had said should anything ever happen to her, he should check the frame for answers. And if it were true his mother hadn't been using again, that tile might be the key to everything.

Another factor working in their favor was the stink he'd raised over the ring and tile's absence from the crime scene. If nothing else, the American authorities would wonder why Ormond had never admitted to having them.

But he knew Ormond, and he knew how the man operated. Confronted with that appraisal, Ormond would have a hundred and one excuses for how he'd come to own them, knowing they would never be able to prove *when* he'd obtained them. He could claim to have run across them after the fact. Or found the ring and frame on Sanction property somewhere.

Even if Ormond finally admitted he'd been in Atlanta that night and took the ring and frame from her hotel room, it still wouldn't be enough to prove he'd killed her.

A blast of rage seared his skin as he pictured Ormond slithering out of that corner. He could hear it now—Ormond would be oh-so repentant, apologizing for lying. Then he'd claim he'd wanted to spare Jack more pain, but gosh, the truth was Nina had given them to him as gifts.

The authorities would believe him, because if there were one talent Ormond had, it was coming up with credible explanations to cover his backside. Mom had been the same way. She'd been a champion of excuses, effortlessly dismissing the inexplicable things she did.

Take, for instance, her relationship with Ormond. Patrick could remember very clearly the last time he'd seen his mother, and the knock-down, drag-out argument they'd had about the affair. He hadn't understood how she could do that to Jack, and she'd kept coming back at him, insisting there was a reason for it. She'd end it with Ormond when she was ready, and Patrick would understand when he was older.

No amount of time would have made him understand it. Or his mother, period. How could someone so smart and so beautiful be so self-destructive?

Growling, he pressed his head sideways to crack his neck. She might have had bad judgment, but she hadn't deserved to die. And what Ormond didn't know about that tile might hurt him, if only Patrick could get his hands on it.

Easier said than done. The security system at Ormond's vineyard was virtually impregnable. On top of that, the place was manned with guards twenty-four-seven, and while he might be able to manage the security system long enough to get in, the guards raised the risk factor exponentially.

His phone rang then, and the relief was like a draft of precious, life-giving oxygen. If this was Jason calling, he'd finally get out of this lobby and away from his own head.

But a quick check of the incoming number put paid to that. It wasn't Jason. It was one of the Continental Council Chairmen, and he was in no mood for a pleasant chat.

Jason had better hurry up before he went stark raving mad. He needed to know where to look for that internal investigations file. He also needed to know the boss's whereabouts the day those messages had been sent between Ormond and the Kretts. Getting their hands on the proper hard drive was vital, as proof of the exchange might scare the Kretts off.

He'd made the mistake of reading those e-mails, and the cold, callous way in which Ormond had sold him out was insulting. It had been nothing more than a business transaction for him, as if he'd been ordering a very expensive pizza to be delivered on time, and not before.

It made no sense. After all these years, why *now*? Monday wasn't the first time he and Ormond had gotten into it over his contract, so why would this time be different than any other?

He didn't understand it, although he supposed it shouldn't be a surprise. He and Ormond had long been engaged in a clandestine war, grappling for the upper hand.

What did surprise him was his own shortsightedness. Back in the very beginning before Ormond had taken office, he'd honestly believed Kate's parents were the worst bosses a man could ever have.

No, that wasn't entirely true. Troy, Kate's father, had been a good sort. But man, if he'd thought his mother had been screwed up, she'd paled in comparison to Kate's.

That woman... Claudia had pimped him around to agencies, emphasizing his looks and dubious talents, selling him as the Sanction's latest, greatest weapon against theft. He'd only been a commodity. An object. Something less than human, worthy of no more notice than she'd give her computer keyboard.

She couldn't have cared less, totally ignoring the furor being raised about his treatment. Arthur Crawford had been fighting to see him

properly trained and conditioned, and his great aunts had threatened to quit if it didn't stop. Troy had finally confronted his wife and to this day, Patrick had never forgotten that ordeal. The way Claudia had gone to work on him had been like seeing the man overcome by a tornado full of razorblades.

Vicious. Evil, if one believed in that sort of thing. Troy had withered under the verbal assault. It had been worse than if she'd physically attacked, and it had been so hard to watch because he could see Troy had wanted to retaliate, but he'd refused to square off against his wife.

He should have. Everyone knew the only reason Troy had stayed with that cow was the children. There'd been rumors of a legal clause that would force Troy to give up custody in event of divorce. Something about the Ormond direct line of descent becoming Sanction CEO, but if the rumor was true, no one knew the details.

Poor bastard, although the sympathy was wasted. Not long after losing his mother, Patrick had also been relieved of Claudia and Troy. They'd resigned from the Sanction six days before their deaths, and then had come his season in hell with the rise of William Ormond.

For a while at the beginning, as bosses went, Ormond had seemed a far preferable replacement to his sister, and everything had been fine. Patrick had been given time to get his feet under himself, put the past behind him, and learn not only to get by in their lofty circles, but to excel.

Sadly, Ormond had also been finding his feet, and their first clash had come when Ormond had ordered him to deviate from theft into the wonderful world of assassinations.

They'd argued, and it had come down to one simple statement that would define the rest of Patrick's career. Ormond had said, "I own you. Do as you're told or you'll rot in jail."

The sheer gall of the man. Patrick had already been the first operative with a global jurisdiction. Everyone else had only a continent to cover, and his popularity had ensured he'd never had a moment's peace. To be asked to kill on top of it all had been a slap in the face.

From that moment forward, Patrick had sworn to get back at Ormond in any way possible, as often as possible.

Lo and behold, within a month of that vow had come word Kate Crawford was about to grace London with her presence.

He'd heard all about her through the grapevine. She'd been described as preposterously book-smart, very reserved, and scorching hot in a naughty librarian sort of way. And suddenly she was due at the London training facility for a final bit of study on international law.

The entire European branch had been on fire with the news, and the Crawfords, misguided creatures that they'd been, had asked him to keep an eye on the girl.

"She's never really been on her own before," Layne had said. "She's smart, Trick, but this will be the first time people have access to her. And I'd like it if you'd make sure no one takes advantage."

If Layne hadn't sounded wholly serious, he would have laughed at the idea. And just who would make sure he didn't take advantage himself?

To this day, he still swore he might have behaved if twelve hours after Layne's call, Ormond hadn't put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. The way he saw it, the man might as well have hung a sign around Kate's neck that said *Steal me, please* in big red letters.

His workload had kept him too busy to do much about it immediately but as luck would have it, Kate hadn't been in London long before word reached him that some ambassador's son was already working his meat hooks into the girl.

Patrick had met him any number of times, and they weren't exactly chums. The kid was a notorious wank, living high on daddy's dime, so Patrick had wasted no time putting his ear to the ground and locating the pair at a night club.

At first sight of Kate, he'd thought whoever had tagged her with the 'naughty librarian' description had missed the mark. The 'scorching hot' and 'librarian' bits had been accurate, but naughty? Never.

She'd been sitting alone in a booth along a side wall, every gesture, every nuance of body language telling the tale. She desperately wanted out of that club yet didn't quite know how to go about it without creating an international incident.

On his part, he figured he'd have no better chance to kill two birds with one stone: scare off the wank, and get his hands on Ormond's niece.

Never one to hesitate, he slid into the booth, and he remembered being deeply impressed when Kate didn't pretend he was a stranger even though they'd never met. She just blinked at him, blushed an alarming shade of scarlet, and waited for him to speak.

He asked, "Can't leave you alone for a second, can I?"

In her moment of violet-eyed confusion, he'd been struck by how much prettier she was than her mother had been. And how infinitely more fragile. Claudia had always been very brittle and direct, and here was her daughter, reeking of naiveté and her father's downtrodden reserve. It didn't seem possible she could really be so utterly unlike Claudia, but time would tell.

"Did my uncle send you?" she asked, fingering the string of pearls at her throat.

He recalled wanting to say yes, inadvertently her uncle had sent him. Here was a perfect chance to pay the man back for the assassinations.

All he'd wanted was to bed Kate just once so he could savor that delicious secret every time Ormond reminded him he was nothing. He'd looked forward to it. Ormond could rail away in that snooty voice all day long, while the slave sat there smugly recalling in vivid detail the time he'd defiled the master's niece.

Leaning closer so he could be heard over the deafening music, he said, "Never mind that. Where's the ambassador's brat?"

"Over there, with those people. He's watching."

"Good. This will only take a moment if you promise to keep quiet and follow my lead."

He could still feel her small, exasperated sigh against his ear. And what had made it so memorable was the realization Kate had no idea of her appeal. She was untouched. An innocent, and for just a moment, the thought of stealing that innocence brought out the very worst in him. His senses were heightened, his entire body burning to possess her as greedily and thoroughly as possible.

The very *next* moment, the gut-check screamed for him to stand down. There were very few things he felt were out of bounds when it came to getting what he wanted. His lack of interest in rules and other people's boundaries were the characteristics that had made him a legend. Yet he'd known if he gave himself full rein, he would cross a line he could never uncross.

In hindsight, he was amazed he'd been capable of that much thought, revved up as he'd been. Later on he came to realize everything he'd experienced up to that point—the blinding desire, the all-consuming urge to possess, and the certainty she'd be the death of him—were perfectly normal when it came to Kate. He'd felt them many times since in varying degrees, but that first time, they'd scared him badly enough to weigh the risks.

As much as he'd like to say he'd been wise or honorable and halted the proceedings, he hadn't. Not even close.

She said, "I promise," in the warriest of voices, so he charged ahead, starting the show.

He raised a hand to that delicate neck, holding Kate in place while he drew back, then very slowly and very deliberately moved in to kiss those sin-inducing, bee-stung lips. So reluctant at first, and so inexperienced. But after about ten seconds, she began to kiss him back, and he should have known he was in for it with the way he completely forgot why he was there or what he was supposed to be doing until the intended audience returned to remind him.

"I beg your pardon," the wank blustered. "Katherine? Who is this man?"

Turning to face him, Patrick looked the competition up and down, and no one could have missed the shock of recognition on the younger man's face.

In the end, he didn't have to say a word. The wank simply accepted defeat, and slithered back to his dealer, never to darken Kate's doorstep again.

Afterwards, he'd marched her out to his car, but his plan had proceeded none too smoothly from there. Never in his life had he had to work so hard to have a woman. He'd nearly given up by the time it happened, and once it had, he'd really been in trouble. His ever-present excuse of *just once more, and that's it* had somehow turned into eighteen months of stealing away with her every chance he could.

Numbskull. The *one* time he doesn't listen to his gut, and look what had happened. Kate was very big on karma, and he'd definitely gotten what he'd had coming. By the time she'd ended it, he'd been more than half in love with her.

And why wouldn't he be? She'd fascinated him. Kind, unfailingly polite, and a soothing balm after insanely hard bouts of work. He'd never met anyone like her and for the first few months he would have sworn she'd come from some alien planet where everyone was straightforward and wasn't always looking out for number one. Yet at the same time, he knew his darker nature appealed to her as much as Kate's gentility attracted him, hinting there was far more to her than she let on.

Not the most trusting soul ever, he'd tested her in every way possible, always expecting to discover she was very much an Ormond underneath that shiny Crawford polish. He never had, but the fear of it was the only thing that had stopped him from becoming completely whipped.

Next thing he knows, he's in the States stealing a bull for reasons he had yet to determine, and rumors are flying that Kate had been seen in the company of some prat from the Australian branch.

Almost the moment he got back, she'd told him to get lost, with no explanation whatsoever. Given the speed and imagination of the Sanction grapevine, he'd figured she'd heard something that wasn't true, retaliated with the Australian, then dumped him. But he'd been wrong about that: Kate hadn't heard anything. Nor had she been seeing anyone else, so for the life of him he couldn't understand why she continued to lie about it.

And now, here he was on her turf, with his life about to end because of her family's lust for power and control.

He wanted to hate her, and this would be much easier if he did. But whatever else might have gone on between them, he could be sure of one thing: Kate had no more sentiment for 'Uncle William' than he did. The whole time they'd been together, she'd rarely spoken of him, and he could count on two fingers the times she'd seen him in the last ten years.

There was little danger she'd tell Ormond anything, but Layne and Arthur were another matter. Kate and Arthur were extremely tight, so

there was no way she could be safely enlisted. It was too risky. Eveleth had been nothing but a disaster and if he didn't watch himself, his actions up here would get back to the Crawfords with a quickness.

He shouldn't be thinking about Kate anyway. She was just another thing in life he could never have, and he had bigger mysteries to solve than why she'd really broken up with him.

He had to figure out how her uncle had faked that overdose, and there were precious few ways to proceed. Getting to the ring and frame would be impossible. With more time, he might be able to snag them, but unless something drastic were to change, they were out of his reach.

The internal investigation file and e-mails were doable if he could only find out where they were.

Jason, who resided at the top of the shortlist of people he trusted, was taking an inordinately long time to call back. At least he could count on Jack to sweat the small stuff for him. Right now, Jack had Alex and crew completely snowed with his feigned amnesia ploy.

Those good old CIA boys—the best of them could look you in the eye and swear up was down, left was right, and you'd believe them.

He'd descended back to staring at his phone and willing Jason to call when the walkway door opened to admit Kate.

Fabulous. Damnation in the flesh. Just what he needed.

She asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No. I'm waiting on a phone call. Reception's horrible downstairs."

"Mine never works down there, either. And speaking of my phone, you haven't seen it anywhere, have you? It was in my pocket, but now I can't find it."

"You think I pinched your phone?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," she said.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I haven't seen it. Did you try calling it?"

“Not yet,” she said. “I’ll try that next. First, though, David wanted me to warn you not to unhook that drive without him.”

“Saves me the time of conning you into letting him do it.”

“How very accommodating I am. But he also asked me an interesting question, and I’d like an answer.”

“What was that?”

“He asked me if this had been a test. Whether you and I had set him up for something.”

“Why would he think that?”

She explained, and a few suspicions began to rattle their chains. How much of the drive’s contents had David seen while he’d been working? Being Ormond’s, it was full of Sanction references. Maybe the kid had seen something and jumped to the wrong conclusion.

He didn’t know, but it didn’t sound as if David had shared his conclusion with Kate.

Smart boy, that one. Kate was even smarter. She was also suspicious, and if he knew what was good for him, he’d unleash a distraction before she got nervous enough to call one of her uncles.

Regrettably, she didn’t look to be easily fooled by cheap tactics just now. In fact, the calculation in those beautiful eyes rather reminded him of an assassin honing in, painting a nice juicy bead on their target.

Was it wrong to be turned on by that?

He could hardly help it. As gratifying as Kate’s gentle, pliant nature could be, he still found glimpses of that stronger, bolder Kate he’d seen tonight absolutely riveting. And she’d certainly lost none of her physical appeal.

At twenty-nine, she appeared to have gained more. She was refined now. More self-assured, and it showed in the way she carried herself and the way she dressed.

Gone was the navy suit she'd had on earlier, replaced by Levis and a brown, long-sleeved shirt that on anyone else would have looked dowdy. But not her. She filled them out in a most unapologetically feminine way, full and rounded in all the right places, lean and firm everywhere else.

Perhaps the fact she wouldn't have dared dress so casually back then was what made it all the more attractive to him. Very un-Ormond of her, he thought. Not horribly Crawford-ish, either. Just the real, pragmatic, grown-up Kate who had a mind all her own, and was no longer naïve or untouched.

He'd taken that from her a long time ago, and he supposed ten years chasing around with the FBI had finished off whatever remained. And there'd been other men since him, he knew. An Italian who hadn't panned out. A professional baseball player who everyone had thought would be the one to finally land her.

Nope. He'd gotten the boot as well, followed a few years later by some cop she'd chanced to meet in South Carolina. Patrick had actually met that one, and hated him on sight. Tall, blond and unspeakably dull. He'd been picked up by the Sanction in last year's hire-on, and then abruptly kicked to the curb.

Interesting, that. She had no trouble getting rid of the men in her life, except the worst of the lot, her Uncle William.

Maddening, really. It made no sense. Kate despised the man, so why did she refuse to slap him down? Did she even have a clue how afraid Ormond was that she'd yank her birthright out from under him?

God, what he wouldn't give to see that happen.

Kate, apparently giving up on him answering why David had thought this was a test, sighed and let her shoulders sag the way they always did when she was defeated. "Forget it. Get yourself thrown back in jail. I

need to find my phone. But when your thugs get here, make sure they tell the staff they've come to test the security system."

"If that's how you want it," he said.

Impatient, he made a decision, and even as he began, he knew this would probably go on record as his most reckless, ill-conceived risk to date.

"Hold on," he said. "This call I'm expecting... I need an answer on something, but they're taking forever to call back, and you might be able to tell me what I need to know."

"Does this mean if I answer your question, you'll finally leave?"

"No need to be nasty about it, is there?"

"I suppose not. What's the question about? Something you found on that drive?"

"No, no. One of the Globals' aides called to ask for a favor before I realized how weak the cellular signal was down there. I only caught about a quarter of what he said."

Kate raised her eyebrows. "Was it the quarter where they asked what the heck you're doing here?"

"Oddly enough, the subject didn't come up."

"Mmm."

"Right," he said. "They wanted me to fetch something from archives, but the call got dropped before he could tell me which warehouse. I've tried to call him back three times now. No luck so far. Any idea which facility he meant?"

"That depends. Did he give you a case number, by any chance?"

The number he recited was a few removed from his mother's case, but he knew the system they followed. It would be very close to the mark. He watched her closely for any sign she might suspect, but there didn't seem to be one. Not so much as a blink before she said,

“That must be an internal case from when my parents were still in office. Any idea what’s in the files?”

“None. All he gave me was the case number and an order to play courier.”

“How dare they give you your very own Lear, then take advantage of you.”

“Hey, the Columbian government gave me the plane. It was impounded,” he corrected.

“Spoiled brat. Anyway, the files would be housed in the archive warehouse in Washington State, next door to Tac Center West.”

Outstanding. His first stroke of luck in this mess. All Sanction tac centers were protected by his security systems, and he knew exactly where to look—the old building with two subterranean levels. This should be no trouble at all if the place wasn’t fully staffed over the holidays.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Mmm,” she hummed, nodding. “How much longer will you be?”

“Not much longer. I think I’ve found enough to go on with.”

“All right. Find me the instant you’re finished. And don’t forget about the thugs.”

“I won’t forget,” he said. “And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry for all this.”

The look on her face said she doubted very much he was sorry, but she nodded a little, then walked out.

How stupid did he think she was?

Kate kept a reasonable pace until she was in the walkway, then took off at full speed, her mind traveling faster than her feet.

That case number had been a dead giveaway. It didn't exist, but she knew what it signified. It meant she'd been right to be paranoid.

Someone had put him on the scent. Without those internal investigation files, he couldn't know much, but if she didn't get to them first, life as she knew it would end.

Panic sped her along, even though luck was on her side. Tomorrow night's party would be taking place practically on top of the true location of those files, so she'd raise no suspicion going to St. Paul as planned.

Man. This was an unforgivable thing she was about to do, and someday she'd have to find a way to explain it to him. Preferably years from now when he was too old to kill her with his bare hands.

Bursting through the walkway doors, she ran straight into Wyatt, one of the night security staff, who was more than a foot taller and twice her weight.

"There you are," he said, taking her by the arms and setting her squarely on her feet. "I've been looking for you."

"Why? What's wrong?"

Wyatt's eyebrows crunched together like a pair of black caterpillars poised for combat. "Wound up much? Why were you running?"

"It's cold in that walkway," she said, hoping her face wouldn't flame at the pitifully bad lie.

"If you say so. But here. I found your phone."

"Oh, thank God. Where was it?"

"In one of the dorm hallways."

"Wretched clip," she complained. "It broke earlier. I've been carting it around in my pocket and I figured it must have fallen out somewhere."

Chatty. Nerves were making her too chatty and Wyatt was staring at her with a mix of tolerance and pity as if she were one of the inmates cranked up on too much sugar.

She was cranked up on something, all right. Only it was more like dread than sugar. She *had* to get to St. Paul.

She told Wyatt, “I need to pack. I forgot about the Christmas party tomorrow and there’s a billion things to be done.”

“Have you lost your mind? You can’t drive down there now. You haven’t slept in days, and the roads are terrible.”

“I won’t be able to sleep until things are settled anyhow, so I might as well go. And I won’t be driving. I’m flying.”

Now came the hard part. Explaining the thugs.

“Another thing I forgot,” she began, “I don’t know if you’re aware Mancini’s here or not, but—”

“Yeah, I know. I saw him earlier.”

“Okay. Well, he’s got some people coming up to test the security system. They should be here soon, and if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could you please call me the second they arrive?”

“Of course, so long as you don’t lose your phone again.”

“I’ll do my best, and one last thing. Please tell the day staff where I’m going. I meant to remind someone sooner, but I—”

“You forgot,” Wyatt said. “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong?”

“I’m just stressed out. Probably a little unglued at the moment. Forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive. Mancini turning up was a surprise, I’m sure.”

“You have no idea,” she said, then sighed as the speculative light appeared in Wyatt’s eyes.

Oh, this was perfect. Her entire life was about to come crashing down around her ears, and Wyatt thought she was flustered because of Patrick’s sudden appearance.

On second thought, if that was what he wanted to think, more power to him. It was certainly a more flattering explanation than the truth.

She left him then, speeding over to her place and dialing the local airport. Her travel arrangements had been made ages ago, and to her endless relief, the pilot didn't mind leaving several hours earlier than planned. He was on standby and would be ready when she got there.

The suitcase from her last trip was still propped in one corner of the bedroom, and she whipped it open, laying it flat on the bed before emptying the contents into the laundry hamper.

Knowing she'd regret it tomorrow, she began to refill it in a rather haphazard fashion. The dress would be one big wrinkle, but she could have it steamed at the hotel.

Shoes, a few changes of clothes, and some other necessities followed, and she was sitting in front of her computer finishing off her resignation letter when her cellphone finally rang. The thugs were here.

By the time she got back to the tac center, Patrick already had everyone assembled. It was awkward, seeing his crew. Some of them she'd known for years, and they all wore this suspicious, hopeful look over why they'd been called here.

One of them—Carlos, Patrick's right hand and a man Kate had once called a close friend—even winked at her.

She would have liked to scream. Instead, for the next twenty minutes, she stood by in silent vigil while Patrick gave his orders.

There was nothing untoward in what he said. He told them what he wanted and they set about their business on the understanding they could not disrupt the facility in any way. They were to stay until Kate or Patrick told them otherwise.

Any relief she might have felt at having Carlos's trustworthy eye on her kids was short lived. When the crew scattered, Patrick told her, "I'm ready for David to come back down."

She nodded. "I'll go get him."

Heedless of what she'd said, Patrick walked beside her all the way up to David's room while a thousand pinpricks of fear assaulted her from every direction.

He was awfully quiet. Did he suspect something? Or was he merely playing meek now that he'd gotten his way?

She wasn't sure, but she kept a close eye on him while they led a tired and greatly subdued David back down to the tac center.

Once there, David told Patrick, "You need to decide how you want to go on from here. Have you seen enough, or do you still need access to the drive?"

"It would help, yes."

"Okay, then we'll probably have to copy the contents onto a laptop with no wifi or anything. If it has no connectivity, it can't ping even if you mess up the password."

"What was the password, by the way?"

"Well, once the hash code parsed the polynomial sequences and unraveled the substitution cipher, it—"

"David. In English, please," Patrick complained.

"I can't. The original password entered into the encryption program is a Latin word. *Unitas*. Unity, in case you don't speak Latin any better than you speak geek."

Patrick snorted, and David said, "I'll just clean this place up and work on the drive in the workshop. Shouldn't take me more than an hour."

Kate urged, "Just get that terminal back online, then take the drive and do whatever you need to do. We'll put this place back together while you finish up."

"You sure?"

"Very. And hurry, please."

“The girl’s on a mission to get rid of you,” David said to Patrick.

Patrick’s only response was one of those mysterious smirks that could have meant anything, and her mind was too much on his mother’s files to guess at its meaning. But whatever it meant, he was obviously in a hurry to be gone himself. He began to disassemble stacks of equipment before David had even finished disconnecting the hard drive.

It was strange, watching them work together. All the similarities that had ever struck her were even more pronounced as David stood over the work station, his eyes full of intensity on what he was doing, and Patrick moving with his uncannily masculine, graceful speed.

Seeing them both in the same place at the same time, she decided the similarity wasn’t so much in their visual impact or dubious talents. She guessed what it came down to was, they were the rare breed made to be memorable. Everyone else was made to lag behind and do the remembering, and she knew which end of that spectrum she fell on.

On the heels of that humbling thought, David leaned forward suddenly, his eyes fixed on the monitor, hands hovering over the keyboard. “Uh oh...”

Chapter Six

Kate gasped a shrill, “What?”

The girl was wound up tight. More tight than she should be, now that she was about to be rid of him.

David said, “I booted the facility’s computer system, and soon as it loaded, a bunch of messaging windows popped up. What does all this stuff mean? Where’s it coming from?”

Afraid he’d see a warrant issued for his arrest, Patrick tabbed through the messages and saw nothing of the sort. “Relax, kid. They’re just readiness alerts from corporate that got queued up while the terminal was down.”

David leaned forward beside him, eyeing the alerts. “What’s priority three mean?”

“It means some highly organized sociopaths in Africa are having delusions of grandeur.”

“Are you gonna have to go over there?”

“Doubtful,” Patrick said, and when Kate took a step forward and gave him an unmistakable *shut up* look, he deliberately continued, “Priority three puts our African offices on call because it’s happening in their zone. Priority two will call up the other five continental branches.”

“Five? Shouldn’t there be six more? There are seven continents.”

“Have you ever been to Antarctica? Not a whole lot going on there except science and frost bite.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Right. Anyway, I’m the Global Chairman’s performing monkey, so I don’t go on call unless it hits priority one.”

Kate plastered him with another violet glare, but what harm could come of answering a few questions? There was no reason the kid shouldn’t know how the company worked, and if they didn’t tell him, he’d plague them both until he found out.

No time for that. *The clock is ticking. The clock is ticking.*

He was getting sick of that phrase and the pressure it brought with it. True as it might be, if he kept this up, he’d be as tense as Kate.

What was her problem? She didn’t have a professional goon squad out for her blood, a homicidal boss, or the Ghost of Girlfriends Past kicking her ass.

“Performing monkey?” David repeated.

“Never mind,” he told him. “The resistance might score a priority two, but the whackos haven’t really got the balls to take this to priority one levels, so it’s going nowhere.”

Kate broke in coolly, “If it hits priority two, the techs may need this place as a communications center. *Please* get back to work.”

David nodded at her, taking off with the thumb drive and disk, leaving them to shove equipment racks into place.

Aside from Kate’s chilly corrections when he steered a cart to the wrong spot, for twenty-five minutes, nothing was said. And Kate, he’d noticed, had developed that syndrome again where she’d look around him or through him, but never directly at him.

She always did that, and it drove him mental. Did she think he didn’t notice? Or wonder what she might be thinking that was so horrible she couldn’t even look at him?

He was getting the itch again. The uncontrollable compulsion to grill her about the breakup, and why shouldn’t he? This could very well be

the last time he'd ever see her. Thanks to Ormond, he only had five days to make peace with the world, and those five days should belong to him, not Ormond.

Ormond, typically selfish, would claim most of that time while he and Jack tried to mount a homicide case. But Kate was right here, right now, and he was entitled to one last shot at the truth.

About to get started, he jumped a little when Kate chirped, "Ow!"

He looked up to see her snatch a hand back from the cart she'd been sliding into place against the wall.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Fine. Smashed my fingers between the carts."

On the verge of saying something he shouldn't, he caught himself just in time. If he hoped to finally get an answer, making her madder than ever wouldn't be a smart approach.

While she was still sucking a sore fingertip, he said, "I have a *What Would You Do* question."

He'd used to hit her with these questions all the time when they'd been together, hoping to finally figure out how her mind worked. It had never really helped, but the mention had an instant effect. For the first time since David had left the room, Kate looked directly at him.

She was surprised, and not pleasantly. "What is it?"

"There's something you've wanted to know for a long time, but the only one who has the answers won't tell you. What would you do?"

Her spine straightened, and very cautiously, she said, "I think it would depend on what I wanted to know. If it was something that could hurt someone else, I'd—"

"No. It's nothing like that. And you know what? Forget the game. It's been ten years and you still can't or *won't* explain why we broke up."

Kate frowned at him, and then she sighed, perching herself on the edge of the work station. “Why do you always have to do this? Why does it even matter anymore?”

“Because you’ve never told me the truth.”

“Yes, I have. We’ve done this what...twenty times? And I keep trying to tell you I was tired of sneaking around. You, on the other hand, loved the risk of getting caught.”

“Okay, yes. I’ll admit the risk did have its appeal. I’ve admitted it before, and it still gets us nowhere near an answer.”

“Well think about it, Patrick. What did you expect would happen? That I’d just continue sneaking around with you forever?”

Now that was a good question, a direction they hadn’t taken before. And the only answer he could come up with was, “I never thought about it, to be honest.”

“No, I’m sure you didn’t. You didn’t care about having a home and a family. I do.”

“You think I don’t want any of those things?”

“You might now, perhaps. I don’t know. But why would you have wanted them back then? I was nineteen. You were twenty-three. Both of us were too young and under too much pressure to be doing what we were doing.”

“There,” he said, pointing at her. “That is exactly what you always do. You make it sound so logical and reasonable that I forget all about Mr. Australia.”

Predictably, Kate began to squirm, and found something utterly fascinating about her shoes.

Why did she do that? How was he supposed to *not* keep after her when she acted this way?

She was begging for more, and that suited him just fine. He had no time left to play nice. “I know it’s not true. Mr. Australia was a grapevine invention. Why did you let me believe that? So you wouldn’t have to sneak around anymore, or did you finally get tired of slumming?”

“Slumming?” Exasperated out of that cool logical shell, she got up and snapped, “Is that what you... God, you’re... Whatever. For the billionth time, it was a lot of things, all right? We were so young and I was always terrified of getting caught. Plus you were stuck in the Sanction for an eternity, and I just—”

“Stuck in the Sanction? What the hell does *that* have to do with anything? It’s your own bloody company. If anything, it should have been a guarantee.”

“It’s not my bloody company, and a guarantee of what? Every time you left on a deployment I was so scared you wouldn’t make it back alive that I couldn’t have taken it much longer anyhow.”

“See?” he said. “You did it again. The way you just said that—‘I couldn’t have taken it much longer *anyhow*’. Do you realize how it sounds when you say things like that? Because what I hear is, you couldn’t have taken it much longer anyhow *if something else* hadn’t happened to make you end it.”

“Oh now you’ve gone completely—”

“No,” he interrupted, leaning forward to make her even more uncomfortable. They were finally getting somewhere and if he kept pecking, she’d crack. “I’m listening to what you say and the way you say it. And I know you’re keeping something from me. What was it? What happened?”

He saw it, then. She was back up against the desk with nowhere else to go, and for the briefest, tiniest speck of an instant, she *did* crack.

It hadn't been quite a blink. Nothing that obvious. He just knew, because he knew Kate.

Something had happened.

Never mind that she hadn't spoken aloud, he pressed, "It's been ten years. Whatever it is, this is your last chance to tell me."

Watching her eyes, it was like seeing a door slam shut.

She was done with him. She couldn't have made that more clear than the way she shoved him aside to resume putting the last of the carts back to rights and tidying the workstation, ignoring him completely.

He let her do it on her own, and took her place on the edge of the station, deliberately staying put and forcing her to work around him.

He didn't know why he had to torment her this way. His own feeble revenge, he supposed, but she refused to be baited, continuing on as if he were nothing more than a stick of furniture too heavy to move out of her way.

She hadn't heard the end of this. Not by a long shot.

"There," she said finally, slapping a manual back into place alongside the keyboard. "It's finished. As soon as David's done, I want you out of here."

Smirking at her, he said nothing. She'd always found the expression irritating, and Kate could become quite chatty when annoyed.

She said, "I have a Christmas Party to get to, and I'm not leaving until you're gone."

"Ah yes, the Christmas Party. Three nations in the same ballroom, pretending to agree on everything and get along famously. What fun."

"At least they try, and don't search the room for an elephant to address."

He shrugged. "I don't get paid for my diplomacy skills."

“Oh really? Could’ve fooled me with some of the things I’ve been hearing. Thanksgiving at the White House, your birthday party last month on Downing Street, a ski trip with the Governor-General of Australia and some big to-do with the Prime Minister of Japan.”

“Jealous?”

“Of what? It smells like power mongering to me.”

“I’m sure it does, except you’re not the one with six years left on your sentence. A word here, a word there, drum up some sympathy, and who knows what might happen.”

Her flinch let him know he’d struck a nerve, and all of a sudden she’d lapsed back to that cold calculation. Only this time there were other signals leaking around the edges. Signals that read like desperation and raw, stark fear.

“Patrick, don’t. Never provoke my uncle that way. He’ll—”

“Finished,” David said, appearing with a laptop in one hand and a bag containing the hard drive in the other. “I ended up copying the drive’s contents onto this laptop. The internet stuff’s been removed, so all you gotta do is remember your Latin lesson for the day, and make sure the thumb drive’s plugged into a USB port. Without it, the data will be encrypted and inaccessible. Got it?”

“Got it,” he said, his eyes still on Kate. “Thank you, David.”

What had she been about to say? That if he tried to chew through his leash, Ormond would have him killed? That might have been useful information about a week ago. But did she know something? And why should she look so afraid?

Kate asked David, “Did you clear up the workroom?”

“You’d never know I’d been in there.”

“Thanks. Now let’s get out of here before something else happens.”

If he'd hoped for another shot at her, he was doomed to failure. Kate wanted him gone and made no bones about it, giving him only time enough to clap David on the back before he was quite rudely shoved out the front door into the cold.

How maddening could this get?

His cellphone rang again, delaying him from marching straight back inside and tormenting her, David-style, until he got to the bottom of this.

"Hey, Trick," Jason said.

"Ah, thank God."

"Problem?"

"Yeah. I have two questions. First, where was Ormond five days ago?"

"Napa Valley. Why?"

Shit. He might have known Ormond would have sent those blasted e-mails from the one place no one could get to them. "No reason," he said. "Second question. Do you know of any modifications they've made to security at Tac West?"

"None. Why?"

"I need access to the documents under the hangar."

"What documents?" Jason said. "What are you looking for?"

Okay, maybe he'd been wrong about Jason knowing where to look. But there was no harm in telling him anything. "Internal investigation records."

"Uh, I don't know who told you there were documents at Tac West. Whoever it was, they filled you full of bull. All the internal stuff is stored at a warehouse in St. Paul, Minnesota."

Oh, that miserable little... Did she ever tell the truth about anything?

Trying to be calm, he asked for details, and got them.

He hung up then. It didn't matter why she'd lied. He already had a fairly good idea, and he'd give her just enough rope to hang herself.

St. Paul, Minnesota

Monday, December 22; 2:30 a.m.

Kate scarcely allowed herself to think before they were in the air, and she wouldn't relive that hour-long flight on pain of death.

She'd spent the entire trip berating herself for what she was about to do, but she had no choice. And that's exactly what this was—a choice. A choice between Patrick who was already lost to her, and a brother she still stood to lose over their mother's selfishness. Once those records were destroyed, there'd be no proof left of what Claudia had done.

Tearing down a darkened highway in a rental minivan, she wondered if destroying the files was really necessary. She and the Globals were the only ones with access to this storage warehouse and to date, not one single internal investigation file had ever been revisited. No one would ever notice they were gone, and if she only destroyed the part that could hurt Alex, the rest might be used against her uncle should it ever become necessary.

Undecided, Kate turned right on a county highway east of St. Paul. The warehouse was in sight now, and time was on her side. It would be hours before Patrick realized she'd lied to him, giving her plenty of time to make a final decision on what to do with those files.

Pulling up before the long, low warehouse, she beat back any stray nerves. She could do this. She had keys and a security pass into the archives. It was the middle of the night, there were no cameras in these facilities, and during the holidays, there'd be no staff on hand.

Swiping her card through the panel, her wait-time in the frigid night air ended with a brittle metallic thump as the main door's bolts shot

back. And with one last deep breath that froze her lungs, she took the plunge.

It was warm and completely still in the lobby, and she passed the plexiglass reception window with a careful glance to make sure there were no signs of life.

None. Not that there ever were around here. The cement-brick walls had been left unpainted. The effect was not welcoming, more like a prison than a storage facility.

In the elevator, she supposed it was a prison in a way. It had been built not only to keep people out but to keep dangerous secrets inside.

Along with the internal investigation cases, these archives contained research documents compiled every time the company had to make a value judgment on whether to accept certain contracts they were offered.

If there was ever a question about the motives behind a contract, there was an exhaustive procedure the councils had to follow, quite similar to the *What Would You Do* scenario Patrick had hurled at her head. First any relevant history was examined, then there was an objectivity litmus test each contract had to pass. Would the requested action adversely affect unintended targets? Who, if anyone, stood to gain financially as a result of their actions? Were there vendettas involved, personal agendas, that sort of thing.

In the event a case crossed international jurisdictions, the Globals got involved and there, things got interesting. Everyone in the world seemed to be constantly trying to interfere elsewhere, so the questions they asked got tougher, the ramifications more complicated, and more often than not, their decisions were based on what was the least of all possible evils.

Those research documents contained uncomfortable truths and brutal criticisms of very important people. Within these walls was enough

fodder to topple governments, destroy economies, and lay waste to history as most people knew it.

She hated it in these places, especially this one. She'd only been here once before but Nina's internal investigation files had been like a siren, screaming with rage over what Claudia had done.

The elevator doors slid open, and five feet ahead lay a wire mesh grate, the last barrier between her and the evidence Patrick was after.

Unlocking the grate and making her way down a long central corridor of metal shelving, she forced her mind off the subject, obsessing instead on who might have set Patrick on this path and why they'd done it.

She had no way of knowing. All she could do was protect the evidence from them and worry about the whys and wherefores later.

The guilt attacked again as she neared the internal investigations section. Patrick had a right to know what had happened to his mother, and in doing this, she was behaving just as badly as *her* mother had.

Claudia Ormond-Crawford. Kate had never been able to fathom how they could be mother and daughter, and was grateful both she and Alex had taken after their father. Dad had been the solid one. The sensible, responsible one whose only true failing had been that he'd loved his wife no matter how much it had cost him.

And it had cost him plenty. Kate didn't know how the man had been able to stand it. She wasn't proud of the fact she hadn't shared his devotion, nor was she proud of the way she'd engaged with Claudia, deliberately antagonizing her out of spite for the way Dad had been treated.

Pretty abhorrent behavior from a pre-teen, but Kate hadn't cared then, and she didn't care now. Claudia had loved nothing better than to humiliate her husband. And one could only take so much before fighting back.

In some people's opinion, it had been for the best when both parents had been taken from her and Alex less than a month after Nina Mancini's death. It had been a weather-related boating accident that could have happened to anyone, but afterwards, Kate had wondered whether they'd still be alive had her father not been so worn down by his wife's ravenous appetite for destruction.

Years later, once Uncle William had told her the truth, she'd come to wonder if her father's guilt over Nina hadn't led them straight into that squall.

Kate bit down on the inside of her cheek. She wouldn't cry about this again. All her life, Uncle William had told her it was wrong to think ill of the dead, but how could she help it? Nina Mancini had been an exquisitely beautiful woman. Claudia had been irrationally jealous, and unfounded rumors of something between Dad and Nina had been the cause of this entire disaster.

In reality, it had been Uncle William and Jack Halloway seeing Nina, but the truth had never mattered to Claudia.

God. Why couldn't she just take the files and go? Why did she have to think? Thinking about the past meant reliving it, and the knowledge of what those files contained made her sick.

"You *bitch*," Kate whispered, and she wasn't sure whether she meant Claudia or herself.

The case files were exactly where they were supposed to be, but she frowned at the number of crates. Somehow it didn't seem right that something so damning and destructive could be housed in a mere pair of 18" x 36" containers. It made the family skeletons easy to transport, however, and after lugging them onto a cart she hauled them out to the van, then returned the cart to the correct floor by way of the elevator.

Now she'd head for the hotel and hope they'd have a room for her. The party reservations were for tomorrow night, but the cold weather, unseasonable even for Minnesota, should keep most sensible people away in kinder climates.

Skin prickling with the malaise radiating from the back seat, she sped all the way back into St. Paul and straight to the hotel, never letting herself think about what would happen when Patrick found out she'd lied to him.

By then, it would be over. Her decision would be made and carried out before he could make it back. And then he could do to her whatever he liked. As long as Alex was safe, that was the only thing that mattered.

A valet scurried outside after she'd pulled beneath the overhang, rubbing his hands together and trailing a steaming line of breath behind him.

"Good morning, Miss. Will you be staying with us?"

"I hope so. Our party's not booked until tomorrow but I got here earlier than expected."

"That won't be a problem," he said. "Would you like me to bring everything inside?"

"Yes, please. In one trip, if at all possible."

Kate practically stalked the poor man as he loaded up both crates and her luggage. The hundred dollar bill she slipped him along with an apology for keeping him out in the cold got her a warm grin and a very attentive companion on her way to the front desk.

"Your suite for tomorrow night's available," the clerk said. "Will that do?"

"Perfectly, thanks."

They had a long ride up to her suite, and they were only halfway there before the valet tried to make conversation. “Corporate Christmas party?”

“Yes.”

“What sort of business are you in?”

Knowing he was only being polite, she gave the standard response. “We subcontract in human intelligence and geospatial patterns.”

The valet nodded vaguely and pretended to understand. That’s how nearly everyone responded to the obscure, confusing explanation. And the man, bless his heart, changed the subject to professional basketball, a subject Kate was forced in turn to pretend she understood.

Twenty minutes later, safely ensconced in her suite, Kate sat on a soft yellow brocade settee, staring at the metal boxes. The valet had set them on the floor in the middle of the sunken lounge area so the sharp edges couldn’t mar the coffee table.

She’d known this wouldn’t be an easy decision to make, but she hadn’t taken this step of the process into account. The majority of the boxes’ contents were a mystery to her, so she couldn’t simply burn them without looking things over. There might be some of Nina’s personal possessions inside, and the thought of touching them made her hands prickle with guilt.

If there were such things inside, she couldn’t destroy them. There were limits to how far she’d go, and even if she couldn’t tell Patrick the truth, she might be able to contrive a way of returning Nina’s possessions to him without revealing their origin.

He was owed something. And sitting here conspiring to deceive him further only made the urge to pick up the phone and confess that much stronger.

This was so unfair to him. He'd done nothing to deserve being lied to, but what else could she do?

She hated this. And it was humiliating to realize how far she'd fallen. For the last ten years, in the back of her mind, she'd always held hope Uncle William would die young and break the last tie between the present and the past.

What sort of person had she become, wishing for someone to die?

Okay, so Uncle William was a pitiful excuse for a human being, but his death would never break that tie. He'd passed the secret on to her, and as long as she kept it, she was just as guilty as he was.

Maybe it was better this way. In six years, Patrick would be a free man again, able to start the life her family had stolen from him. By destroying these files, his mother would be left in peace. Unavenged, but only a distant whisper while he went on to bigger and less dangerous things.

And wouldn't it be lovely if she could honestly believe that? Too bad she wasn't capable of twisting this into something she was doing for Patrick's own good.

This was the wrong thing to do. The right thing would be to find the courage to call Patrick and tell him the truth before he got himself killed. And death was a distinct possibility if Uncle William found out he was after these files.

She had to tell Patrick. Afterwards, she'd be fine. Eventually.

But Alex would not be.

God, this was impossible. There had to be a lesser of all possible evils in this scenario. A way to lessen the damage done.

Now all she had to do was find it.

Eveleth, Minnesota

Monday, December 22; 3:30 a.m.

Layne, forewarned of Patrick's crew's presence at the facility, had Wyatt meet her at the Eveleth municipal airport.

"Let me off at the evacuation tunnel," she told him. "I don't want them to know I'm here."

"If you say so, but why all the secrecy?"

"I told you. I need to see David."

"And? Why does that have to be a secret? You're in charge of this joint."

Sighing first, she said, "Remember signing that non-disclosure agreement when you were hired?"

"Of course. I thought I'd signed my life away."

"Well, you did. Ask any more questions and I'll kill you."

Wyatt pulled the car up to the tunnel entrance, covered over by a storage shed. Before getting out, she told him, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, but surely you know Patrick can be a very...impulsive person and I need to make sure he hasn't endangered David."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. His crew's only here to work on the security system. And Kate was on him like white on rice the entire time, then kicked him out the door."

Layne, with a growing feeling of unrest, got out and raced through the cold to the shed doors, keys already in hand. Inside the small building, she reset the security panel, then dashed past a riding lawnmower onto the stairwell leading down to the evacuation tunnel.

A golf cart finally carried her the full mile to the tac center. Once there, she used the elevator to bring her to ground level where she kept a sharp eye out for Patrick's crew.

She wasn't sure why Patrick's men were really here, but she doubted they'd come to test the security system. It was to be hoped she wouldn't run into them. If Patrick learned of her presence, he'd know she was on to him, and then God only knew what he might do next.

Seeing no one at all, she hurried upstairs, and she'd barely knocked once before David whipped his door open to drag her inside.

"Did you bring them?"

"Yes." She handed over the bag holding laptop computers and two thumb drives.

"Ah, thank God. You got the make and model perfect. Do you have keys to the tac center?"

"Yes, of course. Are you ready?"

David couldn't move quickly enough, and she was hard pressed to keep up with him as he led her back to the center and down into a workroom.

He put the laptops and thumb drives in their appropriate places, breathing out a sigh of relief.

"Why are you so nervous?" she asked.

"Inventory. If Alex finds stuff missing, Kate'd know who took it, and probably why. She might yell at Trick for it, ya know? Then *he'd* know more stuff's missing than should be. Even still we're at risk because those unformatted laptops won't match the old ones' serial numbers."

"Don't worry. I can alter the inventory." Once that was taken care of, she asked, "What have you got for me?"

David pulled a chair over to a corner ceiling tile and stretched a long arm up to shove the tile aside, coming out with a laptop. "I made two copies of the drives he brought and installed the spares in this thing."

"What's the thumb drive for?"

He explained, and she said, “You must have been awfully quick about it.”

