



Night of the Chameleon
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For Charlie

Chapter One

Jack spotted her the first time he looked down at the crowd. She was short.

Skinny. Scared to death.

The woman stood out among the rubes gathering in front of the sideshow tent.

Had a half-starved look to her. Thin face. Stick arms. Baggy clothes. That wasn't uncommon in this part of the country. Times were hard. People went without.

She was small, too -- child-sized -- but he could be judging that wrong. Jack's vantage point turned everyone below into midgets.

An ordinary woman. Nothing special. One of a hundred nameless faces. What made her catch his eye?

It was the way she approached the plywood ramp that led up to the entrance, Jack decided. Hesitant. Feet shuffling. She walked as if being coerced. At gun point. His internal alarms went off. He studied her the way he would any plausible hazard.

No bulges in her clothes. No purse. No one behind her, with her, or watching her. No big deal.

"Paranoid," he said, chiding himself, then relaxed. She was just an average woman, scared but drawn to the prospect of a cheap thrill.

No, average wasn't the right word. Mousy was more like it. The shapeless shirt, baggy jeans, and sturdy shoes she wore would shame a scarecrow. She'd pulled and pinned her pale brown hair in a tight knot. He could see that perfectly -- it sat

on the top of her head like a defective doughnut. She wasn't pretty enough to ignore the clothes, or carry off the schoolteacher hairdo.

"You got the lights, Jack?" His father's voice wavered on the question.

He turned his head to call back, "Yeah."

Another look settled it -- she wasn't pretty, period. Her narrow face was all stark angles and hollow cheeks. Hungry. The small nose was slightly crooked at the midpoint. Broken once -- or just luck of the family draw. Her lips looked white. Frightened. At this distance Jack couldn't see the color of her eyes. The safe money would be on brown. A flat, washed-out shade of brown, to match the hair. He knew who she was. A spinster. A religious fanatic. A self-appointed prude. Everyone had someone like her in the family. The one who always served the punch at parties. Talked through her nose. Shied away from men. Remembered all the rules.

So what was she doing at the freak show, of all places?

Behind Jack came muffled sounds as the others took their places. Down on the makeshift stage below him, Nathan Stokes was striding back and forth as his small, clever hands gestured to the larger-than-life canvas behind him. Nathan's jowls quivered as his voice pierced the air. The crimson band of his bowler sparkled as he capered and wooed, promised and teased. The rubes watched him as though mesmerized.

Nobody worked a crowd better than Stokes. Or had more fun doing it.

The twilight air, stirred by a faint breeze, turned cool, and made the confines of the tent more bearable. A burgeoning smudge on the horizon intended to ruin

that before the night was over. A prelude to the summer storms that would come roaring in from the Gulf of Mexico.

When the rain came, Jack had a feeling it would be cold.. The fairgrounds would turn to mud. The canvas tents would leak. The locals would head for home early. Maybe it would all come down tonight.

He could only hope.

"Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! Be the first to see Stokes' Six Sensational Supernatural Spectacles!"

With his usual flair, the barker went on to promise sights of bizarre and unearthly beings. The fantastic. The unbelievable. The horrific. All to be revealed, he vowed, for the mere price of admission.

"And what, you may ask, can you expect for such a paltry sum? What wonders await you just inside this door? Well, folks, I'll give you a small sample. Right here. Right now. Direct your eyes to the only woman alive to receive ten thousand proposals of marriage! Our very own - Lady Wolf!"

The crowd lapped up Nathan's theatrics, Jack thought, like always. When Nancy glided out from behind the canvas, they eagerly pressed forward to gawk at a genuine freak. Which, beneath her exotic costume, Nancy most definitely was. Where was the little mouse?

Jack scanned the crowd until he found her on the fringes. There she was. Thin arms hugging her pinched waist. Head turning slowly as she looked from Nancy to Nathan to the row of canvas panels. He wondered again why she fascinated

him. The woman had all the appeal of a shaved cat. Seemed about as jumpy, too.

Their eyes met.

"Hello, chere," Jack said, though he knew she couldn't hear him. His lips curved.

"See anything you like?"

As if she'd heard him, the plain woman went absolutely rigid. Caught in his gaze. Unable to move. Now her face went white. She wasn't scared anymore. She was petrified.

Jack's grin flattened. "Guess not."

Her hand made a quick, nervous sweep over her pinned-up hair. Dropped down.

Curled in a knot over her heart. Jack saw her throat move as she swallowed hard, several times.

She might just puke right there, all over those ugly shoes.

"Show time!" Jack's father called out, too loud.

"Would you" --there was the sound of a scuffle, then-- "quit hogging my space, Terry!"

An equally high, shrill voice replied, "You kick me again, you pea brain, and I'll --"

A deeper, feminine voice rang out with, "Children. Places, please."

When Jack turned to look through the oval cutouts again, the little mouse was gone. Running for the portable toilets, he told himself. Plenty of people threw up at the carny. The rich, greasy concession food and whirling midway rides never mixed very well. The women preferred to do it in private, if they could. Who said Southern Belles were extinct?

Poor, frightened little mouse. A strange unease spread through him as he recalled that last moment. That frozen stillness. Could have been the sight of the Lady Wolf, except she hadn't been looking at Nancy. She'd been looking at him. Her expression reminded him of the way the reserve troops had looked, that last push into Kuwait --

"Christ," Jack said, knotting his fists against his thighs. "Not now." Better focus on the task at hand.

Jack moved back and avoided a stack of coiled rope as he returned to the control panel. Spot and display lights were controlled by a series of switches. Beside them, a row of buttons that when pushed would pipe taped music or special sound effects to the speakers discreetly hidden in each display cage.

Normally sound and lighting was operated by Bobby Driswald, the carnival's road manager and main mechanic. Bobby had left earlier to deal with an electrical problem with the bumper cars, leaving Jack to cover the controls. Jack didn't mind. Sitting in a cage eight hours a night had begun to pall. Fast.

Around him, the six other performers completed their preparations behind their individual privacy curtains.

Jack heard his father groan, and frowned. It was getting harder for Connie to go through the motions. He'd have to speak to Stokes about it. Outside, Nathan collected the last of the tickets, and urged the paying customers in through the entrance flap. From there they walked through a dark passage that led to the heart of the tent.

As they entered the wider, strategically-embellished display area, Nathan proudly announced, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to welcome you to the largest collection of human oddities within the Continental United States."

Show time.

Jack switched on the upper recessed lighting, illuminating the center of the tent with a soft, eerie glow. At the same time, he switched on the opening track, a classic rendition of Wagner's Lohengrin. The speakers were adjusted so the bass notes would reverberate, yet the volume would not overpower the barker's voice. Using Nathan's verbal cues, Jack tracked the progress of the group and worked the control panel accordingly. He'd been on the road too long not to be able to read the marks by their voices. There was the usual assortment: older kids, rowdies, a few couples.

Jack pressed two more switches as Stokes introduced the first of the six freaks on display. Now Imogene was illuminated in soft, rosy light as she sat on her throne-like divan for all to see. Wagner was replaced by the delicate, airy sound of Mozart.

A woman's strident voice rang out. "Oh, my god! She's huge!"

Was that her voice? Had the little mouse worked up enough nerve to come back and see the freaks? No, he thought. Not after the look he'd seen on her face.

That woman was halfway to Baton Rouge by now.

"Next time I'm bringing Garlene," another voice, male this time, said. "Show her what's gonna happen if she keeps eating all those beignets her Ma fries up every morning."

The little drab could have used a Mother like Garlene's.. Even now, knowing she was hightailing it back to whatever sorry shack she called home, Jack wanted to go look for her. Talk to her. Buy her a decent meal. Watch her eat. Maybe find out what scared her so much. Give her a few bucks. Nathan always needed help for the food stands --

Jack laughed at himself soundlessly. Where did all that come from? Talk to her, feed her, get her a job? He wasn't the Good Samaritan type. He didn't have time for a damn dog.

Nathan moved on. Four more cages were displayed one by one. Jack assured the occupants were appropriately spotlighted. Their individual theme music played. Nathan added his dramatic commentary about the highly unlikely origins of each freak he presented.

At last the barker reached the sixth and final exhibit cage. From the panel, Jack dimmed the overhead spots. Switched on a series of strobe and black lights. Started the haunted house tape.

"Last but not least, ladies and gentlemen, I direct your attention to Miss Nancy Carguitto, our very own Lady Wolf." Nancy's savage growl punctuated the speech. "She was found as a baby in the deepest forests of the Italian Alps. No one knows why Nancy appears more wolf than human. Perhaps while walking through the woods, her mother was attacked by some beast . . . "

"Or the Dago broad got the hots for a wolf," one of the rowdies speculated. That earned him a collective, raucous laugh from most of the other men. All of the

women present bristled at the insult to their gender. The rowdy's girlfriend got vocal and whacked him on the back of the head with her purse.

Nope, Jack thought. That old boy wasn't getting laid tonight.

Everyone stopped laughing when Jack activated the werewolf effects tape.

Nancy lip-synched to the spine-tingling howl from the speaker. Displayed her fake fangs to the crowd. Reached for them through the bars.

Nathan urged the group to hurry. "Be sure not to let her claws touch you! I've heard it takes only the tiniest scratch to become . . . infected . . . "

Jack knew as the group filed past, Nancy would take a swipe at a couple of them. The resulting shrieks would produce a panicked mass exodus, which efficiently evacuated the tent and ended the show.

"We're clear," he heard Harv Allen drawl. Jack turned on the main lights and went to secure the front and back entrances.

As he passed the cages and pulled the drapes shut, Nancy removed her phony teeth and winked at him.

"Too bad you're not doing your act tonight," she said. "You always scare them a lot more than I do."

"Don't tell Nathan," Jack said as he replaced her curtain. "I needed a night off from terrorizing the natives." He returned to the control panel. Reset the music tapes. Got ready for the next show.

Something was jammed in the crack between a switch and the panel housing.

Jack pulled a utility knife from his back pocket. As he flicked open the blade, unwanted memories of Kuwait came crowding into his head again. He set the

knife aside and looked down at his hands. It had been two weeks, he thought.

Jack struggled briefly with the compulsion, then gave in. He counted the fingers on both hands.

Still ten, Jack thought as he took the knife and stuck the tip into the panel. Still ten.

The soft sound of someone clearing their throat made Jack whip his head around. A pair of unblinking eyes stared back at him.

The little mouse stood in the cramped walk space behind the cages. Dieu, he didn't realize she was that small. He cursed himself. Who the hell cared how big she was? How did she get in back there?

"Next show, one hour!" Jack harshly called out the usual reminder without taking his eyes off her. The others muttered. The woman didn't move.

Like a repentant little girl, she just stood there. Staring at him. Hardly breathing. Getting caught sneaking in had that affect on some. Like bullfrogs blinded by headlights, they froze. There were always moochers trying to get a free look. The freaks had their own way of dealing with them.

She wasn't like any town girl he'd ever seen. Was she a kid, Jack wondered, dressed in her mother's clothes? A quick once-over reassured him. She had camouflaged her body well, but there were curves even the baggiest clothes couldn't hide. Gauging from the quality of her skin, Jack put her at about nineteen. Twenty-one at the most.

Must have slipped in through the side flap, after Nathan had roped off the entrance, he decided. It was the only way to come in behind the displays. Too poor to buy a ticket, but determined to see the freaks and get a quick thrill.

Wouldn't do for her to go away disappointed, would it?

"What are you doing in here?" Jack demanded. He jerked the knife out of the control panel. Kept it in his fist. Moved toward her slowly. He was a foot and a half taller than her. She'd be a snap to spook silly. Jack was in the mood to oblige her.

The little mouse had a backbone. Her chin went up. Shoulders rolled back. Lungs filled with a steady breath.

"I need to see -- " her eyes widened. She stared down at the knife in his hand.

What color she had drained from her small face.

Nice performance. Jack resisted the urge to applaud.

Her eyes were brown. They weren't dull or placid, however. They were the color of dark, rich cafe noir. Without a doubt her best feature. Hispanic? No, she was too fair. Now so white she could have doubled for Jack's dead mother, "The Snow Queen". Strands of the mousy hair straggled against her thin cheeks. Fear made sweat bloom on her brow and above her lip.

Jack was besieged by a sudden, erotic image. He could see himself hauling her back behind the cages. Pulling her down to the sawdust-covered dirt. Licking the tiny, salty droplets from her skin.

"Yeah, I bet you wanted to see," Jack said, shaking off the instantly arousing fantasy. When he had sex, it was with a woman - - not a frumpy little girl. "But you didn't buy a ticket, did you?"

She tore her gaze from the knife and tried to focus on his face. "Uh -- no, I didn't. But --"

"We don't like moochers, chere." He scowled and kept advancing. "Everyone pays before they come in. Everyone."

The little thing had nerve, all right. It took a certain kind of inner strength for her to stand there while he came after her. The basic human instinct for survival should have sent her running away in terror.

High time she learned how important those instincts were.

Jack halted a few inches from her face and bent down. Got to her eye level. Her gaze never left the knife in his hand. Was she afraid he'd use it on her? Probably. She didn't step back, but a sound slipped from her throat. It might have been a whimper. Or a prayer. Or both.

"You don't understand --" she said, her voice hovering just above a whisper.

She sounded sick. Good. She was starting to crack. Out of habit, Jack noted the other details. She wore no jewelry. No makeup. A cheap watch around her left wrist. Poor, but clean. An unconscious grace showed in every line of her scrawny frame. She held herself well for someone paralyzed by dread.

"Oh, I understand, chere," Jack said. And he did. He'd grown up on the road.

Knew the difference between poor and rich. Town and carnny. Ordinary and freak.

He'd learned those lessons the hard way. There had been girls wherever the show set up. Pretty, snooty butterflies who had flirted and hovered around the lanky, dark-eyed boy he had been. One or two along the way had even gotten serious. At least until they'd met Jack's parents.

His mother had understood the pain behind that boy's anger. She was dead. After he buried his wife, his father stopped caring about everything but booze. Jack was left with nothing but pain and rage. The legacy of the loner.

"Let's see how you like being in a cage, huh?" He grabbed the front of her shirt. Shoved her toward the back of an empty display. "Go ahead, chere, climb in."

"But -- but --"

"Open the latch."

Those big, desperate eyes darted from his face to the simple slide latch. Her teeth sank into her lower lip so hard that a drop of blood sparkled against the white edges. "Please, you can't --"

"Do it."

Her hand raised and touched the locking pin.

"Open it!"

He could let her go now. She was trembling. Ready to faint or dissolve into hysterics. But Jack didn't back down. That inner demon of the past had been released, and he didn't care to lock it up with the rest of them just yet.

Her fingers fumbled with the pin, ineptly working it loose and opening the latch.

"Now the door."

Jack saw her fingers curl around one bar. Small, bony knuckles strained beneath the translucent skin. She wouldn't do it, he told himself. Now she'd lose her nerve. Shriek. Try to run away. And he'd let her go.

The small hand pulled the door open. The metal hinges made a small squeal as the section swung out of the way.

She tried to speak again, but her voice was gone. Her eyes moved from the knife to his steady, furious gaze and back again. "Good." Without another word Jack reached out and curled his hands around her upper arms. That first contact caused a brief jolt of awareness. No reason in the world for that. It wasn't as if she was attractive. Not this plain, rather stupid little mouse. She was too short. Colorless. An unappealing twig. Even her arms felt like match-sticks in his grip. So why was he getting angrier?

Jack pulled her closer. His nose flared as he breathed in her scent. Clean. Warm. Female. More potent than the most expensive designer perfume. Not much in the way of curves on her body. She was tiny. Barely cleared his rib cage. Her eyes were too old to belong to a kid. Jack didn't like the bleakness of her stare. As if she expected to be treated like this.

That reminded him of his purpose in putting her in the display. You're supposed to be scaring her witless, you dumb ass.

"Now get in."

He pushed her into the cage. Slammed the door shut. Secured the latch.

Stepped back. The usual treatment. Let the rube stew in the cage. See how it feels to be a freak on exhibit.

She didn't move.

"Well? What do you think?" The little mouse looked shocked. Then ashamed.

"Not so funny on the inside, is it?" He watched her sink down next to the bars.

Wrap her arms around her knees. She was shivering. "C'mon, don't you like it?"

She closed her eyes for a moment. "What's the matter? You gonna cry now?"

She was finally beginning to lose it. Her lips quivered. Behind them, her teeth clenched against chattering. Every muscle in her body appeared locked. And she still didn't say anything. Just looked at him with those wide cafe noir eyes.

He thrust one big hand into the cage. Seized a fistful of blouse. Pulled her against the bars. His breath stirred her hair. She didn't cringe, only jerked once and then went still again.

"Still want to look at the freaks?"

"No," she whispered. "I -- please --"

He looked all over her face. "Maybe I'll keep you locked up for a few days. You look like you could use a job. How about it, chere? Want to learn the tricks of the trade?" He got close, until his mouth was only an inch from hers. His voice dropped to a murmur. "Don't worry. You won't starve. I'll throw you some live chickens once in awhile."

Her eyes changed. Her thin bones turned to stone beneath her flesh. She gritted her teeth, hard enough to make her jaw muscles twitch. Her small chin jutted out. She wasn't going to faint or shriek or weep, Jack saw. Oh no. Not now.

The little lady was furious.

"Let me out of here, you cretin." As she said that, her voice was different. Strong. Confident. The little mouse reached her arms out. Grabbed Jack by the front of his shirt. Yanked him hard against the bars. He was too astonished to react.

"Now. Or I'll start screaming my head off."

Jack studied her eyes closely. She'd do it, too, he decided. He reached over and pulled the latch pin. She let go of the handfuls of shirt she was clutching. Jack opened the door. Made a courtly bow. Gestured for her to exit.

The little mouse stalked out of the cage. Caught her heel on the door frame and stumbled. Jack automatically reached out to steady her. Forgot he still had a knife in his hand. The woman reacted by recoiling, trying to avoid the knife.

"Watch it!" he said, just as her clunky shoes backed into the coiled rope behind her.

She fell. Jack's long arms got under her, but not before she rapped her head hard against the sharp corner of the cage.

He cursed fluidly. A deep gash on her temple instantly filled with bright red. She managed to get a hand up and touched the wound.. Looked at the blood on her fingers, then up at Jack. "Why did you do that?" she asked.

He was asking himself the same question.

"Jack? You okay?"

He ignored the other freaks as they emerged from their cages and surrounded him. The little mouse fainted at last, and proceeded to bleed all over him. He lifted her up into his arms. His breath hissed in between his teeth at the slight burden. Rag dolls weighed more.

"Nathan!" he bellowed, cradling her carefully against his chest as he ran toward the back exit.

Outside, the barker hurried down from the platform at the sound of his name. The painted figure of the Manigator glared out into the night in empty-eyed silence, from the canvas where he was busy strangling a much smaller, helpless woman.

Chapter Two

"Miss? Miss? Can you hear me?"

Jessie groaned as she tried to lift her head. Pain radiated from her left temple outward. Her eyelids felt glued together. Her lips, too.

Her first thought was shot with panic. She was in trouble. Captured? Police?

As she forced her eyes open, her vision was limited to a rather blurry collage of bright color and shadow. She caught the sound of distant, blaring music. Faint shrieks and laughter punctuated each note. It brought back another time. She closed her eyes tightly. Was she having a nightmare?

"Again, again!" That was her father's voice, roaring in her memory. The lethal flashes of silver. The world spun on a mad axis. So many kinds of pain. Old and dull. Sharp and unexpected.

"Papa?" she whispered.

"Shhhh. Easy now." Something cold and wet touched her head where it throbbed. "You're going to be okay."

Not Papa. She focused on the owner of the sympathetic voice. A short, plump man leaning over her, his eyes steady beneath shaggy white brows. An English bowler was perched on his head, black with a sparkling red sequined band. He was holding a damp cloth against her forehead. He looked kind. Worried.

What had happened?

"Don't move just yet, you're hurt," he said as she tried to sit up. "I haven't gotten a good look at your head yet.. There was a lot of blood."

She lay quiet as he examined the throbbing area with narrowed eyes and several clucks of his tongue.

"You've got a nasty gash there, young lady, but it looks clean."

She licked her dry lips. Gash? From what? "How?"

"You tripped and fell. Hit your head against the corner of a cage on the way down."

Cage? Am I at the zoo?

He recognized her confusion. "Don't you know where you are?"

Jessie gazed around her. She was inside what looked like a small mobile home.

The walls were covered with a kaleidoscopic series of framed playbills and posters. Shabby, unmatched furniture crowded the cramped interior. A rack of costumes hung from a rod overhead. Added to this was comfortable clutter.

Stacks of books. A man's outer garments draped over chairs. The remains of a recent meal.

She felt certain it wasn't her home.

Jessie breathed in. The smell of burnt sugar, sausage, and popcorn filled her nose. That made her feel slightly queasy. She turned her head and realized the scents were drifting in through a tiny open window. She was occupying a small, comfortable bed beneath it. Outside it was dark, the stars hidden by thick gray clouds.

"The circus?" she said, guessing.

"If only I had money to burn." He shook his head, making his sequined hat band shimmer. "No, my dear, you're at a carnival. A would-be circus, minus the big top, the animals, and the headaches."

A carnival. Almost as bad. "Who are you?"

The man grinned and removed his hat. "Nathan Stokes, ma'am."

"Stokes. You're the owner," she said. Now it came back to her. She'd flown down from Maine. Driven from the airport directly to the fairgrounds. To see this man, among other things.

"The very same. And your name would be . . . ?"

"Jessie." She remembered everything at last, and lifted her hand touch the pins holding her hair in place. "I was looking for you."

Nathan's friendly expression dimmed slightly. "Oh? Why is that?"

Jessie's lips curved in spite of her headache. Show people were universally suspicious of curious outsiders. "You hired me last week, Mr. Stokes. I'm Jessica Kelly."

The carnival owner's beaming grin reappeared at once. "The lady restoration expert. Of course. We weren't expecting you until Friday."

"I finished my last job ahead of schedule," she lied. She had been forced to deceive her previous employer, too. Left her job back in Portland without notice.

Thrown everything into a few cases.. Alek had better be right about this. "I thought I'd come down and get an early start."

"Well, I'm glad to know Jack was wrong about you."

"Jack?"

"One of my people. He's convinced you were just some poor rube trying to sneak in the freak show."

"I beg your pardon?" The surreal encounter with the dark man inside the tent came back to her. In minute detail. She frowned. "Oh. I remember. Jack would be the big, dark, bad-tempered jerk."

"That's him," Nathan said.

The anger came back, too. "Does he usually threaten people with knives and toss them in cages?"

"Er . . . no." He cleared his throat. "It was all a terrible misunderstanding. I know Jack's very sorry you got hurt." The barker's hands spread open. "I hope there's no hard feelings."

There were all kinds of them, but that wasn't Nathan's fault. "No, of course not."

The barker gave her a cautious smile. "I have to say, Ms. Kelly, you sure know how to make an entrance."

"That's a one way to put it," she said, and smiled back. "Call me Jessie, please."

"Jessie it is." He patted her hand. "Now for the bad news. The cut on your head will need some stitches."

She lifted her hand and carefully probed around the throbbing area just below her hairline. The ache intensified with a vengeance. Alek would kill her. "That bad, huh?"

"That bad," the barker said. "Closest emergency room is twenty minutes from here. We have our own doctor, if you'd rather save yourself the ambulance ride."

"I'd appreciate it." She cringed at the unexpected flash of lightning through the window, followed by an ominous rumbling of thunder. "Is there a storm coming?" "Storm's here," Nathan said, and sighed. "I was hoping it would hold off another hour. We'll be ankle deep in mud before we can close."

As the last vibrations faded, the door to the trailer was yanked open. Jessie's eyes went automatically to the door itself, to see if it remained on its hinges.

Then she saw him.

Rain rattled on the aluminum roof above her head, but she didn't hear it. A freight train running past her feet wouldn't have swayed her attention. All she could do was stare at the man as he approached her.

He was just as she remembered him from the side show. Big. Grim. Threatening. A dark beast in navy T-shirt and black jeans. The clothes fit him like a coat of paint. Those muscles didn't come from a health club, Jessie thought. He could have been a famous athlete. A professional model. An escapee from a chain gang.

Jessie was convinced he wasn't an athlete or a model.

His limbs were long. Incongruously graceful hands were hooked by the thumbs through the loops over a braided black leather belt. Straight, matte raven hair fell from a slight widow's peak to his shoulders.

His face was handsome. Too handsome. It didn't fit the body. He should be rugged-featured, she thought. The high-bridged nose, noble brow, and chiseled lips were pure sculpture. She suspected Greek statues would have crumbled in shame beside him.

His eyes made Jessie nervous. Brown, like her own, but much deeper. Almost black. Absorbing every minute detail. Reflecting nothing he didn't want seen. Where had she seen that implacable gaze before? There was power there. A formidable will. As if he read her thoughts, his eyes glittered with contempt. Her chin lifted. Who died and left you in charge, pretty boy? she thought.

"Hey, Jack," Nathan said.

Jessie drew in a quick breath. Those eyes. Now she knew where she'd seen them. That painted caricature. He was the one who had stared at her through the cutout eye holes. All part of his campaign to terrorize innocent people, she'd bet. He probably considered it a hobby.

"Nathan." His pitiless gaze centered on Jessie's pale face. "What's the verdict?" Jessie shuddered. If she hadn't recognized the eyes, she would have known him by the voice. The low, growling rumble had curled into her bones the first time she'd seen him. He had an odd accent and a faint singsong lilt to his speech. French?

"She'll be fine. Doc will stitch her up."

"Feed her before she goes." He gave Jessie's body a brief, disinterested look.

"She looks pathetic."

Her jaw locked. He didn't have to put it that way. The cretin.

"Jack," Nathan reproved. "She's not going anywhere. Once she gets settled --" The enormous frame tensed. "Settled?" His accent was thicker now. "You're adopting uncoordinated freeloaders now, mon ami?"

That was it. Jessie sat up. Regretted it at once. She squinted through the agony at him. "What did you call me?"

"You heard," Jack scoffed, unimpressed. He turned his back on her to confront Nathan. "What's the deal?"

"I hired her," the barker said.

"As what? La Femme Cure-Dent?"

Jessie knew how to speak French. The Toothpick Woman indeed. She opened her mouth to blister him, then decided against it.

Nathan simply chuckled. "Ms. Kelly is a restoration expert, Jack. She was recommended by a friend of mine who works at the Smithsonian."

"Oh?" A smooth black brow lifted as he glanced back at Jessie. "What does she restore?"

"Antique circus artifacts," she offered caustically. "Specifically, carousels, Mr. -- Mr. --"

The line of his mouth relaxed a fraction, curling up on one side. "Call me Jack, chere."

She could think of other things to call him. "Don't you have anything else to do besides throwing people in cages, Jack?"

"Why?" His obnoxious smile revealed hard white teeth. "Do you want me to do it again?"

Nathan purposely positioned his rotund body between them as another clap of lightning sizzled closer to the trailer.

"Jack. Go get Doc for me, and tell Bobby to start closing down if he hasn't started already. Please."

He looked over Nathan's head at her again. A silent promise for re-engagement.

"Yeah. Later." The door slammed behind him, hard enough to shake the entire camper.

"Be still my heart." Jessie gingerly lowered herself back down. The slightest movement made her head throb unmercifully.. "That man needs therapy."

"Jack's okay."

That accent. It wasn't like anything she'd heard in Europe. "Is he French?"

"Cajun. So was his Mother." When he saw Jessie's frown, Nathan elaborated.

"Descendants of the Acadians, the French settlers who got kicked out of Canada by the English in the mid- 18th Century. They ended up here, in southern Louisiana. Hot- blooded, stubborn people. Never saw Jack this riled up before, though." The barker's shrewd gaze studied her flushed face. "What happened between you two?"

Jessie closed her eyes. No way was she going to try to describe that debacle.

"Like you said -- it was just a misunderstanding."

Doc was not the wizened old man Jessie half-expected. He turned out to be a young medical resident who had worked the carnival circuit for years. Of average height and build, Doc had a spiky thatch of unruly brown hair that topped a pleasant face and ready smile. His casual manner made it easy to warm to him.

"Why work at a carnival?" she asked.

"I like it," was his cheerful reply. While Nathan discreetly retreated to his kitchen, Doc helped Jessie out of her bloodstained clothing with a matter-of-fact deftness.

"My second childhood, I guess. I never got to go to one when I was a kid."

"You must enjoy your work, then." Jessie wasn't going to trade stories about her childhood. She shrugged into an old, soft shirt borrowed from Nathan's closet.

The edges ended at mid-thigh length. Enough to cover what she wanted covered, if she stayed under the sheets.

"Beats working in an ER or infirmary," Doc said. He began pulling the pins from her hair to loosen it, and she put a hand up in reaction. "Sorry, but I need to check under your hair for other lacerations." He felt the odd shape protruding from the back and removed it. He examined the enameled comb curiously before handing it to Jessie.

"Pretty," Nathan said. He had returned and gazed over Doc's shoulder at the comb.

Jessie clasped the cerulean butterfly, her fingers tight. "A gift from a friend." Her eyes went from one man to the other. Neither reacted or commented.

Doc opened his bag and took out a small light scope. "Okay, Jessica, look at my nose. Now the ceiling. Straight ahead. Good." He checked her ears, nose, and mouth. "No sign of blood, so we'll call this a minor concussion. Let's get this laceration closed up now.."

Nathan hastily excused himself, muttering something about helping Bobby close down the show for the night.

"Squeamish old man." Doc shook his head with a chuckle. After injecting her with a local anesthetic, he cleaned the wound just below Jessie's hairline and stitched it up efficiently. As he worked, he glanced at her arms and legs. "You're very thin."

She made a face. "I know." Where was her case? In the car. They wouldn't know which one was hers.

Doc kept pushing. "Anything I should know about, Jessica?"

She shook her head, despising herself for being unable to meet his gaze. "No, I've been like this . . . since I was a child." That was partially true. She had been much thinner.

"Well, I won't lecture you, if you promise not to lose any more weight, okay?"

She nodded quickly. Anything to get past the subject.

"Do you treat many patients as a carnival doctor?" she asked, and winced as he tied off the last suture.

"Sure, when I'm not manning the game stands, the food concessions, and whatever else Nathan can talk me into," Doc said.

"So you're a . . . " what was the term? "Jack of all trades?" She scowled. That name again. Odious man. Why couldn't she get him out of her head?

"Everyone who works for Nathan is. You'll find out, soon enough." He covered the stitches with a square of protective gauze. "I know it hurts, but I can't give you anything for the pain for the next twenty-four hours."

"Does an aspirin count?"

"I think we can swing that." He took a small bottle from his bag and handed to her. "But no more than two tablets every four hours, okay? I'll be back tonight to wake you a few times, just to be sure you're okay. Keep those stitches dry, and plan to stay in bed for a day or two." He turned away to pack up his supplies.

"Thanks." She could sense the hammering pain waiting. She'd better take the aspirin before the local wore off, or her head might split in half.

"Hey." Doc noticed her expression and patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, you'll feel better tomorrow. Rest now."

After Doc departed Jessie relaxed, grateful to be alone again. She had reacted unprofessionally. Gotten hurt under the stupidest circumstances. If Alek found out about it, he'd pull her off the assignment at once. It could ruin nearly two years of work. Why in God's name had she done it?

"Face your fear." Dr. Martin's face emerged from her memory. "You must face your fear."

She had definitely done that, Jessie mused. In fact, she had let him throw her in a cage and lock the door. But why? Why had she frozen up like that? Was it the mocking eyes? The taunts? The knife Jack had been holding in his fist? Except for the eyes, she saw no resemblance between the dark, sarcastic man and the monster in her past. She shut her eyes tightly.

She had been in such a hurry. Alek told her the drop would be in the next two weeks. Jessie only had a few days to set up a credible front and make the initial contact. By the time she'd arrived at the carnival, jet lag had set in. She hadn't

been thinking clearly, or she would have checked into a hotel and come back in the morning.

The show's lights and sounds had dazzled her. Transported her back in time. Her nerves had been stretched to the snapping limit by the time she tracked down Stokes. Why hadn't she simply waited outside the freak show for Nathan to appear after the showing?

Because the other thing, she reminded herself, would have made her vomit.

"How's the head?"

Jessie opened her eyes. Jack towered over her, hands thrust in his pockets. His hair was matted down by rain. Mud spattered his pants from the knee down. Big as he was, she'd never heard a sound.

How had he managed to slip in the trailer so quietly?

"Better," she said, thoroughly shaken.

"I'll bet." The beast inspected her with a decided lack of enthusiasm. "What comes before Kelly?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What's your first name, baby?"

"Oh." She felt like an idiot. "Jessica.. Jessie. Don't call me baby."

"You don't look like a Jessica, baby."

Infuriating man. She had no intention of rising to the bait he was dangling. "Well, that's my name." Forget it, forget me, and go away, she chanted silently.

He moved closer. It took all her self-control not to cringe. The sheer size of him made her want to crawl into a corner. Cower. Pull the sheets over her head. She

stared at a crack in the trailer's paneled wall. He was just a man. A rather nasty, arrogant, bad-tempered man at that.

"You restore carousels."

"Yes." The forgotten enamel pin she still clutched dug into the palm of her hand. Why was he staring at her hair like that? "Mr. Stokes' carousel is a particularly fascinating --"

"How old are you?"

Was he naturally this rude, or did he work at it? "Twenty- seven," she said. Well, she would be. In three more years.

"An unusual job for a woman your age."

"Not really." She didn't want him here, so close to her. Her teeth nibbled at her lower lip, and she winced. It was still tender from when she had bitten it during their first clash. She wouldn't have a lip left soon. Outside the storm intensified, sheets of rain pummeling the trailer without cessation.

"Look at me," the deep voice said.

Jessie looked. Up close, Jack was even better-looking than she'd thought. His skin was incredibly, absolutely flawless. She could barely see any pores. A faint shadow darkened his jaw line. The scent of rain-soaked clothes and man filled her nose. Okay, she thought, so he smells good, too. That wasn't the reason for the knot twisting in her belly. It was nerves. Nothing more.

"Where are you from?"

"Virginia, originally." That was what her documents said.

Jessie kept her gaze bland and fixed on his left cheekbone. He had naturally thick, curling lashes that would make most women grind their teeth in envy. Dark brows that were neither too thick or too thin arched up toward his widow's peak. He didn't seem to believe her.

"Not much of a Virginia accent," he said.

"I moved around a lot when I was younger." That was the truth.

Jack's gaze commanded her full attention. So dark and reflective they gave nothing away, and appeared almost lifeless at first. Now she saw tangible heat. It couldn't be desire. She hoped it wasn't anger..

"Why didn't you run?"

She looked blank. "Run where?"

"Back at the 'show." His tone came out flat and all business. That made his next question even more startling. "Why didn't you run away when I came after you?" Jessie wasn't sure of the answer herself. "Why did you throw me in the cage?" she asked.

"Don't screw around with me, little Miss Mouse." The warning sounded sharp as a slap. "Why?"

"I was facing my fear." Instantly she wished she had said anything but that.

He measured her again with another look, this one definitely interested. Got to his feet. Walked to the door.

"Next time, chere," he suggested just before he left, "just run."

#

Jack poured a liberal measure of Scotch into the cleanest glass he could scrounge. He appraised the heap of dirty dishes waiting to be washed next to a sink of cold, dirtier water. At least a week's worth, maybe more.

Housekeeping have never been Connie's strong suit. Drinking, however, was. Hallelujah for that, he thought, and toasted his distorted reflection on the greasy surface of the dishwater.

The Scotch scored a pleasant trench from his lips to his belly. He ignored the damp condition of his clothes and settled on the sleeper-sofa. It took a minute to work off his boots before he could prop his legs up. He looked at his bare feet on the scarred packing crate that served as a coffee table, and counted. After a brief internal struggle, he did the same with his hands.

Still ten fingers and toes.

It was getting better now. Jack could go weeks without counting. There had been a time in the not-too-distant past when he couldn't have gone a full day.

The cellular phone tucked in his jacket pocket buzzed. He considered ignoring it for a few moments before fishing it out. He pushed a white button that scrambled the signal before he lifted it to his ear.

"Hello?" A cultured voice said.

"Yeah." He sipped from the glass.

"You didn't check in last night."

"No."

An exasperated sigh. "Any luck?"

Another sip. "No."

"Do I get more than one syllable answers?"

"Sure."

Harry Parker laughed in appreciation. "Bastard. Tell me what you have, Chameleon, and I'll leave you alone."

That would happen, Jack thought sourly, when there were igloos in Perdition.

"We head for Blanesville day after tomorrow. Mardi Gras starts up next week."

"Any leads?"

As he brought the glass to his lips, Jack's hand paused..

The best operatives were the ones you never noticed. Balding guys with pot bellies in cheap suits. Old men who smelled sour and muttered constantly to themselves. Contentious, overweight women who lugged around four kids and a dozen carryon bags. The kind of people you never gave a second glance to because you didn't see them the first time.

Was the little mouse an innocent, or a player? "Not yet. Some ideas."

"Keep in touch."

Jack flicked the switch off with his thumbnail and considered the possibilities.

Jessica was only a hundred feet away in Nathan's trailer. She'd be asleep by now. It would only take a minute to go back over there and get her.

The thought was oddly appealing.

He made a rude sound and drank more of the Scotch. Not that it would require much effort on his part. What a piece of work she was. The timid little package.

All chalky skin and big eyes. Pretending to be tough, then cowering in near-terror

after a few harsh words. It wouldn't take more than a minute to have her trembling in other ways.

Maybe longer.

His fingers tingled as he thought of her hair. Thick and soft and yards of it, once Doc had taken out all those stupid pins she scraped it up with. Golden brown, straight as silk. Released, it was no longer dull. It looked alive. It had shocked him, to see it falling around her.. A man could wrap himself up in that hair. The ends went all the way down to her hips. Hips that were narrow, but had a sweet, feminine curve to them --

Jack swore.

After a minute, he was back under control. He swallowed the rest of the Scotch and got up to pour another. If he was going to drink, might as well do it right. The way he saw it, he had two choices. Get drunk and pass out, or go back over to Nathan's trailer. He could scare Ms. Jessica Kelly from Virginia into telling him whether she was a restoration expert or a good liar.

The problem was he kept thinking of what he really wanted to do, which was to simply go and get her.

He got hard. It was the thought of stripping Jessica out of her too-big clothes that did it. Finding out what was under them. Jack had the uneasy feeling that her skin would be as soft and unblemished as bridal satin. That her thighs would quiver when he parted them with his hand. That her breasts would be as firm as they felt against his chest. Beaded with tight nipples. Aching to be --

"You drinking my booze, boy?" His father stumbled over the threshold. Connie managed to preserve the half-filled bottle he cradled under one arm. Dripping wet and looking owlish with triumph, he hefted his trophy. "Want s'more?"

"You haven't got enough, Dad." Jack decided to take a long walk. The cold rain that was steadily falling outside would effectively deaden his painfully aroused body. Clear his obviously befuddled mind. "See you."

"Jackson?" Jack turned around, and saw Connie frowning at him in confusion.

"You all right?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. 'night, Dad."

Outside the rain wasn't cold. It was freezing. Jack made a wide circle around the fairgrounds that took him a half hour, drenched his clothes, and did nothing to solve his immediate problem. If Harry was there, he would have suggested a few refined games of racket ball to work off his frustrations. But Harry was in D.C., waiting with the rest of the team.

This wasn't the first time he had worked alone, or used a carny as cover. The problem was someone else was using Nathan Stokes' show, too. Jack's father had been with Nathan for more than twenty years, so it was a given that Jack would go in.

"What kind of joke is this?" Harry frowned when he heard Jack's plan. "You're going in as a sideshow freak?"

"It's the family business, Harry," Jack reminded him.

"I know you aren't worth a damn in the morning. Not until you've guzzled a quart of coffee. But I don't see you biting off the heads of chickens."

Jack shrugged. He wasn't going to explain something he'd been hiding for the last ten years. "Nathan will fix me up."

"What about Stokes? Is it possible he's involved?"

"After thirty years on the road?" Jack shook his head. "I doubt it."

"It's your case, Jack. Just remember, the body count on this one is at fifteen now."

Thoughts of the investigation faded as he approached the cluster of campers and mobile homes the carnival workers lived in. The lights in Nancy's trailer were still on, so he stopped and rapped on her door.

The Lady Wolf was touted as an exotic import from the Italian Alps. In reality, Nancella Carguitto had been born to a noisy, boisterous Sicilian family who lived in Brooklyn, New York. Any other parents would have been horrified and repelled by their first sight of baby Nancy. The Carguittos wept together once, then vowed to give their daughter as normal a life as possible.

From the day she took her first breath, Nancy had been loved, nurtured and carefully sheltered from most of the prejudices of an unkind world. Her parents' efforts taught her to accept her monstrous birth defect, and later to take advantage of what separated her from the rest of humanity.

"Jack," she said, and smiled. Nancy's smile was particularly beautiful, considering the frame around it. "You're wet."

"Yeah." He wiped the rain from his eyes. "Want some company?"

Chapter Three

Morning streamed through the camper window. It brought with it the songs of birds, and the promise of Spring, and the worst headache Jessie had ever had in her life.

"Oh, God." She covered her eyes and moaned. "Just kill me now."

Nothing happened. If there was a God, he was extremely unsympathetic. Jessie forced herself to get up and perform the most necessary of functions in Nathan's cramped bathroom. Once finished, she staggered back to bed. The pillow she pulled over her head didn't help. She suspected very little would, outside of morphine, a lobotomy, or cyanide.

"You're not going to die." Another voice from the past told her. "You're going to survive."

During the long hours of the previous night, she had been awakened several times. Subjected to Doc's questions. Responded dutifully as a light was shone in her eyes. Each time she thought she would never get back to sleep. Yet exhaustion forced her back to the dreams she would have avoided.

She dreamt of Papa, and the Wheel.

Eventually she faced the fact she would have to emerge from the pillows, like a normal person, and face the new day. The first thing she saw was the pins from her hair on the small table by her bed. She rose cautiously and returned to the bedroom to pin her hair back up in place.

The mirror wasn't kind, as usual. The dark eyes staring back at her were faintly chiding. Come on, Jessie, it isn't as bad as it looks, her image said. It's worse.

Nathan Stokes burst in a few moments later. His cheerful exuberance and dazzling grin made Jessie feel like a grumpy zombie. She produced a tired smile in return. A shorter man followed Nathan, and peered shyly at her. He was a dwarf, she realized. Shorter than she was. His face was badly scarred from surgery to correct a cleft palate, as well.

"How is our restoration expert feeling?" Nathan asked as he carried a tray to her bedside. "Hungry?"

"Starving." Jessie fell on the steaming mug of coffee with the passionate greed of a lifelong addict. Over the rim she eyed the plate. It contained a luscious-looking omelet, the ever-popular beignets so loved in this part of the country, and an assortment of fresh fruit. When was the last time she ate something? She smiled as the chicory flavored coffee went down smooth and rich and darkly satisfying. Maybe she wouldn't need that lobotomy, after all. "Bless you, Mr. Stokes."

"Call me Nathan. Mr. Stokes was my father, and we never agreed on anything."

Nathan bent his head close to hers. "He wanted me to be an accountant," he said in a loud stage whisper. "I wanted to be a Wallenda."

Jessie chuckled. It was irresistible. She could picture the barker suspended above an anxious crowd with only an elongated pole to keep his balance. An interesting, if perilous, career choice.

Stokes straightened and gestured to the smaller man. "I'd like to introduce you to Bobby Driswald, my road manager. Bobby, this is Jessica Kelly."

The dwarf approached her tentatively, apparently ready to step back if his appearance offended her. Jessie set aside the coffee and held out a slender hand. Bobby's rough, callused fingers folded around hers in a gentle, cautious grip. "Hi, Bobby. It's good to meet you."

His mild, friendly gaze flickered to the enamel butterfly comb just above her right ear. "A pleasure, Ms. Kelly." The cleft palette he possessed slightly distorted his voice. "How are you feeling?"

She grimaced and touched the gauze dressing. "Like I fell off the Empire State Building and landed on my head."

Nathan's belly shook as he laughed. "Now that would be one hell of an act, Ms. Kelly."

"The shortest one in history. And it's Jessie." She eyed the tray of food again. The gnaw of hunger was a surprise. As much as the barker's kindness. Her conscience made her apologize. "I'm sorry, Nathan. I'll get out of your way as soon as I can."

"Don't fret about it," Stokes said. "Doc says you should take it easy for a few days. Tomorrow we'll be tearing down. You can get started on the carousel when we arrive in to Blanesville."

"Thank you."

"You can ride with Bobby, if you like. He does great imitations," Nathan said. Jessie smiled at the dwarf, who unexpectedly flushed. "Go on, Bobby. Do Clint Eastwood for her."

"He's Nathan's favorite," Bobby said. His voice changed into a stunningly realistic imitation of the famous actor as he added, "Go ahead, Jessie. Make my day."

"Wow. That's incredible," Jessie said. And meant it. "It sounded just like him."

"Bobby can imitate anyone," Nathan said.

"But I'm sure the little lady doesn't want to listen to me all day," Bobby added, imitating Nathan's voice perfectly.

"See?" Far from taking offense, Nathan beamed with pride.

"I'd love to hear more on the trip to Blanesville." Jessie smiled. "You're very talented."

"Thank you," the dwarf said, giving her an equally friendly grin. "And welcome to the family."

"The family?"

"That's now we think of ourselves at Stokes'," Nathan said. "I hope you'll consider yourself one of us, too."

Jessie kept her smile steady and hid the stab of guilt his sincerity made in her chest. Nathan had no idea who had he just "adopted".

The two men departed a short time later. Left alone to brood over the job she had been hired to do, and the real reason she was here, Jessie's appetite quickly evaporated. She had to force down a small portion of the now-tasteless omelet and fruit. Regretted, not for the first time, her choice six years ago when she was released and met the Director of Prism.

Alek once told her there was no absolution to be had in the church of regret. Not that he was a religious man. He did, however, know a lot about regret.

So did Jessie.

When she felt steady enough, she got up and wandered around Nathan Stokes' trailer. The collection of traveling show artifacts spanned decades. There were framed photographs of Nathan with a dozen famous performers. Playbills from some of the largest circuses to ever play in the United States and Europe. Some were less well-known, carnivals with amusing names like Dr. Dagborne's Fantastic Folly and Jebediah's Gigantic Jubilee.

Along with posters and souvenirs, Stokes had amassed a library of books devoted to the traveling show. One heavy volume described circuses that dated back thousands of years, when ancient Egyptians celebrated the annual recession of the Nile's floodwaters with performances and games of skill, during the feast of Osiris.

Her hand faltered as another, slimmer book caught her eye.

Dr. Martin had tried to get her to read it.

No. She wouldn't touch it. There was no reason to now.. It was a good thing she had been too young to be interviewed by the author. All the photos of her were taken when she was a child. No one would recognize her.

She hoped.

"Looking for something?"

#

Jack watched her swing about. Noted the way her eyes widened. The frown as she saw him lounging on her bed. She didn't like surprises. Didn't like him

sneaking up on her for the second time. And would jump in Lake Pontchartrain before she admitted it.

He made a leisurely survey. Under Nathan's shirt, her body was outlined by the sunlight streaming through the camper's windows. Still skinny and short and swamped by her clothes.

Was she still scared, too?

"Just curious." She had no accent at all, even when she was startled. Not a hint of her native Virginia colored her voice. "Mr. Stokes has a wonderful collection."

"Nathan's obsessed with this junk." He shifted his legs, and saw her glance at his thighs before deliberately averting her gaze. The coy maiden. "How's the head?"

His concern penetrated her first line of defense. She exhaled with barely perceptible relief. Smiled. Her hand fingered the bandage over her temple.

"Not too bad. The aspirin Doc gave me helps."

She wasn't one to bitch about it. A point in her favor.. "I heard you had to have six stitches."

"It felt like sixty." The polite smile became more manufactured. "Jack, I apologize for what happened last night."

He didn't want to talk about that. "Save it."

"It was my fault," she said. "I'm not usually --"

She was really starting to annoy the hell out of him. The anger came out of nowhere, bunching in his muscles, rising like a riptide. He wanted to strangle her with her own hair. "Save it. Why are you here?"

The smile faltered. "I've been hired to --"

"I know what you told Nathan." Jack got to his feet. His size was the first method of intimidation. It worked nicely on Miss Jessica Kelly. "Want to add anything to that, chere?"

"I've been hired to restore the carousel." Her face was serene. Her tone reasonable. Her fingers tugged at the edges of her sleeves. The little mouse refused to cringe, but she was nervous. Jack suspected that composure of hers was built on determination and not much else. He'd push. See if he could get it to wobble.

"Yeah. And I'm the Pope."

She feigned surprise. "Do I call you Jack, or Your Holiness?"

He eliminated the small space between them in two steps.. Ignoring her attempt at humor, and the fact that his lips wanted to curve in response, took considerable concentration. "I haven't got all morning."

"Would you care to see my resume?" She put on her courteous face again. "I can assure you I'm thoroughly qualified.."

He took a third step. Observed the instantaneous, subtle reaction. Jessie tensed in ways only someone trained to read body language could spot. Afraid to be touched, Jack thought. Now that was something he could use.

"Why are you nervous?"

She moved back a few inches, poise still intact. "It couldn't be because you're trying to intimidate me, could it?"

Another step. He couldn't help but notice the physical differences now. The swarthiness of his skin contrasted the pale translucence of hers. The heavy layer of his muscle compared to the airy fragility of her limbs.

"Why would I do that?"

"Look, I'm tired, Jack." She looked past him to the bed. He followed her gaze. Imagined tossing her on it. Dropping down over her. The damn woman was just too little and flimsy-looking. He'd smother her, or break something, before he got her naked. "I'd like to rest now."

"Sure." Changing gears, he moved to one side.. Watched as she inched around him and sat down on the edge of the mattress.. Absently she released two buttons and rubbed her fingers inside the collar to massage the side of her neck. Jack didn't leave the camper, but propped himself against the door. He had all the time in the world. "How long will it take?"

"My nap? A few hours --"

"The restoration."

"Oh." Her brows drew together as she considered this. "A few days to a few weeks, depending on the condition of the horses."

"Ever work at a carnival before?"

Her eyes darted away, and she plucked at a button on her shirt. "A few times."

He homed in on that. "Where?"

Her shoulders lifted. "Here and there."

"Overseas?"

"You ask a lot of questions," she said, sounding genuinely tired now.

"Do I?"

He wanted to press her on her work history, and everything else she was deftly evading. On the other hand, he had an investigation to pursue. Ms. Jessica Kelly was his only new lead. Discretion was critical. If he pressed too hard, he'd spook her and find himself back at square one.

Jack pushed away from the door and went to her, easing down to perch on the side of the bed. She stretched out as far away from him as she could get, which only constituted a few inches.

"You didn't eat much." He examined her breakfast tray with a frown. He squelched the abrupt urge to shake her. Hard. "Want something else?"

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

"You should be," he heard himself say. Watched his own hand encircle her wrist. His thumb and forefinger overlapped by a good inch. Last night's fear darkened her eyes once more. "I've seen chunkier broom handles."

She tried to ease free. "What happened to 'A woman can never be too thin or too rich?'"

He released her wrist. Her limbs slackened almost imperceptibly at the cessation of physical contact. It was like poking at a hermit crab, Jack thought. Touch her, she hides in her shell. Let her go, she comes back out, claws snapping.

"Try rich for a change," he said, and shifted an inch closer. She stared nervously at the diminished space between them. "It's more fun."

"Jackson? Jackson Hamilton?" a familiar voice called from outside the trailer.

Jack fought the desire to swear loudly and at length. The door to the trailer swung open. A statuesque blonde stepped inside. The woman wore a skintight, neon pink dress that displayed an generous amount of tanned flesh. Her trendy perfume flooded the air.

"Why are you hiding in here, sugar?" The question was ripe with transparent lust. Pale blue eyes looked past Jack and fixed on Jessie. The seductive expression gave way to displeasure. Her full scarlet lips bowed down. "Who's that?"

Jack was in no mood for this. "What do you want, Candy?"

The heavily mascaraed lashes fluttered. "You were going to give me a lift into town, remember?" She caught Jessie's interested survey and smiled. "The big bully always forgets his promises to me. I'm Candy Corbin."

"Hi. Jessica Kelly."

"I'll catch up with you," Jack said, cutting off the dancer before she could say anything more. The blonde shrugged, wagged her long-nailed fingers at him, then flounced out of the trailer.

"Your . . . girlfriend?" Jessie asked.

Jack almost laughed out loud, until he recognized the trace of disgruntled envy behind the question. "I like blondes," he said. That provoked a sparkle of ire in her dark coffee eyes.

"Even the synthetic kind?"

"Sure." He grinned. "You should see if Candy can do something with that mop of yours. She's an expert."

Jessie smiled back. "I'd rather be bald. Jackson.."

"Jealous, baby?"

"No." She made an impatient gesture. "Don't call me baby."

"I'll stop when you grow up."

"This is . . . ridiculous. Please, I'd like to get some sleep now." Her face turned away toward the wall of the camper, dismissing him. The bright blue butterfly pin in her hair glittered in the sunlight. "I'm very tired."

Discretion was critical. Well, Jack never claimed to be discreet.

"Is that right?" He reached out and caught her chin, forcing her to look back at him. She was all affronted dignity. Behind it, nervous as hell. He could feel it.

"Funny, you don't look all that tired, chere." When she tried to turn away, his fingers tightened. "Look at me."

Tonelessly she said, "You're hurting."

He was. Jack removed his hand from her face. He touched her hair instead, rubbing the long strands between his fingers. Like silk, it was. "You said you were facing your fear last night. You're frightened by a lot of things, aren't you?"

She didn't reply, but was unable to conceal the quick, trembling breath she took.

"Add me to the list."

Jessie barely managed her would-be bland reply. "I'm not afraid of you."

"No?" He released her hair and bent over her..

Jack wanted her. He wanted to break down her resistance. Make her come to him. Soft. Eager. Willing. He ached to run his hands all over her. Feel her palms on his back. Her legs wrapped around his waist. He needed to hear his name on her lips. Hear her plead and beg. Watch her eyes as he made her come.

Her eyes . . .

Her eyes were frightened. Her face completely white. What the hell was he doing?

The shreds of Jack's reason and sanity caged the beast within. He'd gone too far. Even considering the job he had to do. A job he had completely forgotten about.

His gripped loosened reluctantly as he lifted his head. "Scared now?"

She surprised him again by nodding solemnly.

"Good." He took a fingertip and traced the pale flesh exposed by the buttons she'd opened. Silky. Cool. Sheened with a mist of fear. Giving in to one undeniable craving, he bent and ran his tongue from the sweet place between her breasts up to her chin.

Her shocked gaze met his.

"If you don't want to get bitten," he said, "don't rattle my cage, chere."

Jack knew he had to get away from her. Now.

It took all he had just to take his hands off her. He got up. Didn't look back at her.

Went to the door and stepped out. The sunlight made him blink as he climbed down the three steps to the matted grass..

Nathan approached the camper. Jack intercepted him and tugged him in the opposite direction. When they were out of hearing range, he pulled the barker to a halt.

"Nathan, tell me what you know about that woman."

#

Harrison Lincoln Parker wore hand-tailored suits. Italian shoes. He carried himself with the polished confidence of a man who had known all the privileges. Women tended to ogle him on the street. Their eyes were drawn by his thick, pale-blond mane. If they got close enough, they were nailed by the deep-set green eyes. The small, rakish scar on his cheek. The lethal smile.

None of them would have ever guessed that Harrison Lincoln Parker had spent his first fourteen years of life in the bowels of one of D.C.'s worst ghettos.

That morning Harry walked in to find two of his operatives waiting patiently for him outside his office. The gray-haired man and his darker companion rose to their feet with practiced genial smiles.

"Good morning, Mr. Parker," His secretary, Carolyn Adams, said. She was a pleasant, married woman with two growing boys and a husband who worked on Wall Street. Like everyone else who wasn't cleared, Carolyn thought Harry was an investment broker. "These gentlemen are here from Talbot and Pruitt to see you. I don't have an appointment set for them . . ." she looked from Harry to the agents with a slight, worried frown.

Harry never conducted agency business in this office or at this hour. At the same time, he knew the men wouldn't have come unless it was important. So he lied.

"Sorry, Caro, I set up this meeting last night, after you left." He had to get rid of her long enough to talk to the agents. "I hate to ask, but would you mind running down to the mail room? I'd like to know if an overnight package has arrived for me."

"I could call down," Carolyn said.

"You know what those guys down there are like," he said, and added a dazzling smile. "You have to draw a picture for them on good days."

She nodded, glanced once more at the agents, and hurried off.

Harry wasted no time as he ushered the agents in and locked his office door.

"You've wrapped up the New Orleans case and want me to give you both extended leave time," Harry said as the men sat down.

George Williams, the older of the two, shook his head. He was a lanky, distinguished-looking man nearing retirement. Williams was also one of the most experienced men Harry had in the field. "Much as I'd like to, Harry."

Tom Bardon, twenty years younger than Williams, was a compact, muscular man. He wore his conservative suit like a wolf in a sheepskin. An ex-SEAL, Bardon was usually silent, intense, and always deadly. He got to the point with his usual bluntness. "We caught a ship-to-shore transmission two nights ago with a voice that George tagged. The Soviet Terrorist Arms Coalition is definitely the buyer."

Harry's long, intelligent face tightened. His narrowed green eyes turned to glass.

"STAC? Who invited them?"

"Someone referred to as 'The Cutter'," Williams said. "One of the codes used for the two couriers involved."

"Two couriers?"

Bardon nodded. "Cutter has the hardware, but they're using a second mule for the schematics."

"They I.D. the second one?"

Bardon shook his head. "Not yet."

Harry frowned. "So why are you two here? You could have briefed me through regular channels."

"Because of this." Williams pulled a handful of tapes from his coat. "You'll want to have Scottie analyze these to confirm. I know one of the voices." His weathered face looked at once older and infinitely weary. "It's Kruyokov, Harry."

Harry exploded with several words he never used in this office. "That bastard was supposed to have blown up with the other butchers when they tried to move on Turegastan!"

"The man has nine lives." Bardon's dark eyes gleamed, but not with humor.

"They'll run out."

Harry thrust his hand through his hair and sat back. "Who's covering New Orleans now?"

"Jennings and Wilcox."

Harry shook his head. They were good men, but not enough. "George, I want you to take over the stakeout on the docks. Priority one is to find out who this 'Cutter' is. If you run into Ivan, take him out. Tom, start digging through the shipping manifests. You're looking for an old tub, one that won't attract much notice." He recalled Jack's cover. "Chameleon is working in a carnival outside the city. I'll brief him with the happy news."

Both men stood and shook Harry's hand.

"I don't have to tell you how dangerous the Russian is," Harry said. "We've lost too many people. Don't hesitate."

After the men left, he put in a call to the agency's analysis facility. Scottie answered it on the first ring.

"Engineering, Scott here."

Harry didn't respond to the old joke. "I'm sending some tapes over, Scottie."

Harry briefly explained the scenario to his resident technical genius.

"I've got some old stuff that I can run comparisons with," Scottie said. "But I thought The Shark was dead."

"Yeah. Me, too." Harry's bitter tone sharpened. "Get it done fast. I want the report on my desk this afternoon."

"Aye-aye, Captain."

Harry hung up the phone just before his secretary knocked and brought in a tray with his morning coffee.

"I'm sorry." Carolyn smiled ruefully. "I couldn't find an overnight package downstairs."

"Never mind, Caro." Harry sighed as he rubbed his fingers over his eyes. "I'll get what I was looking for, soon enough."

Now all Harry had to do was sit back. Wait. Hope none of his men got killed in the process.

#

"Hello?"

Jessie opened her eyes and saw she had a new visitor. A very oddly-dressed one at that.

The woman wore a broad-brimmed straw hat from which a heavy veil was draped, covering her entire head. Her entire body was covered, in fact. She had on a long-sleeved blouse, cotton gloves, and voluminous harem-style pants. In this heat? Jessie thought. She saw why when the other woman pulled off her hat.

"I'm smothering," the woman said, her words flavored with a genuine New York City accent. She tossed the hat on a chair and reached back to shut the door of the trailer. "I shudder to think of what the summer will be like." She inspected Jessie with a fierce expression. "You can't weigh more than ninety pounds soaking wet."

"Ninety-eight," Jessie said, then remembered to blink.

"I'll try not to hate you too much." She grinned as she rolled up her sleeves. "I'm Nancy, by the way. Nancella Carguitto. No relation to Jo-Jo the dog-faced boy." "Jessica Kelly. Nice to meet you." Jessie sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"No, sweetie, don't get up." Her smile was like a beacon shining from the thick black beard and mustache around her lips.. Long, luxurious black hair curled all over her head, neck, and shoulders. Hair that also apparently covered every square inch of her body.

"I perform as the Lady Wolf, for obvious reasons." The woman pulled off her gloves, walked over, and held out a hand. Her palm was as furry as the rest of her. Jessie gently grasped her hand. "I don't bite. Not even on nights of a full moon."

"Sorry." Jessie grimaced. "It's a little startling."

"That's my job." Nancy sat down next to her, peered at the bandage, then into Jessie's eyes. "You're a tough gal. Most people scream themselves silly the first time they see me."

"Not tough." Jessie pretended to smother a yawn. "Just not awake yet. Find me some coffee, and I'll yell all you want."

"Ah, another Colombian bean junkie." The Lady Wolf glanced at the bandage again. "That hurt?"

It did, but Jessie shook her head. "I think the worst is over. Now all I have to do is stop feeling like a complete idiot."

Nancy's gentle gaze narrowed, then swept over her once more. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"I don't think so." Jessie hoped not. "I was at the sideshow, but Nathan had already draped your -- uh --"

"Cage." Nancy said. "You can say it. The other freaks call it my kennel." She laughed at Jessie's horrified expression. "Lighten up, sweetie. I learned how to take a joke about this hairy mug before I could walk."

"You're a remarkable person."

"I have remarkable parents. They never let me use my appearance as an excuse to miss out or be miserable." The Lady Wolf kept staring at Jessie. "You know, you look really familiar. I've got this thing for faces, you know. I'm positive I've seen you somewhere before."

"I don't think so, Nancy." Jessie tried to look innocent. "I'd certainly remember seeing you."

"It will come to me. In any case, welcome to the show." Nancy patted her arm.

"Nathan tells me you're going to work on the old carousel."

Jessie nodded. "I'm looking forward to it. The horses are hand-carved. From the photos I've seen of them, they may date back to the late 1800's."

Nancy whistled. "I had no idea it was that old. So how do you go about restoring the horses?"

Jessie explained the processes she used. Her goal was to preserve as much of the original workmanship as possible. Right down to matching the authentic paints used during the turn of the century.

"Most of the horses are damaged in some way or another," Nancy said, and frowned for a moment. "Some legs and jewels are missing, if I remember right. Most don't have ears left, either."

Jessie had expected that. "I have sources who can provide me with matching reproductions. One of them is a carver who locates the exact same-aged wood used in the originals. I make a cast of the remaining legs, for example. The carver uses them for a template to make replacement segments."

"Sounds complicated."

"It can be," Jessie said. "I'm lucky, I located the great- grandson of one of the original carvers who made many of the carousel horses after the Civil War. The techniques were passed down through the family from father to son. He can match whatever carving I send him."

The Lady Wolf grinned, her teeth white against her pelt.. "It's obvious you love it. But how did you get started in such an unusual field?"

Jessie's smile drooped for a moment. "I've always loved carousels. I rode them whenever I could, when I was younger. They made me feel like . . . I was flying away." She forced herself to brighten. "It started with a job at a circus museum as a tour guide. I used to hang around watching the old carpenter who worked on the displays. He was an expert in carousel restoration. One afternoon he handed me a sanding block, and put me to work." She spread her hands. "That was six years ago. I was hooked. He taught me everything he knew."

"I'd like to watch you in action," Nancy said.

"Anytime." Jessie made a casual gesture. "Well, once Doc lets me out of here, I should say. I can't wait to get started."

"Our trailers are next to each other -- I'm over there." Nancy pointed toward one of the windows. "When you're feeling better, I'll help you move in. Where's your stuff?"

"I left my cases in my trunk." Jessie frowned. "I'd like to go and get them as soon as I can get up and around."

"No problem. Is your car the beige rental compact?" Jessie nodded. "I thought so. I haven't seen it before. Lend me your keys, and I'll bring everything here." She began putting her hat back on.

"Just the plaid suitcase, Nancy. I'll get the rest later." Jessie eyed the veil and hat. "Do you really have to wear all that?"

Nancy looked down at her gloves and laughed. "You mean my ingenious disguise? I wear it whenever we're open. No use giving the rubes a free look when they can pay for it."

Jessie removed her keys from the pocket of Nathan's shirt, handed them over, and Nancy departed. A few minutes later she returned with Jessie's case.

"I know you'll be glad to have your own things. Nathan hasn't a clue as to what a woman needs." Nancy rolled her eyes. "Another hopeless bachelor."

"He's been so nice. I know he's been bunking with Bobby Driswald while I'm stuck here."

"You're lucky, we're running with a small crew this season. Once Doc says you can move, you'll have a trailer all to yourself.."

"I'd like to move in tomorrow. I've put Mr. Stokes out enough."

Nancy waved her hand. "We're just one big happy family. Don't worry about it. Since you look like you could use some rest, I'll take off. Nice meeting you, Jessie." With a merry smile, the Lady Wolf pulled her veil back down and departed.

Jessie curled over on her side and covered her face with on arm. Had Nancy worked one of Papa's shows? No, she would have remembered her.

She couldn't sleep now. The memories rolled over her. A voice thundered in a language she had tried to forget. Yet it was another voice she heard most plainly.

"You must try harder." Mama's reproach was almost comforting. Almost. "He expects you to improve by the next performance."

In comparison, Jessie's younger voice sounded desperate.. "Mama, I try! I do! He's always angry with me! I'll never please him!"

"He's your father." Mama, heavy with the baby that would kill her, was impassive. She would always side with him. It didn't matter what he did after the show. She did keep him from becoming violent when Jessie failed to please him. Mama was the one who pointed out that if Papa beat her, she couldn't perform. When her mother died, nothing stopped him.

Not for eight long years.

"Face your fear."

There had been no trial. Not after the police had discovered what Papa had done to her. Had been doing for nearly a decade. Detective Sevlín understood she couldn't bear to talk about it. He had protected her during the first, nightmarish days. Later Dr. Martin had helped her talk about the horror. To see herself as the victim of a deeply disturbed man.

By the time they declared her completely recovered, Jessie had known she needed a purpose. If she didn't, one day she might use one of the knives and put the memories to rest. For good.

Aleksei Davydov came to see her on the day of her release. He'd known Papa. He wasn't as gentle and reassuring as the doctors were. Instead, Alek offered Jessie a challenge that became her reason to go on living.

She went back to Europe for the last time.

The program had been sheer torture. The only thing that got her through it was Papa's training. Jessie worked hard. Attained each goal with a single-minded

intensity. She knew that often concerned Aleksei. His faith in her, however, proved not to be misplaced.

Over the following years, she'd dedicated herself to her work. It was Alek who encouraged her to return to America, and got her the job with the museum, which allowed her to pursue her career in restoration.. In turn, he never required her to leave the United States. It was, after all, to his advantage to keep her on American soil.

She sat up in the bed, slowly, like an old woman.

"Time to get up, Jessie," she said. "Time to go to work." She got to her feet and locked the trailer door. Then she started methodically searching Nathan's camper for any evidence that the barker possessed what she had come here to obtain.

Chapter Four

The carnival pulled up its stakes and headed for the outskirts of New Orleans. There they would join countless other road shows providing entertainment during the weeks before Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras.

Jessie rode with Bobby Driswald, leading the long line of trucks, trailers and cars to the new location. The dwarf was a delightful companion. As Nathan had boasted, Bobby could imitate almost any celebrity, and at Jessie's urging displayed his talent. The trip seemed to take no time at all.

The fairgrounds were located just outside Blanesville, a small town on the banks of the Mississippi. There she was allowed to move into her own trailer, but Doc ordered her to rest while the show stands and rides were set up.

"Doc says you stay in bed one more day, and then I can give you the grand tour," Nathan said.

The next morning, with Doc's blessing, the barker kept his word.

The largest city in Louisiana was about to celebrate its biggest holiday of the year, Nathan told her. More than half a million people lived in New Orleans, most of them settled on the east bank between the big river and Lake Pontchartrain to the North. Another hundred thousand tourists would join the local residents to help them do it.

Blanesville's proximity to New Orleans allowed it to share in the annual Mardi Gras celebrations without the headaches caused by the massive influx of so many visitors. Nathan contracted with a number of civic organizations and

churches on a well-travel led circuit to sell tickets in advance of their arrival. It was, Bobby said, one of the most profitable dates on the calendar.

The ten acres to be occupied by the carnival were carpeted by long-bladed St. Augustine grass studded with spring wild flowers. The carnies parked their trailers, Rvs and trucks in a predetermined pattern, and began the setup.

Jessie was banished to Nathan's trailer, and watched from the window. Ride operators doubled as roustabouts and set up each midway attraction from the ground up. Others erected the tents for the sideshows and the portable stands for the game and food concessions.

She saw Jack and several other men working on the tents.. As the sun hovered above them, they used large mallets to set and drive the tent stakes into the ground. Jack paused for a moment to strip off his shirt before taking up the cables that supported the structure and tying them to the stakes.

Jessie's mouth went dry. Bare to the waist, Jack looked even bigger than before. His chest was smooth, tanned, and solidly paved with muscle. His wide shoulders and powerful arms bulged as he picked up a heavy stack of two-by-four braces as if they weighed no more than chopsticks.. He took them inside the billowing canvas tent. When he reemerged, one of the carnies tossed him a cloth. Jack shouted something and grinned as he rubbed the sweat from his torso on the cloth.

Jessie could imagine herself standing on tiptoe, doing the same thing. Drying the sweat from his dark skin. Leaning over and tasting the salty texture of his flesh with her tongue --

"Forget it." She whirled from the window and dropped down on the bed, covering her eyes. "So he has a great body. He's still an obnoxious, conceited jerk."

In a matter of hours, the empty fields were transformed into a glittering oasis of fun and frolic. Stokes' Show offered such standard attractions as the ferris wheel and midway rides. Jessie counted more than thirty different game-of-chance stands. Twice that number of souvenir and food concessions.

The ghoulish delights of the Fiend House and the more intimate Arrow of Love ride were popular with the teen crowd. Smaller kids sought out the scaled-down kiddy rides and of course, the carousel.

Stokes' Sensational Show was one of the last of a dying breed, Jessie learned later. Nathan appeared after the setup was completed to take her on a tour. He started with the sideshows which, he claimed, set the show above from the average carny.

Animal House, the barker explained as he walked her through the display, held fascinating examples of the truly bizarre turns of Nature. They included a comprehensive collection of photographs and even some living oddities.

"We have a two-headed lamb, calf, and rattlesnake," he pointed out the mutant specimens, who were pampered and treated like pets by Bobby Driswald. A retired veterinarian looked after them as well. "Along with the beaker exhibits, as you see here."

Jessie leaned forward to read the label on the huge glass container of formaldehyde. "A baby mermaid?" She grimaced at the remains of what

appeared to be a preserved grouper wearing a cleverly arranged wig of seaweed.

Nathan grinned. "Barnum's Feejee Mermaid was better, I'll admit." He described the gruesome exhibit P.T. Barnum had made of an embalmed monkey head joined with a large fish tail. "Bobby caught this fellow on the Mississippi, and I couldn't pass up the chance to show him off."

"You mean her," Jessie corrected whimsically.. "Or you'll have to change the sign to Baby MerMan."

Nathan laughed.

Great Excavations displayed equally engrossing geological and fossil examples. Among them a forty-pound nugget of fool's gold that Nathan touted as the genuine article. A huge, twinned crystal of smoky quartz from Mexico. Even what the barker claimed was a 65 million-year old Tyrannosaurus Rex skull.

Jessie didn't comment on the patches of plaster revealed by the slightly flaking paint on the T-Rex "bones".

"Salome's Seven?" she read the sign out loud as they walked into the third caravan. Inside, a half-dozen women practiced the ancient art of belly-dancing.

Minus Salome's famous veils. "Oh."

Nathan greeted the seven nearly-nude women in a decidedly paternal manner. He introduced Jessie all around. One of the older dancers sized her up with a critical eye.

"Put on a few pounds, honey, then come see me," the dancer offered as she adjusted a pasty over one of her nipples. "You move like a natural."

Jessie's embarrassed gaze collided with a pale blue stare. Candy Corbin walked toward her. She was frankly lascivious in a gold sequined g-string and a semitransparent top that did nothing to conceal her large breasts. The flashy blonde strolled over, her hips swaying. Each step created all sorts of ripples and jiggles.

Jessie look away quickly. She may have deliberately cultivated her nondescript appearance, but compared to this woman?, she felt like a pencil with feet.

"Candy!" one of the older women said in a sharp tone. "Were you prancing around outside like that?"

Candy looked down at herself with satisfaction. "Just from my trailer. Call it a little free advertising, Mae." She turned a sly smile on Jessie. "Come to try out?"

"No," Jessie retorted. The satisfied malice on the other woman's face made her fake a polite expression. "Nathan has been kind enough to show me around."

The pale blue eyes darted to Stokes, who Candy hadn't spotted when she came in. "Nathan's a real prince, isn't he?"

"Let me remind you, Candy, this is a family show." The barker regarded Candy with evident distaste. "If I hear you're walking around outside the tent like this again, you're fired."

"Sure, sorry, Nathan," Candy said. Jessie privately thought the dancer wasn't impressed by the threat. The blonde made a show of looking around. "Hey, has Jack shown up yet?" She glared at Jessie. "You're not hanging around here for him, are you?"

Jessie turned and walked out of the tent. The barker soon followed. Nathan looked rather embarrassed. "Sorry about that. I should have warned you about Candy."

She shrugged. "Whatever makes the customers happy.." She glanced at the freak show tent with a sense of foreboding. The barker misread her expression. "You don't like the freak show, do you?"

She made a noncommittal gesture. She liked Nancy. She loathed Jack. The portrait of the Manigator made her nauseous. Still, Jessie had prepared herself this time.

"Irvin Feld said he wouldn't make money off of human misery. That's why he closed down the freak shows when he bought out Ringling. Do you think I'm exploiting these people?"

Jessie shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She had thought something like that. "It's not my place to judge, Nathan."

"You've got an expressive face, Jessie." Nathan took her arm and guided her toward the sideshow tent. "You met Nancy. Does she look miserable?"

"No," she admitted. "She seems very content." She faced the caricature of the Manigator. Her stomach knotted. Her hands curled tightly as they drew closer. Easy, Jessie, she told herself. It's just a picture, paint on canvas, nothing more.

"The freaks consider my show their home," he said as he led her up the ramp.

"We treat them just like everyone else.. They need that dignity. The marks may gawk at them, but that's only for a few minutes each night. It sure beats having

people ogle them twenty-four hours a day, or hiding in some house for the rest of their lives."

Inside the tent, the other freaks had set up comfortable work spaces around the cages they occupied for the show. All greeted her without reserve.

"The Incredible, Incomparable Imogene," Nathan said. The enormously obese woman lived in the back half of a specially designed caravan around which the tent was erected. She was dressed in a Victorian gown. The soft pink dress was made of endless yards of cambric. The lace alone could have easily trimmed five or more wedding dresses.

Imogene's silver-blond hair was carefully swept up into an intricate cluster of feminine curls. Diamond-studded pins in the shape of stars glittered against the fair strands. More sparkling jewels glittered in the many rings she wore. She held out an incongruously tiny hand and clasped Jessie's fingers warmly.

"How do you do." Imogene's voice was both melodic and stately. Deep-set hazel eyes shrewdly measured Jessie in a blink. Beside her, a complex-looking computer was set up. Another table held a printer, which was presently busily engaged. "How much --" Jessie halted. How rude it would sound to ask outright.

"Six hundred forty-seven and three-quarters pounds," Imogene said, smiled, and winked at the barker. "Nathan, you should have her work with me, she makes me look twice that."

"If I can keep you," Nathan joked. He explained to Jessie, "Imogene is working on her fourth -- no fifth novel, isn't it?" The fat lady nodded with regal satisfaction.

"She writes very successful mysteries. I may have to hire a secretary for her soon."

"If I don't buy you out first, old man," Imogene said. Her grin widened, doubling her three chins into six.

Pasha the Pincushion, Nathan revealed, was actually a quiet middle-aged Texan named Harv Allen. Harv nodded to Jessie as he hammered some wicked-looking nails into the "bed" he occupied for his part of his act. He was as tall as Jack, but heavier. Harv had the look of a cowboy, with his thinning sandy hair and deeply weathered, craggy features.

"Harv has been studying far eastern meditation techniques most of his life," Nathan told Jessie. "It helps that his blood has the unique ability to clot instantly, too."

After Harv Allen, Jessie met the show's two midget performers. Gail and Terence Appleby were twins. Both were in their mid-twenties, but had not grown past twenty-seven inches in height. Jessie would have guessed them to be no more than two or three years old.

Gail was dressed in Lilliputian-sized overalls and had an elfin charm with her dainty features and bubbly blond curls. Terence wore a tailored shirt and slacks, and slicked his blond hair back from a serious face. The fact he was no bigger than an toddler made him look even more adorable than Gail.

"Tweedle-Teeny and Tweedle-Wheeny?" Jessie grimaced at the sign over their cage.

Gail elbowed her brother sharply. "See?" her high-pitched voice squeaked with indignation. "I'm not the only one who thinks it's a stupid title."

"It's better than the Fairy King and Queen," her brother retorted, rubbing his ribs.

"No way am I gonna be called a fairy."

"I tell everyone he's the 'Wheeny'," Gail told Jessie. Her rosebud lips pouted.

"You can see why."

"At least I don't have a 'Teeny' brain like you -"

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Do not -"

Nathan interrupted with a long-suffering glance at Jessie. "Gail, where is Connie?"

The Lilliputian woman shrugged. "Probably out sticking his head up his --" the barker coughed, and the midget smiled apologetically at Jessie. "Uh, practicing, I think."

"I need to have a word with our contortionist about practice hours." Nathan waved toward the last cage. "Let's go and meet the Manigator, Jessie."

Whoever played the part of the Manigator had pulled the privacy drape over the display cage. Jessie noticed the midgets had abruptly disappeared, and the other freaks were being a little too quiet.

I know when I'm being set up, she thought with a wry inner chuckle. Nathan probably does this regularly. Part of the initiation process, no doubt.

Jessie wasn't thrilled with the idea of coming face-to-face with that . . . thing, but at least she was prepared for the worst. Odd that she hadn't seen this particular performer since coming to Stokes. Perhaps he preferred to avoid being seen, like Nancy.

Nathan's eyes shone as he went into his exhibition speech. "And now, Jessie, I present to you a mysterious creature from the forbidden tracts of the Brazilian Amazon Basin. The only known specimen in captivity, descended from a lost ancestor in human evolution. Behold the missing link -- The Manigator!"

Jessie's eyes widened as Nathan yanked aside the drape in front of the big cage. The creature rose from a stool, stretching out long, scaly green limbs. From his throat came a series of garbled sounds that might have been words, a million years or so ago. Jessie felt alternating waves of disgust, fear, and fascinated horror sweep over her, leaving behind only pity.

"Scientists would have you believe that man evolved from the primate family," Nathan said, his eyebrows plainly arched. "The Manigator provides another possible theory."

"Where . . . how . . . " Jessie couldn't find the words. Was it really just a costume?

She stepped closer. It looked so real.

Nathan played barker to her astonished rube. "The Manigator was brought back by scientists on an expedition into an unexplored rain forest," he said, then dropped his strident tone to a respectful hush. "The few who survived the cannibal tribes, piranha, and jungle diseases, that is."

The Manigator's tail thrashed back and forth slowly.

"There are some bizarre, exotic tribes in those regions. Primitive beings who practice strange rituals as they worship their animal deities." Nathan stroked his jowls to keep from laughing. "Perhaps while offering one of their virgin sacrifices to just such a god, something went terribly wrong . . . "

On cue, the creature lashed his tail with a quick snap and jumped forward, talons crooked and slashing at the air. The impact of his menacing frame against the flimsy-looking bars shook the entire cage.

Jessie took a step back automatically. Nathan swatted his cane against the bars. "Back! Back! Swamp demon from hell!" The barker sounded afraid. His portly shape trembled while he clasped his small hands together in entreaty. "Careful now, Jessie. Don't venture too close. He's stirred up again. The Manigator is known to be absolutely ferocious . . . " he paused dramatically, gazing into her eyes. " . . . when looking for a mate."

Jessie looked back at the Manigator. He curled his claws around the bars, shook them hard, and let his head fall back as he released an eerie, primal howl.

"We're trying to acquire another of the creatures for him," Nathan confided. "Until then, my dear . . . it's best . . . we keep him . . . from becoming . . . too agitated . . . " the last words were lost as the barker burst into laughter. "Oh, Jessie," he said. "If you could only see the look on your face!"

Jessie blinked, dazed. The Manigator reached out and tugged at the curtain.

Nathan, nearly doubled-over with hilarity, barely managed to pull it shut.

She didn't think it was that funny. "Nathan, who is that?" An inhuman laugh rumbled from behind the curtain as Nathan held his belly with both hands and only laughed even harder.

"Guess." The Manigator's voice hissed out the word.

"Nathan?" someone called. "Nathan? Where are you?"

"Excuse me." Still chuckling, the barker strolled from the tent.

The joke had palled. Jessie swiftly rounded the cage and halted by the uncovered back access door. The Manigator turned around on his stool. The light from behind the cage clearly illuminated his face. Half a minute passed as they stared in shocked surprise at each other through the large opening.

I can't believe it, she thought.

From the grotesque mask of scales, Jackson Hamilton's dark eyes stared back at her.

#

Jessie's disbelief was plain. Her brows drew together. Eyes narrowed. Lips parted. "Jack?"

He didn't reply. He rose from the stool and went to the cage door. When he opened it and stepped out, Jessie took a shuffling step backward.

Jack smiled. "What's the matter, chere? You don't like my act?" She didn't. He'd seen that right away. For some obscure reason, it infuriated him.

"You enjoy doing this?" she asked him, and gestured with her slim hand.

"Looking like that?"

The anger Jack had felt during his first run-in with Jessica Kelly flared once more. Now she was every girl who had sneered at him.. Every rube who had gaped at his Mother. Every idiot who had ridiculed his Father.

The words came boiling out of him. "You know what it's like to be a freak? Everybody stares and points at you. They call you a monster. You can't walk down a street. Go to a movie. No one wants you in their town. Freaks belong in cages. On display for the nice, normal folks to come peek at. They laugh at you. Throw things. Spit at you. No, chere, I don't enjoy it."

"I wasn't trying to insult you," she snapped.. "Besides, this is an act. You don't really look like this."

"Is that what you think?" He moved in. "What if I do, chere? What if I'm really the Manigator, and Jack is just a mask I wear?"

"It wouldn't make a difference," Jessie said -- still backing up. She didn't get far. Her shoulders met the pine tent brace and she halted. "Not to me."

"Prove it," he said, closer now.

"What do you mean?"

"Show me you're not afraid of monsters." Jack stopped a few inches from her.

"Come over here and touch me."

If he'd had lips, he would have smirked. He'd seen her revulsion. There was no way in hell she'd put one pristine little finger on him.

Jessie raised one small hand toward his face. Jack braced himself for the inevitable slap. She lifted the other hand. Pressed both palms to either side of his

head. She wasn't slapping him. She was holding his misshapen face and looking directly into his eyes.

What does she think she's doing? Jack thought, too stunned by her audacity to move away.

"I am afraid of monsters," Jessie said. "But real monsters hide their true faces."

He tensed, as if she'd struck him. "What's under your mask, Jack?" She moved one of her soft palms against his scaly cheek, testing it.

That was when Jack got a very different kind of jolt. Hunger. Immediate. Deep. It radiated through his monstrous limbs in feverish, swelling waves. The pure, female smell of her skin. The feel of her under his hands. The sensations tore at him without warning. Needs he'd thrust aside trampled over his astonishment.

Mine, his blood roared.

The luscious texture of her mouth taunted him. All he could think of was the craving to caress, taste, and thrust into this small body pressed against him. So delicate. So warm. So alive. Jack imagined her nuzzling his chest. Whispering his name. Crying out as he took her. A guttural sound escaped from his throat. She slipped her hands to his shoulders. Her lips parted.

Stunned dark eyes met his.

Who are you? he thought, speech out of the question for the moment. More importantly, what the hell are you doing to me?

She dropped her hands away, but he could feel her breathing. It was as ragged as his. Jack forgot who she was. Who he was pretending to be. One of his

clawed hands moved over her tightly-bound hair in a slow, rough caress. The other clutched the nape of her neck.

"Touch me again."

She jerked back. Her eyes were clear now. "No."

"Again!" he said, his voice a low growl.

She fought him, but it was too late. Jack held her easily. She'd had her chance to back down, he thought. He wanted to feel those cool hands on him again. Her cheek was satin against the flickering tip of his tongue. Her scent colored every breath he took in. Her small breasts heaved as he tugged her closer. The intoxicating effect of the whole package made him nearly miss the swift upward thrust of her knee.

Training snapped into play. With a quick movement he deflected the painful blow with one thick, scaly thigh. His surprise and his defensive movement enabled her to break free of his hold at last.

"Back off!" Jessie whirled out of reach. She was panting. Outraged. "Keep your claws to yourself, you jerk!"

"Jessie?" Nathan called out tentatively. "You still here?"

"Yeah," she called back. Never taking her furious eyes from Jack. "Be right there." Now she walked past Jack as if he didn't exist. He reached out, caught her arm.

"Come and see me again, chere," he said.

Her eyes swept down, then up the full length of his inhuman form. "Thanks, but I've seen enough."

#

Nathan steered Jessie out of the caravan's twisting corridor. It was a relief to see daylight. He apologized half-heartedly for the trick he'd pulled on her with Jack. Jessie shrugged it off. She wasn't going to tell Nathan what had happened behind the scenes. In fact, she was going to do everything in her power to forget about Jack and his monstrous alter-ego. No one needed to know that she'd nearly kissed a half-man, half-alligator on a dare.

Why in God's name had she let it go that far?

"The concessions are independently owned," Nathan said as he walked her down the row of food stands. "I also give the ride operators a percentage of the ticket sales. Helps keep them on for longer than a few weeks." The barker frowned thoughtfully. "Now, I know I'm forgetting something. What haven't I shown you?"

Jessie suppressed a laugh. "Um, the carousel?"

It was almost a hundred years old. Over the last century, loving hands had kept it in marvelous repair. Jessie exclaimed with delight as she knelt on the circular base. She put a gentle hand on the smooth-carved flank of a proud Arabian steed. Admired the heavily-jewelled tack. His mate, who had lost a foreleg, was draped with intricately shaped roses and faded ribbon streamers.

"Oh, Nathan," she breathed. She was going to yell at Alek for doing this to her. A lot. "It's magnificent."

The barker was delighted. "She's my little baby. I'd sell everything I own before I give her up. Then I'd have to sell me along with her, I expect."

"When can I get started?"

"You can work on it in the mornings, before we open. After closing, too, but it may be too dark then."

"You wouldn't consider shutting it down for a few days?" Jessie frowned as she surveyed the damage the past century had wrought. Loving hands hadn't been able to prevent the inexorable erosion of time. The thousands of eager hands and feet. It would take weeks to complete the work.

I'm not going to yell at Alek, she thought. I'm going to kill him. How can he expect me to walk away from this one?

"No can do, my dear," Nathan shook his head. "The kids would be disappointed. Especially the little ones. They all have their favorites, and expect to ride them every year. I may as well shut down the show."

She could work around the show's operating hours, Jessie decided. Her hands itched for her tools and paints already. To hell with Alek. She went on to examine each individual horse. She barely noticed when Bobby appeared. The show manager told Nathan about a problem acquiring some sort of permit.

"Leave me, Nathan, I'm fine." Jessie waved him away with a chuckle. "In fact, I'm in love."

She made a quick trip to her trailer to get her cases. With the help of one of the ride operators, she found and set up a work table on one side of the carousel. With a pencil and tablet, she noted first how many casts were needed. A color chart helped her judge the specific shades of base enamel she would need to

refurbish the worn coats of the horses. After that, she began a piece-by-piece inspection.

Some time later, Jessie was lying beneath the belly of a Clydesdale. It was the only position in which she could measure the crack running under the girth. She suddenly felt a hand grab her thigh. As she jerked upright in startled reflex, her brow collided with the solid wood. Pain exploded through her still-healing temple.

The hand tightened. "Trying for twelve stitches?"

She peered around the horse and saw Jack standing over her. With a huff she shoved his hand away and went back to measuring.

"Feeling a little shy now, chere?"

"No." Was there no end to the man's gall? "Go away."

After a few seconds the deep voice spoke again. "You can't hide under there forever."

No, she couldn't. "Watch me."

"I could drag you out by your leg --" she felt a foot nudge her ankle. "Or crawl under there and join you."

She needed the measuring tape, or she would have heaved it at him. "Jack, what do you want?"

"When I come across a woman flat on her back at my feet, chere, a list does come to mind."

Jessie closed her eyes and counted silently to ten. "Jack, what exactly do you want that is strictly related to my job with the show?"

He laughed. "You're a piece of work, Jess."

"Yes. And you're interrupting mine." She pushed herself out from under the horse and scrambled awkwardly to her feet.

The Manigator had become Jack once more. He was even bigger, darker, and more handsome than ever. Rip open his shirt, put a half-naked woman in his lap, and he could have graced the cover of a romance novel. He must have put on a truckload of make-up and a latex body suit for his act.

You'd think I'd never seen a gorgeous man before, Jessie chided herself. Her eyes strayed to his physique for a moment, remembering the way he looked while setting up the tent. Perhaps she'd never seen one as disturbingly masculine as Jackson Hamilton.

"Better without the scales?"

Jessie brushed past him. She put her measuring tape down on the work table while noting the dimensions of the crack on her list, and thought about kicking Jack in the shin. Only when she was done writing did she glance up at him. "I'm busy. What do you need?"

He hooked his thumbs in his back pockets. "I'm heading into the city. Nathan said you needed some supplies." Jessie tore three pages from her tablet and held them out. He didn't take them. "Come with me."

She shook her head. She'd had more than enough of Jackson Hamilton for one day. "I've just started here."

"The show opens in another two hours," Jack said. "You can't do much more today."

"Why don't you find Candy? She's looking for you."

He only smiled at the suggestion. The curve of his mouth hinted at unnamed pleasures. "I want you . . . to come with me."

The seductive words made Jessie's jaw sag. He couldn't be serious. She ducked her head as she felt the color staining her cheeks, and tried desperately to think up another excuse. Any excuse.

Jack came up beside her. His very proximity was destroying her concentration. She could feel the heat radiating from his body. She steeled herself to look at him again.

Jack was packing up her tools.

"Wait. Stop." She tried to take a chisel from his hand. "I can't go with you."

"Why not?" His fingers grabbed hers. "You scared of me, chere? I promise not to turn into the Manigator on you."

That was enough to straighten her spine, bank her nerves, and match his gaze.

"Fine. Give me a minute to put pack up and my cases back in my trailer."

"I'll help," he said. He fingered the different tools she used thoughtfully as he packed up one case. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"It's my job," she said.

"Jackson!"

Jessie looked up to see a thinner, older version of Jack staggering toward them.

He was either blind, or drunk. Or both. The smell of scotch reached Jessie's nose before the man did.

"Dad." Jack's tone was indifferent.

"Heard . . . heard you were heading to town, boy." The older man smiled angelically at Jessie, then unsuccessfully muffled a belch. "En -- enchanted, m'dear."

"Jessie Kelly." She held out her hand. Eventually she caught his.

"Conrad Hamilton." Jack's father started to bow and nearly fell over.

"Also known as Wyatt Warp, Connie the Contortionist, and currently the Amazing Elast-o," Jack said.

"Don't . . . don't forget Rub . . . Rub . . . Rubber Man," Conrad said.

"A real spokesman for the millennium," his son said.

"You're a contortionist?" Jessie couldn't keep the speculation out of her voice.

In response, Jack's father bent over. Placed his head between his knees. Curled up. His flushed face looked at her over his own spine. He folded his hands behind his neck.

"Yep."

She couldn't help it. Jessie started laughing. The sound seemed to please the older man. Jack's scowl only deepened. Conrad unfolded himself and put a hand on his son's arm.

"Will you make a run for me, boy? Damned if -- 'scuse me, darling girl -- darned if I can remember where I put the last one." His voice lowered to a slurred whisper.

"I think Imo -- Imo -- the fat lady nipped it again."

"No problem, Dad."

Conrad bowed again to Jessie, then stumbled off. He wove an erratic pattern through the maze of game stands as he headed back to the trailers.

"Don't," Jack warned when he saw her expression.

"Jack, he's drunk."

"I know."

"You can't buy more liquor for him." She crossed her arms over her chest. Stuck out her chin. Dared him to disagree with her.

"If I don't, someone else will."

"But he's your father -- you could help him -- Jack, it's wrong!"

"I didn't ask for advice." The handsome face was shuttered, but Jessie caught a glimpse of an old, never-healed wound.

"No, you didn't. Sorry." She eyed Conrad. "Has he always been . . . that bad?"

The big man's fists clenched as he followed her gaze. "By tonight he'll be so plastered he won't be able to crawl."

"Why don't you try to get him some help?"

Jack turned on her, his voice tight and flat. "I've tried. Doctors. Twelve-step programs. You name it. Nothing stops him from drinking. End of discussion. Let's go."

Chapter Five

Once they'd dropped off her cases, Jack led Jessie to an old battered Jeep. He drove with easy competence over the still- drying mud roads. Jessie recalled Nathan telling her Jack was a Cajun. This was home territory for him.

Behind the show was the swamp -- a murky tangle of cypress, willow, and scrub pine. The ground itself was so saturated by early Spring rain that pools of water collected everywhere. Excellent breeding grounds for the universally-detested mosquitoes, Jessie thought.

Something about the bayou's darkness frightened her. Perhaps it was only the moody sky above the silent canopy of gray-bearded trees. Yet Jessie could almost feel the swamp's hidden, secretive violence. One of Nathan's books had described how the bayou country had endured floods, wars, plagues, wild storms, even pirate ships that hid in its web of twisting, murky rivers. It was easy to imagine the dark thickets concealing other secrets -- the kind never meant to be found.

The swamp itself was not the only eerie sight. As they drove toward town, they passed several farms that looked abandoned. Cracked paint adorned dry-rotted siding. Windows were broken or missing. Weathered for sale signs were posted. Some appeared to have been there for years. Jessie frowned.

"They must be having hard times here," she said, and Jack glanced at her.

"Contamination."

"Excuse me?"

"Pollutants from illegal dumping. Swamp is better than a landfill. No one goes into them, and doesn't cost anything. Once the contamination level gets high enough, it permeates the soil. Nothing fit to sell will grow."

"Oh." Jessie held on to the upper door frame and watched Stokes' Sensational Show disappear in the reflection of the rearview mirror.

"Forget something?"

"Uh -- no." She looked over at his hands, which grasped the wheel loosely. "Are you working tonight?" Remembered how they looked, tipped with those wicked-looking claws.

He nodded, and expertly dodged a waddling possum crossing the two-lane road.

"How long does it take you to . . . set up for your act?" Jessie wasn't sure why she was persisting in the small talk. Maybe to keep her mind off the man himself.

"Not long." His smile seemed to mock her. "Nathan asked you to double up?"

"Excuse me?"

"Work something else, chere. Like a stand, or one of the rides?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what else I could do."

"Maybe you'd like to join the freaks."

Her face burned as she recalled every moment of their initial encounter. "I'm sure I couldn't . . . I mean, I can't see me impersonating --"

"We could make you the Manigator's Mate."

So much for small talk.

The silence stretched for the thirty minutes it took them to reach New Orleans.

Jack kept his eyes on the road. Once she got over the embarrassment caused by his last comment, Jessie studied him.

His hands were callused, fingers and palms, the sign of a hard worker. The matte black hair had a scattered trace of silver gleaming in it.

The Manigator had been green, bald, and covered with a realistic reptilian hide.

Jack's skin, on the other hand, was flawless. He had no scars. Not even a slight acne scar left over from adolescence. Nobody looked that perfect. He must have had a charmed life.