“It was no big deal. They’ve got two kitchen sinks in this place so the worst of it was the time it took to copy the hard disk. Then I had to locate an extra thumb drive, but I finally found one in a drawer twenty heart attacks later.”

“Good work, David. So what did you think of him?”

“Of who?”

“Patrick.”

“He’s a... Never mind. I can’t say that in front of a lady.”

“Why not? Did you suddenly find religion?”

Giving her a *get real* look, he said, “I thought he was a prick. A smart prick, but still a prick who can’t keep himself out of trouble.”

“A fair assessment. Over the years I’ve decided it would be easier to keep water dry than to keep Patrick out of trouble.”

He frowned while decrypting that statement.

She said, “Show me what you saw that made you panic.”

Now protesting her choice of words, he fired up the laptop and opened a spreadsheet program, then turned the screen toward her so she could see the list of existing folders.

“That one, right there,” David said. “CFU.”

“Oh dear God. What’s he gotten himself into?”

“I’m not sure. But as soon as I saw that, I knew something was wrong. My idol—the hacker I told you about—did a bunch of work for them. He built a custom spreadsheet program and an electronic payment system geared to work *like* the Internet but separate from the one everyone else uses.”

Layne nodded. “I remember. I didn’t understand a word you said, but I remember.”

“Good. Because they killed him, Layne. The day after he had everything set up and the bugs worked out, he was supposed to receive payment from those CFU people. Only he was never heard from again.”

Layne didn’t comment, although she knew CFU was a suspected front for a weapons dealer. No one had ever gotten close enough to prove anything. Or if they had, like David’s hacker friend, they hadn’t lived to tell anyone else. The only name ever linked with the operation was Carl Castille, but facts on the man had proven elusive. Last time an agency had done any digging, they’d determined the name was a false ID.

Whoever was behind that identity and CFU knew every single regulation there was to prevent this sort of activity, and had safeguards so many layers thick they were impossible to penetrate.

David brought up another window. “And if CFU wasn’t bad enough, look at this drive’s licensing information.”

“There’s a logical explanation. Someone was probably investigating or—”

“No. The spreadsheet I found was an earnings summary that covered the last thirty-some years. If it’s like you said and it’s just information they found from digging around, why wouldn’t they use it to prosecute?”

A hot stone had settled itself at the base of her throat. “It might not be enough. Or too oblique to lead them onto the next step.”

“Come on, Layne,” he protested, pointing to the words *Ormond Industries*. “Wake up and smell the money laundering. The payment service my friend designed was perfect for it, and it’s not like they could ask a legitimate company to do it, then kill everyone who worked on the project.”

“True.”

“Okay. So next, William Ormond’s name is all over the place on this drive. Isn’t Ormond Industries the public front for the Sanction? And isn’t he the head dude?”

“Yes,” she said quietly, taking a step back and rubbing her temples.

Castille. Could Ormond be Castille? That would certainly explain why the Sanction had never been allowed to unleash itself upon CFU.

“This drive was as encrypted as they come, so he was serious about hiding its contents. If that spreadsheet was evidence in a legit investigation, why would he have a billion security layers protecting it?”

Why indeed.

Then he asked, “What I need to know is why Patrick would bring this to me. And where did he get it in the first place? He told me some bullshit story about another Sanction guy getting caught and beat up after setting off the boot tag. Except it couldn’t possibly happen that way.”

“Because?”

“Because boot tags are an archaic theft deterrent. All they do is relay the IP address of wherever an attempt is made to boot the drive. They can’t like...paint a big red X on the guy who did it. Someone had to have actually been in the same room to see him try to boot that drive, then follow him from there.”

Visions of Jack Halloway began to form themselves in her mind. No one was sure of his whereabouts before his attack, and there were one too many coincidences making the rounds for her taste.

Jack was very lucky to be alive.

He added, “Patrick told me the Sanction guy won the fight and brought him the drive. But what if that’s not true?”

“Are you accusing Patrick of attacking J—that Sanction operative and taking the disk for himself?”

“Yes I am,” David said, more decisively than she’d like. “And either Patrick’s looking to tangle with CFU, or he’s into CFU with Ormond.”

“Not possible. Patrick hates Ormond.”

“So? That doesn’t mean they couldn’t be into something together, and think about it, Layne. Who caught me? I’d been sniffing around, asking people if they knew anything about CFU, and within days, Patrick busts me on *other charges*? Then he brings me that disk once the smoke’s cleared. He must think I know something, and now the whole place is surrounded by his thugs. You gotta get everybody out of here before he gives the order.”

“No. Patrick would never—”

“The hell he wouldn’t. He does assassination work.”

“Yes, and resents every second of it,” Layne said. “Now may I ask why, if you thought you were in danger, did you not tell Kate instead of calling me in?”

David looked at her with those soulful green eyes. “Because Kate doesn’t have the nads to handle Mancini, or anyone else. You know it, and I know it.”

“I know no such thing. And you’re wrong about Patrick if you think he’d take part in something like this. Deep down, he’s more an old lady than I am.”

“Then what the hell’s going on? How did he get that disk? Why did he make me access it for him? And why would Ormond have that information on a maximum security drive if he wasn’t in on CFU?”

“Those,” she said, “are all very good questions. But I know Patrick. And I’m afraid we’re in the midst of your first scenario where he’s bitten off more than he can chew.”

David’s eyes were still full of doubt.

“Tell me everything you saw and heard. Then we’ll go over the rest of this drive.”

Chapter Seven

St. Paul, Minnesota

Monday, December 22; 4:00 a.m.

She'd made her decision, and it was done.

Well, not really, but her temporary solution would have to do for now. The crates were in a closet in the other bedroom. Come Wednesday morning, once she'd made sure everyone else was gone and she could move them out of here unseen, she'd take them to their new hiding place.

Where, exactly, that new hiding place would be, she wasn't sure. Storing them at the Eveleth facility was out of the question. Burying them wasn't an option, either. At least not here in Minnesota where the ground would be frozen solid for another few months.

This was exactly the reason she hated playing games of willful deception. It started out on a moment of panicked impulse and became a nonstop cover-up from there.

No matter where those boxes ended up, her actions tonight would be forever on her mind, like fingernails eternally screeching across an infinite stretch of chalkboard. But it was better she live that way than lose Alex, so she pulled herself together once again, got up and went for her suitcase.

What she needed right now was sleep, and if she brought her dress down to the desk to have it steamed back into shape, she could sleep right up until the last possible second. Patrick would call to yell about Tac West at some point, but she'd just send him off in another direction, then go back to sleep.

The faint whiff of a light, citrusy scent should have warned her of what she'd find inside her suitcase.

"Oh come *on*," Kate whimpered.

Everything. Absolutely everything inside was covered with shampoo. The dress, her shoes, her pajamas...everything.

She squeezed her eyes shut and swore. What was that she'd been thinking about karma not very long ago?

She'd asked for this. Moments after coming up with this plan she'd smashed her fingers between two carts. And now even the shampoo was expressing its disgust.

Sitting down on the floor before the luggage rack, she let her head fall into her hands.

What was she doing? How could she have let herself go this far? Stealing files from the archives, lying to Patrick about his mother, and protecting Alex from something he had every right to know? He should have been told years ago he wasn't Troy Crawford's son.

Why had she waited? The more time that passed, the more chance he'd hate her for keeping this secret, and she hated herself for it enough already.

This was it. Her worst fear had been realized. People always said life was what happened while you were busy making other plans. For her, it meant turning into her mother while she'd been busy trying not to.

She should have known better. Done better.

"Well, well, well," said a fathom's-deep, chocolaty voice right beside her. "Do I smell a hint of guilt, or is it only shampoo?"

Scrambling to her feet, she was too overcome by the inevitability of it all to be surprised.

He was early. Hours early, and it was no use asking how he'd found her out, or gotten into her room. Locks were about as useful against him as dinner napkins against a hurricane.

He asked, "What did you take from that warehouse?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask *what warehouse*, but the misdirection stuck in her throat, digging itself in like barbed wire.

She hadn't realized she'd been sinking back down again until Patrick dragged her up by the shirt. The rage in his eyes made her flinch even before he barked, "*What did you take from that warehouse?*"

To her horror, she could feel tears burning her eyelids and thickening her throat. Crying would be a bad idea. Excuses would be worse.

"The internal files," she said.

Her honesty seemed to take him aback, but that didn't stop him from shouting, "She was my mother, Kate. How could you *do this?*"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, sorry you got caught," he said, driving her backward until she collided with a chair.

She sat down hard with not a sensible word coming to mind, waiting for him to explode.

He didn't. Instead, looming over her with his hands on the chair arms, he asked, "What did he do to her? How did he kill her?"

"He? It wasn't a..."

This was not good. He obviously had some bad information, and as angry as he was, setting him straight could prove difficult.

"Don't even think about lying to me right now. It's over. Your precious Uncle Willy killed my mother, so just tell me what happened, hand over the files and get ready for Armageddon."

"You don't understand. My uncle had nothing to do with it until after the fact."

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you protecting him?”

“I’m not. My uncle isn’t responsible for what happened to your mother. Claudia did it.”

For a moment, Patrick looked stunned. But only for a moment. The next he demanded, “What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You have to understand something—I don’t know all the details. No one does, because Claudia never admitted to anything. My uncle’s only involvement came afterwards for the damage control.”

Patrick’s eyes narrowed, then one brow went up.

She said, “I’m sorry. I’ve wanted to tell you ever since I found out, only...it’s complicated.”

“How can it be complicated? And exactly how long have you known?”

Kate looked down at the floor, nearly writhing in guilt and anticipation of his reaction. “Ten years.”

“*Ten years?*” Patrick roared. “Give me those fucking files. Right now.”

Not daring to say one word, she got up and led him across the suite into the other bedroom. She’d no more than stopped in front of the closet’s white, louvered doors before Patrick had them open and the crates hauled out.

Crouching beside them with one hand on a latch clip, Patrick said, “There’d better be enough in here to hang him, or you’ll be doing the honors.”

“I don’t know what’s in them. I couldn’t bring myself to look, but I told you—Claudia did it, not Uncle William.”

He said something under his breath, then flipped open the first box’s latch, and she watched in horrified suspense as he lifted the lid.

She blinked at first sight of the contents. From her angle over Patrick’s shoulder, all she could see were two full stacks of old, green and white collated printer paper.

Taking another step closer, she was right behind him as Patrick snarled, “That son of a...”

She reared back as Patrick began violently unraveling a stack. But there was nothing hidden beneath them. The crate was empty save for those two accordions of blank paper.

Metal screeched in protest as he tore the lid off the second crate and found two more stacks of striped paper while Kate took a deep breath and crumpled onto the edge of the bed before she could fall down.

Uncle William. He’d done this. She should have known better than to believe he’d allow such evidence to remain unprotected in a warehouse. Yet the entire time, he’d held it over her head, threatening to use it if she failed him again.

Patrick, surrounded by jagged clouds of paper, turned a dark, seething stare her way, but she could do nothing except close her eyes and shake her head in disgust.

How could she have been so stupid? She’d stuck her head in the sand for ten years and prayed the entire mess would go away. And now here was Patrick looking for an explanation when all she wanted to do was sink through the floor where she could die of shame in peace.

The sound of Patrick stomping through paper made her re-open her eyes to see him slam a crate shut and set it squarely in front of her. Then he sat down on top, putting them practically nose to nose. “You’re going to start at the beginning and tell me everything.”

She would, but the only thing she could think of was Alex. If the contents of the crates had been destroyed, he might not be in danger. But if the test results excluding Troy Crawford as his father were still out there—and Uncle William undoubtedly had them somewhere—they were still a threat.

Damn Uncle William. Damn him to hell for this.

“Kate?” Patrick prompted.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Start with how you found out. And when. You weren’t very specific.”

“It was the day after you went to Texas for that genetic sabotage case.”

He frowned. “You mean when I stole that bull?”

“Yes. It was Easter, remember?”

“You’d gone to Baltimore to visit Alex.”

She nodded. “Uncle William had been there all week, and knew I’d come over. He kept paging me, but I ignored it because I was...” She let that trail off. Hearing she’d been worried sick about him that day might sound like she was trying to curry sympathy, and she doubted either of them could tolerate that at the moment. “Well, it’s not important. He came over to the dorms finally and made me go with him. And as soon as we got to his house, he started asking me about you.”

“He found out about us?”

“Did you really believe we could sneak around for eighteen months without him finding out? Please. *Everyone* knew. Carlos knew, the rest of your support staff, and half the European branch. The only reason we lasted as long as we did was because Uncle William was the last to know.”

“Go on.”

“To make a long story short, we—”

“No,” Patrick interrupted. “Tell me exactly what was said.”

“This was ten years ago. I can’t remember it word for word.”

“Try.”

Great. The problem was, she *did* remember nearly word for word, and editing out Uncle William’s reproaches, name-calling and threats would make this tough.

She started with a much-sterilized, “He told me you and I couldn’t see each other, and when I argued, he said there was a reason we couldn’t.”

Uncle William had begun his explanation by talking down to her as if she were completely ignorant, lecturing on how the world had been in an awkward transition back then. The cold war had ended, and the intelligence community was in a nose dive, taking the Sanction with it.

The media, too, was transitioning from straight news to entertainment, thanks to the competition for advertising revenue. Without a convenient good vs. evil battle to hook their audience, they’d turned on world leaders for their provocative headlines.

The subjects of all that scrutiny had been justifiably spooked, and anything that might draw the media’s evil eye their way had been suspect.

Uncle William had said the Sanction’s methods, once so crucial to their customers, had turned the company into a dangerous liability. And to make matters worse, there’d long been rumors about Claudia Ormond-Crawford and a certain member of a royal family. They even went so far as to suspect the royal of fathering Alex. Add to that distasteful brew the rumors flying about Jack, Uncle William, Kate’s father and Patrick’s mother, and they had themselves a recipe for ostracism.

Kate could remember the tension. Her parents had been alternately fighting or not speaking at all. Nothing in between, and with business so shaky and Claudia’s flamboyant attention-seeking behavior scaring off prospective business, her parents had been home more than ever.

“I’m sorry to say,” she told him, “it was almost a relief when they went to those Baltimore meetings that weekend.”

“The weekend my mother died?”

Kate nodded. But now she had to be careful. According to Uncle William, her father had fallen victim to the rumors about Alex, and had secretly conducted one of those brand-new DNA paternity tests. The morning before they'd left to mend fences with Europe and North America, Dad had found out he'd been one-hundred percent excluded as Alex's biological father.

Leaving that part out, she said, "Uncle William said when they got there, my parents had an unusually bad argument about the rumors, and my mother took off. Dad stayed and held the meetings without knowing—or caring, probably—where Claudia had gone."

Uncle William, on the other hand, had been worried. He'd seen his sister leave in a fury that Saturday morning, and he'd spent the rest of the day trying to track her down.

Finally, at one o'clock Sunday morning, Claudia had called. She'd been nearly incoherent, begging him to come to Atlanta right away. He'd arrived around four hours later, and had met Claudia at a small hotel on the fringes of town. Without any explanation or warning whatsoever, she'd led him from her room around to the other side of the hotel. There, in a second-floor corner suite, he'd found Nina Mancini dead.

Patrick leaned forward then, scrubbing his face with his hands.

Kate, who could hardly imagine how he must be feeling, forced herself not to comfort him somehow or tell him how sorry she was. It would only sound trite.

When he straightened again, the contempt she'd expected wasn't there. He just looked sad. And very, very angry.

But to her surprise, he nudged her knee with one of his and with the slightest of nods managed to convey he was less inclined to throttle her now.

Then he asked, "How did our mothers end up in the same place?"

"A hotel receptionist in Baltimore told Uncle William Claudia had snatched the phone from his hand when she'd heard him page Mr. Crawford. Apparently it happened not long before my parents had words. It must have been your mother calling for Arthur or my dad."

He nodded. "Claudia would have been in the mood to pounce. Jack and my mother were common knowledge, but not many people knew about your uncle. And I'm sure we can guess how Claudia felt about it."

"So you knew your mother had been seeing Uncle William?"

"Yes. It made me ill, but I knew."

"Can I... I thought Jack and your mother were happy together," Kate said, not sure whether she should really ask why his mother would cheat on Jack. Claudia's affairs had never made any sense. She could hardly expect Patrick to understand any better than she had.

"I think my mother was more ready than Jack to settle down, and when your uncle put himself in the running, she probably used him to get a message across."

Kate shrugged. "Well, you know how Claudia was. She was all about attention, and your mother was a very beautiful, vibrant person. And she'd been linked with Claudia's brother, husband, and others that—"

"It's all right, Kate. You don't have to rationalize it. I took orders from Claudia long enough to know what she was like."

Picking up the story again, she gave her uncle's account of what happened after Claudia had brought him to Nina's room.

Claudia had claimed Nina had been dead when she got there. But when Uncle William had asked why she hadn't simply left, she'd had no answer. Next he'd asked why she hadn't called 911, and was told they didn't need the publicity. And when he'd asked how she'd gotten into the room if Nina had already been dead, Claudia had just stared at him, saying nothing.

Angry then, he'd begun to seriously question what he saw, but Claudia had refused to answer anything else, merely insisting he do something about the body.

When he refused, Claudia had left the room and promptly disappeared again. Uncle William had been forced to make the decisions by himself, weighing the Sanction's future against a dead agent he'd loved.

He hadn't known what to believe about how Nina had died, but the more he inspected the scene, the more convinced he became Nina hadn't overdosed on her own.

He'd suspected Claudia had somehow subdued her before injecting the heroin, only he'd had no idea how. There'd been no signs of a struggle or any evidence the body might have been moved there from somewhere else.

In addition, Uncle William knew Nina had been clean since signing with the Sanction, but he'd also known how this would look—exactly the way his sister had intended it to look, as if Nina's reportedly agitated state of mind that week had made her start using again.

He knew then this had been no heat-of-the-moment event. The heroin couldn't have materialized out of thin air. Claudia must have put time and thought into killing Nina Mancini.

Thanks to his own mandatory stint in Investigations, Uncle William had decided against tampering much with the scene. The lack of trace evidence and fingerprints in a hotel room—notorious for nightmarish amounts of both—would have created more concern than it would have quieted.

Knowing his sister would have been smart about whose prints might be found in the room or on the syringe, the only things he'd removed had been an open bottle of wine and two glasses. The wine had been an

Ormond vintage with their name big as life on the label, and it would be better if they weren't associated in any way with the scene.

He'd left, seen by no one, and Nina's body had been found by housekeeping. The Atlanta Police Department had arrived promptly, and Uncle William's less-is-more approach had worked. Even with Layne standing watch, nothing inconsistent with an overdose had been unearthed.

It was only later Uncle William realized how wise it had been to take the wine bottle and glasses. To quell his own curiosity, he'd had them analyzed privately, and in one glass, the lab had found traces of a predatory drug called GHB, popularly known as the date rape drug. It was especially dangerous for its effects, rendering the user helpless with a high enough dose. It was also particularly difficult to detect because it metabolized very quickly, leaving no telltale chemical components behind in the body.

He suspected Claudia had slipped Nina a dose in the wine, then waited for the GHB's powerful sedative effect to almost fully wear off before beginning to inject the heroin. Claudia would have done it gradually over time, keeping Nina alive long enough to ensure any trace of the GHB would be completely gone before larger and larger heroin doses could kill her. And leaving the needle in place would have left only one needle mark in Nina's arm, consistent with the ME's findings.

The next time Uncle William saw his sister had been the first time he'd ever been afraid of her. After a five-day vanishing act, she'd flounced into his Baltimore home as if nothing had ever happened, and announced she was ready to open the internal investigation.

Kate could remember Uncle William's exact tone of voice as he'd described their reunion. He'd sounded bewildered and incensed at the same time. "I don't know what happened to her. When we were growing

up she was the happiest, sweetest little thing, but the moment they forced her into office, she changed. She seemed to just...brim with hate, and until that day I'd been praying I was wrong about what she'd done. But there she'd stood with this smug look, and I knew she'd done it. I tried to talk her out of the internal case, thinking she just wanted control over the process, but all she wanted was another chance to torture your father. And to punish me and Jack for loving Nina."

Patrick broke in to say, "So there really was an internal investigation."

"Yes."

"And they never found out what happened."

"No," she said.

"Okay, but Jack's name was on that depositions list. Why wasn't he deposed?"

Kate knew Patrick would not be pleased with the truth. "He was."

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"Uncle William said everyone involved, including Jack, decided afterwards that you didn't need to hear the findings."

"What? Why not?"

"Because Claudia made sure it had nothing to do with your mother. She made it all about herself. About how she was so mistreated and how she was the only one in the Sanction who could think with the head above their beltline. God. What a joke."

"Then I don't get why these files would have been a problem. If they had nothing to do with my mother's death, then—"

"I'm not done yet. My uncle never forgave Claudia for what she'd done or how she'd used the investigation to hurt everyone. He'd destroyed the wine bottle and glasses, but kept the lab results so he stuck them and a couple other things into the internal files. Then he told Claudia if she

didn't resign from office, he'd fall on his sword and expose the whole thing."

"And a week later, she and your father resigned."

"Correct," Kate confirmed. "Uncle William nominated my dad's brother Arthur as interim CEO until I could eventually take over. But since Arthur wasn't Ormond blood, it was a violation of the charter."

"So the chairmanship went to William."

They both fell silent, Kate overwhelmed by exhaustion, shame, and the horror of it all. She couldn't guess what might be going through Patrick's head. He kept his eyes down and sat, uncharacteristically still, until she said, "I know this means absolutely nothing now, but I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you, but he warned me if I saw you again, he'd k—"

"Kill me. Right. And the moment I got back from Texas, you broke up with me because you believed him."

Oh, it had been much more than that. She might have been terrified for Patrick, but once Uncle William enlightened her on the threat to Alex should those test results come to light, she'd known if she were ever to open her mouth, her brother would pay for it with his life.

Unable to help herself, she said, "Put yourself in my shoes, then turn that *What Would You Do* magnifying glass on yourself for once."

After another long silence, Patrick shook his head. "It didn't happen to me. So I have no idea what I'd have done."

"Yes, well, it actually did happen to me, and I *did* believe him, you know. Especially when he told me he'd put a gun to your head once already. And think what you will about how or why I ended it, but if I'd told you the truth, you would have—"

"Yeah, I get the breakup part now. What I don't get is how you continue to cover up a murder for ten more years."

How could she explain about Alex? Patrick was so unpredictable, she had no idea how he'd react, and after everything he'd just heard, she had little hope he'd proceed with caution for Alex's sake.

"Kate, I can see every wheel spinning in that head of yours, and if there's something you need to tell me, you better do it fast."

"He had other ways of keeping me quiet. I can't expect you to accept it or even understand, but..."

"But you're about to spew some ridiculous crap about hundreds of jobs being at risk if the Sanction folded or some other—"

"No. No. It had nothing to do with the Sanction," she interrupted. "If I tell you the truth, do you swear not to tear my family to shreds before I've handled it?"

"Handled what? And you've got a lot of cheek, asking me to swear to anything."

"I know I do, but it's about someone who had nothing to do with any of this."

"Fine. Tell me."

Now that the moment was upon her, she had no idea how to say it. Nor was she sure telling him was the wisest move, but this was *Patrick*. He knew how important Alex was to her.

Praying she wasn't making a mistake, she said, "One of the things my uncle put in the files was a paternity test that proved Alex wasn't my father's son. Alex doesn't know, and I want a chance to tell him before he finds out from someone else."

Patrick stared at her for a good five seconds before breathing, "Jesus, Mary and Joseph. What the hell kind of family are you people running? Why wasn't Alex told?"

"Because Uncle William knew the kind of men my mother preferred."

“That’s rubbish. It had nothing to do with the men. It was about knocking rival women down a peg or two by poaching their worthless boy-toy husbands.”

“Exactly. The kind of worthless boy-toy husbands who’d kill the evidence of an affair to protect their meal ticket. And if that wasn’t enough to scare me silent, Uncle William said if I ever repeated any of this, the truth would spread. Then he might have to do something to Alex to spare the gossip and protect the company.”

“What do you mean, *do something?*”

Patrick stared at her, waiting for an answer, but she couldn’t even put the fear into words.

After a moment, Patrick clenched his jaw, dropped his head once more, and raked a hand through his hair. “Dead man. Ormond’s a dead man.”

“No. Patrick, please don’t—”

As he raised his head, his eyes were full of that same fire she’d seen back at Eveleth. “Did you ever actually see the paternity test or those wineglass lab results?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you look for them?”

“Why *would* I? If I had, he would have hurt Alex.”

Patrick gave her a singularly jaded expression.

“What?” she asked.

“So at no point did you ever realize your uncle’s story was complete and utter bullshit?”

Chapter Eight

Kate blinked at him, and he could see she'd had her doubts.

He pressed, "Why didn't you ever call his bluff?"

"Are you crazy? You know what Uncle William's like."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"Ormond might be *your* uncle, but I've worked under him for eighteen years. Taken orders from him, sat in on his meetings, and learned more about how he operates than I would ever want to know. Neither he nor Claudia could ever do anything directly. I once saw them perform a staged argument outside a Paris nightclub to win the company a ten-million-dollar contract. And everything you just told me has their particular manipulation style written all over it."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he stopped her by dropping his chin and letting his dubiousness preempt anything she might say. And she sighed, rubbing her neck the way she always did when she was uncomfortable.

That was okay. He wanted her uncomfortable. She deserved to be uncomfortable after allowing her uncle to get away with murder.

"The only thing your uncle cared about was remaining in control of the Sanction," he said, "And you made it as easy as possible."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Kit. You want everything to be logical and above-board. Safe. For everything to make sense, and for everyone to do the right thing. Your uncle had nine years to script that story into something

you'd fall for, and he did it in a way that strapped you over an emotional barrel."

Her eyes were all doubtful resentment and he could see she was so tired she could hardly take it anymore. But at the same time, he knew he was speaking directly to doubts she'd been forced to ignore forever, and if he played his cards right, he'd walk away from this with a very powerful, motivated ally in this fight.

"Break down what Ormond said," he told her. "He painted you a picture about how stressful everything was. Business was horrible. Rumors were flying. Claudia was under so much pressure, she was bound to snap. Then he gives you a version of what happened which can't be proved or disproved either way, since Claudia was long dead."

"But the files—"

"What files? Do you see any files? I know I don't. The internal farce may have taken place, but he told you he'd seeded them with a bunch of circumstantial, unverifiable evidence. And to keep you from calling his bluff and double-checking his story, he hit you right where it hurt."

"Alex," she said softly.

"Yes, Alex. It's a pretty well-known fact you'd walk through fire for your brother. What better way to keep you quiet than putting Alex at risk if you made trouble?"

He watched her grow pale, and continued, "What do you think would have happened to your uncle if you had? He would have been run out of office, and he's nothing without it. Completely powerless."

"But he never wanted to be Chairman. He put Arthur ahead of himself."

"An empty gesture. He knew your mother had finally gone starkers, and made her and your father resign before she destroyed his precious company. So what does he do? He nominates Arthur, who would have

been a violation of the charter, and could never happen. And if you don't believe he'd do damn near anything to stay in office, think about the two of us from his point of view. What would his odds have been if the Sanction princess and its most lucrative operative had hooked up? You might not have been ready to take over right away, but as your husband, *I* could have. And would have. So he put a stop to it, and with you too afraid to fight him, he's got the Chairmanship locked indefinitely."

"I think you might be overestimating things a bit."

"Oh really? Tell me again why you'd care if he threatened me?"

She went from pale to a bright, angry red.

"Kitten," he soothed. "The two of us together would have been unbeatable. Indestructible, and he had to know how tight we were if I'd risk jail going behind his back that way."

"But—"

"But nothing. We were together a long time, and it would've been pretty mercenary of you to string me along if you didn't—"

"String you *along*?" she interrupted. "Now if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh please. You're making it sound like everything was perfect between us, but you know it wasn't. So can you lay off for a while? Right now I need to figure out what and how to tell Alex."

"Haven't you heard a word I've said?" he asked. "For all you know, dear old Uncle Willy was yanking your chain about the paternity test, too."

"And if he wasn't?"

"We'll dig into this thing. If we find out that part is true, you can handle Alex however you want. That's the only leeway I'll give you."

“Now hang on a minute,” she said. “What’s all this *we* business? I told you everything I know. If you plan on pursuing it, fine. But leave me and Alex out of it.”

“I can’t. Your uncle killed my mother, and used your brother against you. He has to pay for that. And you’re the only one who has the brains and credibility to prove he lied.”

“Why are you so convinced he was lying?”

“Why are you so convinced he wasn’t?”

Kate covered her face with her hands. After a moment, she returned them to her lap. “Even if it was a lie, we can’t prove anything. We’d need means and opportunity. An eye witness account, a broken alibi. Something solid to prove he was in Atlanta and had access to the drugs.”

“I don’t have that. But you might be able to find it.”

Her phone rang, and they both muttered. Calls at this hour were never good news.

“Now what?” She took a phone from her pocket and flipped it open to check the display.

The next instant she’d gone stark white again, her spine ram-rod straight. And with eyes full of suspicion and disbelief, she stared at him, her mouth hanging slightly open.

“What?” he asked. “Who is it?”

“It’s him. Uncle William. He knows. I haven’t talked to him in more than a year!”

Panic. She was panicking. And he wasn’t feeling terribly calm himself. Had Ormond found them out already?

“Don’t answer it.”

“I have to.”

“No you don’t. Put the phone down, Kitten.”

“Stop calling me that. I hate it. And be quiet. I have to answer.”

“Don’t you dare ans—”

Kate held the phone up, and in that instant he figured he knew how a lemming must look as it ran headlong over a cliff.

“Hello?”

He reached over and pressed the speaker button, earning himself a swat. She’d deliberately missed, but the scathingly nasty glare she fired at him was a direct hit.

“Where are you?” Ormond asked. “And I’ve already called Eveleth. So don’t lie.”

What the hell? What kind of way was that to start a conversation after not speaking for a year?

“I’m in St. Paul,” she answered quietly. “The Christmas party is tonight.”

“You won’t be attending. Pack up your things and go straight back to the facility.”

“But—”

“Go home, Katherine. That’s an order.”

“But I *can’t* just go home,” Kate protested. “It’s four-thirty in the morning, and people already know I’m here. How will it look if I leave?”

“I don’t care how it will look. I absolutely forbid you to go to that party.”

“Can’t you at least tell me why?”

“No. It’s none of your affair,” William said. “And be sure you stay clear of Layne and her minions. No phone calls to anyone but me until after Christmas Day.”

Kate’s empty, submissive demeanor seemed to sharpen. Something had rung a bell with her.

It rang a bell with him, too. Ormond had paid the Kretts to hold off until Christmas. What was so important about that date?

The calculation that so intrigued him was in full force as Kate asked, “Not even Alex?”

“Not even Alex,” Ormond said. “I expect you to be back in Eveleth by noon.”

“Uncle William, it’s been a bad week. I haven’t slept in almost three days, and—”

“Yes, I heard about your tantrum in front of the FBI Director. You should be ashamed of yourself, and that’s all the more reason why you should go home. Hire a car or something. I don’t care how you do it, just make sure you’re gone by the time the others arrive.”

“What if they come to Eveleth?”

There was silence on the other end, as if she’d stumped the old bastard.

They both startled when her question backfired and Ormond erupted, “Fine. If you can’t follow a few simple instructions, I’ll have to deal with you myself. And when I get there, you’d better be rested and ready to travel.”

Kate’s eyes rounded a bit, and he had a hard time not grabbing the phone from her.

Yet she came off very cool, asking, “What time can I expect you?”

“Late,” he snapped. “Eight. Perhaps nine o’clock, your time. I can’t get there sooner.”

“And where will we go?”

“I’ll be going to the party. You’ll be going elsewhere. Just be ready when I get there. And if I find out you’ve disobeyed me, you will be sorry. Am I understood?”

“Yes.”

“Is that how you address me?” the man prompted.

“No, Uncle William.”

That was it. He'd be damned if he sat by another second while Ormond went full-metal-Claudia on Kate.

But Kate, her eyes flashing an angry violet warning, intercepted the hand he'd put out to grab the phone, and bent his fingers back hard enough to change his mind.

He swallowed a surprised curse just in time.

Ormond demanded, "What was that popping noise?"

Kate's response was smooth as could be. "Nothing. I just opened a water bottle, is all."

Nursing the fingers she'd mangled, he wondered if it hadn't been Layne she'd been spending too much time with, but Arthur. The old man could always catch him off guard with quick, painful maneuvers like that one.

Puzzling over it, he kept quiet as she ended the call, wondering also what Ormond was about, ordering her to keep away from everyone.

Had he somehow found out Jack had brought him that hard drive?

No. He didn't want Layne and company near her. If he knew anything, Eveleth would be the last place he'd send her.

For a moment or two, neither of them spoke while Kate set the phone down on the bed with one hand and rubbed her neck with the other.

Finally, she said, "Sorry about your fingers."

"Don't apologize. Does he always speak to you that way?"

"Mmm. You wouldn't happen to know what change he's trying to make to the charter, would you?"

"Huh?"

"Earlier, before Alex left for New York, he said someone had told him Uncle William meant to tamper with the charter. I can't think of any other reason he'd be so desperate to cut me off from everyone."

"I'm not following."

“He doesn’t want me to find out what he’s doing. But obviously, he thinks Layne and the others know. Otherwise he wouldn’t waste his time on me.”

“Give me two minutes. If Layne does know, the other continentals probably will.”

Doing a bit of time zone math, he turned his phone back on and dialed the Asian Council Chairwoman, who answered on the first ring.

“Where have you been?” Chairwoman Morioka demanded in her mangled French, since it was the only language both of them spoke. “Half the world’s been trying to reach you for hours.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

It didn’t take long to learn the answer to Kate’s question. Chairwoman Morioka, normally the most placid of women, was seething. It took him a good ten minutes to calm her down with assurances he’d look into the matter.

Kate, who spoke perfect French but wasn’t accustomed to the Chairwoman’s horrendous accent and grammar, still required an explanation.

As for him, he understood everything now. Ormond was about to make the ultimate power grab, and wanted his too-powerful slave out of the way once he had.

He told Kate, “Your uncle wants to amend the charter so we can initiate actions on our own, without a request from another agency.”

“He *what?*”

“You heard me. Someone leaked a vote notification and tally, so that means he’s already put it before the Global Council. And he’ll be pushing the vote through on Christmas Day.”

“But he can’t do that,” Kate argued.

“He can, and he’s doing it. He only needs seven votes to pass the amendment, and he’s got seven locked with his own as the eighth assent. There’s only one Global Councilman planning to vote against the move.”

“Who?”

“Jack.”

Kate went very still. “Do you think that’s why he was attacked?”

“Um, no,” he said, knowing if he told her the truth right now, he’d lose ground.

Letting out one of her patented, exasperated noises, Kate shook her head. “In anyone else’s hands, that amendment might be harmless. Even my father considered it so we could join the first responders at natural disasters and chemical spills or whatever. But I doubt that’s what Uncle William’s got in mind. The current Global Council is full of sheep. They won’t object if he goes beyond emergency response to say...unsolicited intelligence theft. He’ll keep pushing the envelope until one day, he’s assassinating congressmen because he doesn’t like their haircut.”

“And the world would have to think twice before coming after him for it. He’s got dirt on everybody.”

“It’s a bit worse than that,” Kate said. “A lot of agencies and governments have become completely dependent on us. Heck, we practically *are* the government in some places. Good God. The lesser council chairs must be rabid.”

“They are,” he said. “I imagine Layne’s gathering her lynch mob and lighting torches as we speak.”

“This can’t be happening. You know she’ll come after me to exercise my option. What am I supposed to do?”

Ah, yes. One phone call from Kate, and Ormond was history. Which put him in a precarious position, because he still needed her help.

“Prove him guilty of murder. If he’s in jail, he can’t call the vote.”

"Easier said than done," she told him, "since we have nothing to go on. I know I owe you. And that you probably don't care about the charter, but something has to be done. Something *guaranteed*. Alex is out there somewhere and doesn't know everything. I have to—"

"No. You can't tell him yet. Your brother's not exactly the most cool-headed individual when it comes to you, and if you tell him what you just told me, he'll go straight for Ormond. And I'll bet the old goat's prepared for that."

"Then what am I gonna do?"

"I don't know, Kate. I don't know. We need to make a decision, but I didn't realize you'd gone that long without sleep. It can't be helping my cause."

"What, exactly, is your cause?"

"My cause is finding out what really happened to my mother, and punishing the man responsible. This is gonna happen whether you like it or not, so you need to pick a side."

"You *know* I'm on your side."

"Do I? You're not even sure you believe Ormond was lying."

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. When she covered her face, he didn't realize at first what was about to happen.

His only warning was the silence. She wasn't even breathing. And then her shoulders started to shake.

Bloody hell. He'd made her cry. Well done, Mancini.

"Oooo-kay," he said, sighing. "You've had enough. Time to sleep."

He got up and plucked her off the bed, wading through paper to reach the door.

Kate went right on crying, stiff in his arms with her hands still hiding her face until he set her down on the bed in the other room.

Through the hands came a watery, “Nothing to sleep in. The shampoo.”

“So go commando. I’ll be too busy to notice.”

“You’re staying here?”

“Might as well.”

He went into the bathroom for a box of tissues and set it down beside her. “Rest. Cry yourself to sleep if you have to. I won’t wake you unless something drastic happens.”

“What will you be doing?” she asked.

“Returning those crates, since Uncle Dearest is on his way here. Do you have keys to that place?”

She handed them over, then disappeared into the bathroom. To be on the safe side, he picked up the hotel phone and told the desk to hold her calls. Luckily for him, the phone was a portable, so he pocketed the handset. She’d left her cell on the bed in the other room, and once that was retrieved, all points of contact should be out of her immediate reach.

He’d have to catch a couple zees himself, but he doubted he need worry about her waking up before he did.

He left her alone, then. Time was ticking away on him, and he needed to wait until she was asleep before he could take those crates back. For more than an hour, he made calls, checking in with his crew and procuring schematics of Ormond’s vineyard’s security system.

Now, he needed to focus. Circumstances had changed dramatically. His plans would have to shift accordingly. But in what direction?

When he’d followed Kate to St. Paul, he’d imagined an outcome much different than this. Ormond had lied to her and threatened Alex, and if it were any testimony to the mad life they all led, he believed beyond any shadow of a doubt Ormond would have delivered on the threat to Alex had Kate ever told the truth.

Instead of coming away from St. Paul with answers, he'd leave with only more questions. And Kate and Alex would be left in danger.

The last thing he needed was for Kate to turn on him, and she would if his actions jeopardized Alex. Ormond was coming. The threat was imminent. So what was he supposed to do about it?

He could either stay and manipulate matters to his benefit, or do what he should have done from the start: go after that framed tile. It would be an infinitely harder course, but at least the only person he'd have to trust was himself.

Yet that would leave Kate a free radical, and somehow, that risk did not appeal. Maybe if he could see her, he'd know what to do.

Getting up, he went to Kate's door. There wasn't a sound from inside, but that didn't mean she was asleep. He tried the knob and, finding it unlocked, smirked a bit as he eased the door open. He would have thought she'd lock it, but they both knew it wouldn't keep him out.

The room was dark and still. In the crack of light from the door, all he could see of Kate was a stream of gold hair spilling out from beneath the blanket.

That hair. Most women he knew were forever cutting or coloring for some unfathomable reason, but Kate's never changed. It had always been long and straight. In sunlight, it was the exact color and sheen of finely spun gold thread, and the sight of it conjured a memory of the sort he'd hoped never to have again.

Mere days before the breakup, they'd gone for a drive together, ending up in some park somewhere. She'd been walking ahead of him, holding his hand. All she'd done was look back and smile, and in that moment, she'd been his entire world.

This wasn't helping him make a decision. She'd always looked harmless and innocent, but for ten years, she'd been lying to him. And

while he did recognize the corner Ormond had backed her into, he'd also seen the way she'd shrunk under the man's assault.

Ormond still had a death grip on that girl.

He couldn't just forgive and forget. Nor could he trust. He shouldn't, and didn't want to. The way she'd bent his fingers back reminded him too much of an injured animal that would bite anyone who dared to help.

Fuck it. He'd think this through on the way to the archive warehouse.

St. Paul, Minnesota

Monday, December 22; 11:15 a.m.

Layne sat quietly picking at a thumbnail, and trying not to think the worst.

Kate still wasn't answering her phone. No one had been able to reach her since she'd left the facility. They knew she'd checked into the hotel, but when Layne had knocked on the door of Kate's suite a few minutes ago, there'd been no response.

Patrick was also out of reach. He'd spoken to Chairwoman Morioka during the night, but beyond that, there'd been no trace. The threat of rousing Ormond's suspicion made it impossible to track Patrick officially. She'd had no luck whatsoever with Jack, Mancini's number one fan.

Wily old coot. After viewing the full contents of Ormond's hard drive, she'd reassessed the situation. Whatever Jack and Patrick were up to, chances were it had nothing whatsoever to do with CFU.

Knowing Jack, it was about the death of Nina Mancini. He was up to his old tricks again, understandably this time. The man was on the Global Council. He had to know how dangerous that sort of power would be in Ormond's hands, only instead of turning to others for help, he'd stolen a hard drive from one of Ormond's properties in a failed attempt to

damage him. Jack had gotten caught, no doubt precisely the way Patrick had described to David.

That wretched hard drive—what was she supposed to do about it? The contents were a bastardized version of the Sanction's black file policy. Every employee was required to keep record of threats, bribery or blackmail attempts, or anything else that could compromise their safety or anonymity. With them, the company would have a good place to start looking for suspects should anything ever happen.

After so many years in office, Ormond had a healthy stack of black files already. But the contents of that drive had never been given to security, which meant the bribes had probably been accepted, and the threats countered or eliminated in an illegal manner. So that disk was a running tally of Ormond's enemies, and it was useless as leverage against him since he'd seen fit to obscure the details.

Hateful slime-ball. As if that hadn't been infuriating enough, she was still steaming over the one document he *hadn't* defaced, the deposition list from Nina's internal investigation. Claudia had made a mockery of the entire thing, and to preserve even a small part of that travesty was criminal in itself.

And then there was the CFU information, which appeared to be an anomaly. There was nothing else on the drive even remotely connected to it, so what had it been doing in Ormond's private black file?

It had to be looked into, and soon. Their only hope was to compromise the Global Council. In order to do that, they needed unanimous votes across all six Continental Councils, yet as things stood, each one had holdouts. They needed absolute proof of criminal activity to swing things in their favor.

Proof would be hard to come by. She knew Jack and Patrick were working on the Nina angle, but they didn't have much of a prayer. CFU

was more promising. She had to know for certain whether Patrick was involved before proceeding, and someone had better find Kate before she went straight out of her mind with worry.

After a steadying breath, she did something she'd promised herself she wouldn't. Kate would hate this, but there was no other choice.

Picking up the phone, she placed a call to have David's court order rescinded. Since it had been her idea in the first place, nobody put up a fight. Then she called Eveleth and gave David his instructions.

"I'm on it," David said. "I'll get back to you as soon as I've got something solid."

That done, she asked him to put Tina on the line, and gave the girl a second set of instructions to keep everyone away from David.

"Yes, ma'am," she was told, and then the phone was passed to the daytime security lead.

Nervous, but certain she was doing the right thing, she gave an order to have everyone but David, Tina, and Lori moved into the nearby city of Hibbing. "Put them up in a hotel, on me. Let them swim, eat junk food, watch trashy movies, and otherwise have some fun. Pull in whoever you can to cover watchdog duty, but make sure there's someone at the facility to look after Lori. And tell Mancini's crew the other kids are going home to family."

Next came a hopeless shot in the dark as she dialed Patrick's cellphone. She hadn't even bothered until now, knowing he wouldn't answer.

She nearly fainted when he did, saying, "What a coincidence. I was just thinking about you."

"I'll bet you were. Where's my niece?"

"Premature interrogation. Bad, bad form."

“Dammit Patrick, don’t you run me around. I know you were in Eveleth last night. I also know what you and Jack are up to, and we’re on the same side. I promise I’ll do everything I can to help, as long as you *swear* you won’t let anything happen to Kate.”

“I’m not swearing to anything,” Patrick said. “She’s known for ten years, Layne. How long have you known?”

“Known what?”

“That Ormond killed my mother.”

“I don’t know that. And what do you mean Kate’s known for ten years?”

Patrick snorted a laugh. “She lies and keeps secrets, just like her mother. How sure can you be she’s not in league with old Uncle Willy?”

“You’d better watch your tone, young man. I kept my mouth shut the entire time you were messing with *my* baby girl because I trusted you to do the right thing. But if you think for one second I’ll stand here and let you talk about her like—”

“Whoa, now. Hold on. What are you talking about?”

“You think I didn’t know? Every day for eight years I screamed at you for catting around, and then one day, you suddenly stop sleeping with all and sundry. Did you really think I wouldn’t get curious and find out who could hold your interest for more than an hour?”

Silence. She knew she had his attention.

He said, “You...are a nosy old cow.”

“Yes, I am. But I never told anyone, Patrick. You can *trust me*.”

“Right. And I suppose Ormond found out about me and Kate from someone else.”

“You wanna know how he found out?” Layne asked. “He finally heard the rumors and wired Kate’s apartment in London a few days before the

breakup. You think the timing was a coincidence? Neither do I. So stop trying to divide and conquer, and tell me what you need.”

“I can’t. Not yet. Where are you?”

She gave him her location, then said, “Now, talk to me. Please.”

Sounding extremely reluctant, he said, “Jack found something semi-solid this time.”

“Okay. But I can’t stop that vote until the two of us have talked, and I know where Kate is. So we need to compromise.”

“Quaint idea, except Uncle Willy’s on his way to make sure no one gets a crack at her. Do you imagine he’ll be interested in compromising?”

Crap. Deep, foul buckets of crap.

She froze when someone knocked on her hotel room door.

Getting up, and feeling an ominous sense of dread, she unsnapped her gun holster, went for the door, and told Patrick, “No. I don’t. What are you planning?”

“I’m not planning anything. Open the damn door. I don’t need to be seen in this hallway.”

Calling him a few choice names, she undid the chain and let him in.

“You’ve been here? The whole time?” she demanded.