Jack parked the Jeep outside a large shopping center and turned off the engine.

Before Jessie could get out, he grasped her arm.

"Wait a minute. I want to talk to you."

He picked a funny time to do it. Why the silent treatment all the way here? "We don't have much time," she said, holding up the pages of supplies she'd made note of. "This will take at least an hour to round up. Don't you have to get ready for the show, too?"

"Whatever you're up to, drop it. Right now."

The vehemence in his tone almost made her recoil. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" He pushed her arm away and climbed out of the jeep. He ducked down and looked back at her through the window frame. "I'll meet you back here in an hour."

Jessie watched him walk away. Once Jack was out of sight, she scanned the parking lot quickly. She had to get to a telephone. Now.

It took a precious fifteen minutes to locate a secure phone. Place the call. Wait for the call back. By then she was sweating. Imaging the worst possible reasons behind Jack's warning. He didn't believe her cover. That alone was frightening enough. Could it be possible Jack was involved?

Jessie couldn't mention him in her report. Not yet. Once contact was made, she would have to find out who Jackson Hamilton was. How he fit into the dangerous situation.

Aleksei listened patiently. When she told him she had been injured, he was appalled.

"It was an accident, Nachalneek." She had no intention of explaining to the Director of Prism how she had let someone lock her in a cage, then had tripped and banged her head. "I will be fine."

"You are not to have any more accidents, Galoobaya," Alek said. He listened to the rest of her report. Jessie could tell he was not at all pleased by what little she had to tell him. "What about Cutter?"

The back of Jessie's neck prickled. When she glanced over her shoulder she saw nothing but a couple of tourists on their way into the mall. An old, homeless man in a worn overcoat shuffling by with his shopping cart. A family loading bags into their car.

"Soon," she said into the receiver.

#

Some time later, Jack returned the coat and cart to its original owner. The bag lady had been only too grateful to rent it to him for the twenty he offered.

"Want to borrow my hat, son?" she displayed twin rows of gap-spaced teeth. Her gnarled hand patted the shapeless, battered Panama perched on her gray hair.

"Let you have it for a ten spot."

"Next time," Jack promised grimly. He went to buy his father booze. Pick up an order of lighting for Bobby. Wait for his prime suspect to finish her shopping.

Jessie walked out of the home improvement store a half hour later. She had cart full of bags. The list in one hand. A faraway look in her eyes. She almost walked right past Jack. He cleared his throat, gaining her notice. She smiled.

So small. So delicate. So deceptive. He could snap her neck with one hand, Jack thought. The question now was, would he have to?

"Done shopping, baby?"

"Don't call me baby," she said. "Are you ready to go back?"

"No." He loaded the bags into the back of the jeep. "I'm going to feed you first."

Jessie's fingers crumpled the list in her hand. "I'm not hungry."

"I am." Jack slammed the hatch. He was sick of looking at her bird-boned limbs.

"Come on."

They drove through the tourist district to the other side of town. Jack stopped and escorted Jessie into a rather unremarkable-looking diner. Inside it was packed with customers. The air was pungent with the smells of simmering pots of gumbo and spicy steamed seafood. A harassed waitress found them a small corner table, and he automatically ordered coffee for both of them.

"I'll just have coffee," Jessie said.

"You'll have coffee and lunch."

Jessie looked at the couple at the next table. The elderly man and woman were arguing about a television show. Jack slid the menu across the table and nudged her arm with it.

"I'll order you a double burger, giant chocolate shake and extra fries, chere," he said, keeping his tone soft and menacing. "And make you eat every bite. I guarantee."

That got her attention. "Would a salad be acceptable?" Her tone indicated he was being extremely unreasonable.

"No." He tapped the menu with a finger. "Try something that has a cholesterol warning next to it."

By now the waitress had returned. The middle-aged woman shoved her damp hair back from her brow. Was clearly ready to quit her job at the slightest provocation. "You folks ready?"

Jack nodded. "I'll have the catfish po'boy, crab gumbo on the side, and iced sweet tea." He eyed Jessie.

"The house salad, please, with vinaigrette dressing, and a glass of water." Jessie closed the menu with a snap. Her expression dared him to contradict her.

Jack glowered. Before he could change the order, however, the waitress disappeared. "You can't be on a diet."

Jessie gazed through the grimy window behind them, effectively ignoring him.

"Are you one of those vegetarians?"

She didn't respond.

"Fasting for Jesus?"

Nothing.

He tried one more time. "Hunger strike for the I.R.A.?"

She wasn't listening at all now. He looked over his shoulder and saw a group of teenagers walking past the diner. They were carrying huge ice cream cones.

Jostling each other cheerfully. Chatting between licks.

Jack reached across the table and ran his index finger down her nose. She pulled back, startled by the sudden contact.

"Qu'est-ce que vous avez?" he said, and watched her lift a hand and rub her nose.

"Je vais bien - uh - nothing is wrong with me."

"Ah, vous parlez le francais." He'd suspected as much. "I'll be careful not to swear around you."

"Un peu seulement." she said, shrugging it off.

Only a little. Interesting. Jack wouldn't have guessed French was in big demand while living in Virginia. Especially French spoken with a Parisian accent. "Did you hear anything I said?"

"I'm not a vegetarian," she said, and frowned. "Why?"

"Never mind."

Despite the crowd, the waitress was quick to return with their meals. Jessie sipped her water and watched Jack as he tasted the gumbo.

"Is that a sandwich?" She nodded toward his plate. Jack held up the po'boy for her to take a bite. She shook her head.

"It's a poor boy's sandwich," he said. "French bread stuffed with deep fried catfish, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, Cajun mayonnaise, and some hot pepper. Try it."

She politely refused again. He noticed she picked up her fork several times. Pushed the salad greens around her plate. Drank a little water. It was a good act. Jack got to his feet. "I'll be right back," he said, and headed for the men's room. Once he was out of Jessie's sight, he walked through the diner. He found a position where he had a clear view of Jessie at the table, but she couldn't see him.

She waited a minute. Looked around. Turned. Spoke briefly to the elderly woman at the next table. Smiled. Handed her salad to the other woman. Took an empty plate in trade.

The entire exchange took only a minute. Jessie glanced carefully in the direction of the rest rooms several times.

So there was a problem, Jack thought. On top of everything else. He wanted to talk to her. To understand why. To shake her until her teeth rattled.

"Damn conniving woman." Jack retraced his steps. When he approached their table, she gave him a slightly superior smile.. Wasn't she was pleased with herself? He'd play along. For now.

"That was quick." He looked at her plate. "Was it good?"

She didn't even hesitate. "Delicious."

Jack finished his sandwich and the steaming bowl of gumbo that came with it. He didn't look at her again. After he paid for their lunch, he saw her reach into her pocket. Her hand came up with several bills, which she extended to him.

"My treat," he said, holding on to his temper.. Barely. "Let's go."

#

The ride back to the carnival was made in another vacuum of silence. Jack looked more distant than before, if that was possible.

Jessie was surprised to notice the edge of a tattoo on his right arm. It was revealed when he made a left turn and his sleeve slid up over the flexed bicep. It was the bottom of a scroll, the kind that edged emblems of state. Coats of arms. Military insignia.

She broke the silence to ask, "Were you in the Army?"

He grunted. "Marines."

Jessie didn't probe further. The fact he served in the military meant only one thing. He might have been recruited to work for either side. Now her problem was to confirm he was an operative, and discover whose side he was on.

She wasn't worried about her own background. Jack might be suspicious, but her cover was extensive and flawless, thanks to Alek. There were no records of her former identity anywhere. Jessie was activated only when absolutely necessary. Her cover was her own life.

Her image was one she had carefully cultivated over the years. She'd become the plain, rather dowdy woman devoted to her work. It helped to blend in to the background, to appear ordinary, and at certain times, even poverty-stricken.

Men like Jack didn't pay attention to women like that. They liked attractive women -- curvaceous blondes, like Candy Corbin.

But Jack had noticed her, a small voice protested within. He had touched her, first at the sideshow, then in the trailer. He was a sarcastic and bad-tempered beast, but there was something between them. Moments when his reaction had been basic. Male to female.

Jessie rubbed a tired hand over the back of her neck. Who was she kidding? Jack was simply amusing himself with her. It was all a game. If he wanted her, well, some men weren't bothered by conscience when it came to sex.

In spite of that, Jackson Hamilton was the best-looking man she had ever seen. Forget the Manigator. He could have stepped out of a movie screen. The kind of movie where an equally beautiful woman waited on him to take her in his arms. And yes, a part of her longed to be that woman. Jessie imagined throwing away her ugly clothes and showing him how she could really look. How would Jack react if he saw her in a silk dress, with her hair loose and her face made up? Silk and hair and make-up would only cover up so much . . .

Jessie laughed silently, bitterly at herself. She wasn't in the same league as Jack. He obviously liked attractive women. Why would he take a second look at her? More importantly, she had a job to do, and Jack could have no part of that. No one could.

Jessie forced herself to mentally catalog the supplies she had purchased, then planned where she would start her work. The best part of her job was the actual restorations she accomplished. She made it a calm center from which she drew

strength. Perhaps tonight, after the show closed down, she could scrounge a few hanging lights and work on the castings.

Make herself available to Cutter.

They reached the carnival. Jack pulled the Jeep up into the spaces reserved for the employees' vehicles. Jessie climbed out and took an armful of bags.

"Where do you want them?" he asked.

"Can you help me carry them over to my trailer?"

"Sure."

She didn't look back. "Thanks."

Once Jack helped her stow the supplies in her trailer, he stomped off without another word. Jessie was grateful. She had a lot of thinking to so.

She went back to the carousel to select the horses she would begin restoring first. Given the limited amount of time she had -- among other things -- Jessie decided to start with the least damaged first.

While she was inspecting the first area to work, a red-haired man appeared beside her. Behind him, the first groups of customers were spilling into the fairgrounds.

"Hello." She shaded her eyes against the bright sunlight to look up at him. He was dressed in faded jeans and a T-shirt with STOKES stenciled on the front pocket. "You must be the ride operator." He nodded. "I'm all done here. Let me get out of your way."

While Jessie packed up, the red-haired man unlocked the carousel's remote operation console. Deft hands flicked on the power switches. She kept glancing at him. He seemed very familiar, but she couldn't place him.

An Irishman, she guessed. With that bright hair, pale skin and green eyes, what else could he be? His features couldn't be called handsome. Pugnacious, perhaps. Jessie wagered he knew how to take care of any rowdies --

That was it. She snapped her fingers, catching the operator's attention.

"You look just like that actor," she said. "You know, the one who used to be on that police drama?"

The man grinned, obviously used to the comparison. She was about to ask his name when she saw the road manager approaching them.

"Hey, Jessie." Bobby nodded to the ride operator. "How's the work going?"

"Smooth, so far. I'll be ready to begin as soon as we close tonight, if I can requisition some lighting."

"Danny can fix you up. Okay, Danny?" The ride operator gave Bobby a thumbs-up. Jessie smiled as she finished packing up the last of her supplies. "Let me give you a hand with those."

Bobby handled three cases without effort, allowing Jessie to collapse the work table and carry that. He kept pace with her as they made their way through the growing crowd toward her trailer.

"I haven't seen that guy Danny before," she said. "Is he new?"

"No, he's one of the locals," Bobby said. "Danny usually works Mardi Gras for us every year."

"Doesn't talk much, does he?"

"He can't," Bobby said. They passed one of the game stands, where a pair of teenagers were trying to knock down milk bottles without success. "He's mute."

"Really." Jessie was thoughtful. "I hadn't realized."

"Have plans for the afternoon, Jessie?"

Absently she shook her head, then remembered the warnings from Doc and Jack about doubling up. She flashed Bobby a panicky look.

"I can't cook," she said. "I burn water."

"I'd like to see that." Bobby grinned. "Today, though, we could use a hand at the Pluck-A-Ducky stand."

Jessie was wary. "I don't have to pluck these ducks myself, right?"

"Nope. Just take the money and let the kiddies do it."

Once they'd put away her tools and supplies, Bobby took her to the game stand.

The stand itself simply a frame box of plywood, covered by weathered striped canvas. The biggest prizes, a collection of comical-looking stuffed animals, were hung overhead in bunches, like colorful bananas. Smaller consolation trinkets were heaped in open cardboard boxes at the back of the stand. A strip of track lighting made it possible to illuminate the game during the evening hours.

Pluck-A-Ducky was an easy game, designed to please the youngest carnival goers. A long, shallow aluminum "pond" stretched the length of the stand's front. It was filled with a few inches of water.. Dozens of bright yellow, grinning rubber ducks swam in the "pond", nudged along by the agitation created by a small aquarium pump.

Jessie's job was to collect a quarter from each player, who proceeded to choose a duck. On the bottom of the rubber toy was a number. The number corresponded to a particular prize. All that was left was for Jessie to hand the novelty over to the delighted player.

"Everyone is a winner," Bobby said, then added in a John Wayne voice, "so circle the wagons and keep your head down, pilgrim."

She was busy. The stand was inundated with hordes of children as soon as Jessie opened. The small customers eagerly handed over their quarters and plucked out their ducks. Their enthusiastic hands sent splashes that soon drenched Jessie's jeans. There were moments, too, when she couldn't hand out prizes fast enough. She ignored the rush and discomfort, and simply enjoyed the excited faces. Their happiness was more than ample compensation.

Nathan came by to give her change, and watched her work for a few minutes. He reached into the pond and picked out a duck at random, and presented it to a shy girl of four who had been watching the others play.

"Lucky number seven!" Nathan called, and Jessie looked at him in surprise.

There was only one duck in the pond with that number, which entitled the child to one of the enormous stuffed prizes. She grinned when the child handed over the duck. The seven was actually a three.

"Here you go, sweetheart." Jessie handed the grand prize to the little girl, who squealed with delight as she showed it to her parents. She shot a sideways glance at Nathan. "You need reading glasses, boss."

He winked shamelessly at her. "Keep 'em happy, Jess."

She worked the stand for several more hours, until a pleasant middle-aged woman came to relieve her. Feeling damp and sticky from the afternoon's shift, Jessie decided to take a shower. The tiny cubicle in her trailer didn't allow for much maneuvering, but at last she got her hair washed.

It took nearly a half-hour to dry the thick, heavy mass with the small travel drier she had packed. By then the sky was starting to darken, and Jessie was exhausted. She set her alarm clock, and settled down for a nap.

She woke up just before it went off, in darkness. After she dressed, she calculated what supplies she would need for that night's work and packed it up. Her loose hair was gathered, coiled, and pinned it above her nape. She placed the blue butterfly comb just above the nape of her neck.

Could Danny be her contact? she wondered. The muteness could be an act. An excellent way to conceal something he couldn't change -- like a Russian accent. Jessie saw the last of the crowd departing the fairgrounds as she walked over to the carousel. Danny was waiting for her. He had left on the ride lights but shut off power to the motor which turned the huge circular base.

"Bobby said you could help me out with the spot lighting I need," she said, and the red head nodded.

Jessie made sure they were alone, then turned so Danny saw the blue butterfly comb in her hair. He only pointed to a large box of hanging lamps and coils of power cords set neatly to one side of the ride. Subconsciously Jessie relaxed. If Danny had been Cutter, he would have said so. "Great." Her smile was warmer than she realized. "Let me show you where I need it to go."

Night time conditions required the lighting be placed to illuminate each of the horses Jessie had planned to work on. She decided to do the sanding and stripping first. It didn't require as much detail work. The horses could still be ridden by the next day's customers, too.

Danny was as efficient as he was silent, and had the lighting rigged in a few minutes. While he ran the extension cords back to one of the generator trailers, Jessie adjusted the bulb shields. He rejoined her as she removed the multi-headed sander and a can of paint stripper from her case.

"Thanks, Danny," she smiled absently as she sorted through her brushes. He pointed at her case, then the carousel, and finally at himself, all with an inquiring expression. "No, I won't need any more help tonight."

He frowned, and mimicked someone eating.

Jessie shrugged. "Later. Thanks again." She didn't see the look he gave her before he headed off down the midway.

She chose one of the biggest horses to begin with, a massive Belgian whose gray-spotted coat was badly damaged by wear, weather, and time. It took nearly two hours to sand and prep the worn areas.

Next to the Belgian, a dainty black thoroughbred arched her elegant neck, her halter glittering under the lights. Jessie decided before she began sanding to remove over fifty cut-glass gems from the settings around the neck and mane. The heavy old faux gemstones were exquisitely fashioned, and costly to reproduce.

As she was leaning over one of the horses to coat the base of one of the gems with solvent, she felt large hands clamp around her waist. The small brush fell from her fingers.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" Jack said as he lifted Jessie off the horse and dropped her on her feet.

"What Nathan is paying me for." She bent over to pick up the brush, and considered sticking it up his patrician nose. "My job."

"With that dent in your head, you'll probably pass out instead." He snatched the brush from her fingers. "Take a break."

She straightened to her full fifty-nine and a half inches. "I just started --"

"Yeah, and now you're taking a break." He grabbed her arm, tossed the brush on her work table and began to drag her away from the carousel.

"Jack." She struggled, pulling against him. A belated sense of diplomacy made her force a laugh. "This is silly --"

"Silly?" He came to a stop, and faced her. His expression made her gasp. Jack wasn't angry. He was furious. "When was the last time you ate anything?"

She groped for the right answer. "Um . . . lunch, with you."

"That's what I thought." He jerked her arm once more. "Come on."

"Jack, I'm fine."

Dark red appeared on his cheekbones. "Etes-vous folle?"

"I'm not crazy!"

He grabbed both arms and shook her. Hard. "You're a stupid, anorexic twit!"

Who needed diplomacy? Jessie twisted out of his grip. Planted her fists on her hips. She wouldn't want to break that pretty face of his. Yet. "I am not anorexic, stupid, or a twit." She took a breath. "Furthermore, I am not going anywhere with you."

Without another word Jack snaked one long arm around her, hauled her up, and tossed her over his shoulder.

For a moment Jessie found herself upside down. The weave of his braided belt an inch from her nose. Her fingers curled into fists..

She couldn't use the techniques Alek had taught her, so options were limited.

What would a normal female do? Should she pound on his back, or try to kick him?

She tried yelling. "Jack! Put me down!"

Jack's large hand connected with her backside in one sharp, stinging slap. "Shut up."

He carried her straight past the game stands, food concessions, and nearly every who worked for Stokes. Jessie cringed at the amused looks they were getting from the other carnies.

"Okay, Jack," she said as he set her down in front of a trailer. "You made your point."

He yanked the door open. "In."

"Jack --"

"Now."

She hesitated. He took one threatening step forward. That sent her hurrying up the steps before him and into the trailer.

The door closed. The dark interior was cool. Quiet. Empty.

They were alone.

Chapter Six

I know how to explain everything, Jack thought. I'm losing my mind. That's the answer.

When he extended a hand to switch on the lights, Jessie shied out of reach.

Good, she was scared. It might just save her skinny little neck. He watched as she inspected the dilapidated interior with frustrated disdain.

"Yours?" she asked.

Jack shook his head but never took his eyes off her. "Dad's." He pointed to the shabby sleeper-sofa. "Have a seat.."

"I have no intention of --"

"Sit down!"

She backed away. Plopped down on the faded tapestry cushions. Folded her arms over herself. All huff.

Too bad the silly twit listened, Jack thought. Now he couldn't give in to the ever-increasing temptation to shake some of her pretty white teeth loose.

Sonorous snores drifted from the bedroom. Reassured Jack that Connie had passed out for the night. That was a plus. He didn't want an audience.

Jack toyed with the idea of a lecture. Judged it safer to put some distance between his hands and her backside. He went into the tiny kitchen. Food. That was the immediate problem. And he was going to deal with it. Tonight. He opened the cabinet and began to rummage through Connie's meager supplies.

"You don't look like the canned pasta type," he said as he pushed aside some cans. "Soup isn't enough. Here we go.." He pulled out a large, squat can. "Beef stew," he read from the can's label. "Meat. Vegetables. Calories. Just what Doc would order."

"I don't eat --"

"You're eating beef stew," he said, cutting her off. "You have your choice of beverages. Water, or water."

Jessie glared at him. Defiant eyes went from his face to nearly-full bottle his father had left out. "I'll have some scotch."

"On an empty stomach? Bad idea." Jack slammed ice into a reasonably clean glass and filled it from the tap. He put it on the table. Went back to the counter. Emptied the can of stew into a plate. Glanced over his shoulder. "Get your ass over here."

Jessie reluctantly got up and slipped into the kitchen chair furthest from his position. Jack kept his back to her while he warmed the stew in the microwave. When it was done, he thumped the plate and a spoon on the table without ceremony.

"Eat."

"Jack --"

"Eat!"

"I'm not --"

"So help me God," Jack promised the ceiling, "One more word and I'll sit on you, hold your nose, and shovel it in myself."

"All right!" Jessie picked up the spoon.

He sat across from her. Watched her choke down the first mouthful. Her face was bright pink. The dark eyes glittered. Vibrant. Fierce. She looked good, angry. Too damned good. Watching her eat, however, was like watching someone chew prunes. Rubber prunes.

"What is it with you, Jess?"

She gave him a black look. Shoved another spoonful in her mouth. Chewed mechanically. Swallowed. Drank down some water.

"I don't like being told when to eat," she said at last. Emphasizing each word. As though Jack was mentally deficient. "Or what to eat, either."

"No one would have to tell you, if you ate regular meals. Like a normal person."

Jessie's gaze burned. "I do!"

He uttered a two-syllable obscenity that graphically described what he thought of that.

"There's nothing wrong with me," she said.

"Oh? Tell me, do you think that little old lady liked the vinaigrette dressing?"

Her mulish expression faltered. Changed. She seemed to shrink. Her eyes dropped to the bowl. "You saw that?"

"Yeah. I saw that. I see a lot of things. Like this problem you have with food."

"I don't have a problem with food."

"Take a look in the mirror, baby. You look like a refugee. Fresh out of some labor camp."

"I --" she paused. Took a sip of the water. "All right, maybe I forget to eat sometimes when I'm working." She wouldn't look at him. All that nervous vitality was gone. She listlessly stirred the stew with her spoon. "When I'm nervous, too." Something twisted in his chest. "Take a tranquilizer. Get some for me while you're at it."

"Why should you care?" She dropped the spoon on the plate with a clatter. The fire was back. Jack liked that a lot more than the guilt and the shame. "You don't even know me!"

"You're right. I don't know you. Why should I bother?" He sat back in his chair. Surveyed her coolly. "You're not much to look at. What there is of you. I've seen fourth graders with more curves. Bag ladies with better clothes. On top of that, you're as sensitive as a porcupine. Half as friendly, too."

"A porcupine?" Her jaw dropped open. "A porcupine?"

"I won't bring up that nasty temper of yours."

"I've got a nasty temper?" Her tone climbed two more octaves. "Who just picked me up and dragged me off, Mr. Neanderthal?"

He shrugged it off. "Big deal. If you were heavier, stronger, you could fight back. Right?"

Jessie's hands gripped the edge of the table. "Since the day I got here, you've done nothing but try to intimidate me, and --"

"And tonight I'm feeding you," he said, and pointed to the stew. "Now shut up and eat, or you'll find out exactly how nasty I can get."

It was good to watch her slowly consume the stew. He ignored the hateful glances he got between mouthfuls. A curious sort of pleasure warmed him. She needed a firm hand. That was all.

His firm hand.

It startled him for an instant. Christ, all I want to do is see her put on some weight, he told himself. Common human decency. Nothing more.

When the plate was empty, he removed it and took her glass. She rose. He turned in time to clamp a hand on her shoulder. With a shove, Jack pushed her back down on the chair.

"You're not going anywhere, baby. Sit." He emptied the water from her glass.

Filled it a third full again with scotch. After he located another clean enough to drink from, he poured a double measure for himself. Sat back at the table.

Handed her the glass.

"Now I get a drink?"

"Now you get one," Jack said. "See what happens when you're a good girl and eat all your dinner?"

She picked up the glass and sipped it gingerly. Jack swallowed half of his in one gulp. The longer he knew Jessie, the better he understood why some women drove a man to drink.

"This is awful." She sputtered, and peered into the glass. "Like paint thinner."

"Rot gut usually is." Jack lifted his drink in a satirical toast. "But it gets the job done."

Her eyes went over his shoulder, toward the source of the faint background snoring. Sadness softened her expression. "You really can't stop him from drinking, can you?"

In response to the gentle inquiry, Jack leaned back. Pulled a picture frame from a shelf just behind his chair. Placed it on the table in front of her.

"She's the only one who could stop him."

Jessie looked at the beautiful woman. She was dressed completely in white. Her eyes and smile were gentle. Her skin and hair were absolutely colorless.

"She's lovely."

"My mother, Marianne. She's dead."

Jessie's face lifted, surprised. "She was called 'The Snow Queen', wasn't she?"

Jack nodded, and drank down the rest of his scotch. "Yeah, she was. My father met her when he was working Mardi Gras. By the time Fat Tuesday was over, they were in love. She left her family and married him. I was born nine months later."

She raised her glass and swallowed the liquor with only a faint grimace. "How long ago did she die?"

"Six years ago."

Jessie's eyes returned to the photograph. "How?"

"She developed skin cancer, some albinos do late in life. Mom never did like staying indoors. She fought it for a long time, and Dad was with her through it all. I couldn't get emergency leave when she was dying, all hell had broken out in the Gulf. Dad started drinking after her funeral. Connie hasn't been sober since."

"He must have loved her very much."

"They should have put him in the hole with her before they filled it in." Jack's brutal candor made Jessie close her eyes briefly. She touched the picture with the tips of her fingers, then handed it back to him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He replaced the picture. Didn't look at her. Poured himself another drink. "What about your folks, chere?"

"My parents?" Jessie was startled. Something passed over her features for an instant. She took a healthy gulp of her drink. "They're dead."

"Show people?"

Her expression became guarded. "What makes you ask that?"

"The way you move. Not screaming when Nancy dropped in on you. Recognizing my mother by her show name. A thousand other things."

Her fingertip circled the rim of her glass. "Why are you asking me all these questions, Jack?"

"Why don't you answer them?"

She lifted the glass and drained the last of the scotch.. "I'm a private person. I don't tell everyone my life story."

"Got something to hide?"

"Why would I be hiding anything?" She got to her feet. "I mean, really. Look at . . . me . . ." Jessie slowly sagged back down to the chair. Turned pale. Pressed a shaking palm to her forehead. "Oh, no."

"What is it?"

"The scotch . . . not such a good idea . . . " She closed her eyes. Pressed her hands to the top of her head now. As if it might roll right off her shoulders. "Dizzy . . . "

Jack leaned down. "I should have known you'd be a cheap date." He lifted her easily. "Do you have to throw up?"

She shook her head. Curled up against his body. The combined effects of solid food and scotch made her tremble. "No, I just need . . . I should lay down for a moment"

Her neck lolled against his arm as Jessie struggled to focus on his face. Her eyes fluttered shut. Jack swore.

"Hold on." He got her to the sofa. "Here." He eased her down on the cushions.

"I'm going to fall." She clutched at him, panicking. "Don't let me . . . don't . . . "

"I've got you." He pressed her against him. Felt her heartbeat speeding wildly against his chest. "Dieu, Jess, you don't drink at all, do you?"

"No. Never." She groaned. "Jack. The room is starting to spin."

"How can you tell it's the room?" He maneuvered and finally sat down with her in his lap. "Your eyes are shut."

"Am I spinning, too?" Her face went taut with distress. "Oh. This is terrible."

"Open your eyes. Focus on something," he said. She looked directly into his eyes. "Take deep breaths. Slow and easy." She obeyed, and the shakiness slowly faded from her limbs. "That's it, chere." He splayed a hand behind her head to help support it. The strands of hair beneath his fingers felt like polished silk. "Better?"

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his shirt. "You make me mad, Jackson."

Her voice was slurred now.

"Same goes, baby."

"Don't call me baby," she said. Let out a small giggle. "The room is still spinning . . . a little . . ."

He smiled against her hair. "Wait 'til you see what it does in the morning."

Her fingers dug into his shirt. "Do you miss your mother?"

The unexpected question made him lift his head. "Yeah." He'd never gotten over her death. "I do."

"What was she like?"

Jack frowned. His fingers tried to stroke her hair, but the tight coil defeated him.

"She was fun, I guess. Always laughing, making jokes." He plucked out the pins holding Jessie's hair up. Dropped them one by one over the arm of the sofa.

Unclipped the enamel pin. Studied it for a moment. "Where did you get this?"

Jessie sighed. "A gift from a friend."

"Cute." He set it on the arm of the sofa.

A satisfied smile lit her thin face. "I knew it . . ."

"Knew what?"

"Never mind." She snuggled closer. Peeped up at his face through her lashes. A little girl now. "Did you spend a lot of time with her?"

"More than most kids do. Mom couldn't go outside unless it was dark, or overcast. On rainy days and nights she'd take me into the bayou country."

"What was it like?"

"The swamp?" Jack's mouth curved. "Wet.. Muddy. Full of mosquitoes."

"That's all?" Jessie sounded disappointed.

"No." He thought for a moment. "It was another world, her world. She got me to sit still and listen. Taught me how to tell weather by the bullfrogs' songs. The difference between cottonwood and cypress. How to find honeysuckle and yellow jasmine by using my nose.. How to pole down the bayou making barely a ripple in the water."

Jessie sighed. "That's lovely."

"Yeah. She also taught me to watch for gators, cottonmouths and how to burn off the leeches that got stuck to me." Jack watched the small nose wrinkle. "She was one of a kind."

"Did it bother you?" Jessie asked. "That she was different?"

Jack shook his head. Smiled at an old memory. "No. Just the opposite. I couldn't understand why other women didn't have pretty pink eyes, like my Mother. I told her that once. She practically broke my ribs, hugging me."

"She sounds wonderful."

The old grief washed over him. Made his throat tight. His voice rough. "She was."

"My mother like to bake bread," Jessie said on a sigh. "The way it smelled . . . she sang the whole time . . ."

Jack pulled out the last pin and her hair slumped down over her shoulders. He spent several moments unwinding the heavy coil, until it spread over his arm. A long waterfall of golden brown.

"Why do you keep it so long? All that sitting on top of your head has to give you a migraine, chere," he said as his fingers combed through the soft mass. "There, that's better." The curve of her bottom pressed against his thighs. Jack shifted her a few inches away.

"Um-hmm." She sighed, nestling right back against him. The combination of food and alcohol had her asleep in another moment.

The movement of Jessie's weight on his lap made Jack's body clench. The heat gathered between her thighs sent a very old message to his now-rigid flesh.

It had been awhile, Jack reasoned. He had no time for lengthy relationships.

Knew better than to be careless. The women in his life were few. Infrequent. Far between. All of them went into it knowing what to expect. He made sure of it.

Candy Corbin had made it plain that her welcome mat had Jackson Hamilton permanently listed on it. Jack wasn't interested in a woman who sharpened her claws before slapping the polish on. He hadn't been interested in any woman.

Until Jessie.

Jack muttered an obscenity under his breath. Willed his body to ignore the soft, vulnerable woman in his arms. She's too tiny, he told himself. I'd snap her spine with one good hug. She needs gentleness, kindness --

His body wasn't listening. One hand left her hair and came down to rest on her shoulder. It was as fine-boned and delicate as the rest of her. From there it took only a moment to find her heartbeat with his palm. Her deep breathing lifted her breast. It just filled his hand. She wasn't wearing a bra. Probably never had to, firm as she felt.

"God, Jess . . . "

Jack wrestled with the demands of his body. Tortured himself by holding her.

Stroking her hair. Shaping her breast with his long fingers.

I can't do this, Jack thought. Jessie could be an operative. Hell, he almost knew she was. Couldn't afford to screw around with her . . .

Jack couldn't stop himself. His fingers reached down. Tugged up the edge of her pullover. Couldn't keep from watching as her breasts were revealed. Couldn't stop looking at the exquisite shape of her. The way the dark rose nipples hardened as Jack's breath touched them.

Jessie's lips parted on a silent sigh. She melted against him. Limbs lax. Flesh glowing.

"Damn it, Jess," Jack whispered. Knowing he had to touch her now.

He allowed himself to caress one tight peak with the pad of his thumb. The aureole pebbled under his touch. She was so beautifully responsive. Jessie arched her back slightly, nestling her rounded bottom on his thighs. Her hip pressed into Jack's groin. Not very helpful at all. He had to swallow a groan of agony. Her breast pressed against his fingers with every slow, deep inhalation.

"You're going to kill me," he said. The cords in his neck were standing out. His jaw set. As if she knew, Jessie made a low, dreaming sound.

Jack's teeth clenched, hard enough to grind stone. Beads of sweat grew fat over his brow. He couldn't remember anything he wanted as much as to bend his head at that moment. Take that small, pretty crest in his mouth. Suckle her from sighs to moans.

He compromised by placing the edge of his thumb in his mouth. Wetting it.

Transferring the moisture to the stiff tip. Gently he played with her, rubbing the slick pad over the taut crown.

"You like that, chere?" he whispered, drinking in the soft sounds she made in response. "Yeah, thought so."

Below the strained length of his fly, Jack's erection pulsed against her hip. He could see himself laying her down. Stripping off her jeans and panties. Parting her legs with unsteady hands. Putting himself between those soft thighs. Cupping her hips with his hands. Sinking into her. Stroking her with the same slow, lazy rhythm of his hand on her breast.

Jack shook his head. Now that would be something for her to wake up to. What the hell was the matter with him? He had no interest in taking advantage of helpless women. Jessie muttered something wordless.. A sensuous entreaty that tore at Jack with ferocious, needy teeth.

"I'd love to, baby," he murmured. His hand looked dark against her pale breast as he touched her one last time. Then he regretfully tugged the pullover back in place. "But I want you willing and awake."

Jack lifted her up off his lap. Turned. Put her down on the sofa. He covered her small frame with an old, soft blanket. Then went back to the kitchen for the bottle of scotch.

The sound of her voice made him halt. Whirl back around. He listened. Cursed.

He couldn't. She was helpless. Just having a dream. This was madness.

Jack let go of the bottle and went back to her.

#

The American agents fought ferociously for their lives. They were two against eight. They lost. In the end both lay sprawled and motionless on the filthy floor of the warehouse. Life slowly draining from their bodies into spreading crimson pools.

"Are they dead?" someone asked.

Ivan Kruyokov made a careless gesture before he raised the bottle of vodka to his lips with a thick, bloodstained hand. "If they are not, they soon will be.

Nazdarovye!"

He saluted the bodies and gulped down the potent liquor.. Knife-fighting was a thirsty business. One Kruyokov had excelled at long before he'd grown his thick, luxurious red mustache or raped his first woman.

"Eezveeneetiah, Akoola," another said. "What should we do with them?"

"Ah!" A third spat with pleasure at the agents' still forms. "Leave them."

Kruiyokov was well-named Akoola -- "The Shark".. He was the shortest of the group, but had a deep, barrel chest and a uncanny ability to move and strike without the slightest sound. The words had barely left the third man's lips when he found himself jerked within an inch of Ivan's face.

"For their comrades to find, Yuri?" The tip of Kruiyokov's knife tapped against the end of the other man's nose. "You believe that is the wisest choice to be made, eh?"

"Nyet," a now-terrified Yuri shook his head. Tried not to move. Begged forgiveness. "Prasteetye, Akoola, prasteetye, pahzhaloosta."

"Good." Kruyokov gave the larger man a benevolent smile, shoved him out of his way, then rammed his boot into the bloodied body closest to him. Ribs snapped with a hideous cracking sound. "Search them, then dump the bodies in the bay." One of the crewmen from the ship hurried up to the group, skidding to a halt when he caught sight of the bodies.

"The Captain asks if he should weigh anchor, Akoola," the nervous sailor said. Before Ivan could reply, the courier appeared as well. He struck a match and lit a cigarette before shaking it out. The hooded sweat jacket he wore concealed all but the eyes that glared first at the fallen agents, then at Kruyokov.

Ivan took another long drink from his bottle, never taking his eyes from the American. "Tell that son of a busy slut that he will remain in dock until I give the order."

"Akoola." The American's voice was expressionless.

"Cutter." Ivan wiped his mouth with the back of his fist. "How fortunate that you are here now. My men caught these vermin trying to board our vessel."

Cutter crouched down beside the bodies and rolled them over far enough to see what was left of their faces, then stood. "Who are they?"

One of the men had already searched them and quietly informed Kruyokov that neither man carried I.D., only weapons.

"Undoubtedly agents of some sort or another," Ivan said, noting the courier's growing agitation and raised his bottle again. "Fchyom prablyema?"

"The problem?" Cutter expelled the smoke from his lungs with a hiss. "They're American agents."

"It is to be expected." Kruyokov idly tested the edge of the weapon in his hand with his thumb. Smiled as he felt the resulting sting when his skin split. "We are in America, are we not?"

The American shook his head. "This should have been avoided."

"Is this so." The courier's stilted use of Kruyokov's native tongue infuriated Ivan almost as much as the reproach. The Russian absently sucked the blood welling from the fresh cut on his thumb. "You think perhaps I should have let them go, Cutter?"

"You didn't have to hack them up like that," the American said, gesturing toward the dying men.

Ivan lifted his knife so the faint light filtering in from the dock ran along the stained blade. It never ceased to fascinate him. How many ways it could inflict pain on the body of an enemy. He was certain he would never live long enough to explore all of them. A pity a man's pleasures were so limited.

"Why didn't you just shoot them?" Cutter was saying. "I don't need any more complications."

With an unexpected movement, Kruyokov grabbed the American. Cutter's cigarette dropped to the warehouse floor. The Russian applied his knife to a spot just above the courier's carotid artery. "You do not need complications? Yet you come to me with only half of what we were promised."

Cutter was careful not to move. "I told you. The other courier is carrying the targeting schematics."

"I hope your counterpart arrives soon, Cutter. My patience is most . . . limited."

"You'll get everything you were promised."

"Good, good. Then you will have the money to take back to our suppliers.

Everyone will be happy." Ivan casually wiped the blood from his knife on the American's jacket. "Now get out of my eyes, errand boy. Remember what you saw here."

Chapter Seven

Jessie was immersed in a dream that had held her spellbound throughout the night. Only too often had she known longing, fear, and desperation during the dark hours of slumber. Endured nightmares so terrifying they seemed like cages of fear from which there had been no parole.

But her dreams had never before given her pleasure.

The beginning was a muddle of disconnected images. Muttered words. Emotions dwindling and rising. Jessie rode with it, unable to escape, afraid to open her eyes.

Then he was there.

Jessie found herself suspended in strong arms. Gentle hands stroked her.

Fingers threaded through her hair. Palms caressed her bare skin. A dream lover, who seemed everywhere.

She didn't try to open her eyes, afraid she would wake if she did. At one point he stopped touching her. Released her. Moved away.

"Please," she heard herself beg. "Oh, please don't leave me, please . . . please . . ."

Her soft cries brought him back. The delicious weight of his arms pressed her to him. Jessie gasped as his tongue traced a slow path from her lips to her neck. Long fingers shaped and kneaded her breasts. She felt his breath touching her nipples. Arched her back. Tried to pull his mouth to her tight flesh.

Est-ce que vous desirez? Is this what you want? he asked her.

Yes . . .

Est-ce que va bonn? Does it feel good?

Yes . . .

Voudriez-vous plus? Do you want more?

Yes, yes, yes . . .

She murmured her encouragement as his body pressed down over hers once more. A hard, thick ridge rubbed against the place between her thighs. She lifted herself, trying to fill the aching emptiness that pressure created. Only to find herself held in place and caressed. Over and over, until Jessie thought she would scream.

The frustration nearly ended the dream, but somehow she knew if it did she would lose him forever. Sounds spilled from her throat. She fought to reach him, make him understand. Nothing had ever felt as huge, as desperate as this unfamiliar need.

His deep voice soothed over the scalding desire.

Easy, baby, easy . . .

The deep voice went on, caressing her like his hands. He spoke in French again. Telling her how lovely she was. How fine and fragile her skin felt. The ways he wanted to please her.

Something released the garments covering her flesh. Tugged the confining layers out of the way. Then her thighs were eased apart.. The clever, gentle fingers stroked her. Jessie trembled as she opened herself to his insistent, maddening touch.

She was rising now. Thrust up with a swelling, erupting force that nothing could stop. When Jessie rushed through the last of the wanting, she found what he had promised.

Jessie shattered.

He held her until she drifted back to the darkness. The last thing she felt was the brush of his mouth against hers.

Jessie, she heard him say.

A hand was shaking her out of the dream. She swatted at it. "Jessie?"

"Go 'way," she mumbled.

"Jessie. Come on." The hand shook her again.. "Time to get up, Sleeping Beauty."

She opened her eyes and saw Conrad Hamilton, of all people, standing over her.

"Good morning, Princess."

She sat up at once. It was a terrible mistake. Unseen jackhammers at once drove twin wedges of pain on either side of Jessie's head. She tried to swallow, but someone had lined her throat with sandpaper. Her nose twitched at the scent of stale liquor. Her stomach greeted her with a serious gurgle of warning.

"Con--"

The first wave hit her. Jessie clapped a hand over her mouth. Rolled off the sofa.

Raced to the bathroom.

"I'll get the tomato juice and the aspirin ready," Conrad called after her.

It some took time for her abused stomach to purge itself. During the wretched, interminable period she spent on her knees, Jessie made a solemn vow never to drink scotch again, or any other liquor, for the rest of her natural life.

Why had she been drinking? she thought as she half-rose to her feet. She abruptly recalled most of the previous nights' events. Jack. He'd argued with her, forced her to eat that revolting canned stew . . .

Back down she went.

When at last she felt she could safely stand, Jessie got up, tidied up the mess, and braided her loose hair. Where were her pins? She'd have to look for them after she washed. The cold water felt so good against her flushed cheeks. She splashed her face with it over and over.

What had she been thinking? she regarded her pale reflection incredulously as she dried off. Drinking all that horrible scotch. The only thing she could be grateful for was that she hadn't thrown up in front of Jack. She hoped.

Jessie borrowed an inch of toothpaste and used it on her fingertip to scrub the vile taste from her mouth. It would have to do until she could get back to her trailer. She was still too white, but at least her eyes were clear. Now all she had to do was face Jack's father.

She emerged warily. Connie smiled from the kitchen and walked toward her with both hands full.

"Take these" --he handed her two aspirin, then a small glass of tomato juice--
"with this."

Jessie gratefully accepted the offering. Cautiously swallowed the tablets with a sip of juice. Waited to see if they would stay down.

"Okay?" Conrad asked. She nodded. "Good. Sit down, I'll fix you a coffee chaser."

Jessie carefully sank onto a chair at the tiny kitchen table. She began to feel better almost at once, and said so.

"I usually suggest the hair of the dog," the contortionist said, "but I suspect that you and booze should part company. First time?"

"Yes." A fresh surge of humiliation made her rest her hot face in her palms. "And the last. Sorry."

"Don't be." The older man made a clucking sound with his tongue. "No one should have to wake up and puke. Well, maybe pregnant women, but then that goes with the territory." He gave her a devilish look. "Nothing baking in your oven, I hope."

"No." A rueful smile tugged at her lips. "Uh, how did I, I mean, what exactly . . . happened?"

"Jack said you fell asleep on the sofa last night. Guess he didn't have the heart to wake you up."

He didn't have a heart -- that much she agreed with. "Where is Jack, Mr. Hamilton?"

"Around." Conrad's hands were shaking badly as he reached for a bottle of scotch on a shelf beside her. He took it over to the counter. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Black, please." Jessie watched Jack's father poured her a mug, then himself. She was relieved to see he added a splash of the liquor only to his. Her hands reached for the coffee before Conrad could get to the table. The hot, strong brew was nectar.

"This is heavenly." A dark French roast, she'd bet, by the flavor and aroma. One very similar to the brand she regularly bought for herself.

Conrad nodded. "Yeah, Jackson is picky about his coffee, that's for sure."

Jackson might be drinking his coffee through a straw in days to come, Jessie thought darkly. Especially if he tried to bully her into eating again. She watched Conrad over the rim of her mug.

"It tastes much better without the scotch, you know," she said.

Instead of taking offense, Jack's father grinned. "Oh, I think the scotch tastes better with a little coffee added." He toasted her with his mug. "Best hangover cure in the world."

"If you didn't drink, you wouldn't get hangovers," she felt she had to point out.

"Oh, I wasn't drinking it because I had one," he said in a very cryptic manner.

They shared a surprisingly comfortable silence. When she had finished gulping down the last of the delicious brew, Jessie got busy.. She started by attacking the stack of dirty dishes beside the sink. It was a small return for Conrad's hospitality. As she scraped the dishes, she felt a curious sensation in her breasts. Jessie frowned. It wasn't time for her monthly cycle to begin. This felt different than the usual discomfort.. It was more like tenderness from an irritation. She couldn't very

well pull up her blouse and check for herself, she thought wryly. Jessie filled the sink with hot water and went to work.

Far from protesting, Conrad watched her with evident pleasure. "I think I like having a woman around the place," he said after several minutes. "Why don't you move in with me, darling girl?"

"I don't do windows," Jessie said, then smiled at his chuckle. "But I appreciate the offer, Mr. Hamilton."

"Connie, please."

She glanced at the scotch bottle on the counter. "Do you want me to make you some breakfast, Connie?"

Jack's father went over to the refrigerator, opened it, then slammed it shut. "I can't abide the thought of eating before a civilized hour myself." He eyed her dubiously. "You, on the other hand, could stand some feeding. We've got eggs . . . unless they've turned into chickens already . . ."

"No, thanks." Jessie used the cleanest towel she could scrounge to dry the dishes. "Did Jack say where he was going this morning?"

"Out somewhere making someone else miserable, I'll bet."

"Ah." She folded the hand towel and placed it next to the sink. "He was being his usual charming self, then?"

"Charming?" Conrad snorted into his spiked brew. "Hah!" He sipped from his mug. Sighed. Rubbed a gnarled hand over the short graying whiskers covering his chin. "Boy walked out of here holding his head. Said it was from sleeping in my armchair. God knows I never get hangovers."

"Jack had a hangover?" Jessie looked over her shoulder as she placed the last stack of clean plates in the cabinet. She went still as what Conrad said sank in.

Jack had spent the night here, too?

Jack's Father nodded. "Big one. Snarled and used every bad word I ever taught him. Don't know where Jackson gets it from. Must be the Cajun blood."

Jessie felt the unusual tenderness beneath her pullover again. There was a peculiar, lingering softness between her thighs as well.. And Jack had spent the night here. Drinking. Perhaps the highly erotic dream of the previous night hadn't been a dream at all.

She controlled her growing ire enough to ask, "How much did Jackson drink last night?"

"Good half a bottle." The contortionist yawned. "Not that I was up to making conversation when he stomped out of here." Connie chuckled. "Have to say, he looked like hell. Acted like he was in charge of it, too."

"I'm surprised to hear it." No, she wasn't.

"Jackson never drinks, you know. Not like that." Conrad eyed her with a sly grin.

"Wonder what set him off?"

"I think I have a pretty good idea," Jessie said as she folded the towel neatly and placed it by the empty sink. "I'd better go. Thank you again for the coffee."

"Going back to work on the carousel?"

"I have to find Jack first." Hopeful she'd find him someplace quiet, private, and free of innocent bystanders. "There's a small matter we need to discuss."

#

"Where is he?" Jessie's voice came loud and clear. Like a pitchfork through canvas. She sounded cool. Authoritative. Ready to commit first degree murder.

"Inside? No. Thank you. I'll get him myself."

Jack was in no mood to be confronted by an woman bent on vindication. Last night's idiocy had backlashed on him only too well. He had a headache the size of the SuperDome. His eyes were gritty. The leash on his temper was pulling apart, thread by thread. A clash with Jessie now would only result in more stupidity.

When he heard Jessie's footsteps clatter on the plywood ramp. Jack ducked behind a drape. As he stripped off his shirt, he thought of a song he'd heard in high school. Sung by some British pop star, he recalled, who dressed -- and looked convincingly like -- a woman. He/she had crooned something about chameleons. Coming and going.

It was definitely time to go.

Jessie's small shadow appeared outside the partition. Jack unsnapped his jeans and lowered the zipper a few notches. The curtain was jerked aside so hard the fabric snapped like a whip.

"Jack, I --"

He watched her mouth sag open. Her eyes widen as she stared. Her cheeks flush pink. All in the two seconds before she presented her back to him.

"Sorry, Harv." Jessie sounded acutely embarrassed. "I thought Jack was back here. Excuse me."

Jack pulled the curtain back in place. Waited until her footsteps receded.

Relaxed.

The first time it happened, it had repelled him. Made him feel like a monstrosity.

After nearly a decade, it seemed almost as normal as changing his clothes.

Almost.

There were only odd moments of panic. The nights Jack felt compelled to count his fingers. His toes. Strip off his clothes and stand naked in front of a mirror. Just to be sure he was still Jackson Hamilton.

Behind him, a quiet voice said, "Now that's something I haven't seen before."

Harv's mild gaze met Jack's as he swung around.

"Projected optical illusion," Jack lied. "I'm thinking of putting it in the act. What did you think?"

"Hell of a trick." Harv's drawl became more pronounced as he ran a hand through his thinning sandy hair. "Next time, Cajun, just remember I don't have that much left on top." Pasha the Pincushion left without another word.

"Yeah. I will." Jack rubbed his fingers over the now rampaging pounding beneath his forehead.

He'd never made the change in front of anyone. Never been found out. Even over all the years he worked as an operative. It was the reason he insisted on working alone. Harry and the others assumed he was some kind of genius with make-up and disguises.

Jack suspected if the government found out just how their "Chameleon" was able to transform himself, he'd spend the rest of his life in a military research facility.

Being probed. Tested. God knew what else.

He heard Jessie's voice again.

"Where was he going?"

Straight to hell, Jack thought.

"Jessie? Can you look over here for a minute?" he heard Gail's high voice ask.

"Terry says this doesn't have any film in it, but it looks like there is." She didn't wait for a reply. There was the sound of an instant-film camera being used.

"Hmmm. Guess it doesn't. Thanks anyway."

He had a critical case and no leads. Last night, he had too much scotch, too little Jess. Or maybe the reverse. That was enough of a screw-up. Now changing in front of Harv Allen. All because of a woman he had no business messing with in the first place. No matter how good she felt under his hands.

His body responded to this argument by getting hard. Instantly.

Those soft, sweet lips of hers, Jack recalled, had made the most erotic sounds he'd ever heard. If she hadn't moaned, hadn't pleaded for him to come back to her, none of this would have happened.

He grabbed his shirt with an impatient swipe.

His intentions had been well-meant. And Jack had been blind, deaf and dumb to them. He'd listened to her. Gone back to her. Lowered himself over her. Put his mouth on her.

Her throat kept issuing those needy, whimpering sounds. He had wanted to taste her, but something kept him from kissing her. Before Jack realized it, he was doing everything else. His hips were between her thighs. His hands were pulling up her shirt. His fingers were playing with her nipples again.

Jack's hands tingled with the memory.

Small as she was, she had writhed and shuddered under him. All that passion. Why hadn't she woken up? Stopped him? Her eyes had fluttered a few times. Yet Jessie had remained in that warm cocoon of sleep. And that had been his undoing.

Cursing between his teeth, he refastened his jeans.

Her blurred voice responded when he murmured to her in his Mother's language. Everything he did pleased her. Excited her. All she had to do was say no, resist, wake up. But she hadn't. It had been so easy to slide down the zipper on her jeans. Easier to slip them down from her hips. Easiest to slide his hand down over those soft curls...

And Jessie had never woken up. Even when Jack made her come.

The sound that had spilled from her throat when he'd given her what she needed. That had been the most erotic moment of all. He'd never been so hard. It would have been simple to take what he needed. His flesh was undeniably willing. So was hers.

Jack wanted more than that. A lot more. In a blur of satisfaction and agony, he eased Jessie back on the sofa. Straightened and fastened her clothes. Gave her a chaste kiss. Left her to sleep.

He had taken the bottle on his second trip. Made damned sure he didn't look at her again. He knew what would happen if there was a third time. So Jessie had slept safely through the night.

Now Jack was the one walking around with a knot in his groin.

The attraction to Jessie had to be set aside. Now. She would be treated as a suspect. Nothing more. Jack would find out who she was. Why she had used the pay phone on the trip to town. Who she had spoken to. How she fit in with the smuggling ring.

And if he didn't want to go crazy in the meantime, Jack had to keep his goddamn hands off her.

"She's gone."

Gail Appleby's tiny blonde head peeked through a fold in the curtain. She grinned at Jack, and wagged a small square in her hand. "She never saw me palm it.

Got a good shot of her from the front."

He took the photo from the midget. It had already developed, he saw as he shrugged into his shirt. A clear picture of Jessie emerged. Still short, skinny, and now seething.

Jack's fingernails made shallows dents on the edge of the photo. "Thanks, Gail."

"Anytime, big guy." Gail's head disappeared. Almost at once he heard her call out, "Zip up your pants, boys. Here comes Candy."

Jack remained where he was as he heard the dancer's languid drawl. "What's the matter, Gail? Can't find a stepladder?"

"Why?" Gail wanted to know. "Do you have something stuck up your --"

"Girls," Imogene said. "Gail, I need another ribbon for my printer. Be a treasure and get me one from the supply cabinet." Her voice chilled. "Have you lost something, Candy? Assuming you have anything remaining under such a restrictive category?"

The exotic dancer made a peevish sound. "You're a real laugh a minute, Fat Lady. I need to talk to Jack. Is he here?"

"Apparently not," Imogene said, and sniffed. "Although the next time I see him, I will recommend he get a beeper, being so much in demand."

Candy snorted. "Just tell him I'm looking for him.."

Another minute passed by before Imogene called out again. "The coast is clear, Jack."

"For how long?" Jack said. "If this keeps up, I'm going to have to hire a bodyguard."

"Considering Candy's preferred methods, pepper spray might be the most effective deterrent," Imogene's rich voice floated through the curtains. "Miss Kelly, on the other hand, did appear to have a bona fide desire to do you great bodily harm. What did you do, precious? Try to seduce the poor little thing?"

"I should have." Jack emerged from the curtains. The fat lady was busy editing another chapter of her latest novel. She looked up.

"She might be fairy-sized, Jack, but I'd wager that little girl could kick your butt," the fat lady said as she peered over her reading glasses at him. Her delicate eyebrows rose. "Merciful Heavens. Dear boy, you look like . . . how does Harv put it . . . rode hard and put away wet."

That nailed it, right on a certain head. "If you have some aspirin, Genie, I'll marry you."

"I'd squash you like a bug, Jackson Hamilton," Imogene said as she offered a plastic bottle of pain reliever.

"No problem." Jack gave her a mock leer. "I'll be on top."

"Lecher." Her chins jiggled with her mirth. "Now what is all this business with Gail and that camera? Surely you're not pining for Jessica? And here I thought you were devoted to me."

"What else can I do?" Jack dry-gulped two tablets before he handed the bottle back to Imogene. "You've rejected me too many times. I have to settle for what I can get."

"Jackson!" She swatted at him, giggling like a girl. "Take your smart mouth out of here, my boy, before one of those dangerous females decides to come back."

Jack managed to avoid Jess on his trip from the sideshow to his Jeep. Now he sat behind the wheel. Contemplated heading in toward the city. He had to follow up with the site team, see what they had uncovered on the buyer. As he started the engine, the cell phone in his pocket buzzed.

"Jack?"

"Harry." Jack turned off the ignition.

"We've got complications." The cultured drawl dropped as Harry recited the facts in clipped, cold syllables. "Williams and Bardon were jumped down at the Port last night."

Jack went still. "What happened?"

"I don't have all the details yet. A couple of longshoremen who were working late heard something and decided to call it. NOPD found them in an abandoned warehouse. Whoever did it used a knife."

"Cutter?"

"Kruyokov." Harry spat the name out bitterly.. "I've seen some of his handiwork before. Tom is still in surgery, but it doesn't look good." Harry paused. His voice went low and savage.. "George didn't make it."

Jack uttered a single, vicious word.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Now tell me you know who this mule is. This Cutter."

"I don't. Yet."

"Damn it --"

"Twenty-four hours, Harry."

Surprisingly, his team chief didn't argue. "All right." There was a significant pause. "George was three weeks from retirement. His wife Barbara called last week to tell me about the house they were planning to buy in Florida. I want that blade-happy bastard, Jack. Badly."

Jack pulled his keys out of the ignition and shoved them in his pocket. "I'll get him, Harry." He ended the call.

The passenger door to the Jeep swung open, and Candy Corbin slithered onto the seat. Her full breasts bulged over the edge of her scanty top as she leaned toward him. Her light eyes were focused on the fit of his jeans, so she missed the disgust that briefly flashed in Jack's eyes..

"Jackson, sugar." The glossy red lips pouted.. "I've been looking for you all morning."

"So I heard." He resisted the urge to shove her out of the Jeep and onto the backside that was hanging out of her panty- sized shorts. "What do you want now, Candy?"

"Mae told me that girl Jessie spent the night with you," the dancer said. One long-nailed hand descended on Jack's thigh. The pout deepened to a sulky frown. "I thought you'd come to me if you were looking for love, sugar."

He'd join the priesthood first. "Jessie spent the night on Dad's sofa," Jack said before he thrust open his door. "I've got to go, Candy."

The blonde was out of the Jeep and blocking his path before he could avoid her.

"Jackson, I need to talk to you. There's something wrong with that girl."

"Oh?" Jack regarded her earnest expression. "What?"

"Don't you think she looks strange?"

His lips curled. "I'm sure she does -- to you."

"Come on, sugar! She's supposed to be this big important expert on merry-go-rounds, right?" Candy's contempt of Jessie's occupation was plain. "So why does she dress like she's on welfare?"

"I don't know," Jack said. Candy wasn't as stupid as she looked. "What else?"

"She's too quiet," she said. Tossed her blonde hair. Peeped at him from under her mascaraed lashes. "Plus she's sweet on you. I can tell."

Jack rolled his eyes. "That's it? You don't like her clothes, and you think she has a crush on me?"

"Connie told Mae that Jessie puked her guts out when she woke up." Candy eyed him slyly.

He'd forgotten about his father. "Did he?"

"He surely did. So, did she get plastered last night?"

Jack didn't have time for this. "Candy --"

"I won't breathe a word," the dancer promised. "You can tell me, sugar. Did she drink a little too much? Make a pass at you, maybe?"

"Yeah, she did." He would have said anything to get rid of her. "It was fun, too, until she passed out. I've got work to do, Candy. See you around."

Candy watched him stomp off into the fairgrounds and smiled. She had all the ammunition she needed now.

Chapter Eight

Jessie stopped looking for Jack. It was apparent the other carnies weren't going to give him up. It had only taken a half- dozen trips around the fairgrounds before it sank in.

Gail had sent her to Nathan's trailer. Nathan had told her Jack might be working the pitch-a-dish stand. The worker there had seen Jack on his way to the business trailer. The cashier in the business trailer had directed her to the balloon-dart game. Bobby, who was handing out the darts, had sent her back to Conrad's. Conrad had just shrugged.

"Maybe Jack's gone into the bayou," the contortionist had said. "Could be there for hours. Likes the swamp, just like his Mother did. Says he can think while he's slogging around that godforsaken bog."

She couldn't blame them for protecting Jack. Loyalty had to be earned, and she was the new one here, not Jack. When she did find him, she wasn't sure what she'd do. Rage had evaporated and confusion was taking its place.

Why her? The man could have any woman he wanted. Just look at him, she thought. He was tall. Dark. Dangerous. He'd probably had every woman he wanted. Jessie would bet a million dollars that not one of them slept through it, either. Scotch or no scotch.

It was useless to speculate on why he'd done it. She'd never know unless Jack told her. And he wouldn't be able to. Her immediate plans were to keep him at

least three feet away from her. For the remainder of her assignment to Stokes'.
Using a cattle prod, if necessary.

She had a few hours before the show opened. Jessie lugged her cases out to the carousel and started working. She hoped labor would help her get over the feelings of humiliation and homicide.

It took time and concentration to sand the cracked saddle of a unicorn. When she moved from the prepped horse to get wood filler for the crevice, a silent figure was standing at the work table, watching her..

"Hi, Danny." She noticed he was examining the contents of her tool case intently.

"Want to help?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"Here." She tossed a sanding block to him. "Just remember -- always go with the grain."

After showing him where to begin, Jessie watched him work for a few minutes. Sometimes she had the oddest notion that Danny wanted to tell her something. Like now. Of course he couldn't, because of his handicap. What had happened to render him mute? Was he born like that, or had it happened later?

His green eyes caught hers. The sanding block in his hand stopped in mid-stroke and lifted away from the horse he was working on.

"No, you're doing fine," Jessie said. She lifted the back of her hand and wiped the sweat from her brow. Danny pulled a clean red bandanna from his pocket, offering it to her. "No, thanks, I'm okay. I'd better get back to work, right?"

He nodded once, then went back to sanding.

Once the rough edges of the crack were smooth, she used a syringe-style applicator to inject the filling compound into the crack. Careful strokes with a putty knife smoothed it over. Danny watched her closely. He seemed surprised when she let him to do the same to the horse he was working on.

"Once it dries, and I paint over it, you won't be able to see where the crack was," she said. She was proud of her craft, and flattered at his obvious interest. "Now, down here on the belly we have a different problem. See where the wood is splintering around the brass?"

They worked together for another hour, and then Danny tugged at her arm. She looked up and watched him pantomime drinking something from a glass.

"Thirsty? Me too. Let's take a rest."

She walked with him down the row of concessions until he waved at her and headed off in another direction. Jessie watched him disappear with a slight frown, oddly disappointed.

"Jessie?" Bobby walked up. In one hand he carried a large lemonade. "Thought you might be ready for a break."

"Thanks." She sipped from the plastic straw and sighed. "Wow. Just what I needed." When he handed her a baseball cap he had removed from his back pocket, she looked puzzled. "What's this for?"

"Your head. You'll be standing in the sun for most of the day." The dwarf continued with a debonair imitation of Cary Grant. "Jessie, Jessie, Jessie. You don't want to get sun stroke now, do you, my dear?"

"Why no, Mr. Grant, I don't."

Bobby grinned. "Want to sit for a minute now?" He pointed to a cluster of trees to one side of the fairground. A patch of shade beckoned like a cool oasis in the desert.

"Sure."

They sat together and watched the carnival slowly emerging into life. Midway rides were checked over, run through their cycles, then checked again. The game stands' canvas shrouds were rolled back as prizes were hung out.

Everywhere was the confident movements of the carnies as they performed one familiar task after another.

"Tah-dah." Bobby produced an apple like a magician, with a flourish. "Can't live on lemonade, you know."

Jessie tipped her cap back on her head. "Yes, Mother." He grinned as she took the fruit and bit into it.

"Isn't this cozy."

Candy Corbin stood a few feet away. The blonde was dressed in the briefest pair of cutoff shorts Jessie had ever seen. Above them, a tube-top strained at maximum expansion. Candy inspected Jessie and Bobby, then crossed her arms beneath her breasts, creating the kind of cleavage that made young boys swoon and strong men weep.

Jessie wondered if she should warn the dancer that even Spandex had its limits.

"Hello."

"Am I interrupting something?" Candy cooed, but before Jessie could reply the blonde released a snide sound. "It's kind of sweet to see you two together. You

know, like Snow White and her little . . . " Bobby's expression was bland, but even Candy could see that she'd hit home. "Sorry, what's the politically correct term for you people, Bobbykins?"

"Fastidious?" Jessie said in a helpful tone.

Bobby choked on his lemonade and a laugh that didn't quite pass as a cough.

Candy's amusement abruptly evaporated. "Whatever. Jessie, I hear you were looking for Jack this morning."

Jessie nodded, but didn't elaborate. She took another bite of her apple. If Candy wanted to fish, she could go to the Pluck-A-Ducky stand.

The blonde gave her a sly once-over. "Guess after what happened between you two last night you wanted to . . . thank him."

Jessie stopped chewing. Watched the dancer's smile grow wider. Wondered how much Jack had told her. "Not exactly," she said. Thank him? She would break his legs.

Sensing she'd drawn blood, Candy zeroed in. "I thought I should be the one to talk to you."

Jessie swallowed the chunk of apple. Narrowly avoided choking on it. "About what?"

"Jack told me everything, you know. How you were feeling no pain. How you . . . came on to him." Candy slowly twined a thick blonde curl around one long-nailed fingertip. "Everybody gets drunk now and then. That's nothing to be embarrassed about, honey."

"I'm not embarrassed." Jessie became aware of Bobby stillness beside her. No, she wasn't embarrassed. She was utterly humiliated.

"Jack's been dodging you because . . . well, look, honey, he felt sorry for you last night. Now he knows he shouldn't have encouraged you." Candy rolled her eyes.

"Men."

"I see." A miracle, considering the red haze forming in front of her eyes.

"I thought it might be easier, hearing it from me. You know, one woman to another." The dancer ran her other hand languorously down the side of her body.

"And since Jack and I are . . . well, you understand."

Somehow Jessie produced a calm, almost pleasant disinterest. "Really. I had no idea." She wanted to tear the bleached hair from the other woman's skull. One strand at a time.

"All the girls have a crush on Jack. I'm not jealous of you or anything." Her tone implied amusement at the thought of such emotion being wasted on Jessie.

"Guys like Jack need a woman with stamina."

"Right." Jessie's chest was tight. It was getting hard to keep her voice even.

"Thanks for the message."

"Any time." Candy flicked a dismissive look over Bobby, then sauntered off.

"That bitch," Bobby said, and spat on the ground.

"Seconded."

"You don't believe that load of bull she just handed you, do you, Jessie?" The dwarf made a thoroughly disgusted sound. "Jack wouldn't touch her. Even if you paid him."

Jack's preferences were the last thing she wanted to discuss now. "She's an attractive woman, Bobby."

The dwarf eyed her in disbelief. Lifted his hand. Stuck a finger in his mouth.

Produced a realistic gagging sound.

Jessie hid a smile and regarded her apple. She needed to change the subject.

Talk about anything except Jack, Candy, and her own homicidal urges. "So tell me, how long have you worked for Nathan?"

"Fifteen years this winter."

Jessie was surprised. "You must like it very much.."

Bobby nodded. "Yeah, I do. Nathan never treats me . . . well, look at me." His distorted lip curled slightly. "If it wasn't for Nathan, I'd still be stuck in the town I grew up in. Washing dishes in the back of my Uncle's diner. Going nowhere.

Doing impressions just so people would talk to me. Here I run the show. Nathan depends on me."

"The road and crisis manager."

"That's me." Bobby plucked a slender blade of grass from between his feet. "And someday . . . I'll be the best impressionist since Rich Little," he said in Rich Little's voice. He gave Jessie a direct look. "What about you? How do you like working for the show?"

"Not counting Jackson Hamilton and Candy Corbin, so far, so good."

"Candy's jealous of any female under the age of fifty," Bobby said. "But Jack's okay."

"I just wish --" she shook her head. What was the matter with her? She was ready to blurt out everything.

The distorted smile reappeared. "What?"

Jessie stared at her sneakers. Every word she said had to be carefully considered now before it was spoken. "Bobby, have you ever been afraid of something?"

"Big dogs. Laryngitis." He chuckled, then grew thoughtful. "Being alone for the rest of my life."

"Do you avoid it? I mean, if you see a big dog coming, do you do everything to get out of the way?"

He shrugged, made a seesaw motion with one small hand. "I guess I have, once or twice. As far as being alone, that's another reason I like the show." In the voice of Greta Garbo he said, "Ven I am here, I don't haf to be alone." Jessie smiled.

"What are you afraid of, Jessie?"

He would have understood. Yet Jessie couldn't tell him.. "It's a long story."

"Jessie? Bobby?"

They both spotted Nathan hurrying across the lot in their direction. The road manager helped her to her feet.

"I'd still like to hear that long story, sometime, sweetheart," Bobby said, imitating Humphrey Bogart.

"Maybe I'll tell you someday." She noticed the barker's woebegone features as he joined them. "Nathan? What's wrong?"

"We're in a real jam." Nathan turned to the road manager. "Bobby, Steve and Emil took off this morning with their wives. Told one of the other ride operators they were going to work the Quarter."

Bobby's distorted smile faded. "You're kidding."

Nathan shook his head. "Jessie, this leaves us short four operators until at least tomorrow. Would you mind filling in on one of the kiddy car rides?"

"Not at all. Just let me pack up my stuff --" Danny appeared out of nowhere. With quick movements he indicated he would perform the task. "That would be great, Danny. If you have a chance, would you please take them over and stow them in my trailer?"

Danny nodded. Jessie turned to Nathan. "Okay, boss, I'm ready."

"May God have mercy on your soul," Bobby said, exactly like Charleton Heston. They all laughed. Danny grinned.

The kiddy car rides ranked among the most popular in the fairground. They were definitely the most troublesome to operate. Scaled down to accommodate small children, their slow speed and extra harnessing didn't prevent problems from occurring, Bobby told Jessie.

Older kids were prone to try hanging out of the cars, which were brightly-painted models of police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances. Keeping camera-laden parents behind the safety fence was almost a full-time job in itself. Then there were the over- eager protective parents that had to be kept from blundering into the cars as they reached for their kids before the ride stopped.

Bobby went over the operation with Jessie. Had her run the ride through a cycle several times. Showed her the emergency measures to be used in the event an accident threatened.

"Belt every single one of them in, Jessie, no matter how much they whine."

Bobby checked the safety harness in each car. Tugged on the straps. Inspected each belt's locking clip. "And no parents in the cars with the kids."

She inspected the center motor assembly closely. "Won't the shaft take the weight imbalance?"

The road manager's scarred lip curled. "No, the assembly can take it, but the cars are too small. The kid or the parent will end up falling out, then get hit as they're getting up by the next car."

"Why did those operators take off for the Quarter?" Jessie asked as she looked over the console.

"Always happens during Mardi Gras," Bobby said, and shook his head. "They quit, go into the city and work selling cheap souvenirs in the French Quarter. Tourists will buy anything."

"You aren't going to save their jobs for them, I take it?"

"No, there are plenty of people out of work in this area. We try to hire locals for most of the rides and stand work when we can."

"Is Danny from around here?"

"I don't really know." Bobby looked vaguely perplexed. "I guess so. He usually shows up when we're in this area."

The information she desperately needed might be available from Bobby. "So who travels the circuit as permanent employees?"

"Besides me? Hmmm." Bobby thought it over for a moment. "There's Nancy, and the others who work the freak show. They worked for Stokes' before I hired on. Doc has been with us since he got out of med school. Jack's Dad has been with Nathan since he first opened Stokes', thirty years ago."

"What about the dancers?"

Bobby frowned at the interior of the console and touched a bunch of wiring. "Mae and a couple of the girls travel with the show."

"What about Jack?"

Bobby shrugged. "Jack sort of comes and goes. Never know when he's going to show up, or how long he'll stay." He closed the panel. "Wiring looks good. You'll be fine, Jessie."

"You hope." She gave the ride a rueful look. "Something tells me I should have stuck with plucking ducks."

"Just relax," Bobby said. "Use common sense. If the kids start crying for Mom or Dad -- and there are some that always do -- stop the ride, take them off, and refund the ticket."

"Keep 'em happy," she said, repeating Nathan's advice.

"That's our motto. One more thing -- don't let the kids carry any souvenirs, balloons, or toys on the ride with them. Especially balloons. The strings can get tangled around the kid's neck or get caught as the shaft turns. Here's the

emergency brake." He showed her the heavy steel lever she would have to pull in the event the electronic controls failed. "Any questions?"

"Do I get a raise?"

"For doing this, my little chickadee," he said in a W.C. Fields voice, "Absolutely!"

Another pair of eyes watched Jessie as she joked with the road manager. She looked so ordinary, he thought, had acted so convincingly that suspicion made him double-check her identity. The supplier had vouched for her. She had been with his operation for two years, and had never failed to deliver the goods.

Now that he knew who she was, he had to get her alone, and quickly. His life was riding on it. Tonight, after the show closed, he decided. After the surprise at the docks, he wasn't going to wait any longer.

The murder of the two American agents had caused him to change his plans. It was time to retire. The supplier the woman worked for would simply have to write off the trip as a loss. STAC's payment would be more than enough to keep Cutter in luxury for the rest of his life.

As long as he took care of the woman, there would be no problem. A peal of laughter made his eyes narrow. She played her part very well, he thought again.

It was a shame it would have to be her last performance.

#

Just before nightfall, Jessie decided she needed a long, cold drink, a bottle of tranquilizers, and a very large raise. She also was convinced that as much as she loved children, she never, ever wanted to be within a hundred yards of one of the little fiends again.

The contrast between working the Pluck-A-Ducky game and the kiddy car ride had been immediate, stark, and brutal.

First there had been the beautiful blonde angel. She had long, carefully groomed curls, a ruffled pink dress, and shining patent leather shoes -- along with an eardrum-piercing voice. The petite darling had screamed. Continuously. "I want to go faster! Make it go faster, lady!" Her proud parents had bought her ten consecutive rides. Jessie's ears were still ringing.

"Why can't I stand up when the car goes around?" One indignant boy demanded to know after Jessie had stopped the ride and made him sit down. For the third time in three minutes. "Fireman get to stand up when they ride the back of their trucks!"

Then there was the young, apologetic woman who hovered nervously after Jessie stopped the ride.

"Um -- miss?" She shifted the baby she was carrying from one hip to the other. Two more children clung to her sides, with a third standing a few feet away howling. "I'm sorry, but my son ate all this cotton candy on top of three hot dogs, and he just threw up in there . . ."

And of course, the lady couldn't clean up her screaming son or the car he vomited in. She was at the carnival with her four kids by herself, and who would take care of her baby?

Mercifully, Bobby appeared to lead the boy to the facilities, while Jessie dealt with the mess in the car. Candy Corbin sauntered by in the middle of the cleanup

and stopped to chat. "Euew," the dancer said as she watched Jessie performing the unpleasant task. "What did the rug rat have to eat? That smells like --"

"Candy." Jessie plunged the sponge into bucket of disinfectant cleaner she was using. As she squeezed it out, she pretended it was the dancer's head. "Don't." The blonde looked smug. "You know, I heard if some kids even smell puke, they start upchucking, too." Her loud comment made many of the parents nearby grab their children out of line and hurry away.

"Why don't you go . . . " Jessie remembered the presence of children and abruptly changed her wording, " . . . practice twirling your tassels?"

"I have better things to do." With a decidedly smug sneer, Candy strolled off down the midway.

A grateful Bobby relieved her some time later, apologizing profusely for leaving her to operate the kiddy car ride alone most of the day. Sweaty, tired and feeling decidedly grumpy, Jessie trudged off to find any place that was quiet and devoid of people shorter than she was.

Her feet lead her directly past the entrance of the freak show. At the same time, Nathan emerged from behind the tent. He appeared pleased to see her.

"Evening, Jessie. How was your day?" He looked closer and winced. "Never mind, don't answer that. Do you have a minute?"

She gave him a weary nod.

"Would you come inside? Imogene needs to see you."

The performers were still in costume. Jessie smiled at the fat lady, who was resplendent in a sea of scarlet satin, black lace and rhinestones. She reclined on

her custom-built divan, which was large enough to comfortably seat twelve women -- or one Imogene. Her small feet propped on a black velvet ottoman.

"Jessica!" Imogene gestured for her to come to her side. She pulled a rolling cart from behind the triptych screen that concealed it. On it was the laptop computer that was never far from Imogene's busy fingers. "Guess what I found while I was surfing the Net?"

Jessie watched as the fat lady pulled up a colorful screen.

"Well, what do you know. A web site on carousel horses." Jessie scanned the data with a grin. "Hey, there's the name of the man who does replacement carvings for me."

"I got an e-mail message from him for you, and backtracked him to here."

Imogene gave Jessie a decidedly coy look. "He's quite an admirer of yours."

Jessie stifled a yawn. "Paul is a confirmed bachelor. The only thing he admires is a straight, seasoned length of oak."

"Don't we all?" Imogene laughed with delight, causing an earthquake of tremors to ripple through her satin gown. She pressed a few keys and printed out the e-mail message, then handed it to Jessie.

"Great," Jessie said after she skimmed through it. "He says he should have all the materials he needs by next week.."

"I heard you were looking for Jack this morning."

"He made a clean getaway," Jessie said, giving the other woman a dry glance. She had been tormented by the smallest, most vicious demons from hell all day, and was in no mood to think about a larger version of the same. "Lucky for him."

"I don't suppose you'll tell old Imogene what happened to make you so unhappy with the dear boy?" she said, and looked over Jessie's shoulder. "Here's Harv, he wants to know too, don't you, Harv?"

"Lordy, Imogene, stop poking around in the young lady's business," the human pincushion said as he extracted the last of the ten-inch skewers from his chest. The holes left only small spots of blood on his otherwise smooth skin. Strands of his sandy hair fell over his brow as he checked himself, and Jessie frowned, jarred by the memory of seeing Harv that morning.

"Did you get a haircut?" she asked.

Harv simply grinned. At the same time, Gail and Terence skirted around Imogene's curtains. Both halted and peered up at Jessie.

"No hard feelings, I hope?" Terence said, his baby face cherubically appealing. Jessie was becoming overwhelmed by the attention. "No, of course not, Terry."

"See?" Terence ungently prodded his tiny sister with an equally tiny elbow.

"Jessie calls me Terry. No one calls me Terence but you."

"Terror is more like it," Gail said. "Terry is a girl's name."

"Is not."

"Is too."

"Is not!"

"Is too!"

"Children." Imogene clapped her hands. "You remind me of two reasons why I never married. Brothers and sisters."

Jessie could understand that just fine, especially after the day she'd had. She was about to slip out when a wrenching yelp came from the end of the row of cages.

"Anybody out there who's good at untying knots?" Conrad's muffled voice called.

Jessie, Harv, and the midgets rushed over to discover Conrad in the most amazing contortion Jessie had ever seen. His legs were wrapped behind his neck, entwined around each other, while his arms emerged from behind to support him off the floor of the cage. She had no idea where his head was. Somewhere in the middle of the knot, she hoped.

"Damn it, Connie," Harv said as he opened the cage from behind. "You know you shouldn't be doing stuff like this no more. Always puts a kink in your spine."

"Cramp along my back," Jack's father said with a groan.

Jessie would have come around to help, but Harv shook his head and looked at Terence.

"Go get Doc. Move, boy." The midget disappeared while the Texan said, "Sorry, Jessie, but it can't be helped. Connie could rip every ligament in his back if we do this wrong. Doc has muscle relaxers he can inject him with."

Conrad's voice emerged from the pretzel of his body at Jessie. "Thank you for the thought, darling girl."

Doc arrived shortly after that and administered the drug. Between him, Harv, and Jessie, they were able to ease Conrad down off his hands.

"He'll do better on his side," Doc said, and frowned as he inspected the contortionist. "If we can find it."

The drug began to take effect. Within minutes Conrad's locked muscles were released from the agonizing cramps that kept him immobile. A sigh of relief escaped him as his body slowly uncurled from the twisted pose.

"Doc, I'm going to buy you a drink," Conrad said.

The carnival Doctor snorted. "Old man, you are going home and going to bed."

He turned to Jessie. "Would you do me a favor and find Jack for me? Harv's back isn't much better than Connie's.. I'll need more help if I'm to haul him back to his trailer."

Jessie saw the performers exchanged troubled glances as she accepted. No one wanted to volunteer any information, she saw, but Conrad needed help.

At last Imogene spilled the beans. "He's taken the cash box over to the business trailer, Jessie. Can't miss him. Just look for the big Cajun with the bad attitude."

#

On his way back from the business trailer, Jack found himself on a collision course with Jessica Kelly.

He knew how her day had gone. That he was presenting to her a perfect opportunity to vent her spleen. He stopped and waited for her to reach him. While he waited, he amused himself by guessing what her opening remarks would be. Jack, you're a jerk. Jack, you're slime. Jack, you're a dead man --

"Jack, your father needs you. He's been hurt."

No, he wouldn't have voted that as his number one choice, he thought. "What happened?" He listened in terse silence as Jessie described the incident. She indicated Doc was waiting for him.

"Come with me," he said.

"I don't --"

"Doc and I can carry him," Jack said. "But we'll need you to open the trailer door and clear a path back to his bed."

She nodded, and accompanied him in silence back to the sideshow.

Conrad was distinctly stiff and aching from the prolonged contortion. He groaned as Jack and Doc lifted his thin body between them.. Jessie walked ahead, out of the tent and over to Conrad's trailer. She propped the door open and made sure the way back to the bedroom was unobstructed. While she waited for the men to catch up, Jessie removed several bottles of liquor from floor around the bed.

After a short debate, she hid them in the kitchen food cabinet. Then she plumped up Conrad's pillows and straightened the tangle of bed sheets.

"Here we go, Dad, hang on."

"I want a drink," the older man said as Doc and Jack eased him through the door and onto the bed. Jack nodded to the physician.

"I'll take it from here. Thanks, Doc."

"No booze tonight, Jack," Doc said. "Not on top of the muscle relaxers."

Conrad roused at that. "Quack!"

"You're welcome, you old buzzard," Doc called back over his shoulder as he left.

Jessie helped Jack ease Conrad onto the bed. The old man's gaunt features were vague. His eyes blinked in confusion.

"You . . . get me . . . a drink, Jack . . . son," he said, then fell asleep.

"Right, Dad."

Jessie slipped out of the bedroom. She had almost made it to the door of the trailer before Jack's voice halted her in her tracks.

"Jess."

She hesitated, then yanked open the door.

"Jessie, hold it."

Chapter Nine

If he went after her, Jack thought as he walked out of the bedroom, he'd catch her. Put his hands on her. If she ended up on the sofa under him tonight, she wouldn't be doing any sleeping.

So don't touch her.

Jessie surveyed him as though he was an unremarkable splotch of swamp scum. He reached over and shut the door, forcing her to step back inside. Jack noticed again the contrasts between them. How could such a little thing get to him so fast?

"Jessie. I'm sorry."

"Uh-huh."

The words weren't going to make anything easier. A pity. Maybe he should just throw her on the sofa now. "Last night I was out of line."

"Is that right?" She appeared disinterested. Her eyes calm. Clear. Chilly. "I have to go."

Jack took time to choose his words. He still had a case to work. "I don't know how much you remember --"

She glanced pointedly at the sofa. "Most of it."

He tried again. "It was the scotch. I shouldn't have --"

"Oh, please." She reached for the door.

"Wait just a damn minute." He swore as he slammed a hand on the door to keep it shut.

She struggled to force it open. "No."

"Where are you going?"

"Away -- from -- you."

"Jess." His hand was on her arm. Mistake number one. Every nerve ending in his body immediately focused on her. And every damn one of them remembered how he had touched her the night before. The petting and caressing. The way she felt against him, under him.

"Don't, Jack." Now she was interested, although he suspected only in jamming her knee into a certain vulnerable portion of his anatomy.

He wanted to throttle her, shake some sense into her. "I'm trying to apologize, damn it!"

"Why? Candy already spoke to me."

"Candy?" His brows lowered. "What has she got to do with this?"

Jessie looked disgusted. "I got the message, Jack.. Don't give it another thought."

His hand fell away. "Too late," he said with a snarl, and moved in closer. Mistake number two. The smell of her became a new torment. "I've done a lot more than think."

"I remember. Was it part of your strategy? Force feed me, get me drunk, then molest me?"

"Molest you? Get you drunk?" He laughed. "You have some memory, Jess."

Her chin went up. "I know what you did to me."

"Yeah, but you don't want to admit that you enjoyed it, do you?"

The calm act was beginning to wear at the edges, he saw.. She stared at him the way she had the night they met. Outrage kindled in the cafe noir eyes. "No, Jack, I enjoyed the way you touched me. It seemed part of a dream."

Something in him clenched. "Then why are you so mad, chere?"

"It was wrong." Jessie's voice was almost gentle. Her fingers curled against the fabric of her jeans. "I had no control, no consent, no choice but to respond."

"I didn't hurt you!"

"Didn't you? Look at me, Jack." She presented her face defiantly. "I know what I look like. You didn't have to send that blonde bimbo over to warn me off."

Candy had been busy. "What did she say to you?"

Jessie ignored that. "I'm know I'm not beautiful, or even pretty. I see what's in the mirror when I stand in front of it. I'm too short, too skinny. My clothes are plain.

To top that off, you've known me all of what -- a week?"

"You have some kind of time-limit here I don't know about?" Jack countered. It had only been a week since she came into the sideshow. It felt like he'd wanted her for years.

Maybe he had.

"Women like me are lonely. I couldn't attract a blind man. You saw it that first night, didn't you?"

The corner of his mouth curled. "As I remember, I yelled at you and threw you in a cage that first night."

She made an impatient sound. "You didn't exactly yell at me the next day, did you? You came after me, and kept coming after me, even last night. You keep" -- she made a frustrated gesture -- "touching me."

"I don't do it because I think you're easy, chere."

"Why not? Other men have," she said, very matter-of-fact. "I guess they think women like me would be overjoyed by the attention."

The thought of other men touching Jessie sent Jack's control hurtling toward the edge. He made one last attempt to restrain himself.

"It wasn't like that, Jess. It was . . ." Where were the words to describe one of the most frustrating, erotic experiences of his life? "Special."

"And the thought that a homely woman would be grateful for attention from such a handsome man never entered your mind?"

He smiled. The tiny porcupine was so prickly about how she looked. "You're not homely."

"You need to get out more," she said, and put her hand on the door latch. "It was wrong, Jack. You were wrong to do that to me. You were wrong to laugh at me with that -- that --"

Jack was getting tired of being the bad guy. "The only thing wrong about it," he said, drawing her back by taking her arm, "was not waking you up. You were dreaming of a lover, weren't you, chere? One who touched you and loved you and made you come. What do you think would have happened if I had woken you up first, chere?"

She didn't answer him. Her face blanched.

"You're awake now."

Jessie was trapped between him and the door. He used his weight and hands to keep her in place. The scent of her saturated his senses. She wore no perfume, the way other women did. Jessie smelled like the rain. Pure. Fresh. He tugged her into his arms, and rested his brow against her hair.

"Stop it," she whispered.

Jack didn't want to strangle her anymore. He wanted to tear her clothes off. Then his. Bury himself in her slender body. It would be hot. Satisfying. Take care of the itch that had grown into a predatory lust. He couldn't recall wanting a woman this badly. Ever.

"I won't stop, Jess." His voice went deep. "I can't."

Damn woman. From the moment he laid eyes on her, she had gotten under his skin. That first, irrational fear. The frozen terror. The subsequent shame. He could dismiss all that. It was the moment she had grabbed him and hauled him up against the cage that he couldn't set aside. That incredible, ferocious moment of courage, when Jessica Kelly sank her invisible claws into him.

Right. And now she was under his hands.

Something alien surged inside Jack. He wanted to drag her off into the swamp. The bayou was a place to hide from the rest of civilization. He could take her there. Make her his woman, under the tattered canopy of moss-draped oak. Drive himself into her, over and over, until this miserable hunger was finally sated.

Jessie flattened her hands on his chest and pushed hard.. Jack didn't move an inch. The heated tension between them flared into wildfire.

He lifted his head, and his black gaze burned over her taut little face. She knew something of what he was thinking. He could see that. And all the little mouse wanted was to push him away.

"Not yet," he said, and lowered his head again. "Let's test your theory."

Jessie went rigid as his mouth glided along her jaw line. The little mouse was all bird bones and thin skin. He moved down her throat, nuzzling, nipping at her. The taste of her was driving him insane. He arrived at the deep hollow between her collarbones. Pressed his tongue flat against her frenzied pulse. Felt her digging her nails into his chest.

"Don't!" Her voice was reedy now. "Go -- go get your blonde!"

He ignored her. His hand deliberately unbuttoned the front of her shirt. The buttons popped from their holes, one, two, three. That was when she stopped clawing at him and released a low, aching sound.

"Jack."

He grabbed both her wrists in one hand. With a smooth, quick movement, he yanked them over her head, out of the way. Her back arched up. Her breath rushed out. In that moment, she resembled a pagan offering to some animal god, Jack thought. Just like the kind Nathan described when Jack performed. They were both panting now. The air around them was crackling with a bizarre, electrifying excitement.

"Chere." His hungry mouth slanted over hers. Her lips parted on another breathy moan, and he thrust his tongue between them, taking her the way he'd wanted to, with a kiss so deep and wet and hot that it rocked him to his heels and rendered her limp and quivering in his arms.

It took everything he had to lift his mouth from hers.

"You wouldn't have fought me off, would you?" He watched her dark eyes gradually refocus on his face. "You're as hot and hungry as I am. I can tell from those sounds you make." He imitated one of her sensual whimpers, and Jessie flinched. Not sure if he could stand much more, Jack released her and stepped back. "You didn't answer me. If I had woken you up last night, would you have kissed me like this? Touched me? Pledged until I came into you?"

She wrenched open the door.

He enjoyed the perverse satisfaction of having destroyed her pitiful defenses. "It bites deeper when you know it's the truth, doesn't it?"

New pain made her gaze waver as she stared up at him. She hesitated for so long that Jack nearly reached for her. Then she took a gliding step back.

"Go to hell," Jessie said clearly. Then she walked out.

#

After the encounter with Jack, Jessie walked blindly without direction for a time. She was deeply disturbed by Jack's intimate revelations. Thoroughly disgusted by the knowledge he was right. Completely unnerved to know she wanted more. "Jessie? Jessie!"

The strained voice penetrated Jessie's cocoon of misery.. She saw Nancy Carguitto rushing toward her.

Jessie absently admired the other woman's sheer wild beauty. The Lady Wolf's hair rippled with her movements, dark and sleek. She still wore her gaudy sideshow costume. The brief silver and gold fabric, patterned after leopard skin, barely covered her breasts and loins. An uneven, pagan-looking fringe of crystal beads sparkled against her black pelt.

Nancy reached her, not even panting despite her quick pace. "Someone's been in your trailer," she said, pressing one hairy hand to Jessie's arm. "I stopped by to talk to you, and saw the door was cracked open. When I looked inside --" she shook her head. "Come on. We'll go to Nathan's. He'll call the police."

"Why should he do that?" An ominous sense of foreboding had Jessie walking in the opposite direction, toward her trailer.. "What happened?"

Nancy kept pace with her. "From what I saw through the open door, well, you'd better see for yourself."

Jessie thought of her assignment. Started to run. Nancy kept pace with her easily. That was a problem, Jessie thought. She'd have to do something to stop her from seeing the cache case.

When she reached her trailer, Jessie pretended to stumble and fall. As she hit the hard-packed dirt, she took a quick look under the trailer. The familiar square shape of her Father's case was still sitting next to the air conditioning unit beneath the trailer. She pushed herself up on he elbows and covered her face with her hands.

Part of her wished the vandal had found it, after all.

"Oh, geez." Nancy reached down to help Jessie to her feet. "You okay?"

"Yes." She brushed the clinging soil from her hands and knees. "Thanks."

"Hold still." Nancy's furry fingers wiped over her cheeks. "You're an accident waiting to happen, girlfriend."

"I'm clumsy sometimes," Jessie said, and mounted the steps to the open doorway. The first look made her go still. "Oh, no." Jessie's throat hurt as the words were torn from it. "No." Behind her, Nancy looked over her shoulder and then put a gentle hand on her back in commiseration.

The trailer had been thoroughly ransacked. Whoever the intruder was, he hadn't been content with a simple search. Once he had searched, he turned to destruction.

"He must have been in here for hours," Nancy said. "No way anyone would have heard him with the show open. The speakers along the midway are too loud."

Every piece of furniture had been systematically ravaged. Cushions with gaping slashes tossed everywhere. Padding and foam ripped out. The cabinets in the small kitchen were thrown open. The dishes removed. Dropped to smash where they fell.

Jessie went back to the bedroom. The small mattress she slept on had been disemboweled. Sheets shredded. What clothing she had was torn into rags. Even the meager amount of toiletries she kept in the bathroom had been opened and poured down the drain. Traces of shampoo, hand lotion and toothpaste coated the sides of the sink.

It wasn't that important. Not like her -- "My tools!"

Jessie searched for frantic seconds until she righted a tipped-over chair. The open cases lay beneath. Her tools had been dumped out. Those that could be mangled, along with every cast she had made, were in pieces.

"What did he do? Stomp on them?" Nancy watched as Jessie knelt down and picked up what had once been a narrow wood gouge from the floor. "What kind of lunatic does something like this?"

Someone who knew her well, Jessie thought. Her tools were the only thing she cared about. Her stomach turned. The destruction was as vicious as it was senseless.

Nancy's voice tugged at her attention. "Did you see anyone around here before you left?"

"No. No one has been here since . . . " Jessie remembered asking Danny to take her cases back to her trailer just before taking over the kiddy car ride. "Since yesterday."

"Someone had to see something. I'm getting Nathan," Nancy said from the doorway. Jessie lifted her head and got to her feet, blocking the way.

"There's nothing he can do," she said, a defeated slump to her shoulders.

"Whoever did this is long gone by now."

"You don't know that!"

She gestured around the trailer. "Has anything like this happened before I started working for the carnival?"

"No," Nancy said. "But why would someone do this to you?" Jessie was forced to lie again. "I don't know."

The Lady Wolf looked suspicious. "You know more about this than you're telling me. C'mon, Jessie, spill."

Jessie shook her head, then kept her expression clear as she met the other woman's shrewd gaze. "Just forget it, Nancy."

"Don't give me that. This isn't a prank, Jessie, this is sick!"

Jessie only shrugged.

"Listen, lady." The Brooklyn native was getting angry now. "I respect loners. God knows, road shows wouldn't exist without them. Your past is your business. Okay by me. But what if this psychopath decides to do this to someone else?"

"He won't," Jessie said. "There's nothing you can do." "Maybe Jack can." Nancy nodded with satisfaction when she saw Jessie's reaction. "Ah-ha! That's what I thought. I'll just go get Jack."

Jessie's hand shot out, grabbed Nancy's. "No. It's not his problem."

Nancy wrestled her arm free. "Fine. Then we tell Nathan to call the police."

"No police."

The Lady Wolf grabbed Jessie by the shoulders and gave her a shake. "Just what the hell are you involved in?"

Jessie took a deep breath. "Nancy, Jack may have done this himself."

"No way." Nancy let go of her, and sat down on a ruined chair, shocked. "Not Jack."

"We had a quarrel last night." She felt ashamed at misleading the other woman, but Nancy had given her no choice. "He's been hostile toward me since the first day I joined the carnival."

"Not Jack." Nancy sounded firmer. Incongruously, her eyes refused to meet Jessie's.

"He's talked to you about me, hasn't he?"

The other woman lifted her hand weakly. "Well . . . after you hit your head, he was upset . . . he came to my trailer that night. Soaking wet from walking in the rain for an hour. Even that didn't cool him off."

A curious sensation stabbed inside Jessie's abdomen. With horror she realized that she was actually jealous. Jealous that Jack had gone to Nancy that night.

"Nothing happened," Nancy said, accurately reading Jessie's expression. "We played a few hands of gin rummy. He bitched about the weather, then you." Her smile faded. "He wasn't himself, though."

Jessie didn't have to say another word. The Lady Wolf seemed to make up her mind without further prompting.

"All right. I'm still not convinced it was Jack, but if it was, we don't want to call the cops. Come on." She got up and started for the door. "You can't stay here. You'll have to sleep at my place tonight. Tomorrow we'll talk to Nathan, and try to find out who did this. If it was Jack," -- she looked pained at the thought -- "what are you going to do?"

"Make him clean it up," Jessie said.

Jessie had to wait another two hours before Nancy finally fell asleep. It took some time to slip out of her trailer without waking her, but at last she got out. The fairgrounds had been closed for hours now. Everyone was down for the night. She moved silently toward her goal.

The carousel was dark, cloaked with the night. The century- old horses were frozen in various positions on their polished brass poles. The speakers which spilled out continuous loop- recordings of calliope tunes were silent. Moonlight glimmered on the old cut-glass gems. Highlighted the gingerbread moldings' mirrored insets. The ghosts of a thousand children clung to it. Silent echoes of laughter rang out from another century..

Jessie stood contemplating the symbol of her new life. Mourned the loss of her tools. Jumped when a hand touched her shoulder from behind.

"I like the butterfly," a low voice said in another language.

She forced herself to respond in the same. "A gift from a friend."

The hand disappeared. A match was struck. "A grateful friend."

It was the response she had been waiting for. When she would have turned, the hand clamped on her shoulder again.