“Yes. In Kate’s room. She’s still asleep, and if you even mention waking her up, we’re done. I won’t listen to another word.”

“Are you finished marking your territory?”

“Not quite,” he said. “I’ll go back and pee on the door if you make it necessary.”

“Do you have to be this way?”

“Yes. I do. I know you, Layne. You called to do one of those mind-melt jobs on me, hoping I’d give you access to Kate. And the moment I do, you’ll slit my throat if I get in your way, just to make sure the vote can’t happen.”

Damn. He definitely had her number. Trying to sound reasonable, she said, "Hobbling you is hardly in my best interests when we're both working toward the same end. If you can give me something solid to charge Ormond with, we both get what we want."

"Not entirely. He needs to pay."

"Getting him thrown out of office won't be enough?"

"See? You've got one thing in mind, and one thing only."

"Be sensible," she attempted. "If he passes that amendment—"

"I don't give a shit about the amendment. Same way you never cared about finding out what really happened to my mother."

"What are you talking about? I did everything I could to ensure the official investigation was airtight. And I followed up on everything you—"

"No you didn't. If you had, we wouldn't be here right now. He killed her, Layne. And he took the ring and the frame from the scene."

"Just..." Holding her hands up, she pleaded, "Slow down. I don't know who you think you're talking to, but if I remember correctly, *you* were the one who told *me* to stop digging so Jack would quit tormenting you about it every moment of every day."

She'd taken the wind from his sails with that one. It had been a cruel truth she'd just hurled his direction, but they'd get nowhere if she didn't knock him back on his heels.

It worked a little too well. He sank into a chair, and let his head fall back. "I should have listened to him. Why didn't I believe him?"

"Why would you?" Layne asked quietly. "Jack wasn't the one who had to take care of her when she was incoherent. Or clean up after she'd been sick. Or call an ambulance when she needed to have her stomach pumped. Or take a lead pipe to—"

"Shut up," Patrick said. "I don't need this right now."

"I know, and I'm sorry, but ripping yourself apart over it isn't the answer. Neither is revenge. There are a lot of people affected by this mess, and you endanger every one of them by focusing only on how you'll get even with Ormond."

"You expect me to sit back and take it?"

"Patrick, we've been over this tunnel vision problem of yours a thousand times. Your ability to focus on a single goal is phenomenal, and your drive to achieve it extraordinary. But there's a flipside to this coin. You developed that focus because you don't trust anybody, and while it's made you an exceptional thief, it doesn't do much for you as a person."

Patrick didn't respond. He never had.

Trying another approach solely because instinct wouldn't let her do otherwise, she asked, "Do you care about Kate at all? Or were you just happy to have one over on me and Ormond?"

"Right now, the only thing I care about is finding out what happened to my mother. And if you try to make this personal one more time, you won't see Kate again until I'm satisfied."

Electing not to test him on that score, Layne said, "Please tell me what happened yesterday so I'll fully understand where we're at."

He hedged on Jack. David's involvement too, surprisingly enough, considering he had no reason to protect the boy. But when it came to Kate's recollection of how Ormond had manipulated her, Patrick didn't seem to hold anything back.

He was hurt. Deeply. And frankly, she was surprised at Kate, too.

Kate was smarter than that. Or at least she'd thought so. But considering everything Kate and Alex had been put through over the years, had Layne been in Kate's shoes, she didn't know if she would have had the courage to call Ormond's bluff, either.

What she did know, however, was Kate and Patrick would need to work together. Time for some emergency mitigation before one or the other of them did something they'd regret.

"You know what scares me about Kate?" Layne asked.

"The way she can look you in the eye and stab you in the back at the same time?"

"Can't you listen for once? This is what scares me— Say a live grenade lands at your feet. What does instinct tell you to do?"

"You expect an answer?"

"Humor me."

"I don't know," he said. "Probably throw it back at the enemy."

"Yes, that would be a very Patrick thing to do. But Kate? She'd scoop it up and swallow it, minimizing the damage to others. She's always been that way, even when she was a child. I suppose that's what comes of growing up in a war zone."

"Now I'm supposed to feel sorry for her? I really don't need—"

"Yes. You *do* need to hear this. If Kate had told you the truth back then, we both know you would've killed Ormond and spent the rest of your life in jail. And don't think for one second Kate didn't know it, too."

"I don't care why she did it," he argued. "This is my mother's *murder* we're talking about. It wasn't Kate's call to make."

"Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't, but Ormond forced her to make it all the same. And you know Kate pretty well. Do you think she made that decision lightly?"

He thought about it a moment, then begrudgingly admitted, "No. She probably cried blood before deciding to let Ormond get away with it."

"More than likely, but it was the only way to keep you and Alex safe, even if the guilt killed her. So take that into account before you judge the girl too harshly."

Patrick cast her a dark look.

“And really,” she continued, “It explains a lot. First the break up, which I never understood. Next she caved in about taking over Eveleth so she wouldn’t have to be near you in London. And she was hyper-protective of Alex afterwards.”

“What about that? Is it true?”

“That he isn’t Troy’s son?” she asked. “The rumor surfaces every now and then. Probably because Kate and Alex look nothing alike. And I suspect Arthur had another test done later on, but he never shared the results, so...”

“So you think he didn’t get the answer he wanted. Who was Claudia feeding on at the time?”

“There were several. Three, at least. She always had a full stable.”

“God,” he sighed. “What the hell was wrong with that woman?”

“Short answer? She was a spoiled brat who thought the world was her toy and the Sanction her remote control. Same with her brother, so we need to figure out how to proceed, except I’m still in the dark on Kate. Does she even know about the amendment?”

Patrick recapped Ormond’s early morning intrusion. “She’s totally against it, but she has no intention of making that call.”

“I should hope not. If Ormond killed your mother—whom he allegedly loved—he wouldn’t think twice about killing Kate and Alex both. They pose a pretty hefty threat to his dreams of world domination.”

She saw something interesting, then. It was hard for someone of Patrick’s warm coloring to pale, but he did.

“Kate’s not even thinking along those lines,” he said. “She was only thinking about what would happen if the vote passed. But I don’t trust her, Layne. Not after what she did.”

Boy, had she made a mistake barging into this crowded situation. She couldn't change how he felt without employing his so-called mind-melt. If she did that, she'd be as bad as Ormond, slicing Patrick's many Achilles heels simply because he didn't do things her way.

Her way had left her sitting helpless in this hotel room. Meanwhile, Patrick, Jack and Kate had been kicking doors open that had been locked for years, and they were nowhere near done yet. And just because she was terrified for them didn't mean they'd fail.

She could help by investigating CFU. Sure, she might be placing everyone's fate into the hands of a sixteen-year-old hacker, but when she'd picked David for the program, she'd known he was a sure thing.

She'd felt the same way about Patrick. Both he and David carried an aspect of the demon. They had histories of deviant behavior that brought a unique dimension of problem-solving techniques to the Sanction, and the company couldn't do the things it did without them.

As for Kate, the only shrinking violet left in that girl these days was the color of her eyes. Given enough time to recover, Kate might just surprise them all.

It was time to let loose the apron strings, and take the rest on faith. First, though, she had to assuage one last fear. "What can you tell me about CFU?"

He frowned at her. "Is that one of the new soviet agencies?"

"No. It's a suspected front for an arms dealer."

She went on to explain what she'd found on the hard drive, and Patrick shrugged. "I saw the spreadsheet, but sorry. No clue what it's about."

She trusted he was telling the truth. He might be a lot of things—vengeful, unpredictable, and possessed of a volcano instead of a brain—

but he would never stand by and do nothing while something that could endanger so many lives ran unchecked.

He asked, "You'll follow up on this CFU thing?"

"Yes."

She then explained how the Global Council could be compromised to prevent the vote from taking place. "We'll have to be ready early on Christmas Eve, so we have today and tomorrow. That's it, and whatever we charge him with, it has to be solid, or we're sunk. The holdouts have to be convinced of wrongdoing. And while we're on the subject, remember, Patrick, if the Dutch get wind of you messing around, we won't be able to stop them from rescinding your release."

He nodded. "Then I guess there's only one way to proceed. I'll give her the afternoon to look at the inquest, and see what she can do. Maybe wait for Jack to get out of the hospital and let them put their heads together."

"I agree. She's good at this. Better than I ever was. Give her a chance."

"We'll see what happens. But we need to stay on top of Ormond so we know where he is."

"Yes. And try to convince her she shouldn't buckle under him this time," Layne said. "You'd probably have more luck at that than I would. Now, get back there before she wakes up. And when she does, you'd be wise to keep this conversation to yourself. She doesn't take very kindly to having decisions made behind her back."

"What will you be doing?"

"Oh, I'm envisioning a panic attack or two. Otherwise, nothing."

The distrust in his eyes was a setback. "Nothing?"

"Well, I'm overseeing the CFU process, but I'm here if you need me. This is your show, Patrick. Don't let me down."

Chapter Nine

The morning after wrought burning eyes and a splitting headache.

That's what she got for coming unglued twice in one day. All things considered, she could hardly have helped it, and the side effects were only mitigated by her mostly cleared conscience and the water bottle Patrick had at the ready.

"You're dehydrated," he said. "Drink up. You need to get started soon."

"On what?"

"We have to figure out how your uncle got to Atlanta when he was supposed to be in Baltimore."

Gathering the sheet to make sure everything was covered, she said, "But I have to be gone before he gets here."

"You don't want to go with him?"

"Are you crazy?"

Patrick shrugged a shoulder. "I must be. I assumed you would."

"Can we hold off on the posturing? My head hurts, and I'm not awake enough to defend myself yet. Let's wait until I'm showered and dressed."

"No. I'm still mad," he said. "I don't trust you, so we'll be doing what I want. And I want to talk."

She sighed, and rubbed sore eyes. Somehow, she'd hoped he wouldn't do this, but karma being what it was, she had this coming. "All right. Go ahead."

"I don't trust you. At all," he said. "You lied to me about everything for ten years. Then you lied about the files, yet I still need your help. What would you do?"

Help! She wasn't ready for a philosophical debate. "I honestly don't know."

"Yeah, well, neither do I. But I do know if I let you run from Uncle Dearest, he'll go nuclear. And we can't afford that."

"So what do you propose I do? Let him lock me in a closet or something until Christmas?"

"I say you meet with him, and do a stress test of sorts. Feel him out. See how much he knows about what happened yesterday."

"You mean at Eveleth?"

Shaking his head, Patrick took the water bottle back, then pulled her upright.

"Hey," she complained, clutching the sheet to her sides with her elbows.

"Please. It's not like I haven't seen you naked before."

"Not for ten years, you haven't."

"And whose fault is that? But hang on. I'll get you a robe if you have to be that way about it."

He disappeared, while she whimpered and rubbed her temples, trying to soothe the ache in her head.

Whose fault is that? What kind of thing was that to say?

Something landed in her lap, and she opened her eyes to find a fuzzy, blindingly white hotel robe there. Momentarily stuck remembering its pink counterpart in Florida, she didn't even want to touch the thing.

"What?" he prompted.

"Long story. Could you at least pretend to have some manners and turn your back, please?"

Muttering something she couldn't quite make out, he turned his back while she slipped her arms into the sleeves, then got up on her knees, still hanging onto the sheet. Once the robe was securely wrapped around her and the belt tied, she pulled the sheet back out.

Patrick said, "That was remarkably uptight of you."

"I remember your fondness for mirrors. A girl can't be too careful."

Spotting a heap of department store bags and boxes on the closet floor, she did a double-take. "You went shopping?"

"No. We were both short on provisions, so I had some things delivered in case we had to bolt. I threw it all in there."

"I see that. Thank you."

"Don't mention it." He turned to face her again, and after opening the water bottle for her, he handed it over once more. "Where were we?"

"You were talking about a stress test."

"Ah. Okay. I suppose I should tell you Jack was the one who stole and tried to tap that hard drive. He got caught somehow, and showed up at my door in New York, beat to hell."

"You— Last night, when I asked if you thought he'd been attacked because of the amendment, you—"

Patrick interrupted, "You don't get to complain about lying by omission today. Or ever."

She held her hands up in capitulation.

"The men who came after Jack must be some rogue crew of Ormond's," Patrick explained. "So we can safely assume Ormond knows the disk was taken. But we *don't* know whether he's aware Jack gave it to me."

"And that's what you want me to find out?"

“One of the things, yes. The other will be whether he realizes Jack also took an insurance appraisal from the office where the hard drive came from.”

“An insurance appraisal? Why would Jack take that?”

“It might prove Ormond took something from the crime scene. He had an appraisal done for the facility and contents of his California vineyard, and there’s two items on it that belonged to my mother.”

“Wait. You mean that ring and the framed tile thingy?”

He tilted his head, giving her a quizzical look. “Have you seen them?”

“No, I just remember you mentioning them once. You said they were missing from her room the night she died, and there was something unusual about the frame.”

“Yes. And now they’ve turned up in Ormond’s possession, strangely enough.”

“We’ll need something else to support it,” she said. “Evidence to prove he actually took them from the crime scene instead of finding them afterwards.”

“Welcome to the party, Kitten. What we need most right now is some cold, hard fact checking. And that’s where you come in.”

“Of course. But I’m a little short on facts to check.”

“That’s taken care of. We’ll get to that soon, but first you should know Layne’s down the hall.”

“Oh God. I suppose she’s chomping at the bit for me to make that phone call.”

“Not at all. In fact, she’d have a conniption if you did.”

He recounted the conversation, and hearing about Layne’s attempt to vote the Globals compromised, she nearly choked on a mouthful of water out of sheer relief. It wouldn’t save her from becoming Chairwoman, but it would delay it for quite some time.

Patrick patted her on the back. "She'll need us to come across with something prosecutable to score unanimous votes. But there was something else—a little tidbit you might find interesting."

"Do I even want to hear this?"

"I doubt it. I just thought you might like to know how Ormond found us out."

He explained, and Kate was horrified at the thought of the rather carnal sendoff she'd given Patrick before he'd left for Texas. If Uncle William had seen or heard any part of that, it was no wonder heads had rolled two days later.

Patrick, meanwhile, was about to die laughing.

"It's not funny," she scolded.

"Yes it is. We must have put on quite a show that night. I wonder if he saw the part where you had your—"

"*Patrick*. Please," she begged, blushing to her hairline.

"All right, all right. Serves that old psycho right if he did, though. How creepy can he get?"

She covered her face with her hands, shivering a little.

A hand descended on her shoulder. "Ease up, Kitten. It was ten years ago, and you need to hurry. Come to my room when you're ready."

While locating her handbag in pursuit of aspirin, she tried to keep her mind off the immediate problems of Uncle William and Patrick, preparing herself instead to unravel a homicide made to look like a suicide.

Her handbag turned up in the closet, buried under shoe boxes and still more bags of toiletries and lingerie.

"Good grief," she said, pulling a new suitcase free of hanging bags. "Is there anything he didn't get?"

Curious, she began to dig, not horribly surprised he'd gotten her sizes exactly right or that the lingerie was all brightly colored and beyond frivolous. What did surprise her were the clothes. Perhaps a bit more colorful than she normally liked, but if anything, their cut was more conservative than even her habitually staid choices.

Very elegant. And no doubt ungodly expensive.

"A few provisions, he says," she sighed. "Must be nice to pull down seven figures a year."

From outside the door came, "I heard that. And it was almost eight this year, thank you very much."

"Eight? How in the..." She went to the door and whipped it open. "*Eight?*"

He was standing over a room service cart with an orange in one hand and some kind of roll in the other.

Swallowing first, he said, "*Almost* eight."

"How? What did you do? Rob the Treasury Department?"

"Something like that, yes. Underwriters pay ridiculous amounts to test the systems on the properties they insure. But the real money's in system design and component development."

"You do all that on top of your Sanction cases?" she asked.

"Yes. I don't sleep much. Aren't you supposed to be in the shower?"

"Sorry. I just—Wait a second. Is that... Are you eating a caramel roll?"

"I believe so." He raised the roll to examine it. "And I have to say they live up to their hype."

"You once made me eat tofu and spinach egg torte, and now you're eating caramel rolls for breakfast?"

"Lunch, actually. It's noon."

Kate raised her brows, then turned around and headed for the shower. Patrick was renowned as the world's pickiest eater. He liked only

the most disgustingly healthy foods, geared to fuel that sleek, tight body, every inch of which had been built for speed.

Well, perhaps not built so much as *conditioned* for speed. She remembered a long time ago—she must have been thirteen because Patrick had been seventeen. Layne and Arthur had been stressed over Patrick's latest growth spurt and excessive physical training habits. His shoulders had been growing ever wider and he'd topped six feet, raising concerns that he wouldn't be able to perform in tight spaces.

They'd made him stop lifting weights, so he'd taken up running and Tai Chi, and finally the martial arts training that had honed him down into perfection.

By the look of things, he still worked out religiously. The caramel roll had to be a fluke.

After the quickest shower in history, she threw on the least provocative of the lingerie, a solid black velvet set, followed by black chinos and a green shirt. The shirt was a bit snug, gaping open for a hint of cleavage, but it would have to do. She'd wasted so much time puzzling over his income and the caramel roll, she only had about seven hours left to work with before Uncle William arrived.

However, the first thing she did upon entering Patrick's room was ask for her phone back so she could check in with Alex. An argument ensued about the dangers involved, but Patrick gave in once she'd pointed out she'd be distracted if she didn't know Alex was all right.

Phone finally in hand, she checked her messages first. Alex hadn't left any, which she found strange, and when he didn't answer her call, she left a message, praying he was just busy.

Jack had more than likely sent him off on another pointless tangent, so she sat down at the work table Patrick had set up for her. A different

laptop than the one David had given him was standing at the ready, a plain gray web page with a lone password window waiting on the screen.

Patrick was on the bed, another unfamiliar laptop in front of him. "The password's Atlanta eighty-six. Go ahead and let it start downloading. It sometimes takes a while."

"What is it?"

"Jack's research database. It's got everything from the Atlanta authorities, the FBI, some of Layne's background work, and a heap of his own contributions on there. Probably not as convenient to work with as the real thing, but it's thorough."

An understatement, she thought, watching as a long index began to load. "What's that you're working on?"

"Just some homework for an upcoming job."

"Ah. And what was on the hard drive Jack took from my uncle?"

"About a million blacked-out documents and pictures. Completely worthless for our purposes."

"Go figure," she said. "What about that appraisal statement?"

"Under your elbow."

Picking up the depressingly shallow stack of paper turned print-side down, she noticed something. "These were stapled together at some point. Was there more than this?"

"Yes, but they were just copies of some e-mails that don't matter."

"They must have mattered if Jack thought they were evidence," she said.

"Jack thinks crop circles are evidence of how Ormond mocked up an overdose. But I was thinking... Was Ormond as detailed as all that when he described Claudia's method of faking that overdose?"

"I'm with you," she said. "He was describing his *own* method. Rather proudly, I might add."

Since the index was still loading, she flipped through the insurance appraisal, recognizing a few items on the list that had belonged to Claudia. Jewelry mostly, although there were also a couple of very valuable first edition books her father had collected.

She'd always wondered where those had gone. They didn't belong to Uncle William, but since Alex would one day inherit the entire estate, she supposed it didn't matter. Her legacy was to have been the Sanction, which was another bone of contention between the two siblings. If she passed him the Sanction, Alex wanted her to have the wine business, never mind that she knew nothing about it and didn't particularly care to learn.

All she really cared about was the Eveleth program. The work could get rough at times, heartbreaking at others, but it was rewarding. Or at least it would be if she weren't constantly interrupted with Investigations calls. She'd hardly know what to do with herself if she didn't have to chase down murderers or fortify court cases for someone.

She asked, "Does it usually take this long to load?"

"Not always, no. Slowish connection, here."

"Mmm."

The index was easy to follow. Each contributor had been given their own category, and she started with the initial findings of the Atlanta PD. There were copious photos, showing a hotel room full of Victorian furnishings, and she had to agree—there didn't seem to be any signs of a struggle, obvious or otherwise.

She had a rather hard time with the pictures of the body. Nina, when alive, had been a lovely woman. Long, shiny black hair, with the wide, almond-shaped eyes, and honey-gold skin she'd passed on to her son.

The only word Kate could come up with to describe Nina in the photos was peaceful. Her eyes were closed, her head lying a bit to the

side, and had it not been for the tourniquet left in place or the syringe on the bed beside her, she might have been merely sleeping, not dead.

If there'd been any more proof needed her uncle had lied about Claudia, there it was. The scene was *too* peaceful. There was nothing violent or vulgar about it, which there almost certainly would have been had Claudia done it.

Some amount of staging after the fact was also likely. Nina's hair was smoothed back from her face. Immaculate. And the long gauzy skirt she wore must have been straightened to lie that smoothly. The staging had been done respectfully. With care. Nina looked like a perfect China doll laid out on that bed.

From there, Kate skimmed the coroner's report for remarks regarding inconsistencies with overdose, but of course there weren't any. There'd been nothing on the tox panel to support she'd been given a bad dose. No poisons, unless you counted the heroin that had killed her. No metabolic by-products of GHB. No anomalies left behind to mark interaction between the heroin and another chemical.

It was official. The GHB angle was worthless.

Fingerprints were a no-go, too. Nina's had been all over the place, along with a few thousand others, leaving nothing to ponder there, either.

Moving on, she found a statement from Jack, whom the interrogating officer had described as "extremely distraught", in which he'd reluctantly admitted Nina's past addiction issues. He'd also admitted to arguing with her earlier that week over rumors she'd been using again.

At that point in the investigation, the FBI had come on board since Nina had technically been a subcontractor for their Jewelry and Gem Division. Under Layne's orders, they'd pursued the matter as a homicide and continued on with Jack, retracing his whereabouts. There was a

detailed list of verified credit card charges tracking him from Paris to Seattle, where he and Nina had argued. He'd gone straight back to Paris afterwards, and at the time of Nina's death a few days later, security video placed him in the Sanction's Paris offices. With such an irrefutable alibi, Jack had been ruled out as a person of interest.

Surprisingly, the FBI hadn't hesitated to haul Uncle William in. Some creative officer had listed "annihilated" for demeanor. He'd admitted arguing with Nina about Jack that week. Alibi seemed solid. The FBI Director himself had been in on those Baltimore meetings, and had seen William Ormond at 10:00 p.m. the night Nina died. Allegedly, he'd gone to bed at that time, and to give the FBI their due, they'd worked long and hard to prove he'd gone to Atlanta without leaving an obvious trail. But despite their best efforts, they'd been forced to conclude Ormond had been telling the truth.

Patrick had also been questioned. Demeanor: numb. Alibi had been ironclad, although he'd never been considered a person of interest. He'd last seen his mother three days prior, and they too had argued. Twice, in fact. Once on Monday, over certain rumors circulating about her recent trips back to London, Cairo and Columbia. She'd been seen with her old bad crowd and Patrick had been justifiably angry. Two days later, the last time he'd seen her, they'd argued about Ormond.

The ring and framed tile had come up during his interview. Nina had been wearing the ring both times they'd argued, and according to Patrick, she'd never gone anywhere without that framed tile.

"But why would Uncle William keep those?" Kate asked. "He might have been caught with them, and you can't tell me he's dim enough to hang onto evidence from a federal crime scene."

"It has nothing to do with dim. It has everything to do with being a jealous, possessive bastard."

“Excellent point. But can you tell me what was so special about the ring and that tile?”

“Sentimental value,” he replied. “The ring was her engagement ring from my father. It was his great-grandmother’s. The tile was a gift from the Haunts.”

“The whats?”

“My great aunts. The ones who own those shops in London and Cairo.”

“Oh. You never talked about them much.”

“Hard as it is to believe, they’re still alive and kicking. Still help out on my cases occasionally, although it’s more to keep them from dying of boredom than any actual help they might offer.”

She nodded. Two sentences, and that was the most she’d ever heard from him on the subject of what little family he had left. Most of the time, the only family he claimed was Jack, who wasn’t technically family at all.

“Are you close with them?” she asked.

“Not really, no.”

“Were they the ones who put you onto that Dutch Warehouse job?”

“Accidentally, yes,” he said. “They were supposed to fence those stones for the guy who kified them in the first place, only he balked at their service charge and had them shipped up to Amsterdam from Ramat Gan instead.”

“He shipped forty million dollars worth of diamonds into the Netherlands?”

“No, he shipped a crate of antique tapestries with the diamonds as stowaways. One little typo on the manifest got them snagged and stored in a low security area. Before I came along, that particular customs house wasn’t too picky about who they hired on to their cleaning crews, so I got on for a few weeks and slowly moved them out.”

She had to smile a little at the thought of him ripping off another thief before he'd even become Sanction. "How did you get them out? Isn't that a lot of diamonds?"

"Not really. That number was retail value, and they were nice stones. One of them was fifteen carats with almost perfect clarity, so in total there were only about two hundred pieces, and you'd be surprised how many you can stuff in your pockets without being noticed. Especially when there's an inordinate amount of female staff on hand."

"Ah," she said, nodding. "That certainly explains a lot."

"I still can't believe I got caught. And by the prettiest one, too. I thought I'd made rather a good job of it with her."

"I'm sure you gave it your all. But how, may I ask, did she find out your pockets were filled with diamonds?"

He glanced over at her wearing just a hint of that razor-sharp smile.

She said, "You *didn't*. You were only fifteen, for God's sake."

"Love is blind. Unfortunately, it still has nerve endings."

Kate put a hand over her eyes and shook her head, and managed not to laugh until one of Patrick's lower, more diabolical-sounding chuckles shook her loose.

"I now understand why people call you incorrigible."

"What's incorrigible about it? I'm male. Women are interesting. They're soft, and they smell good. A few rare ones make fascinating noises in certain intimate situations." His wrists relaxed from their typing position and he looked up over the doorway as if remembering something. "And the finest of them turn pretty colors when sufficiently baited."

"Are you trying to embarrass me?"

"I was going more for flattery."

"Why? I said I'd help, and I will."

He gave her a strange look, then rolled his eyes. "Back to work, then."

Face still warm, she dove back in, reading over a few more statements taken by the FBI and Atlanta PD. Everything was above board. And as much as she hated to say it, the statements given by those closest to Nina painted a picture of a woman under extreme emotional distress. Constant arguments that week. It spoke to the proper state of mind for overdose, and if Kate hadn't known what she knew, she would have accepted the findings at face value.

Moving on, however, she came across Layne's contributions, which went far more in depth on Nina's movements prior to Atlanta, and the cases she'd been working on. None of them had called for travel to London, Cairo, or Columbia. Yet Nina had been to all three locales in the two weeks prior to her death. Also to Seattle, where she'd met with Jack. And no one could explain why she'd been in Atlanta.

What had she been doing there? Kate turned to Jack's contributions for an answer, and felt as if she'd fallen down a rabbit hole. There was so much information that might or might not be related, it was totally overwhelming.

At four, she took a break to try Alex again.

"Still no answer?" Patrick asked.

"No. And that's not like him."

"Let me try Jack. See if he knows where Alex is."

Patrick called, and she was much relieved to hear Alex was still there, chasing down leads. The hospital wouldn't allow cellphones to be on, and according to Jack, Alex had been having trouble with his battery since the first time he'd shut it off.

Pulling the phone away from his ear, Patrick said, "He's swinging down to the New York offices to grab a different phone after he takes Jack home from the hospital."

Unable to miss the conversation that followed, she listened as Patrick said, “We’d be able to move faster if you and Kate could talk in person. But we’ve a problem on our end. Ormond plans to move Kate out of reach tonight. Yeah, I know. I’m on top of it. Don’t worry.”

Once he’d hung up, he said, “Tonight, when you’re talking to Ormond, convince him to let you go home to Eveleth. Jack will meet us there as soon as he can.”

There was no time to waste worrying over the impending face-off with her uncle. She’d barely scratched the surface of Jack’s notes. He’d kept transcripts of all the interviews he’d done, and there was a particular one with Nina’s on-and-off partner. If anyone *should* have been able to explain Nina’s travels, he should have been. But he hadn’t. He’d said the argument they’d had that week was due to those inexplicable trips, and Nina not being where she was supposed to be when she was needed.

Jack had retraced Nina’s steps, and what he’d found didn’t help. In each location, Nina had been seen at known drug trafficking hot spots, but Jack hadn’t been able to learn anything useful.

By seven o’clock, Kate was ready to give up. Jack had been exhaustive in his efforts, and nowhere were there convenient inconsistencies to be found.

Given the information they had to work with, there was no way they could call Uncle William’s whereabouts into question. She needed more, and the only avenues left were his finances and false identities. Most Sanction operatives used alternate personas from time to time. Her mother had concocted many to hide affairs. Uncle William probably had a full set of his own, and if she could find his private stash of passports and credit cards, she might be able to prove one of those identities had flown into Atlanta that night.

They could be kept at any of his homes, or possibly in a Sanction office somewhere. The question was, which one? Uncle William owned eight private residences, but spent most of his time at the vineyard in Napa Valley.

“Anything?” Patrick asked.

She began to explain what lay ahead, and in the middle of it, Patrick’s phone rang.

The conversation was very short. Afterwards, he hung up and shut his phone off.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Get packed in case I have to take you underground. They’re early.”

“Who’s early?”

“Your uncle. They’re already on the move, and they’re coming straight here. We’ve only got about ten minutes. Get moving.”

Nerves alight with panic, she scrambled to her room, cursing herself all the while for getting so caught up in the evidentiary chain she hadn’t bothered to pack earlier. Right now, she could be preparing herself for the showdown instead of tossing bright red push-up bras into her suitcase.

Her phone rang with two minutes left. Praying it was Alex, she answered and got her wish. It was him, but the relief was short lived.

“Kate, honey, don’t talk. I need you to listen, and listen carefully. Jack just told me about Uncle William. You can’t go with him, and you *have* to get away from Patrick. I don’t care what you have to do to get away, do it. And we can’t talk. You can’t call me, and you can’t come here. We can’t be caught in the same place at the same time. Just run. Get outside, jump in a cab, and disappear. Do it, Kate. I mean it.”

Alex hung up before she'd recovered enough to ask what the hell was going on. But it was her brother. He had his moments, but he'd never been that abrupt. And if he'd ever been afraid, he'd never shown it.

Until now.

She could hear Patrick moving around in his room, and before she'd even let the shock wear off, she had her case zipped up, her coat on, and her purse tucked under her arm.

Jump in a cab, and disappear. That was all she had to do. She had her own false identities in place, and she'd never been more grateful for what she'd always felt was an unnecessary precaution.

Moving as silently as possible, Kate extended the handle on the case Patrick had gotten her, and rolled it to where she could see the door to his room. He was nowhere in sight, and she was in the hall the next instant, jogging toward the stairwell doors.

Inside, she picked up her case and started down the stairs. Twelfth floor. It would be a long way down, but she went as fast as she could, reaching the third floor before she heard a door bang open far above her, and Patrick yelling, "*Kate!*"

She darted over to the far side of the stairwell and kept right on going, speeding up when Patrick called her name again and told her to stop.

He was fast, but she was nine flights ahead of him. If she could just get out the door and to the parking ramp exit, it would be a short run out to the busy street where she wouldn't have to hide long before a cab would appear.

She had only one more flight to go when she began to realize how fast he was moving. He was cursing now, ordering her to stop, sounding as if he were right on top of her.

She had to ditch her case. Wherever she ended up, she could buy anything she needed.

Dropping it, she sprinted the last twenty-four steps and flew for the door, praying she'd be able to evade him in the street.

The door opened outward and just as her hand connected with it, she saw Patrick round the top of the last flight.

She should have been looking where she was going. Directly outside the door, she collideded with something very big, and very solid.

"Stop her!" a sickeningly familiar voice yelled, and the arms of the man she'd run into instantly clamped themselves around her waist.

Uncle William and his security team. Only she could have luck this bad.

Chapter Ten

“Katherine!” her uncle demanded. “Just where do you think you’re—”

He was interrupted by Patrick, who came flying through the door, stutter-stepping to a halt.

The look on Uncle William’s face at the sight of him was enough to still her lungs. Total and utter hatred.

The look transferred itself to her, and she could see the realization of her betrayal hit him in that instant.

It was chilling to watch the way that rigid, calm control won out over his fury.

“Mr. Mancini,” he said. “What a surprise to find you here.”

Patrick recovered quickly, but nowhere near as convincingly. “I heard there was a party here tonight.”

“Interesting. I don’t remember you ever attending a company social event in all your years in my employ.”

Patrick didn’t answer. Instead, he turned a hard stare in her direction.

Then everyone seemed to be staring at her. Uncle William, Patrick, and the two other security team members flanking them. She was caught. Even if she got away from the man holding her, the rest of them would be on her instantly.

She was more worried about Patrick than she was herself. With him and Uncle William in the same space, the very air around them was electric and unstable as if two oppositely charged magnets had just been slammed together.

A confrontation wouldn't end well. She had to get Patrick out of here.

Before she could speak, Patrick said, "I was just about to have a word with Kate, if you don't mind."

"I do mind," Uncle William snapped. "I know what you're trying to do. You couldn't get the answer you wanted from me last week, so you figured you'd go to work on her."

"No, you were—"

"Patrick," she interrupted. "Just go. Please."

If she could get Uncle William alone, she still might be able to convince him to let her go home. The longer he drew this out, the worse it would be for both of them.

"Take your hands off me," she ordered in the snottiest, most Ormond-like voice she could muster.

Her captor let go instantly, and she straightened the hem of her jacket with a sharp tug.

Then, to Patrick she said, "Get out of here. I mean it. You and I have nothing to say to each other that hasn't already been said."

Turning, and giving her hair an extra-haughty toss, she marched for the limo, knowing this would get much worse before it got better.

One of the guards scurried to reach the passenger door before she did, and she was trapped inside with Uncle William a moment later.

When he ordered the driver to get out, she knew this would be bad. Whenever he meant to be especially nasty, he made certain he couldn't be overheard.

Outside, she saw Patrick stare at the car with a highly troubling expression. He was still in the mood to pick a fight. But as the guards formed a barrier between him and the car, he must have decided it was no use. He disappeared into the stairwell.

Alone now, Uncle William dug in. "*What* were you doing with him?"

Reminding herself that she had to convince him to let her go home, she pretended ten years hadn't passed and she was still the meek, malleable little victim he remembered. She spoke with a submissive fear that made her nauseous. "We weren't doing anything. We weren't together. He just showed up and when I wouldn't talk to him... We... We're not—"

"Liar," he barked. "Do you think I'm blind? He was after you, and there's little doubt what he really wanted."

"That's not true. We're only friends."

"Friends, Katherine? How can you be friends? Have you forgotten why you can't be friends with him?"

"No, I haven't. Believe me, I could never forget."

"Was he asking questions? Did you tell him anything?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't dare."

Her uncle hissed, "You disgust me."

"I'm sorry."

"You *should* be sorry. I have a company to run. I shouldn't have to make a scene in front of the help because you can't keep your knees together."

It took every last shred of her self-control not to slap him, and the tears that crowded her throat were from outrage rather than the shame and remorse they would have once been. "I said I was sorry."

"Sorry's not good enough," he said. "He's only trying to use you, and you *know* that. How could you be so stupid?"

"He wasn't—"

"Shut up. God, you make me sick. This is a crucial time for the company, and if something goes wrong, it will be all your fault."

The only way she'd get through this was breathing in and out. Slowly. But was it any wonder she'd believed his lies? Under assault from this

much hatred and venom all her life, he'd made her believe she was less than dirt and totally unable to defy him.

He asked, "Has Layne been on you about the amendment?"

As far as Uncle William knew, she hadn't heard word one about the amendment. "What amendment? I don't understand what's going on."

"I'm amending the charter so we'll be able to take action on our own, free of outside influence. It's absolutely vital, and I won't have you jeopardizing it."

"I wouldn't. But I do have to wonder whether anyone will hire us if we're operating in their territory without their consent."

"A woman's understanding," he said, making it sound every bit the insult he'd intended it to be. "We won't need to be hired. The Sanction has great rapport in areas where the major powers have none. Imagine what could happen if there were one objective body presiding over them all to sort out the problems before things got messy."

Objective, her ass. He was a self-righteous hypocrite, trying to make it sound as if he had motives aside from ultimate control.

He went on, "You have to see my way is the *only* way. War used to be about power, money, and territory. Nowadays it's theological arguments that can't be won. Everyone believes they're justified in what they're doing. Nobody will concede anything, but the Sanction has been left in a unique position to head off these arguments long before they happen."

He was good. He must have practiced this speech a hundred times before serving it up to the Global Council. She said, "But what you're talking about supersedes the fundamental right of citizens to govern themselves. You can't just—"

"Don't hand me that ignorant nonsense," her uncle interrupted. "Less than half the world believes in that right. They want to hold hands and skip around singing Kumbaya while the rest of the world is controlled by

regimes. The only thing everyone has in common is they're all mindless sheep like you, blindly letting everything happen, bleating afterwards how war is wrong, or might is right, or whatever else the media has told them to believe, when they have no idea what's really going on."

"What is really going on?"

"The same thing that's always going on. Every nation has secrets. Some they keep from outsiders, more are kept from their own people. And each new leader, well intentioned or not on their way in, inherits the mistakes and secrets of everyone who's come before. It's a bottomless pit of conflict. No one knows how to climb out, but the Sanction's been watching for more than a century. We know the truth. We above anyone can speak to leaders in the two languages they all understand—blame and culpability. So we level the playing field by promoting peace through fear of consequences."

God help them all. His plans were much wider in scope than they'd suspected. He wouldn't wait to use the dirt he had on people until he got himself in trouble with his shiny new amendment. Uncle William meant to strike first, and actively blackmail world leaders into his flock.

"Peace through black files," Kate said quietly.

"An ugly way to put it, but it's the only hope we have for true, lasting peace. Surely you can see it's for the best."

Kate inspected her fingernails so she wouldn't strangle him. Every word he'd just said represented the very reason no one but an Ormond was supposed to hold the office of Sanction Global Council Chairman.

The Ormonds of old had been content to be public servants, and her great-grandmother had mistakenly believed future generations would feel the same. But after years of enjoying too much money and too much power, the line had been corrupted. Uncle William now thought himself a deity who was entitled to run the world.

Why hadn't she seen what a lunatic he was? Or maybe she always had, but had also been too afraid of him to do anything about it.

Insane he might be, but the man was smart. Someone had leaked that vote notice, and instead of panicking, he was counting on Layne and the others to do exactly what they were doing now—sequestering word of that amendment for fear it would get loose and do irreparable harm to the company's image.

She was the only one who could stop him, but in the face of his pious certainty, she knew there was no hope. He craved more power. He was right on the brink of getting it, and none of this boded well for her. His Global Council cronies were on board with him, and she found it very hard to believe they weren't in some way prepared to stop her if she tried to take over.

Provided she lived that long, of course.

He said, "I won't have you making trouble. You know what could happen to Alex if you do."

"Stop threatening him. You have nothing to fear from me. Nothing. So why do you keep blathering on about Alex at every turn?"

"Because of the way you are. The way you sound. The very way you breathe tells me your father's ridiculous idealism still rules the empty space between your ears."

She bit the inside of her cheek, forcing herself not to respond. Anything she said would only make matters worse. It was time to turn the conversation away from his madness and back to her immediate future.

Just as she was about to speak, her uncle's sudden movement caught her eye. He raised one arm over his mouth and nose, vampire style. Then he raised his other hand and for a moment, she thought he meant to slap her.

She never expected the long hissing sound or plume of fine white mist that hit her directly in the face.

Her inhale of surprise was quashed a second too late. She'd already taken the mist into her lungs.

The dizziness hit a moment later, then a pleasant, soothing sensation like having warm water washed through her limbs made her forget to be scared, thinking absurdly that if Uncle William had any idea how good this felt, he would never have used it on her.

She floated in sensation for a few seconds, then let herself slip beneath the surface, closing her eyes and flowing off into the distance.

"What do you mean he *got* her?" Layne demanded.

"She took off," Patrick said, his heart still hammering in his chest. "For no reason. One minute we're packing because they were early, and the next she's just...gone."

"Why would she do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know what happened. I was this close to catching her in the stairwell and then *bam* Ormond's got her. And now all we can do is wait and hope Jason's got my back."

"Was he there? Did you see him?" Layne asked. "We have to get a hold of him somehow. Ormond knows you were here. I wouldn't put it past him to move the vote up, and then we're all screw—"

"Would you *stop* worrying about that *God damned* amendment? He's got your niece, Layne. This is happening, right here, right now. And what do you think he's gonna do? Keep her chained up in the basement for the rest of his life so she can't dethrone him?"

Layne raised her hands, pushing them into her temples as if physically forcing her mind to stay on the right track, not veer off into

panic land. "Oh... Oh God. Patrick, call my husband. Find out where he is. He should've been here by now."

"We can't wait for Arthur. We have to track Jason down."

His phone rang, and he almost dropped it in his haste to answer.

"Got a small development," Jason said. "Figured you'd want to know."

"Please tell me you know where he's taken Kate."

"Yeah, I do. I've got her here in the car, and you might have known that if you'd stop shutting your phone off until the shit's already hit the fan."

Patrick grabbed Layne's arm and nodded at her.

Layne sank down onto the edge of a bed and closed her eyes.

"Is she all right?" Patrick asked.

"I hope so. Ormond hit her with a sedative inhalant, but he must have sprayed enough to kill a herd of bulls. Knocked his own self out for a minute or two."

"Were you there?"

"No. Last minute, he told me to stay at the airport in case something went wrong and new arrangements had to be made. I don't know what happened in that car before he gassed her, but this wasn't what he'd planned, so it must have turned bad."

"What does he want you to do with her now?"

"Take her back to Eveleth," Jason said. "And cut off all contact until he gives me further orders."

"Further orders? What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. But it's not sounding good for her. I don't think I've ever heard him that angry."

"All right. Where did Ormond go?"

"Nowhere. He's staying for the party, and we're supposed to charter a flight to Eveleth."

Patrick said, "Don't. We'll take mine."

"Where and when?"

"It's grounded at a military strip. Call my pilot, tell him to be ready to fly, and I'll be there just as soon as I can. And thanks, Jayce. I owe you one."

"Nah, I'm still down a couple. But get moving. She won't feel too hot when she wakes up, and she doesn't like me much."

"Doesn't like you? Why?"

"I'm her uncle's number one minion."

"Right. But she's a reasonable lady."

"Sure she is. Now hurry up. We need to get underway before the boss gets suspicious."

Patrick flipped his phone shut, and took a couple deep breaths before relaying the plan to Layne.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"You can't. Ormond's staying for the party. If you're not there, he'll wonder why."

"He's staying for the party? What kind of—"

"Hey! Pull it together. If you go off on him, we're finished. You have to keep cool. And whatever you do, don't tell Arthur until after the party. He'll kill him, and I want Ormond alive long enough to see the inside of a prison cell."

"Well we can arrange that quickly enough," Layne said. "He's just kidnapped Kate."

"Forget it. We've got bigger fish to fry, and you know it."

"But it's enough to get the councils to—"

"No. Dammit, Layne, listen to me. We can't attack. Not yet. He knows Kate and I were together, but not why. And if you want him out of play

for good, we need something bigger than assault and attempted abduction.”

Layne said, “You want him sent up for murder.”

“Yes.”

“How on earth will you ever manage that? Jack’s been trying for eighteen years and hasn’t gotten him yet. Just what sort of miracle have you got up your sleeve?”

“None. But I’m not giving up. You said we had until Christmas Eve morning before we have to have him charged. That still leaves me a day and a half, and the vote will take what...a couple hours?”

“It depends on how long it takes to get everyone rounded up, and then—”

“Stop,” he said. “Give Jack and Kate time to work together. She had an idea how to uncover his travel that night, and if you can keep your knickers on a little bit longer, they’ll nail him.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you can go ahead and have him charged with what he did to Kate. Just not before we’ve given this our best shot.”

Layne sighed and rubbed her temples. “This CFU thing is bad. You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I don’t care what I’m asking. I deserve this one last chance to make him pay for what he’s done.”

“Fine,” Layne said. “But take care of her, Trick. Or Arthur will snap your neck right after he kills Ormond. And I’ll let him. I might even help.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Layne. I’m out of here.”

He left her then, and did a lightning-fast round through the room to grab their things.

On the tarmac, the first person he encountered was his pilot, who was jittery as hell. “I don’t like this, Trick,” the pilot said. “What’s going on? What happened to her?”

“I’ll explain everything at Eveleth. Get us there. Fast.”

Once inside, he found Jason standing over Kate. He’d laid her across a couple seats, and covered her up. She was out cold, although she looked all right. Even still, it gave him a jolt to see her that way.

“Her vitals are great,” Jason said. “Respiration rate’s normal, so’s her pulse. I’d check blood gasses, but you don’t have the equipment.”

“How long has she been down?”

“About an hour, but we really don’t need to worry. I’ve used that stuff more than once, and we’ve never had a problem.”

“Yeah, but this is Kate.”

Jason said, “Do you really think the legal department would let us use that spray on civilians if there were any undue risk?”

“Good point. So how long until she wakes up?”

“Probably not long. What usually happens is they roll straight from unconscious to regular sleep. Which is a blessing, considering how they feel if they *don’t* sleep it off.”

“Ah, God. She was dead tired last night. We’ll probably be lucky if she doesn’t pull a Rip Van Winkle on us.”

“So what if she does?” Jason asked. “Just keep an eye on her. I gotta call my lawyer. Seems I’ve just done myself out of a job.”

“Hold off on anything too drastic. Layne’s on the warpath, so you may be looking at your new boss.”

Jason’s brows went up.

Patrick said, “Not me. Her.”

“That’s what I mean. She’ll fire me, first thing.”

Patrick made no further comment, only a muttered curse when the plane began to taxi, making them grab onto seats to stay upright.

They strapped themselves in and kept a sharp eye on Kate during takeoff to make sure the seatbelts held her in place. And once they were leveled out, Patrick took out his laptop and pretended to work, spending more time watching Kate than the screen filled with the security system specs at Ormond's vineyard.

She was safe with him temporarily, but the reality of the last twenty-four hours was beginning to set in. And the reality was, they were lucky Ormond hadn't capitalized on their mistake by murdering Kate instead of dumping her on Jason.