"No." Cigarette smoke billowed around her head. "Don't turn around."

Jessie remained in her position. Her hands clenched at her sides. Never had she been so glad of Alek's training methods.

"Why have you taken so long?" She deliberately spoke in English. Tried to inject the right blend of disdain and irritation. "I have been here more than a week!"

"No English," he said. "There was no opportunity before this."

That was highly unlikely, she thought. "Did you search my trailer today? Destroy my belongings?"

"No."

"Who else would have a reason?" she said. "Perhaps you hoped to find --"

"Enough," he said. "I told you I was not the one. Now, listen carefully. There is a problem with the buyer."

She closed her eyes. Alek had been adamant about finishing this job. "That is not my concern."

The fingers flexed painfully into her flesh. "My problems are your problems. The buyer grows impatient. I have the components. Do you have the schematics?"

"Why else would I be here? Of course." She released a relieved breath, hoping it sounded like a huff of annoyance. "Where is the drop point? What time is the rendezvous?"

"You must give the designs to me."

"No." The moment she did that, she was dead. "That was not the arrangement."

His hand ground the bones of her shoulder together. "You will follow my orders."

"I am under the supplier's orders, as are you, Tohvareesh," Jessie said. "If I don't deliver the material personally, my life will be forfeit."

Silence extended for several moments. Anything could go wrong now, she thought, biting her lip. She could end up joining the ghosts of the long-dead carousel riders.

"Very well," the voice said at last. The hand left her shoulder, and she heard him drop the cigarette and grind it out under his shoe. "I will arrange the drop."

Thank God. "When? Where?"

"Expect to hear from me tomorrow. Don't turn around."

Jessie didn't dare move until his footsteps retreated.

She turned around at last. There was no sign of the man. Her eyes spotted a small square on the ground. She quickly bent and picked it up. It was a book of matches from someplace called Hot Sax. A few inches from it, the crushed remains of a cigarette. She put both in her pocket, then walked onto the carousel. When she got to the platform, she straddled one of the horses and pressed her head against its polished brass pole. Reaching back with her hand, Jessie pulled the butterfly comb from her hair. She stared at it in the moonlight before she threw it into the darkness.

Now that he had made contact, Jessie thought, she didn't ever have to wear the wretched thing again.

She got off and headed back to Nancy's trailer, unaware of the shadowy form who watched from behind the carousel.

#

The phone Harry hated to answer rang. Exactly ten minutes after he fell into the only sleep he'd had in two days. His bedroom was completely dark, only faint moon-glow filtered in from the overhead skylight. He groped, found the receiver.

"Parker."

"Harry. I've got something I need you to run down.."

Harry sat up in bed, alert at once from Jack's grim tone. "Tell me."

"A woman Nathan hired to restore the carousel." He spat out each word as if it was a forced confession. "Recommended by someone in the Smithsonian. She's using the name Jessica Kelly." Jack spelled it. "She likes to make calls in town on pay phones."

"Anything concrete?"

"No. If she has the components, she isn't keeping them here."

"Why do you think she's an operative?"

"Tonight I heard her speaking Russian like a native."

"What did she say?"

"I couldn't get close enough to make it out."

Harry's lips drew back in a soundless snarl. "So the Shark is taking delivery from a woman?"

"Has to be." On the other end, Jack sounded ready to kill someone with his bare hands. "I figure she made her contact tonight. They're probably setting up the drop."

"Who's the contact?"

Jack muttered something under his breath that matched Harry's mood. "Male, just under six foot, wearing a hooded running jacket."

"You think she's 'The Cutter'?"

"I don't know." There was a significant pause. "She could be."

"Don't let her out of your sight." Harry's voice sharpened when he received no response. "Jack? Did you hear me?"

"Goddamnit, yes!" he said, then muttered something and took a breath. "Sorry, Harry. I was hoping -- ca ne fait rien maintenant. It doesn't matter now."

Harry knew Jack only spoke French when he was upset. "Just what the devil is going on between you and this Kelly woman?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"You're hardly speaking English," Harry said.. "Don't think with the wrong head, Jack. I'll have Scottie run her name through the system, see what he can dig up on her. I need a photo."

"Tomorrow. I'll fax it. Tell your computer genius to check the Eurobase for any correlation."

"If she's in any system, Scottie will track her down. In the meantime, use your advantage. Use her. Find out where Ivan is."

"That I will," Jack said. "With pleasure."

#

A severe thunderstorm rolled in before dawn, and rain muddied the fairgrounds within minutes. After hearing the dismal morning forecast predicting more of the same, Nathan closed down the show for the day.

"No one but gators will come out in this weather," he said. The carnies had assembled for breakfast in the employee tent behind the food concessions. Everyone gave a collective groan. "So take the day off, boys and girls, and enjoy it."

"I want to have a word with you," Nancy said from behind Jack. He turned his head to look at her. She looked ready to tear his throat out. Jessie came up as

well. She gave the Lady Wolf a nudge with her elbow, and Nancy stepped back.

"Never mind." She stomped off in the opposite direction.

He turned his attention to Jessie, who was wearing jeans and another shapeless cotton knit that effectively concealed her form.

"Mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Someone trashed my trailer yesterday," Jessie said. "Nancy thinks it might be you."

"No doubt you instantly assured her it wasn't." Jack noted the faint shadows under her eyes. It didn't matter, he thought. He didn't have a choice any longer.

"I don't know that I should."

Or perhaps he did. Jack got to his feet and grabbed her arm in a tight hand.

"Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"The Bayou Teche. My cousin Darel is having a fais dodo at his place."

"Why would I want to go to your cousin's pajama party?" Jessie sounded astonished.

Jack laughed without humor. "A fais dodo isn't a sleep-over --it's more like a . . . hoe-down."

"I can't. I have to clean up that mess --"

This was his last chance to get through to her. "You're going to Darel's with me. Right now."

Chapter Ten

From Blanesville Jack drove his Jeep inland across Bayou Lafourche and through Morgan City to Bayou Teche. The trip was made in silence, save for the radio Jack turned on halfway there. Jessie noticed how the road signs were posted in both English and French, as well as the dual nature of the local radio stations.

"Are we still in Louisiana?" Jessie asked after Jack stopped for gas. The entire exchange between him and the rather greasy-looking attendant was conducted in a thick, barely understandable Cajun dialect.

Black eyes moved to study her face for a moment. "Oui."

"Very funny."

A half-hour later, Jack pulled off the road again when they reached a small town, and parked outside what appeared to be a cross between a junkyard and a truck stop. Rusted car bodies were heaped alongside mounds of tires. Several tractor-trailers were lined up in a clearing beyond. Two stray dogs were barking ferociously.

Jessie got out of the car slowly. "This is your cousin's place?" She'd seen prettier garbage dumps.

"No. This is where we leave the car," he said. With a single sharp word, Jack silenced the dogs and took her hand. "Come on."

Inside, Jack spoke to a short, stocky man behind a busy lunch counter. His conversation was even briefer than the one at the gas station. Equally as

incomprehensible. The heavyset man reached under the cash register and handed Jack a set of keys.

Jessie followed him through to the back of the building and out a screen door. Below them, on the bank of the bayou, was a row of small, wooden boats. Jack pulled her in the direction of the small pier they were tied to.

"A boat?"

"No road to Darel's place," Jack said. "From here we have to use a pirogue." He helped her in the canoe-shaped boat and untied the ropes. The keys were used to start a small outboard motor.

"Jack." Jessie had gone along so far, but this was becoming more and more disturbing. She didn't like the idea of being stranded in the swamp with Jack. No matter what a fais dodo was or why his cousin Darel was having one. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea."

"Relax, chere," Jack said as he expertly guided them out into the center of the bayou. He remained standing, leg straddling the plank seat for balance.

Sometimes he used a long pole from the bottom of the boat to clear the occasional tangle of water hyacinths and other obstructions from the bow.

Civilization disappeared. Jack's eyes narrowed against the rare beam of sun that worked its way through the mossy mesh of cypress branches. Since launching the pirogue and entering Bayou Teche, he seemed more aware of their surroundings, and at the same time more receptive to them.. Jessie was seeing both sides of the man: here in the swamp, Jack was both soldier and Cajun boy.

Cousin Darel's modest house was a mile down from the truck stop, set back from the incline of the bayou, deep in shadowy groves of cypress and oak. The unpainted structure appeared in desperate need of repair. A sagging porch wrapped around the entire front of the house, facing the bayou. The high, steep roof was draped in so much Spanish moss it looked like pieces of rain cloud had been caught by the peaks when they passed over..

Jack tied off the boat at the uneven pilings of an equally dilapidated pier, and helped Jessie up from her seat.

"This isn't Paris," he said. "Darel and his family are good people. Don't stick your nose up at them."

She disliked the warning but understood why he'd made it. This was his family, too. "I won't."

A large group had gathered outside the back of the place, where an Acadian band was playing. Jack identified it as Zydeco, Cajun music, traditionally played by accordion, fiddle, and steel washboard. Many people were dancing, others were gathered around a long table heavily laden with heaping platters of food. Children laughed and shrieked as they played in and around the groups of adults.

Jessie was not as much welcomed as she was absorbed into the party. Jack's cousin Darel turned out to be a lanky, red-haired man dressed in work clothes and a Stetson. When he spied Jack, he trotted over and embraced him without hesitation. Jack introduced Jessie, who found herself being soundly kissed.

"Enchante, chere," Darel said, and thumped Jack on the chest with the back of his hand. "She's why you not come to see me, eh?"

Jack's arms folded as he stared at Jessie. "You can say that, mon cousin."

"Ah, bien." Darel laughed, then leaned over to confide to Jessie, "He never brings a woman to the fais dodo before, you know."

"Oh, really?" It was Jessie's turn to stare at Jack.

Darel watched the by-play between his cousin and the tiny woman and grinned.

Jackson had his hands full, he decided. Something he'd needed for a long time.

"Come, Jessie." he took her arm and put it through his. "I want you to meet Marcella, ma fiancee."

Darel introduced her to a petite brunette with translucent blue eyes and a lovely smile. It was apparent they were in love, for dainty Marcella glowed with adoration for her husband-to-be. From there Jessie was introduced to so many cousins and Aunts and Uncles that she lost count..

Eventually Jack steered her toward a wide, long table covered with thick layers of newspaper. Long benches on either side were being filled even as the heavy, steaming pots were carried out from the kitchen..

"This is what we call a crab boil," Jack said. Jessie watched as one pot was upended and mounds of hot, spicy boiled crabs were piled in the center of the table. On either side, the other pots yielded small, pink shrimp and what looked like tiny, scarlet-shelled lobsters.

"What are those?" She pointed to the last item.

"Crawfish," Jack said. He reached into a steel pan filled with crushed ice set on a stand by the end of the table. He pulled out two bottles of beer, opened them and handed one to Jessie. "This puts out the fire."

Memories of her last bout with alcohol made her politely refuse the beer. Jack called to one of the women, who brought Jessie an iced tea instead. Jessie took a sip and looked helplessly down at the crawfish piled before her. She'd eaten shellfish before, but that wasn't much help.

"Here." Jack showed her how to hold the lobster-like crustacean in her fingers and snap off the ridged tail. He broke the tail in half and scooped out the morsel of white meat. Before Jessie could refuse, he popped it in her mouth. "Well?"

The white tidbit was sweet and melted on her tongue. "It's good." Jessie picked up a crawfish and tried to imitate Jack's skill. After several fumbling tries, she successfully extracted the meat and held it up in triumph. "Got it." And popped it in her mouth..

"Now you suck on the head," Jack told her.

Jessie's jaw dropped. So did the crawfish. "I have to what?"

Jack's laughter rang out before he took pity on her. "Right here." He grasped the crawfish and showed her the small recess. "See that little yellow there? That's the fat. You suck it out, like this." He demonstrated.

"Um, can I skip that part?" No way was she sucking crawfish heads. What he called fat, she called brains.

"Ah, but chere, that's the real treat."

He teased her into trying it, and she was surprised to find he was right. Within minutes she was stripping and eating crawfish like a swamp-bred Cajun.

"This is easy." She flourished a stripped bit of white meat. Jack's mouth swooped down and snatched the flavorful morsel from her fingers. "Hey!"

Jack brought her hand to his lips and licked the juice from her fingertips. She swallowed against an instantly dry throat and tugged her hand back. He grinned.

"You taste good, too."

Jack sat down next to her and began making serious inroads into the pile of crawfish. Jessie admired the ease with which his efficient hands cracked and stripped the tiny crustaceans in seconds.

He eyed her. "You eat enough dinner, chere, and I might let you dance with me later."

She was too busy chewing to tell him what she thought. That was when an Aunt of Jack's sat across from them with her family. Throughout the meal, she alternated between complaining about the preparation of the food, and scolding Jack for not visiting more often. Her sharp, singsong way of speaking fascinated Jessie. So much so that she paid no attention to the growing pile of crawfish shells in front of her.

"Mais non, Jackson, for why did I fry all these pig's ears for? Zut alors, Darel, that dirty dog says to me, he says, for your sweet boy cousin Jack, not for me!" Tante Fleur's black eyes rolled. "So when I came I didn't let him have a one, no sir!"

The older woman chuckled, then suddenly turned to Jessie. "Why you so scrawny, little girl?"

Jessie took a diplomatic sip of the strong iced tea Jack had brought her and smiled. "I've never had crawfish before today."

Tante Fleur seemed to approve of this, for she laughed again. "You like them, you all right then, chere. You come to my house one time with Jack, I make you etouffe. No one make you better than Tante Fleur."

As long as she could skip the pig ears, Jessie thought.. "How do you make etoufee?" she asked Tante Fleur.

"You start with the crawdaddies," the Acadian woman said, gesturing broadly.

"Saute them with the onions, garlic, sweet green pepper, celery, and a whole lot of cayenne."

The two women discussed tradition cooking for a time. Jessie was astonished to learn the ways and varieties crawfish were used. The heads were stuffed and simmered in a thick pink bisque. The sweet meat was mixed with leftover seafood and rice to make jambalaya. Crawfish were baked in tarts, fried in cakes, and even whipped with eggs into omelets.

Jack interrupted their discussion and drew Jessie from the table. "I better dance with you while you can still walk." He hooked an eyebrow at the table. Jessie saw she had single- handedly demolished what appeared to be twenty pounds of crawfish.

One of the older man sang a boisterous, bouncing song, the words of which Jessie couldn't fathom, and Jack swung her into his arms.

"Tell me something," Jessie said as he danced her around the grassy clearing.

"Does your Aunt really fry pig ears?"

Jack threw back his head and laughed.

"What?"

"Oreilles de cochon aren't pig ears, they're pastries shaped like pig's ears." Jack pulled her closer as the band went into a slower, softer tune. "You want to try some?"

"I'll pass." Jessie tried to put some distance between them. "I thought a Virginia country girl would appreciate down-home cooking," Jack said.

She was about as down-home as a Manhattan socialite. "Perhaps I'm not the adventurous type."

"You could have fooled me, chere. You travel all over the States while you work, don't you?" Jack smiled down at her. "On the road as much as show people."

Jessie only shrugged.

He turned her in a quick spin, then pulled her back to him. "Ever been to Florida?"

She put one hand against his chest. Pushed. A stone wall would have been easier to move. "No."

"Never? I'd have thought a restoration expert like you would have made a pilgrimage to the Ringling Museum in Sarasota." Jack bent his head and murmured next to her ear. "Or is Miami more your style, chere?"

What was he trying to say? She shoved him again, and he let her create a few inches of space between their bodies. "I've never been to Florida. Period."

Desperate to change the subject, she gazed over his shoulder. "I like your family."

"Merci." Jack stared down at her without smiling. "They like you, too." He said this as though it surprised him. "So, what do you think of Cajun country?"

"It's beautiful," Jessie said. "Mysterious. Not at all what I thought it would be."

She glanced overhead and judged it was late afternoon, by the position of the sun. "I've really enjoyed myself, but we'll have to go soon. I have some shopping to do."

"Shop another day," Jack said. "Darel's fais dodo will keep going until midnight, at least."

"I can't." Jessie wondered if he was going to make an issue out of it. "I don't have any clothes left, and I've got to put my trailer back together."

"Then we will go." Jack stopped in mid-step and marched her away from the band. He paused long enough to say good-bye to Darel and Marcella, and some of the other relatives. Jack's face was a blank mask, drawing curious looks from his Mother's people.

"You come back for the wedding, huh, chere?" Darel called after them. Jessie waved.

They made the trip back to the car in silence. Jessie looked over the side of the boat and saw how the bayou water reflected everything. She saw the spindly web of branches overhead. The pale linen sky. The intensity of Jack's gaze while he thought she couldn't see him.

"I'll drive you in to the city," he said when they arrived back at the Jeep.

Jessie tried to refuse. "There's really no need --"

"The rain turns dirt roads into mud. My Jeep is the only thing that can get you there." When she would have protested again, he glared. "Don't argue with me, Jessie. Not now."

During the long drive to New Orleans, Jessie kept her face averted. Stared out into the rain that met them as soon as they left Acadian country.

Traffic in the city was nonexistent. The Mardi Gras revelers either had widespread hangovers, or had moved the parties indoors to avoid the filthy weather. Jack drove north on Canal Street, past the large discount store Jessie had asked him to take her to.

"Wait, you just passed the place."

"You can do better than that, chere."

As the last of the rain drizzled away, Jack pulled into one of the more exclusive shopping malls just outside the French Quarter. She looked at the conglomeration of expensive retailers and thought of her cover. How could she swing plain and dowdy shopping here?

Money. That was it. "I can't afford this," Jessie said.

Jack wasn't listening. "Come on."

She tried another approach. "Okay. Why don't you leave me here, and I'll --"

"Not a chance," Jack said. "I'll tag along." He looked over her baggy jeans and oversized cotton pullover. "You need help."

Jessie looked down at herself. Replaced the urge to grimace with an angelic innocence. "What's wrong with the way I look?"

"What's right?"

Jessie tugged defensively at the hem of her pullover. It wasn't that bad. His cousin's family hadn't said anything, had they? "There's nothing wrong with wearing comfortable clothes, Jack."

Jack snorted. "There's comfort, and then there's the stuff you donate to charity."

"I thought men didn't care what women wore," she said.

"You're wrong. We do." Jack took her arm. "Come on."

The bewildering variety of women's clothing stores offered an even larger assortment of garments. Jack guided Jessie to one of the bigger, more trendy outlets. They went to the petite section, where Jack began sorting through the racks. He did it with the same dexterity he used to strip a crawfish. He stopped only when Jessie's hand pressed over her mouth.

He frowned at her. "What?"

The other customers in the area -- all female -- were gazing at him, too. Not sure whether to gawk or call security. "You look very odd, doing that," Jessie said, trying not to giggle.

He looked down at the clothing rack, then at her. "I know what I like."

They began arguing soon after that. Jessie automatically pulled the plainest styles and drabest colors from the racks. She held them up only to check the length. When she tossed a noxious-looking yellow jumpsuit over her arm, Jack grabbed it and put it back on the rack.

"No."

She hesitated, then reached for an equally virulent version in avocado green.

He grabbed her hand. "Forget that, too."

"What's wrong with it?" she demanded to know..

"It's looks like something a bird deposits on the hood of a car," he replied. "Are you colorblind or something, chere?"

She didn't reply, but chose a third, in a neutral khaki color. He sighed, ripped it from her hands, and shoved it back on the rack..

"Any one of those three would fit me!" Jessie said in protest.

"Yeah, so will a mulch bag. Want to go cruise the garden shop and see if you can find one?" Jack reached over and paused to turn his head and eye her small frame. "What size are you?"

"Size?" She shrugged. A perfect size three. "A ten."

"Huh. More like a three," He selected a smaller garment in a startling shade of deep rose. "Here." He shoved it in her hands and nodded toward a set of double doors. "Go try this on."

She glowered at him. "I don't like it."

"Tough."

"It looks like something Candy would wear."

"Candy never wears anything that can't be tied on with strings."

"I don't want to try it on."

#

Jack considered putting the pretty garment on her himself. Bad idea. Those dressing rooms had doors. Doors that locked. He didn't trust himself alone with her behind locked doors right now. Not after enduring the temptation of having

her in his arms as they danced at Darel's. He gave Jessie an ungentle shove in the direction of the dressing room.

"Put it on, walk out, and show me how it looks."

"Jack --"

He lowered his brows. "You really want me to throw you over my shoulder in front of all these nice ladies, baby?"

"Don't call me baby." She stomped off to the dressing room.

While she changed, Jack spent the time picking out other garments for her. He began enjoying himself. He'd bet Jessie could wear almost any color -- except that bird splat green.

"Well?"

She stood there, silently rigid in the rose-colored jumpsuit. It clung to her legs and body with a soft, flattering fit. Her breasts suddenly appeared much larger. Jack frowned. Maybe there was something to be said for those baggy shirts of hers, after all.

"It's too tight," she said through lips that were in a similar condition.

"If I can stand it, so can you," he said, and handed her three more garments.

"Now these."

She held up a summery dress in a muted floral pattern. "I can't wear this."

"You're asking for my personal assistance again?"

She whirled around and stalked off.

By the time they were finished with clothes, Jessie's face was pink. Jack wasn't speaking to her. A compassionate sales clerk had produced a cart in which Jack dumped everything he liked and Jessie hated.

"Come on."

He marched Jessie over to the lingerie section. Eyed her breasts and hips.

"32B?"

"Drop dead," she said.

Jack nodded to himself. "And size five panties." He scanned the stock displays and selected began selecting the lingerie items in her size.

"Jack!" Jessie said in a scandalized tone.

He only tossed a handful of lace and satin on top of the outfits, then pulled her along after him.

"Are you going to pick out my shoes, too?"

"Yeah, I am." Touching all that silky stuff had given Jack ideas he wanted out of his head. Now. "Those old lady shoes you wear should be outlawed."

"They're not old lady shoes!"

"You're right. Old ladies have better taste." He nudged her along. "Move."

Jack selected several pair of sandals, pumps, and slip-ons. None of them were low-heeled, sensible, or brown.

"Jack, I need --"

"Therapy. You need therapy. This way." He marched her over to a large cosmetics counter, where two clerks were idly chatting. "Excuse me, ladies?"

Both women took one look at Jack and beamed. "Yes, sir?"

Jack used his hands on Jessie's shoulders to force her to sit down on the stool before a large oval mirror. "We need some of this stuff," he gestured to the display of bottles and cases. "Not too much, but enough to make the lady here look . . . "

"More vibrant?" one of the clerks said with a tactful smile.

"Exactly."

"We're offering a free makeover with a purchase of twenty dollars or more," the other clerk said.

Jack eyed the selection. "We're good for that. Let's do it."

Jessie glared at him as the women descended on her with testers and samples.

Her rigid silence was ignored as the clerks debated on colors and brands.

"We better go with a neutral on the shadow."

"Not the crimson. Mocha, or that bronze rose."

"An ivory concealer, yes, just a touch under the eyes."

Jack watched as Jessie's plain features were transformed. Subtle application of the different cosmetics made her brown eyes huge. Her cheekbones softened.

Her lips' fullness revealed. Jess would never be beautiful, Jack thought, but now that the drabness was erased, she was an uncomfortably striking woman.

Both clerks finished. Stepped back. Chortled with delight.

One woman clapped her hands. "You wouldn't know it was the same girl!"

"See, honey?" The other clerk gently turned Jessie's face toward the mirror. "Isn't that better?"

"It's a miracle," Jack said, and added a tote brimming with make-up to the cart.

"Thanks, ladies."

He guided Jessie away and looked at her again. "You don't look like the same woman," he said, echoing the clerk's statement.

"No, now I look like a hooker."

"It's only a little make-up, Jess."

While they waited to pay, Jessie eyed the cart and him with an equal amount of proud dislike. Once the purchases were totaled. Jack slid his credit card across the counter.

Jessie's temper flashed. "You are not going to buy this for me!"

"Oh yes, I am." He looked at her once. "Close your mouth, chere. Now."

"Jackson! Over here!"

They both turned and saw Candy Corbin and two of the other dancers sauntering through the store. The blonde dancer rushed over and latched onto Jack's arm with visible glee. She spared Jessie a second-long smirk. That turned into a gape as she examined the expert make-up she was wearing.

Candy recovered quickly and turning to Jack, gushed in a little girl voice. "I'm so glad we ran into you! We can have lunch together!"

Jack pried her fingers from his flesh. Signed the charge slip the clerk handed him. Grabbed Jessie's arm. "Another time, Candy. Come on, Jess."

Leaving the dancer and her friends to stare after them in dumb-struck amazement, he hauled Jessie by one arm out of the mall and through the parking lot to his Jeep. The air outside was still rain-washed and crisp. He threw the bags

in the back as she stalked around it to the passenger side. Following, he grabbed her shoulders and spun her around.

"What is wrong with you?"

"I don't want you to buy me clothes!"

"Tough." He shook her, once. "I just did."

She lifted her hands to shove back. "And stop touching me! If you're so damn desperate, go get your girlfriend!"

"Who are you talking about? You mean Candy?"

"You're using me to make her jealous, aren't you? Well, buster, you've can't --"

The hell he couldn't. She'd been asking for it all day.. A growl rumbled in his chest as Jack jerked her into his arms. Jessie was pinned against the Jeep as his body pressed her back. His mouth took hers before she could catch her breath.

Jack told himself it was just to shut her up.

The silky heat of her lips permeated his displeasure. The way they parted for his tongue made his mind shut down. Jessie was rigid with anger, but her mouth was all soft, willing woman. His woman. His for the taking. He saw himself pushing her into the Jeep. Back on the seat. Jerking down her jeans --

"Dieu." He lifted his mouth. Rested his forehead on the Jeep. Thought about praying for sanity. Jessie wasn't fighting anymore. When Jack lifted his head, he saw her lips were naked. Bruised from the ruthless assault of his mouth. He slowly wiped the lip color from his mouth with the back of his hand. He watched her eyes. "Stop looking at me like that."

"I'm not like your bimbo."

"I'll say this once. She is not my bimbo."

Jessie's eyes glittered. "Oh really?"

"No. Credit me with some taste, will you, chere?"

A faint line appeared between her delicate brows. "Then why did she . . . "

"Why did she what?"

"Never mind." Jessie lifted a hand to push back a loose piece of hair. "Why did you just grab me like that?"

"It was that, or spanking you." He patted her backside. "Which you wouldn't have enjoyed so much."

"Probably not," she said, and her mouth curved at one corner. He didn't want her humor, not now. Their hips were still pressed tightly together. If Jessie didn't know what he wanted she was nerve-dead below the waist. His eyes narrowed as a giggle escaped her.

Jack lifted a brow. "It isn't funny."

So did Jessie. "Make up your mind, Cajun. What do you want it to be?"

"Me and you, in a horizontal position," he gritted, resisting the urge to grind himself against her. He rested his cheek against hers. His eyes closed as he thought of it. "Naked. Me inside you. The whole night, chere."

A couple of well-dressed women walked past the jeep, and stared at Jessie and Jack with evident interest. Jack frowned at them, which made one of the pair titter and whisper something to her friend. They both started laughing as they walked on.

"But not in a damn parking lot." Jack tore his hands off her and yanked the passenger door open. "Get in. We'll go to the home center, see what tools we can replace."

While he was driving, Jessie scrutinized the streets she traveled so attentively that Jack asked her, "Looking for something?"

She began to shake her head, then asked, "Have you ever heard of a place called `Hot Sax'?"

"Yeah." Jack was amused. "It's been constantly on my mind." His attention sharpened. "Why do you want to know about that sleaze palace?"

Jessie deftly avoided the question. "Why is it a sleaze palace?"

"Because the local sleaze go there to get drunk, picked up, or beat up. Why?"

"I was just curious."

#

Candy was getting bored sitting in the bar. Mid-afternoon traffic was at a minimum. Most patrons of the Hot Sax were couples. A few old men ogled her from a distance. She was bored. Still stinging from Jack's public rejection. The other dancers had gone on shopping. Leaving Candy at loose ends.

Candy's wounded ego perked up when she heard the door to the bar swing open. Loud, masculine voices filled the air.

The rowdy group of men who came in were already half-drunk. Their eyes instantly homes in on the only blonde in the place - Candy. The dancer silently preened.

This was more like it, she thought.

The men weren't the bashful type. They strolled over and filled up the barstools on either side of her.

"Couple pitchers of beer!" one of them sitting next to her yelled at the bartender. He leered down the front of Candy's abbreviated top. "Hello, sweet thing. Where have you been all my life?"

She smiled. Enough to tease, not to promise. "Waiting for you to find me, sugar." The heavyset man turned and punched one of his friends on the shoulder. "Did you hear that?" He swung back and shifted his stool closer. The smell coming off him was unpleasant. Booze. Sweat. Lust. Candy didn't mind. She had learned long ago which senses to ignore. Which ones to indulge. The man leaned over and put his wet lips next to her ear. "How about you and me . . . "

His description was short, graphic, and to the point. If she had been drunk enough, it might have intrigued her. But Candy was still furious over Jack. The way he had walked away from her, she brooded. Choosing that flat-chested little rabbit over her.

"You think I'm pretty, sugar?" Candy drew back enough to flutter her lashes under his heated gaze.

"I'd sniff a mile of your farts just to see where they come from, sweet thing," the oaf said, and the other men broke up into guffaws.

Candy only smiled. An idea began to form. One that would teach Jessie Kelly not to mess with the man Candy Corbin considered her private property.

She lifted a long, scarlet nail and traced it along the man's thick lips. "What's your name, sugar?"

His smile faltered as he shifted on the barstool. "Lloyd." Candy gave him a charming pout. "Lloyd, how would you like to do a lady a little favor?"

"Depends on the favor," he said. His eyes flat. His mouth getting wet. "And the reward."

"Oh, I think you'll like it." She dropped her hand to his lap, and lightly raked her nails over his obvious erection. "And I'd be very, very grateful."

Chapter Eleven

"Give me some good news, Harry," Jack said as he watched his father snoring.

"Scottie ran everything. Jessica No-Middle-Name-Or-Initial Kelly from Virginia did not exist prior to 1997." Harry shuffled some papers. "No social security, no birth records, DMV, nothing. Unless she's exactly four years of age, she's a player."

It was what Jack had expected to hear. The last, faint hope that Jessie really was simply a restoration expert died. In its place grew something cold and determined.

"Scottie ran the photo you sent to us, lousy as it was."

"Tell Genius Boy not to complain. It was that or a sketch from the guy who sells caricatures for the show."

"Yeah, well, he found no match with anything from Intelligence or the Bureau. Interpol came up empty. Zip. Jessica Kelly doesn't exist under any other name, either."

That was worse. "The job in Maine?"

"Got more there. Her current employer told Scottie he likes her a lot. Says she's extremely competent. Knows her stuff. Coworkers report she's something of a loner. She told the boss she had a death in the family when she left. The glowing references she gave him are from previous jobs in a five different U.S. cities. All legit."

"The cities just happen to follow the smugglers' route, too."

"Yes."

Jack closed his eyes. The final nail in hope's coffin. "That's it, then."

"Chameleon." Harry despised giving orders to terminate, but when he did there was no debate involved. "Get the schematics, then bring the girl in. If that's not possible, do what you have to."

"Yeah." His voice was impassive. "I'll do that."

He switched the phone off. Threw it across the trailer.. It bounced off a wall and clattered to the floor. Conrad Hamilton's snores cut off abruptly. He sat up and surveyed his son with bleary eyes.

"Marianne? That you, honey?"

Jack got up and pulled the quilt back over his father. "Mom's sleeping, Dad," he said. "Get some rest."

A shaking hand covered Jack's. "She's dead, son. I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"Yes, you did, Dad." Jack swallowed the bitterness in his throat. "You sent the telegram while I was overseas. During the war."

"Stupid damn war. Never should have let you join those Jarheads . . ." A moment later Conrad began snoring again.

Jack changed his clothes. Sat back down. Counted his toes and fingers. Ten. Still ten. The same ten he'd been born with. The same ten he'd possessed before the attack in the desert.

Before he had become an authentic freak.

Jack had spent eighteen months in the Persian Gulf during Desert Storm. He remembered the weeks of boredom interspersed by nights of terror. Endless drills. SCUD attacks. Watching kids play ball in the streets around still-smoldering

piles of rubble. Hearing the sobbing voices of frightened women in the dark. Smelling acrid smoke from oil well fires hundreds of miles away. The tedium ended when Jack and his men got their orders and joined the final advance into Kuwait.

"Maybe we'll get to rescue a few belly dancers," one of the Marines said. "Or a whole harem."

"Right," Jack said. He shouldered his field pack. "They chop your hand off for stealing out here. What do you think they chop off for messing with their women?"

There wasn't time for many more jokes. The men were silent and grim as they packed out for the offensive. Each Marine carried his own weapon and ammunition, as well as sixty-five pounds of survival gear.

The Marines were well-trained, battle-experienced men. Most had trekked through jungles, tundra, and other hell holes in the past. The desert promised them nothing but sun, sand, and blast- furnace heat.

Enemy forces retreated. Jack's unit pushed forward, deeper into the wasteland. They fared better than the reserve units sent in along with them. Jack spent more time evacuating middle- aged weekend warriors suffering from heat exhaustion than he did engaging the enemy.

A surprise air-to-ground assault left ten men wounded and Jack in charge of the unit. More reservists were sent up to replace the wounded Marines. Jack's orders were specific. They were to keep on the move. The final push into Kuwait had to

be accomplished quickly, before the enemy's SCUD attacks incited other nations like Israel into the fray.

He was in the desert when Jack received the news via the Red Cross. His mother's death had shaken him, so much so that he hadn't paid attention to the watch schedule. During that night, one of the two reservists on guard duty decided it was too cold. He and the other man built a small fire. Jack woke up the instant he smelled burning wood, but it was already too late.

"Hey, Sarge!" the boy protested as Jack kicked sand over the flames. "We're freezing our asses off!"

Jack remembered turning to shout to the men when the first blast shattered the darkness over head. "Take cover!" he bellowed, running for his gear.

There was almost no cover to be found. The enemy bombarded their position with heavy fire as the men scattered. Jack thought the incoming armament were mortars, until he realized nothing was hitting the ground. Then he saw the other men falling in their tracks. They screamed without sound. Clawed at their faces. Choked on their own blood.

His bowels turned to ice. Chemical weapons.

Jack yelled at the men left standing to mask up. He yanked his own protective gear from his pack. One of the reservists was stumbling, sobbing, unable to function. With a curse, Jack shoved his own mask over the other man's face.

Every hair on his body stood on end as he heard the approaching whine directly above him.

Pain. Fire. Blackness.

Jack woke up in a Saudi hospital. The sole survivor of the attack. His body, he learned, had been saturated with an unknown chemical toxin. Combined with the serious injuries he suffered during the attack, Jack's outlook was grim. The weary doctors were blunt. He was not expected to live more than twenty-four hours. Jack laid there in a haze of drugs and regret. Waiting to die. His last day of life became two. Then three. Then a week.

Jack didn't die.

His recovery prompted little interest among the Muslim doctors. They were only impatient for him to recover so he could be discharged and make room for their own wounded veterans. During his last week in the hospital, Jack discovered exactly what the enemy's chemical barrage had done to him.

The nurse had come in to take his vitals. A pretty, vivacious brunette, she'd teased him when he demanded to know his release date..

"Hey, Cajun, just be grateful you're getting out of here with all your fingers and toes still attached," she said. "Not to mention the other vital parts."

His battered face stretched into a grin. "Damn straight."

She patted his shoulder, and tried not to sigh over the way his smile had her melting inside. "A few more days, okay?"

When the nurse departed, Jack settled back against the pillows. Stared at his hands. Yeah, she was right. He could have come out of the attack with a stump where something healthy had once been. He was rather fond of all his attachments.

"Still ten," he said, flexing his fingers. Lifting one hand. Imagining it as a stump.

Jack watched in horror as the five digits began to thicken. Retract. Melt down into his hand. A moment later he was staring at a blunt stump.

"What the hell?"

Jack had stumbled out of bed. Held his fingerless hand away from him in absolute terror. It had to be a hallucination. A nightmare. He had come out of it with all his fingers. All ten fingers --

He went still. Five fingers slowly grew back out of the stump. In a blink, his hand was as it had been. Intact.

Jack sat down weakly on the edge of his bed. Looked at his feet. Deliberately he imagined his toes gone. The same thing happened.. First they disappeared, then they came back.

He spent the next half-hour in the tiny lavatory, choking up everything in his stomach. When Jack was through, he collapsed on the bed. His mind worked furiously. Chemical saturation. His father and mother. Whatever the enemy had hit him with must have altered his already-unique genetic structure. He tried a few more experiments.

When he had finished, he was convinced. No one could know about this. No one. Jack had received a medical discharge soon after that. Before he returned to the States, he had met Harry Parker. Allowed himself to be recruited. Went into intelligence training. The kind his cousin Darel and Tante Fleur would never know about.

"I can do this," Jack said, and made the change before he stepped out of the trailer. Idly he wished he had died in that Saudi hospital bed.

There wasn't another option left to take.

#

It had taken most of the afternoon to track down and replace the bare minimum of tools Jessie needed. There was no way she could have suggested going to the Hot Sax. Not after what Jack had said about it.

By the time they had arrived back at Stokes', the renewed tension between them had been almost unbearable.

"Thank you for taking me to your cousin's, and to the city," she had said, not looking at him. "I enjoyed it."

Before Jessie could get out of the Jeep, Jack had tugged her over to him by the arm. His mouth had pressed fast and searing against hers.

"Later," he had promised.

In your dreams, she thought as she hurried away.

Once inside her trailer, Jessie dumped the shopping bags and gave them a disgusted glance. It didn't help that everything Jack had chosen was just what she would have selected for herself.

A hurried trip to the bathroom for soap and water removed the make-up job. Her face dripping, Jessie stared at herself in the mirror.

Plain, colorless Jessica Kelly.

She sighed before choking off the reluctant wistfulness at the source. She had to maintain her cover. She couldn't very well do that parading around made-up and drawing unnecessary attention.

Damn Jack.

She ran out of the trailer to get away from the treacherous temptations in the shopping bags. Decided to recruit Danny to work with her on the carousel.

Should Jack try any more caveman tactics, Danny could intervene.

The problem was she couldn't find him.

Some carnies were scattered around the fairgrounds. Most, Bobby told her, had gone into the city.

"I'll see if I can track him down," the dwarf said.

Jessie went back to the carousel and began working on her horses. Twilight came and she took a break. She'd have to set up the light rigging by herself. The sound of a throat being cleared behind her made her jump.

Danny standing behind her, carrying a box of hanging lights. His pale face looked oddly blank in the moonlight.

"Oh, hi, Danny." She wiped the beads of sweat from her brow onto her sleeve, smiled, and reached to take the lights from him. "I need to talk to you."

He set down the box and looked at her expectantly.

"You heard about what happened to my trailer?"

He crossed his arms over his chest, and nodded.

"I was wondering, I mean, when you took my tools back . . ." She blew out a breath. Met his eyes directly. The expression in the cool green gaze made her flinch. "Danny, what's wrong?"

He made a quick gesture, and indicated a shadowy spot behind the carousel.

Jessie trailed after him, perplexed. What was going on? She peered at his face as he turned around. Why did he look so angry?

Jessie could have smacked herself in the head. He must think she was accusing him of trashing her trailer. Of course Danny couldn't have done it. Now he was holding out his hands to her, palm-up. Showing her he was innocent, she guessed.

"It's okay, Danny," she said. "I know you're not responsible for what happened." His hands remained outstretched, and on impulse she took them. Following her instincts, Jessie slid her hands around his waist. Pressed her cheek against his chest. Hugged him tightly. "I'm sorry." His hands held her arms stiffly for a moment, then moved up to her shoulders. She felt his fingers slid loosely around her throat. Jessie pushed aside the small shiver his touch produced. Papa was gone. This was Danny. She was safe with him.

"I know you're my friend." She felt his hands tighten a fraction on her neck. Her head dropped back as she gazed up at him. "Why would I think you did it? You have no reason to hurt me."

His hands released her abruptly. Danny turned toward the carousel, hiding his expression. Jessie thought he must be embarrassed by her rather open display of affection. She couldn't blame him. It was an odd feeling for her, too.

"Well," she exhaled the word. "We better get started." She inspected the carousel, and completely missed the look Danny gave her. And the white-knuckled fists he held at his sides.

Working with Danny allowed Jessie's mind to wander, as she was not expected to keep up any sort of conversation. At first she wondered how many horses she could finish tonight. Tomorrow her obligations would require much more exacting

abilities. Then she would be pulled from the assignment. Another restoration expert would be sent in her place to finish the job.

Absently she began talking to Danny as he helped her apply a thin layer of varnish to a freshly-painted saddle.

"Do you have a favorite?" she asked him. He pointed to the largest horse, a massive black Arabian decorated with white streamers and gilded ornaments.

"Good choice. Here, look at this."

Danny moved around to the front of the horse.

"See these?" Jessie pointed to the open mouth. "They're real horse teeth. This particular carver liked using as many authentic details as possible. Some of his horses even had real horsehair manes."

Danny pointed to Jessie, and waved at the rest of the horses.

"My favorite?" He nodded. "Right behind you." Jessie smiled as he inspected the small dark filly. "That little lady reminds me of Shadow, a horse I used to ride when we were in Paris. There's a park just outside the city. My Mother would take me there when we weren't performing."

Danny's eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Yes, I grew up on the road." She shrugged. There were some good memories.

She caressed the filly's smooth wooden muzzle. "The carousel was really incredible -- it might have been two hundred years old. My favorite was black, like that Arabian. I secretly named her Shadow. She had the most beautiful blue jeweled butterflies inset on her bridle." She looked up to find Danny staring at her

intently. Her hand fell away and she forced a laugh. "Nothing like childhood memories to put someone else into a coma."

He shook his head slowly. Jessie grinned, then went still for a moment. Was that the shadow of someone lurking, just beyond the carousel's circle of light?

It was. She had to get Danny out of here.

"Look, Danny, why don't we wrap this up for the night?" At his puzzled look, she rubbed a hand over the back of her neck.. "I'm a little tired."

The red head nodded. Danny efficiently stripped down the temporary lighting while Jessie gathered her tools. She said goodnight to Danny and walked to her trailer. Each step she took made it harder to breathe. No one approached her.

Whoever her contact was, he was very careful.

She put away her cases. Changed her clothes. It was a good thing Jack had picked out a black blouse and matching jeans. As she transferred her wallet and keys to her pockets, she fingered the pack of matches from the Hot Sax. What did a sleazy bar have to do with the smuggling ring? She shoved the matches in her pocket. There was no time to speculate now.

A quick check from the window revealed the fairgrounds were deserted. Jessie silently made her way back to the carousel, alert for any movement. After several minutes, she decided to sit on one of the horses.

Where the hell was he?

She stared hard at the shadowed area where she had spotted the figure. Saw nothing. Hissed out a breath as a pair of heavy hands encircled her waist.

"Well, get a load of this, boys!" Jessie found herself being lifted from the horse by a heavysset man. He held her up like a trophy. "Got me a little piece of brass!"

A group of men circled around them. Jessie looked down.. Her feet were dangling a good foot off the ground. No leverage. His thick hands were clutching her so tight she'd probably have bruises tomorrow.

"Show's closed, gentlemen." She gave the man holding her a teasing smile. Her stomach muscles clenched. "Would you put me down, big fellah?"

"Sure, sweetheart." The cruel grip relaxed. Jessie dropped to her feet. He used her awkward landing as an excuse to put his hands on her again. This time they landed on her breasts. "Whoa, there, gal."

"Got her, Lloyd?" one of them called out.

Lloyd chuckled as he groped her with his thick fingers. "Sure do. I'll check you out, huh? Make sure you're not hurt?"

Jessie took a smooth step back, keeping the smile plastered tightly on her face.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"She sure has a nice little set, don't she?" Lloyd put his hands out again to grab her. Jessie dodged his fingers, then saw the circle tightening around them. Lloyd stopped grinning and looked irritated.

"What's the matter, honey?" he said. "You got PMS or something?" He took another swipe at her chest.

Jessie glided back another step. She was in trouble. "Please, don't do that."

"Why are you being so unfriendly, sweetheart? I heard you liked surprises."

What was he talking about? Jessie thought frantically. "You must have me confused with another lady."

"Yeah, right." Lloyd chuckled, then wagged a finger in her face. "No need to play hard to get. I'm hard and I'll get you."

The men burst into guffaws at this.

Jessie tried again. "I'm sorry, but you've made a mistake. Please excuse me, I need to get some supplies." The last of Jessie's confidence faltered as she scanned the faces around her. The men resembled a school of hungry sharks closing in for a frenzied feeding.

"Don't be that way, sweetheart."

Jessie saw a gap between two of the men. She ducked under the drunk's arm and tried to push her way through the small opening. More hands snatched at her, and she found herself thrust back to the center of the circle.

"Now, was that nice?" The drunk asked the group with an incredulous look. "I don't think the little lady likes us much, boys." He rubbed a ham-sized fist with his other hand. Gave her an evil look. "She's just another snotty little bitch."

"Let me go." Jessie prayed one of the carnies would pass by and spot them. She went motionless as Lloyd casually pulled out a knife from his pocket. The drunk waved it under her nose.

"Uh-uh-uh, honey. You're staying right here."

Davydov had taught Jessie the most dangerous situations were those subject to events an agent couldn't predict. A dramatic change in the weather. Unavoidable

accidents. Chance encounters with civilians who unknowingly stumbled onto an operation.

Still, Jessie's instincts told her chance had nothing to do with the drunk holding a knife on her. What had Lloyd said? He heard she "liked surprises".

Who had sent this leering maniac after her?

"Hey, take it easy." Jessie was careful to hide her alarm. Lloyd's blade was only an inch or two from her face. She knew better than anyone how much damage a knife could inflict. "There's no reason to get crazy."

"Honey, you're gonna find out just how crazy I can get," he said as he rubbed his bulging crotch with his free hand. "Up close and personal."

She met his bloodshot eyes with a facade of calm. "If you hurt me, you'll only end up in jail. Let me go now. I won't tell anyone."

"You're damn right you won't."

He grabbed a handful of her blouse and dragged her against him. The tip of the blade pricked her throat. His fist released her blouse and dragged one of her arms behind her back. Jessie's breath hissed at the instant pain.

"You're gonna have a little fun with me and my friends, understand, honey?" His breath stank of beer and rotten teeth. "Just like your friend told us you would. Right over here behind the old merry-go-round, where it's nice and private."

She was off-balance. Hindered by the brutal position of her arm. Lloyd's knife was pressed against her throat. Jessie was helpless to stop him from dragging her around the back of the ride. All she had left was her cunning.

"Why there?" She looked up. Produced a credible expression of seductive guile. Shimmied her hips against his. "Why not my trailer?"

Lloyd laughed, pleased. "Yeah. Sure, why not?" A shadow darted in front of the group and into the darkness, catching his attention. "What was that?"

The carousel suddenly whirled into life. Lights blazing. Music blaring at full volume. It startled the drunk enough to allow Jessie a moment to wrench free. She pushed off her heels and into a blurred series of handsprings away from him. With a tuck and a curl, she tumbled into one last vault and landed on her feet three yards away.

The men seemed dumbfounded by her acrobatic escape. That was when Danny materialized. He walked out of the shadows, moving steadily toward them. He held one arm behind his back.

The circle parted as Lloyd faced Danny. The drunk spat on the ground. "Wanna play hero, huh? Come on, boy." He waved to him with the knife. "I got something for you!"

"Get 'im, Lloyd!" one of the men yelled.

Lloyd took the advice, and barreled toward the ride operator. His knife slashed the air in front of him. Danny didn't move. Jessie opened her mouth to scream. At the last possible moment, Danny swung out a baseball bat in his hand. Drove the blunt tip deep into Lloyd's potbelly.. When Lloyd doubled over, the bat came up abruptly. Connected with his jaw. There was a sharp crack.

A heartbeat later, Lloyd was flat on his back and unconscious.

"Danny!" Jessie cried out in warning.

Two of the other men charged the ride operator. With skilled, rapid strokes of the bat, Danny disabled them as well. The rest of the group scattered. Jessie saw Nathan, Bobby and a group of the carnies coming toward them at a flat run. Danny came to Jessie and put a hand on her arm. He was looking all over her, his fingers tense against her skin.

"I'm okay," she told him. "Thanks." She saw movement from the corner of her eye and turned. Lloyd pushed himself up off the ground.