Resting his head against the seatback, he gave up all pretense and just stared at Kate. The danger still existed. As long as Ormond drew breath, Kate had a mortal enemy, and seeing her lie there helpless was the clincher.

Time had already run out. He'd agreed to give Kate and Jack a chance to work together, but someone had to end this before Ormond was allowed to kill again. Period.

He knew what had to be done. Go back to his original plan. There were obstacles to be dodged, and the earliest he could possibly strike was tomorrow night. The act would be a hellacious risk, but he had nothing left to lose.

His mind made up, he tried to concentrate on the vineyard specs. Yet the memory of Kate swallowing another grenade for him by flouncing off to that limo was hard to let go.

Kate had been right when she'd said everything hadn't been perfect between them. Her wide-eyed adoration, so good for his ego at first, had begun to get on his nerves. She'd always given in to him, tried so very hard never to exert her own will, eventually he'd begun to question why

she put up with him. Underneath it all, she was an Ormond, and God knew her family was capable of anything. It wouldn't have surprised him in the least to learn Kate had been sent into his life—and his bed—to spy for Ormond.

Of course, had he ever truly believed that, he would have ditched her post haste. There'd been something so fundamentally good and incorruptible about her, the very idea had seemed absurd. Still, he'd tested her at every turn and waited to be proven wrong, never fully trusting her. Not deep down where it counted, but after watching her deliberately get into that limo, everything he'd ever believed about her had been thrown into question.

All this time, he'd assumed being one of *them* had exempted Kate from Ormond's abuse. Clearly, he'd been mistaken. Kate had put up with his crap because she'd been putting up with crap her entire life. And now he felt like a true jackass for pushing her buttons that way.

Total, utter jackass. It had all been about him. About how Kate couldn't be trusted and how disappointed he'd been that he'd always had to be the instigator in bed. How he'd always felt cheated she'd never broken out of that librarian shell and come after him for once.

He knew enough about women to understand she couldn't have, even if she'd wanted to. Not while under Ormond's black-hearted, fear-ridden spell. And having been endlessly subjected to that shit, it should probably stand in testament to Kate's strength of character that she wasn't shooting people from a bell tower.

But he couldn't count on her. She'd been programmed to betray everyone and everything in favor of her superior Ormond blood, and relying on her to save the day was a risk too big to take.

He'd do what he had to do. Keep mute about the Kretts. Keep mute about everything until it was already done, and if Jack, Kate, and the

Crawfords didn't like it, that was just too bloody bad. Let them stay behind in the kiddie pool where it was safe. He'd been programmed to brawl with sharks, so he turned his eyes back to his computer monitor.

After studying the vineyard's system specs, he'd changed his mind about the guards. The property's layout would hinder them as much or more than it would hinder him, with acres upon acres of heavily wired fields almost completely surrounding the buildings they needed to protect. Paint a couple tennis balls black, pitch a few fastballs into the fields, and the guards could be drawn off post at will.

That part would be mildly amusing. It always was. The only route in was a narrow driveway leading straight to the house, and if he could pull all the guards away from the camera monitors in the security office, one quick run later, he'd be in.

After that, the fun was over. The security system in the buildings was a beast.

He'd need his crew to have a look for more weaknesses. Carlos, his crew chief, always seemed to come up with something when the boss was stumped. And the boss had to admit he was rattled and distracted, robbed of that clarity he'd had before Jack had come pounding on his door.

With about twenty minutes remaining on their flight, he caught some movement from Kate, and before he'd even gotten to his knees beside her, she was curling up in a ball, clutching her head and breathing out a weak, tortured, "Oww...."

"Ah, God." He hardly dared touch her. "Help. Jason? *Jason!* Make it stop."

Beside him, Jason said, "It won't last long. Usually only a couple minutes."

"That's a couple minutes too long. Do something."

“Be right back,” Jason said.

Patrick rubbed her arm, whispering, “It’s okay, Kit. You’re safe. It’s okay.”

Jason, reappearing to budge him out of the way, ordered him to grab a water bottle while slipping an oxygen mask over Kate’s nose and mouth.

It helped. She started to relax almost instantly.

“Water,” Jason reminded him.

He reached over to the mini bar and produced a bottle, then shoved Jason away again to hold the mask until Kate finally opened her eyes.

Something happened, then. Instantly, totally, and irrevocably. All she did was lean forward a little, and then she was clinging to him, crying into his neck. His arms went around her and he stroked her hair, trying desperately to figure out why he felt the way he did.

She’d just looked so relieved to see him, and then there’d been this explosive blast of protective instincts and now all hell was breaking loose.

Fantastic timing. The eleventh hour was not the time to realize he *did* have something to lose. Kate might have kept the truth from him for ten years, but it hadn’t been by choice.

No matter what any of them might have done, his mother wouldn’t be any less dead. Nothing would bring her back. Not the truth, more lies, or any amount of risk.

There was too little time left to split hairs. He’d seen what loss had done to his mother. Loss of innocence, loss of hope, and the devastating loss of the one she’d loved.

Kate had already lost her parents. If he didn’t put a stop to this, she might lose far more. He didn’t want that to happen to her.

And dammit, he wanted her back. Yet he couldn’t cram a lifetime into the next twelve hours. The poor girl was in bad shape. She’d stopped

crying after only a moment, yet he could feel how shaky she was, and how vulnerable.

A bit shaky himself, he got up and took her with him, sitting with her in his lap.

Jason decided to make himself scarce, and since there were very few places to hide on a Lear, disappeared into the sleeping cabin.

Kate continued to cling, and from the feel of her, the inhalant wasn't quite finished with her yet. She wanted to go back to sleep, but she was fighting it every step of the way.

He rearranged them so he could get the mask back in place. "Breathe, Kitten."

She listened, but continued to blink drunkenly for another minute or two.

Finally, when those uniquely colored eyes were a bit clearer, she pulled the mask away and said simply, "Explain."

After forcing yet another bottle of water on her, he did explain, then said, "And now you can explain why you ran."

"Alex," she said, recounting the phone call. "I don't know what's going on. Why would he say I couldn't call?"

"Because he's smart. He's switching between phones and hiding in semi-plain sight. And he was right on the money about you needing to bolt."

"Wait, wait. Back up. Are you saying Ormond's after my brother too?"

"Not necessarily. What I'm saying is, Alex took your uncle as seriously as we should have. I screwed up. It won't happen again."

She gave him one of her more prime looks and said, "Yes, well right now you better prepare in case my uncle's on the phone to the Dutch."

Bollocks. He hadn't thought of that. Now he was really in trouble. It would be very much like Ormond, calling the Dutch to neutralize him.

They would not stop to let him collect two hundred dollars. They'd toss him right into jail, otherwise known as the sitting duck pond.

Desperate to change the subject, he asked, "How's your head?"

"It's felt better, but I'm all right." She shot a suspicious glance over her shoulder. "Where's Jason?"

"Sleeping compartment. So it's true you don't like him. Even after what he did tonight?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just don't... Something's not right about him."

"You'll see. He's a decent sort."

"Mmm," Kate said. "What time are you expecting Jack?"

"I'm not sure. Rather depends on how soon he can get a flight. And I'll need some time to talk to my crew before he gets here."

She nodded. "I need some peace and quiet myself."

"You're not planning to run off again, I hope."

"No, no. Nothing like that. I'd just like a chance to clear my head."

Raising a hand to her cheek, he said, "That poor head's had quite a night. Want me to run cover when we get there? Buy you some time?"

This was bad, bad news. There was nothing worse than Patrick being thoughtful, and with his warm palm against her skin and the way they were sitting, her nerve-endings had begun to throw Mardi Gras at the return of their favorite tormentor. And he knew it, too. His lashes had fallen, and he was now staring quite unabashedly at her mouth.

She shouldn't want this to happen. It shouldn't be this easy to slide right back into that time when they'd been so close, so attracted, and so comfortable with each other. And she really shouldn't have picked now to remember that his "palm and stare" technique was almost exactly how things had gotten started the night he'd taken her virginity.

That night, for the first time he'd shown a side of himself she hadn't known existed—the real Patrick lurking behind the almighty Trick Mancini's image. The one who cared how she felt and wanted to please her more than himself. It had taken her nearly three months to realize it *was* the real Patrick, and if she hadn't loved him before then, she'd been a complete goner afterwards.

God help her. She knew better. Allowing herself to feel anything for him beyond what the situation required was the surest way to get her heart broken. And if she kissed him, it would be all over but the crying.

A binging noise made her jump, breaking the spell.

The pilot's intercom announced, "Bench 'em and belt 'em, campers. We're on approach."

"I think that one deserves a *worst timing ever* lifetime achievement award," Patrick complained.

Best. *Best* timing ever. Good Lord, he was potent.

Growling softly in a way that stirred her blood, he deposited her carefully in the seat beside him and belted her in, nodding at Jason who'd emerged to join them.

He asked, "Feeling better?"

"Mmm."

"Give it a few more minutes. You'll be good as new."

Not. Patrick beside her, and her uncle's lead henchman along for the ride. Her brother was out there somewhere, alone. And her uncle was back at that party, pressing flesh after what he'd done.

It would take a lot more than half an hour before she was anywhere near good as new.

Chapter Eleven

Eveleth, Minnesota

Monday, December 22; 11:00 p.m.

Once they were home, Kate immediately sought privacy the only place she could—the girl’s locker room in the gym. No cameras were allowed in there and she wanted to be alone.

She felt guilty for not checking in with Wyatt and the kids first, but spouting a steady stream of *I’m all right* or *everything will be fine* would be as impossible as it was untrue. And would more than likely cause her to bypass “unglued” and go directly for “unhinged”.

Before she dealt with the business of her everyday life, she had to face up to her abnormal one. The Sanction. Uncle William. The anger, fear and disgust over what he’d done, and her own weak acceptance of it for so long. She could not allow sleeping dogs to lie another second.

Between a row of dark blue lockers, Kate sat on a bench as far from the doors as possible. It was time to break it all down, then pick up the pieces, one by one, until they could be rearranged into something that would produce a solution.

Taking a realistic view, much of the present situation was her fault. Not all of it. She hadn’t given her uncle the idea to create a new world order. And she hadn’t been the one to take pleasure in the emotional terrorism he’d let loose on her simply because she wasn’t Claudia.

She’d never faced up to it. Never faced up to anything. The Chairmanship. Patrick. Or Uncle William.

He'd done damage. There was no denying it. But there had to come a time when his words lost their hold on her. Words like stupid. Weak. And spineless, just like her father. Over the last ten years she thought she'd managed to extract him from her every thought and feeling, but William Ormond wouldn't still be Global Chairman if she truly had.

He needed to be exorcized. Sitting there in the locker room, for the first time ever, she eased her steely, cramped grip on self-control, and let herself fall back, right into the thick of the problem, that first summer she and Alex had gone to Baltimore for visitation.

The very first night, Uncle William had sent Alex to bed, sat her down, and said he had big plans for their summer.

"You have a tremendous life ahead of you, Katherine," Uncle William had said. "You'll be a very powerful woman. While you're here with me, we'll prepare you for it. Groom you into perfection."

As unreal as it seemed now, what he'd proposed had sounded exciting. She'd missed her father and the interest he'd taken in her. Not that Aunt Layne and Uncle Arthur hadn't been wonderful, but here was someone who knew about the office she'd one day hold, and offered to show her how to survive it. And maybe, if she performed well enough, Uncle William would turn out to be as nice as Uncle Arthur.

For the first two weeks, she'd been under siege by people who'd taught her how to walk, speak, dress, eat, and conduct herself properly in public. Every night, Uncle William would watch her at dinner, commenting on her transformation from a little girl into a refined young lady.

At the beginning of the third week, she and Alex had been taken to the beach where inevitably, they'd played hard and gotten sunburned. Dinner that night was the first time her uncle's mask had slipped, when he'd yelled at her for fidgeting at table.

She hadn't been able to help it. The sunburn had been extremely painful, the cotton dress she'd worn had been scratchy, and she remembered thinking afterwards if only she hadn't enjoyed herself so much, everything would have been fine.

She knew now it wouldn't have mattered. Once he'd drawn first blood, she hadn't stood a chance. From that night on, Uncle William always managed to find fault in her behavior.

"Those people are getting paid a lot of money to make you special, but it's not working. Either there's something wrong with you, or you're just plain stupid," he'd said. Then exploded, "Why can't you be like your mother?"

It had gotten much worse than that. He'd hit her more than once, and made her so afraid of not measuring up she'd often become physically ill.

Back then, it had seemed strange to her that during the last week of their stays Uncle William would allow her to play with Alex again. He'd speak to her in a kinder tone of voice. He wouldn't hit, and then he'd send her home, confused and still terrorized.

Layne and Arthur had known something was wrong. But after a summer full of threats, she wouldn't have dared tell anyone about her stay.

It was infuriating to realize she'd feared nothing more than how Layne or Arthur might react to the truth. What if they agreed with Uncle William that there was something wrong with her? That she really wasn't good enough. Pretty enough. Smart enough. Polished enough.

The third summer spent with him, he'd finally broken her. She'd been fifteen that year, and she'd still swear Uncle William had thrown that party on purpose, just so he'd be able to slaughter her afterwards.

The party had taken place in London, about one week before they were to go home, and he'd invited neighbors, Sanction employees, VIPs and their families. She'd thought she'd been as close to perfect as could be.

But she'd made a mistake. She'd talked with one particular boy too long, and Uncle William's tirade later that night had been the worst yet. He'd used words like whore, jezebel—words she understood years later had been aimed at her mother, not herself.

That's what the whole thing had been about. Everything he'd never been able to take out on Claudia without getting hit back twenty times harder, he'd taken out on her daughter. Who hadn't been equipped to fight back. At all.

From that night forward, the world had been gray. She'd poured herself into her studies, finishing high school and college both by the time she was eighteen. There'd been no more parties, no more life in her until she'd returned to London and run into that boy again.

She'd rebelled, and it had been over almost as soon as it started. The Ambassador's son she'd been interested in that night at the party had turned out to be everything Arthur had ever warned her about. Too much money, not enough to do.

And then, Patrick had slid into that booth beside her and the world had seemed to burst into Technicolor.

Looking back on what she'd done to him, she felt worse than ever. Patrick had been the best thing ever to happen to her. He'd been the first hint Uncle William might have been wrong about her. She wasn't stupid. She might not be good enough or pretty enough for the likes of Thee By-God Patrick Mancini, but she'd been polished enough to keep him for eighteen months.

Through it all—every second of it—she'd been plagued by Uncle William's words. She'd known she'd lose Patrick to someone better. And it hadn't helped that Patrick had demons of his own, thanks to growing up with an addict.

Everything would be fine one minute, but as soon as things got *too* fine, he'd grill her with those *What Would You Do* questions, waiting for her to give a wrong answer so he could trust her even less.

Life with him had been no picnic, but it had never made her stop loving him. If anything, his insecurities had only made her love him more. He might not have trusted her implicitly, but he'd trusted her enough to let his guard down now and then. Let her see through the rock star image so she could recognize his distrust for what it really was—a side effect of being hurt, let down, and unpleasantly surprised by people all his life.

She'd hurt for him. Agonized over what he'd been through, and had honestly believed if she could just be unthreatening enough, everything would be okay.

It hadn't been. Uncle William had reared up and driven a fatal wedge between them, and she'd just lain down and died, allowing her uncle to control every aspect of her life through fear.

Interesting, that her greatest fear had been to turn into her mother, when her father had been equally bad in his own way. The unloved, stubbornly hanging on and taking abuse out of some perverted notion of love. Or a big fat masochistic streak. It was rather hard to tell the difference.

Even more interesting was the fact she'd spent the last ten years putting men like her uncle behind bars, but when it came to him, she ran screaming from the danger like the hapless blonde in a horror movie.

Well, that part wasn't hard to understand. It was very easy to intellectualize abuse. Not so easy to overcome or even recognize the true extent of the damage. And she was about to square off with her abuser, a prospect that would send any abuse victim into a cold sweat.

Tonight, though, when she'd woken up from that spray, something had been different. She'd heard Patrick saying *make it stop*. The powerlessness in that voice had both frightened and angered her. Yes, it was nice to know he cared, but dammit, she hadn't spent the last ten years serving tea and cookies to some of the most dangerous people alive.

Her head had hurt. That was all. She wasn't frail, helpless, or weak. She was perfectly capable of defeating a headache on her own.

Defeating her uncle wouldn't be that simple, but she knew now how it could be done. Making the phone call wasn't it. Taking away the Chairmanship alone would be like swatting a wasp with a tissue. It would only piss him off, and she'd get stung. She had to hit harder with something more powerful, and crush him like the insect he was.

Even still, the idea that had begun to form in her head seemed crazy. She was the Sanction's weakest link. The one who refused to play games with people. This plan was totally unlike her, and just as manipulative as her uncle himself.

But the more she thought about it, the more firm and *right* it became. Their evidence was a bust. Ormond had been given too much time, and covered his tracks too well to be caught by something as simple as a false identity.

To force and record a full confession was their only chance, and she had all the players she'd need on her team. Each of them was reliable for two things: to push their own agendas, and be who they were.

Patrick could be relied upon to go after his pound of flesh in the most reckless, vengeful manner possible. Layne would demand everyone give

two thousand percent until they had sufficient dirt on Ormond, leaving no one time to sit idle or think too much. Arthur would tower over them all with his hands out, ready to make a catch should someone fall.

Jack would never stop obsessing until they knew the truth behind Nina's death. Jason she wasn't sure about. He was a problem. An unknown. And so was Alex, who was clearly doing his own thing. But unlike Jason, her brother could be trusted.

Meanwhile, she was in the middle of all this. The meek and mild one. Too afraid to strike at her uncle, and prone to bend and sway along with everyone else's will.

Really, she couldn't ask for a better setup. With everyone gunning for Ormond, she was in perfect position to be his only safe port in the storm.

Good-cop, bad-cop was the oldest trick in the book, and it remained on the page because it *worked*. The problem was how to prime her uncle for the fall—how to crash him against the others, and make him believe she was on his side, still too afraid to defy him.

The first collision was imminent, she knew. If Patrick wasn't already planning something, he soon would. She had to be ready for that. Get herself pulled together. Keep her agenda quiet, and pretend to be the same old passive, non-threatening Kitten she'd been before tonight. Go along. Bend to the various wills involved until she had Ormond where she wanted him.

No one would ever expect this from her. And that was the sole reason why it would work.

The biggest obstacle ahead was Patrick. He always knew when she was hiding something. Keeping away from him was a must, but would be no simple task. Patrick might not trust her an inch, but it wasn't over between them. They still had something. And whatever it was, she had it bad.

There. The attraction had been acknowledged. It could now be controlled. And Patrick would no longer see through her if she didn't let him. He wasn't the only one who knew the power of misdirection.

Ready for real life once more, she went in search of Wyatt and received the umpteenth bombshell of the last two days. Layne had not only moved most of the inmates out of the facility, but she'd also had David's court order lifted.

What the... When she'd come up with this plan, she hadn't counted on Layne wreaking havoc up here in Eveleth. For two cents, she'd call that woman and let her have it, once and for all. Layne had given her this responsibility. She was accountable for what went on here, yet she had no real say in how the facility was run or what became of the kids, and she was sick and tired of it.

But she couldn't blast Layne for it now. She had to allow Layne and everyone else to play their part. If she suddenly stood up and defended her territory, they'd all probably die of shock, and she should have moved those kids herself.

She asked simply, "Why would Layne move some kids out, but not those three?"

"No idea," Wyatt told her. "David and Tina said she had them working on something. I tried to find out, but every time I got close to the tac center, Tina would set upon me like a Rottweiler. Said she had orders to keep everyone away. So before you ask, no, I don't know what they're working on."

"Well, where are they? Are they still working?"

"Nope. They put Lori to bed at eight, and were in bed by ten. About an hour and a half ago."

"Mmm."

She'd have to work on David in the morning. It was no use calling Layne to find out what was going on. Layne wouldn't tell. And considering the woman had just been forced to share the same ballroom as Ormond, a call right now would yield nothing but an hour-long rant.

"I'll just go up and check on them," she said.

"Perform the homecoming ritual, you mean?"

From the doorway, Patrick repeated, "Ritual?"

"Whenever she's been gone, soon as she gets home she's up there counting fingers and toes to make sure her cubs are unharmed."

Clicking her tongue at Wyatt, she said, "I'm not *that* bad."

"Oh yes, you are. But go on up. I know Lori was wanting to see you."

She did a double-take at Patrick, hardly able to believe her eyes when she saw him pop the last bit of chocolate into his mouth.

First caramel rolls, and now chocolate. What was with him? Next thing she knew, he'd be eating French fries, and pigs would start earning frequent flyer miles.

Turning her attention back to the subject of Lori, she asked Wyatt, "Was she scared when the other kids left?"

"Nope. Just miffed that she couldn't go swimming. Cried for an hour."

"Ugh," Kate said. "It'll only take a month to make that one up to her."

"I can maybe take her over there in the morning before I go. Let her splash around a while."

"Thank you."

"It's no problem. She owns us all."

"Does she ever. I'll go upstairs, but then I'm going to bed until Jack gets here. Do you guys have everything covered?"

Wyatt looked to Patrick, who said, "Yes. Jason and my crew have things worked out."

"Okay, good. Thank you."

Patrick followed her out, and on the stairs she realized he wasn't going away. "I'll only be a minute. You don't have to come up."

"Actually, I do. I've been given my orders. You don't leave my sight."

Great.

Choosing not to say any more, and holding a finger to her lips, she stopped before David's door and carefully turned the handle.

After a quick peep inside to find him sprawled out and fast asleep, she reached in to flip the maid service sign hanging on the inside knob.

That done, she moved a couple doors down to the girls' room, where both Tina and Lori were also out cold. Slipping silently in, she crept over to Lori's nightstand where she knew there'd be something waiting for her.

Sure enough, there was a Christmas tree nightlight at the ready and as quietly as possible, Kate switched it with the Santa Claus version already in the socket.

A hoarse, quiet, "Kate?" drifted over.

Tina was awake. Hurrying to her so she wouldn't wake Lori, Kate dropped a kiss on the girl's forehead. "Sorry I woke you. Everything okay?"

"I think so," Tina said, raising up on an elbow to stare at Patrick.

"It's all right. It's only Patrick."

"Oh. You're not leaving again before morning?"

"No, no. We'll be here. Go back to sleep. I'll see you at breakfast."

In the dim glow of the nightlight, she saw Tina nod her dark head, and when the girl rolled over onto her other side, Kate tucked her in, warring with jittery nerves. She wished she knew what Layne had them doing. Tina was still very much in the repair process, and any setbacks could be devastating.

Smoothing the girl's hair before meeting Patrick in the hall, she caught him looking at her in a quizzical manner.

“What?” she whispered.

“What’s with the night light?”

Moving them down the hall, Kate said, “It’s just a signal to let them know I’m home.”

“Ah. And David’s maid sign?”

“How did you see that?”

“I saw it last night.”

“His room was always a pit for the first month, so I brought home one of those hotel maid service signs for him.”

“But his room was spotless,” Patrick said.

“It better be. Anyway, the system is, if I have to leave suddenly, I flip it to *Early Maid Service*, and back to *Do Not Disturb* when I get home.”

“What business is it of his?”

“I do that with everyone, really, but you have to remember David’s a special case. He knows about the Sanction. The others don’t. Plus David and I aren’t always on very good terms, so the sign is more a reminder that if he tries anything while I’m away, I’ll still hear about it.”

“So you’re the heavy around here?” he asked, holding his elbow out for her to take it.

She laughed, took his arm, and let him steer them back toward the stairs. “Hard to believe, I’m sure. But since I’m not around much, I get to play bad guy. And David’s made that necessary more than once.”

“Well, whatever you did, you’ve made quite an impression,” he said. “He’s quite taken with you.”

“Yes and no. He’s *taken* with Tina. But he relies on me to enforce discipline and boundaries. They make him feel comfortable.”

“Uh, I don’t think comfortable is the word.”

“Please. He’s a big prima donna. If there was no one around to roll their eyes at his antics, he’d feel completely out of control. Rather like someone else we know.”

“Did you just call me a prima donna?”

“Yes, I did,” she said. “But don’t be offended. The first time I met David, I thought you must’ve been cloned in a lab.”

“I still don’t get how I’m not supposed to be offended by that.”

She said, “He’s brilliant. He’s also got drive for days and loves what he does. The only difference between you two is that he lets the rest of the world define who and what he is. Once he’s gotten over the notion there’s something wrong with him because he can do amazing things other people have told him are bad, he’ll do fine. Maybe even as well as you have.”

“Yeah. I’m doin’ fabulously right about now.”

“I’m not talking about now.” She nudged him with her elbow. “You’ve helped put a lot of bad people away, and you’ve certainly made a name for yourself. With Ormond gone, Alex will become Chairman, and things will be different. I’m sure he’ll go to work on the Dutch to revise your contract. Then you’d be free to dominate the security system design industry, or whatever it is you plan to do next.”

“You make that sound simple.”

“Yes, well, most things are for you.”

“Right. But what about the kids? Is this all some big science experiment or does it really work?”

“We’ve got program graduates in nearly every American agency already,” Kate said. “So that’s something. But we’ve had our failures, too. Layne’s careful who she picks. Even still, some of them respond more readily than others.”

“Why does she pick these specific kids?”

"Lots of reasons. Candidates go through extensive testing. Intelligence is a big factor. So is imaginative problem solving. But... And please don't ever repeat this."

"Oh, just tell me already. You know I'll only keep after you until you do."

"From the pattern of choices, I'd say the one thing they most have in common is a bone-deep vengeful streak. I mean, look at what Tina did. David went after drug dealers and the Mob, for heaven's sake. Right now we have a boy who was ready to blow up his school to get revenge, and with so many other cases like that, it's pretty hard to discount the pattern."

"Seems a bit risky, don't you think?"

"Perhaps. You know how Arthur's always said there's a very thin line between vengeance and justice. That's why it's so important the children are emotionally intelligent enough to tell the difference between serving yourself and protecting others."

"Well then she failed with me," Patrick said. "Because I just like robbing bad guys, catching the competition, and getting paid obscene amounts of money to do it. The justice part is someone else's problem."

"In that case, you were an ingenious choice for the Sanction," she said. "That's exactly what the Sanction is supposed to be about. Well, perhaps not the obscene amounts of money part, but the part where you understand it's a job, not a personal crusade. Too bad my uncle's forgotten that."

"Do I detect a note of vengeance in there somewhere?"

"Probably. I said there was a thin line between the two. I *didn't* say which side I was on."

His brows went up. "Could it be my kitten's grown some claws over the years?"

Reminded how easily Patrick could make her forget she was supposed to be guarded, she backpedaled. "It would be hard for anyone not to in this business, don't you think?"

"I suppose not. And it does make me feel better for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"I've got business to attend to, so Jason will be in charge. I'll have to leave some time in the morning."

"What? You can't—"

"I have to," he interrupted. "I've got one shot at this particular target, and if all goes well, I'll only be gone overnight. Plenty of time for you and the others to find something to compromise the Globals while I'm gone."

"But..." she began, then stopped as the worry set in.

She'd known he'd try something, she just hadn't expected him to move this quickly.

They were in the walkway, right outside the door to her house, the same spot they'd argued about David two nights ago. She'd known he was up to no good then. It was no different now.

How should she handle it? Her own plan called for letting him do his own thing, but that didn't include allowing him to run off somewhere and get himself killed. And as much as it might pain him to hear it, with a simple phone call to her friends at the airport, clipping the Chief Thief's wings wouldn't be too terribly difficult. Puncture a hydraulic line, and his plane would be grounded.

If worst came to worst, that's what she'd do. For now, she had to act natural, and under normal circumstances, she'd be nagging him senseless. *Not* making a fuss would be a mistake. He'd know something was wrong.

"Hey," Patrick said. "Don't worry. Jason will take good care of you."

“You think I’m worried about *me*? What about you? Have you forgotten how angry Ormond was?”

Expecting an argument, she was very unnerved when he didn’t respond. He just stood looking down at her with a slight crease between his brows, as if he might actually be susceptible to reason for once.

“Don’t do this,” she said. “You’re not safe on your own. If it’s that important, have Carlos do it.”

Still, he said nothing. And just when she was about to try again, he said, “I’d forgotten how beautiful you are when you’re worried about me.”

Oh Lord. Help! “Don’t change the subject.”

When he took her by the waist to draw her closer, she knew she was being played. His eyes had taken on the sultry haze signaling a fiery, intense session ahead, and something in her that didn’t care for logic or even acknowledge better sense wanted very much to ignore the fact he was doing this solely to avoid further argument.

And so much for keeping away from him. The feel of his hands sliding up her back was turning her insides to flammable mush.

She put her hands on his chest and said, “Stop it. This won’t make me shut up about you leaving.”

“There’s really no need to worry. It’s just a quick in-and-out, and I’ll come straight back.”

“Why don’t I believe that?”

“Probably because I lie a lot. But if you must, you can interrogate Carlos. He knows all about it.”

“Like he’s credible,” she said, working herself loose. “He’d lie to the Virgin Mary with a smile on his face if you told him to.”

She went into the house, pausing briefly to reset the alarm, then yelped as she collided with the suitcases someone had set inside the door.

“Careful,” Patrick said. He caught her with one hand and hit a light switch with the other. “Get the lights for me.”

She went ahead of him upstairs, where he set his own case down outside the guest room door, then carried hers to her room, lugging them onto the bed.

That done, he asked, “So what’s on the agenda?”

“I need to unpack, and then hopefully some sleep,” she said, opening her case and taking out a couple toiletry bags. “Any word on what time Jack will be here?”

“Not for a few hours, yet.”

“All right. You should probably sleep until he gets here, too. Good night.”

She took the bags into the bathroom, but as ever, Patrick followed to lean against the doorjamb and stare at her via the mirror.

“I wish you wouldn’t be angry,” he said. “I know it’s bad timing, but I don’t have much choice. So can we call a truce?”

“Sure. Right after you tell me you’re not going.”

“I’m not going.”

“You have to actually mean it,” she said, setting the bags down. “What did you do? Just order one of everything?”

“Yup.”

She shook her head at him in the mirror and began to unload while he stepped up behind her, examining the jars and tubes.

“What is all this stuff, anyhow?” He picked up a tall green tube. “Exfoliant? Isn’t that like Agent Orange?”

“Agent Orange is a *de*-foliant. Sort of.”

“Then what’s this do?”

“Removes dead skin.”

“Ooo-kay,” he said dubiously, then set the tube back down rather gingerly, as if it might melt his hand off without warning.

He continued to pick through things as she unpacked them, until she noticed he’d stopped. Glancing up in the mirror to see what he was puzzling over now, she caught him eyeing her neck.

The instant spill of heat across her skin almost made her sigh. She was hopeless.

So was Patrick. He used the mirror to maintain eye contact while lowering his head at a torturously slow pace, daring her to stop him.

Heaven help her, but she couldn’t do it. Nor could she miss the sparkle of triumph in those dark, scorching eyes as his mouth met the skin he’d been blistering a moment before.

That. Right there was the reason she’d never completely get him out of her system. He lived to push the envelope. She’d spent her entire life trying not to. And she craved that boldness of his at a cellular level.

She both felt and saw his hands in the mirror as he put them on her stomach, drawing her back against a warm, solid body she remembered all too well. The effect was pure fuel, making her heart race, her skin warm, her breasts and lips swell in anticipation.

Then he began on his next incendiary act, tugging her shirt free of her pants before starting work on the bottom button.

Okay. Clothes were about to come off, and somewhere beneath the firestorm she knew this was probably a big mistake. But she could see in the mirror he was intent on having her, and she could already feel his powerful, whipcord body driving into her, obliterating everything but him.

A small, breathy sound of helpless pleasure escaped her throat, and his eyes flashed raw encouragement.

Lord, those eyes. Arson. This was arson. He was making her burn ever hotter with every button.

The shirt was gone a moment later. She wasn't exactly sure how he'd managed that, but didn't much care once his hands returned, this time on bare skin.

At first contact, she was overcome by that foggy buzz of arousal. She could see the heat of it turning her skin an unmistakable red. She could also see he was enjoying the effect he was having. He watched it too, the dark eyes focused on the steaming blush's progress, his breath erratic on her neck. She watched first his hands as they lingered over the contour of waist and ribs, then the desire on Patrick's face as those hands found what he sought.

The black velvet bra. She had to close her eyes for a moment as Patrick cupped her breasts, the clinging fabric doubling his touch, teasing her skin with the sensation.

It was almost too much, watching and feeling everything he did at the same time.

Almost. After so long without him, it wasn't nearly enough.

Patrick ran his fingers over tight nipples and faltered a bit, growling against her neck. "I want your mouth on me."

She turned around to obey, and then everything began to blur. All that was left was the feel of him. There was no haste anymore, just the simple pleasure of kissing, touching, and rediscovering what they'd lost.

When her hands found their way under his sweater, he went still a moment as if losing track of what he'd been doing, distracted by her touch.

He took his mouth away to breathe, "God, I've missed you."

With him staring down at her that way with those passion-glazed eyes, she didn't know what to say. Telling him she'd missed him back

was too big an understatement, but she couldn't very well blurt out she still loved him.

She swallowed hard, trying to get some air back into her lungs and some sense back into her head. Hardly effective when she was this far gone, and before she even knew what she was saying, she'd said, "Promise me when this is over you won't go away again."

Something wrong. A shadow fell behind his eyes, but she was only given a second to see it. The next moment, he was making fists in the hair behind her head and kissing her with so much intensity she couldn't breathe, let alone worry over that shadow.

When he backed her up against the door, she forgot everything except how very, very good he was against doors. Long ago, she'd become something of an expert on his favorite locations and best performances, and given a choice, against a door would be among the first.

He was fighting her chinos button when the auxiliary security panel in the bedroom let out a strange sound—the squeal of an electrical circuit that was about to burn out.

Patrick tore his mouth away and tried to focus his eyes on the panel. "Shit. Kate, get dressed. We've got company."

Reluctantly setting her down, he moved closer to read the words scrolling on the small LCD display while dialing Jason's cell.

The system panel blinked out for a second, then the whole house went dark while the panel righted itself to display *backup power enabled... Auto-repair system activated...*

Dammit. Whoever this was, they'd cut the power to jack up the security system. And he didn't need a gut-check to know what was about to happen.

Helping pull a sweatshirt over Kate's head, he dropped his phone. He'd need both hands free, and Jason already knew they had trouble.

He ordered Kate, "Follow me. Keep one hand on my back and when we get downstairs, you go straight for the walkway and don't you stop until Jason is right on top of you."

She took hold of his sweater and he slipped into the hallway, running his hand along the wall so he could feel his way to the stairs, his eyes struggling to adjust to the dark. There wasn't much moonlight, and what there was washed everything in a thick charcoal shroud.

They were in the front hall when he heard metal scrape metal. It was just the slightest sound, but he'd heard it thousands of times while raking a pick across lock pins.

Whoever was outside would soon be in.

His mind completely consumed by the thought of the Kretts, he ordered in a harsh whisper, "Go. Get out of here."

She didn't, immediately. He had to shove her in what he hoped was the kitchen's direction before she'd move, and even then she hadn't gone far before he heard the faint, brassy knock of an old doorknob receiving pressure from one side.

Keep them out. No mean feat. He couldn't see a damn thing down here. But the foyer doorway was narrow. They'd be bottle-necked, and wouldn't get past him easily.

Hoping Kate was running top speed toward Jason, he took two silent steps toward the foyer, giving the intruder time to close the door behind him.

Only it didn't happen. He heard first one person enter, and then a second.

No hesitation now. He moved in as silent as the grave, and if either of the two men sensed him before his foot caught intruder one somewhere in the midsection, they hadn't reacted fast enough.

The injured man flew backward into the second, who recovered quickly. Patrick heard him launch forward out of the foyer to receive a slashing backhand blow that crumpled his heavy frame.

Too heavy. Too heavy for the Kretts.

The sound of a third man trying to get in stopped him from finishing off the one he'd dropped. And Patrick knew the odds were beginning to shift in their favor when the third one made noises as if hefting the first one upright again, just as the second one got back on his feet.

Fighting in the pitch dark was a bitch, especially when he knew he could only incapacitate, not kill. These people weren't the Kretts. They'd need at least one left able to speak when this was done.

After doubling over the man beside him with a sharp elbow to the abdomen, he checked number three's rush, sending him backward once more.

Knowing he had to put at least two down for good, he moved into the tight, cramped foyer just as the screen door opened again to admit number four.

He grabbed hold of someone and threw a good old-fashioned punch, buckling them. Trying to drop him in such a way that would impede the other two still in the foyer, he knew it was too late. The second intruder was closing behind him, and the others were pushing in.

Something hit him. He didn't know what. But his chest felt crushed, and he shot backward out of the foyer like he'd been hit by a cannonball.

He'd failed. One punch or one bullet, and they'd be past him.

It took neither of those things. He was already halfway to the ground when his head connected with something behind him.

Chapter Twelve

Kate had just finished dialing 911 when she heard the fight stop.

Oh God. They had him. He was down.

Please let him be all right. And please make the sheriff get here quickly.

There was no time to explain anything to the dispatcher. Kate set the phone on the counter, knowing no response from this number would get immediate attention.

The sheriff's office was only a couple miles away. A five-minute drive at top speed. All she had to do was hold the intruders at bay until either Jason or the Sheriff arrived. But if Patrick hadn't been able to stop them in this accursed dark, there was no way she'd fend them off without some help.

It was time to find her gun.

Firearms weren't allowed on the property, but she needed them in the field, so locking up her .38 had been her and Wyatt's idea of a compromise. She skittered across the kitchen to a locked drawer by the fridge, feeling along the inside edge of the cabinet above it for the key.

Bad idea. Very bad idea to lock them up. Her hand shaking so hard she could barely get the key into the lock.

Please, please let Patrick be okay.

The key slid home and turned without effort, but once the drawer was open, her hand stilled.

Hushed voices drifted into the kitchen. She couldn't make out a single word until one of the men hissed a discernable, "Is it him?"

A flashlight came on, showing her Patrick's unmoving form on the floor.

"No," another man responded. "I dunno who that is. Find the girl. The guys are probably in the depot."

Guys? Which guys? Who were they looking for?

Cursing herself for not doing exactly as Patrick had said, she beat a silent retreat to the walkway door as the security panel beside her let out three soft beeps.

The display read *Component failure corrected... System rebooting...*

"Come on," she mouthed silently. If it could reboot in the next two seconds, she'd be able to hit the panic sequence so Jason would at least know her location.

"What was that?" someone asked.

Kate wasted no more time. She burst through the walkway door while the alarm system spat out another fluttery chirp.

She heard it, but didn't dare stop. The men were in pursuit, and she was three-quarters of the way down the walkway when the alarm went off anyhow.

Hoping it would make them falter, and knowing several people were about to come pouring into the corridor from the depot end, she slowed down to look back.

It was dark. Too dark. The emergency lighting hadn't come on, so the only light she had came bleeding sluggishly in from windows. But it was enough to see four shadowy silhouettes closing in on her.

None of them was Patrick.

God, please. If Patrick could just be all right, she'd never mess with people's heads ever again.

One of the men behind her was fast. Excessively fast. She shouldn't have looked back.

A hand shot out and caught the back of her sweatshirt, jerking her backward and downward so hard they both almost fell.

“Careful, you idiot,” someone said. “No bruising.”

The man who held her said, “I’ve got her. Keep moving.” Then he shook her hard and warned, “You make one sound, and everybody in this place dies. Do you understand me?”

Kate nodded, counting the seconds until Jason or Wyatt or someone on Patrick’s crew got to them.

They went through the door into the depot. Kate strained to hear or see something that might give her some hope. And she got it. They weren’t inside more than two seconds before one of the men cried out in pain.

The man holding her jumped, and Kate took that as her signal to stomp his foot so hard she felt something crush beneath her boot’s high heel.

He yelled, and she was free, whipping around to drive a fist into an abdomen that felt like rock. A pop of air came from his lungs, and he buckled just in time to catch the heel of her other hand at his temple.

One down.

The depot around her was full of movement, and it took her a second to realize the person dropping a second intruder beside her was female.

“Tina?”

“Quiet,” the girl warned. “Jason got a third one, but there’s another still loose. The guys are chasing him back to the house, but we can’t be sure that’s all of them.”

Not allowing herself a second to think about the fact that two minors in her charge had been exposed to this much danger, her only thought became reaching Patrick before another moment could pass.

They'd reached the kitchen once more when Jason shouted, "Get back. *Now*," and the wide, percussive blast of a large caliber handgun shattered the night.

And then someone landed on the floor at her feet.

"David!"

Jason called, "He's not shot. I threw him. Get down and stay down. They're sending cover fire, but I gotta get out there or those bastards are gonna get away."

Kate took hold of a breathless David's pajama shirt and yanked him into sitting position.

"Keep him on the floor," she ordered Tina. "Where's Lori?"

"Wyatt has her upstairs in the depot."

"Thank God," Kate breathed.

The lights came back on then, making them all blink and squint. And this time when she went for the drawer where her gun was supposed to be, she didn't have to be quiet. She tossed things onto the floor until she'd uncovered the edge of a leather holster and the clip underneath it.

She had the gun unholstered, the clip injected and the chamber loaded in a matter of seconds. Keeping the barrel pointed to the ground, she kicked off the safety and headed into the hall after Jason.

He was pressed up against the wall of the foyer, his jaw clenched in frustration. A second shot rang out, and the door frame just inches from Jason's head splintered. He dropped down, then raised his gun, trying to track the bullet's path back to its shooter.

"Don't." She slid to her knees beside Patrick and pressed her fingers into his neck, searching for a pulse. "Don't risk it, Jason. Just go back to the depot and make sure the other three don't bolt."

"They're already out there. Or at least a couple of them are."

"Where's Patrick's crew?"

“Scattered. Whoever cut the lights back on must have been the pair headed down the evacuation tunnel. Another two were patrolling the perimeter, and one of them was watching the airport.”

“Get back to the depot in case they left anyone behind,” Kate ordered.

Beneath her fingers beat Patrick’s strong, steady pulse. He was alive, but unconscious.

Jason said, “He’s got a bump the size of Kansas on the back of his head.”

She flinched when David suddenly dropped in beside her. “Is he okay?”

“Get back in the kitchen,” she snapped, feeling along Patrick’s scalp and finding the enormous lump, then checking her fingers for blood. Nothing.

Jason stepped over them, using David’s head to steady himself on his way by.

David was white-faced and shocky, hardly reacting at all, his eyes locked on Patrick. “No. Let me help. Tell me what you need.”

Frigid air was pouring into the hall from the open door, but she didn’t dare send him to close it. Not yet.

“Blankets.”

David scrambled past her and up the stairs, replaced by Tina, who took her elbow and turned those ancient-looking blue eyes on her.

“He’ll be all right,” the girl said.

Kate gave her a quick, one-armed hug and said, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being you.”

“Oh. You did good back there. Dropped that guy like a brick. You don’t look like you had it in you.”

“It’s better that way,” Kate said. “Now please stay in the kitchen. I don’t want you out here if they try to come back in.”

Tina obeyed, and a moment later, more yelling came from the direction of the walkway while David reappeared with the blankets. She was in the process of covering Patrick when Carlos slid in beside her.

He put out a gentle arm and eased her away so he could take vitals and explore that bump on Patrick’s head a bit more aggressively than she’d dared.

There was something relieved about his look, but he kept on with the examination, finding the beginnings of a footprint, high up on Patrick’s chest. “Lucky they didn’t fracture his sternum. Or stop his heart.”

“What about his head? Concussion?”

“Hard to tell. We’ll need x-rays. A lot of x-rays.”

The high wail of sirens pierced through the air while Kate and Carlos stared at each other, both knowing how close they’d come to disaster.

Two hours later, she was sitting in the local emergency room’s lobby, flanked by Tina and David.

Things were bad. By the time Jason had gotten back to the depot, the last of the intruders was gone. Their retreat had been tracked through the snow to a road along the western edge of the property where the footprints had ended abruptly alongside fresh tire tracks.

The best Jason could deduce, there had been five of them, with the driver. The four who’d come into the house had been in position already when the driver had entered the evacuation tunnel shed to neutralize the security system. His entry had pulled two of Patrick’s men that direction, but they hadn’t been fast enough to catch him. The driver had cut the

power. Effective, but not for long. The system had already begun repairing itself before those men had even made it through her door.

Everyone else had been scattered at the far corners of the grounds, and without the security system able to show them exactly where the trouble was located until it was too late, they'd been unable to stop it.

She'd had to stonewall the sheriff, reminding him jurisdiction at the facility was dicey, and promising a full explanation as soon as she'd figured out what happened herself.

The things said by the intruders weren't very enlightening. They hadn't recognized Patrick. They'd been looking for her and "the guys".

Glancing over at David, she rubbed her neck. He might have been among those they'd been looking for, and after all the time he'd been spending on the computer, his enemies certainly couldn't be ruled out as possible suspects.

David would be under constant watch until those men were found. And when Layne got here, plan or no plan, there would be shrieking involved over that court order's removal.

It might relieve her feelings somewhat, but it wouldn't make a difference. She knew who was behind this. Uncle William had sent her home to be dealt with, and if it hadn't been for Patrick, David and Tina, he might very well have gotten his wish.

Meanwhile, Patrick had spent much of the last hour and a half in radiology, Carlos keeping a rabid eye over the proceedings.

She was itching to make that call to legal. But she knew if she did it, they'd never find out everything they needed to know. Ormond would see the move as a hostile takeover, and any hope for answers about Nina or this CFU business David had just finished telling her about would be lost.

Make a decision, her father had always said. *Then stand behind it come what may.*

They had to learn the truth. Her plan was the only way they'd get a full confession, and she absolutely would not settle for less.

Jack showed up then, causing much alarm in the lobby. He looked like he should be admitted himself, panicked, pale, and still bandaged from his own ER visit.

Matters did not improve when he pulled her aside, staring at her as if he'd like to skip all talk and simply read her mind. "How many were there?"

"Five, we figure. Why?"

"Did you recognize any of them? Are you sure it wasn't the Kretts?"

"The Kretts? You mean the killer Kretts?"

"Yes. Yes! Was it them?"

"It was too dark to tell. But why would you ask? And you'd better talk fast before I call my friends at the FBI," she threatened.