"Asshole!" With a vicious burst of strength, the fat man jerked back his arm and threw something in his hand. Directly at Danny.

It was a knife.

Jessie screamed. "No!"

Three things happened at once. Nathan shouted. Bobby tackled Lloyd. Jessie reached out and caught the knife blade a split second before it reached Danny's chest.

No one moved except for Bobby, who slammed the drunk's head into the hard-packed soil and knocked him out again. Everyone was looking at Jessie. A moment of dead silence preceded the shocked murmurs from the carnies.

"Did you see --"

" -- can't believe --"

" -- her hand --"

Nathan walked carefully toward Jessie. He was badly shaken by the violence.

"My God, Jessie." He halted and drew in a sharp breath when he saw the way she was staring at the blade she had caught.. "Jessica? Are you all right?"

Jessie didn't move, didn't speak, didn't react at all. She simply stared at the knife in her hand, seemingly unaware that her fingers were tightening over it. Thin trickles of blood pooled beneath it and spilled down her forearm.

The Lady Wolf had arrived and advanced on the scene. Her gaze too was focused on the small woman standing so protectively in front of Danny. She stopped beside Nathan to put a furry hand on his shoulder. "Easy. She's in shock."

Danny caught Nancy's eyes. His message was evident -- distract Jessie so he could get the knife without hurting her further.

"Jessie?" Nancy used a soft, gentle voice, but Jessie didn't respond. "It's me, Nancy." The Lady Wolf approached without making any sudden movements.

Danny watched the death-grip Jessie had on the blade without blinking. Signaled to Nancy with a surreptitious hand to keep coming.

Nancy tried again as she drew closer. "Jessie, honey?" Jessie finally glanced up. Her eyes were unfocused and confused.. "Let go of it." She paused, then repeated, "Let go of the knife, honey. It's over now. Everyone is okay."

Danny slid his hand over Jessie's as Nancy spoke. The wide dark eyes flashed over to his pale face. For a moment, she resisted. He smiled. Felt the icy sweat making dark patches his shirt. Carefully put pressure on her rigid fist. Slowly Jessie's fingers uncurled. The bloody knife fell to the ground.

Jessie took a long, shuddering inhalation. Her palm and the inside of her fingers were oozing freely from thin, deep gashes. Danny cradled the wounded hand

with his as he examined it. Nodded to Nancy. The Lady Wolf put an arm around Jessie.

"Come on, honey. We'll get that taken care of."

Nathan rubbed a handkerchief over his perspiring face while Nancy led Jessie away. "You guys to help Bobby keep this guy down.." He motioned to a pair of his workers. He scanned the still-stunned group of carnies with a tired gaze.

"Somebody best go call the cops."

#

"I'm not pressing charges," Jessie said an hour later.

The belligerent police officer gave up. He muttered under his breath as he finished making his notes. "You're making a mistake, lady."

"He's drunk," Jessie said. "Things just got out of hand, that's all."

Jessie wanted to press charges. Badly. She knew the kind of bully Lloyd was. He would go on menacing women. His type didn't stop until they were behind bars or shot by someone smart enough to carry a gun in her purse.

However, there was no legal recourse Jessie could pursue. Filing charges meant giving a statement. Committing to a court appearance. Testifying against Lloyd and his friends. Alek would make her return to Europe before he ever allowed her to do that.

She hissed in a breath as Doc irrigated the wound in her hand with an antiseptic solution.

"Good thing I'm specializing in surgery." Doc gave her a stern look. "Especially if you continue to work for Stokes', Jessie."

Her eyes were dull. "I need stitches again?"

"Not this time," he said as he probed the shallow gashes. He wound a snug bandage around her palm and taped it off, then did the same to each wounded finger. "Keep it dry and let me look at it tomorrow." He reached for his bag. "You need a tetanus shot, too."

Jessie shook her head. "I had one six months ago."

"Tell me, what were you thinking, catching that knife by the blade?"

"I didn't think," she said. "I simply reacted." It was the truth.

"Next time," Doc said, "try to catch it by the other end." "We're going to throw the bunch of them in the drunk tank," Jessie heard another officer tell Nathan. "You sure you don't want to at least press charges for trespassing?"

The barker glanced at the rigid set of Jessie's features and quietly refused once more. Once the police and Doc departed, Danny stepped into the camper and looked at Nathan expectantly.

The barker came beside Jessie and put a hand on her shoulder. She lifted dull eyes. "Jessie? Danny's going to take you to your trailer now. Okay?" He patted her cheek. "Get some rest, my dear."

She nodded. Let Danny's strong arm support her as she climbed down out of Nathan's trailer. As they walked the short distance to her trailer, she could feel him watching her face. She took in a steadying breath, and met his cool, green gaze.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for what you did, Danny." Jessie said, and saw a wry smile touch his mouth. He pointed to his chest, then to her throbbing hand.

"That was just dumb luck.. Your baseball bat was much more effective."

Jessie shivered as reaction and exhaustion began to fight for supremacy over her limbs. She didn't protest when Danny swung her up into his arms and carried her the rest of the way.

Close to his face, Jessie noticed how beautiful his eyes were. She chuckled silently at herself. First Jackson Hamilton, now Danny. After this assignment was over, she'd have to get out more. Drowsiness made her surrender to the impulse to rest her head against his shoulder.

His arms tightened around her, and she felt his cheek rub against her hair. It felt so lovely, to be held like this. Jessie was almost sorry when they reached the steps to her trailer. Danny eased her back onto her feet and opened the door for her.

"Thanks, Danny." Before Jessie stepped in, he touched her arm. She turned back to him. "Yes?"

He carefully took her injured hand and brushed his lips over the bandaged palm.

"You're very gallant," Jessie said. The strange pleasure that spread from that simple caress made it hard to step back. "Goodnight, Danny. Thank you for everything." Jessie closed the door between them.

Danny stood there, the gentle mask of his expression changing into something much harsher.

Once inside the trailer, Jessie collapsed against the closed door. Let the blessed solitude envelope her. Alone. At last. Now she could fall to pieces.

The memories threatened to drown her as she relived the moment when she had plucked Lloyd's knife from midair. Years ago, Papa would have punished her severely for what she had done tonight. Maybe even beaten her. Not for catching the knife. For injuring her hand so carelessly.

She could hear his voice. "Only the thrower holds the knife by the blade!"

"There was no time," she said out loud. As though her father's ghostly presence needed an explanation. "No warning."

She went to her bed. Dropped onto it. Above her, the rugged face of Detective Sevlín appeared on the ceiling. He had been first on the scene. Stayed with her. Visited her for months whenever he could.

She could recall how he sat by her hospital bed. Holding her hand. Telling her over and over that what happened wasn't her fault.

The rugged, weary face had been so kind. "Your father was a sick man, Kat."

"I killed him." And she had.

Sevlín had never hesitated to disagree. "You defended yourself."

"It was self-defensive, but it doesn't eliminate the fact. I killed my father, Detective."

She had defended Danny tonight. It had shocked her -- she had never caught a knife like that one before. It didn't register at first that her fingers had snatched at the blade instead of the hilt. Papa's perfectly-balanced Scagel throwing knives had no hilts.

If Lloyd had thrown it in a curve, she would have done better. Juggling knives were more dangerous, heavier, possessing thicker bases to grasp and release. They haunted her dreams, too. The flash and fall of the rhythmic loop. One Papa expected her to keep whirling in perfect time.

Jessica knew more about knives than she did about carousel horses. She had years of intimate knowledge. The feel of them, their weight, the deep, searing bites they took out of flesh. Unlike guns, which could be loaded with blanks, knives were deadly props in the most dangerous of stunts. Only experts could handle them, those without fear or hesitation.

As Jessie had, when she reached out and saved Danny's life.

"Never again." She turned over and covered her eyes. The door to her trailer eased open, and she removed her arm to see a large form looming over her. The glowing tip of a cigarette. The silhouette of a hooded jacket.

"What are you doing here?" She rolled from the bed to her feet.

"No English." He turned and flipped the cigarette through the door, then closed and locked it. "I came to warn you.. The men who attacked you tonight were sent by the Americans."

She took a step backward. "That's impossible!"

"They know you are one of us." His hand made a clutching gesture. "Give me the designs, now."

"I can't." Jessie thought frantically of a means to stall him. "My orders are specific. I must turn them over to the buyer personally."

"The buyer is not interested in your orders. He will kill you and destroy the entire network unless he has the designs in his hand. Tonight."

"I don't believe you," she said. "Why would the buyer tell you anything? You were to set up the drop, nothing more."

"The buyer will wait no longer."

"The buyer can go to --"

His hand lashed out. The palm connected sharply with her face. Jessie staggered back, her hand pressed to the blazing skin. Her eyes widened. He had removed an automatic pistol from his jacket pocket. Was now pointing the silencer at her skull.

"You will get the designs. At once."

Before she could move, someone began hammering on the trailer's locked door. She heard Jack's voice.

"Jessie?"

Cutter grabbed her injured hand, crushing it between his fingers. "Get rid of him."

"If I tell him to go," she said, "He'll only force his way in here."

"Jessie?" The door knob rattled. "Open the door!"

She gazed up into the black hole of the hood that concealed the man's face. "Let me go out. I'll get him away from here so you can leave without being detected.

I'll meet you later, at the carousel."

"One hour." He tapped the silencer's business end against her throat. "Or I will kill you both."

#

The police took the men in their squad cars and left the fairgrounds. Nathan Stokes and the Lady Wolf walked together to the barker's trailer. Nathan wanted a drink. Nancy wanted to know more about what had happened. Both were still unnerved by the sudden, brutal attack on Jessie and Danny.

"Were you watching her?" Nathan poured a short measure of aged bourbon in two tumblers before handing one to her. Nancy knocked back a healthy swallow and nodded. "Never saw anything like it. She grabbed that knife out of thin air. Maybe a fraction of a second before it hit Danny."

The Lady Wolf stared down into her drink. The expression on Jessie's face still haunted her. So had the network of scars she'd never noticed before, on Jessie's palms. "Sliced her hand up pretty good, too."

Nathan thumped down heavily on the sofa next to Nancy. His jowls jiggled as he shook his head. "Those drunks were a nasty bunch. Next thing you know I'll have to start handing out zappers to all you girls."

Nancy bared her teeth in a mock snarl. "We girls can take care of ourselves, as a general rule." Her mouth softened. "Well, maybe Jessie could use one. Or a trained Doberman."

"I don't know if I agree with that," Nathan said.

"Oh?"

"When I saw her reach out and snatch that knife" -- Nathan's cherubic lips pursed over a whistle -- "I couldn't believe it. I don't believe I've ever seen anyone move that fast. Ever."

"I have." At the barker's surprised expression, Nancy nodded. "Twice. Once in upstate New York. My Dad took me to a Seneca Indian Reservation where Prince Che-Che was giving a demonstration. He threw nine knives at his wife. His blade throws were so fast I could hardly follow the movements of his hands." "I've read about him. It must have been something to see." Nathan frowned. "You said twice."

She nodded. "The other time was in Europe. The doctors here were still trying to 'cure' me. They sent me to a specialist in Paris. One night Mom took to the circus. It was easier to go out after dark, I didn't scare so many people then." Nathan's expression softened as he stroked an affectionate hand over the back of Nancy's head. "Poor kid. What you must have gone through."

"Hell, Nathan. I survived." Nancy shrugged. "Anyway, we went to the Cirque de Soleil. There was a big Russian doing unbelievable things with knives. What was his name . . . " she made a frustrated sound. "You might know. He was billed as 'Master of the Blade'."

"You saw Sergei Yuskovitch perform?" Nathan's eyes rounded. "That was him." Nancy snapped her fingers. "Yuscovitch."

Nathan let out a slow breath. "I have all the books they wrote about him. He was a legend. Probably the greatest European knife-thrower who ever lived."

"I can believe that." The Lady Wolf cupped her drink. "I never saw anyone handle blades the way that man did. He made them fly like birds, Nathan. Like they were alive. But I didn't like his face. He looked . . . scary."

"He was the best," Nathan said. "You know how it is with top acts. All ego."

"Maybe. Yuskovitch made those knives dance, Nathan, but it gave me the willies. All I could think of was that I wouldn't want to get within throwing range of that man."

"Yuskovitch died almost ten years ago, Nancy." Nathan put aside the rest of his drink and massaged his temples slowly. He suddenly remembered how Yuskovitch had died.

"He had a partner. A kid. Maybe twelve or thirteen years old," Nancy went on. "I don't think they announced her. I can't remember her name."

"Do you know what happened to him?"

She shook her head. "That was the only time I ever saw him." Nancy put down her bourbon, too. "What?"

Instead of answering, Nathan got up and went to the stack of books he had collected on circus lore. He pulled out a slim volume and flipped through the pages. Once he found what he wanted, he turned the book toward Nancy.

"Is that the girl you saw in Paris?"

The black and white photo had been taken from a distance. It was of the Russian and a young girl. They were juggling long, wicked-looking knives between them. The caption read, "Master of the Blade Sergei Yuskovitch and assistant practicing The Hail From Hell."

Yuscovitch was a large, robust-looking man with huge hands. In contrast, the girl was tiny, swamped by a baggy costume. The bear and the wraith.

"Jesus." She took the book from Nathan and examined it closely. Despite the grainy quality of the photograph, the absolute concentration was evident. Lines of strain were etched on the young face. "Nathan, who is she?"

"Katarina Yuscovitch, Sergei's daughter. The one who murdered him."

Chapter Twelve

Jack had reached the kick-the-door-in stage when it unexpectedly swung open. For a moment he didn't recognize the woman standing there. Her body was taut. Her eyes wild. She took a breath, masked everything with a manufactured smile. Her voice reflected the strain, too. "What do you want?"

He smelled a faint odor of cigarettes. Jessie didn't smoke. "I heard about what happened to you." He stared at the bandaged hand, at the blood staining the gauze. The hardest part to accept was that she had caught the damn knife in her bare hand. He wanted to hunt down that drunk and tear him to pieces. "Want some company?"

"Sure." Unexpectedly she closed the trailer door behind her and climbed down the steps. "Mind if we take a walk? I need some fresh air."

She didn't say anything until they had left the trailer section and started toward sideshow row. Jack saw her eyes fix on the painted portrait of the Manigator. That wildness returned to her gaze. Wildness and something older. Something worse.

"Jess? You all right, chere?"

"Sure." She began to chuckle, and then laugh.. The sound was terrible. Like the tearless weeping of a crazy woman.

"Come on." He grabbed her hand and tugged her up the ramp into the Great Excavations exhibit.

The interior of the tent was quiet and dark. Jack groped until he found the lighting switch that illuminated the geological displays. Jessie drew away from him.

Walked down the aisle, pretending to examine the various exhibits.

"What happened to you tonight?" Jack watched every move she made. "Who was the drunk throwing knives at you?"

Jessie stilled for a moment. "No one. Just a jerk who got out of hand."

"I'm not the police, Jessie." He was a lot worse. "You can tell me the truth." And he'd use it against her in a heartbeat.

"The truth? The truth is . . . fool's gold," Jessie murmured. She walked over to the huge pyrite nugget and placed a hand on it. "This is absolutely worthless, you know. And Nathan told me there are regular attempts to steal it anyway.

Wherever the show goes."

"People want to believe what they see is what they get," Jack said. "It's part of what makes the show a success."

"Is it?" She traced her fingertips over the toothy violet interior of a basketball-sized amethyst geode. "Even when they know nothing is what it seems to be?" She was getting all female on him. "You tell me."

Jessie flexed her bandaged fingers. "Nothing is what it seems to be, Jack. You aren't the Manigator. Nancy isn't a werewolf.. But it sells a lot of tickets, doesn't it?" She tugged at the bottom of the form-fitting black blouse he'd bought her.

"We live surrounded by illusions, don't we?"

"Do you?"

Tears filled her eyes. "Yes, I do. And I'm tired of it, Jack. So tired."

He reached her just as the first sob escaped her lips. With his arm he swept one of the shelves free of the strange rock formations with a casual swipe. Ignored the subsequent crash and sat down. Hooked Jessie's waist with his hand and pulled her onto his lap.

She crumpled against him like a wet paper doll. The crying bothered him. He'd rather have nails hammered through his hands than listen to a woman weep.

"Hey." He bent his head down to hers. Stroked her rumpled hair back from her forehead. Gave her a gentle chuck under the chin with his knuckles. "Is this the same woman who I'm told catches knives with her teeth?"

"No," she sobbed, trying to pull away. "I catch them with my hands. Badly."

"So practice."

Jessie averted her face as his arms enveloped her. Her small body remained rigid beneath his stroking hands. At the same time, she wept so hard her body shook uncontrollably.

"Jess." Jack couldn't listen to the soul-shredding sounds. Not a moment more.

He gave her one hard shake. "Come on, baby, enough."

"Don't call me baby!"

Jessie twisted, trying to free herself. When she couldn't, she beat her hands blindly against him. Jack held on, his large frame easily absorbing the blows.

Eventually she grew tired of fighting. Slumped against him. All broken dignity and exhausted surrender. He kept her close. Caressed her hair, her arms, her back.

"Shhh," he said. At least the sobs had abated. Jessie shuddered against him with a deep sigh. "Good girl."

"I'm not." Her throat rasped out the words. "I swore . . . I swore I would never . . . but Danny . . . he would have . . ."

"It was the knife, wasn't it? You catching that knife?"

Jessie nodded.

His fingers slid under her jaw. Lifted her face. Now she was vulnerable. Jack could pry the truth from her. Discover who Cutter was. Carry out his orders.

"Tell me about what really happened to you tonight, Jess."

"You don't want to know."

He didn't want to know. He had to know. "Tell me.."

Jessie lifted her hands. Knuckled the tears from her eyes like a little girl. It should have been charming. Jack's belly tightened. Her wet lashes sparkled around eyes gone flat and empty. Could Jessie have been involved with the attack on Williams and Bardon after all?

No. Not Jessie, Jack told himself roughly. No terrorist would have butchered two agents then stopped a knife attack. If he was wrong, and she was a STAC agent, he could still turn her. Use her to reveal the rest of the smuggling network.

Negotiate immunity for her. He was tired of the work. Sick of hiding in plain sight.

They could disappear together --

"My name isn't Jessica Kelly."

Just in time, Jack recovered his sanity. "What are you talking about?"

"There is no Jessica Kelly. I had my name legally changed, but I made it up."

He braced himself. "Who are you?"

"My real name was Katarina Yuskovitch. My parents were circus performers."

She closed her eyes. "You may have heard of my Father. He was billed as 'The Master of the Blade'."

The spot between the rock and the hard place Jack was occupying got tighter.

The Master of the Blade. His daughter, Katarina, had been his assistant. Learned to handle knives before she could walk. Jessie was the daughter of a world-class knife-thrower.

And she had murdered her famous Father. With a knife, if he remembered correctly.

"Sergei Yuskovitch was your Father." It was a flat statement.

She wiped her palms over her cheeks. "Yes."

"You're Russian?"

Jessie smiled. "I was actually born in Paris. On the road, in the back of the caravan we used for traveling between shows. The circus was my school, my family, my life." Jessie eased out of his hold, and stood. She wrapped her arms around herself. Stared out through the small gap in the tent canvas. "Do you know what happened?"

"No." Jack said. "Tell me. Tell me everything."

Jessie told him.

Sergei had been an orphan abandoned on the streets on Moscow. Her Father had stolen a knife, among other things, when he was five years old. It was the knife that would become his single most important possession. He taught himself

how to use it. First for self-defense, later simply to survive. The knife was Sergei's only toy. His only friend.

Sometimes Sergei earned a few rubles by demonstrating his throwing skills on street corners and in the city parks. He was invited to join a small troupe of performers, and found his escape from Moscow. He worked as a roustabout. An old man who had traveled the circuits all his life recognized Sergei's unique talent. He took the boy in hand and began to teach him the abstruse art of knife-throwing.

"He practiced for hours. All day. Every day," Jessie said. "It was everything to him."

Eventually Sergei was allowed to fill in for an injured performer. His juggling and throwing act was a huge success with the audience. For the next show, he was billed as a premiere performer. Sergei would never have to pound tent stakes again.

He developed and refined his act. His reputation spread. In less than five years, The Master of the Blade was known throughout central Europe. His skills were soon in great demand. Everyone wanted to see the agile Russian who made knife-throwing into a hair-raising, death-defying form of art.

Sergei met Natalie Tanner during a tour of America. Hired fill-in for his regular assistant, Natalie boldly demanded he teach her how to throw the knives he handled so well. Sergei fell in love at once. She was, he claimed, was the only woman who had ever understood him. When Sergei left for Asia three months later, Natalie went with him as his wife.

Sergei trained Natalie as his partner. Relished the added success her beauty and natural grace brought to his act. Only the birth of their daughter, Katarina, disappointed him. The little girl could not take the place of the son he coveted. Natalie miscarried several times over the next years. Each loss sapped more of her strength. In the meantime, Sergei had trained their daughter to handle his blades before she could walk. Eventually he was forced to use Katarina instead of Natalie in the act.

"We were traveling through the mountains in Virginia. I was eight years old. I'd never been to America before. Mama was pregnant again, and close to delivery. She was so excited. Then during a rest stop, she went for a walk. It was raining. She fell and must have hit her head. It took hours for Papa to find her. No hospitals close by . . . " she closed her eyes for a moment. "She and my little brother died.. Papa buried them and began to drink."

Jack stood as well, came up behind her, resting his big hands on her shoulders.

"Go on, Jessie. All of it."

Sergei drank heavily, and became even more obsessed with perfecting his act. It was, he told his daughter, the only thing he had left to live for.

Sergei had taught his daughter to handle the fourteen-inch blades. To juggle, throw and catch them. Now he began to use Katarina as a target. First Sergei threw knives at her while she was strapped to a revolving wheel. Then he began throwing while he was blindfolded. Finally, while blindfolded and using the wheel, Sergei had soaked specially-wrapped handles with kerosene and ignited the blades. Then threw the flaming knives at his daughter.

"At first I thought he just wanted to kill me. I never pleased him. Never. I was too slow. Too clumsy. I cut myself a dozen times. When Mama was alive, he was never satisfied. Once she was gone, there was no one to intervene. Papa began to punish me for my mistakes." Jack saw her fingernails stabbing into her palms. "It wasn't bad, in the beginning. He'd punish me once or twice a month. Then every other week. Then weekly."

"You never told anyone, did you?"

"I couldn't." Jessie explained how they moved from show to show. Never staying long enough for questions to be asked. Never remaining when other performers noticed Katarina's unnatural devotion to endless practice sessions. Never allowing anyone to see what happened after each performance.

"I got better. Sometimes I went a few days without punishment. Once a whole week. Papa made the routines harder. Of course, I would make a mistake during practice."

"How long?" When she glanced up at him, he clarified. "How long did he abuse you, Jess?"

She looked back through the gap, into the night. "Eight years." She didn't see the expression on Jack's face. "He kept me away from the others. Told me they would only distract me from the craft. The craft, he called it. As if it was some secret, unearthly power.."

"What happened when you were sixteen?"

In a flat voice, she described the events that occurred on the anniversary of her mother's death. They happened to be in Virginia again, where Sergei had

contracted to a prosperous carnival. By now the bigger shows were refusing to sign the big Russian. Sergei was drinking so much he was never sober.

One of the carnival's managers had stopped by their trailer to speak to Sergei. Her Father had gone into town for more liquor. For once, Sergei had forgotten to lock the door.

"He stepped in, looking for Papa. He saw me. Saw the chains."

Jack's head snapped up. "He chained you?"

"Like a dog," she said. Her voice grew low, almost faraway as she remembered.

"I tried to tell the manager to leave me alone. I knew what Papa would do. But he was a decent man, and refused to go. He had almost worked me free when Papa came back."

She told him how the manager had exploded with rage. How her Father had blustered at his accusations. In the end, Sergei had physically thrown the man out of the trailer and bolted the door.

"Papa began cursing me. He was so angry. I'd never seen him like that before, even in the worst time. I tried to protect myself, but he was so much bigger than me."

Jack stared at Jessie's thin limbs. Grew cold at the picture his imagination was painting for him.

"I was too weak to hold him off for very long. He kicked me at first, then picked me up from the floor by the neck. He shook me. Shouted at me. I was worthless, nothing but trouble . . . " She was very still now. Her voice distant and void of feeling. "His hands kept squeezing, harder and harder. I couldn't breathe. I

realized he meant to choke the life from me. And even after all that had happened . . . I didn't want to die."

Jack waited as she struggled to tell him the last.

"I was starting to black out. I groped until I felt Papa's favorite knife under my hand. It was in a sheath he always wore on his belt. I pulled it out. Then I stabbed my Father in the heart."

#

Ivan was enraged. The schematics had not been located, despite a thorough search. The second courier, the woman, had hidden them somewhere else. He exercised his authority by beating the man responsible for the search into unconsciousness.

"Worthless -- idiot -- fool!"

The ship's captain stood and watched without comment. The short, burly Russian took pleasure in kicking the bloodied form of the man over and over. Even after the man stopped screaming.

"Imbecile." Ivan wiped the wet stains from his pointed-toed boots on the unconscious man's trousers. "Must I do everything myself? Why do I bother with any of you?"

"Cutter promised . . . " one of the men began, but Kruyokov silenced him with a deadly stare.

"Cutter has stalled for the last time." Ivan paced back and forth in the cabin. "His part in this farce is over. It is the woman we must deal with now."

"Kostya searched everything. He told me it was easy. Someone had been there ahead of him. The woman's trailer was ripped to pieces."

Ivan considered this. For two seconds. "Cutter was looking for the schematics himself!" "Will she turn the schematics over to us?"

The STAC leader smiled broadly. "For the price, she will do anything I tell her to. We cannot wait for her to come to us. The FBI may have an intelligent moment." He barked out his orders to six men who stood in silent readiness. No one looked at their fallen comrade.

"What about Cutter?"

"The American says he wishes to retire." Ivan's mouth curled into an ugly smile.

"We shall accommodate him." He turned to the captain. "Prepare for departure in two hours."

The Captain gestured toward the injured man as Kruyokov strode to the cabin door. "What about this one?"

The Russian never looked back. "Throw him in the hold. Once we're underway, you can drop him into the sea."

Ivan knew the FBI was watching the dock for any unusual activity. It was a problem, but not a large one. The Americans had little imagination when it came to surveillance.

He waited until dark, then directed the men to drop noiselessly down ropes on the bay side of the ship's hull. An inflatable raft was waiting, ready to transport them. They used oars until they reached a safe enough distance to start the

outboard motor. The raft crossed the short distance to where their vehicles were concealed in minutes.

The carnival site was dark and silent when the Russians entered the fairgrounds. Ivan's men spread out as they strode down the midway.

A hooded figure appeared from the shadows. Ivan gestured for him to approach. He smiled at the courier as two of his men noiselessly came up behind and flanked Cutter.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw you." The American was severely agitated. "Have you lost your mind? What are you doing here?"

Ivan spread his hands. "Time is up, Cutter. I want the delivery."

"And you come here?" The courier made a furious sound. "There is nothing here I can give you! I don't have the components, or the designs --"

Starlight glittered, reflected by Ivan's knife. "You should be more careful, Cutter. My men followed you after the last meeting. I know where you have hidden the guidance system core. Where are the schematics?"

Cutter muttered a vile curse. "I don't know."

"Where is the woman?"

The traitor gestured toward the cluster of trailers. "She will be returning soon. When she does, I will get the designs. You must leave here, now, at once."

"No, Cutter. We will stay." At a subtle gesture from Ivan, the two men grabbed the American from either side. "Where is she?"

Cutter forgot to whisper. "I don't know!"

Ivan leveled his knife at a spot between two ribs, just below the traitor's heart.

"Then you are useless and a fool. I will make it quick, my friend. As payment for your devotion to our cause."

Kruiyokov's arm swung back. At that moment, the American sagged suddenly.

Pulled the two men holding him off balance. Ivan struck at once, but the edge of his blade glanced off the American's ribs. An unexpectedly vicious kick drove into Ivan's heavy belly. The blow knocked the air from his lungs. Drove Ivan to his knees.

"Pamageetye!" Kruiyokov got out with a groan.

His call for help went unanswered. The Russian watched as Cutter smashed his men's heads together, leaving one stunned and the other unconscious. The traitor held his ribs and lashed out again with his leg.. His foot landed squarely in the last man's groin. Cutter was panting but upright as he turned back to face Ivan.

"Now . . . you lose the components . . . and the schematics." Clutching his side with a blood stained hand, the American backed away, turned and stumbled into the darkness.

"Forget him," Ivan said as one of his men staggered up and made to follow. "Get the woman."

#

It had been a lousy night, Candy thought, once the police left and the carnies drifted off to their trailers. She had stayed out of sight while Lloyd and his friends paid their visit to the carousel. To her disappointment, Mae told her the stupid

redneck had only groped the girl. Seemed that the dummy redhead Jessie was friendly with had come to her rescue.

"Then that jerk threw a knife at Danny, and Jessie caught it before it touched him!" Mae whistled. "That girl is something else."

Something else indeed. Once again Jessie Kelly had gone and spoiled everything. So when Candy spotted Jack and Jessie crossing the fairgrounds, she decided to take one more shot at the little rabbit. It was simple to follow them. They were so wrapped up in each other they wouldn't have noticed a marching band in their wake.

Candy positioned herself just outside the entrance to Great Excavations' tent. Listened carefully as Jessie told Jack the pathetic tale of her past.

Poor, poor Jessie, the dancer thought. As if anyone had a Daddy who treated them right. She thought of the bible-thumping hypocrite who had raised her and sneered. One day she'd go back to her hometown with Jack in tow. Show the Preacher just how well his personal lessons had worked out for her. The more Jessie said, the wider Candy's smirk became. Until that last statement. Jessie's admission of murder made even Candy go still.

The little rabbit had actually knifed her old man, Candy thought with reluctant admiration. From inside the tent, she heard Jack say, "You killed your Father."

A few feet away, Jessie turned. Saw what she knew had to be disgust and horror in Jack's dark eyes. "Yes. I killed him. And now I have to go." She strode toward the tent flap, refusing to look back at him. Stopping only when his hand caught her wrist.

"You're not going anywhere."

Her spine stiffened. "I've told you what I can."

"I see." Jack's fingers tightened over her bones. "You tell me you're not Jessica Kelly. That you killed your father. And now you want to walk? I don't think so, chere."

Candy knew a cue when she heard one. She smiled as she pulled aside the folded canvas. A stunned Jessie and furious Jack watched as she sauntered into the tent.

"Well, well, well. Aren't you full of surprises, Jessie Kelly. Or should I call you Katarina?" Jack swore, and Candy pursed her scarlet lips as she turned on him.

"Sugar! I didn't know you used such filthy words. I'm shocked."

"How much did you hear?" Jessie asked.

"More than you wanted me to," Candy said with a purr. "Funny, you don't look like a killer. Not that I knew any, until tonight, that is."

Jack took a step toward the dancer. "Candy, stay out of this."

"You think I should, sugar?" The blonde sidled over to Jack. Extended her long nails. Triled them languidly over the hard plane of his chest. "Maybe I could forget all about the nasty things I've heard tonight, with the right motivation."

"Knock it off." Jack pushed her hand away.

The dancer's smile faltered for an instant before her purpose reasserted itself.

"That's no way to treat me, Jackson. Guess you been hanging around trash too long." She sneered at Jessie. "She's pathetic, isn't she? Crying and sobbing all over you, and come to find out she stuck a knife in her poor old Daddy."

"I was only sixteen years old," Jessie said. "He was trying to kill me. It was self-defense."

"We were all sixteen, once upon a time." Candy's voice was ugly and flat. "You think you're the only one whose Daddy couldn't keep his hands to himself?"

Jessie's brows drew together as she realized what the dancer was saying. "I didn't know, Candy," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Keep your sympathy." The blonde's hands curled into claws. "You're nothing but a lying, murdering bitch!"

"Don't even think about it," Jack said as he moved to stand in front of Jessie.

"Oh, I won't hurt her, sugar," Candy said. "But it's my moral obligation to tell everyone we've got a killer working here at the show."

"Moral obligation?" Jack snorted. "There's two words I never thought I'd hear coming out of your mouth, Candy."

Jessie tried to step around Jack. "Candy, you don't understand."

"Oh, I understand. I understand everything just fine. You can't stop me, either," the dancer taunted, pivoting around to face the entrance. She paused. Turned to glance back over her shoulder. "Of course, I might let Jack persuade me . . . we could talk about it . . . back at my trailer . . . "

"I don't chat with my dick," Jack said. At the same time, his eyes flashed to Jessie.

She pressed a slender hand on his arm. "Please." There was so much Jessie couldn't say. She was out of time.

"All right." Her hand slid off as Jack followed the blonde. "Come on, Candy," he put his hand on the dancer's elbow. "We'll talk."

Candy could hardly believe her luck. Finally, she was going to nail Jackson Hamilton. "My pleasure, sugar."

Jessie endured the victory in Candy's pale blue gaze as it slashed over at her before Jack marched her out of the exhibit. She watched from the entrance as Jack escorted the dancer across the fairgrounds.

At last they were gone. Jessie stepped out of the tent.. The night air was cool against her burning face. She wasn't going to think about Jack or Candy. She had a job to do. As she walked the distance to her trailer, she watched the shadows. Her contact wanted the designs, wanted them badly enough to kill her. Jessie had no intention of handing them over. It didn't matter what Cutter threatened to do. Alek's orders had been implicit. For the first time since she had joined the organization, Jessie might be forced to use her more specialized talents.

When she got to her trailer, she dropped to the ground and slid beneath the crawl space. The case she needed was strapped to the a/c unit. It took a moment to loosen and drag the cumbersome object out from under the trailer.

She got up at once and looked around. No one appeared to be in the immediate area, but Jessie sensed her time was running out. She hefted the case and slipped inside the trailer.

The dial locks turned rapidly beneath her fingers. With a faint squeak of rusted hinges, the shabby case opened. A faint odor rose from the case, once that made her swallow, hard. Jessie pulled aside the protective cloth.

Leather and metal gleamed with dark, malevolent light.

"Damn you, Papa." She stared blindly at the contents.

A muffled sound just outside the trailer door jerked her from the self-induced trance. Jessie unfolded the supple leather and methodically checked the straps before she eased the straps over her shoulder. How simple it was, she thought, to slip back into the past. To forget Jessica Kelly and become Katarina Yuskovitch.

A step creaked under a man's weight. Jessie had no intention of being cornered in such a restricted space as the trailer. She needed room to move. When she pushed the door open, she used deliberate force to make it slam against the outer wall of the trailer.

Seven silent men watched as Jessie walked through the doorway.

#

On the other side of the lot inside Candy Corbin's trailer, Jack struggled not to break another of his personal rules. He had never struck a woman in his life.

"I'm soooo glad you're here, sugar. You can't imagine how happy it makes me."

Why the hell did he have all these damn rules, anyway? he thought. The idea of slapping Candy Corbin silly gained more appeal by the moment.

Jack glanced around in distaste. The interior of the dancer's trailer resembled a cheap bordello. Candy's preference for seductive lighting and unrelieved scarlet

combined to make an atmosphere that shrieked of sex. Discarded costume pieces littered the overstuffed furnishings. Jack felt smothered by the lingering traces of floral perfume and other men's sweat.

"Look, Candy, I can't stop you from talking about what you heard tonight," Jack said, "but I'd advise you to keep quiet about Jessie."

"You'll have to map that one out for me, sugar." Candy smiled as she removed a bottle of tequila and poured out two shots. She offered him one, but only shrugged when he refused. With two swallows, she drank both down. The alcohol made her face flush beneath the careful makeup. "I could forget about it . . . with the right incentive."

While this bubble-head was playing seductress, Jessie could be on the run, Jack thought. He didn't have time for Candy's games. Impatiently Jack took her hands in his. "Listen to me now. Your life is in danger."

"From her?" Candy giggled. "She may have killed her own Daddy, Jackson, but I can take her with my eyes shut." She used Jack's grip to pull his arms around her waist. She pressed her hips and breasts against him, rubbing her torso seductively over his. "Now, there's a thought, hmmm? Ever see that movie with that guy who did the girl while she was blindfolded?"

"No. Candy, you're not listening to me --"

"I've heard enough. It's time for some action, Jackson." She giggled again and moved her hips in a mechanical rhythm. "Ummm, that feels so good. Come on." She pouted when he turned his face from her seeking lips. "Kiss me, sugar. You know you want to."

Jack set her aside. This was a waste of time. He had to get back to Jessie. "I don't want you, Candy. I never have."

"Fine." The dancer's voice went shrill. "Go back to your little girlfriend. I don't need you. I don't need anyone!"

She grabbed the bottle of tequila and took a long drink from it. "I'll start making the rounds tonight. By tomorrow everyone will know about her. Everyone!"

Jack silently apologized to his Mother, who would have strapped him for what he was about to do. Took the bottle out of Candy's hand. Set it aside.

"Change your mind?" Candy preened as she reached for his crotch.

Jack's hands encircled her throat. His fingers used a steady, calculated pressure on an important spot. Candy's fingers reached his wrists just as her eyes rolled back. She sagged against him. He made sure her pulse was strong and steady, then carried her unconscious body back to her bedroom and dumped her on the bed.

"Sorry, sugar." A quick search of her dresser produced a handful of stockings.

Jack used them to bind her wrists and ankles together. After a moment of deliberation, he gagged her with the silky sash from a robe hanging over the end of the bed. "Nothing personal."

Jack was frantic to get out of the trailer and find Jessie. Instinct told him he was going to be too late. He wouldn't be able to stop the exchange. The woman he was falling in love with would be killed. That, or go to prison for the rest of her life.

"I'm not falling in love with her." Yeah, right, an inner voice sneered. He slipped out into the night. Started toward Jessie's trailer. He wanted Jessica Kelly. Was

burning up with it. And her name wasn't Jessica Kelly. They weren't even on the same side.

She was a murderer and had admitted it outright. Jack skirted the shadows and approached the trailers. Stabbed her own Father in the heart, the inner voice goaded him.

"After years of abuse," he said, feeling the sting of self- contempt. He was still making excuses for her. Even now. Knowing who she was. What she was involved in. Jack was further surprised to find his disgust died almost as soon as it was born. It didn't matter.

He was falling in love with her.

Jack's thought disintegrated as he came into view of Jessie's trailer. And saw Jessie, surrounded by a ring of men.

Jack froze. Pressed back against the trailer. Prayed the shadows would conceal his presence. He was close enough to hear them. What the hell was this now? No one bothered to look in Jack's direction. Everyone seemed to be interested in only one thing: Jessie. The smallest man in the group stepped forward. Thick-bodied and brutish in feature, the man began speaking to Jessie.

Jack was glad Harry insisted all his agents learn Russian, even after the Berlin Wall fell. It came in handy at the oddest times, like right now.

"Federal agents have discovered our presence," the Russian told Jessie. "This has forced us to come to you, Galoobaya."

"I'm sorry to hear of your difficulties." Jessie sounded far too calm. "And you are . . . ?"

"Ivan Kryukov."

Jack muttered a soundless obscenity. Shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Watched the Russian without blinking.

"I represent the buyer of the guidance system schematics you have transported," Kruyokov said.

Jack held his breath as one of the men turned around. The Russian scanned the area to the right of Jack's position. Shrugging to himself, he swung back toward Jessie.

Her pale face was blank as she met Kruyokov's easy smile. "My contact?"

"Regrettably, Cutter had to be eliminated from our transactions. Permanently."

The man's sinister pleasure in that announcement was clear. "Which brings me to the point of our visit. Where are the designs, my dear?"

"Safe." Jessie took another step down. The circle of men shrank forward in response. Jack evaluated them by size and position. Devised the best angle to go in. It was like planning suicide, but he couldn't go for help. This fight was going to be brief. Nasty. Probably Jack's last one.

"Safe somewhere within the immediate vicinity, I hope?" Kruyokov smiled.

"No."

"A pity." The short man's hand went to rest at his waist. "You will tell me where you have hidden the designs."

Jack's stomach sank as he heard Jessie's response. "As soon as you make payment for them."

"We will meet the price quoted," Kryukov said, and made a broad gesture toward New Orleans. "The funds can be in your possession within an hour."

"Let's go get the money now," Jessie said.

"Of course." Kruyokov's smile widened. "As soon as you give me the designs, I will take you to our vessel."

Jessie shook her head. "My superiors were most specific. The money first. Take me to your ship now, and then you can have the designs."

"Impossible."

"I'm not a fool, Akoola."

Ivan inclined his head. "I see my reputation proceeds me." "Exactly," she said.

"No payment, no schematics."

"Let me persuade you to think differently," the Russian said, his voice was almost caressing. Kruyokov turned and nodded to one of the men.

Jessie seized the opportunity and jumped down over the last step. Jack hissed in a breath as she dropped into a fast, tumbling roll. This was the moment he had been waiting for, too. Jack pushed himself off the trailer and sprinted silently toward Kruyokov's men. Using his full body weight, he tackled two men on the left side of the circle from behind. A well-planned sweep of his leg allowed him to smash his foot into the kneecap of a third man on the way down.

The world was suddenly filled with thrashing limbs and pounding fists. Through the fray, Jack saw the short Russian leap at Jessie.. A thick-bladed gutting knife brandished high over her head. That was when Jessie extended the long roll into a double back flip. She landed on her feet like a cat.

What the hell is she wearing? Jack thought before a fist connected with his jaw. In a haze of starry pain he turned his attention back to the two men who were trying to beat him into the ground. A pistol fixed with a silencer spat once. In the next moment, he heard something hiss through the air. A man's muffled cry of pain shattered the silence.

"Jess!" Jack yelled as he ducked another blow. "Run!"

Jack used the sides of his palms to smash the ribs of the man spread-eagled over him. He thrust the other away with the soles of his boots. By the time he disabled them and got back on his feet, all Jack could do was watch.

Jessie wasn't running away.

A long, black leather vest decorated by slashes of silver was strapped to her small torso. Like some kind of harness, the vest was fastened under her arms, across her hips, and against her thighs. The bandages that had encased her right hand had been ripped off and were discarded by her feet.

Both of her small hands were moving so fast Jack couldn't follow the individual movements. With an unbroken rhythm, Jessie's fingers plucked at the silver slashes on the black leather. Then her arms curled out in a graceful arc.

Something flew from her hands at the men.

The slashes weren't decorations. They were knives.

Jessie was throwing her Father's knives.

Chapter Thirteen

There was no more time to think. One long, hiltless blade passed within inches of Jack's ear. A shriek made him whirl around. Most of the knife had buried itself in the shoulder of a man coming up behind him. Kryukov's man fell, clutching the wound and writhing in agony.

Kruiyokov screamed at the men, none of whom were left standing. "Get her, or I will cut your throats myself!"

Three of the men tried to get up. Jack took care of one. Watched Jessie deal with the other two in less than three seconds.

That was when Kruiyokov started toward Jessie. For some reason, he either evaded everything she threw at him, or she was deliberately trying to miss him. Now Jessie had a terrified, blind look as she watched the Russian approach. She seemed frozen. Jack knew he was too far away.

It didn't matter. Just before the man plunged his knife into Jessie's chest, she seemed to wake up. With graceful speed she pivoted and block the blow with one arm. With her free hand she slashed the blade she held across the Russian's forearm. Kruiyokov grabbed her by the throat, meaning to throttle her. Jessie seemed to go limp -- for three seconds. Instantly Kruiyokov released her, and doubled over.

"You crazy bitch!" He held his wounded arm against his chest and his other hand over his crotch.

"Jack." Jessie whipped out four more blades, two in each hand. "Get out of here."

Jack reached her side, then turned to face the group with her. "I'm not going anywhere, chere."

She never took her eyes off the others. "I can take care of myself."

"Yeah. I noticed."

The sound of a shotgun blast instantly revived the fallen attackers. Five of the men stumbled off into the shadows. One lay unconscious. Ivan Kruyokov rose slowly and deliberately spat on the grass between Jessie's feet.

Jessie didn't move. "Leave now," she said. "Or I will cut out your heart."

"I will get what I came for," Ivan said. "And you, Galoobaya, you will be at the mercy of my blade."

Nathan Stokes stepped into the light. Nodded to Jack. Leveled the shotgun in his hands at Ivan's chest.

"You heard the lady."

Kruiyokov stumbled away into the shadows, limping badly. Jack saw the other men were also gone. They must have dragged the unconscious man with them, from the drag marks on the ground. Nathan propped the shotgun on his shoulder and strode quickly toward them.

"Are you okay, Jessie?"

She nodded. Swayed on her feet. Reached for Jack.

Before she could touch him, Jack had his arm around her.. He crushed her against him. Buried his face in her hair. Breathed in her scent. Silently thanked whatever God there was for her life.

When he had some semblance of control back, Jack put her at arm's length.

"Don't you ever do that to me again." He jerked her back against him.

Dozens of flat knife blades were hard and cold between them. Jessie eased out from his embrace. Fumbled with the straps. Her hands, so steady and precise during the attack, were shaking. Shaking so badly she couldn't remove the harness. Desperately she looked up at him.

"Get it off me. Please. Get it off me, Jack."

He tore at the vest straps until it was loosened. Jessie shrugged out of it and flung it to the ground. For a long moment, she simply stared at it. Then she suddenly staggered away. Collapsed on her knees. Supported her sagging body with both hands.

"Jess." Jack followed. He used his arms to support her as she retched violently. Nathan stood a few feet away, mopping the sweat from his face as he guarded them both.

"Okay?" Jack murmured after she seemed to be over the last of the heaves. Jessie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Nodded. He ignored her weak protests and lifted her up into his arms. He walked with her to the steps of the trailer. Nathan was pale as he regarded the splotches of blood on the ground, then Jack's set features.

"What should I do?" The barker was badly shaken. "I can't call the police this time, can I?"

"No. Don't call anyone," Jack said. "I'll explain later. Get the knives and clean them up. I'll get them from you later."

"Should I have Doc come over? He should take a look at you and Jessie."

"We're all right. I'll take care of her now." Jack carried her up into the trailer and kicked the door shut behind him.

Nathan Stokes walked over and gingerly lifted the harness Jessie had torn off. It was unbelievably heavy. Looked familiar. He thought for a moment, and his mouth turned down. It had to be the same one her father had used. He'd worn it during every performance. Nathan had a picture of Yuskovitch wearing it, throwing the knives it held at the young daughter he had tied to a revolving wheel.

#

Candy woke up in her bed, tied and gagged. For a moment, she thought she was back in the Preacher's House. Her Daddy had enjoyed tying his only daughter up at night. Among his other pleasures.

Her memory returned. With a vengeance. Jackson had done this to her. Jackson Hamilton, the only man she'd ever wanted and never gotten in bed.

The dancer spent the better part of the next hour working her hands free. Once the stifling gag was torn from her mouth, she spat out a steady stream of obscenities.

Jackson Hamilton would regret the day he ever crossed Candace Corbin.

She plucked at the remaining stubborn knot in the nylon stockings binding her ankles. To keep herself from screaming, Candy imagined all the lovely, horrible ways she was going to even with him. Starting with Jessica Kelly.

Heavy footsteps traveled down the length of the trailer.. The sound made her sit up and glower. So the weasel had come back. Well, she would tell him a thing or two before she called the cops. Wouldn't he be upset when they came for his little girlfriend.

Surprise crossed her petulant features as the man stepped in through the doorway. He was smoking a cigarette. As he dragged on the end of it, the tip flared.

Candy exhaled sharply. "Oh, it's you."

He hadn't been to see her for a week. Not that she missed him. The last time they were together he had spooked her a little. Candy liked wild sex, but he had used her hard. His rough treatment had left bruises all over her. Even Mae had noticed and complained about it.

"I thought I told you not to bother me anymore." Her eyes were drawn to the dark, crusted stain on the torn side of his shirt. She went still. "What happened?"

"An accident." His face had an odd expression. He was staring at her ankles.

"Who tied you up?"

"You like it?" Candy reclined in a provocative pose.

"Who did it?"

"Why do you want to know? Mad because you never thought of it, lover?"

He dropped the cigarette and crushed it out with his foot. Came to the bed.

Eased down next to her. "Who did it?"

"It's none of your damn business who --"

His hand flashed out. Slapped her across the face. Hard enough to bruise.

"Who?"

"Get - out!" Candy tried to claw his face with her nails. He caught her wrists.