Jack stood up a little straighter, put his injured hands on his hips, then swore before letting them fall to his sides again. "Patrick...didn't tell you about the Kretts?"

"No."

"That stubborn, irresponsible bastard. We need to talk. Soon, and in private."

"Yes, we do, Jack."

His brows went up. "Why are you mad at me?"

"The one thing Patrick didn't neglect to mention was how he got the hard drive. And you've been leading an entire team of investigators around on a wild goose chase."

"I have. And I'm sorry. This is my fault, but I had no idea someone would leak that vote notice."

She would have liked to point out that he was a Global Council member and should have leaked it himself, but she was delayed by the sight of Patrick's doctor coming down the hall.

The doctor spotted her. "Kate, come here a sec, please. I need you."

He led her into the radiology lab, picked up an x-ray, and spoke in a voice that instantly soothed her nerves. "He's lucky. Very slight concussion. No skull fracture, and no broken ribs. The kick was high enough we can rule out myocardial or pulmonary contusion. ECG's perfectly normal, breath sounds are good. Everything looks fine, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"He's in a good amount of pain. It's affecting his blood pressure, and that's a concern in combination with a chest contusion. The swelling's not bad yet. Should it worsen, there'll be strain on his heart and lungs. I've explained it to him a number of times, but he still refuses medication on no uncertain terms. When I ask why, he gets a bit hostile."

"Sorry," she said. "I should have warned you about that. He's pretty militant about any form of drug."

"Very. I didn't think that sort of language was allowed outside of hell."

"I'm sorry. I really am. What would you like me to do?"

"Explain his refusal of pain management so we can find a compromise."

Kate said simply, "His mother had a drug problem."

"Ah. All right, well that changes my approach. Come with me, please."

Following the doctor into the ER, she found Patrick and Carlos sitting side by side on the exam table. Patrick was down to his boxer briefs. The heel print on his chest was already beginning to turn strange colors and the general air about him could only be described as mutinous.

When he saw her, though, he visibly relaxed.

Carlos said, "There. See? I told you. She's fine."

"Never been better," she responded.

"Jason needs me back at the facility," Carlos said. "Can you take it from here?"

She nodded, and Carlos caught her hand, giving it a little squeeze of solidarity on his way out. Patrick got up and she walked into his arms for a very cautious embrace. "Causing trouble again, I hear."

"Can we go now?"

"No," she said, disentangling herself and guiding him back onto the exam table. "We need to have a talk about pain management. I... No. Listen, for once. I know you don't like the idea, but let's be clear on this one thing—when we get back to the facility, we'll have enough to do without monitoring you every second. So you will either agree to pain management, or I will duct tape you to this bed and leave you here until everything back home is under control. Are we understood?"

Patrick looked deeply offended, but asked the doctor, "What are my options?"

"I think the most sensible course for you is a high dose of ibuprofen every six hours for at least the next twenty-four, and a mild sedative so you can sleep through the worst of it."

"No sedative," Patrick said.

"There are plenty of non-narcotic, non-habit-forming routes we could take. And have you given any thought to how you'll sleep with that knot on the back of your head and a sore chest?"

Patrick sneered and stared at her.

She realized his problem might not be the sedative's effect on his body so much as the situation they were in. "The place is swarming with cops now, Patrick. Jack's here, your crew's got the system back up, and

Jason and Carlos are making sure we can't get caught off guard that way again. You don't have to worry."

"Call Layne," he said. "I'm not taking anything until Arthur gets up here."

Nodding, she was in full agreement. Arthur was a licensed physician as well as a tough old goat who took no crap off anyone. Especially Patrick. She said, "I'm sure someone's already called them, but I'll—"

A shrill, "*Where are they?*" from outside the ER made Patrick bow his head in relief.

The sound didn't have quite the same effect on Kate, but at least she wouldn't have to worry about Patrick resisting the meds anymore.

The door banged open and there was Uncle Arthur, standing about a mile tall and a quarter-mile broad, his graying platinum hair glowing white under the fluorescents. Next entered three of the more enormous North American branch operatives, and shoving them all out of her way was the five-foot-nothing Layne, her eyes wild with panic until she'd seen them.

"Down, girl," Arthur said. "No ankle-biting. They both look fine to me."

"Are you blind? Look at his chest!"

Patrick didn't bear the brunt of her concern very well, and Kate didn't escape her fair share, either. But the doctor spent the next several minutes giving Layne a painstakingly thorough diagnosis and recap, while Arthur simply took the chart from the doctor's hand to look it over for himself.

"Films?" Arthur prompted, his eyes fixed on Patrick's ECG.

Doctor Mays hesitated, then shrugged a shoulder and asked Kate to show her uncle to the radiology lab.

She was detained briefly by a hand grabbing the back of her coat, and at Patrick's desperate but silent plea not to be left alone with Layne while she was in this mood, she bent to whisper in his ear, "The sooner she gets it out of her system, the better off we'll be."

That won her a perturbed face, and after a quick kiss that raised everyone's brows but the doctor's, she led Arthur out into the hall where he dropped an arm around her shoulders. "You okay, Katydid?"

"I'm fine. Better, now you and Layne are here. Patrick was having a hissy about pain meds and wouldn't agree to take them until you were on hand to take his place as Chief Butt-kicker."

Arthur snorted. "That boy sure does hold a grudge."

"It's not a grudge. It's respect. You're the only one who's ever beaten him at hand-to-hand."

"He's sloppy when he gets mad. And I bet you'd give him a good run for his money."

"Mmm. In here," she said, steering him into the lab. "His films are still up on that back panel."

"All right. I'll only be a minute. Soon as I know what we're looking at, I'll have him released into my care. Until then, get back there before my wife crashes through Patrick's annoyance barrier. She cried most of the way up here, and I don't think she's done yet."

They hadn't been back at the facility more than half an hour before Patrick began to change his mind about sedatives.

Had he been smart, he would have taken one before they'd left the hospital and he might have slept through what happened next.

But sadly, he was still wide awake when Jack slipped into his room to begin round one. First they'd fought over why Jack had been feeding

Alex information. In return, he'd received a fifteen-minute lecture for being a bullheaded, thoughtless prat.

Jack said, "I thought it was understood you had to be careful."

"You said we had to be smart. Not careful."

"So it was smart to go bashing around without me?" Jack shouted.

"Oh, of course *I'm* the one who's done everything wrong. Care to explain why you never told me about the internal investigation?"

"There was no point. It had nothing to do with your mother."

"You still should have told me. And what about the vote? You knew it was coming but didn't warn anybody."

"Yes, and you're looking at the very set of circumstances I was hoping to avoid. Instead of just you and me being in danger, now everyone is."

Patrick said, "You are so full of shit. This was all about politics. You went to Ormond's looking for anything that might damage him. Then you run across that insurance appraisal and used it as a detonator to set me off about my mother, knowing I'd go for his throat."

"Yes, but— No. Patrick, it wasn't like that. You make the whole thing sound mercenary, and you know what? Maybe it was. But I panicked. All the amendment groundwork had been done behind my back, and once I found out, I had to make a split-second decision. I can't help what I found in that office, and if I used your mother as a detonator, so what? At least the truth about her will finally come out. And why not use it to light a fire under the lesser councils? We need something highly compelling to make them compromise the Globals, and once it has, your mother will be the one responsible for finally giving that piece of filth exactly what he deserves."

"I still don't like this."

“Be smart. You’re an offensive weapon only. I gave you a very specific job to do instead of forcing you to account for things you don’t know how to handle. There’s no way you can argue with that.”

“The hell I can’t. I ended up handling everything anyhow,” Patrick said.

“And damned near got yourself and everyone else killed. You’re lucky I broke into that office and found those e-mails when I did. If I hadn’t, you wouldn’t have been on guard. And let’s not get off track. I told you on the phone to make sure the kid was safely out of this mess, but now he’s—”

“Hey,” Patrick countered, “Layne was the one who put him to work, not me.”

The argument continued, and Patrick thought it a bit unfair of Jack to yell, since the whole thing had been his doing. And who was Jack to be mad in the first place? He wasn’t the one who’d been used as a weapon in a political battle.

This wasn’t politics to him. It was personal, and Jack shouldn’t have mixed the two together.

Railing on, Jack argued, “Look what almost happened to Kate. I *know* Ormond sent those men. He was livid when he caught you two together in St. Paul, and after what Kate heard them say, I’d bet my last cent he told them to stage a murder-suicide between Kate and someone else. Not you, obviously. They didn’t even know who you were since Ormond’s arrogant enough to believe you’d never dare follow her. It was probably meant to be Jason, because he knew about the amendment, too.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Is it?” Jack challenged. “No bruising, they said. No one used guns until it went bad. And we all know how fond Ormond is of staging suicides.”

Then he got threatened pretty vividly with what would happen to him if Jack found out he was planning anything behind their backs. “This situation’s gotten completely out of hand. We still have time, so control that hot head of yours and let us work without having to worry about what stunt you might pull next.”

He thought he might be given a moment’s peace, but hard on Jack’s heels came Kate and Layne. And he knew he was in for it when Layne held up copies of the Krett e-mails.

Layne’s screeching never seemed to stop, but even worse was Kate’s silent, seething shock. It was a good thing he already had a head wound, or he was fairly certain she’d slap him for being so cavalier about his death sentence. But the only words she uttered were,

“That explains the caramel roll and chocolate. What would it matter if you’d be dead?”

Layne was forced to tone it down when the little one appeared in the doorway, searching for Kate.

Kate was clearly owned by the kid. She was all at once smiling, offering gentle reassurances on her way out that the bad men were gone, Patrick would be just fine, and Wyatt still wanted to take her swimming.

Once she’d gone, Layne took the gloves off.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why didn’t you tell someone?”

She went on and on and on until he was finally forced to defend himself. “I had a plan. Finish Ormond, then disappear. Is that so bad?”

Apparently it was, for Layne went postal, tearing into him about feelings and other assorted bullshit. Yes, he’d believed the worst about his mother and yes, he wasn’t very happy with himself for that. But to call *him* suicidal because of it was insane.

“Do you think I was overjoyed to be put into that position?” he demanded. “For eighteen years I’ve had to put up with whatever that pissant dished—”

Layne interrupted, “Yes, and if you know he’s a pissant, why let anything he says or does bother you?”

“Bother me? He turned me into a killer.”

“Yes, he did. And I’m sorry for that. I know it’s not at all what you signed on for, but consider the type of people the Sanction executes. Tony Krett was barely human anymore after twelve years of non-stop killing. So that’s business, not personal.”

“That’s your opinion.”

Layne countered, “I’m not defending him by any means, but Ormond doesn’t order you to do those things because he wants to. He does it because sometimes, you’re the only one who’d be able to get to certain targets.”

“Then what about the rest of it? I mean, have you any idea what he’s like? Here’s a sample: Oh look. There’s Patrick, the poor little street waif who’s made good, thanks to me. He’s become the living legend, never mind that he can never eat what he wants because he has to stay in shape. Can’t sleep when he wants because the next job is always waiting. And heaven forbid he should do side work he actually enjoys. No, then we must solicit more intelligence theft cases so there’s no time for that. And let’s not forget he’s wrecking his body in the process.”

“I—”

“My knees are shot, Layne. Permanent damage. If I keep up this pace, I’ll be looking at knee replacements within two years. And what do I have to show for it? A dead mother, a boss who constantly grinds my nose in his superiority, and three great aunts I rarely speak to.”

“Patrick, I’m—”

Interrupting again to rant onward, he said, “Oh, wait. I forgot. There’s all that money I don’t deserve, according to Ormond. Well, what good is money when I have no time to enjoy it, and no one to spend it on? I have nothing. My life has never been my own since the moment I signed *your* bloody contract. I would’ve been much better off if you’d left me in jail.”

“Do you feel better now?”

“No. I hate Ormond. He killed my mother, and now he’s sold me out to the Kretts because I did my job too well. Now look me in the eye and tell me he doesn’t deserve to pay.”

Layne blew out an exhausted breath as if she’d been the one raving, while he concluded, “There was absolutely nothing else I could’ve done about the position he’d put me in. There still isn’t.”

“That’s not true,” Layne said. “And you’re a hypocrite, being mad at Kate for keeping secrets. Did you think we wouldn’t protect you? We might have lost you, Patrick. You may not think that would matter much, but you couldn’t be more wrong, you big...*diva*.”

Diva? He took a deep breath, but before he could get started again, Layne had stormed out, slamming the door behind herself.

There. Another one down. Now he could finally lie here in peace and thank God for silence.

It didn’t last long. Layne caught up with Kate downstairs, and they must have been directly beneath him, because he heard every word.

They kicked things off with a cat fight about David and Tina. “It’s too late,” Layne said. “I already started the paperwork to have them admitted to the Academy after the first of the year.”

Kate was not happy. An understatement, that. “I will *not* let you turn this facility into a Sanction prep school. They have a right to make their own choices, and you’re not giving them a chance.”

“Stop projecting yourself all over those kids. This was *their* choice. And they deserve a shot at what they want, even if you can’t stand the thought of them leaving.”

He felt for Kate on that one. She cared for those kids, and Layne had some nerve complaining about Kate wanting them to have choices when Kate had never been given one herself.

“What about Lori?” Kate asked. “What’s she supposed to do once Tina leaves?”

“Tina wants her to stay here with you. Temporary custody until Tina’s able to support her financially and emotionally. And while we’re at it, would you like to explain why I wasn’t informed of what’s going on between David and Tina?”

“Oh God. They’re not doing anything wrong. I told David she’d have serious trouble with intimacy, and he underst—”

“When will you *ever* admit what Ormond did to you? Can’t you see how it’s affecting your judgment with these kids?”

Low blow. Was there a penalty box somewhere in this house?

Then Kate said, “If anything, it makes me understand their need for comfort and unconditional acceptance far better than you ever will.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I love you, and you know I’m grateful for everything you’ve given Alex and me, but your help hurts, Layne. You demand too much perfection. And trying to survive your expectations is almost as bad as smothering beneath Ormond’s. So when you want to go toe-to-toe with me because I won’t tell you every little thing that’s ever happened in my life, be prepared for disappointment.”

Silence reigned until Layne said, “I had no idea you felt that way.”

“I’m sorry. But for what it’s worth, I’ve talked about it with someone. I may not have handled things as well as I’d like, but I’m okay.”

“Who? Who did you talk to?”

“Layne...” Kate complained.

“Was it Patrick?”

“No. It was Arthur. And don’t be mad at him for not telling you. I chose him because I knew he could keep a confidence.”

“Well. That explains his murderous hatred for Ormond now, doesn’t it?”

Patrick nodded, even though he wasn’t in on the conversation, and was almost as mad as Layne that Kate hadn’t confided in him. But confided what? What had Ormond done to her? Was it worse than just the full-metal-Claudia?

He wasn’t to find out, for Layne moved on to say, “The next time you see Arthur, you should ask him about Alex’s paternity test.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“See the problem too many confidences cause?”

“God, you’re cruel,” Kate said. “Why are you being this way?”

“I’m not being cruel. I’m trying to make you stubborn mules see reason. We all arrived in this situation because of secrets, and it won’t end until everyone comes clean. No one trusts anyone anymore. No one knows whether any of us even cares what happens to them, and that is *totally unacceptable*. It has to stop. And in order to end it entirely, we have to go back. Far back. Do you know, to this day, my husband won’t admit he suspects your father was responsible for what happened on that boat?”

Whoa.

Leaning a bit closer to the vent, he listened while Layne said, “That day at the pier, your father was acting very strangely. He was...tranquil, smiling this odd little smile, saying he was sorry. That he couldn’t let this go on. That he loved us and we should take care of you and Alex. We

were watching you for the weekend so I didn't really think anything of it at the time, but when a notoriously cautious, former Navy Seal steers his sailboat straight into a squall, it does tend to make one wonder afterwards."

"You think he did something, too," Kate said, and he could hear the tears in her voice.

Layne said, "Yes. I do think he did something. His greatest fear was that Claudia would turn you kids into mini Claudias and Williams, and it would only have been a matter of time."

"Then why didn't he file for divorce and fight her for custody?"

"Do you think he would've won? Me either. I think Arthur believes something Claudia did or threatened to do finally pushed Troy too far. He'd had enough, and probably felt he had his own tab to settle with the house because he'd never had the strength to leave. If that's true, I don't agree with him, but I can understand why he might have felt that way. The problem is, my husband doesn't. So maybe you two need to talk about more than Ormond."

Kate didn't say anything, but he wouldn't have heard her if she had. His head was all over the place, wondering if there might be a connection someone had missed.

If Arthur believed what had happened on that boat had been murder-suicide, why had it never been looked at? Everyone had believed Nina Mancini had been a suicide too, and three deaths in four weeks within one very small circle of people was a pretty steep curve of coincidence.

Layne said, "Listen to me. Yesterday with Patrick, I remembered I'm not always right. Psychology's not an exact science, and sometimes, auntie doesn't know best. I'm sorry. I know I've been too hard on you. But you have to understand where I'm coming from. It's not easy for me

to know you suffered. I wanted to help you so badly, but you'd never let me in, and that hurt."

"I never meant to hurt you."

"I know you didn't, honey. You were protecting yourself, not shutting me out. But at least now we know where we stand, and you can end this the right way. You can't spare people from the truth anymore, no matter how hard it might be for them to hear it. This time, nothing can be left buried to rise up and hurt someone else."

Silence. Kate said nothing.

Layne went on, "You know better than we did. You're stronger and wiser. And I think you should consider holding onto the Chairmanship for a while. They only convene fourteen days a month, and with web-conferencing, who knows how much time you'll really have to spend in London? If you do it that way, you can stay here. Spend more time with the kids than you ever have, in fact."

"I wish it were that simple," Kate said. "Alex wants the office, I don't. I just want *out*. I want a family and a house and a dog and—"

"And a chance to have that normal life you're always going on about. You need to give this more thought. I know the so-called normal life seems ideal, but you'd be bored to tears within six months."

"And that's a bad thing? I mean, can't you see how *insane* all this is? World domination, uber-thieves, murder, suicide, mayhem, adultery, non-stop manipulation, lies, secrets, blackmail... And you still question why I might value normalcy above anything else?"

He snorted a laugh. That could very well be the most inarguable point ever made.

Someone's phone rang then. Layne's. It was a short conversation, after which Layne told Kate, "I need to locate Jason and get down there. David's ready to show us what he made of that CFU spreadsheet. You

should go to bed. You're exhausted, and I'll need both you and Patrick to be sharp for the meeting this afternoon. And by the way, Patrick's crazed right now. I wouldn't go in there if I were you."

"All right."

"If there's time, though," Layne said, "I insist you speak to Arthur."

Chapter Thirteen

Kate emerged from the depot library half an hour later, vowing never to follow Layne's orders ever again.

The conversation she'd just had with Arthur had been exceedingly uncomfortable for them both, and seeing the person she trusted most in this world actually look his age for once had scared her down to the marrow. When Arthur had talked about what her father might have done on that boat, he'd seemed to age a hundred years in the space of fifteen minutes.

More than anything, she wished she could take his suspicions away from him. It must have been chewing at him for years to make him look that way, but since there'd never been any bodies found to autopsy, there was nothing left but supposition, pain and regrets.

Next they'd discussed Alex, and she'd learned the rumors were entirely false. Alex was Troy's son, as confirmed by a test done at Alex's own insistence.

He'd first heard the rumors about his paternity at age eight, but kept them to himself for ten years, until he'd come of age and approached Arthur for a DNA sample. Alex had already swiped a sample of Kate's blood from a recent mandatory Sanction physical, giving them everything the lab would need to include or exclude Troy as his father.

Arthur had said, "Alex decided that if it turned out Troy was his father, no one needed to know about the test. Including you."

"Why? Why wouldn't he want to tell me?"

"Why would he? It only confirmed what both of you already knew."

"I'm not talking about the test, Arthur. I'm talking about the rumors."

"Well, if you were so concerned by them, why didn't you ever ask him about it yourself?"

She'd had no answer for that.

Winding her way slowly back to her house, she supposed this was the final confirmation she was in no way competent to run this company. Faced with a problem, Alex had attacked it head-on by having a test conducted. She'd done nothing but wring her hands and avoid the subject for fear of losing her brother.

And here she was, in the middle of a very dangerous situation that wouldn't end until she'd attacked Ormond. If she chickened out on her plan, she'd be as weak as Ormond had always claimed she was.

She wasn't. And she'd prove it to herself this very minute by marching into that guest room and finding out exactly where the Chief Thief had been planning to go this morning and what he'd planned to do once he got there.

She found Patrick sitting up, holding an icepack to his head. Giving him no chance to derail her, she got right to the point. "Last night, when you said there was a job you needed to do, what were you planning?"

"Gee, Kate. I'm feeling a lot better, thanks for asking."

"What were you planning to do?" she repeated. "Were you planning to kill Ormond?"

Patrick readjusted the icepack. "I notice you've stopped calling him Uncle William."

"Patrick..."

"No. I was only planning to rob the vineyard for the ring, tile, and whichever hard drive sent those e-mails."

"What would you have done once you had them?"

"Find him and confront him," he said.

“And then what?”

“It didn’t happen, so what does it matter?”

She said, “It matters because if those men hadn’t broken in last night, you’d be out there somewhere right now, alone and unprotected from the Kretts. *Why* didn’t you tell me about them?”

“If I had, you would’ve panicked and called Arthur. And then I’d have been stuck under a protective order.”

“That’s nonsense,” she said. “You outrank everyone but Ormond by a mile. No one but Ormond himself has the authority to take you into protective custody. Not even Jack, as you know all too...”

But she could see he *didn’t* know all too well, and she had to sigh in frustration when Patrick threw the ice pack across the room, then growled and pressed a hand into his chest. But he still erupted, “You have *got* to be joking. Do you honestly mean to tell me I could have done exactly as I pleased and none of you could have stopped me?”

“I hope that’s a rhetorical question.”

“No. It’s not a bloody rhetorical question.”

“Too bad,” she said. “The next time you want to dodge the system, you might try asking me how it works first. And you know what? Let’s cut the crap. The Kretts are out there, and you had no plan to stop them.”

“I was gonna run. I’ll still have to. If they don’t get me, the Dutch will.”

“We won’t let that happen.”

“Oh? And how, exactly, do you plan to stop it?”

“I don’t know yet,” she admitted.

“Well, here’s an idea,” he said, turning blazing black-diamond eyes on her. “How about you pick up the ruddy phone and make the call? No one

could stop *that*, either, but God forbid you put your precious neck into the noose instead of mine.”

She could feel the blood draining from her face, and asked with a bone-dry throat, “You think I wouldn’t do that to protect you?”

“You haven’t done it, have you? You could have done it at any time these last eight years and spared me and a lot of other people a real pleasant working environment. And there’s the small matter of the amendment he’s about to pass. Mustn’t forget about that. Why didn’t you ever make that wretched call?”

Before she could stop herself, the words came out. “Because then I’d be the one forming a shadow global government. I’d be the one sending e-mails to the Kretts and treating you like a performing monkey.”

Looking utterly confused, he asked, “What the devil are you on about? You would *never*—”

“I’m sure Claudia would never, either, until she was forced into office. And she was six years older when it happened than I would have been.”

“Be serious, Kitten. You’re too smart to—”

“So was Claudia,” she interrupted again. “And look what that job did to her. She let them force her into office, and the next year she found herself married to a man who would boost the company’s honor value. But she didn’t love him, and he spent the rest of his life paying for it.”

“If you’ll forgive me for saying so, your mother was a raging bitch long before she took office. What makes you think a job would somehow magically transform you into Claudia Jr.?”

“After all the misery my parents caused, you don’t believe that could happen?” she asked.

He turned his hands up and looked at her as if she’d lost her mind.

“Don’t even,” she said. “Most of my life people have kept their distance, afraid Claudia Jr. would rear its ugly head whether I took office

or not. And you were no different. Except you could never resist holding your hand to the flame to see if you could get burned by her again.”

To her surprise, he didn’t deny it. “Guilty. The whole time we were together I waited for it to happen. Instead, you took the Troy Jr. path and did nothing while others suffered.”

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. His words were a crushing blow. It was one thing to believe such things of yourself. Quite another to hear someone else say them.

“Kitten, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes, you did.”

“No. I really didn’t. Your father went through hell on earth to stay with you kids, and there’s no shame in sacrifice to protect the ones you love most. The rest of us could only wish someone cared about us that much.”

Feeling the jagged edge of the knife he’d been carrying in his back all these years, Kate said, “If things had been different, I would’ve—”

“Things aren’t different,” he cut her off. “You did what you had to do, and there’s no shame in that, either.”

“Yes, there is. I let down everyone I care about because I was scared.”

“You *should* be scared. And you know what? If you can stomach some advice from the Reigning Monarch of Bad Decisions, screw all this. Don’t let them do it to you. It’s not what you want. Everything you want from the Sanction is right here in this facility. The kids. The rehab program. If you could survive me for eighteen months, this is where you were meant to be, and if you make that phone call, the kids will lose you.”

“Two minutes ago, you were yelling at me because I didn’t make the call, and now you’re ordering me not to?”

"I don't care what I said two minutes ago. I was being a prick. It's what I'm best at. You need these kids, and they need their mother hen. They're probably sound asleep right now, with visions of sugar plums and fairies and whatever else you've got cooked up for them dancing in their heads."

There was such an air of bitterness about him, all she could do was puzzle over where it was coming from.

Unsure, she tried, "I don't spoil them, if that's what you're implying."

"No, I'm sure Layne wouldn't let that happen."

"Oh really? She bought them all MP3 players for Christmas. Which reminds me I forgot to yell at her for that."

"What's wrong with MP3 players?"

"Nothing. But we try to keep the holidays in emotional perspective, and— Wait a second. You just completely changed the subject on me again. Do you have a problem with the way these kids are treated?"

He didn't answer, lying back instead, then swearing as his head came in contact with the pillows stacked up behind him.

Kate went for the nightstand to dole out his meds. "Take these, then explain. If you think we're making mistakes with these kids, I want you to tell me. If anyone's opinion should count, it's yours."

The ibuprofen went down easily enough, but there was a brief scrap over the sedative. Anyone would think she'd asked him to swallow a cyanide capsule.

"It's very mild," she said. "I took the exact same thing after I'd had my wisdom teeth out. You won't be groggy afterwards, I promise. Now tell me what you meant."

"I didn't mean what I said as criticism. I just... This hasn't been a good week."

She had to smile a little at that, even though she did wonder what Christmas had been like for him since his mother had died. Or before then, for that matter. The two Christmases they'd been together, he'd been on the job, so she had no way of knowing if the holidays were as hard for him as they were for her and Alex. "I see you've mastered the art of understatement. Did you have big plans for Christmas?"

"Yes. I planned to sleep through the entire thing."

"Well, once this is over, you can sleep all you want. And you're officially invited for Christmas dinner."

He raised the water bottle in a toast. "Here's hoping we live that long."

They looked at each other, and she hoped her thoughts on their life expectancy didn't show on her face. "I know you don't trust us, but have some faith. Arthur has a friend following up on the Kretts, and my brother's still out there doing whatever it is he's doing."

"You're worried, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "What's good for the goose is good for the gander, isn't it? I'm trying to have faith, too."

"All right, everybody," Layne said. "Here's where we stand."

Patrick turned away from Kate—who looked as if she should have taken a sedative herself, because she clearly hadn't slept a wink—to give Layne his attention. They'd assembled in the tac center's situation room, a plain rectangle of concrete with a whiteboard at one end, reinforced door at the other, and a long table in the middle.

He, Kate, Arthur, Jason, Wyatt, David, Jack and Tina sat around the table, listening as Layne began,

"I need everyone on the same page, so listen up. I've had to prioritize our concerns. You may not agree with the way they're ordered, but you can complain about it later if you must. Are we understood?"

Everyone nodded.

Layne turned to the whiteboard with a blue marker and wrote *Amendment*, then laid out exactly what needed to be done to stop the vote. "We have some options, but the safest route has already been decided. Our team is leaving for Baltimore very shortly to go after CFU."

"Who's going?" Wyatt asked.

"David, Tina, Arthur, Patrick, and a number of his crew members. David knows what to look for. Tina will be documenting the procedures, and packaging evidence if there's anything we can safely take with us."

Kate started to fidget. She didn't want those kids going anywhere. He wasn't too wild about the idea himself, but without David, there was no point in going.

Poor Arthur, though. The old man had been pestering him for years to come along on a job, and he'd be mightily disappointed by how utterly dull this would be.

"David's confident we'll find proof," Layne said. "So it's by far our best choice, although there are no guarantees. We'll also have to pursue those men who broke in last night. There's been no hospital reports of any injuries consistent with what happened, but Kate and Jason have yet to look at the ID base. I know it was dark, but if those men can be identified, they can be tracked, arrested, and questioned for anything concerning Ormond."

"By whom?" Tina asked. "The Sanction can't arrest anybody."

"We'll have support from the American authorities. Don't—"

"Hold it," Jack interrupted. "What about Ormond? Those guys he sent must have reported back to him by now, so he'll know they failed,

and he has to know he's suspect number one. What's to stop him from trying again while the others are gone?"

"With half the county's law enforcement parked outside for the night? Not likely. Ormond can't afford those men to be caught. They're not Sanction. They'll talk. Now Jason, are you absolutely certain they're no one Ormond's used before?"

"If he has, I don't know about it," he said. "But Jack might have a better chance identifying them than we would. They almost have to be the same crew Ormond sent after him in New York. Maybe if he sees one he'll remember something."

Jack nodded.

Layne said, "Good catch, Jason. Oh, and would you mind recapping Ormond's schedule for everyone? I'm sure they'll find it as interesting as I did."

They already knew Ormond had gone straight back to London from the party, no doubt to distance himself from what he'd tried to do. He was planning to fly back to the States again tomorrow.

"But won't he have to turn right around and go back to London for the vote?" Arthur asked.

"No. His plan was to do it via web-conference. He didn't want anyone to know where he'd be from tomorrow afternoon until after the vote. The second leg of his flight goes from JFK to Sacramento, then he'll be driven the rest of the way to the vineyard where he'll stay for the duration."

"Or at least those are the travel plans Jason made for him," Layne clarified. "They may no longer be valid, but..."

She turned for the whiteboard again, then wrote *Kate*. "She's still a threat to him. If he doesn't go to the vineyard, we have Kate to draw him out."

Patrick grunted a laugh that hurt his chest. "Over my dead body."

“Not funny, under the circumstances,” Layne replied.

“It really doesn’t make sense,” Jason said. “The man can’t be in his right mind, trying to take her out so close to the vote. He’s got motive for days because of what Kate can do to him with one phone call.”

Jack asked, “You don’t believe Ormond was responsible for what happened last night?”

“I’m saying I don’t know,” Jason said. “Until Patrick told me, I wasn’t even aware a hard drive had been stolen from Ormond’s house. And we’re in worse trouble than I thought if Ormond turned to this rogue crew instead of ordering me to get it back. That means he knows where my loyalties are, and was smart enough to hide his disdain. Except we all know he’s not that smart. He was perfectly normal until he found out that vote notice had been leaked. So either he’s gone nuts, or we’re operating on false presumptions somehow.”

Arthur asked, “Did he say anything about Alex? If, God forbid, anything happened to Kate, Alex would become another threat he’d have to deal with.”

“That’s why I’ve been saying he’d wait until after the vote,” Jason said. “I don’t mean to be argumentative, but he doesn’t see Kate as that big of a threat. He believes he has her under control. His bigger concern is anyone who could influence or force her to take office. Like Patrick, who that crew didn’t even recognize. I just... Knowing what I know of him, I can’t convince myself he’d do anything that blatant.”

Kate looked at David. “Are you sure you didn’t recognize any of those men?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” David said. “And what’s wrong with you people? All you ever do is analyze and piss around making sure you miss the obvious. Look at Ormond. Really *look* at him. He’s got a billion-dollar wine dynasty. He owns more property than most third-world nations

combined. He runs one of the most powerful companies in the world, and he still needs more.”

Tina put a hand on his arm and gave him a warning look.

“No,” he protested. “I won’t shut up. Why can’t you people see he *is* crazy. He’s *not in his right mind*. None of you are, I swear to God.”

Patrick sat back and put a hand over his mouth, willing himself not to laugh. The kid might only be sixteen, but he definitely had an astute handle on this situation.

David got up, snatched the blue marker from Layne’s hand, slammed it down on the table and picked up the red one. “You’re making this way too complex. He’s already tried to kill Kate, and put a hit on Patrick.”

Then he wrote *Krett e-mails* on the whiteboard. “I’ll go to Baltimore and do my job, but if you want to see those council people flip out, take those e-mails to the Attorney General and have Ormond’s ass thrown in the can for solicitation to commit murder.”

“We can’t,” Patrick said. “We only have printed copies. We’d need the hard drive they were sent from. It’s in the vineyard somewhere, and if Ormond will be there, the place will become virtually impenetrable unless we take it by force, and that’s been deemed too big a risk.”

“But what about Jason?” David asked. “Can’t he get you inside the place another way?”

“Stop. *Stop*,” Arthur said. “Too many chiefs, people, and too many options. We’ll never get anywhere with this much dissension in the ranks. If Baltimore doesn’t pan out for us, we can consider California next. Right now, we need to get moving. Jason knows Ormond didn’t issue any orders to move or destroy anything from the Baltimore house before last night, but we don’t know what’s happened since. So everyone needs to get a move on.”

Kate stood up. “I’m going to Baltimore.”

Patrick tugged her sleeve so she'd sit down. "No, you are not."

"Try and stop me," she said, jerking her arm away.

Good God, those eyes could be fierce when she was mad.

Layne and Arthur shot each other a glance, but it was Jason who asked, "Are you worried about the kids, or is there another reason you want to go?"

Those two stared each other down while everyone in the room tried to figure out what their problem was. Why would Jason challenge her?

After a while, Jason said, "If she goes, I go, too."

The air seemed to clear. Jason was already testing his brakes on the woman who would soon be his new boss.

"Forget it," Patrick said. "I have to go to Baltimore. You two don't, and someone needs to identify those guys from last night. We'll make more efficient use of our time and numbers if you do that while we're gone."

Kate said, "Fine. Then would someone please find my brother without raising an alarm at Dispatch?"

"I said I'd take care of it," Layne said.

"Then why isn't he here?"

What happened to that faith speech she'd given him? He supposed it didn't count when it came to Alex. They were Crawfords, after all. The longer Kate went without knowing Alex was safe, the more volatile she'd be, and Layne should have had him here long before now.

Kate walked out and everyone but Layne and Arthur followed after her, probably happy to flee the tension.

"Don't worry," Arthur said to him. "She'll cool off before we go."

"I know. And by the way, where *is* Alex?"

"We don't know," Layne said. "I spoke with one of his crew members earlier, and he can't explain why Alex cut off all contact."

"Then yank him. You're technically his boss, Layne. Bring him in."

“And how do you suggest I do that without sending out a big red flag to Ormond?”

“Screw Ormond. David’s right, you know. He’s got us all right where he wants us.”

“Yes, he does, but if we’re gonna use the American authorities to hold Ormond, we have to play by their rules, and that means we need—”

“Blah blah blah. Have you considered the possibility Alex cut himself off because Ormond’s been playing him, too? After what Ormond told Kate about Claudia, who knows what he might have told Alex?”

Layne said, “God. Why do you have to say things like that? This pit just keeps getting deeper and deeper and... But you’re right. We have to bring him in. He needs to know what’s happened here, and it’s long past time he informed us of what he knows. Except— ”

“Layne,” he interrupted. “Don’t make me do this.”

“Do what?” Arthur asked.

“This. I’m pulling rank. I am *ordering* you to call Alex’s crew and have them bring him here. By force, if necessary. We have a mandate to protect our own.”

Once she’d raced upstairs to make the call, Arthur asked, “How’s your chest? Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“I’m fine. Honestly. A bit sore, but I’ve done more with worse injuries.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you have. And listen. Try not to worry too much about what might happen afterwards. No one wants to find out what happened worse than Kate does, and once she’s in office, she’ll do right by you.”

“Well, about that,” Patrick said. “How solid are we on her taking office?”

"It's unavoidable. If we'd had more time, legal might have been able to work something out, but it's too late now."

"What about before? Alex wants the job. Kate doesn't, so why was nothing ever done?"

"Tell you what," Arthur said. "You sit Alex down sometime and discuss it with him. See how far you get."

"Why? He doesn't want the job anymore?"

"Yes, he wants it. He's been itching to knock Ormond down for years. But you know how it is—if you want to see Kate go ballistic, endanger her brother. If you want to see Alex roll over and die, threaten to give him something that's rightfully Kate's."

"I don't get that," Patrick said. "It doesn't make any sense."

"It does to Alex. Kate used to deliberately provoke Claudia to keep her off Troy and Alex. Troy may be gone now, but Kate will never stop protecting Alex, and Alex will never put his own needs before Kate's. And I wouldn't like to think what he might be doing out there to protect her."

"Right. So they're both grenade swallowers."

"What?"

"Nothing. Never mind. They'll bring him in. Don't worry."

Arthur nodded, then said, "There's something I need before we go."

"Such as?"

"I need your word that should something go wrong tonight, you won't get any ideas. I've got someone on the Kretts, and we stand a very good chance of damaging Ormond with CFU. So you have to remember this doesn't end with just an arrest. Once he's in custody, his paranoia could pay off."

"Pay off?"

"You saw his private black file, and we know he has video cameras and recording equipment all over the place. If he's been hoarding footage

the way he's been hoarding those files, there's no telling what we might find."

"Fantastic. Yet another thing we have to locate, provided he's not destroying everything as we speak."

"I'm hoping he's not," Arthur said, "But I want you to keep that in mind. Even if it's been destroyed or he never kept it in the first place, we'll find a way to get your questions answered. I give you my word. Now give me yours."

"Fine," he said, although he didn't really mean it. He knew Arthur believed what he was saying. Admirable, but the Ormond he knew would have begun destroying everything the moment he'd found out Jack had taken his hard drive.

So as much as he'd like to give his word and mean it, if they failed tonight, he'd *have* to get ideas.

Twenty minutes later, everyone was crammed into his plane on the airstrip. With curiosity running so high on how he operated, he'd allowed an audience.

"Okay," Layne said. "Show us how it's done, big shot."

"It's pretty simple," he explained. "Thanks to my charm and wit—and the Sanction—I've got full legal access to almost every security device manufacturer's database in the world. Safes, vaults, entire systems, you name it. To coordinate them all, we've got software to help identify components and their specifications, based on the street address where they're installed. Take, for instance, Ormond's house. Its security designer also owns one of the most popular monitoring companies, so naturally he's received favors from me. In exchange, I get access straight into his mainframe."

He turned to the computer in the communications center, kicked off the screen saver, and pulled up his specialized search engine. “In goes the property’s street address.”

Typing it in, he could feel everyone crowding up behind him to watch as the program kicked back a list of numbers and letters. He highlighted one of them, hit return, and a schematic of the security system’s main floor components popped up.

“There it is, in all its glory. Those are cameras,” he said, pointing out the red dots on the screen. “Those are the motion detectors, the control panels, each window and door contact. Even if I hadn’t been in the property before, I’d still have a fair idea of the layout based on the locations of those components. So you can imagine how vital it is to have access to the databases. This one is particularly detailed. Some aren’t, but I have two crew members who do nothing except maintain, update, and expand our database’s resources.”

“That can’t be constitutional,” Wyatt said.

“Nope. It’s deliciously illegal. It’s also a privilege we don’t abuse or take for granted. Someone hand me that remote over there.”

Arthur picked up what looked like an oversized PDA with a four-by-four-inch display monitor and a few rows of unlabeled buttons.

“I need a memory card. Tina, could you grab me one out of the top drawer?”

She did as asked, watching intently as he plugged the small plastic computer disk into a metal drive on his desk, then brought up the save menu. A few filled checkboxes later, he hit *okay*, and the drive’s green LED lit up. When it went dark again, he pulled out the memory card, and plugged it into the hand-held’s USB port.

David asked, “What does that thing do? Jam the system?”

“In a way,” Patrick said, “We know what kind of system we’re dealing with at Ormond’s, remember? It’s our favorite. There’s an exploit in their software coding that can make the system forget it’s supposed to receive data from its components. Enter a certain set of commands in the right order, and the only thing the system will care about is whether those components have power. So as long as no one cuts the electricity, we’re golden until the system automatically reboots at 5:00 a.m.”

“Why would they leave bad code in their software?” David asked. “Especially if they know what it can cause?”

“The release of the product was rushed because of the demand for it. And once we showed them the glitch, it would have bankrupted them to fix it.”

“Lazy people,” David grumbled.

“Cut them some slack. It takes a string of fifty-two commands to set off the exploit, and my team’s the only one who’s ever found it.”

“Whatever. Now explain what you do if you can’t use a remote signal like that. Not all systems are wireless.”

Patrick snorted a laugh, echoed by Carlos. “Then we use the monitoring company’s connection to manage the system.”

“And if there’s no monitoring company?”

Carlos said, “Then Mr. Showoff over there gets to go in first, and do it the old fashioned way.”

“I don’t get to show off very often,” Patrick explained. “If a criminal’s doing well enough to need a security system, they tend to spend the big bucks. And the more money they spend, the more likely we know the designers and manufacturers personally.”

“Funny how that works,” Carlos said.

“Isn’t it, though?”

Arthur said, "So when we get there, what will I have to do with the remote?"

"Listen closely," Patrick said. "Because this part can get a bit dodgy. Are you ready?"

There were a few nods, everyone riveted.

He said, "You get out of the van, and stand near the gray rock at the base of the driveway. Then—and this is the really dangerous part—you point the remote at the house, and press the round red button."

Laughing, Arthur said, "You asshole."

"Sorry, man. Not very exciting, but if you play your cards right, I might let you hack the front door with the pick gun."

"The what?"

"My favorite toy," he said, taking it out of his vest. "Looks just like one of those battery-powered screwdrivers, unless you look at the end."

"Yeah," Wyatt said. "What are those things?"

"Picks. The insides of the tool move different types of prongs in certain ways, depending on the type of lock you're boosting, and the sort of head you've put on the tool. Then you have to do something else. But it's all very complicated. Top secret, really."

"Let me guess. You press the round red button," Layne said, pointing to the three buttons on the handle.

"Witch. But you *do* have to put the proper head on the tool first, and there are two-hundred-twenty-two pick sets to choose from, not counting the cheater-rake."

"What does the yellow button do?" Layne asked.

"Releases the head."

"And the black one?"

"I'm so glad you asked. Hand me that hammer with the rubber handle, then stand back."

Layne gave it to him, but no one moved.

"I'm serious," he said. "Move back. It's quite dangerous."

Kate finally stepped back, and the others humored him by taking half a step or so. But they jumped back a good two feet, colliding with walls and each other when he pushed the black button. Electricity arced from the prongs to the hammer with a deafening crack.

Hands up, still shying back, Kate asked, "What on earth would you need that for?"

He winked at her, and put the tumbler back in his vest. "Emergencies."

"Now tell them how many times you've accidentally zapped yourself with that stupid thing," Carlos said.

"Never mind him. He has toy envy."

All tension officially broken as he'd intended, everyone who wasn't going to Baltimore debarked except Kate, whom he swept into the sleeping cabin to gauge her mood. He'd never seen anything like the Kate who'd stared Jason down. *That* Kate wouldn't swallow grenades. He hardly dared guess what she might do with them, so giving her a chance to vent some frustration on a deserving target seemed a good idea.

And he might have known the first words out of her mouth would be, "That was quite a show you put on out there."

"Things were getting a bit tense for my taste."

"True. But are you sure you should do this? Doesn't your chest hurt? And what about your head?"

"I'm fine, Kate. No heroics involved in this one."

"But if something happens, how—"

"There's no one there, it will be very late by the time we arrive, and the house is situated remotely. Plus we've got Arthur. And Carlos *and* another guy coming to watch our perimeter. Very little risk. You're the

one who needs protection, so you stay here with Jason where I know you're safe."

She gave him one of those delicate frustrated faces. "How long have you known Jason? Where did he come from? Are you *sure* he can be trusted?"

"I've known him for nine years. He's had my back almost from day one, and I'll always have his. Beyond that, I don't need to know."

"But he's been working for Ormond. How do you know he's not relaying information back to him?"

"I told you. He's a decent sort."

She challenged, "Don't you find that a little odd? Why would such a *decent sort* work for my uncle?"

"What is this? Why are you suspicious of a man who's done nothing but protect you?"

"He's too quiet. And he watches everybody."

"You're suspicious of him for acting exactly like you?" he asked.

Her shoulders sagged and she let her head fall into her hands.

"Sorry." He put his arms around her. "That was uncalled for. Is there anything I can do to make you feel better about this?"

"Yes. Promise me you'll take care of them. Please."

"You have my word," he said.

"And do you swear there's nothing else you haven't told us?"

"Thief's honor," he said, raising his middle finger in his crew's favorite salute.

"Oh that's charming."

"I know. But it almost made you smile."

"Stop it," she ordered. "This is not the time to haul out the dog and pony show. I want all of you home safe in the morning. And if that means

walking away from CFU before we've got what we need, then I expect you to walk away. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, but—"

"No. You know your own limits. You don't know theirs. And I'm sure I don't need to remind you the Kretts and my waste-of-oxygen uncle are still out there."

She stood there frowning up at him with those fierce, beautiful eyes, and it was doing a true number on his head.

My God, she could almost make him listen when she looked at him that way.

"Patrick?" Kate complained, grabbing the front of his gear vest. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied. "I was just thinking about the Kretts."

"Try not to worry. If you do, you'll be distracted. And if you don't want me nagging you senseless tonight, you'll conduct yourself accordingly."

"I promise, Kitten. Honestly."

"You'd better be honest. And you'd better start trusting me."

"I'll try." Feeling opportunistic, he asked, "Kiss for luck?"

Much to his amazement, she proceeded to oblige so thoroughly he was all but staggering by the time she got done with him.

"Right. Luck's covered, then."

Someone pounded on the door and David's voice came through. "Break it up in there. It's time to go."

Chapter Fourteen

As it turned out, Jason wasn't so quiet after all.

"Stop. Please stop." Kate struggled to catch her breath. She felt somewhat better about him, although the stories he and Jack swapped were a little horrifying. "My sides ache."

Still laughing, the two men knocked forearms since Jack's hands were too torn up for a high-five.

She scolded, "You two are awful, talking about them that way."

"Well come on," Jack said. "All those high class suits sitting there with this look on their faces like *Not again*. You could hear them going at it next door plain as day, and we're talking some highly athletic sex, here. The guy's like ninety years old. She's not much younger and she's in there yelling *yes! Do it! Yes!*"

Jason was laughing so hard she could barely understand him. "Yeah, and get this—Patrick leans over, all nonchalant, to ask the Cabinet Minister if they want sound-proofing added to their system estimate. I thought the guy was gonna choke on his dentures."

"Oh God," she pleaded. "No more. We're supposed to be looking at pictures."

"Forget it," Jack said. "We've already been through most of the image bank. We're not gonna find them, and they'll be bringing Baltimore online any second."

Jason, still chuckling and wiping tears with a thumb, rolled his chair over to the string of computers he'd set up to record Tina and David's transmissions. "No activity yet. Soon, though."

Layne walked in and before she could even ask, Jason repeated his report.

Yawning first, Layne thanked him and took a seat beside Jack. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad."

One of the monitors kicked on, showing them a crystal-clear, color picture of Ormond's entry hall in Baltimore.

"Can you guys hear us? Got video?" David asked.

"Yup. Good to go as soon as Tina's online."

The second monitor came up, Tina did her sound check, and then from somewhere off screen, Patrick's voice came through. "You there, Jack?"

"Yeah, man. What you need?"

"Retrace your steps for us."

Jack did so, taking them around the ground level where they spent the majority of their time in his den.

"Jeez," David said. "Is this place like a palace or something? This office is bigger than my whole house used to be."

"Keep your head in the job, kid," Patrick said.

David must have turned to look at Patrick, for there he was, looking quite edible in his all-black gear.

Jack said, "There's two computers at the desk, but I didn't find anything of interest."

"We need to follow cables," David said. "See if we can find something that leads into the floor or through a wall, so we know how many computers are hooked into that server."

Kate asked, "What's he talking about?"

"Jason came through with the information there's a subterranean complex similar to our tac centers out behind that house somewhere."

“Not similar,” Kate said. “It *was* a tac center. It used to be Tac Center East way back when they used telegraphs to transfer information between centers. But they moved it to Maine when the CIA and NSA built in the area with all their tracking equipment.”

Jason asked, “Have you ever been in there?”

“No. Ormond said it wasn’t safe.”

“Yeah, he told me the same thing. I’ve never seen him go in there, either. But if this CFU system takes as many servers strung together as David thinks, that’s where it’s gotta be.”

“Why? Internet servers can be anywhere. They don’t all have to be in one place.”

“These will be,” David said over the comm. “It’s a private Internet, built just for CFU and its clients. They wouldn’t risk spreading them out for security reasons, and I know it has to be close because that hard drive was physically connected into its network by a cable. So if the servers aren’t stashed somewhere in the basement, it has to be that place out back.”

She said, “Patrick?”

“What?”

“Check the desk for keys. There used to be a passage between the house and Tac East, and if it hasn’t been blocked off, that’s where he’d keep them.”

A moment later, he said, “I’ll be damned. Thank you, Kate.”

She could feel David’s excitement kicking in when he was able to trace a cable down into the floor, but Patrick kept a tight rein on the boy, making them go downstairs to the basement office before they checked out the bunker.

“That’s the machine I took the drive from,” Jack said, tapping the monitor as if Patrick and crew could see what he was pointing at. “The appraisal and e-mails came out of that filing cabinet next to the desk.”

“Got it. All right,” Patrick said. “Do we want another look round this place, or can we move on?”

David said, “Let’s cut to the chase and head for the bunker.”

“Hang on. I’ll go first in case we’ve got independent circuits or cameras near the door.”

Everyone followed him into the hall, but kept well back as Patrick went ahead, comparing the schematics on his hand-held to whatever had sparked his interest near the door. Then he extended a metal sap to poke the ceiling. He wasn’t happy with something, because after prodding for a while, he used the sap to pop out a large ceiling tile. After jumping to catch the tile supports, he flipped his legs up and over like a trapeze artist. He disappeared from sight while Kate held her breath and prayed the false ceiling could hold his weight.

Her heart nearly stopped when something fell from the hole. But it was only a cable, and he appeared a moment later, landing gracefully on his feet. “Closed circuit camera.”

“And that’s why he gets paid the big bucks,” Layne said, then jumped a little when her phone rang.

Patrick unlocked the passage door, and the monitors went blank as everyone filed into the dark passage.

Layne glanced at her phone’s display screen. “I need to take this. Be right back.”

She stepped out and Jack asked, “So what does CFU stand for, anyhow?”

“We’ve been trying to figure that out,” Arthur said. “David used an acronym finder on the net, but out of about forty-five results, everything was either a legit business, school, club, or technical term.”

“Not helpful,” Jack said. “Layne thought it was a suspected arms front. The rumbles I’ve heard are everything from car part choppers to drugs or porn.”

“Well, here’s hoping we soon find out,” Arthur said, the monitors beginning to show light again as they went through the tac center’s door.

“Smells old in here. But look.” David’s camera showed a span of ceiling and PVC pipe. “Cables. Follow them around the corner.”

A few seconds later, they were viewing a room nearly identical to the one she, Jack and Jason were sitting in. Racks of equipment lined the walls, work stations occupied the middle, and green and yellow indicator lights glowed and flickered from every direction.

“They are so busted,” David said, his camera jiggling as he hurried toward a work station.

“Stop,” Patrick barked. “Don’t touch anything until you’ve memorized where all the chairs and equipment are. Pens, papers, cups, everything.”

“Kate,” Layne called from the doorway. “Out here, please.”

“He’s just about to—”

“Now, Kate.”

When she stood up, Jason followed suit.

Layne said, “Jason, take her upstairs. She’s got a call coming and their network has horrible reception down here.”

Kate had no choice but to do as Layne had asked, with Jason bullying her up the staircase.

“Do you know what this is about?” she asked him.

“No.”

“Will you be following me everywhere I go?”

“Yes.”

“Great. I noticed you’ve managed to never be alone with me tonight so I couldn’t ask why you wouldn’t let me go to Baltimore.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t go. I asked you if there was another reason. What were you hoping to do once you got there?”

“Look for his stash of identities, among other things.”

“Other things like information about Patrick’s mother, you mean.”

“Yes. Jack might not have a very good idea where my uncle squirrels his evil little acorns away, but I would. I spent every summer in one or another of his homes.”

“Well, Patrick wouldn’t have allowed it anyhow, so sit tight. Maybe we can work something out.”

Her phone rang. Jason grabbed it to check the display before she could answer it.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“Yay. I can answer my own phone. Thanks.”

Relief trounced annoyance once she’d answered. It was Alex. “Hi, Katie. How you holding up?”

“I’d be better if you were here.”

“I can’t be there. Sorry. There’s something else going on I need to deal with, and you can’t ask me any questions. But I gotta ask you two favors.”

“Oh, that’s fair,” she complained, then quickly corrected herself. “Anything.”

“First, I need you to follow through, Kate. You absolutely cannot let me down on Uncle William. Any...means...necessary.”

“We’re doing our best.”

“Do *your* best. Their best won’t be good enough.”

She stammered a little, wondering what the heck was going on. What was he dealing with?

"Second favor," he said. "Tell Aunt Layne if she ever tries that again, I'll go completely invisible. Got it?"

"Yes, but what did she—"

He hung up on her.

"What the *hell*?" She flew down the stairs, bound for Layne. "What did you do to him?"

"Don't blame me. It was Patrick's idea."

The guilty party asked, "What was my idea?"

"Having Alex's crew bring him in."

"Oh. It didn't work?"

"No," Layne said.

"Hey, Trick?" Jason asked. "Go up to ground level, please. I need a comm."

"Roger."

Both Kate and Layne watched Jason walk out again, and Kate sat down and whispered, "I think he knows something about Nina."

"Who? Jason?"

"Yes. And now he wants to talk to Patrick. Very interesting."

"For his sake, I hope so," Layne said.



David had some difficulty with the password, but once he got into CFU's network, the next several hours flew by.

Early on, they knew disaster had struck. Their original plan to use CFU against Ormond was in tatters, and a thick, stifling fog of horrified disgust hung in the air. What they'd found in the old tac center was so

incriminating, the fact it was on Ormond's property was enough to put him in a federal penitentiary for life.

But they couldn't touch it. Not yet.

Presenting CFU to the lesser councils wasn't possible. They couldn't trust each of seventy-two members not to panic over something this huge. If someone jumped the gun and leaked the information, all agencies involved stood to lose hundreds if not thousands of arrests.

With that pall of failure in the air, no one had talked much as the Baltimore team dissected CFU. For more than thirty years, the shadowy entity had been formulating and manufacturing illicit drugs. After a lengthy perusal of the company's financial holdings, it was discovered the ghost corporation had a trillion dollars cash sitting in banks all over Brazil, the Caymans, and Switzerland.

The balance seemed never to be touched except for operating expenses, and those expenses were incredibly damning. Their accounting was methodical. Layne had been very interested, and maybe even a little smug when they found the mysterious Carl Castille received a million-dollar salary as CFU's Operations Manager. Beyond that, every lab, every restricted chemical production plant, everyone on their payroll, every bribe, every minute detail of their operation was clearly documented, and from it, a very clear picture of CFU had emerged.

Each prospective client was given an electronic questionnaire to fill out. If the applicant passed muster, CFU would give them a computer that could only be linked to their private server. Logging on allowed the clients to order product via the user-friendly interface designed by David's idol. It was as easy as ordering office supplies. And all of it untraceable courtesy of the private server and encryption system.

The logs recording each and every transaction were the reason they couldn't act yet. There were hundreds of clients already under

investigation for drug trafficking, and the threat of cheating the people who'd worked so hard to nail them trumped the need for evidence against Ormond. They still had time, and if worst came to worst, they still had an attempted abduction and those Krett e-mails to spin.

It was too bad. Ormond deserved to burn in hell immediately for CFU. Heroin, cocaine, opiates—any manner of designer drugs—were manufactured by the company. Restricted chemicals had been no problem. CFU had a public front doing a bang-up, legitimate and often government-subsidized job in pharmaceutical and industrial chemical production.

Safe delivery seemed to be their real specialty. They'd been using the Ormond family wine business to bottle and import product in unmarked, specially sealed and sanitized casks the entire time. Each client had their own safe drop-point predetermined in the system. CFU reps would drop the product, the dealer would pick it up later, and never the two shall meet.

The money changed hands via the electronic payment system designed by David's friend. It worked like any other online store, except the system was set up to launder all funds before they landed in CFU's accounts. Other methods of payment and laundering had been used over the years, but the company had evolved with technology over time. And Ormond had always evaded investigation by either bribing officials, or refusing the contract whenever the Sanction was petitioned.

"Hold on," David said. "I just found something else, and I don't know what it is. Layne? Jason? Jack? Anyone? Have you ever heard of something called the Catalyst project?"

Catalyst. Catalyst project. Kate picked her head up.

That name. She'd heard it several times shortly before her parents had died. And whatever it was, they'd been fighting about it the day

they'd gone out on that boat. They'd been sniping at each other in the car, and Kate had very nearly gotten slapped for telling Claudia to stop badgering Dad.

"I haven't heard of it," Layne said. "But I think Kate has."

"Katydid?" Arthur prompted.

When they'd talked earlier about what might have happened that day, she hadn't been able to remember much. But now, one simple word later, the door had been opened. Just a crack, yet it was still progress.

"Maybe," she said. "What is it? I mean, what are you looking at?"

Arthur said, "It's itemized under a special expense category. Click the link, kid."

There was a binging sound as an error message appeared on screen. David read it aloud. "This sub-sector cannot be accessed on this terminal. Please consult the network administrator'. I need to go to that basement office. Where's the hard drive?"

"Right here," Patrick said. "Log out and clean this place up. We've seen enough."

"You ain't kiddin'," David said.

It took them fifteen minutes to get the hard drive put back in its original machine, and they knew they were running out of time. Patrick complained his chest was sore, and he was getting antsy about any potential monitoring of those terminals.

"Relax, man. There's a system utility that tells whenever someone taps the server, and no one's been online except us since we got here."

"Must be a slow sales night," Arthur said.

"Boo hoo. I think their bank balance can afford a few of those."

"Yes, that's odd," Layne said. "Why have all that money? Their overhead's steep to be sure, but they're supplying a good ten percent of

the world's most prolific distributors and dealers. Why amass all those funds but never touch them?"

Arthur responded, "It's the timing. You hoard a ton of liquid capital. Then you double the amount of operatives in the Sanction. And once you've reached that magic number—one trillion dollars—you've got enough funding set aside and enough people in place to launch the shadow government you've been planning for thirty years. All you've got to do is amend the company's charter so your own people can't stop you, and you're home free."

"He's right," Kate said, "And CFU gives Ormond the means we were looking for. He certainly had access to the heroin that killed Nina."

"All right. Here we go," David said.

Things didn't go his way. When he'd performed the steps necessary to reach that special expense category, the system wouldn't let him access the Catalyst project from that terminal, either.

"The software's gone buggy. Guess that's what happens when you kill the designer. We'll have to try again upstairs."

They left the hard drive behind and returned to the upstairs office where David sat down at William Ormond's desk. After a further twenty minutes of fraught tension, David finally got into the Catalyst expense report. But when he did, they hit a different kind of roadblock.

"It's all coded," David said. "Everything's just numbers like item one, item two. Then under properties it's property one, property two up to twenty-six, and there's systems one through twenty-six, too. Well, it sorta looks like there was twenty-four up until a decade ago, but unless he's got a chart somewhere that lists what all this crap means, we're shafted. None of the right-click options work."

"Close that out," Patrick said. "I'm getting the feeling it's time to go."

"The infamous Mancini gut-check?"

“No. Make sure everything’s as you found it, and let’s bail.”

They cut their links, and the monitors went dead.

Kate sat back, so overwhelmed by everything they’d learned she wanted to cry when Layne asked, “Why did Catalyst sound familiar?”

“My parents. They were arguing about it that day. Before the accident.”

“What were they saying?”

“I don’t remember, exactly. I just remember I wanted a cat. Cat, catalyst.”

“You two did go round and round about pets. Are you sure you don’t remember?”

Kate looked down at her hands. She remembered more than she’d let on, but they didn’t need to hear about Claudia trying to slap her.

With some guidance from Layne, she tried to put herself back into the limo that day. They started with the easy sensory cues. The smell of leather. The bright sunshine. It had been beautiful, driving down the coast. Few clouds in the sky, the trees were green, and she could recall very clearly her relief at being free of her parents soon. Ever since they’d resigned, the bickering and sniping had been constant, and the promise of escaping that hostility for even a short while had seemed heavenly.

She could see Claudia in her prissy pink suit sitting in the limo’s bench seat behind the driver, Dad beside her, who kept pleading with her to stop talking.

“Of course you don’t want to talk about it,” Claudia had said. “Catalyst was my idea. If we left the thinking to you, nothing would ever—”

“Claudia,” her father interrupted. “Please stop. We won’t see the children for a few days and I’m sure they’d—”

“Oh hang the children. This is more important than your precious little babies, Troy.”

The argument kept looping in her head, her parents interrupting each other. Nothing was especially clear except the moment she'd told her mother to, “Stop yelling at him, for the love of God.”

Dad had grabbed Claudia's hand to restrain her.

She remembered his face afterwards, how he'd silently stared out the window, then glanced over at her and Alex. He'd looked so sad.

Claudia had said something, then. Something about Catalyst. “It might never be used, you know.”

Her father had replied, but all Kate could recall was, “Good, because we have no mandate.”

Layne asked, “Why would you remember that?”

“Because I didn't know what it meant at the time, and I thought it sounded funny. Like they needed a date with a man.”

Jack grunted a laugh. “Then what?”

Casting her mind back again, she thought *mandate*. “We have no mandate,” her father had said.

“We resigned,” Claudia countered.

“Serves you right.”

“You think it's better my twit brother has control over everything?”

She could recall that part because she'd been listening closely. It had been the first time she'd ever heard them discuss their resignation.

Her last image of Dad was him kneeling on the pier, his arms around her and Alex. He'd told them he loved them more than anything else in the world, and they should take extra special care of each other. He'd be back just as soon as he could.

“That's what he said to you?” Jason asked. “That he'd be back?”

The others exchanged looks, and Kate could understand why. Dad's statement didn't sound much like a man who was about to kill himself and his wife.

A cold, numb feeling started somewhere around her navel and bled slowly outward.

Layne said, "Troy would never have said that to the kids if he didn't mean it."

"What else could he say, though?" Jack asked. "Kids, I'm off to kill your mom. I'll be—"

"*Jack!*" Jason barked. "For Christ's sake, have some tact."

"Sorry, but you know what I'm saying."

"You're wrong. Troy wasn't like that." Layne turned back to her. "So you remember your mother saying Catalyst was her idea. And it might never be used."

Kate wanted out of the room. Out of her family, even out of her own skin. "Have Jack try to get Alex on the phone. He might remember more."

"Not necessary," Layne said. "And we have to discuss how we'll proceed. We have to give the drug enforcement agencies time to assimilate this."

Both Jack and Jason nodded, but didn't look too pleased about it.

Jack asked, "You know what this means, don't you? If they can prove Sanction resources were in any way used or connected, the company's toast."

"I don't know about that," Layne said. "The wine company was used, but I saw no reference to anything Sanction in those records."

"What about Catalyst, though? We don't even know what it is."

"That's a chance we'll have to take," Kate said. "If any of our operatives participated, we deserve to be toast."

Jason said, "I really don't think the Sanction has cause to worry. I've been with him for nine years, and I see and hear way more than I should. But he never talks about either CFU or Catalyst."

"It doesn't matter," Kate said. "We can't have him brought in on this, but we do need to prepare Tina's footage for distribution. Meanwhile, we'll have to go after the Krett e-mails."

"I really don't..." Layne started, then asked, "What did you have in mind?"

"We're going to California tomorrow night, and I'd like to be alone until they get home. Jason?"

Her oversized shadow came along nicely, and in the walkway between the tac center and the depot, she asked, "Why did you call Patrick?"

"There's a vault near that tac center tunnel in the Baltimore house. I thought maybe Ormond might have something useful in there, so I called Trick to give it a look. But he'd already spotted the unaccounted-for space in the blueprints, and went up in the ceiling right beside it to double check the wiring."

"Did he break into it?"

"You're kidding, right? If something's built to keep him out, he'd feel compelled to break in, purely on principle."

"Were you thinking he might find something in there about his mother?" she asked.

"Yeah. Given Ormond's predilection for blackmail, he must have years' worth of footage and recordings stashed somewhere. But we shouldn't count on any old stuff being left in that house. It's more than likely been moved to the vineyard by now with the rest of his... What did you call them? Evil little acorns?"

She nodded, feeling the crush of the CFU setback. Her uncle would fry for it eventually. Not soon enough. They needed more, and unless

Patrick had found something in that vault, their last chance was in California.

But what if they failed again? Something had to be done immediately, and she knew what that something was.

First, there was Jason to be dealt with. She didn't care what Patrick said. She'd had a strange read on Jason from the first time they'd met, and while he might not be an enemy, she'd darned well better make sure he was a firm ally.

Not horribly easy to do when most of her head was stuck on that image of her father.

Man, this was frustrating. Out in the field, no matter how emotionally invested she became in the victims, there always came a point where she could put that aside. Trust the research hours she'd put in, as well as instinct to tell her when, where, who and how. But put her family in the picture, and her research amounted to a galaxy of lies. And all her instincts ever told her was to keep her head down to avoid the next blow.

She had to do better than this. Her brother was out there somewhere. Patrick was hanging in the balance. Layne, Arthur, and the kids were in danger and she had the means to end this.

Drawing them to a halt halfway down the corridor to her house, she said, "All right. We've been polite long enough. I don't know who you really are, or what you're really doing here, and frankly I don't care. But if you get in my way tomorrow night to protect your own agenda, I'll—"

Jason held his hands up. "Hold your fire."

"No. Do you know how important these people are to me? Because if you don't, you're about to find out the hard way."

"Slow down, Kate. Please. You've got totally the wrong idea."

"Then give me the right one. Who imbedded you? And what do they want?"

He stared at her a while, and she watched his wheels spinning. Expecting a huge pack of lies to follow, she was very surprised when he said, “Ah, jeez. You honestly think I’m a plant because I leaked that vote-reminder.”

“Who else could have done it? I know it wasn’t Jack. He was playing everything under the table.”

“Yeah, I did leak the vote-call and standings as soon as I found out about them. But I’m not a plant from another agency. I’m Sanction, through and through.”

“Oh you are not,” she protested. “You have American MI written all over you.”

“Flattering guess, but you’re completely wrong. I swear to you I’m Sanction.”

“What’s your objective? You can’t tell me it’s really to protect Ormond, because we both know that’s a lie.”

Jason said, “No, protecting Ormond is not my objective. My objective is to protect you and Alex from *him*.”

“What?”

“There was concern Ormond might put up a fight about leaving office when the time came, and it looks as if they were right.”

“They? Who’s *they*?”

“I don’t...” Jason stalled, his jaw clenching in frustration. “I’m not sure I’m cleared to tell you.”

“Jason, I want you to listen to me. Very carefully. If you don’t tell me, I swear they will need a *mop* to clean your remains out of this hallway after I’m through with you.”

His eyes widened, and then he burst out laughing.

Hands on hips, she demanded, “What’s funny?”

“Nothing, it’s just... You are exactly like your old man.”

“My what?”

“Your father. Troy.”

“You knew my father?”

“Very well,” Jason said, still laughing. “My father was *your* father’s unit commander before they both got drafted into the Sanction.”

“You’re lying. Stuart Tikalov was Dad’s unit commander, and I know you’re not Stu’s son.”

“Do you? How much do you really know about Stu?”

“I...”

She paused to mentally index everything she could remember about Stuart Tikalov. He and her father had been MI together after the Seals, but aside from that, all she really knew was Stu’s Sanction title. He was head of the legal department, and had been for twenty-some years.

Jason sighed and said, “All right. Before Troy agreed to step down for Ormond, he made arrangements to imbed someone who could keep an eye on things. I was only a kid back then, but they figured you’d be safe until you came of age. So I grew up, got trained, and became head of Ormond’s security force, just as your father had asked.”

She blinked at him, this man she’d never trusted who was living proof of how much Troy Crawford had loved his children.

In the background, she could feel the clock ticking, and remember her father’s face that day.

She had a lot to live up to. And a lot of people depending on her to end this, even if they didn’t believe she could.

Her path through the next twenty-four hours suddenly came clear, and she would stand behind her choices, come what may.

Taking out her phone, she ignored Jason’s questions and complaints as she scrolled through contact numbers.

Stuart Tikalov answered on the first ring. “Kate? Is that you?”

“Yes, Stu. Please listen. I need to exercise article five, effective immediately.”

Stu let out a whoop. “Ah, thank you Jesus. You can’t know how happy I am to hear those words after all these years, but are you absolutely certain this is wise, under the circumstances?”

“Wise or not, it’s done. And I need to know I’ve got my powers and protection in place.”

“Yes, of course. But it’s not that simple. There are a million details to be worked out, and I cannot allow you to go forward without said protections.”

“Your son is standing right in front of me. Will he do?”

“Oh. Oh dear. Madame Chairwoman, I can explain.”

“There’s no need,” she said. “And please don’t ever call me that again.”

“Of course not, Mada—Miss Kate. I’m at your service. How do you wish to proceed?”

She could remember hearing him say those exact words to both her parents countless times, but she could bet Stu had never argued with them the way he tried to do with her. After fifteen minutes of outraged refusals and pleas for more conservative measures, she put her foot down.

“We’re doing this. That is my final word on the subject and if you two won’t cooperate, I suggest you polish up your résumés.”

She hung up on Stu, and turned to Jason.

He said, “All these years I thought Ormond was the craziest person I knew.”

“You have a lot to accomplish before we leave. Please get started.”

“But Kate, Patrick will never forgive you for this. And what if something goes wrong?”

For a moment, she considered explaining herself further, but it would be pointless. If he couldn't understand she was only making the best of the inevitable, no amount of explanation would make it clear.

"Your objection's been noted, but we move forward as planned. And no one is allowed in my house except Patrick. Understood?"

She turned her back and walked away. She wasn't without her own qualms, and he wasn't helping.

This was for the best. They no longer needed to compromise the Global Council because she was the only one who could call a vote. Ormond wouldn't know until it was too late.

All that remained was the clean up: getting their questions answered and ridding the world of CFU, the Kretts, and William Ormond.

She spent the next hour at her kitchen table, fine-tuning arrangements until Arthur called to brighten her night.

"We have an issue."

"Oh God. Now what?" Kate asked.

"I just got off the phone with my guy who's tracking the Kretts, and I don't know what to make of what he said. First you need to know this—my source isn't exactly on the up-and-up, but I trust him. He's been an informant for twenty years. So unless he's being lied to, this information is gospel."

"All right. And?"

"And he went to one of the Kretts' brokers to see if he could be put in contact. Which was stupidly dangerous, but it turns out the broker was in the know. As far as he knew, the Kretts weren't called about Tony until around twenty hours ago."

"I beg your pardon? How can that be?"

“Beats us, and that’s why I called. Neither Patrick nor I have any idea what this means. My guy’s still on it, but until he can give us more, all we can do is wait.”

“Fantastic,” Kate said.

She ended the call and rubbed her neck, willing Arthur’s contact to hurry the heck up.

Feeling wholly mercenary for not warning Arthur of her plans, she waited fifteen minutes, then called Patrick. He was tired, frustrated, but still Patrick, talking to her in that deep, come-hither voice. For almost an hour, they talked the way they used to. About nothing important. They just talked until the plane began its descent, and after he’d hung up she sat quietly, hoping she was doing the right thing, and allowing herself to fall back into love with him.

Then again, she couldn’t fall back into something she’d never climbed out of in the first place, and this time, there was no clear-cut right or wrong. The only certainty was her love for him. There was no question about that, and never had been. So this had to be done. He’d either understand, or he wouldn’t. There was far more at stake here than the two of them, and the cancer inside the Sanction would never be fully excised unless they cut deep and made sure there were no malignant cells left behind.

Less than twenty-four hours remained between now and show time. She held little faith he’d surprise her and make the plan unnecessary, but when you loved someone, you took the bad with the good. And maybe it was time he was pleasantly surprised for once.

Kate went upstairs and prepared to welcome him home.

Chapter Fifteen

Back at the facility once more, everyone was dead tired. It was straight to bed for the kids and Arthur, and Patrick was of a similar mind. He headed for Kate's house, finding Jason at a makeshift security station in the walkway outside Kate's door.

His monitors showed everything from the yard, the gate up by the highway, and wide angles of the house. No one would get anywhere near the place without Jason knowing about it.

"Any luck in the vault?" Jason asked.

"None. Unless you're fond of bawdy oil paintings and ugly jewelry."

"Bastard. That stash has to be somewhere. He never bothers to let me know what ID he's using when he takes off on secret jaunts, so I'm of no use on that score. The recordings and footage, though... That amount of stuff would take up some considerable space. Did you check the other floors of the old tac center?"

"Every square inch, and nothing. My money's on the vineyard."

"We're headed that direction tomorrow, although I don't think Kate was planning to leave until 7 p.m. Maybe 8."

Patrick nodded. "I figured as much. But getting in there will not be fun unless you know something I don't."

"Lucky for you, I know a way to clear those guards. We can talk about it tomorrow."

"You got it, man."

He went inside, his thoughts battering around a tired mind. Kate would not be happy with what might have to go down at that vineyard,

but ever since Arthur's contact had called, the Chief Thief had tired of relinquishing control.

Things were wrong around here. Alex, for one. His behavior was very odd for a man whose sister was in mortal danger. Jack too had just failed a gut-check in the wake of finding out the Kretts hadn't learned the name of their brother's killer until yesterday.

Someone had been yanking their chain. Those e-mails had been planted, but it was hard to say who'd been meant to find them. Jack? Or Ormond?

There was no time left for games. Kate, Jack and the Crawfords meant well, but reality had to be taken into account. And the reality was, conventional justice wouldn't cut it anymore. Ormond would be left too many avenues of escape. He'd slither free somehow, taking all their answers with him.

Unconventional justice would have to take over, so this was between him and Ormond from here on out.

When he was halfway up the stairs, Kate appeared at the top in a white silk robe. Her hair was down, she wasn't smiling, and he could tell she had much more immediate plans than California.

Brilliant plan. He liked it. And he'd go with it, sore chest be damned. He took the last few steps slowly and stopping one step beneath her, leaving them nearly eye-level for once.

Without saying a word, she put her arms around his neck to meet him with parted lips, but she drew back at the last second, preventing actual contact and holding him suspended at her mercy.

This. *This* was the night she picks to break the librarian mold and seduce him. Nothing like waiting until the last minute.

When she kissed him, it was one of those brain-melting, open-mouthed and barely touching numbers she knew were his favorite. And

she took her time over it, making sure he was hard enough to sprain something before unzipping his gear-vest and dragging it down his arms.

God help him. He made himself think about his stock portfolio. World Cup scores. Anything so he wouldn't take her right here at the top of the stairs. He'd be more than happy to relinquish all control in this scenario, but he helped by dragging his shirt over his head, then letting her take his mouth again while gently raking her fingernails up his ribs.

He might have sworn then. He wasn't sure. But if he had, he could hardly help it. She knew exactly what she was doing to him and was enjoying the upper hand, even nipping his bottom lip as she undid the belt on her robe.

The soft white fabric whispered to the floor and she did nothing to stop him as he eased back to look at her.

It wasn't the decadent curves, the creamy skin, or the gentle slope of beautiful hips that got to him first. It was the lingerie he'd ordered in St. Paul that he hadn't even dared hope to see her in.

"Why you little coquette." He stared at the red velvet bra with the small gold bow in front, and the way the fabric molded itself to those full, perfect breasts. "Merry Christmas to me."

Farther down, the panties rested against pristine flesh, and the thought of unwrapping his gift a bit early this year made him burn with a raging impatience.

Then he met her eyes, and if he'd thought she'd had him thoroughly seduced already, he'd been wrong. When aroused, her eyes turned a deeper shade of violet and at the moment, they were almost as black as his.

A beautiful sight. One he'd been waiting ten years to see again.

Typical of them, everything spun wildly out of control from there. He forgot they were standing at the top of a steep staircase when his fingers

found an intoxicating, warm slickness. He lost his balance because of what she was doing with her hands, and Kate's throaty gasp made him stop long enough to move her into the bedroom before they could fall down the steps.

And there, she held him breathless for a time, her mouth trailing across his skin, and her hands finding places that made his eyes roll up into his skull.

He couldn't take much of that. Before she could push him to the limit, he took over, revisiting the softness of her and tasting her essence, fueled on by a chorus of whimpers that made his blood burn.

Those sounds she made. He loved them. It made him feel like a god, the way she responded to him. He wanted to hear more. A lot more, but at the pace they were roaring along, he wouldn't hear nearly as many as he'd like.

He kissed her, just to slow them both down. It didn't help much, but this one night with her would have to last him a while. Possibly for the rest of his life, however long that might be.

So he raised his head to watch her face as she stared back at him with those lovely, hazy eyes. They were one of a kind. He'd never found their equal, and never would.

She was rare in every respect, and the thought of her being forced into that office soon, even temporarily, was a harsh intrusion. He'd seen a lot of people rise and fall during his nineteen years in this business, and he knew what could happen. If she somehow resisted her fear of turning into Claudia Jr., she'd be shredded by others who had.

He said, "I was so wrong, earlier. I'm sorry I ever said that."

She gave a muddled frown. "Said what?"

"The phone call. Please, Kitten. Don't do it. No matter what happens, don't you make that call."

She raised a hand to trace first his cheekbone, then the outline of his bottom lip. And when she finally kissed him again, her need erased all thought. There was nothing but her. Nothing beyond this moment and the hunger to be inside her.

When it happened, a helpless sound escaped him while Kate let out another airy gasp, and those remarkable eyes fell closed.

He was making fists in the sheets and holding his breath by the time they were joined completely. She wound her arms around his neck, drawing him back down to her for a tender, soul-charging kiss that served as zero warning for the highly inflammatory movement of her hips that followed.

They wouldn't last another minute if she kept on this way. He knew her too well. Remembered too clearly what happened when she planted her hands in the small of his back like that, pulling him closer, wanting him deeper inside.

It had always been this way with her. The first time had always been frantic and mindless, all their more imaginative pursuits left to round two.

Thanks to her surprise initiative, it would be no different tonight. He was too far gone already. And the rising heat and her grasping hands warned she was already poised at the brink.

No use in trying to hold out. He'd never been able to. Not with her. And not when she had that aroused stain on her skin. It was, by far, the most spectacular display he'd seen yet.

All too soon, the higher pitch of her whimpers sent a dangerous surge through his system, the force of it rocketing down his legs and up his back. Rapt by the electricity inside him, he thrust harder and faster until Kate's body began to tense.

The waves of it hit her hard enough to make his jaw clench, and the feel of her taking him along for the ride proved too much.

He came so hard his back cracked. And even while he was paralyzed with the force of it, Kate rewarded him once again with a stifled cry as a second wave crashed through her.

It took awhile for his body to unlock itself from passion's grip, and by then, Kate had weak arms wrapped around his neck.

He collapsed very carefully to protect a now excruciating chest, then dug his hands beneath Kate and held on, smiling at her quaky-legged, nerveless contentment.

Now, it was different than it had been. Back then, he'd have felt he should say something, but this time he kissed her instead, because there was nothing left to say.

It was over. Ten years after the fact, they'd finally been broken apart. Not by her, not by Ormond, but by him this time.

He loved her. He always had and always would. But it didn't mean anything, even if by some miracle he survived the next twenty-four hours. If he tried to be with her, it would only be another waiting game, gambling on how long he'd have before she'd break up with him.

Never again. He wouldn't survive it a second time. He just prayed she'd forgive him someday for what he was about to do.

The signs Patrick was about to do exactly as she'd feared had been coming nonstop all day, one after another.

First, he'd kept her in bed until the last possible second. There'd been long silent bouts, a few naps, but otherwise solid lovemaking as if he'd never see her again. And once he did finally let her out of his sight, he'd disappeared for more than an hour, placing a lengthy phone call they'd

traced to his lawyer in London. Afterward, he and Jack had argued. No one knew what they'd fought about, but the tension between them had been thick enough to hold a spoon.

Their away-team this time consisted of Jason, Patrick, Carlos, Jack, Layne, Arthur and Kate, who'd been made to feel like a tagalong most of the day. But that was exactly what she needed for now. Layne and Arthur would be brought into the loop if, and only if, things went down the way she suspected.

And she was certain they would, when just before they boarded a special charter in Fargo, Carlos confirmed Patrick had ordered his pilot to fly the Lear to a small municipal airport very near the vineyard. Patrick hadn't given any express orders on where he meant to go next, but as he'd told no one about the Lear aside from his pilot and Carlos, she knew he was planning to do his worst.

It was reassuring to know she'd made the right choices and preparations, but it stung to know for certain that even after last night, he still didn't trust her to protect him.

If he only knew how much work had gone on behind the scenes to keep him safe. Stu and Jason's hand-picked team of operatives had already closed on the vineyard, swiftly and silently dealing with the guards while Ormond slept on, none the wiser.

Jason had not been surprised by either the number of guards, nor their identities. She and Stu, on the other hand, had been. There'd been eight guards covering the premises, four of them a little beat up by a recent altercation in Eveleth. They weren't sure which of the remaining number had been the driver, but Jason had said their crew would get to the bottom of it.

Now, they just needed to give Patrick his cue. And Jason did it well, waiting until they were moments from landing to place a call, then announce the guards had been removed and replaced by friendlies.

Instantly, Patrick said, "Then there's no need for everyone to come along. I can do the take alone, and Jason can stay behind to help David with the e-mail hack-job."

"Works for me," Jason told him. "Fewer bodies to keep track of that way."

"We won't need the comm-link, either."

When Patrick shed his microphone and camera, they all knew it was on.

Once the plane was on the ground, Patrick went ahead alone in the first car. She and Jason took the opportunity to fill Layne and Arthur in, and Kate's ears were still ringing from their less-than-approving response as they left the airport.

During the sixteen-mile drive to the vineyard, she stayed curled up in the backseat while Jason touched base with his crew to make sure the security system was under control. Everything was ready for them, he was told, and the coast was clear as Jason met up with Patrick near the vineyard's office building.

The house was a bit further on, and she stayed hidden while the two men neared the point where they'd have to part ways.

Sneaking out of the car to creep along a tall hedgerow, she whispered, "Have Jason and I got audio?"

Over the headset, David said, "Yup. You're all linked up, but be careful up there, Kate. Once you spring this on him, he might react just as badly as you said."

"He won't hurt me. Remember to stay quiet so Ormond doesn't accidentally hear you through my headset."

She stopped moving when she heard Patrick's voice drifting over Jason's microphone. "This is as far as you go, Jayce."

"What do you mean?" Jason said.

"Please walk away. Get back in the car and go. I'll only ask you once."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm giving you a choice."

Oh God. Here it comes.

She didn't know who hit who first, but the grunts and crackling sounds indicated a pretty good fight going on.

It stopped, as abruptly as it had begun. Jason had let it go on a full twenty seconds before he'd thrown the fight.

Very near the mic, Patrick whispered, "Sorry, mate."

She raised her brows a little at that, but started moving again, faster this time.

Just beyond the hedge line, she saw Jason lying frighteningly still on the ground, and for a horrified second she thought Patrick might have killed him. But as she crouched beside him and ran her knuckles over his sternum, he came to. "You owe me for that one. Man, he hits hard. Get out of sight."

She patted him on the chest in apology. "Be ready."

Inside the house, she made a silent beeline for the kitchen stairs. She wasn't sure whether Patrick would actually bother pausing for a look at her uncle's computers, but doubted it, and she'd better get herself into position.

Her uncle's snobbery would work in her favor up here. He couldn't abide running into the servants, so the kitchen stairs let out near the back door of his ridiculously large closet. Patrick might have taken the same route, but she couldn't hear him. One did not become a legendary

thief by stomping around like an elephant, after all, and she heard nothing until Patrick issued a harsh, "Wake up."

Moving quickly now, she went for the maid's door and listened to Ormond's confused and frightened, "*You?* What are you—"

"Stop talking. Do what you're told, or you won't live to see dawn."

Kate put her hands out to feel carefully along a row of what must be suits. There was no light in the closet. It was totally dark, but she knew the space. This section was largest. Up ahead would be another door that opened into his dressing area.

She slipped through it, leaving only one door between her and her goal.

"Here's what you're gonna do," Patrick said. "And listen carefully, because this is your only shot to keep yourself alive. I want my mother's ring, and the frame. While you get them, you will tell me exactly what happened that night."

"Oh for God's sake. I don't have any ring. And I don't know any more about what happened to her than you do."

Wrong answer. The sound of flesh hitting flesh made her put her hands out and walk, feeling for the last door.

Patrick said, "I'm not in the mood for bullshit. Get the ring and the frame. I know they're here."

Ormond didn't respond right away, probably still dazed from the blow. Her hands met with cool wood, and before she went for the door knob, she took the gun from her holster, holding it down by her side.

The door didn't make a sound as it opened.

Neither man had heard or seen anything, and when she stepped into the room, Ormond was saying, "I don't know what you're talking about and if you aren't off the premises in thirty seconds, I'll have your worthless carcass thrown in jail."

Stepping out into the light, she saw Patrick raise an arm to strike him again.

Okay. That was far enough.

She barked, "Don't, Patrick. Don't you touch him."

He stiffened at the sound of her voice, but at no point did he ever take his eyes off Ormond, nor lower his hand. "Get out of here, Kitten."

"No. Back away from him."

Ormond gaped at her, probably unable to believe his luck.

Then Patrick turned on her. "Leave. Now."

She'd never seen anything like the expression in those liquid-black eyes. They looked frozen. Hard and cold. Empty.

"I can't," she said. "I can't let you do this. He didn't do anything wrong."

Instantly, those eyes filled with incredulity. Fury and betrayal came a second later when she raised the gun level with his throat, steadying her shooting hand.

"Back away from him," she warned, praying he'd see through this ruse before it got out of hand.

"Be careful, Katherine," her uncle said. "Don't trust him."

"He's right," Patrick said. "I can't be trusted. Not anymore."

In a flash, he had his own gun pointed directly between her eyes.

The eruption of fear and disbelief began somewhere in her chest and flew outward, burning at a thousand degrees. This couldn't really be happening.

But she was staring down the barrel of his gun. It was happening, and that frightened heat turned to ice at the sight of the hatred in Patrick's eyes.

"Why hello, Claudia Jr." He clicked his gun's safety off with his thumb. "So nice to finally make your acquaintance."

Steadying her grip, she began to edge her way between Patrick and the door. He might not shoot. Yet. Jason would be coming toward that door soon, however, and she had to shield Jason's entry point.

"Put the gun down, Patrick," Ormond said. "She'll shoot."

"Right. She'll do a lot of things to get what she wants."

A muscle in her neck began to tick from the strain. She had a script of things she knew she had to say before Jason would intervene, but she wasn't sure Patrick wouldn't shoot if she said them.

But again, she had no choice. Her uncle could not leave this room with any doubt she was on his side.

Not bothering to keep her hands from shaking, she tried to make Patrick understand. "I knew you'd do this. So the only thing you have to sacrifice right now is pride."

His eyes narrowed, and she pressed, "Be me, Patrick, then consider the decision you forced me to make. *What would you do?*"

She saw him falter for a second in confusion, but Uncle William responded first. "Don't try to reason with him, Katherine. Just shoot. He's rubbish. People like him will never understand why they can't win against people like us."

"Please don't talk," she told him. Every time he did, Patrick got more and more agitated.

Patrick said, "Do it, Kit. Shoot. You might as well kill me, because you can't hurt me any more than you already have."

Blinking from the sting of tears, she realized far too late how afraid Patrick had been she'd turn into Claudia Jr. He honestly believed she'd choose Ormond over him, and wasn't willing to believe anything else.

There might be no repairing the damage she'd just done, no matter what she'd planned to do for him afterwards.

He began to move then, edging his way toward the closet door until they'd shifted their positions and she was beside Ormond.

Jason hadn't waited. From her vantage point, she could see him in the vanity mirror behind Patrick, coming in the same way she had.

Now that the damage was done, she went for broke. "I can't let you take him. You were wrong, Patrick. He didn't kill your mother."

She didn't know if he'd heard Jason behind him, but the next moment Patrick had lowered the gun, and all he did was stare at her while Jason took his weapon, put the cuffs on and led him out. And every step of the way, he spat poison from those glaring eyes. Killing her slowly, and promising to get even for this.

Numb now, save for nausea, she holstered her weapon, realizing a bit late she'd never released the safety.

And like it or not, the show had to go on. Turning to Uncle William, she asked, "Are you okay?"

"Katherine..." Her uncle stared at her in wonder.

She could about imagine what he was thinking—that maybe his servile imbecile of a niece wasn't such an imbecile after all.

"Later," she said. "I'll explain after we're gone. Please. We have to hurry."

"What ever for? What's going on?"

"The others. They're coming here for you so no one can vote."

Ormond stammered a few more questions, but she got him up and moving, urging him to dress in a hurry and throw some things in a bag.

"Where will we go?" he asked.

"I've got a plane waiting to take us to Miami. Then to a private airstrip near London. We'll need all your identification packets, just in case."

"Good girl," Ormond praised, as if she were a dog.

He retrieved his ID stash from a safe in the wall and they were soon on their way. She wasn't half-surprised to find herself carrying his bags for him, but outside, everything went perfectly. They were almost to the garage when two darkly clad forms came out of nowhere.

The two men were from Jason's borrowed crew, their faces obscured by masks. And even though she'd known it would happen, it was still a bit eerie to be grabbed from behind, wrestled to the ground, and handcuffed in silence.

Not total silence. Ormond screamed and pleaded through the entire thing, complete with pompous rants of, "Don't you know who I am?" and "You'll be sorry for this, whoever you are."

It was a long ride back to the plane, and when they got there, the looks of disapproving disbelief from Layne and Arthur as she and Ormond were led onboard in handcuffs weren't completely fake.

Forget them. This would work. She *dared* Ormond not to crack after everything this had cost her.

A two-hour plane ride stood between her and the good-cop routine, and every second of it would have to be spent wisely. To ensure she wouldn't be interrupted, Jason had put a livid Patrick on his own plane with Jack, sending Carlos along to keep the peace.

Jason had stayed behind. He had things to look for, and a job to assist David by pointing him toward every computer terminal Ormond had ever used in search of any communication between him and the Kretts. She'd given Jason exactly two hours to work with before yet another charter flight would bring him back to Eveleth. He hadn't been happy about that, but the danger was minimal now, with Ormond in custody.

Well, probably. Patrick hated her, and she had no idea how long it would take him to cool off. She'd known he wouldn't take kindly to the

gun. She'd also known if he'd been warned ahead of time, she'd have either been left on the ground beside Jason, or locked in her uncle's room while Patrick made off with Ormond.

Instead, things had gone as she'd planned, if not precisely as she'd hoped. The only consolation was the ruse had worked and Ormond believed she was his lone ally.

Arthur had already begun work on backtracking the identity packages, and Layne kicked things off nicely with Ormond. They'd barely leveled out before she had him under siege, and aside from a hard, arctic stare from Arthur, Kate was left to herself in the rear of the plane where Ormond couldn't see she was no longer handcuffed.

Now it was time to work on the olive branch she'd need desperately before she ran into Patrick again. Mindful of the ticking clock, she took out her phone and dialed Stu.

He was chomping at the bit to make an announcement, but he lost some enthusiasm when she gave him the lowdown of what she would soon have on tape, and forewarned him of CFU and Catalyst.

"You'll be busy," she said. "Make sure your crew keeps that vineyard covered. We need to preserve evidence, and I need the name and number for whoever I can talk to in Holland about Patrick's release."

He gave her the number, and she glanced at the clock. It was half past two in the morning. Still early in the Netherlands, and it was also Christmas Eve.

Hoping the man would have some holiday spirit, she dialed.