Climbed over her. Pinned her to the mattress. Began slapping her, over and over.

"It was Hamilton!" she said, twisting frantically to avoid the blows. He stopped hitting her. "Satisfied?"

"Why did he tie you up?" He leaned over. "And don't tell me it was for sex. He'd do the fat lady before he'd touch you."

Candy's tears dried immediately. "He's protecting that Jessica Kelly. She killed her father. I overheard her telling him about it." She licked her dry lips. "I'm going to take care of both of them."

"Calm down," he said. "I'll do it."

"Oh, no, lover." Candy's pale eyes glittered.. "Not this time. I trashed that bitch's trailer for you, remember? You owe me."

"You went overboard with that."

"I don't care!" Her face turned dark red with rage. "You owe me. Hamilton owes me. I'm gonna collect this time!"

"How much?"

"I'm going to the cops. I think I'll turn both of them in." She smiled. "Wonder what they'll think about the little rabbit killing her poor Daddy."

"What can you turn Hamilton in for?"

"He tied me up, beat me!" Candy said, then gave him a provocative look as she added, "He raped me, too." He was hard against her, and she undulated slowly beneath him. "Oh, yeah, you like the thought of that, don't you, lover?"

"It has its appeal."

The pale gaze gleamed. "Well, it won't come cheap.."

"You're not in a position to fight me," he said as he pulled down her clinging top. His breath came faster as he stared at her naked flesh.

"Pervert," she said. Gave a throaty laugh before her voice hardened. "Just forget about that. I want to see some money."

He reached for her breasts. His hands were rough and cold. "What are you talking about?"

"You want me to keep my mouth shut about your little game? Well, lover, it's gonna cost you ten grand!"

His expression changed as he regarded her. "Or what? You'll turn me in, too?"

The voice was as cold as the hands kneading her breasts.. Candy's belated sense of self-preservation made her stutter, "No -- of course not! I'm just kidding, you know I'd never --" "Shhh," he said. His hands moved up and settled around her neck. "Shhhh."

#

Jack sat in the kitchen and listened as Jessie washed her face and cleaned her teeth in the bathroom.

None of the events of the night made sense. There was no logic to the attack, or the way Jessie had responded. Apparently Cutter was dead. More importantly,

KrUYOKOV himself had verified that Jessie was not the American traitor. But if Jessie wasn't Cutter, who was she? She wasn't a STAC agent. Not after taking out five members of the group. She spoke their language, yet worked in the U.S. She was no courier, either. Couriers didn't fight like that. Smugglers didn't waste time training their mules to be commandos. They were too easily replaced. If she wasn't one of them, and she wasn't part of the ring -- and she certainly wasn't one of his -- just who the hell was she working for? Why had she demanded the money up front? Demanded to personally go to KrUYOKOV's ship?

The ship.

"You never wanted the money, did you?" he asked her when she emerged.

Jessie stopped in her tracks for a moment. "You only wanted to get to the ship."

Her gaze shifted away, but it was too late.

"That's it. This is some kind of sting operation!" He got up and grabbed her.

Thought about the bed. Decided the chair would be safer - for now. He shoved her down. She was so small her feet didn't touch the floor. Who in their right mind recruited someone the size of a child? Then he recalled how fast her hands had moved. Someone who wanted an efficient, lethal operative.

"Let me go, Jack."

"No." Jack cradled her face with his palms. He could smell her scent rising from her skin. It only added to his frustration. "Now you listen to me, chere. I just tried to commit suicide because I thought you needed protection. Then I get to watch you take out five armed men in as many minutes. You're going to tell me exactly who you are. Who you work for. What you're doing. Now!"

"I can't."

"Ne sois pas bete!" Jack's hands left her face. Slammed as fists on top of the table on either side of her. "Do I have to beat it out of you, woman?"

She smiled briefly. "I wouldn't advise it. Not while I'm in the vicinity of any sharp objects."

He sat down next to her. Rage and astonishment rendered him temporarily speechless. She was an unknown working for somebody. It didn't appear to be the bad guys. Harry would string him up by the balls if he knew what Jack was going to do now. Despite the risks, Jack had to take the chance.

"Fine. I'll go first. I'm an intelligence agent, like you."

"No." Jessie got to her feet. "No, Jack. Don't say another word."

"Domestic covert operations."

She would have run if he hadn't grabbed her wrist. "Don't tell me. Please. I don't want to know."

"Too bad, because you're going to listen to every single word," Jack said.

"I can't."

He pulled. She might be great with knives, but he had the advantage of size and strength. "Jessica, shut up and sit down."

Jessie sat.

"Two years ago a disbanded radical alliance called the Soviet Terrorist Arms Coalition regrouped and went into the arms business. A real vicious bunch." She didn't blink, but Jack noted the set of her jaw. "They specialize in smuggling

nukes, high-tech hardware, and more recently, strategic military ICBM and ATG computer guidance components."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You should. You took out seven of their thugs tonight."

Jack said. "Since the Soviet Union dissolved, certain splinter factions have acquired the missiles the Party left lying around. Now they're looking to purchase the means to launch them." Jack peered at her. "I'm not telling you anything new, am I?"

She hesitated, then shook her head.

"I've been working this case for a year and a half.. Fifteen people have been murdered since the people Cutter works for began stealing and smuggling components out of this country. What leads we could scrounge led us here, to Stokes' and New Orleans. Next thing I know you show up, and things start to happen. I checked you out."

"You discovered there is no Jessica Kelly," she said. "And thought perhaps the American traitor was a woman instead of a man."

Jack dipped his head once. Folded his hands. Sat back in his chair. "Your turn." Jessie pushed a tendril of hair back from her face. "What agency do you work for?"

"I did some of my training at Quantico, but I'm not FBI. We're a satellite of what my boss likes to call The Creative Idiots Association."

Her mouth thinned. "You're CIA."

"Not exactly. My agency doesn't have a name." Jack shrugged. "We share information, resources. That's all."

"No group, even a nameless one, would sanction you giving me this information, Jack. Why are you telling me this?"

"An even trade." He took her hands in his. "Who are the people you work for?" She hesitated, then her shoulders slumped. "Much like yours. European-based. Interpol is involved, but does not publicly or privately acknowledge working with our organization." She was back on her feet. "Jack, I can't involve you in this." His fingers snatched her forearm. "Baby, I'm up to my ears in this already."

"Don't call me baby. I don't work with American agents."

"You're working with this one. Tell me."

She dropped back onto the chair. "Our group is called Prism."

"I've never heard of it."

Jessie shrugged. "We don't advertise."

"NATO allied?"

"No."

"Then who runs it?"

"The man who founded Prism was once the Deputy Director of an agency called many names. Cheka, GPU, NKVD, MGB . . . "

"The Soviet secret service," Jack stated. "The KGB." Fists clenched. Eyes glittering. He was far beyond fury now.

"Yes, Jack."

"KGB," Jack had to be sure. "You're working for Aleksei Davydov. The Iceman."
Jessie nodded. He got to his feet. Hauled her off the floor and up to his eye level. Her throat was so slender. Vulnerable. Easy to snap something that fragile, Jack thought. And knew deep in his gut that he'd kill anyone who tried it. "I could strangle you right now and my boss would pin a medal on me."

"They don't give medals to domestic covert agents, Jack," she said. "You're not even supposed to exist."

Jessie looked like she expected him to slap her. Throw her aside. Perhaps in some small section of her mind, she waited for Jack to put his powerful hands around her throat and snap her neck.

Jack groaned and pulled her into his arms. Held her against him tightly. "If this is your idea of a joke . . ." he said against her hair. She wound her arms around his waist while shaking her head. "Why? Why the Iceman? Why not STAC?" Jack closed his eyes.. "It would be easier if you were one of the crazies."

She pressed her cheek against his heart. "I'm sorry."

His hand stroked over her hair. "Yeah. Me, too, chere."

"Do you understand now why I didn't want to tell you?"

Jack thrust her at arm's length. "What the hell is the Davydov thinking, sending you to mule for STAC?"

"It's a sting," she reminded him. "Alek needed someone who could work the profile. I . . . fit."

His eyes narrowed at her casual use of the Iceman's first name. Just how well did she know Alek? "Since when did the number two man of the Kontora Grubyykh Banditov concern himself with splinter faction terrorists?"

Jessie expected it. The man she worked for had once gone to great measures to insure a certain notoriety in the intelligence community. Now Alek was trying to redeem twenty years of disrepute through his Prism organization.

"Since the Director discovered those same terrorists had captured enough viable mobile missile arrays to create Armageddon." She pulled out of his arms. "Alek is not KGB anymore, Jack. He left Moscow and formed an independent agency. It became apparent the need to police our newest countries required the involvement of other European powers. All of it was worked out long before I joined them," Jessie sighed. "Alek is using the knowledge he acquired during his years with the secret service to help the world."

"Did he personally recruit you?"

"Yes. He had heard about my Father, and came to see me."

"Did he?" Jack imagined what he could do to the Iceman. With a flame-thrower.

"He must have been persuasive."

"Aleksei?" Jessie chuckled. "He doesn't take 'no' for an answer." She gasped when Jack's hands tightened. "Jack?"

"What exactly did you agree to do for that slimy bastard?"

"For God's sake, Jack." Jessie's temper flared. "I was still a child! My Father's abuse had nearly destroyed my mind. Alek Davydov gave me a reason to keep living. Nothing more!"

Jack's grip eased off. So did the teeth of the snarling, jealous beast inside him.

"All right." Her eyes glittered. "I was ideal for Prism, Alek told me. The daughter of a Russian national and an American woman. A citizen of France. He told me how I could use that and my background in the circus to help the world remain at peace."

"Yeah, I've heard that speech myself. Protect the mother country, along with the rest of the planet. You're a regular U.N. Ambassador." Jack thrust a hand through his hair. "How am I going to explain this to Washington?"

Jessie looked at her hands. "You can't tell them, anymore than I can tell the Director that I confided my mission to one of Harrison Parker's agents."

He started to argue, then what she said struck him and he stared at her. "You knew I worked for Harry?"

Her lips quirked. "An educated guess."

"So where do we go from here, chere?"

"An even exchange, Cajun," she offered. "I protect you, you protect me."

"And after this is over?"

She averted her eyes and stared at the trailer door. "I return to my job in Maine, you go . . . wherever you were before this.."

"Great." Jack glared at the ceiling. "All right. Let's talk about what happened tonight with Kryukov and his six goons. Why you froze when Kruyokov came after you."

Jessie's hands clenched. "I . . . was surprised. I didn't think."

"Right." Jack snorted. "You drop five bad guys without blinking an eyelash, but the Shark surprises you by coming head- on with plenty of warning. Why did you freeze, Jessie?"

He barely heard her response. "For a moment . . . it was like . . . he looked like . . . he reminded me of my Father." Then she straightened and rolled her shoulders back. "It won't happen again."

"It better not. I take it the original plan had you meeting Kruyokov on his boat, retrieving the components, and shutting down the ring."

"Something like that. I was to identify Cutter, as well."

"Why worry about a mule?"

"Cutter wasn't simply a courier, like me. He had contacts, was beginning to negotiate deals himself. Like this one. He's selling to STAC because they are simply the highest bidder," Jessie said.. She was beginning to sound exhausted.

"This was to be my first direct contact with STAC. All the other times I went to a middle man set up by him."

"Why?"

"Cutter was very careful about who he allowed near him and his buyers. I took the place of the regular courier, and had to earn the trust. I believe my predecessor was killed during a customs raid in Miami."

Jack nodded. His voice went grim as he recalled the tragedy. "I remember that one. Two years ago. We lost four ATF agents in that blood bath."

"Alek arranged for me to take over his route. In spite of my cover, Cutter still didn't trust me completely. He'd never met me before, and as I said, he's cautious."

"Why would Kryukov come here himself?"

"Something must have gone wrong. Ivan implied he killed Cutter, which means he probably has the components in his possession."

"He won't leave until he has the schematics."

Jessie nodded. "The guidance system is inoperable without them. They'll be back."

"I have no doubt about that." He moved suddenly and lifted her out of the chair.

"What are you doing?"

"Putting you to bed."

He carried her back through the trailer and lowered her onto the narrow bed. He would have straightened, but her hands grasped his shoulders.

"We have to go after him."

"The only thing you're going to do for what's left of the night is sleep." Jack shoved her back down on the bed. "Kryukov needs time to regroup, plan his next move. So do we."

"Stay with me tonight."

He measured the bed with a glance. It was only a twin. They'd be all over each other. "Bad idea."

"Stay anyway."

With a sigh, he nudged her over. Carefully eased his big frame next to her on the bed. Flexed one arm and brought her back against him. He smiled. If he rolled over in his sleep, he'd probably crush her. Or end up taking her. It was going to be a long night. "Go to sleep, baby."

"Don't call me . . . " she was already asleep, and never saw the grim smile fade. Never heard the whispered vow he made.. Never felt the gentle kiss Jack brushed over her hair.

Jessie's revelation kept Jack awake for a long time.

During his training, he had studied many aspects of the dissolution of the KGB after the Soviet Union fell apart. Once regarded as the Soviet Politburo's spy army, KGB agents were regularly used for espionage work in Capitalist countries. Once the Communist Party lost power, their agents scattered, but continued to work in the same field.

Jessie had more reason to work with STAC than against them.

Anyone in American intelligence knew who Colonel Aleksei Davydov was. His reputation was notorious. Davydov was a Lithuanian, recruited from the Soviet regular army. Serving first in Afghanistan and then as an intelligence operative in Europe had toughened and honed Davydov. He was highly intuitive and quickly rose in the ranks.

Davydov became known as "The Iceman" after being briefly detained by the CIA. Harry had told Jack the story himself. The Agency had used intense and probably illegal methods of interrogation on him. Davydov refused to break. The Iceman had escaped under mysterious circumstances. Circumstances that had

something to do with Harry, though he wouldn't say how. When the Communist Party lost its struggle against the wildfire of democracy, the number two man in the KGB had simply disappeared.

Yet Jessie had talked about one of the most dangerous men in the world as if he was a favorite Uncle. Davydov better be nothing more than that, too, or Jack would find himself a flame- thrower.

Jack looked down at the woman nestled against him. Her closed eyes were shadowed. Her lower lip bruised. The vulnerable delicacy of her features made him even more furious. How could Davydov have used someone like her? Did Jessie have any idea of what kind of man she worked for?

Added to all of it -- how the hell was he going to be able to keep this from Harry? Jack must have drifted off in spite of the troubling thoughts. Some time later, a low sound jerked him awake. He lifted a hand to touch Jessie.

She was gone.

He rolled out of the bed, alert, prepared for the worst.. The soft noise became recognizable. Jack relaxed. Water. She was taking a shower. A dozen soundless steps took him to the tiny, closet-sized bathroom. As he looked through the open door, he recalled the shredded shower curtain he had torn down.

Jessie hadn't replaced it.

Chapter Fourteen

The nightmare had been like all the others. Jessie was strapped to the Wheel, while her father, cloaked in darkness, threw knives at her. He had been drinking again. She begged and pleaded for him to take her down, but Sergei had only laughed. Then her father had stepped out into the light, and she saw his face melt into the brutal visage of Ivan Kruyokov.

The only thing that kept her from shrieking as she woke were the heavy, comforting weight of Jack's arms around her. She released a shaky breath, eased over on her side, and stared at his sleeping face. He looked different -- almost boyish -- the grim lines gone. She almost touched him, then snatched her hand back. Jack stirred slightly as she eased out of his arms, but didn't wake. Jessie went to the bathroom and quickly stripped out of her clothes. What was she thinking? She turned the shower on to a cool, steady spray. She had no future with Jack. She stepped into the narrow space. Once this assignment was finished, they would go their separate ways.

The nightmare only emphasized the fact that there could be nothing between them. There was so much Jack didn't know about her. She glanced down at her thin, wet body. Too much. He knew the bare details. She had held back the pain. The ugliness. The horror.

Jessie stood under the spray for a long time. Face turned up. Eyes tightly closed. She washed her body, then her hair. Streams of white foam ran down her wet, hip-length hair. It was as much as spiritual cleansing as a physical one.

She couldn't stay in here all night, Jessie thought at last. No matter how her nightmares or Jack made her feel. She turned off the shower and groped for a towel.

Jack's voice, low and rough, startled her. "Are you okay?" She opened her eyes. He must be standing just outside the bathroom, out of sight.

Jessie dried off quickly and wrapped her hair and body with towels. When she stepped out into the hall, she saw Jack propped against the wall just outside the doorway. Every muscle on his large frame was tensed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up." She glanced back at the shower and found herself telling him the truth. "I had a nightmare. I feel better if I take a shower."

Jack's gaze was riveted to a point just above the edge of her towel. Why was he looking at her like that? She glanced down at the beginning curve of her breast and stiffened. The light directly above them highlighted the shiny mark. It ran from the outside swell of her breast to beneath her arm. His finger reached out to trace the scar before she could pull the towel up.

"What's this?"

She looked at her toes. "A mistake."

"You did this?"

"No." Jessie swallowed hard. "Papa -- my father did."

Jack moved his hand from her breast to the inside of her left arm. She gripped the edges of the damp towel tightly. The thick ridge of puckered tissue he trailed

his fingertips over was older than the other one. This wound had been deeper than the other. "This? He did this, too?"

Jessie nodded.

He eased her hand away from the towel. Jessie made an awkward attempt to stop him. His dark eyes flashed up.

"I want to see, chere." His fingers curled around the folds. "Let me."

It took all of Jessie's composure to stand unresisting as the towel fell away. Her nude body glowed in the light. Jack's mouth flattened as he scrutinized the length of her body.

She knew what he saw. The scars were only too conspicuous. Beneath her breasts. Above her hips. On the outer edge of her thighs. Most were only a few inches in length. A few were more severe.

"When did he do this to you?"

"It wasn't all at once." Jessie bent and retrieved the towel. Her fingers quickly wrapped it back around her damp body. "How?"

"I told you my Father drank. He didn't when we were performing, but when we practiced, sometimes --"

"He threw knives at you when he was drunk?" Jack's voice lashed out.

She tightened the towel around her. "It didn't happen very often." When he didn't reply to that, her stomach twisted. "I know they look bad."

Jessie found herself swept off her feet. Jack carried her back to the bedroom, muttering obscenities the entire way. She stared up at him in astonishment. Why

was he so angry? He put her down on the bed. Took the damp towel away. Drew the sheet up over her.

He was disgusted. She clutched the edge of the sheet. "I didn't want you to see them," she said.

That made him curse even more. He yanked the sheet out of her hands and stripped it from her body. It didn't make sense. She was completely exposed to his unblinking stare. He reached for her, and she shrank away.

"No, don't cringe from me," Jack said. He appeared ready to kill someone with his bare hands. "This is why you wear those ugly, baggy clothes. Why you won't wear shorts or skirts, even when it's 90 degrees outside." Jack shook her. "Isn't it?"

"Yes!" No tears now. Only frustration and old shame. And the rage of the helpless child she had been. Jessie slammed her fists into the mattress. "I don't want people to know! I don't want them to see what he did to me!"

All the fury drained out of Jack's expression.

"Ah, Dieu, baby." He pulled her up and cradled her against his chest. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Jessie strained away. She didn't want his pity. "Let me go. Please."

"Don't." Jack pressed his fingers against her lips. "Don't say that." Her eyes widened as he moved his hand from her mouth, and traced his fingertips down her throat. A shudder racked her limbs as he slid his palm over one breast, cupped it and lowered his head. She felt a gentle caress brush across her nipple. It instantly pebbled beneath his mouth. "You're beautiful, Jess."

Beautiful? Scarred as she was? What would he think when he heard everything?
No. She wouldn't let him do this to her. She squirmed away. Flipped over the opposite side of the bed.

"Stop it!" Jessie reached down and pulled the wrinkled sheet up over her naked body. "I don't want your pity!"

The beast lunged across the bed, caught her arms in his hands and ripped away the sheet. Jessie was on the bed and under him in two heartbeats. Her struggles only seemed to infuriate him more. As she fought, he drew her arms up on either side of her head. Watched as her breasts quiver. Bared his teeth as she arched and writhed in protest.

"Yeah, I guess I do feel sorry for you." He buried his lips against her throat. Coursed up the delicate flesh to nuzzle her ear. "So sorry I can't seem to zip up my pants when you're around.."

"Let me go!"

He planted a knee on either side of her hips and straddled her. Jessie writhed. Tried to free herself. Jack's weight held her down.

"Get off!"

"We keep doing this," he said in a conversational tone as he sank his fingers into her hair. "You insult me. I get you under me. You tell me not to touch you."

She shook her head. "I don't want you to touch me!"

"Liar." He spread his body over hers. She struggled as she felt his hips counter every movement of hers. A parody of love making, just as she was a parody of a woman. She went still when the thick ridge of his erection settled in the soft

harbor below her belly. Oh, God, the feel of him. Her vision clouded. Her hands twisted into the pillow beneath her head.

"There it is," he said as he rubbed against her slowly, and her thighs trembled.

"Feel how it will be. That's what you really want. What makes you so angry. Isn't it?"

Her face reflected her internal struggle. Jessie tried to control the response of her body, and couldn't. Jack laughed beneath his breath. Dipped his head.

She braced herself for a savage assault. Found his mouth settled gently over hers. Jack kissed her tenderly, almost wistfully. His lips moved from hers and wandered as he mapped her features one at a time with feathery pecks. Jessie had gone very still by the time his mouth returned to hers.

Jack wanted her to think it was merely lust between them. He'd almost convinced her, too, tossing her on the bed, using crude, explicit language, and laughing at her resistance. Now he kissed her as though she was the most precious thing in the world to him. It didn't fit. If Jack only felt physical desire for her, he would have never stopped that night in his father's trailer.

He was drinking from her lips, his palms cradling her face now. Jessie opened her eyes, was shocked to see him looking back at her.. He kissed her with his eyes open? For an instant she saw beyond the fire and power, deep into unguarded territory. His eyelids closed, but Jessie had seen the longing, the pain that had nothing to do with their bodies, and the loneliness that called to her.

Could it be?

Her tongue touched his lips hesitantly, and surprised him, for he lifted his head. Her fingers moved to trace the chiseled beauty of his mouth. He didn't open his eyes, but a strange, uncontrollable shudder racked his long limbs. An odd serenity settled over Jessie as his mouth burned across her palm. He gathered her against him and buried his face in her damp hair.

"Ah, Dieu." He exhaled the words as if in agony. His fingers laced through hers. "I want you until it tears me into pieces, chere."

She heard the words, the despair behind them. It had come down to this moment. All the attraction, the antagonism, everything since the moment she had seen him staring out of a nightmare. In spite of the facades, deceptions, cross purposes, they had been drawn to each other, protected and fought for each other. There was only one reason behind all of it..

Jessie was in love with Jackson Hamilton and, though he might never say the words, he was in love with her.

"Jack." She heard her discovery coloring her voice. Jessie gloried in it, knowing she could offer it to him along with everything she was.

His big frame tensed at the sound of his name on her lips. "You go to my head."

Jack released her hands. Began to ease his body from hers. "I can't do this."

To be so close and so completely denied! She had felt his hands shaking. Heard the rasp of his breath. He wasn't doing this for himself. He was trying to be noble again. The idiot. "Please, Jack." Jessie didn't care if she had to beg. "Please."

"Baby, don't." He got to his feet. No, Jessie thought, she wouldn't let him leave her. Not again. She thrust herself off the bed. Threw her arms around his neck. Tugged him back to her.

"I want to be with you." She wanted a lot more, but her newfound love would only drive him further away. Especially if he hadn't realized the same yet. His skin was hot and damp beneath her lips.. "As much as you want me."

"Just a scratch for an itch." Jack sounded cruelly indifferent.

She smiled against his throat. If he only knew. "I don't care what you call it."

"I don't trust you. I was ready to take you." When she didn't respond, he swore.

"Aren't you listening, woman? I had orders to kill you!"

And she knew he'd cut his own hand off before he'd hurt her. "All I hear is you making excuses," Jessie said. "Make love to me."

Jack took her into his arms with a force that would have been vicious had she not matched it. His mouth slashed over hers and released all the power he'd been holding back. Jessie held on, met his need, and equaled it as her lips moved hungrily under his. Their tongues met, danced, stroked.

Jack lifted her with one arm, using his other hand to cradle her head as his mouth tore from hers. His lungs pulled in a harsh breath as his intense black gaze all but devoured her. "Be sure, baby," he said. "I won't let you go after this. You'll be mine."

She shivered at the sensual promise in his eyes, smiled, and brushed her lips against his chin. "Who said I would let you?"

"There is a God," he said, and dumped her back on the bed before he jerked off his shirt. He couldn't wait, she saw, and reveled in the idea she could do this to him. He freed himself from the straining denim of his jeans. Her face was dreamy as she watched him. Jack swore again. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" she held out her hands to touch his chest. Jack shoved the jeans and briefs down his legs. When he straightened, Jessie's hands stilled. The sight of his hard, pulsing erection made her gaze flash up to his face.

"Like that." From the pocket of his jeans he removed a shiny square, tore it open and used the condom inside to sheath himself. He kicked his clothes aside and reached for her, yet before he touched her, Jack paused once more. "Are you sure?"

Jessie wasn't sure of the mechanics. She was so small, while Jack was . . . impressive. The success of such an attempt seemed highly unlikely. She was only certain of one thing -- she trusted him. As an answer, she took his hands and pulled. He came down on top of her.

Jack's hands worked under her, lifting her hips off the mattress. "I can't wait, Jessie. Next time."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she felt him carefully press the swollen head of his penis against her folds. Blood roared in her ears as he worked it into her. There was a stretching, burning sensation she hadn't expected. She saw sweat pelting Jack's skin, and a taut, dangerous set to his features. Jessie never felt more alive in her life. For a moment, he held her like that, his body poised to complete the possession.

He was still waiting for her to refuse, Jessie thought. Even now. She followed her instincts, and moved her hips up in age-old feminine invitation.

A low, deep growl broke from him. "Mine, Jessica. You're mine."

"Yes." Her lips parted. She could no more hold back what she said next than she could let him go. "I love you, Jackson."

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Jack thrust into her body. Deep into the sleek passage.. Straight through an unanticipated obstruction. It was that last sensation that made him go absolutely motionless. A startled cry was wrenched from Jessie's lips. She arched her back and hips, which only drove him further inside. Her hands gripped his biceps. Raw surprise replaced the sultry passion in her gaze.

Jack was so confounded by the virginity he had just rammed past that he couldn't speak for a full minute. When he at last found his voice, he said, "Why didn't you warn me, chere?"

She caught her breath as he began to withdraw. Seated her heels against the mattress. Thrust her hips up to counter his retreat. Then her slim legs lifted, winding around the back of his. "No, don't.. Stay with me. It isn't . . . it isn't that bad."

Jack groaned at the tight constriction of her sheath over entire length of his shaft. Endured the torment of staying in her without moving. He was hard as stone. Pulsing with need. At the same time, an uncivilized, deeply satisfying surge spread through him. There had been no other men before him. Jessie was his.

Sweat condensed and flowed in thin streams along his brow, chest and arms. He clenched his jaw. Tested their fit with a single, careful stroke. Felt her quivering response. Watched her teeth sink into her bottom lip. The faint line appear between her brows.

"I'm hurting you," Jack said in a voice that rasped. Hating himself. Wanting her too much to stop.

"Yes." Jessie pushed up against him, lodging him deeper. Her vaginal muscles were so contracted that it was nearly as painful for him as it was for her. Yet she didn't seem to realize it. She kept lifting and working herself on him.

"Easy, chere." He used one hand to sweep her hair back from her face. "Relax." She nodded. Jack felt the internal grip ease back a fraction. Even so, she was tight as a velvet vise. Bathing him with liquid heat. "I'll try to --" he drew in a startled breath as she moved on him again. "Don't do that. I don't know if I can --" "Then don't." She wriggled beneath him. Around him. The startled doe eyes closed. "Love me, Jack."

The primal need to mate stomped over the wish to pull away. He surrendered. Took one long, steadying breath. Entwined his fingers with hers. Prayed he wouldn't hurt her more than a cruel Nature intended.

"Hold on to me, baby." Her unbelievably narrow sheath massaged every inch of him as he slowly withdrew. She gave a rippling sigh. "Better?"

"Yes." She gasped as he slid back into her body. "Oh, oh . . ."

A low, satisfied sound rumbled from him. Jack began to thrust steadily. Pulling out of her body. Pushing carefully back in. The delicious friction sent wave after

wave of sensation through Jack's body. He was a part of her now. Taking her. Filling her the way he had so often imagined. Dieu, she was burning him alive. Just out of reach, however, was what he needed. The essential gentleness she required created a kind of tug-of-war, pitting his control against his desire.

Control had to win, for her sake. Even if it killed him.

"Jack," Jessie whispered. "Don't hold back. Let go."

He stilled once more, staring down at her in amazement. How could she know? Even if she did, she was a virgin, he reminded himself. She had no idea what she was asking for. He told her that.

"I don't care."

Hoarsely he persisted. "Sure?"

"Yes. Yes!" She moved wildly under him.

Desire destroyed control. He stormed over her body like a dark tide. Took her with aggressive, hungry power. The strokes of his hips hammered into her.

Jessie rose to each one. Taking and giving him equal demand. Somehow he worked one hand between them. Touched her triangle of dark curls. His fingertip searched. Found the small silky spot he wanted.. Caressed it with a quick, circling determination.

Her head fell back over his arm. Another cry broke from her lips. Jessie dissolved into a cascade of violent tremors. Ancient primal satisfaction etched Jack's face as he watched her come. Fierce quakes racked his body as he followed her.

Jessie should have been crushed by his weight, but she kept her arms wrapped around Jack. Welcomed his heaviness on her body. He stayed inside her but propped himself up on one elbow. Looked down at her with wonder.

"Jess?" He groped for the right words. "Tell me you weren't faking that."

Breathless laughter escaped her. "Virgins don't know how to fake," she said, then pressed a quick kiss to his damp chest. "Unless you want to teach me how."

"Smart ass." His hands grasped her sides and he rolled over, bringing her with him to sprawl across his big torso.

"Was it good for you?" She delivered the classic line innocently.

"Good?" He closed his eyes for a moment. "Jess, part of my brain detonated."

They lay like that for a time, their hands stroking each other gently. Jack stared at the aluminum ceiling. She said she loved him. Tried to imagine what he had done to deserve this. Jessie snuggled against him. Listened to his heartbeat. Trace invisible patterns over the muscular planes of his chest with her fingertips.

"What are you thinking?" he heard her ask.

He put a hand to her hair and stroked it slowly. How to tell you I love you, he thought. Among other things. He ignored those dark realms. For now, for tonight, he would have her.

"How tough it is to join the KGB."

"Prism." She smiled above his heart. "It took Alek a year to train me. Physical conditioning in Switzerland, technical training in Germany, operational exercises in France, Belgium, and Spain. He supervised my education himself. Most of which he spent cursing very quietly when he thought I wasn't listening."

"No Prism branch offices in Virginia?" She shook her head. "I didn't think so. You'd have picked up the accent."

"My mother was American, and she insisted I learn to speak English as well as Russian. I watched a lot of television during training, too. Alek said it would help me assimilate." She frowned slightly. "Guess I'd better work on the Virginia accent."

Suddenly aware of what they were talking about, Jack put his hands under her arms. Hauled her up to his face. "Kiss me, Jess.."

Shyly she brushed her lips over his. The pressure of his hands settled her mouth more firmly against his. Her half-closed eyes flew open as he kissed her the way he had the night in Conrad's trailer, with the same frustrated desire magnified a thousand times.

Her breath was uneven when he let her pull back. "Jack?"

He was getting hard inside her now. Carefully he disengaged their bodies and discarded the condom. Then he pulled her back to his side and tucked her head against his shoulder. Stroked her back with his hand. She was -- had been -- a virgin. He couldn't take her again tonight. Not without causing her more pain. "Go to sleep, Jessie." Surprisingly, they both did moments later.

Passion acted like an effective drug. Neither heard the trailer door lock being picked. The man in the hooded jacket entered and closed the door quietly.

The intruder held his side as he walked back to the bedroom. Stood and gazed at the nude bodies entwined on the bed for a moment. Fingered the cold metal of

the pistol he carried. Killing them as they slept held definite appeal, he thought. It was too bad he needed to keep them alive just a little longer.

He had come to retrieve a specific item. After a quick search, he found what he was looking for in the back pocket of Jack's discarded jeans. He tucked it away in his jacket. Then he saw another item -- a bonus he hadn't expected. He carefully retrieved that, too. Contemplated the sleeping couple once more. Smiled as he noiselessly departed.

Seconds later, Jack's eyes opened. He peered through the darkness, but saw nothing. It must have been a dream. He pulled Jessie closer and went back to sleep.

Hours later he was startled awake by a loud, continuous sound. Jack sat up. Someone was pounding on the trailer door. He looked down at Jessie. She was still sprawled over him, fast asleep.

The knocking didn't wake her up as fast as the reaction of Jack's body. She made a low moan of pleasure. Stiffened as the sound penetrated her languid bliss. She lifted her cheek from his chest with a sigh. Drowsy brown eyes met Jack's.

"What time is it?"

Jack lifted his arm and checked his watch. "6:30 a.m." Too early for most of the carnies to be up and about. "You expecting a wake-up call?" She shook her head and eased away from him. He swung his legs over the side of the bed. Grabbed his pants. "It's probably Nathan. Stay here."

He dressed rapidly. While he buttoned his shirt, Jack crossed the trailer and looked out the window. Three uniformed policemen were standing outside with Nathan and Bobby.

"Great. Cops." Jack hoped they were following up on the rednecks and not the Russians. He went to unlock the door and frowned. It was already open. He could have sworn he'd locked it himself last night.

The first thing Jack noticed was Nathan's expression. He looked miserable. Beside him, Bobby was pale and tense.

Trouble.

Jack addressed the closest officer. "Good morning.."

"Good morning, sir. Are you Jackson Hamilton?" Jack nodded. "Would you step down out of the trailer, please, Mr. Hamilton?"

Jack saw the frustration in the eyes of the two carnies.. Frustration and something else. Shock? He climbed down the stairs. Found his arms being grabbed by the other two officers. His hands were hauled his back. Steel handcuffs were snapped around his wrists. The first officer took a small white laminated card from his pocket.

Jack frowned. "What the hell . . . ?"

"Jackson Hamilton, you are under arrest for the murder of Candace Corbin. You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney . . . "

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Jessie was dressed and out of the trailer as the police finished reading Jack his rights. She would have protested his innocence, had Jack not given her a direct look and a small, nearly imperceptible shake of his head.

"Can I have a minute with my lady?" Jack asked before they led him off. The officer nodded.

Jack used the minute to lean forward and bury his face in her hair. While the officers watched the highly emotional embrace, Jack whispered a set of terse, rapid instructions against her ear.

Jessie nodded. Pressed her hand to his cheek. "I'll take care of everything." His lips were cold as he kissed her good-bye. She watched him being taken away through empty eyes. When he was gone, she turned on her heel and strode off. Nathan caught up with her just before she reached Conrad's trailer.

"Jessie, tell me what's going on." The barker's face was agonized. "I know Jack couldn't have killed Candy."

Despite her instinctive trust, Jessie had no justification for confiding in Nathan Stokes. Cover had to be maintained. For the safety of Jack and herself. "I don't know, Nathan."

"Jack is on his way to jail. They found his wallet and . . . some physical evidence on the bed." The barker swallowed hard. "With Candy."

Jessie frowned. Had Ivan come back and killed the dancer? Planted the wallet? What physical evidence? "Did they say when she was killed?"

Nathan shook his head. "They won't know until the autopsy, but it was sometime before midnight."

Jessie suspected she and Jack had been the last ones to see Candy alive -- and she was right. She was also his only alibi. She hoped Harrison Parker was as influential as Jack claimed. Alek would never sanction her giving a statement to the police. She didn't want to be forced to choose between the Director and Jack. Alek disliked losing.

The barker regained her attention. "Jessie? You know Jack couldn't have done this. What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to call a friend of his. He'll see that Jack makes bail." Or Jessie would threaten to blow up the Pentagon. "I promised I'd tell his father, Nathan. Excuse me."

Jessie found Conrad huddled over his morning cup of scotch- laced coffee. With a quick scan of the trailer, she located the blazer Jack had described and reached into the right pocket.

"Where's my boy?"

Nathan walked in the trailer behind her.

Jessie could have screamed with frustration. Instead she calmly addressed both men.

"Conrad, Jack has been arrested. They think he murdered Candy Corbin." Jack's father got up from the kitchen table with an outraged roar. Clutched his head. Wilted back down on his chair. "Nathan, as I said, I have to take care of some things for Jack." When the barker would have bombarded her with questions, she held up one hand. "Please. I don't have a lot of time to do this."

She walked out of the trailer before either man could say another word. The carnies were beginning to gather outside the food concessions. Jessie saw Nancy trying to flag her down. She trotted back to her trailer and locked herself in.

The number she had memorized rang directly through to Harrison Parker. He listened carefully as she described the events of the night before, leading to Jack's arrest.

"Who are you?" Harry wanted to know.

"Jessie Kelly, the woman he thought was a STAC agent. I'm not working for them. My agency is trying to shut them down, too."

"What agency are you working for?"

"That's not important now," she replied. Parker's hatred of Aleksei Davydov was only too well-known. The truth would only muddle things further. "Jack needs to get out of the jail, now. He said to tell you do it as fast as you did when he got diverted from his vacation in Peking last year."

"Jack thinks I walk on water." Harry may have grumbled, but he understood the message being relayed. Jack was telling him time was of the essence. More importantly, that Jessie could be trusted. "It'll take some time. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going into New Orleans," Jessie said. "To find Kryukov's ship."

Harry sucked in a quick breath. "Do you know which one it is?"

"No," she said. "But I won't have a problem identifying it. I've seen six of his men."

"You'll need back-up before you go in."

"Is that what you tell your people?" There was silence on the other end of the phone. "That's what I thought. Thanks for your concern, Mr. Parker, but I'll be fine."

"Call me Harry," Parker said. "Next thing you know I'll be putting you on the payroll."

"Send me a W-4 form." Jessie smiled. Parker might just have to do that. "In the meantime, when you spring Jack, have him meet me at the Port of New Orleans. Tell him I'll be at the commercial docks."

Chapter Fifteen

Harry hung up the phone and answered it two seconds later.

"Okay, I'm here," Scottie said from the airport terminal. "Mind telling me what all the rush was about, boss?"

The briefing only took a few minutes. When he was through, Harry listened to his chief analyst swear under his breath. "You have your assignment, Scott. Move it."

"Chameleon isn't going to like this."

Harry thought of what Jessica Kelly had just told him. "Chameleon is in no position to argue. Go."

Carolyn knocked on his door as Harry was massaging his temples. "I canceled your afternoon appointments, Mr. Parker. Do you need anything else before I go to lunch?"

"Drugs," Harry said, then smiled from behind his building migraine. "Just kidding, Caro, go on." The thought of food appealed. "Where are you headed?"

"Just down to the employee lunchroom," Carolyn said. "Bill had to take my car today, his is in the shop."

Harry pulled his car keys out of his trouser pocket. "Here. Take my car. That cafeteria food will kill you."

"Oh, I couldn't -" Carolyn said, refusing politely.

"I insist. You can pick me up a sandwich while you're out," Harry got up, put the keys in her hand, and grinned. "Besides, how often have you driven a classic '64 Vette around town?"

"Never," she said, and laughed. "Bill won't believe this. He loves your car, Mr. Parker. I think he drops by to see it, not me."

"There. See? All the more reason. Go on." Harry pushed her out of the office gently. "Have fun. Just don't get into an accident, okay? My insurance premiums are a nightmare already."

"I won't let it get a single scratch," Carolyn said as she departed.

Harry sighed. Now that he had his secretary out of the way, he could make those calls.

He was arguing a few minutes later with a key man in the NOPD when he heard a muffled sound. Just below his feet, the building shook slightly. There had been construction ongoing in the street below for the last six months. What were they widening the roads with? Dynamite?

He finished the call, went to his window, and looked down. Something was burning just inside the lowest floor of the building, just inside the entrance to the parking garage. He frowned. Accident?

A half hour and five phone calls later, someone hammered on the outer office door. Before Harry could answer it, one of the executives' rushed in. And came to a skidding halt.

"Mr. Parker!" The man seemed shocked. "Oh, thank God!"

"What's going on?"

"We thought -- we didn't know -- I mean --" The man was so shaken he was stuttering. At last he got out, "We thought you were in it!"

"In what?" Alarmed now, Harry took the man's arm and gave him a shake. "Talk sense, man! What's happened?"

"It's your car, Mr. Parker. There's been a terrible accident."

#

When Jessie got to her car, she found the Lady Wolf leaning up against it. Arms folded. One foot tapping the ground.

"Hold it. Right there."

Just her luck. "Nancy, I can't. I've got to go."

"You're not going anywhere," Nancy said. "Not until you tell me what in God's name is happening around here!"

Jessie struggled to find patience she didn't have time to display. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you, Jessie? Or do you prefer Katarina?"

"Candy told you?" Jessie was incredulous.

"No. I saw a photo of you in one of Nathan's book.. You haven't changed that much in the last eleven years." The black-haired hands seized Jessie's arms.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't kill Candy." Nancy was very strong, Jessie thought. This might be a bigger headache than Jack being arrested. "Let me go."

"I know you didn't kill her," Nancy said. "Mae told me the details after she found her this morning. Whoever did it raped her, too."

Jessie's mouth dropped open. "She was raped?"

"Yeah, Candy was raped." The Lady Wolf sounded incredulous. "Candy, who would screw a snake if you held its head."

"Candy was undoubtedly abused as a child," Jessie found herself defending the dancer. "Not everyone has remarkable parents like you."

"Ah, hell." Nancy had the grace to look guilty, but only for a moment. Renewed anger surged over her hairy features. "You didn't kill her, but I'm betting you know who did!"

Jessie spread her hands. "I don't, Nancy."

"Don't give me that! Ever since you came here there's been trouble. First that redneck tries to kill Danny. Then you start using seven guys for target practice. Now Candy is dead. Jack's been arrested. And what are you doing? You're running away!"

Jessie tried to think of what she could say to diffuse the situation. Explanations would take too long. Every minute counted now.

"Well?"

Jessie cursed Alek's excellent training. She hated this. "Sorry, Nancy." Without warning she swung her fist and expertly clipped the other woman on the jaw. Nancy staggered back, and Jessie caught her under the arms as she crumpled. It took a minute to drag her to an open spot on the grass. Fumbling for the cellular phone, she got in her car, and took off.

Davydov answered her call at once.

"Nachalneek."

"This is Galoobaya."

"Salaga," he said. Jessie smiled at the pet name. Alek had given it to her during training. While his instructors had all but tortured her during the brutal daily regime. "Report."

"Cutter is dead or captured. Kryukov may have the first item in possession."

Jessie's teeth caught her lip before she added, "Hamilton has been detained by local law enforcement."

"The second item?"

He meant the schematics. "Safe. I am going to the ship to retrieve the first item."

"No." the Colonel said. "Not alone. You will rendezvous with Krasnaya in New Orleans in three hours."

"Too late, Nachalneek. I have arranged it so that Hamilton will meet me there."

She didn't wait for Alek's scolding reaction to this revelation. "Now, listen to me. This is the plan."

A half hour later, she was driving through the city, meeting the fringes of the Mardi Gras revelers celebrating the first days of the week-long party. Horses hitched to carriages clopped their plodding way through the swelling masses. Arriving tour bus windows were lined with animated faces. And everywhere people were dancing, drinking, and laughing. Tourists in shorts snapping cameras. Locals in kaleidoscopic costumes and masks.

Jack had ordered her to remain at the carnival until Harry could arrange his release. Men. He and Alek were just alike. She couldn't risk waiting. Ivan

KrUYokov could return to the carnival at any time. This time the STAC leader might start using his thugs on innocent bystanders.

She skirted the bulk of the revelers and endless block parties. Envied the careless frolicking of the colorful figures. Would life ever be so uncomplicated for her? Probably not. Especially now that she had fallen in love -- and made love to -- an American intelligence agent.

Jessie reached the Port of New Orleans minutes later. She hid her car in a derelict warehouse a few blocks from the commercial piers. Luckily the sky turned dark. Rain began to pour over the bay. She trotted the distance to the off loaded cargo facilities. Inspected the long stretch of wharf. More than a dozen large boats and yachts were docked.

One of them belonged to KrUYokov. But which one?

The wide loading platform was empty. The noon break, she guessed. Jessie kept behind the concealment of some banana crates the longshoremen had already unloaded on the dock. She examined the ships one by one.

Two pleasure yachts. A sturdy little barge -- too open to conceal anything. Tugs. Three shrimpers. Where was the Russian?

At the very end of the dock was an ancient rusting hulk that drew her attention. It looked more likely to sink than to transport cargo anywhere. It was also the only one whose deck was being nonchalantly patrolled by two of the men who had attacked her the night before.

Got you, she thought.

A man's voice came from around a corner. "Would you look at that."

Jessie ducked behind a forklift to avoid being spotted by the pair of men approaching. They wore dark, sober suits and neatly slipped haircuts. Both were openly admiring the sleek lines of a millionaire's expensive racing boat.

"Nice toy."

"If that's what it is."

The second voice sounded bored. "Too cramped."

"I don't know. We could shadow her, see where she goes."

"Boat like that would leave us eating wake once we reached open water."

"Keep your voice down," the other said, then yawned.

FBI, Jessie thought, and wrinkled her nose. This was the Bureau's idea of a covert operation? The two men might as well have hung signs around their necks. The morons. If they had worked for Prism, Davydov would have shot them himself for such shoddy surveillance.

While the federal agents continued to bicker, Jessie relocated as quickly as she dared to the end of the pier. She squinted, trying to make out the name of the vessel. Years of rust and barnacles nearly obscured the lettering. It appeared to be Norwegian. Since she couldn't translate the words, she committed the letters to memory.

Galdhøpiggen.

Now Jessie waited. Watched the repetitious movements of the two guards.

Judged the best place to board the ship. A grim smile touched her lips. One of the men pacing the deck regularly rubbed his shoulder. Precisely where one of her knives had landed last night. She turned her head and saw the two FBI

agents drifting in the opposite direction. Even better. If her timing was perfect, she would make it to the ship unseen.

The two men on deck didn't fool Jessie. Kruyokov had other men waiting just out of sight. Akoola was a fanatic about security. Her only choice was to board the ship from the hull side facing the bay. They wouldn't be expecting anyone to come up out of the water. The added benefit was that if detected, Jessie could dive from the vessel directly into the water.

Three more seconds, she counted. Two. One. With quick, noiseless grace, Jessie crossed the open dock and eased over the side of the pier.

With her feet, Jessie carefully felt for and braced her weight against the dock supports. Her hands grasped the edge of the wharf planks. So far, so good. As she worked her way parallel to the vessel, she eyed the lapping water three feet below her. She'd better not slip - the splash might alert the guards.

With practiced ease she worked her way along the edge of the dock parallel to the ship. The knife wounds in her palm flared, but she ignored them. She ran out of dock. Found a foothold she could push off safely. Swiveled her body in an arc. Jumped from the pier to the ship.

A endless ten seconds later, she slowly pulled herself up to the bottom rung of deck railing. Hung there on the pitted, peeling bar. Watched for the guards. No one raised the alarm, so she began edging along the railing, hand over hand. Skirted around the bow to the bay side of the hull.

When she reached mid-center, she swung her legs to one side and chinned the rail. Used the momentum of her body to swing up and over. Landed with a small thump on the deck. Stretched out and flattened her body on it.

The sound of voices drifted from an unsecured hatch of the central cabin.

Carefully Jessie inched along the weathered planking to a position just outside the side door.

Through the gap she heard Kruyokov's men inside. They were arguing in low, rapid Russian. One wanted to murder the Federal agents they'd spotted on the dock. Another argued that locating the second courier was more important. A third seemed to think there was a high probability of failure no matter what they did.

"We take too many risks!" the first man said. There was a moment of absolute silence. Jessie froze. She heard the sound of a pistol slide being pulled back. "No need to overreact, Akoola. I am only concerned about our success."

"Save your concerns for retrieving Cutter's components, Shilenko." Kryukov's voice was unmistakable. "And the designs we will get tonight."

"What about . . ."