"Feeling better?" Patrick asked.

Jack had just emerged from the sleeping cabin, where he'd been for most of the flight. He said, "A little. I gotta stop taking those meds. They conk me out every single time."

"You didn't pop any stitches, did you?"

"Nah, but one of them's bleeding a little, and my ribs are killing me. Nothing to worry about, though."

"Sorry," Patrick muttered.

"Don't apologize. You were angry, and it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't tried to grab you from behind."

Patrick kept a look off his face. Things had gotten a bit heated when Jason had shoved him into the plane. In the scuffle, Jack had gotten hurt again.

He felt bad for knocking Jack over, but the man had set upon him the moment he'd boarded, and for a second, he'd thought Jack was a Krett. After patching him back up and being grilled about what had happened and why Ormond wasn't with him, he'd given Jack one of those painkillers, just to shut him up.

Now he'd want to talk about it again.

Sure enough, Jack said, "We have a good shot at him now. Layne will get him to say he really did do it. In fact, she'll probably have a full confession by the time we land."

"She'd better."

"Come on, Patrick," Jack said. "I'm sure Kate had good intentions. She was probably only trying to scare him into copping to everything, right there on the spot."

"It didn't work, did it? Was it really worth holding me at gun point?"

"I told you not to try anything but you wouldn't listen, so don't come cryin' to me, pal."

"Thanks, Jack. Really."

“Aw, relax,” Jack said. “All is not lost. Layne’ll wring it out of him, so you won’t have to doubt your mother anymore. That has to count for something, at least. To know for certain she wasn’t using in the end.”

“She’s still dead. I can’t apologize for doubting her. Or take back the things I said.”

Jack sighed and took the seat next to Carlos. “True. But you can put it behind you now.”

“In another six years or however long I’m in jail, perhaps.”

“Do you have to be so cynical?”

Carlos and Jack both stared at him. Carlos was still steaming after a slight difference of opinion they’d had while Jack had been passed out.

Patrick ignored the dirty look. Carlos was on Kate’s side, so Carlos could stuff his traitorous eyes straight up his ass.

“I have a right,” Patrick said. “I didn’t see either of you held at gunpoint by Claudia Jr.”

Carlos asked, “What the hell else was she supposed to do?”

“Let me handle it?”

“Handle it? Is that what you call handling it? You would’ve taken off with him, then killed him once he finally coughed up what you wanted to hear. But Kate put a stop to it before you could get yourself thrown in jail for life. If you can’t figure that out, you’re even dumber than I thought, you fuckin’ prick.”

Carlos got up and stalked to the cockpit, slamming the door behind himself.

Jack asked, “What’s his problem?”

“Probably mad because when I go to jail, he’ll lose his job.”

“That’s not what it sounded like to me.”

“Nothing ever sounds like what it is around here. Doesn’t look like it, smell like it, taste or feel like it, either.”

“Well, you three can fight things out when we get there. I’m sure if you remind Kate of what she did, you won’t be going to jail.”

“I’m done talking about this,” Patrick said. “I still need to figure out what to do about the Kretts.”

“I wouldn’t worry over that, either. Mrs. Robinson’s got David hunting for communication between Ormond and the Kretts.”

He snorted. “I don’t believe her. She set me up right from the start.”

“Sure looks that way. But who knows?”

He *didn’t* know, and that was the problem. He didn’t know what to think about what happened. No one would be overjoyed to be held at gunpoint, but this had been so much more than that.

Claudia Jr. Every inch of Kate had turned stone cold, and it had been like seeing that hag reborn right before his very eyes. The master manipulator, moving her luckless victims around like chess pieces on her board. And what about last night? Why had she done that? Just to make sure the guerilla tactics hurt him as much as possible?

Ruthless cat. Now he’d be handed over to the Dutch as soon as Ormond was charged, something Kate was racing toward without giving the consequences he’d face a single thought. As soon as he fell into their hands, he was as good as dead.

He’d been *right* not to trust her. No matter how she’d try to justify this, he’d never, ever fall for her purple doe-eyed line of bull again.

With what time he had left, he had to attack the Krett problem somehow. Put up one last fight.

Chapter Sixteen

Altogether, given some language difficulties and a couple stunned silences on both her and the Dutchman's parts, it took more than an hour before she understood Patrick's status and the full house of ramifications it would have.

Through it all, her hands shook with a rage so violent she had a hard time placating the judge, assuring him she'd handle the situation, when the whole time she wanted nothing more than to kill her uncle.

After hanging up the phone, she blew out a long, slow breath. One thing at a time, and she had to keep going.

Dialing once more, she asked how Jason and David were faring.

"Not good," David said. "We've got a big fat nothing here. I've now hacked every computer Ormond owns. Jason's tracked down three un-networked computers with the right e-mail security software, but still no dice."

"I don't understand it," Jason said. "He hates laptops, so that terminal has to be here somewhere."

"Well, if the Kretts didn't find out until yesterday, we're barking up the wrong tree anyhow. Have you gone through all the cellars?" she asked.

"Yeah. Oh. Hey. I found his blackmail stash. An entire cellar lined with wall-to-wall video and recordings, all of it converted to disk. I grabbed tons that could prove useful. I've got the ring and the frame, too."

"You found them?"

"Sure did. Right where you said they might be, in one of those cabinets in his study."

That was a major relief. "Whatever you do, don't forget those. I'll need them to barter Patrick down."

"God, was he pissed," Jason said. "This had better work, or..."

"I know. But if you think about it, we're actually in pretty good shape."

"Yeah. Fighting fit."

Glancing at her watch and dreading the confrontation that would ensue the moment they got back to the facility, she reminded Jason he was nearing his time limit, then hung up.

Why couldn't they find any form of contact between Ormond and the Kretts?

She could guess. After what Arthur's friend had told them, she was pretty certain Jack and her brother would have a lot of explaining to do. If Jason hadn't been the one to warn Alex about the impending charter change, it must have been Jack. So there was more at work here than she knew. And Alex had specifically asked her to do something, trusting her to handle their uncle.

She'd done it, and now she had to trust Alex to do his part. It would have been nice of him, however, to give her even the slightest hint what his part might be.

And then there was Patrick to be dealt with. And her uncle to vaporize. And the charter to be amended, along with a few thousand other things.

Once they'd landed and Ormond had been safely stashed away in the tac center's interrogation room, she snuck down to one of the computer workrooms for a minute to figure out exactly how to tell Patrick what the Dutch had said.

Before long, she'd have the pleasure of being tossed into the cell alongside Ormond's, and with that script running through her head on top of what she had in store later for Stu, her mind felt like a spinning plate act gone wrong.

It was hard to decide how to handle Patrick. What she'd done had been extremely dirty pool, but it would pay off. Someday, he'd forgive her. Maybe.

Until then, there was her heart to control. No one in Patrick's life had ever appreciated everything he was or could one day be. No one but her, and she was so afraid right now she could hardly breathe.

Within the next few minutes, his world would be turned upside down. And if she loved him—*really* loved him—she'd let it happen. She couldn't allow her own feelings to complicate matters.

Let him go. Just let him go without trying to apologize or explain. Not because he was too angry to be reasoned with, but because he'd soon have bigger concerns than what might happen between them.

After everything she and her family had put him through, she had no right to do anything other than fade into the background. If the two of them were meant to be together, he'd find her again. If not, it was out of her hands.

The workroom door burst open, and Patrick came through. Definitely still mad. His eyes glowed with it.

"Hiding from someone?"

"Stop," she said. "I know you're angry with me, and you've every right to be. You can get your revenge later. At the moment, we have business to discuss."

"You're damned right we do. How could you sleep with me last night when you knew the whole time you'd be—"

"I said stop. And I meant it. I will not have that conversation with you until the Kretts are in custody. For now, I have an extreme development to report."

Glaring, he crossed his arms over his chest. "I can hardly wait to hear this."

"While we were in the air, I made a call to a representative of the Hoge Raad. As you're all too aware, they have complete control over your contract. But what I found out was, they'd reduced your sentence quite some time ago. Technically, you've been a free man for four years."

"Excuse me?"

"Four years ago, the Dutch decided you'd more than satisfied your debt. Ormond concealed it. He led the Hoge Raad to believe you'd been informed and had chosen to stay on with the Sanction of your own free will."

Patrick snarled, "Where is he? I'll kill that son of a—"

"No. Please just stop."

"What? I'm not supposed to be furious he stole four years of my life?"

"Hear me out," she said. "There are steps that need to be taken before it's official."

"Like what?"

"I promised them you'd call to confirm you'd been informed. If you don't, we'll be barred from the Netherlands."

"You expect me to care?" he asked.

"No. But I'd appreciate it if you did."

His eyes narrowed, and before he could explode again, she said, "We need a recommendation for your successor. Carlos?"

Now looking slightly stunned, as if it had never occurred to him his freedom would have consequences for others, he said, "Yes. Of course, Carlos."

"All right. There's something else. I had Jason stay behind at the vineyard, and he was able to locate your mother's ring and tile. He should be back with them in about two hours."

"So they can be taken into evidence?"

"No. They belong to you. And I hope you'll speak with Arthur before you do anything too drastic. Because of your release, we no longer have a mandate to protect you, but we're still hoping his informant will come through. For now, please go call this number." She held out the card she'd written it on. "They're waiting."

"That's it? That's all you have to say to me? No apology for manipulating the living shit out of me?"

Forgetting herself momentarily, she slipped. "None of this would have been necessary if you could trust anyone for five whole seconds. But of course that's not possible, so all I could do was hope you'd figure out what I was doing."

"Are you serious? How was I supposed to know what you were doing?"

"The same way I knew what you would do."

"Then you give me too much credit, Kit. Apparently, you believe I'm a lot smarter than I am. A lot more fearless than I am, and a hell of a lot quicker to catch on."

Okay. This was not helping. "Just... Can we not—"

He grabbed her wrist. "Do you have any idea how many mistakes you made? Ormond could've been armed. He might not have been alone. Or I could've hurt Jason much worse than I did, and about a million other legitimate risks that went unaccounted for. Yet your most glaring mistake was your certainty I wouldn't pull that trigger. And I very nearly did. So the least you could do is apologize."

Why? Why had she let herself fall into this argument? She'd known better, but controlling her heart was a lot easier in theory than in practice. She had to get them back on track, and it seemed the only way to do so was to tell him what he wanted to hear.

"If sorry's what you want me to be, then yes, I'm sorry. I accept the blame for everything that's happened. You were right, I was wrong, and I hope you have a nice life. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a billion things to do."

Trying to wrench her wrist from his hand, she was thwarted by Patrick's tightened grip.

"Oh, no. You're not getting away with that." He pinned her down with those black diamond eyes. "You can't just kick me out of here without listening to a word I say."

"Yes, I can. I'm done listening to you. All I ever hear are orders, impending doom, or demands for apologies when *you're* the one who should apologize."

"*Apologize?* For what?"

"For believing I'd choose Ormond over you, while you were busy choosing revenge over me."

He blinked at that one. "My life was at stake. It still—"

"A *lot* of lives are at still at stake. You can make this all about you if you want, but I don't have that luxury. So go call the damn Dutch, then *leave*."

Patrick dropped her wrist and took a step backward, wearing an uncertain, wounded expression.

Well. So much for good intentions. She'd made a godawful mess of things, and it was time to go before she said anything else she couldn't take back.

She made for the door. As she passed Patrick, he said, "I'm glad you believe in karma. It makes it that much more satisfying when people get what they deserve."

Ignore it. Ignore *him*. He was a free man, and she had other ducks to align. If she stayed to let him rant it all out of his system, his questions might never get answered.

There was no time to make him feel better. Before long, she'd instate a change that would alter the course of Sanction history forever, all while paying close attention to Layne and Arthur. Once they were done and had Ormond sufficiently traumatized, it would be her turn at bat.

Damn her. She didn't even have the courtesy to *sound* sorry.

If sorry's what you want me to be.

Honestly. How insulting could she possibly be? Although she still had nothing on her uncle. Four years. Four years yanking his chain and rubbing his nose in his own servitude, and he'd been free the whole time.

Free. That hadn't quite sunk in yet. It dazed him. Made him feel as if he'd been hit over the head and forgotten everyone and everything he'd ever known.

Maybe it was just the bump from the other night, but suddenly he had no idea what to do with himself. He did have a call to make, however, so he went upstairs and called the Hoge Raad to receive their angry, bewildered apologies. The man said, "At least Miss Crawford is a woman of her word. God knows how long Ormond would have let this go on."

He felt like saying it was early days yet and she'd no doubt screw them over before long in her own right, but instead, he said something innocuous and hung up.

Free. He was a free man. If he wanted to, he could hop his plane and never look back. And he did want to. He didn't owe these people anything, and without a jail sentence hanging over his head, he'd only be running from the Kretts, not every law enforcement agency in the world. He could make a good go of it, maybe even turn the tables on them and eliminate the threat.

But what about Arthur and David? They might still produce results. And it would only be a couple hours until Jason arrived with his mother's belongings. As soon as that happened, he'd take what was his and run. He could find out what happened with Ormond from a safe distance.

Staunchly ignoring the fact that running was not his style, he made for the depot walkway so he could grab his things from Kate's house while she was occupied.

On his way past the tac center kitchen, he was accosted by a sharp, "Hey!"

David.

"Hey, kid," he said. Tina was beside David, and there was an enormous pair of shy, dark eyes peering at him from behind her shirt sleeve. Lori. "Hi, girls."

The little one blinked at him.

Tilting his head to see around Tina, he told Lori, "We never talk anymore."

Tina said, "She won't talk. She's not too enthusiastic about anyone but David, Wyatt, and Kate, and this place is crawling with strangers. Nice Christmas Eve we're having."

Those words had some kick. It was Christmas Eve, and the facility was a madhouse. Not a sugar plum or fairy in sight.

“Come here, munchkin,” David said. “He won’t hurt you. Those are his friends who’ve been keeping us safe.”

He could see David was doubly whipped as the child crawled into his lap and curled up in such a way that she could keep her eyes on him.

Such blatant distrust, although he supposed he couldn’t blame her after everything that had gone on here recently.

His crew—his *former* crew—couldn’t leave now. Someone had to be here to make sure the kids were safe. All of this was his fault.

If he hadn’t shown up Friday, right now they’d probably be opening presents and having a great time, and he remembered with painful clarity how it felt to know the rest of the world was celebrating, but not you. Your life didn’t work that way, and you had nothing to celebrate anyhow.

“You all right?” David asked.

“Yes. I just...need to run into town.”

He’d want his head examined for this afterwards, he supposed. But it would be smart of him to escape for a while. Get a few breaths of free air before he became entangled in anything else. Or had to say goodbye to his crew.

Besides. Kate would have a screaming fit when she found out, which made it all the more imperative.

You can get your revenge later.

Ha. She had no idea.

David said, “Okay, but I need to talk to you when you get back, first thing.”

“Got it. Where will you be?”

“Here, or in the tac center.”

A bit stunned he was about to go through with this, he took his car from the garage and headed into town. It was still early, but there was a

gigantic department store open complete with bakery, toy and electronics departments, and his first shopping excursion as a free man didn't start out very well.

He had no idea what he was doing. Back home in London he had umpteen people to handle the everyday concerns. And it was such an odd thing to know people actually made their living in such a place. How would he get on in the world when he knew nothing about civilian life?

Much to his relief, he ran across a very short, very old woman named Sylvia who turned out to be Wyatt's mother. Intimately familiar with the facility and everyone in it, she knew what was needed, so he ended up spending his shopping time in the electronics department, getting his butt kicked at demo video games by some kid named Pete who'd tagged along to work with his father.

About ten minutes into it, Sylvia appeared at his elbow to ask how much he planned to spend.

"I couldn't say. I've never done this before," he said.

"We could probably manage around fifty dollars for each child. So about three-hundred and fifty or around there."

"Fifty? Are you mad?" he asked. "Get them everything they want. And I do mean *everything*, Sylvia. Take shameless, total advantage of me. If my credit card isn't a blistered, smoldering shard of plastic by the time you've finished, I'll hold you personally responsible."

I don't spoil them, if that's what you're implying.

He could already hear Kate cursing his name, and smirked.

Sylvia snorted. "What's the limit on your card?"

"Limit? Be serious, woman. And set Pete up, too. Maybe then he'll have mercy and let me win a game or two."

For some reason, the woman sighed, shook her head a little as if she thought him extremely odd, then asked if he wanted things wrapped.

Of course he did. And once Sylvia had left them alone again, Pete asked, “Who are you? The king of England or something?”

“Nope. I’m just an ordinary Joe, Pete. Who are you? King of impertinent questions?”

“What’s impertinent mean?”

“I’m not entirely sure. But that’s what the Queen always calls me.”

An hour later, there was barely room for him in the SUV by the time they were done loading, and it had taken Wyatt and his truck besides. Back at the facility, he had the misfortune of drawing to a halt right in front of Carlos, who was too dumbfounded by this development to start another fight.

He was a bit confused himself. Carlos clearly hadn’t been informed of his new status. And he couldn’t blame the man for being stunned. This wasn’t like him at all, but then, the rulebook on what he was like had just been hurled out the window, and shopping had been quite entertaining in a surreal sort of way.

David and the girls found them just as they were carrying the last of the bakery boxes into the kitchen, and the little one decided to forgive him his trespasses over a breakfast of milk and frosted snowman cookies.

So forgiven was he, in fact, that he had frosting in his hair when David said, “Oh. I was gonna ask before—have you talked to Kate?”

“Briefly. Why?”

“Because we never did find any communication between Ormond and the Kretts.”

Reminded once again about Jack’s failed gut-check, he told the boy Arthur was on top of it, then gave him permission to sort through presents before the other kids got back.

In the meantime, he’d finally go pack up his belongings.

"You're leaving?" David asked.

"Soon, yes."

"Before Kate gets done?"

"Done with what?"

Tina said, "*David*. Shut up, retard."

"Shut up about what?" he asked.

"Nothing," Tina said, staring him down so hard that for a moment, he thought she was angry with him. But the next moment he figured out she was daring him to leave without asking more questions.

Women were so strange.

"See?" David said. "You want to tell him, too. And he's entitled to hear her stick it to that old skeezer."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm gonna get killed for telling, but you know how much I like the crap these people are always pulling."

"Indeed," Patrick said. "And what crap are they pulling now?"

"Kate's been waiting to get Ormond alone so she can move in for the kill."

"Alone?"

"Yeah." David paused to cover Lori's ears. "And you're a dick for being mad at Kate, you know. She only did that stuff so she'd be able to find out what really happened to your mom. Well, Catalyst and CFU too, but she told me you were gonna go completely ape-shit. And guess what? You did. So now she's mad at you for being mad at her, and said we should let you leave if that's what you wanted."

Patrick blew out a breath. "We are all merely players."

"Get over yourself, bro'," David said, releasing Lori. "It's not like she really shot you or anything."

"I don't care about the gun. It's the principle of the thing."

“Whatever. I like her better when she gets all cobra. It’s hot.”

Tina turned to give him *the look*, one particular thing about women he did understand after receiving it thousands of times himself. The cobra concept, however, eluded him.

“Cobra?” he asked. “What does that mean?”

“Snake in the grass. Rattlesnakes give you a warning. Cobras don’t.”

He picked frosting off Lori’s shirt while trying to unravel David’s tale and his own idea of what had happened at that vineyard.

It was possible he’d been mistaken. He’d thought Kate had failed in that room, hoping to catch Ormond on the spot and score a confession, but apparently her plan had been more elaborate. And perhaps he’d been a bit too reactionary. She *had*, after all, lit a fire under the Hoge Raad for him.

If sorry’s what you want me to be.

Right. Maybe he had some rethinking to do, but she’d be under firm probation until she’d needled a full confession from Ormond.

He asked, “Is there any way I can listen in without her knowing?”

“We all will be,” David said. “We’ve wired the ceiling of the holding cells and got observation points set up in the tac center’s computer lab and conference room. For now, we’re stuck waiting until Layne and Arthur have Ormond good and scared. Soon as they’re ready, they’ll put Kate in one of the cells, then move Ormond in next to her. Why don’t you come help us sort presents until then so I won’t have to hunt you down?”

It was a good thing they’d put him to work, for if he’d spent that hour alone with his own head, there was no telling what sort of knot he’d have worked himself into. As it was, by the time they headed for the tac center, he was beginning to question a lot of things that didn’t make sense. For instance, why the Hoge Raad would have discussed his release with anyone but the Global Council. Or why Kate had been the

one to ask him to name his successor, not to mention why Carlos hadn't yet been told he was the new Chief Thief.

They were gathered around a computer in the lab when Jason appeared to tell him, "I put something in your room at Kate's. Hope that's all right."

"That's fine. Thanks for picking it up."

Shrugging at each other, he could tell they'd be having words before long by the ill-tempered look he received.

Go figure. A woman gets between them, and they're no longer friends.

Jason moved on to David. "We're a go. They're about to move Ormond into the cell, so start your engines. And keep my link alive, just in case."

"Yes, sir," David said. "Where will you be?"

"I'll be upstairs in the situation room with Carlos and the others. It's the closest I can get without Ormond knowing I'm there."

"He's behind bars, man," David told him. "It's not like he can do anything to her."

"Ormond doesn't need to get physical to inflict pain. Now stop nitpicking and get the system running."

Grumbling to himself, David went to work until he had the computer lab monitors working, and both the other observation points.

On the monitor, they could see both Kate and Ormond, separated only by a wall of bars. Both of them were sitting on the flat metal benches that doubled as beds, Kate with her knees drawn up, curled into a ball while Ormond sat with his head in his hands.

He looked horrible. His colorless hair was sticking up all over the place, he was sweating, and he looked as if he'd been caged for a month, not a matter of hours. Served the old bastard right.

Silence prevailed long enough to make everyone fidgety before Ormond finally turned to face Kate through the bars. He whispered, "Can they hear us if we talk?"

"No. Listening devices aren't allowed in tac centers."

Ormond was quiet again for a moment or two, then he sighed and said, "Such a friend you've turned out to be. If you'd let Mancini take me, I'd be dead by now."

"You're my uncle. You've always taken care of me."

"I tried. God knows I tried."

It went on that way for a while, with Ormond doing all the talking, alternating between sucking up to Kate, blaming her for getting them caught, and cursing everyone else.

Ormond said, "You stand a far better chance than I of getting us out of here. What will you do?"

"I can't *do* anything. I'm clueless on half the things they're asking me about."

"It's all foolishness. They're so narrow-minded."

"Perhaps, but they're holding all the cards," Kate said. "I don't know. Maybe if I knew more I'd be able to figure out who to pin things on."

Even via the camera, he could see Ormond's eyes light up at the mention of deflecting blame. "They keep asking me about Nina, and you know who really did it."

"Uncle William, I know you told me that story for my own good, but we both know it's not true. How am I supposed to convince them it *wasn't* you? What if they've found her ring and frame?"

"That damned ring," Ormond snarled. "All I ever heard about from the moment Nina was hired was that accursed green diamond. Your mother wanted it so badly, but of course she would never have been able to wear it."

She said, “No, I suppose not. Was that why it happened?”

“No, no. It was my fault. Nina was a very observant woman, and she’d gotten wind of a project we couldn’t afford to have exposed. They don’t know about that yet, do they?”

“I really couldn’t say. They haven’t talked much in front of me. I don’t think they’ve trusted me since I ran away from Patrick in St. Paul. What project did Nina find out about?”

“Your mother’s masterpiece. Her final stroke of genius before she turned.”

“Turned?”

“She was ill.” Ormond leaned against the wall once more, looking more tired than ever. “All those men. I don’t know why she did that, when she hated them so. And she was so jealous of Nina. When some of our people informed me Nina had been sighted where she didn’t belong, I knew there’d be no holding Claudia back. But in the end, I made her stay in Baltimore. Nina would have suffered terribly if Claudia had gotten her way, so at least I was able to spare the poor dear that much, and make her comfortable at the end. She never knew a thing about it.”

“Bingo,” David said. “Cross number one off the list.”

Patrick, who’d just had the air donkey-punched from his lungs, was nonetheless seeing red, barely registering that Tina actually had a list.

It hadn’t been about jealousy. Or whatever she’d wanted from Jack. His mother had said he’d understand when he was older, and now, he did.

As soon as this was done, he needed to take a look at that frame. He’d go after it right now, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Kate, who said in that gentle but oh-so-flat voice, “I’m sure you did the right thing. But why did you take the ring and frame? It seems like a stupid risk, to me.”

Ormond asked, “Have you ever had to kill someone you love?”

“Very nearly.”

“Well until you have, you just can’t understand. I needed something I could hang on to. Something to hold that was hers.”

The bitterness in Ormond’s voice was an unpleasant surprise. Hard as it was to stomach, he might actually have loved Nina Mancini.

Kate asked, “Does Patrick know? Is that why he came after you? Or was it because of that hard drive he took?”

“Hard drive? What are you talking about?”

Patrick saw her falter, clearly confused. Why would Ormond feign ignorance when he was in such dire straits?

Kate recovered quickly. “Jack had some hard drive or other of yours, but I don’t think it yielded anything useful.”

“It mustn’t have,” Ormond said. “If Patrick had known anything solid, I’m sure he or Jack would have used it against me by now.”

They were all distracted momentarily by the highly unexpected arrival of Alex, who ruffled David’s hair, kissed Tina’s cheek, and punched Patrick in the arm.

Alex whispered to Tina, “She got him yet?”

“On point one, yes.” Tina handed him a headset with a microphone. “Make sure the mic’s turned off. And hush up so we can hear.”

They’d missed some things in all the commotion, but it fell quiet as Kate was saying, “Well, I did hear Layne mention the Kretts.”

“What about them?”

“Something about you communicating with them yesterday, I think. I don’t know. I was in the next room and couldn’t hear everything they were saying.”

“I don’t know what why she’d think I was communicating with them. They’re savages.”

“Are you sure you don’t know? And please think fast. They could be back soon.”

“Yes, I’m sure I haven’t communicated with the Kretts.”

Patrick glanced at Alex, who was doing one of those Tina numbers—staring at him. Begging him to ask the question.

The hell he would. The whole lot of them could go hang. They’d kept him in the dark one too many times in this game, and if Alex was trying to manipulate him into position again, then Alex could go pound sand.

Kate said, “I’ll see what I can find out about the Kretts on my own. But I’m warning you. They’re more interested in something called Catalyst. And... Mmm. Some letters. TFU, or maybe CFU. I mean, you told me the project was Claudia’s idea, but that’s all I know. Do we need to worry about this stuff?”

Ormond cringed. “We have to get out of here and bury whatever they’ve got. CFU will become vital once that amendment passes. Catalyst might, too, if they know too much.”

“But what are they? I can’t bury them if I don’t know what they are.”

“CFU is just the financing of the New Sanction. It’s relatively unimportant. Merely a system of self-sustaining income.”

David said, “There’s number three. He’s copped to CFU, not that it matters. We’ve got him on that already. Let’s see if she gets the bonus question.”

Sure enough, Kate asked, “Okay, but what do those letters stand for?”

“Catalyst for unity, silly,” Ormond said. “That’s what this is all about, remember? One global agency to keep everyone honest.”

“Ah. Now that you say it, it makes sense.”

Ormond sat forward and wiped his hand over a stubbly chin. “We’re in trouble, Katherine. The Catalyst project could be misinterpreted.”

“Can we get rid of it somehow? What is it?”

“The project is a series of chemical weapon explosives imbedded in densely populated areas, so perhaps you can understand why I’m nervous about this.”

“Uh, four,” David said. “Oh my God.”

Alex was already digging for his phone, and David was hanging onto the sides of his chair, trying to figure out which way to panic first.

Patrick reached over and clamped a hand on his shoulder to keep him in his seat. The boy still had a job to do, a message Patrick firmly relayed to him with a cold, black stare.

David blew out a breath and turned back to the monitor as Ormond told Kate, “I know it sounds bad, but it was only to be used as a last resort.”

“That’s reassuring. But there’s something else I need to ask—did you send those men here the other night?”

“I did.” The murdering bastard sighed, and turned to face her. “Forgive me. When I saw you with Patrick in St. Paul, I believed the worst. I had no idea you might be... Well, at any rate, David Brighton was a problem since he knew about his friend’s connection to CFU, and Jason had always been a thorn.”

“Thorn?”

“He’s a traitor. A spy for Stuart Tikalov, and as they say, keep your friends close...”

“Your enemies closer,” she finished for him. “And you expect me to save your neck after you sent those people here to kill me.”

“Forgive me, Katherine. We live in a much different world than most people. Power is the only way to survive, and believe me, if I didn’t love you, you’d already be dead. I could have killed you and Alex both any time these last ten years, but I never did. And I couldn’t be happier for

that. I never knew you had so much of Claudia in you. Now, you've got to convince them to let you out of here. Find out how much they know. Act sick or something."

"Yes, I think there's a very good chance I'm gonna be sick," she said. "Before they come back, there's one more thing. I need to know about the day my parents—"

Alex, who'd still been attempting to get a cellular signal, abruptly quit trying and switched his microphone on. "Kate, stop it. Don't you say another word. Jason, move. Get her out of there. *Now*."

Kate, meanwhile, kept right on staring at Ormond.

Alex asked David, "She can hear me, can't she?"

"Yep. Doesn't look like she's real interested in listening, though."

Alex shouldn't stop her. She was oddly calm, yet there was something about her body language that warned if left alone with Ormond long enough, his Kitten just might claw her uncle's eyes out through those bars.

Why cut her off? She shouldn't be denied that right.

Alex barked, "Kate, don't do it. Jason's coming for you. He'll take you to the admin offices and you will stay there until I give the all-clear. Jason, she doesn't leave that building. Not for any reason. Are you getting me?"

Kate obeyed her brother. She got up, walked to the cell door, and pushed the unlocked door open. On her way out, she said, "Oh. By the way? You're fired."

Patrick was the only one still watching as Kate's betrayal began to dawn on Ormond. First his eyes widened. Then he swallowed hard. And finally he flew from the bench to rattle the bars, screaming for her to come back.

Outside the cells, Kate was nearing the edge of the camera's view when she tore out her ear piece and dropped it on the floor. Jason entered the frame to take her arm.

In the computer lab, bedlam ensued with David trying to back up the saved footage and Alex swearing at his phone.

Only Tina was calm, looking about as bewildered as he felt.

He supposed he should be panicking too, but he was no longer Sanction. Considering what he'd just heard, he was rather glad of that, and his mother's frame was waiting at Kate's. If he was smart, he'd head over there before Alex or someone else could whip out the thumbscrews.

He wasn't quick enough. Alex grabbed his shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"Kate's, to pack my things."

"No. You're not going anywhere yet."

"Yes, I am. I'm a civilian now. Remember?"

"Tough, Mancini. My sister took one in the head for you. The least you can do is—"

"Took one in the head? What are you talking about?"

"She made the call so she'd have a mandate to protect your reckless ass. She's Chairwoman. And we need all hands on deck, because this isn't over yet."

Chairwoman. Kate was Chairwoman. "She's *what*?"

"Hold that thought," Alex said.

He told Tina and David to get the footage burned to disk and ready to transmit before shoving Patrick toward the door hard enough to make him stumble a couple steps.

"Would you like to step outside?" Patrick asked.

"More than you know. But there's no time. So we'll have a talk instead."

Fabulous. If David and Tina hadn't been watching, he might have made an issue of it, but as it was, he followed Alex across the hall.

Alex shut the workroom door. "I wanna know where you get off blaming my sister for what happened at the vineyard."

Ouch. "I did what I thought I had to do. And Kate will get over it. She'll have the office to console herself with."

"You are such an asshole. Do you think making that call was fun and games for her? She took office to *protect* people, including you. But of course you wouldn't understand that. The only person you've ever cared about is yourself."

"Are you done yet? I'm having kind of a bad day, here, and there's something I need to do."

"No, I'm not done," Alex said. "I am dead sick and tired of you demonizing Kate when all she's ever done is save you from yourself. And take a lesson from her on how to do the right thing. She's disbanded the Global Council and used the special circumstance to nix the charter's Ormond clause. As soon as CFU and Catalyst are resolved, Layne, Arthur and I take office."

"Take office? What happens to Kate?"

"Do I need to use smaller words? She resigned after firing the entire Global Council, and fixed the charter so our children wouldn't—"

"Wait. She resigned already? And the *entire* counsel? What about Jack?"

"Yeah. What *about* Jack, Patrick?"

All right. He'd had enough condescension and insults, even if there was a small chance he genuinely deserved them. Holding his hands up in resignation, he said, "Clearly, I'm out of whatever loop you lot are in. And you've got a hell of a nerve squaring off on me when you and Jack were the ones who dragged the Kretts into this thing. So can we just—"

“What do you mean me and Jack dragged the Kretts into this thing?”

“Oh come on, Alex. We know those e-mails were fakes, yet Arthur’s contact confirmed the Kretts had been told I’d killed Tony. Don’t even try to tell me you two weren’t behind that.”

Alex ran a hand over his mouth, then scratched the back of his head, glancing at the door. “Where’s Jack?”

“No idea. I haven’t seen him since we got back from the vineyard.”

“And Arthur?”

“In the conference room upstairs with the others.”

“Okay. I need to talk to him, but listen, Mancini. This isn’t over yet. I wouldn’t stray too far from the tac center if I were you.”

“Right. The games never end, do they?” Patrick asked. “You’re a fine one to berate me for hurting your sister. She’s been worried sick for five days while you’ve been off gambling with my life, but I’m the villain here, as always.”

Alex swore, then sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry about your mother. I know the Sanction failed her about as badly as anyone’s ever been failed. But if you could look at the big picture, you might see that *your* questions have been answered. Kate’s haven’t.”

“Only because you stopped her from asking Ormond what happened on that boat.”

Alex stared him hard in the eye for a moment. “I said this wasn’t over. What exactly did you think I meant?”

Chapter Seventeen

Patrick hurried through walkways, bound for Kate's and still stinging from his run-in with Alex.

It had been a very long time since anyone but Ormond had dressed him down that way, and Ormond's blathering could be taken with a large grain of salt. Ormond was an idiot. Alex was different.

Taking a right into the depot corridor, he thought he heard someone behind him. He stopped, took a couple steps backward, and peered down an empty hallway.

No one there. The place seemed abnormally quiet, but he was glad of that. He'd hate to run into someone else who wanted to tell him off.

He didn't really demonize Kate, did he?

Maybe. Maybe he really had been a bit quick to judge. It wasn't unlike Kate to do something she'd rather not in order to protect someone. In fact, if he were honest, it seemed to be all the woman ever did.

God. Maybe he *was* an asshole. Practically the first thing she'd done upon taking office was call the Dutch to give him his freedom. And he truly would have killed Ormond if he'd been allowed to make off with him.

If sorry's what you want me to be, then yes, I'm sorry.

Yup. Asshole.

He'd need to see her before he left. To apologize, if nothing else. Groveling would probably be more the thing, but he'd deal with that as soon as whatever game Alex was running had ended.

Kate's house was quiet, and he found a familiar black canvas-covered bag beside his bed. It sat there, conjuring some of his worst memories while he forced himself to pack his own belongings first.

Finished, he steadied himself to face the enemy. That case, which looked much like any other, had been omnipresent in his life as long as he could remember, and the heavily framed Russian icon inside had been the focal-point of his mother's addiction. When the aunts had given it to her, they'd shown her the hidden space between the tile and frame-back, but instead of smuggling them treasures to sell, she'd smuggled the drugs she couldn't live without.

Quite clever, really. The frame was huge and very deceptively built, leaving an inch and a half gap that had been lined with a thin layer of lead to make it feel and appear solid under airport x-ray machines.

He needed a look inside, yet didn't want to hear the sound of the hinges squeaking open. It had always been the prelude to nightmares for him.

The smell of alcohol, and the putrid scent of melting chemical crystals, seemed to emanate from that bag, sparking memories full of guilty looks and incoherent slurs. And he could picture her, sitting at the table in their rundown flat with a bottle of whiskey by one hand, a bottle of pills by the other.

Her eyes had been vacant. Glazed over and sightless, making him invisible, even when she'd looked his way. She'd stare out at him from her solitary world of pain, a world he'd never been allowed to enter. He couldn't help her. Could never reach her through the drugs and alcohol.

He hated remembering her that way. When she hadn't been using, they'd done fine. But when she *had* been using, his life had been chaos. And every time he'd pleaded with her to stop, she'd kept right on choosing the poison over him.

He had to know, though. If there was any chance she'd left him answers, they'd be inside that frame. No one knew about that hiding spot except him and the aunts. No one else.

His mother's own private black file. It had been lost to him since she'd died, and up until he'd heard Ormond's confessions, he'd never really believed it would hold anything besides pills and a flask or two.

Sitting down on the bed, he lifted the flight bag to rest beside him. Even the sound of the zipper was familiar to him, with its low plastic rasp and the way it had always caught in one corner.

Once opened, he found and pocketed the ring's red satin pouch. He'd look at it later. For now, all that mattered was the frame. The gilt structure still held an unmarred, textured-gold-foiled tile depicting a lamb napping in a field, one small hoof stuck out at an odd angle.

As a piece of artwork, it was hideous. Of no value at all, except for the materials. The only other value it might hold was still inside, and when he lifted the frame from its case, he was surprised once more at how weighty it was. A good ten pounds, at least.

Anxious now, he felt along the underside of the gilt work until his index fingers came across the serrated edges of two hidden dials. Twisting the right dial clockwise and the left one counter, he closed his eyes, envisioning the nickel cams inside, and felt for the slight clicks that would tell him when to reverse direction.

He'd lost his touch. It took him four tries before the cams let go of the pins, but he'd gotten it. And without giving himself another second to forecast what he'd find inside, he snapped the frame open.

Inside, the first thing he saw hit him like another boot to the chest: his mother's handwriting scrawled in red marker across the front of an inch-thick, legal-sized manila envelope.

Patrick,

I hope you never find this, but if you do, give it directly to Arthur Crawford. DO NOT OPEN IT FIRST!!!

He'll know what to do with the contents. Then get yourself someplace remote and safe. Do not come back until Arthur gives the all-clear.

There's so much more to say. Just know that I love you and if there were anything I could do to take back the hurt I caused, I would. I figured the least I could do was get Claudia off your back, and this ought to do it.

Love always—

Mom

Arthur. It had been Arthur his mother had been trying to reach at the hotel that day in Baltimore. Claudia had intercepted the call, and eighteen years later, his mother was still waiting to get through.

The hell he'd give this envelope to Arthur first.

Inside was a report, neatly packaged in a thin, expensive binder, complete with cover letter addressed to Arthur. She apologized for being so deceitful, but she hadn't thought anyone would believe her without a solid case to present.

Flipping quickly through pages, Patrick caught the gist. CFU had started out like many other dirty little secrets. The CIA hadn't been the first to contrive a way of using untaxed drug profits to finance their operations, they'd only been the first to get caught. There'd been many other instances the world over, and CFU had been ditched by its creator agency in the fallout of the Medillin and Contra affair.

Claudia had taken over the orphaned operation, using the pooled capital to develop and produce Catalyst. The scientists working to find a stable-enough chemical reagent with an extraordinarily long shelf life hadn't quite yet perfected their formula, but his mother had gone to

Atlanta with samples she'd nicked from their labs in Columbia, London, and Cairo, planning to have them analyzed at CDC Headquarters.

It explained everything. Every move she'd made had been another step toward proving Catalyst and Ormond were mortal threats. And what better way to milk the man for information than feigning a relationship?

He turned a few more pages until he found an explanation of what they'd seen on that computer in Ormond's study. The *items*, *properties* and *systems* they'd seen in the Catalyst expense report were fairly simple to make out. *Items* were the chemical reagents. *Systems* were the containment and detonation devices.

When his eyes reached the *properties* listing, he breathed out a stunned curse.

Amman. Auckland. Beijing. Berlin. Cairo. Calcutta. Capetown. Geneva. Jerusalem. London. Los Angeles. Manhattan. Mexico City. Moscow. Nairobi. Paris. Rio de Janeiro. Riyadh. Rome. Santiago. Sydney. Tehran. Tokyo. Toronto.

No one had been spared. No race, religion, or walk of life. Had Catalyst ever been set off, there would have been millions dead with no obvious culprit. Unity through utter chaos, the entire world crippled equally, and everyone reliant on the Sanction to restore order.

Emergency Response would need the list immediately, yet Patrick could already spot a discrepancy. His mother's information included only twenty-four items, systems, and properties—two caches shy of the twenty-six they'd seen in the CFU expense reports.

Either his mother hadn't been able to locate the others, or they'd been added later, but determining their whereabouts would have to be someone else's problem.

Flipping through more pages, he found particulars on chemical labs and more references to that Castille character Layne kept mentioning.

His mother had been hot on the trail, but she must have been unsuccessful because he ran out of report before Castille had been named.

Or maybe not. An envelope was stuffed into the back pocket of the report cover, bearing the return address of the hotel where his mother had died.

A chill raised the hair on his arms as he peeled the envelope free. Arthur's name was written on the front and the ink must have still been wet when his mother had placed it there, for the writing had dried to the inside of the pocket.

She must have been in a hurry. He could imagine her quickly scrawling Arthur's name and tucking it away before shoving it into the bigger envelope and writing her son a note.

Had she known she was about to die?

Patrick tore the envelope open to find several pages handwritten on hotel stationery.

Arthur,

I just got off the phone with Troy. He forbid me to repeat a word of the conversation but you should be forewarned in case something happens.

Very recently, Troy uncovered everything you'll find in this report on his own. But as you may or may not know, there's a prenuptial agreement signed by Troy that states in the event of divorce, Claudia would retain full custody of the children.

Your brother means to use CFU/Catalyst as leverage. He will promise his silence in exchange for that clause stricken from their pre-nup and a divorce granting him full custody of Kate and Alex. He also plans to demand Claudia's resignation. Once his demands are met and the children have been hidden away, he'll see that charges are filed.

Given what's at stake for your niece and nephew, I agreed to hold off filing this report. However in hindsight, I realize Troy has no intention of telling you any of this until he's made his deal with Claudia and William.

I'm afraid of what might happen in the meantime, and I want it on the record that I had no idea Jack Holloway was Carl Castille until Troy told me as much. I still don't want to believe it, but it stands to reason: Jack was CIA and knew of many different drug ops like CFU for Claudia to choose from, and Troy believes the only reason Claudia's been carrying on with Jack all these years is to keep him from telling anyone about CFU or Catalyst.

Thus explains the rumors about poor Alex—Jack thinks he's Alex's father. I'm just sick, knowing how blind I've been. I would dearly love to have a go at Jack right now. The only thing stopping me is Troy's warning I shouldn't confront Jack without taking precautions for Patrick's safety. I hate to think he'd hurt my son, but you know how persuasive your brother can be with his favorite "safety first, kill the bad guy second" line. I can't take the chance of this backfiring on Patrick.

So I pass the decision what to do about all this onto you. Please let me know as soon as you're able. I'd say more, but William will be here any minute.

—N

Patrick read the note through again, then twice more with a thick veil of red sharpening his vision.

His mother had died within hours of writing that note, and Troy's fight for his children had ended in death. In the aftermath, only Ormond and Jack himself had known Castille's true identity. Or the Sanction's connection to CFU and Catalyst.

Until now. Alex had been correct. This most definitely wasn't over. Jack had to be found and his intentions made clear. Preferably by force. A lot of force.

After returning the letter, report, and frame to their original states, he removed the spare gun from his overnight bag. Jason had taken his at the vineyard and had never given it back.

As he checked and loaded the replacement weapon, the betrayal began to hit home. Jack had known about CFU and Catalyst the whole time. Yet he'd pretended to be just as shocked and appalled as everyone else when those old dirty secrets had been uncovered.

The son of a bitch had brought CFU into the Sanction. He'd been having an affair with Claudia, even while seeing Nina.

Unbelievable. Jack's fixation on Mom's death was highly hypocritical when he'd been cheating on her with Claudia all along.

But what really made no sense was the theatrics. Jack had gone first to Alex, warning him about the amendment for some reason. Next had come the elaborate act in New York, where Jack had materialized to drop the bombs. The e-mails were a stage prop. Ormond had never ordered that hit, which meant the clock had never been ticking on anything but the amendment. Yet Jack had passed along a hard drive containing a CFU spreadsheet.

Why would he do that? What purpose did it serve? And why get his hands chewed up climbing over that gate? Why contact the Kretts three days later to name their brother's killer?

None of it made sense, except the timing. The amendment must have set Jack off somehow, but why? Was it about the money? The power grab?

It was no use trying to reason it through. He'd never been the brains of this organization, only the brawn, and had no intention of changing hats now.

He could almost choke on the irony. All this time, he'd trusted Jack but refused to trust Kate, the only one who really gave a damn about him.

He needed to warn her. He didn't even know whether she realized Jack was the one who'd tipped Alex off about the amendment. And did she have any idea her brother had been playing with fire these last five days?

There was no other explanation for Alex's actions. He'd stuck to Jack like glue while she polished off Ormond, warning her of trouble every chance he got, trying to keep her safe.

Replaying his last conversation with Alex, he finally heard what the man had been trying to say without actually saying it.

Yes, what about Jack, Patrick? Your questions have been answered. Kate's haven't. I said this wasn't over. What exactly did you think I meant?

God. Not only was he an asshole, he was also an idiot. Alex had been trying to tell him Troy's killer was among them. And he couldn't name him because Jack could be listening.

Ten to one odds, Alex would have Jack dead before they could be found. The only question was why Alex had waited this long.

His gun set to rights, he dressed quickly, this time slipping his holster on beneath his jacket, wondering if Kate had a safe in this place somewhere. The frame needed to be tucked away for later.

He hesitated a moment, then began to dial her cellphone, realizing after a couple digits there was no signal.

Odd, but it probably shouldn't be a surprise. Jack was a pro, and a pro wouldn't let something as simple as a phone call outside the facility stop him this late in the game.

Just to be sure, he picked up the phone on Kate's nightstand. Dead as a doornail.

He went very still as the facility's computer capabilities crossed his mind. David would be able to get word out. And he and Tina had been left alone in the lab.

Alone. And no one knew where Jack was.

His mother's frame and report forgotten, he tore downstairs. But as he passed the cupboard door under the stairs, he stopped.

He'd heard something. He wasn't sure where the sound had come from or even what it had been, yet something about it had set off the gut-check with extreme prejudice.

Silent, he waited.

The sound came again. A sniff. Very soft, from inside the cupboard.

Patrick got down on his knees and opened the door, and there, pressed against the back wall, was Lori. She'd obviously been crying for quite some time. Poor thing was terrified half to death, surrounded by Kate's boots, and half-obiterated from sight by coats.

How long had she been hiding there? He'd been upstairs a good twenty-five minutes. Maybe longer.

For the second time in his life, he knew a rush of protective instinct so strong it nearly broke through his skin.

Keeping the edge out of his voice, he asked gently, "What's wrong, little one?"

Lori shook her head and pressed herself even harder against the back wall.

"Honey, it's all right. I'll fix it if you tell me what's wrong."

"Your friend is bad."

"My friend? You mean Jack?"

She nodded.

"I know. I just found that out. I've been stupid, haven't I?"

She blinked at him.

"What did he do, sweetheart? Can you come out here and tell me?"

"He made Wyatt sick."

Made him sick. How? With what? And *why*?

"How did he do that?" Patrick asked. "If you can tell me where Wyatt is, I can make him better."

"You can make him better?"

"I promise I'll do my best. Where were you? What did Jack do?"

"I wanted a present and Wyatt was gonna sneak me one. He told me to stay in my room but I wanted to see which one he got, and then..."

Trying to help her along, he asked, "Did you follow him to peek?"

She nodded. "I got down on my belly by the stairs the way David does when he doesn't want to get caught."

"Very smart. What happened next?"

"Jack sprayed him in the face with hairspray or something, and then Wyatt got sick. He fell down, and Jack shoved him behind the presents."

Oh God. Jack's hands were torn up. He couldn't fire a gun, so he was using the sedative inhalant instead.

But why? Buying himself time to get away? What was the bloody *point* of all this?

"Okay. Thank you for telling me. And I'll bet you want Kate, don't you? Is that why you're hiding in her coat closet?"

A vehement nod was her response, and he could sympathize. He wanted Kate, too, but he couldn't wait around for her to save him this time.

“Come on, love. I’ll take you to her.”

Lori scrambled out and straight into his arms, clinging so hard he felt like he was in a sleeper hold.

He wasted no time heading into the kitchen as Lori asked the inevitable question he couldn’t answer.

“Where’s my sister?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet. The moment I hand you over to Kate, I’ll go find her first thing.”

“What about Wyatt?”

“Wyatt will be okay,” he whispered, hurrying down the corridor to the depot. “That stuff Jack used only made him sleepy, not sick.”

“But what if he gets you, too?”

“He’d need more than that spray to get me. Try not to worry. And be very, very quiet so we don’t scare the Christmas tree fairies on our way through. They’ll watch over Wyatt for us if we pay them in cookies, you know.”

Lori raised her head to give him a dubious look, but he winked at her and was relieved a bit when she gave up a watery smirk.

He regretted the lapse a moment later. Had he paid total attention to his surroundings, he might have seen the lone man with an unmistakable shock of red hair before he’d been seen himself.

Kyle Krett stood in the center of the depot, a gun with a custom-made silencer raised to Patrick’s knee-level.

“Stop, Mancini,” Kyle said.

He stopped. What else could he do? Dear God, he had a six-year-old in his arms and a hit man poised to strike. His gun was holstered, and his shooting hand was supporting Lori’s weight.

He could feel her begin to shake. She was terrified again, and this was the end for him. He had to try something. Anything.

Hoping she wouldn't understand him, Patrick spoke in French. "I'll come quietly if you let the girl go."

"Noble," Kyle answered in like tongue, "but unnecessary. We're not here for you."

"Then why are you here?"

"I ask the questions. Where is Jack Holloway?"

Jack. Again. "If you came here to kill him, you'll have to get in line."

Kyle's head tilted a bit to the side, rather like an intelligent but puzzled dog. After a few seconds, he lowered the gun. "Sorry to cheat you of the pleasure, but we have prior claim. He's been having us on for days, using the boy as bait."

"Boy? What boy?"

"David Brighton."

David. *David*. Jesus Christ. There were still contracts out for his life, and Jack had brought the Kretts here to kill David over CFU.

"No. No, no. You have to listen to me, Kyle. I don't know what kind of game Jack's—"

"We already have the boy. But I might forget he's here if you produce your old friend Jack."

"Deal," Patrick said instantly. "Provided you allow me to leave the girl with someone safe."

"That could prove difficult. Nearly everyone in this place is unconscious. Rooms full of them over in that building with the cell block. A security office in this place as well."

God dammit, Jack. That son of a bitch had taken that spray to everyone, and he'd better hope and pray Kyle got to him first.

For a second, he contemplated asking whether they'd found anyone in the admin offices, but decided against it. He couldn't take the chance of leading Kyle anywhere near Kate. Especially not with Jason standing

by to spook Kyle into shooting. “There was a girl with David. Where is she?”

“She’s with him. We put them in a cell for safe keeping.”

“Was Ormond still there?”

“Oh yes. Pleaded something terrible for us to free him, but I rather enjoyed seeing the arrogant pig locked up.”

He almost smiled at that. Even the Kretts hated Ormond.

“Let’s go.”

Chapter Eighteen

Kate prowled her office, checking the clock for the thousandth time. It had been nearly half an hour since she'd been sequestered, and still there was no sign of Alex.

He had a lot of explaining to do. Why had he stopped her asking the only question left?

This time it wasn't her heart in need of controlling, it was her temper. She understood Alex must have had a good reason, but there was too much going on to be left in the dark this way. The phones were dead. Cell signal and broadband Internet both had been knocked out somehow. Trying not to be scared or mad was tough, especially when she didn't know where the kids were.

And what about Alex? Layne? Arthur? Or Patrick?

Maintain. She just had to maintain a while longer. Alex would show up sooner or later to tell her what the heck was going on.

The sound of Jason's raised voice outside sent her charging for the door. It flew open to admit Alex, and at the sight of him, she nearly fainted.

He'd been in a fight. A bad one. His shirt was covered in blood, there was a gash high on one cheekbone, and the blue-gray pall of early bruising on the other.

"What happened to you?" she cried. "Are you all right?"

Alex rushed past her to a stack of Emergency Management storage trunks. He set one of the smaller ones on her desk. "Relax. Most of the blood's not mine."

“Whose is it?”

“Jack’s. Are you armed?”

“Yes, but—”

“Good.” He pointed to the case on her desk. “Gear up. Jason? Take that one.”

Kate unlatched the lid to find a riot control vest inside. “Now would be a very good time to tell me what’s going on.”

“Jack’s been behind a desk too long, is what’s going on. Turned himself into one seriously incompetent criminal.”

“I knew it,” Jason said. “He wants CFU and Catalyst back from Ormond, doesn’t he?”

“That might be what he wants now, but he had loftier goals to start.” Alex tightened the Velcro strapping of his vest, then began loading it with ammo.

So much for no weapons on the property. Her brother had an entire arsenal in here. He said, “Jack thought he’d have control of the entire Sanction by proxy if he could get Ormond to kill Kate and Patrick.”

“*What?*” Kate cried.

“Just listen. Jack didn’t find out Ormond was about to make a move until it was practically done. He had zero time to plan, but saw a means to get you two out of my way, so he took it.”

“Out of *his* way, you mean.”

“No, I meant *my* way. Up until about fifteen minutes ago, Jack thought I was his son. He didn’t react well.”

“Oh dear God. You have to be joking.”

“If only. His plan was to make Ormond mad enough to kill you both. Jack could’ve killed you himself, but Patrick? Not a chance.”

“No. Jack and Patrick are best friends. He couldn’t have meant to—”

“Think about it, Kate. I can’t say I’m a big fan of Mancini, but there’s one thing both Jack and I know—if anything ever happened to you, Patrick would never stop coming until he had the man who did it. And would you want him gunning for you?”

Jason said, “Wouldn’t live long enough to worry much.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Alex said. “And Ormond might have come through for Jack if that crew hadn’t given up so easily. Or if Jack himself hadn’t been such a moron. I don’t think he even considered there might be CFU information on that disk he gave Patrick. Certainly didn’t count on David ratting Patrick out to Layne, and he definitely had no clue it was the Krett brothers who solicited the hit on their own brother in the first place.”

Kate asked, “*What?*”

“The Kretts made a deal with Interpol not to kill on their turf for a year if they’d contract the Sanction to put Tony down.”

“Why would they do that to their own brother?”

“They had no choice. He was so out of control, he would have gotten them caught, and I suppose Interpol thought a year off and one dead Krett was better than nothing. Point being, Jack didn’t know about the deal. I did. So I was wise to him about half an hour after I got to New York.”

“But what about all the—”

“Everything he did out there was an act,” Alex interrupted, assembling an automatic weapon from a kit. “Had a hell of a time of it. He wanted to get beat up a little to scare Patrick, except the locals he picked at that bar kicked his ass. Then he accidentally sideswiped another vehicle on his way out of the lot. Generated a police report I found right away. And once he got to Patrick’s, numbnuts had shut his phone off again and slept through the gate buzzer, so Jack had to climb

over and got his hands all torn up, landing him in the hospital. Couldn't very well bury CFU with half the Sanction in his room, and it's been non-stop damage control ever since. I'll bet he damned near crapped himself when you guys raided old Tac East."

Kate, who'd been slipping into the heavy gear vest, paused. "Okay. I understand what you mean by incompetent but why did he think you're his son?"

An odd look passed between Jason and her brother.

"Oh for God's sake!" Kate cried. "How long have you known who Jason was?"

"A while."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Is this important?"

"Hell *yes* it's important. What else do you know that you're not telling me?"

Jason said, "We gotta tell her, man. Just get it out there in case something happens."

"All right, but this has to be quick. Keep dressing, because we need to move," Alex said. "Jack and Mom had been involved forever. After Nina died, Jack decided he wanted Dad out of the picture so Claudia could finally make a dishonest man out of him. There was a bunch of other stuff going on to complicate matters, but bottom line, Jack followed the boat."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Ormond's CD collection," Jason said. "While I was on the plane, I listened to a couple I'd found in the cabinet with Nina's belongings. Jack never knew what really happened to Nina, but Ormond's known all this time Jack killed your parents. We have a recording of him arguing with Jack about how Claudia ended up dead. Jack said... God I'm sorry, Kate."

Forgive me for being this blunt, but Jack said once he'd shot and dumped your father, Claudia went berserk. He had to do it. And Ormond never retaliated because Jack had just won him the ultimate prize."

Kate said, "The Sanction, all to himself. And fourteen years later, he gifted Jack a seat on the Global Council in gratitude for a job well done."

She tucked her gun into its holster and went for the door. Somewhere in this facility were two men who needed to die.

"Hey! Kate! Get back here. Where are you— Shit. Jason, hurry up."

They ran after her, but Patrick wasn't the only one in the Sanction with jets.

Unfortunately, neither was she. Jason caught up and grabbed the back of her vest. Next thing she knew, Alex had her against a wall, pinning her there with both hands.

"Breathe, Kate. And *listen* to me. You don't know everything yet. Jack's been holed up in the evac tunnel since you got back from California. I'd been waiting for him to make a run for it so I could catch him outside the facility where it was safe, but he wouldn't budge, so I went down there trying to smoke him out. And about five minutes ago, I found out why he hadn't left. He was waiting on the Kretts, another loose end he had to clean up. They came in through the evac tunnel, and Jack got away from me. I wasted time trying to find him. Now the Kretts have Patrick and the kids."

"No!"

"Breathe, dammit. We'll get everyone out, but it won't be easy. Jack hooked an inhalant canister to the conference room vent. They're all unconscious, and the day staff probably is, too. And now I want you to think about why Jack would drag everyone who knows about CFU back to Eveleth and then knock them all out."

"Because his hands are injured and he can't shoot?"

“Wrong. Because I’m ninety-nine percent certain you’ve been living directly on top of a Catalyst cache for the last ten years.”

“Oh my God,” she squeaked. “Ormond said he could have...”

“That’s right. You ever try to make the call? You and this entire facility get shot to the moon. Bastard probably dropped one in my house, too, and the only reason we aren’t puddles of biohazardous material already is the attention that detonation would have drawn. Now, if you can’t keep it together, you’re going straight back into that office because there’s no time left for mistakes.”

“Okay. There’s an ATV in the gym with a trailer attached. It fits through the walkways. We can use it to move people out.”

“Jason can do that,” Alex said. “I’ve got to find Jack, and you have your own job to do.”

Patrick stood at the center of the cell. Tina, David, and Lori were huddled on the bench.

Outside, Kyle kept a gun trained on him. Patrick had attempted to negotiate. Kyle had not responded. This standoff could only come to a bloody end because the Kretts weren’t the type to leave witnesses.

He kept his body between the kids and that barrel, but if Ormond didn’t stop shouting, he’d reach over there soon and snap the man’s neck.

“We have to get out of here,” Ormond blathered on. “Don’t you understand? Jack’s been playing you both. We’re all about to be blown up!”

Kyle thought Ormond was bluffing. Patrick didn’t. The CFU expenses had listed twenty-six caches. His mother’s list, twenty-four.

David had figured out the discrepancy for himself. “You were gonna blow Kate and Alex up if they ever tried to take—”

“Quiet,” Patrick interrupted. The kid was naming names.

If he could only get Kyle to leave for a couple seconds, he could pick the cell door. But of course, that’s why Kyle wasn’t leaving. The other two Krett brothers were still trying to find Jack, and until they did, Kyle wouldn’t move.

The man was growing impatient, however. Communications between him and his brothers were completely cut off without a cellular signal, a circumstance no one in his position would care for. He was starting to sweat. And it wouldn’t be long until Kyle shot Ormond. Not that anyone would mind horribly, but the kids didn’t need to see it happen.

He had to think a way out of this cell. Or to make Kyle take just a couple more steps toward the bars.

Somewhere beyond the cellblock, a door opened and closed. Kyle turned to face the hallway, but neither of them could hear anything new. He doubted the Krett brothers or Jack would be so quiet. Who was out there?

After about five seconds, they heard the sound of footsteps moving along at a leisurely pace, which struck him as odd. It didn’t sit well with Kyle, either. He was no doubt torn between having a look and turning his back on an experienced assassin who picked locks for a living.

The footsteps drew closer, and from his angle outside the cells, Kyle could see the newcomer before Patrick could.

Kyle pointed the gun their direction, but the look on his face was strange. His brows had gone up a hair. He certainly wasn’t afraid of whoever was out there, and given the way his eyes swept them up and down, Patrick would swear he was...

“Kyle?” Kate called.

No. Oh *hell* no.

All the air left his lungs, and everyone, even Ormond, was shocked into silence.

Kate said, "Come quickly. Your brothers have Mr. Halloway, and you're needed."

The man looked completely flummoxed, and Patrick didn't blame him. Kate's voice was infused with concern, but held the underlying reassurance of a good hostage negotiator. What the devil did she think she was doing? Where was Jason? And did the other two Kretts really have Jack?

"Who are you?" Kyle asked. "And why would they send you?"

"My name is Katherine Crawford. I've just been appointed Chairwoman of the Sanction. Your brothers tell me we'll be working together from time to time."

"I can't leave my post."

"You'll have to. Mr. Halloway has armed an explosive device that's due to go off in a few minutes. Your brothers would like to leave as soon as possible."

Kyle's eyes crept to Ormond. Then he lowered his weapon and went through the door.

Patrick set instantly to work. He took the pick gun from his pocket, flipped the tool around, and stuck his arm through the bars.

From the hallway, he heard a sound that stilled his hand—the unmistakable, meaty pop of breaking bone.

Kyle Krett cried out in agony. When it died off, there was a soft hissing noise, followed by a thud.

David flew to the cell door. "*Kate!*"

She entered, hauling Kyle by the collar, and Patrick couldn't have loved her more if he'd tried. Kyle Krett. One of the most skilled and

highest paid assassins in the world, and she'd taken him down in a matter of seconds with that deceptively serene demeanor.

Watching her, he was so transfixed that when she abandoned her task to toss him the heavy tac center key ring, it hit him smack in the middle of his bruised chest.

"Ow," he complained, bending to pick it up.

"Sorry. Get the kids out."

"Katherine," Ormond bleated. "You have to stop the Kretts before they kill Jack. There's only one way to arm Catalyst, and if Jack was really in my Baltimore house, he could have taken that laptop."

She withered him with a stare first, then said, "I was lying. The Kretts don't have Jack. We don't know where any of them are."

"We have to find him. That laptop is the only way to set Catalyst off, and I'm sure that's what he means to do. Everyone who knows about CFU and Catalyst is in here somewhere."

"He couldn't set it off even if he wanted to," David argued. "All the signals are disrupted. Phone, cellular, even the broadband. The laptop wouldn't be able to connect to anything."

"The satellite's still up," Ormond said. "And that's how it works."

Patrick swung the door open. "Tina, can you drive?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. But—"

"We'll need David on the satellite. I need you to get Lori out. Here's my car keys. And my phone. As soon as you break the disrupter perimeter and get a signal, call 911. We'll need every oxygen tank and mask they've got. My car's the SUV parked out front of the depot. Take your sister for a swim."

He handed everything over to Tina, then waited while Kate gave them a hug and prepared to send them off.

Kate had managed to maintain her composure until then, but the girls were a weepy tangle for a few moments. And when Tina dragged David into the clutch, it got even worse.

Finally emerging, Kate stripped off her vest to remove her holster. She held the holster out to Tina. The girl stared at it for a moment, then slipped her arms through the loops.

“David, Tina, you listening?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“My resignation won’t be official until CFU and Catalyst are resolved, so with the powers vested in me by my office, I’m temporarily waiving your training. David Brighton and Tina Lynch, do you solemnly swear to serve and protect the public in a manner befitting a Sanction operative?”

“I swear,” they said in unison.

“Katherine, you can’t—”

The look Kate shot her uncle instantly shut the old man up, then she continued on with a very abbreviated version of the induction oaths. David looked ready to burst from pride while Tina calmly swore to everything, and when it was over, Kate said, “Go, Tina. Alex is waiting upstairs. He can take you as far as the car, but you’ll be on your own from there. Make sure you do as Patrick told you, and call 911 when you can. Otherwise, straight to the hotel. No stops. Do you understand your orders?”

Tina nodded and then the girls were at it again, Kate nearly strangling the younger two in one last fierce Mama Bear hug.

When they’d gone, she took the keys from him and unlocked Ormond’s cell door. David laughed out loud when Ormond scurried toward the back. But the sound choked off abruptly as Kate produced a second gun from her gear-vest and trained it on her uncle.

She steadied her firing hand. “Where’s the device?”

Ormond stammered.

"I will pull this trigger," Kate said, "unless you cooperate fully. And in case you don't believe I'm capable of killing you in cold blood, know this: We've found the disks you stashed with Nina's things."

"Oh snap," David said. "What's on the disks?"

Patrick nudged David in silent warning as William Ormond, a man who'd had aspirations of running the world, blanched white.

"Katherine, I—"

Kate closed in on Ormond, backing him up against the bench. His knees buckled. He sat down hard and Kate pinned his head to the wall by way of the gun barrel. "*Where's the device?*"

Not good. Patrick slipped through the door to intervene as Ormond said, "Your basement."

"Can it be manually disarmed?"

Ormond prattled off a complicated explanation that boiled down to the fact they were screwed without the laptop. The devices placed for her and Alex were different than the others because the chemical version would have taken up too much space. The plastique-based systems in use were virtually tamper-proof while armed. Even after the control unit received and enacted the disarming sequence, the device's capacitors could still hold sufficient charge to detonate for weeks.

Patrick had done more bomb squad assists than he cared to remember, his knowledge of structures and ability to get their technicians past barriers a must-have in some cases. He knew how much trouble they were in with a ten-year-old device on their hands. Left largely unmaintained, the residual charge in the capacitors could escape through loose or damaged wiring, causing it to go off. The charge would have to be drained and the detonators pulled from the explosive compound before it would be safe.

Kate, with her gun still pressed to Ormond's forehead, inquired after backup copies of the laptop's software, and when Ormond admitted a version might be hidden in the Sanction mainframe, Kate ordered David to work fast.

The boy flew from the room.

Once he'd gone, Kate told her uncle, "This is for Patrick."

He saw the tendons in her hand flex. She was about to shoot. His mouth opened to shout something, but it was already too late.

Kate pulled the trigger.

The dry snap of an unloaded weapon was unnaturally loud in the cement-walled room.

Ormond, who'd been squeezing his eyes shut, opened one in time to see his niece pocket the gun and haul him to his feet by the shirtfront.

She manhandled him until she had him shoved face-first into the bars between cells.

Keeping him there with a knee grinding into the man's spine, Kate produced a pair of handcuffs. As the first ring closed around Ormond's wrist, she said, "This is for my father, you son of a bitch. The other wrist's for Nina. And everything that happens to you the rest of your miserable life is for *me*."

He'd been wrong, earlier. It was possible to love her more after all. Such a pretty little thing, but so mean.

Perfect for him, quite frankly.

Kate dragged Ormond off the bars and out the door. "Patrick, please help Jason evacuate spray victims. I'll be right with you, soon as I've brought him down to David."

The next several minutes were a mad scramble to get organized. Jack had hit fifteen people with that spray, including Carlos and four of his former crewmates, Layne, Arthur and the three Sanction operatives

they'd brought, plus Wyatt and four of the facility's staff. No one had any idea how much time they had, or if the device was even armed. But they had to get everyone as far from Kate's house as possible, and since the weather was hideously cold, their options were limited.

Jason had decided they should move everyone to the far end of the evacuation tunnel. It was a mile long, and surely a safe enough distance if the device detonated—no one would be hurt even in the event of a collapse.

They had to get the victims down there first however, and Jason had started with those closest to Kate's house. He'd already gotten Wyatt and the facility staff as far as the tac center's third sublevel where the tunnel began.

Outside the conference room, Patrick asked, "Where's Alex?"

"Looking for Jack and the Kretts."

"Alone?"

"Yes," Kate snapped, in a way that clearly conveyed her feelings on the subject.

"Jason, give me your guns."

"No," they barked in unison, then Jason said, "We get everyone out first. Then we can go find them. Alex's orders."

Ten unconscious people were transferred to the third level at top speed, and they loaded the first two onto golf carts. Kate and Jason drove while Patrick lifted Layne into a fireman's carry and took off at a run.

The carts were slow so he was able to keep up most of the way. Quite easy when you were afraid a bomb would go off at any second.

On their second trip down the tunnel, Jason carried a female member of the staff while Patrick drove Carlos to safety, so he was in the lead as they approached the tunnel's end.

When they'd left, only the orangey glow of the emergency lighting had lit the space, but sunlight now filtered down the stairs.

They'd laid the first three victims horizontally across the tunnel. There was now a body lying perpendicular to the others.

"Stop," he called over his shoulder, but Kate had already seen it.

"Who's that?"

"I don't know. Stay back."

He stopped the cart and got out to run the remaining distance.

The new addition was Lee, oldest of the Krett boys.

A noise from above made Patrick go for his gun, but the muttered curse that followed the sound came from a familiar source.

Rushing up the stairs, he found Alex at the top, the other Krett slung across his shoulders.

"Help."

Patrick took over, then dropped Steve Krett to the floor when he got a good look at Alex. He'd been shot through the left upper arm. It was bleeding steadily. And how the hell Alex had lugged two bodies around with that wound, Patrick couldn't guess.

Alex wavered on his feet, and Patrick caught him before he could fall.

"It's all right, Alex. I got you. *Kate!*" he yelled, then said, "Just hang on, man. She'll take care of you."

Patrick carefully hauled him down the stairs and when Kate saw her brother, all he could do was get out of the way. She took Alex from him and immediately began checking him for other injuries.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The Kretts," Alex answered, "met with an unfortunate accident involving a flash bang grenade and that inhalant stuff."

"Okay. And where's Jack?"

Alex shook his head. "They got to him before I did, out in his car."

“And the laptop?”

“This close,” Alex said, holding up his good hand with his fingers about an inch apart. “But I didn’t know the disarm code. When they shot me, the bullet went through and through, then hit the laptop screen.”

“Do you know how much time we have?”

“He’d set it for an hour when he hooked into the satellite. Must’ve tapped a circuit down here or something before I got to him earlier. I don’t know, but we’ve only got about eleven minutes left before it detonates.”

“Okay. We can do this. Do you know where the laptop is now?”

“Jack’s car. It’s right outside the shed.”

“Thank you. Patrick, go get what’s left of it and bring it to David. The screen may be shot, but the hard drive might not be.”

“On it.”

The next ten minutes were sheer madness. The sheriff arrived with three ambulances, the rest of the bodies got moved, and David and Ormond were evacuated after successfully disarming the bomb’s control unit.

They’d gathered at the end of the evac tunnel to decide what to do about the bomb. It could still detonate unless someone went in to drain the charge and disconnect the detonators.

The nearest trained bomb technician was hours away, and as Kate forced the details of the bomb’s location and physical makeup from her uncle, Patrick knew what he’d have to do.

He’d never actually handled an explosive device, but he’d seen similar procedures done any number of times, and God knew he’d drained his share of field capacitors while repairing security systems. He was about to volunteer when Jason did it for him.

“Trick’s seen it done,” Jason said. “And he’s fast as hell. He could be over there and have the whole—”

“No,” Kate interrupted. “There is absolutely no way I’ll—”

“Someone go check Carlos for a resistor set and a pair of pliers. He’s usually packing half a toolbox in his coat.”

David ran to catch the ambulance, and Patrick took Kate’s arm to lead her partway down the tunnel. She kept up a steady stream of protests until he figured they were sufficiently far away from the others.

In relative privacy, he caught her up and stopped her mouth with his own. She didn’t respond instantly, but eventually he felt her give up and her arms twine around his neck.

It was a heavenly five seconds before she tore her mouth away to start in again. “I won’t let you do this. Everyone’s safe and it will only take a couple hours for the bomb squad to get here.”

“My mum’s tile is in that house, and why chance it when I can just as easily—”

“It’s not a leaky faucet we’re dealing with, you know. It’s a *bomb*. An old, unstable bomb at that, and if anything happened to you, I’d... You’re not even listening to me, are you?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I’m going soon as David’s back with those tools. I don’t want this place blown up. I like it here. And I think I might stay a while if the offer still stands.”

She didn’t respond quite the way he expected. “You could spend all eternity here in tiny little pieces if you do this.”

“Have some faith, woman. Incurrible I may be, but incompetent I’m not.”

As he watched, her jaw set, and a telltale shine filled her eyes.

“Don’t cry,” he ordered. “I can’t stand it when you do. And here—keep this safe for me.”

He went into his pocket for his mother's ring pouch, then pressed it into her hand.

"What's this?"

"A six-and-a-half-carat pine green diamond that's worth a hell of a lot more than five thousand dollars. I think you should wear it while I'm in there. Get used to it."

"Why?"

"Because I love you, Kate. Please don't let me go without knowing whether you love—"

There she went, making him stagger again with that greedy, insistent, beautiful mouth.

All too soon, David materialized beside them. "I hope to God you two don't expect us to put up with this sappy shit the rest of our lives."

"And I hope you don't expect me to put up with that toilet you call a mouth," Patrick told him. "Take her to Alex."

He traded Kate for the toolset, watched his future rejoin the others, then turned and began to run.

Eveleth, Minnesota

Six months later

They'd gathered in a darkened observation deck above the gym. Kate and Wyatt stood on either side of Layne, whose eyes were fixed on the track below.

Behind them, waiting silently on a bench, were David and Tina.

Layne was furious, but Kate and Wyatt stood firm. The facility was their responsibility now. Layne had only been granted this viewing in the hope she'd stop calling twice a day once she'd seen for herself why they'd gone against her recommendation.

On the gym level, Patrick ran along at what was jogging pace for him, and after twenty minutes of stubbornly keeping pace, the young man beside him was beginning to falter.

Any moment now, he'd reach his breaking point. Kate could see the anger on Tyrell's face. They all could, and Kate and the others knew that when Tyrell got angry, his first instinct was to lash out violently.

This was a gamble. Tyrell's test scores were off the charts, but his consistently violent behavior had forced Layne to reject him as too high-risk for Eveleth. Patrick had disagreed, and Kate understood why. Tyrell had grown up with a drug-addicted mother. No father. And he had a prolific rap sheet for theft among the assaults.

Yet he was only fourteen, and when they'd looked beneath the surface of the boy's record, they'd discovered he'd never once assaulted a theft victim. His violence had always been directed at the neighborhood gang members.

Patrick had asked to try a new approach with Tyrell, and forces of nature tended to have their way. Every day for the last two weeks, Patrick had been running Tyrell into the ground. The more Tyrell struggled, the faster Patrick would run, and it wouldn't end until the boy couldn't take any more.

Truth be told, their first thirteen sessions had ended in physical altercations. The fights had been easily handled by Patrick but devastating to Tyrell, who'd learned to get by in the world by beating it into submission. Met with someone he couldn't land a blow on and who never backed down, Tyrell's armor was ready to shatter.

This afternoon marked day fifteen of Patrick's treatment regimen. Yesterday had been the day Tyrell's pride and anger had first failed him. When Tyrell had stumbled on the track and gone down for the last time, there'd been no altercation. Not so much as a curse, a threat, or

anything else. Patrick had simply helped the boy up, walked him back to the tac center, and left him in the care of Carlos and crew.

Kate supposed it didn't help Layne's attitude that Patrick had poached his former Sanction crews to staff his company. Replacing them was taking much of Alex's time, and the company was still in recovery. Jack and Ormond's actions had taken a devastating toll on the Sanction's relations, but it had been largely mitigated by opening the doors to any client agency wishing to oversee the internal investigation.

Nearly every nation and commonwealth in the world had gotten involved, and the coalition they'd formed had been out for blood at first. Yet Nina Mancini had been their savior. Her report had been the constant companion of nearly every world leader for months, and her words had placed the blame where it belonged.

Ormond would never again see the outside of a prison cell, but that had been small consolation. At the time of his incarceration, the Sanction and this facility had been hanging in the balance. Three months had passed before the coalition had finished inspecting the company, CFU, and Catalyst. The wait had been pure agony, and she'd been shocked when the coalition had withdrawn after decreeing only that the Global Council be filled with elected representatives from outside, civilian sources.

Catalyst sites were still being sanitized, and CFU systematically dismantled. There'd been almost a thousand arrests made. A devastating crater had been blown in the drug trade, but it had been a bittersweet, temporary victory. New suppliers were already emerging, and no one was naïve enough to believe the market would suffer for long.

As for the trillion dollars of banked capital and all the Ormond wine label holdings, the media were alight with curiosity at the recent deluge of anonymous charitable contributions to non-profit drug treatment

centers. They'd never unmask the benefactors, but it was somewhat amusing to watch them try.

Down on the track, Tyrell stumbled and went down. Kate could feel Layne tense beside her, and even David and Tina came up to the window to see what would happen next.

They all watched as Patrick jogged back to the boy, talking to him all the while. Tyrell raised his head to reply, then rested it on an arm as Patrick got down on his knees and put a hand on the boy's back, still talking.

It was frustrating, not knowing what was being said. But she trusted Patrick. No one else would have gotten this far with Tyrell, and she supposed, in hindsight, his interest in the program shouldn't have been a surprise.

He adored Tina and Lori. He pretended to be brusque with David, never mind the fact they called each other every day. And the other inmates had instantly accepted Patrick as the new heavy to be reckoned with.

Not that everything had been smooth sailing. There'd been a battle royal over his Christmas present revenge, and some tense moments while she'd steered the Sanction into her family's willing hands. But the worst had come the night she'd burst into tears when Patrick had shown her the fuzzy yellow bathrobe he'd bought for Lori.

For two people who'd always loved to talk about nothing important, they'd quickly found themselves up to their hairlines in serious topics. The lives they'd led had consequences, but instead of turning tail and racing for the door as she might have expected, Patrick had talked, listened, and dropped roots faster than kudzu. And after six months, had shown no signs of wanting to pull them back up.

As for the ring, she was still getting used to it. They'd agreed to take things slowly for now so that when the time came, they could relax and enjoy the process of making it official. Afterwards, she'd go about the business of pleasantly surprising him while he happily bored her senseless with "normal" for as long as they both shall live.

Well, as normal as a law enforcement legend knew how to be, that is. His company was already backed up with work, a new home and his component development labs were under construction across the road, and he'd hired a veritable army to handle the bulk of it. Which left him free to lurk the facility halls with Lori, sometimes skating on the floors in their stocking-feet, sometimes letting her trounce him at whatever game she wanted to play.

The facility's clean-up had taken some time, and they had yet to return it totally to rights. David and Tina's departure had opened two vacancies. One had already been filled, and if Patrick came through with Tyrell, they'd be back to capacity.

Still watching, they saw the boy get to his knees, then sit back on his heels. His head was bowed, turned slightly away from Patrick.

She wasn't sure which one of them saw it start to happen first. Probably Layne, who'd edged closer to the glass as Tyrell's shoulders had gone lax. Then his hands were over his face and he'd leaned forward, his forehead touching the ground, when they saw the first sob shake his entire body.

Unrelenting, Patrick leaned down with him, continuing with whatever he was telling the boy.

It was painful to watch. Tyrell was completely broken, and her hands itched to extend some form of comfort. Tina and Layne must have felt the same, for they'd all but crowded her out of the window, their hands on the glass, eyes pinned on the pair below.

Kate stood back to stay out of their way. She had total faith Patrick knew what he was doing. She didn't need to observe every single second.

Her mind was changed for her, though, when Layne let out a gasp. Getting onto her tiptoes to see what had happened, Kate found Patrick's arms around Tyrell, who now had his forehead pressed into Patrick's chest.

And Patrick was still talking.

Layne turned slightly damp eyes to her, and shrugged. "Okay. When I'm wrong, I'm wrong. But you shouldn't allow Tyrell into the depot with the others until you're sure he's stable."

"Patrick's got that worked out," David said. "He's using the tac center barracks to house him for now. But the kids are all over him to learn Tai Chi, so he's gonna introduce Tyrell into the general population gradually during lessons."

"Pied Piper, I swear to God," Layne muttered.

Kate smiled a little. "Who knew?"

"Don't be smug. It's rude."

"Hey, it was his idea, and who am I to say no?"

"Yes, well, he should still at least consider our nomination."

"He won't, you know," Kate said. "He doesn't feel he's a good fit for the Global Council."

"He's wrong."

"I'll let you tell him that."

Jason came through the observation deck door, pleading, "Can someone get this off me? Kinda hard to field phone calls when your ears are being used as a steering wheel."

Tina laughed and hauled a giggling Lori off Jason's shoulders. "Sorry. She missed you."

"I noticed." Jason blew the girl a kiss as he backed his way out again.

Lori caught it, then wriggled free of her sister to go tug on Layne's skirt until she'd been picked up once more.

Tina said, "You are getting totally spoilt, munchkin."

"I know. It's fun. Patrick said I'm getting a puppy tonight, too, but we're not supposed to tell anyone."

"Oh he did, did he?" Kate asked.

Layne caught her eye. "The family, the house, and now the dog. You're very lucky, Kate."

Smiling again, Kate looked through the glass at Patrick, who was hauling Tyrell to his feet.

Every time she counted her blessings and said how lucky she was, Patrick would tell her it had nothing to do with luck. It was all karma, according to him.

Whatever it was, she'd take it.

About the Author

A lifelong fan of psychological thrillers and romantic suspense, Emma Wayne Porter believes the best heroes come from the most unusual villains. Combining elements from both her favorite genres, she'll steer romance down a darker, more sinister path, pursued by villains you won't soon forget!

When not writing, Emma spends her time either reading or getting whipped at Wii games by her children.

To learn more about Emma Wayne Porter, please visit <http://www.emmawayneporter.com>. Send an e-mail to emma@emmawayneporter.com or drop by her blog at <http://www.emmawayneporter.com/blog/>.

When deceit and desire collide, the results can be deadly...

Truth and Consequences

© 2007 Linda Winfree

For undercover FBI agent Jason Harding, coming face to face with the grown-up version of his adolescent dreams is a nightmare. Kathleen Palmer sees him as a despicably corrupt small-town law officer and a murder suspect. Trapped in a web of his own making, he must see his mission through to the end and bring down the crooked cops who've run Haynes County for decades. To do so, he must betray the only family he's ever known and fight his growing love for Kathleen, a relationship that could get one, or both of them, killed.

Determined to uncover the truth, Georgia Bureau of Investigation agent Kathleen struggles with her attraction to the one person who's awakened her since she buried her heart and emotions in her son's tiny grave. Listening to her heart could destroy all she has left in life—her career and reputation. When the truth about Jason's identity surfaces, they both face unimaginable consequences: Jason may lose his life and Kathleen the man she loves.

Book One of the *Hearts of the South* series.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Truth and Consequences*:

Anger set up camp in Jason's gut, reaching out tentacles that smothered the thrill he'd gotten from blowing two hundred bucks of his oh-so-convenient tax refund on food.

What did he care what she thought of him? It wasn't like he stood a chance, anyway. Her mind was made up, and any opportunity he'd ever

had of her seeing him as something other than just another corrupt cop was long gone. He resisted the urge to shove the cart toward the truck and create another dent in the pockmarked side panel.

Insects flirted and danced against the halogen security lights, casting weird shadows on the parking lot. The spot next to his truck sat empty now, devoid of the massive blue Cadillac parked there earlier. A familiar white and wood-paneled Wagoneer was two spaces away, and Kathleen moved bags from cart to the cargo area with economic speed.

He began unloading his own purchases, aware of her glances in his direction. She slammed the cargo area door closed. After a moment's pause, she approached him, her shoes clicking on the pavement like angry castanets. Jason settled the bag holding his milk and ice cream in the corner of the truck bed and watched her approach.

The bright security light glinted off the elegant silver studs in her ears. Anger glittered in her eyes and he stiffened. She marched up to him, her hands resting at her hips. "It's probably not my place to say this, but I'm going to anyway. This job in Haynes County and your loyalty to your cousin are going to ruin your life. You need to get out, Jason, before you get sucked in."

"Didn't we have this same conversation last night?" He nestled a bag of canned goods in front of his milk. "I need this job. I need the money."

Her gaze flickered toward the bags of groceries and he could sense the thoughts tumbling through her mind. She thought he was already selling out, taking payoffs.

Sadness settled over her features, tugging the corners of her mouth down, wrinkling her brow. "There are other jobs out there. You don't have to do this."

If she only knew. He rubbed the tightness at his nape. "Yeah, I do."

“Why?” She threw her hands skyward. “Just tell me why. Make me understand. And don’t give me that crap about family loyalty. The only person Jim Ed has any true loyalty for is himself.”

He shrugged. “He’s faithful about visiting Billy up at Reidsville.”

“Do you really think he’s going to look out for you?” She shook her head, dragging her fingers through her hair, the short wisps standing out, begging him to smooth them. “How do you know he’s not setting you up to take the fall for some of his shenanigans?”

A bark of laughter escaped him. “Shenanigans? Did anyone ever tell you, Miss Palmer, that you have an old-fashioned vocabulary?”

She muttered a word sure to have offended the old-fashioned English teacher they’d shared in high school.

He lifted his eyebrows and muffled his laugh this time. With a quick shove, he sent the cart into the buggy corral and turned to face her again. “Why do you care? Does it matter whether you’re slapping cuffs on me or Jim Ed?”

The question brought her up short. He could tell by her rapid blinking. Finally, she nodded. “Yes, it does. I don’t want to see him bring you down, too. You deserve more than that.”

The quiet words ricocheted through his brain. She thought he deserved better. No one—*no one*—had ever said that. While he tried to digest the idea that the girl who’d always been out of his reach thought him worthy of more than he had, she stepped forward, a hand gentle on his arm. “You have to get out now. Before it goes any further.”

I can’t. The words refused to leave his lips, his brain short-circuiting since all he could focus on was the warmth of her hand against his bare skin. He stared at her, her eyes dark and luminous. The muggy air pressed in on them, enveloping them in the silence of the deserted parking lot. Heat radiated from her skin on his, desire invading his blood stream, traveling through his body.

Don't do this, man. Step away. Get in the truck and leave her alone before one of you gets hurt. Or dead.

I can't.

“Jason?” Her lips parted on his name and the desire hit him hard, even weakening his knees for a split second. God, he wanted to taste his name lingering on her full bottom lip.

With a hand on the truck to steady himself, he bent his head and covered those parted lips with his own. Her soft mouth moved against his and her hold tightened on his arm. Making a small noise in the back of her throat, she swayed closer and he drank in her unique taste—mint mingled with something sweet and wild.

Can separated soul mates learn to trust each other again before a ruthless killer ends their second chance?

Bed of Lies

© 2007 Pam Champagne

Drug Enforcement Agent Ace Bear returns to Spruce Harbor, Maine to investigate a deadly drug ring. He's prepared to deal with the town's bigotry against his Cree heritage, but when he comes face-to-face with the woman he loved twelve years ago, passion flares. He realizes the ties between them cannot be broken.

Brenna McKenzie is furious the man who deserted her the day their infant daughter died has dared to show his face. When she discovers why Ace is in town, however, fear for her brother, who she suspects is a drug addict, forces her to swallow her animosity. Ace's return ignites a chain of events and soon Brenna's own life is in jeopardy.

As Brenna and Ace struggle to understand the treachery that once ripped them apart, they fight to stay one step ahead of the danger that threatens to put an end to their reunion—and their lives.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Bed of Lies*:

Brenna floated on the brink of sleep when Ace returned. Like the night before, she watched him move around the small interior. He stacked wood next to the stove before taking off his boots. She ogled his lean, hard body. She'd grown accustomed to his long hair, pulled back and tied with a thin piece of rawhide. When he moved to blow out the kerosene lantern, she sat upright, the blanket falling to her waist.

He spun around, his eyes widening. A hardened expression spread over his features, adding years to his age. For a brief moment, her bravery faltered. No. After all that had happened, honesty between them

was vital. Plain and simple, she wanted Ace. As much, if not more, than when they'd been kids.

She held his gaze and refused to back down at the cold amusement in his eyes. The loud, slow tick of the windup alarm clock filled the room. He may not like it, but passion flared in his eyes, convincing her that he, too, remembered the hot sex they'd once shared.

He came toward her in the dim light. "People will talk," he whispered.

The sexy huskiness in his voice sent a thrill straight to her belly. "You think I give a damn?"

"You sure?"

"I'm tired of the way we've been circling each other. We're adults now. We know what we want."

His mouth curved into a smile. "Hot sex?"

She shook off the feeling that the smile held a hint of sadness. "You remember. Back then it was more than that."

He knelt on the floor beside the bed and stroked her cheek with fingers still cold from being outdoors. "And now?"

"I don't know," she lied.

Ace captured her hand and brought it to his lips. Her breath hitched at the wet warmth of his tongue on her palm. He released her wrist and kneaded her shoulders. "You're beautiful. Back then you were a girl. Now you're a woman."

"And you're now a man, no longer a boy."

His mouth twisted in a half smile before he buried his face in her hair. He trembled against her. The hands clutching her body gave away his need. Did they have another chance at love?

Ace trailed kisses down her neck to the necklace that hung in her cleavage before returning to her mouth. His kiss held the same hint of sadness as she'd seen in his smile. The kind of kiss that had once seen a hot fire and now hoped to fan the burning embers.

She drank in his kisses, an occasional moan of pleasure escaping. Just when she thought she'd explode from want, his fingers burrowed beneath the blankets and closed around her hips. She kicked off the covers, craving cool air on her overheated skin. Ace bent and trailed his tongue across her navel.

Need overwhelmed her. She swallowed the sob that rose in her throat. "Ace, please." Her fingers clutched wildly at his hair.

Without warning, he tugged her to the floor. She scrambled to her knees so they knelt, facing each other. Her stomach somersaulted at the intense hunger in his eyes. Their gazes locked. Her heart beat in time with his erection throbbing against her.

Ace feared detonation any second. His erection pounded, demanding release. He forced himself to loosen his tight grip on Brenna's shoulders. Surely, she'd have bruises. Such soft skin, never meant to be treated harshly.

His body screamed to hurry and plunge deep inside this woman clinging to him as if she'd die if he didn't. His brain sang a different chorus.

"Been there, done that, jerk. Look where it got you the last time."

"This time's different."

"Right. That's what they all say."

"Ace?" Brenna's soft voice interrupted the mind battle, and he realized he'd stiffened in her arms.

"No talk," he muttered and claimed her mouth, toppling her to the floor. The floor better suited his mood.

His lips feathered her belly, tasting the slightly salty skin. In the yellow glow of the kerosene lantern, he focused on the myriad of thin, spidery scars above her bikini panties. From carrying their child. Joy and pride rushed to his head and quickly vanished, as cold anger pumped

through his bloodstream. She'd tossed their daughter to the wolves. Given the infant away without even a glance. Ace rolled away.

"What's wrong?" Brenna's hoarse voice revealed her hot arousal. "Ace?"

The small hand touching his shoulder burned. He shook it off and got to his feet. "I can't do this. There's too much bad history between us."

Brenna got to her knees. "That's not true. We can work around the past. As long as we're together, anything is possible. Don't make me responsible for what my father did."

Was she crazy? The Brenna he'd known would never act like giving away their child was of no consequence.

"Ace?" He focused on her face. Confusion dimmed the warmth in her eyes. God she was beautiful. He still wanted her. Wanted to grab the hand she stretched toward him and pick up where they left off.

His words came out more brutal than he'd intended. "No. It's impossible."

"I don't understand. Why are you so hostile? It's almost as if you hate me."

"Hostile? Believe me, you don't know the meaning of the word."

She maneuvered away from him, leaned against the bed and hugged her knees, head slightly bent. "Get out. I want to be alone."

His fingers itched to stroke the graceful shape of her bowed neck and tangle themselves in the black silk of her hair. For long moments he simply stared, then without a word, he left her.

Outside, Ace pressed his forehead against a tree trunk and gulped the cold night air. The frigid temperatures soon brought him to his senses. He'd been unfair, both to himself and to Brenna. She must know why he was so bitter. He had a hard time understanding why she didn't know already, but if she needed to hear the words, he'd give them to her. Pushing away from the tree, he walked back inside.

He entered the cabin and moved to where she still sat on the floor.
“How could you give away my child?”

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