Jessie had heard enough. Her instincts told her to get off the ship. Right now. She'd call Harrison Parker, inform him of the Galdhopiggen's location. He could send a dozen agents to board the vessel. Silently she retreated back to the railing. Checked for the guards. Climbed over. Lowered herself down out of sight. She'd almost reached the dock when someone directly over her head called out, "Astanoveetyes! Stop!"

Pain slammed into her body as Jessie threw herself from the ship to the pier. She lost her grip and spent several moments dangling by her injured hand. The determination to live made her reach up and claw at the slippery wood. She grabbed on, found the support holds with her feet.. Murky water splashed at her shoes as the rusting ship rocked beneath the pounding of running feet.

Jessie pulled herself up on the pier. Landed on her stomach with a muffled grunt. She eyed the cargo containers. Another fifty feet --

Something clamped on the back of her neck and hauled her up. She struggled to free herself, but there were four of them. The Russians held her steady as a fifth approached.

Ivan Kryukov's mustache gleamed as he smiled. "How thoughtful of you, my dear, to come to us."

#

Jack sat in the interrogation room. Stared steadily at the two detectives questioning him. Analyzed the situation. Weighed his options. What few he had. He didn't have time for this crap.

The older detective, a haggard-looking man named Donatti, had the tenacity of a pit bull. He started the interview from the beginning. For the fifth time. "You want to tell us how your wallet ended up beneath Ms. Corbin's body yet, Mr.

Hamilton?"

Jack figured his wallet had been found somewhere in Candy's trailer. He knew it the moment he turned over his personal effects during the booking, and found it missing.

"My wallet was stolen," Jack replied. He had heard something last night in Jessie's trailer. It also explained why the door was left unlocked this morning. Whoever killed the dancer had picked the lock. Came in while they were asleep. Took the wallet as evidence to plant at the scene. All to incriminate Jack for Candy's murder.

"If it was stolen, Jack," the second detective said, "why didn't you report it?" Jones was younger than his partner, but equally as dogged.

"I was asleep, for Christ's sake."

Jones smirked. "Okay, let's say you were asleep. Do you think you might have been sleepwalking, Jack?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. See, I never heard of a man who puts a condom on before he sleepwalks. You ever heard of that, Donatti?"

Jack leaned forward. "A condom?"

Jones sat back in his chair, pleased. "Yeah. Hell of a thing. See, Jack, we not only found your wallet, we found a used condom beside the body. Your brand, from the extras we found in your wallet. And when we get to testing the semen, I'll bet we'll find out it's yours. Safe rape a priority these days, Jack?"

"If I put on a condom before I raped and killed a woman," Jack said through clenched teeth, "do you think I'd be stupid enough to leave it at the scene?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Hamilton." Donatti peered at him. "I'm sure you didn't intend to leave it behind. Just as I'm sure you didn't intend to strangle Miss Corbin. Maybe you panicked."

Jones joined in. "Was that what happened, Jack? Did you panic? Did you forget to clean up before you ran?"

"I didn't rape or kill Candy," Jack said in a toneless voice. "I was with Jessie Kelly. In her trailer. We made love. Someone came in while we were sleeping. Took my wallet. Took the condom I used while I was with Jessie. Planted it at the scene." He saw the plain disbelief staring back at him from both faces. He had to get out of here. "Did you try calling the Bureau again?"

"Look, pal, if the Bureau was working a case within fifty miles of the city, we'd know." Donatti was surly. "I gave you the benefit of the doubt, didn't I? We called them. They never --"

"-- heard of me, I know. I told you, I'm not FBI." Jack rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Forget it."

He was in a building filled with cops. Armed cops. Making a break for it was out of the question. Even if he could have a moment alone to make the change. Someone tapped on the door and summoned one of the detectives. Apparently an urgent phone call from Washington had come in for him.. Donatti left.

"We can do this all day," Detective Jones said.

Had Jessie gotten through to Harry? If he could get this one out of the room . . .

"Do me a favor," Jack asked the cop. "Call down to Stokes' Show and have someone tell my Father I'm all right."

The young detective shook his head. "You'll get your phone call later, pal."

He was deciding exactly how to knock out the detective when Donatti unexpectedly returned.

He reached behind Jack and removed his handcuffs. "Some yo- yo up in D.C. named Parker tells me you're a secret agent, Jack." "Yeah. A secret agent," Jack said. Rubbed his wrists. Gave the men a bland smile. "Maybe Pierce Brosnan will play me in the movies."

"Good luck. I advised your friend to use the appropriate channels." The old cop grinned sourly. "Which should take him a day or two. We'll have the lab results back on the condom residue before then."

A nervous receptionist knocked and appeared in the doorway. "Detective Jones? There's a priority phone call for you. Someone who says he's from the Pentagon."

Jones glared at Jack. "Friends in high places, huh, buddy? Don't move. I'll be right back." He departed with the receptionist.

Jack couldn't wait for these two to figure out what they were dealing with. "Look, detective, I know what it looks like, but --"

The door opened again. Suddenly, the old detective was no longer listening to him. He stared straight past Jack. His mouth gaping. His eyes unblinking.

"Mary Mother of God," the older man gasped.

Jack turned to see Nancy standing in the doorway. Minus her hat, veils, and long sleeves. She wore an ankle-length dress in a particularly vivid shade of scarlet.

Her black pelt shimmered under the florescent lighting.

"Actually, Nancella Maria Antionetta Carguitto." Nancy smiled. "Are you Detective Donatti?" The older man gulped before he nodded. "I was told I should see you."

"About . . . what?"

She stepped closer. "I assume you're still taking statements about the murder at the carnival?"

"Uh - yeah." Donatti cringed a little. "Sure. Be with you in a minute."

Nancy bared her teeth. Made a discreet but definite growl. "I have a show to do in a few hours, Detective," she told him. "I don't think you want me sitting around in the general waiting area out there, either. Wouldn't want to scare all the people paying their parking tickets, right?"

"Uh, right." Donatti rose from his chair. "Wouldn't want that, I mean -- right." He was so flustered he never saw the small gym bag that dropped from under Nancy's skirt. Or her foot as she pushed it out of sight under Jack's chair. "Uh, Hamilton, stay put."

"By the way, Jack, Harv said to tell you this would be a good time to get in some practice on your imitations," Nancy said. She used one hand to smooth her flowing beard as Donatti passed by her. Palmed a substantial wad of a waxy substance from her mouth. Surreptitiously pressed it in the knob plate on the door as she turned to follow the pale-faced detective.

The door closed. Jack waited for a few seconds, then checked the lock. The knob turned easily.

"Nancella," Jack said, and grinned. "I love you." He reached under the chair and grabbed the gym bag. Inside was a change of clothing and shoes that belonged to Harv Allen.

A minute later Jack eased open the door. Checked the corridor outside the interrogation room. Stepped out to walk downstairs and out of the building. No one even glanced at Jack.

Because Jack had become Harv Allen.

Around the corner from the police station, Jack spotted two cars from the show. The Appleby twins, Doc, the real Harv Allen and Bobby Driswald were waiting for him. Jack turned his face away for a moment, then strode across the street to meet them. He half-expected to see Imogene, but the handicap of her size restricted her ability to travel. It was probably killing her, too.

"This is aiding and abetting, mon ami," Jack growled as he ducked down beside the first car.

"Yeah." Harv chuckled, and handed Jack a wide-brimmed Stetson. "Ain't it, though? Get yourself in the back and take a rest, boy. We'll wait for Nancy."

Nancy emerged from the station several minutes later. Fascinated as they were with her appearance, people couldn't get out of her path fast enough. Conrad trailed behind her, looking as disgruntled as Jack had ever seen him.

"All right, Cajun," Nancy said as she slid in next to Jack. The finger she jabbed in the center of his chest was not gentle. "Start explaining!"

"I can't, chere." He pulled down the brim of the Stetson to avoid the curious looks of bystanders. "No time. Where's Jessie?"

"Jessie?" Bobby Driswald looked over the back of the seat. "Don't you know where she is?"

"I do." Nancy snorted, and rubbed her jaw. "She took off. Nathan gave me that knife rig of hers. I'm going to turn it in to the cops. Jackson, she's mixed up with this killer."

"Took off?" Jack rubbed his eyes with one hand. Thought of ways he would beat Jessie. "Nance, she didn't have anything to do with Candy's murder. Don't say anything to the cops." He scanned the street. "They're going to find out I'm gone any minute now.. I've got to get out of here. Jessie's in trouble."

"I just busted you out of jail," Nancy said in a testy voice.

"I know, Nance. And I'm grateful. But I've got to find Jessie."

"I'll go with you." Doc's blunt features lit with a wry grin. "My services are usually needed when Jessie gets in trouble."

"Count me in, too." The Lady Wolf wasn't happy. "I'll make sure Doc's services are needed."

"You can't. Doc, take everyone back to the show and wait for us there," Jack said as he got out of the car. The rest of the carnies followed. Gail Appleby threw her arms around Jack's leg.

"C'mon, Jack." From his knee, the midget gave him a wheedling smile. "We never get to have any fun. Take us with you."

"Gail, will you knock it off!" Terence was completely mortified. "Everyone is looking at us!"

Bobby Driswald rolled his eyes and in a Walter Cronkite voice said, "Terry, a parade of naked women could walk down this street and everyone would still look at us. And that's the way it is."

"Bobby's right," Doc said. A small crowd was beginning to form on the sidewalk several feet away. "We're starting to attract a lot of attention."

"Yeah, so shut up, you idiot!" Gail wrapped herself even tighter around Jack's leg.

Terence's small face reddened. "I'm not the one acting like an idiot!"

"Knock it off." Jack carefully pried Gail from his leg and placed her in Bobby's arms. "Hang onto her until I get out of here."

"Aw, c'mon, Jack." The midget wailed as she struggled against Bobby's tight hold. "Imogene will kill me!"

"That's enough, Gail." Conrad's voice was stern. "He's working for the government. They don't take kindly to interference by civilians. Even when they're family."

Gail's mouth gaped. Jack gave his father a harassed glare. "Thanks a lot, Dad."

"Don't you thank me, boy," Conrad's hands trembled badly, but he still managed to make one into a fist. He shook it under Jack's nose. "When this is over, I'm going to thrash the daylights out of you."

Doc stepped forward and put a hand on Connie's arm. "Steady, old man." His expression was grave. "You'd better let one of us go with you, Jack. If she's hurt . . ."

Jack shook his head. He didn't want to think about the possibility of Ivan getting his hands on Jessie. "I need all of you back at the show." He described Kryukov and his men. "Keep an eye out them, they may show up asking questions about

Jess or me. Make sure no one gets in their way." He looked around at the street.

"I've got to get down to the Port. Now."

Harv Allen slapped his keys in Jack's palm and pointed to the four-by-four parked a few yards away from the second car. "Take my truck."

Jack clapped the man on the shoulder before he went to the truck and drove off.

A moment later, several uniformed officers spilled out of the police station, scanning the streets intently.

"Oh, look. The cops finally noticed Jack's escaped." Nancy peered at Conrad.

"What are you thinking, letting him go like that?"

"Trust the boy, Nancy. He's been doing this for a long time."

"How do you know what he's doing, Connie?" Gail wanted to know.

The older man lifted a brow. "Because I rather enjoyed playing possum and listening to all those secret phone calls about smugglers he thinks I don't know about."

Doc stared after Jack. "We can't let Jack do this by himself."

Nancy grinned. "Okay, so we don't." She noticed one passing uniformed officer who was staring at her. "Hey, pal, you're going to catch yourself some mosquitoes if you don't shut that mouth."

Terence, Gail, Bobby and Conrad agreed to return to the show to watch for Kryukov's men. The midgets were disappointed until Doc pointed out they would be the most effective lookouts.

"I can think of a million places to hide," Terence began thoughtfully as they walked down to hail a cab.

"Gee, you don't get confused when you run out of fingers?" Gail said.

"I bet you were adopted," Terence said before he stuck out his tongue.

"Right after you were hatched," Gail said, and returned the favor.

"Children. Behave yourselves." Nancy turned to Harv and Doc. "Okay, guys, let's go cruise the waterfront."

#

Kryukov made a point of being present, along with two of his men, while the ship's doctor strip-searched Jessie. She endured the painful degradation. Any protest or struggle would only further delight her captors.

"I can find nothing, Akoola," the physician said as he stripped off his latex gloves.

"She's clean."

"Give her back her clothes, then bring her to me." Ivan strode out of the infirmary.

Jessie dressed rapidly, ignoring the loathsome stares of the two guards. She tried to calculate how much time it would take Harry Parker to arrange Jack's release. How much longer it would take Jack to discover she had not remained at the carnival. How quickly he would get to the docks. It could be anywhere from two to twelve hours.

Jessie suspected she didn't have that many minutes left.. The only way she could stall Kryukov was to withhold the schematics. As long as the Russian didn't know where they were, he wouldn't kill her.

He'd only make her wish she was dead.

Kruiyokov's leering thugs escorted her back up on deck. She was shoved into the main cabin where the ship's controls were located. Jessie appeared bland but in

fact examined everything closely. If an opportunity for escape presented itself, she needed to know what she could use. The assembled group of men went quiet when she entered the cabin.

Ivan placed a straight-backed chair in the center of the deck. Ordered one of her guards to tie her to it. Stroked his mustache and watched as she was. Tight coils of dirty rope were looped around her arms and legs and secured. Without preamble, the men filed out, leaving Jessie alone with Kryukov.

"You didn't have to tie me up," she said, and hoped he wouldn't notice the sweat trickling between her shoulder blades. In plain light, she saw he didn't resemble her father as much as remind her of him. They both had the same eyes, she realized. Self-absorbed and utterly ruthless. "You know I'm not armed."

"After last night" -- Ivan held up his bandaged arm -- "I am inclined to be much more cautious with you, Katarina."

So he knew who she was. "I was defending myself."

"Is that what you call it?" Ivan said, and chuckled. He pulled another chair opposite Jessie and sat down. On a console beside him, she saw a half-full bottle of vodka and two shot glasses had been placed on a tray. "So tell me" --he consulted the driver's license they had taken from her -- "Jessica Kelly? Surely Katarina is much better. You should change it. Tell me, Jessica, why did you come here?"

"To get my money," she said.

"What about your partner?"

"I don't have one."

"The man who knocked out several of Fyodor's teeth seemed interested in protecting you."

She didn't allow her expression to change. "Hamilton works for the carnival. I've been using him to maintain cover. When he saw the men, he reacted." Jessie shrugged. "Americans watch too much television."

"Ah, I see," Ivan nodded. Picked up the bottle of vodka. Regarded it fondly. "They think everything is like their action- adventure movies, don't they?"

She allowed herself to smile as Ivan filled both shot glasses to the brim. When he lifted one to her lips, she turned away. Papa's favorite drink had been vodka, and the smell of it made her nauseous.

"No, thank you."

"Drink," he said, and tossed back his own measure. "You see? It is not drugged." Jessie shook her head. Ivan's hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of her hair. He yanked her head back. "I dislike drinking alone, Katarina." The Russian poured the fiery alcohol into Jessie's mouth. At the same time, his fingers pinched her nose shut. Jessie had to swallow it -- or suffocate. The undiluted liquor seared her throat, but she refused to cough or sputter.

"You don't follow orders very well, Galoobaya," Kryukov said, then drained another shot. "You are not my superior."

"I am now." He set down the empty glasses. "We have a simple task before us. You will tell me what I wish to know.. At once."

"I can't."

Ivan's thick hand slapped her face without warning. Her head snapped back. The strength behind the blow split Jessie's lip. Coppery blood spread over her tongue.

"Don't waste my time, woman," he said. "Not if you want to survive the night. Do you understand me?"

She nodded slowly. At the same time, she imagined him on Papa's wheel while she threw flaming knives at him.

"We know where Cutter hid the components. As I speak, my men are retrieving them. All we lack is the schematics for the guidance system. You were transporting them. Where are they?"

"As I told you last night. Safe."

Kruiyokov raised his fist. "Tell me where they are.."

"The location of the designs are the only reason you have to keep me alive."

Jessie's lip throbbed.

He hit her again. Closed-fisted, directly into the diaphragm. Agony exploded into her lungs.

When she could speak, her voice remained even. "If I tell you where they are, you will kill me. Hit me all you want, Akoola. I am not participating in my own murder."

"They are not so important. We have the equipment to enable the ICBM array," Kryukov said. "Cutter's components will allow us to access the launch sequence."

"Each missile has an autonomous computer core." Jessie nodded as she saw the effect her words had on the Russian. "Yes, I know very well what I am transporting. The guidance cores can be programmed only by following

schematic specifications. You can certainly fire the missiles. You simply can't target them without the designs."

"Cutter was wise to inform you of their value," Ivan said. His thick hands knotted.

"Cutter had nothing to do with it," Jessie said. "My superiors want their money, Akoola. You don't want to kill me."

"Perhaps I don't." His small, sinister eyes inspected her for a moment. "You know, you are very small, Miss Jessica Kelly, and without your knives, quite helpless."

"You underestimated me once," she said. "Don't make the same mistake again."

KrUYOKOV suddenly reached out. Clamped his hand on her breast. Squeezed her flesh cruelly. Jessie reacted to the pain, jerking against her bonds. Her eyes went wide with terror for a single instant before she controlled herself. Ivan released her just as quickly.

"As I thought." He was pleased as he rose to his feet. "With women, it is always so simple." He placed one thick finger against her bloodied lips. "For a man, always a pleasure."

"Not always so simple." Jessie's fingers curled into her palms. Too late, too late.

He would rape her now. Oh God, Jack, where are you?

"My men have far less patience than I, Miss Kelly." KrUYOKOV gestured to the outer deck. "They grow weary and anxious to return home." His callused palm moved to caress the bruises he'd left on her cheek. "Perhaps it is because they have been denied the comfort of a woman for many weeks." Jessie's chin

trembled for an instant as his thumb rubbed beneath it. "Yes, now you understand. I do not have to do this myself. Well, perhaps the first time."

"I'm not afraid of you, Kryukov."

"But you are afraid of my men, eh?" Ivan's voice dropped several notches. "Some of them are not so very nice. They were guards in the gulags, you know? They have a certain . . . expertise with female prisoners."

"You may as well kill me now," Jessie heard herself say. "I won't tell you where the designs are."

"Oh no, my dear," Ivan shook his head, and laughed with genuine pleasure. "You will tell me everything. Perhaps not today, or tomorrow. Shpik like you are trained to resist, eh? But think of it, my dear. You are very small. Your skin is so delicate. How will you feel after ten are done with you? After twenty?"

Jessie stopped listening to him. Her eyes became unfocused. Her gaze fixed. Like other abused children, she had long ago mastered the ability to retreat from reality. She would do the same when Kryukov turned her over to his men.

Her last coherent thought was wistful. Jack, my love . . .

Ivan slapped Jessie several times. Blustered and threatened to do worse. Cursed her as Jessie remained unmoved. His last, vicious blow knocked her unconscious, for her head drooped down and lolled against her chest. He went to the door and bellowed for one of the men to remove her from the cabin.

"Shall I put her in the crew's quarters?" The avid eyes of the guard moved greedily over Jessie's limp body.

Ivan considered it for a moment, then shook his head. "No one is to touch her.

Not yet. Throw her in the hold with Kostya."

"Kostya is dead, Akoola."

Ivan shrugged. "Throw her in there anyway."

Chapter Sixteen

It took precious minutes for Jack to work his way through the crowded streets. He was forced to make several detours around areas that had been blocked off altogether.

"Hey, man!"

A costumed Harlequin appeared out of nowhere. A moment later, his colorful form sprawled across the front of Harv's truck. He grinned up at Jack. A blissful, bourbon-soaked daze enhanced the foolishness of his clown's make-up.

Jack hit the horn a few times. "Okay, mon ami, get off the truck."

"Aw, c'mon!" Squinting hazel eyes shimmered with glee. "How 'bout I be the hood ornament?"

Jack put the truck in park and got out. "Come on, imbecile." He grunted as he hauled the drunk from the hood. He held him upright until the man regained his balance. The man's pointed hat fell off, and Jack patiently replaced it atop his wavy brown hair. "The party is that way," Jack said, and gave the man a gentle shove in the direction of the other revelers.

He turned, and found himself in a swirl of silk. A woman in a belly-dancer's veils had shimmied behind him. Now her slim golden arms lifted and linked around his neck.

"Hi there, big fellah." Her southern drawl was low and intimate. The scent of roses filled Jack's nose.

"Hi there, yourself." Jack reached up and pulled the clinging hands away.

"Excuse me." He swiveled and found the Harlequin standing in front of the truck again. Now he was having a conversation with the grill. With thinning patience and a threat to use him as tread cleaner, Jack sent the clown on his way. The man stumbled off muttering about ungrateful killjoys. He turned back to find the woman had climbed into the cab through the open driver's side door.

"Hold on, lady," Jack put his hands around her waist and pulled her out. "I can't give you a ride right now."

"Why, honey, I'll go where you're going." She was a pretty, reckless-looking redhead with hazy blue eyes. The slight slur in her voice told Jack she was feeling no pain, either. "Don't you want some company?"

Jack quickly improvised. "Sorry, but I'm in a hurry. My wife is having a baby, and I've got to get to the hospital."

The woman pouted and draped one of her silky veils around his neck. "The good ones are always taken."

On impulse, Jack leaned over and kissed her hard. The drowsy blue eyes went round. "Keep looking, chere," he said, then climbed into the truck and slammed the door. He hit the accelerator and backed out of the side street. If Jack had checked his rearview, he would have seen the woman take a small cell phone from her handbag.

"Sedoi, eta Krasnaya," the belly dancer said.. "Chameleon is moving out of the Vieux Carre," she said, and recited the license plate number. Her eyes were clear now. Her playful expression became all business. "Toward the Port. Yes, I

planted the tracer.." The agent gingerly touched her reddened lips. "Remind me to tell Galoobaya she has excellent taste."

Three blocks away, Jack muttered under his breath as he swerved to avoid yet another group of drunken revelers. "Hold on, Jessie." The feeling something had gone wrong grew stronger with every passing moment. "Just hold on."

He couldn't take the chance of waiting until it was dark to approach the dock. It was by pure chance that he spotted Jessie's rental car parked out of the way as he approached the pier entrance.

"Smart girl."

He pulled up beside it and left Harv's truck there. From the warehouse, Jack ran down a maze of alleyways until he reached the edge of the commercial dock.

Crouched behind a huge stack of baled cotton, Jack scanned the line of ships.

There were several possibilities presented by the assortment of vessels. Jack didn't have time to search each one. Not if he wanted to get Jessie out alive.

Keeping to sides of buildings, he worked his way down along the dock. Inspected every sailor and dock worker he saw. At last Jack spotted a familiar face peering over the railing of a rusted old trawler. He was one of the men who had attacked Jessie.

"Bingo." Jack said under his breath. Now, how to board the ship? He tugged off his shirt and caught the transparent scarf before it floated to the ground.

The belly-dancer. Of course.

#

Fyodr was restless and bored. The woman had been taken below and locked away. None of them were to have any fun with her. He ran his tongue over his teeth, where the empty gaps still throbbed. Fyodr wanted to be the first with the woman once Akoola was through with her. He had definite plans for the knife-throwing bitch.

"Yoo-hoo!" a husky voice called.

Fyodr looked down. A tall, shapely female was waving at him from the dock. Her blazing red hair was mostly hidden beneath a scarf tied around her head, and she wore a man's trousers, but her face was lovely. She was naked from the waist up. One hand clutched a wet shirt against her enormous breasts.

"Can you help me, please?" she asked, and coughed. "I fell off the dock in the water, and I'm a mess."

Fyodr grinned, winced from the pain that caused, then pointed to the gangplank. "Eedeetee sooda, come up, come up," he said. The others would never believe this!

She hurried up the ramp leading to the ship. Her smile of gratitude was dazzling as she reached him. Fyodr couldn't take his eyes off her breasts. Surely he had never seen a pair as large in his life. It was a miracle that she did not walk like a hunchback.

The redhead pulled the scarf from her hair. Fyodr was so busy admiring the way her enormous nipples poked against the wet fabric that he never saw her hair darken to black.

"Thank you," she said. A man's fist plowed into Fyodr's chin. The last thing he saw were the distended breasts beginning to deflate. "So much."

Jack caught the guard before he hit the deck. Looked around. Dragged the unconscious man behind a large storage locker. He stripped the pants and shirt from the Russian. Dressed in them rapidly. Tearing the sleeves from the wet shirt, he bound the guard's wrists and ankles. The harem scarf made a particularly effective gag.

"Fyodr!"

Jack peered into the unconscious face, then stood up. He made a show of stretching lazily. Tucked the guard's gun in the waist of the borrowed pants.

"Zdyace." Jack coughed again to cover the pitch of his voice. He walked casually away from his victim toward the sound of the voice.

"Indolent pig, you have the devil's luck." The other Russian met him halfway. Handed him a small automatic rifle. Spat over the side of the ship. "The Captain wants you to go check on the woman in the hold."

Jack nodded and started toward the back of the ship. The man's hand shot out and grabbed his arm. Jack readied himself for an attack.

"Idiot. The hatch is that way." The guard chuckled. "Already thinking of how to do her, eh? Just be sure to leave some for the rest of us."

Jack grinned and nodded. Thought of throwing the leering Russian off the ship into the bay. Turned and strolled off in the opposite direction. He spotted the hatch that led below decks. Climbed down. Held the rifle out before him.

The bowels of the ship smelled of rotten fish, motor oil and stagnant air. The hatch to the hold was bolted from the outside. It only took a moment to release the latch. Jack yanked it open and stepped into the darkness.

"Jess?"

As his eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light, he saw several large empty crates. Heaps of straw. The odor of old fish was stronger now. Was that the outline of a small form huddled on the floor? He felt along the inner wall until he found a power switch, and flipped it on.

"Jessie!" He knelt down next to her and turned her over. Felt her throat for a pulse. Breathed again when he found it, strong and steady, at the small depression between her collarbones.

The light was not kind. One side of her face was swollen and blotched with the dark bruises. When he tore the gag off, he saw dried blood on her mouth. "That son of a bitch." Gently he touched her torn lip. Closed his eyes for a moment. Imagined gutting Krutyokov with a dull blade.

"Jess, wake up."

She lay limp and unresponsive in his arms. Jack smoothed back her ruffled hair. Called her name several times.

"Jessie. Come on, chere, open those eyes for me. It's Jack." He felt all over her skull. There were no lumps, no lacerations. He could smell vodka on her breath. What had Krutyokov done to her?

#

Jessie regained consciousness a single degree at a time.. She heard her name being rumbled out in a deep voice, and felt her throbbing face being caressed. A sigh left her lips. Then she remembered KrUYOKOV, and her eyelids flew open. She tried to lash out, but her hands were tightly bound.

"No, no, Jessie. It's me." Above her, a man's dark, blurry visage swiftly coalesced into a more familiar and beloved face.

She blinked, unable to trust her eyes. Jack?

"Hello, chere."

She wasn't dreaming. "Jack!" She threw herself at him and felt his strong arms close around her.

"Next time you want to try bondage, baby, come to me first," Jack said. He was holding her so tightly she couldn't breathe. Jessie didn't care. He was sweaty and damp and absolutely wonderful.

"I will." Her mouth was horribly dry from the gag he had removed, and she swallowed a few times. "How did you find me?"

"It didn't take a lot of effort. A good thing, too," he said, and glared at her. His hands worked the ropes binding her hands loose. "When this is over, I'm going to beat the hell out of you."

"No, you won't." She tried to smile, but her lips and face were stiff with pain. "I have some good news. Kryukov hasn't got the components yet."

"The designs?"

She shook her head. "He didn't get those, either."

"I've got to find a way to get you out of here." Jack checked the weapons he carried. "I've got enough ammunition, but we're slightly outnumbered. There's no cover up top, either. I doubt we'd make it across the upper deck."

"Leave me here."

Fierce black eyes moved to hers. "The hell I will.."

"Get off the boat," she said. "You can get those idiot FBI agents scouting the dock. Bring them back with you."

"Or stay, Mr. Hamilton."

They both looked up at the open hatch door. Jessie closed her eyes and uttered a defeated sound.

Kryukov and six of his men stood watching. Guns trained on Jack and Jessie.

Ready to fire.

"How convenient that you both should come to me.." The Russian laughed. "I should never leave the ship."

Jack got up slowly. One hand raised the gun he had taken from the Russian. The other held the rifle steady at his waist. He pointed both at Kryukov. "Let her go."

"You were right, Miss Kelly." Ivan rubbed one end of his mustache between two thick fingers. "This is just like the movies. Shall I check to see if an actor is hidden behind those crates, ready to spring out and save the day?" He laughed at his own joke, then waved his hand at Jack. "Put down your weapons, Mr. Hamilton."

"Kiss my ass," Jack said.

KrUYOKOV stopped laughing. "Put them down, or my men will begin using Miss Kelly for target practice. Starting with her very talented fingers."

Jack hesitated. The Russian's men raised their guns and aimed them at Jessie's hands. With a curse, he tossed both weapons to the deck. One of the men approached cautiously and retrieved them. Another came over and roughly searched Jack.

"Neecheevo, Akoola," he said. "Nothing.."

"Good." KrUYOKOV regarded them thoughtfully. "Now, what am I to do? We must wait for Shilenko and the others to return with the components." He frowned at Jessie, but his small eyes were gleaming with maniacal glee. "Perhaps by then Miss Kelly will be ready to turn over the schematics to us."

"Forget it." Jack put an arm around Jessie. "You're not touching her."

"You, Mr. Hamilton, have very little say in what I do to Miss Kelly," KrUYOKOV said as his men filed back out of the hold. "If you are still alive." Before Ivan shut the hatch, he smiled back at Jack and Jessie. "I will give you a few hours to think it over. Remember my promise to you, my dear. Do you think it will be more amusing if your lover is made to watch?"

They wasted no time once they were locked in. Jack prowled the confines of the hold. Jessie searched the containers for anything that could be used as a weapon. The heat was becoming intense. Lack of ventilation made the confined area into a rather smelly sauna.

"Nothing," she said at last. Stood up. Brushed the loose straw from her arms and legs. "Not even a crate we can break apart . . . wait." She spied a plastic bundle

in the far corner. It took her a minute to crawl behind the container to get to it.

"There's something -- oh, God."

"What?" Jack came over as she quickly backed out. Jessie held a hand tightly pressed over her mouth and nose.

"It's a man. He's been beaten to death." Jessie's voice shook badly. "Probably Cutter."

Jack held her until she was steadier, then went to try the hatch. For the hundredth time, it wouldn't budge. He slammed his fist against the heavy steel door. "Damn it!"

Jessie sat back on her heels. "That's it, then." She wiped the dust from her palms on the legs of her jeans. Raised her head slowly. Kept her voice even. "You know what happens next."

Jack swiveled around. "Give him the schematics."

"I can't," she said. "It will take them years to sort out the targeting technology without them. Time enough for Prism and your government to put an end to STAC's insanity."

"You have the genuine designs, don't you?" She nodded. Jack swore at length.

"Why the hell didn't you use a bogus set?"

"The schematics had to be examined several times during the setup of the sting. STAC wanted assurances I could deliver the genuine article. I had to have the real ones to pass all their inspections."

Jack put his head back against the door. Thrust a hand through his sweat-soaked hair. "Kruyokov will interrogate us separately. I want you to try to get over the side of the ship."

"No, he won't split us up. He wants the other to be an audience." Jessie shuddered as she thought of Ivan's promise. "Jack, when they come for us . . . " she paused and collected her nerve. Made herself say the words. "When they come, I want you to kill me."

He started working at the door again. "We'll find a way out."

"He intends to turn me over to the crew, to be gang-raped."

"We'll get out of here."

"Promise me." Her voice broke. "Promise me you'll do it before they get their hands on me."

"No, Jess."

"Damn you, promise me!" she shouted. She sprang to her feet. Tears spilled down, making twin pale tracks in the dirt clinging to her skin. "There are more than thirty of them, Jack, for God's sake!"

He was across the hold and had her in his arms before she could take another breath. Jessie pressed against his big frame. Burrowed into his damp shirt. Drew on his strength and warmth to keep the terror at bay.

"I will get us out of here, Jess. I swear I will."

"And if you can't?"

"If I can't . . . " his hands encircled her throat, gentle but firm. His next words were uttered in a barely audible murmur. "I won't let them touch you. I promise."

Jessie had dreaded the thought of being forced to endure an endless succession of rape. Now she saw the unwilling conviction in his stark, black eyes. Jack would take care of it. He would spare her that much.

"You'd think that I could do it myself." She grimaced. "I've never killed anyone . . . except my Father. I don't think I could do it again."

"Jess. You were a kid. Your Father had been beating you for years."

She went still. He didn't know. Jessie recalled what she said when she had told Jack about her Father. She had been too ashamed to tell him everything. "The moment of truth."

"What?"

"I have to tell you the rest of it. The whole truth." The bruises on her face plain now against her stark paleness. "Something I didn't want you to know."

#

Sedoi watched as the FBI agents made yet another very public promenade of the dock. If they had worked for him, he decided, he would have shot them himself.

"They train these men in Quantico to do this," he said with soft wonder.

"Incredible."

"I like the one with the Boston accent. He's cute," Krasnaya said. A stony glance from Sedoi made her roll her eyes. "So they are young and not as discreet as they should be."

"They are walking calamities waiting to happen." The steely eyes scanned the row of vessels.

"You think the one on the end?"

"The Galdhúpiggen. Perhaps. Why?"

Krasnaya shrugged, causing her gauzy costume to ripple. "If it were anymore Russian, they would be shooting a remake of The Hunt for Red October around it." She reached down and tugged at one side of the brief panties beneath the transparent gauze trousers.

Sedoi frowned as he watched her. "Why did you not change into more appropriate attire?" His disapproval of her clothing was exceeded only by his irritation with Jessie. "You resemble an escapee from a harem."

"I am supposed to look like a belly dancer," she said. "I believe your instructions were for me to get down here, as fast as I could? That did not include a stop at my hotel to change, Nachalneek."

"Do not call me that."

"Ah, sorry. Sedoi." Krasnaya grimaced. She knew better than to identify him with anything but a code name on American soil.

He turned his head back to the pier. "You should keep a case with clothes in the car."

"Ah, if only I was as perfect as you." The redhead sighed. "I could conquer the world."

Sedoi snorted. "Not in that garment."

Her dimples appeared. "Well, the Middle East, perhaps."

"America has infected you with humor," Sedoi said. "Hope it's contagious," she said, leaned over and breathed on him deliberately.

Sedoi's lips twitched. "Insolent female. Enough. We must find a way onto the ship." His flat gaze consulted the horizon, then his watch. "It will be dark soon.

Hamilton arrived here over an hour ago."

Krasnaya's impish smile faded. "Kryukov could do a great deal in one hour."

"In the name of God." Sedoi spotted a small group approaching the docks. "Look at this."

#

"Papa didn't beat me, Jack," Jessie said. "I couldn't have performed injured. And the only thing that mattered were the performances."

"If he didn't beat you, then how . . . " Another possibility occurred to Jack. One that slashed him down to his soul. Jessie must have seen the color drain from his face. She lifted a hand to his cheek, and shook her head again.

"No, Jack, he didn't."

"There are different ways to hurt a kid," he said as he covered her hand with his own. "Too many."

"He didn't molest me. Sometimes I had wished he would. Beat me. Hurt me some other way." Her hand slipped from his face to her side. "The end would have come much faster." Jessie stopped there.

"Tell me, chere."

The shame intensified. "I'm not sure I can."

Jack laced his fingers with hers. "I want to know.."

"You have to understand, Papa didn't see me as a person. Not after my mother died. To him, I became merely an extension of his act. A device to be used. An animal to be trained." Jack squeezed her hand. Jessie forced herself to go on.

"When someone trains an animal, particularly for a circus act, they use the reward method. If your dog learns a new trick, you give it with a treat, right?"

"I don't have a dog," he said, "but yes, that's the principle."

"And when the dog doesn't do the trick right?"

Jack's fingers stopped caressing hers. "No," he said.

"No treat. No reward. Papa's rule was simple. One meal for every mistake."

Jessie looked away.

"He starved you."

Jessie nodded.

A sharp sound came from his lips, something that if he had released it would have been a howl of rage.

She pulled her hand free. "You wanted to know why I don't eat. Now you do. All those years, I went hungry, day after day after day. Eventually it becomes a part of living. I don't feel hunger the way other people do. I never will."

Jack thought of the big Russian. In the photographs, Yuskovitch had looked big. Robust. Well-fed. And he did this to his only child?

Jessie's voice went on, without inflection. "An adult human being can live for surprisingly long periods without food. Children can be trained to do the same. Still . . . in the beginning it was very hard. I didn't understand why he was doing that to me." She smiled slightly. "There were moments I cheated him out of his

punishment. When he wasn't watching. Circuses have plenty of food concessions. People throw away more than you can imagine."

Jack pressed his palms against his eyes. Trying to shut out images her words wrought. Jessie as a little girl. Furtively sorting through garbage cans. "You went through the trash for food."

Her chin lifted. "When you're starving, you have no pride. No dignity. To find a half-eaten candy apple, or part of a hot dog after going days without food . . . I can't describe it to you. Sometimes I even dared to hide what I could find in our trailer. Later, when he kept me locked up, I couldn't even do that. I learned to be very good with the knives."

"For God's sake, chere, why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I did, many times, at first," Jessie said. Her voice shook a little. "Papa was very persuasive. 'I sent her to bed without her supper,' he would say, or 'Such an actress! She will say I beat her next.' And after I tried to tell, to get help, he would beat me."

"Was that what happened in the end?"

"It had been a bad time. I had been starved for almost two months. No one knew. It was the baggy costumes Papa made me wear.. They thought it was to give him leeway when he threw the knives at me." She looked down at her thin frame. "I weighed fifty-two pounds when I killed him. After that, I had a complete breakdown."

"Be glad you did," Jack said through clenched teeth. "If he was still alive, I'd do him myself." He regarded her solemn face. "They took you to a hospital."

"Yes. The years of starvation had stunted my growth -- that's why I'm so small -- but that was the only lasting effect. The doctors weaned me back to solid food. Once I was strong enough to be moved, I was sent to an asylum. I spent two years there, putting my life back together." She looked up at him. "Learning to face my fear."

"You never touched a knife again, did you?"

"Not until last night. Now you understand why I threw up." She went to one of the containers and sat down on the edge. "And why I didn't want you to know."

He understood, more than she knew. A wall of knives couldn't have kept Jack from going to her.

"You are something, Jessie." He feathered a kiss on her brow. Then he grabbed her arms and shook her once. Hard. "How can you feel ashamed? After what you've gone through? Jesus Christ, you're the strongest woman I've ever known."

"Thank you for that." She dropped her eyes to the deck as he stroked her arms.

"I'm glad I told you the truth."

He didn't comment. The truth was a sore subject with him at the moment.

"Can I ask you to do something for me?"

"Name it," Jack said.

"Make love to me."

It was the last thing he expected her to ask him. "You want me to what?"

"Make love to me. Here. Right now."

"Chere, I don't know if you've noticed," he felt he had to point out, "But right now we're being held hostage. By terrorists. In the belly of a ship."

"We're going to die." Jessie sounded calm. Even reasonable. "You know it. I know it. I want to be with you. One last time."

Jack forced a laugh. "You think it's that hopeless?"

"I know it is. There's no way out. Jack." She touched his arm. "Please."

Her honesty and courage decided it. Jack stepped away from her. "You may change your mind in a minute. Sit down, Jessie."

She stared at him. "What is it?"

"It's time, chere, for my moment of truth."

#

The Intensive Care Unit was eerily quiet. Only the hiss and hum of machines that kept its patients clinging to life colored the air. An armed Marine guard stood outside one glassed-in cubicle. He admitted no one but the shift nurses and the two men cleared to have access to the occupant.

Wilcox stood silent by the window as Harrison Parker watched his wounded agent's chest rise and fall. Tom Bardon was being kept alive by the respirator, and what remained of his formidable will.

"Mr. Parker?"

Harry glanced up at the middle-aged nurse waiting in the doorway. "Yes?"

"Dr. Ramstead just called. He'll be here within the hour."

Ramstead would be administering the drugs that might pull Bardon out of his coma. And probably kill Tom in the process. "Thank you, nurse."

When she withdrew, Wilcox looked from the patient to his boss. "Harry, do you really have to do this?"

"I don't have a choice." Harry's icy green eyes examined the battered face nearly obscured by tubes and dressings. "Someone murdered my secretary today trying to get to me. George is already dead. Tom is the only one who can tell us where that bastard Kruyokov is." Bardon's eyelids twitched at the sound of the Russian's name. "I'll be damned. Bardon?" Harry took hold of the man's limp hand. "Tom?"

The sunken eyes opened to mere slits. Harry leaned over the bed to place himself in the limited area of Bardon's vision. He grinned as his agent's dark eyes widened. Slowly focused. Filled with confusion..

"Tom. Do you understand me?"

Bardon went rigid. All at once he recognized his surroundings. The waves of pain. The tubes entering nearly every orifice of his body. A low groan thrummed in his chest.

"You're in the hospital. Ivan and his thugs jumped you. Do you remember?"

The endotracheal tube in Bardon's throat didn't allow him to speak. He gave a single weak nod.

"You and Williams were ambushed down on the docks in New Orleans. We flew you to D.C. after your surgery." A single eyebrow raised in an imperative, silent question. Harry understood. "George is dead, Tom."

The dark eyes closed tightly, then reopened. The savage fury in them didn't trouble Parker. He knew Bardon needed a reason to fight for his life. He'd just given him an excellent one.

"I know, Tom. We're going to nail him. I promise you." Harry knew he couldn't expect Bardon to remain conscious much longer. He pressed on. "Chameleon is out of commission. Someone planted a bomb in my car today. I can't risk using anyone else. I need to know where Kryukov's ship is. Did you find out?" Another nod. "Can you write the name?"

Bardon's fingers flexed. Harry quickly placed a pencil in Bardon's left hand and held a writing tablet underneath it. The I.V. needle taped to the back of his hand made it difficult for Bardon to write. His thick brows drew together. With agonizing effort, he scrawled a line of symbols before the pencil slipped free.

"Thanks, Tom."

Wilcox looked over Parker's shoulder at the pad. "That looks like one of those no-smoking signs," he said, pointing to the "Ț". "Is that Russian?"

Harry got to his feet. "No. It's Norwegian. Get the Bureau on the horn. FAX them a copy of this. Tell them we're looking for a Norwegian vessel with these letters or something close." He glanced back at Bardon, who had slipped back into unconsciousness. "At or around the dock where Tom and George were found."

Chapter Seventeen

Jessie eased back on the edge of a container. Jack didn't want to tell her this.

She could feel the absolute tension radiating from him. Whatever it was, it was as bad as Papa's abuse. Maybe worse.

"Jack, you don't have to."

"I do, chere." His accent became thicker. A shudder ran over his back as he continued to avoid her gaze. "No one knows about it. There was no one I could tell." His shoulders squared.. "Je suis seul dans ceci."

"You're not alone any more," she said.

"I never wanted anyone to find out." He turned around. "But I want you to know."

What could be so terrible? "Okay."

"It happened while I was in the Marines. My unit was one of the first sent over during the Gulf War. We stayed for the duration. From the first incursion to the march on Kuwait. Desert fighting." Jack made a disgusted sound. "Only thing worse than that is Central America in high summer."

"I haven't had the pleasure of either," she said, hoping to ease the tension.

He didn't seem to hear her. Jack started to pace back and forth in front of the hatch.

"My unit was usually on point when Allied Forces entered enemy territory. The SCUD attacks increased. We had to integrate with some reservists during the push into Kuwait. They were just kids, weekend warriors. Zero combat experience."

Jessie saw the way his face changed. He was remembering it. Seeing it instead of her.

"One night, a couple of them lit a fire during guard duty. I woke up when I smelled it, and put it out, but the damage was done. The thermal signature enabled the enemy to pinpoint our position. The first explosion was maybe thirty seconds later. I woke up in a Saudi hospital a week later. They told me I was the only survivor."

"Oh, Jack," she whispered. "How terrible."

"I was burned. Second and third degree burns over seventy- five percent of my body." Jessie gasped. His mouth curled derisively when he saw her subsequent confusion. "There's a reason I don't have any scars, but I'll get to that. They told me I was going to die. I was supposed to die. So I waited."

He stopped pacing. Faced her.

"But I didn't die, Jessie. Something happened to me." His deep voice was tight now. Each word seemed wrestled from his lips. "The ground-to-ground armaments they used were special. They detonated just above targets rather than on impact. Their payload was dispersed more effectively that way."

Above the target? That meant -- she got to her feet. "What were they using in them, Jack?"

"The Saudis weren't sure what it was." He swung away and went to the hatch. Braced himself against it with both hands. "I found out when I was debriefed. The U.S. military found plenty of it when they performed the autopsies on the others."

"My God." Jessie's voice was hushed. "Chemical weapons?"

"Yeah. Nerve toxin. The other side liked to experiment with that stuff. They hit us with some kind of new blend."

"Jack?" She went to him. "What happened?" He didn't answer her. She tentatively reached out, placed her hand against the back of his shoulder. "Jack, please, tell me."

"It's better if I . . . show you."

Beneath the palm of her hand Jessie felt something move.. She spread her fingers. The fabric over his back began to bulge and undulate. As if something was moving under his skin. Something that was alive.

She snatched her hand away. "Jack?"

"Just a few . . . more . . . seconds . . . "

Jack's entire body was rippling now. Shrinking and swelling in different places.

Jessie watched without daring to blink. Move. Breathe.

Individual muscle groups appeared to be rearranging themselves under his skin. Bones seemed to alter their shape and length. She could hear no sound from his metamorphosis, other than his rapid breathing. Somehow Jack was changing into something else.

His body grew slimmer. More compact. His skin texture became rougher, the pigment paler. Even his hair's matte blackness was lightening to something else.

Then the strands of hair themselves seemed to retract into his scalp. Became shorter, until it was only a few inches in length all over his head.

How could any of this be possible?

Jessie watched. Another ten seconds passed, then his body stopped reforming. The process was evidently complete. He didn't turn around.

"You're the only one I've ever done this in front of," she heard him say. "C'est pour vous."

"If you've done this for me," Jessie said, "then why won't you turn around and show me the rest?"

Jack turned around. If what had happened before was inconceivable, the sight of his face made her doubt her own sanity. It couldn't be.

The name left her lips with most of her breath. "Danny?"

Danny's eyes regarded her steadily. He spoke for the first time. "No, Jess. It's me. It's always been me." And it was Jack. Jack behind Danny's face. Jack's voice coming from Danny's throat.

She backed away, until one of the containers pressed against her calves. "Why?"

"I had to keep an eye on you."

"But . . . " Jessie couldn't grasp it. Jack and Danny were two distinct people. Two separate men who looked nothing like each other. Like night and day. "Why did you pretend to be mute?"

Danny's eyes narrowed. "I can't change my voice. The gas I was exposed to damaged my larynx."

"So you had to be mute," Jessie said. "But which one are you? Who is the real man? Danny, or Jack?"

"You don't get it. There is no real man. Not anymore." His voice was so bitter she flinched. "I can become anyone." Danny's pale face darkened. Sprouted long,

gleaming black hair. He changed into Nancy Carguitto, complete with pelt.

"Nance's twin sister." Nancy became Nathan Stokes, and lifted a pudgy hand to his face. "My own boss."

"I want to see what you looked like before this happened," Jessie said. "I want to see your real face."

At last, Jack's familiar features emerged. With a distinct difference. He showed her the burned, scarred face of a man with no hair or discernible features. Just two eyes and a mouth. The twisted line of his lips parted. "This is what I was before the toxin changed me. What I would have looked like if this hadn't happened to me."

"Oh, love." She went to him then. Her arms slipped around him. Her cheek pressed to his chest. Tears flowed down her face as she felt him gently touch her hair.

They stood like that for a long time. Jessie weeping. Jack stroking her hand with one hand, holding her against him with the other. And she had thought he could never understand her pain, her scars, Jessie thought.

When she had control of herself, she raised her wet face. He had become the Jack she knew again.

"This is the face I was born with, Jessie." He touched his face. "Whatever they hit me with seemed to speed up the healing process. My burns were gone in weeks instead of months. And I don't scar. Ever."

"Why did this happen to you, Jack, and not the other men?" "I'm the son of an albino and a contortionist. Whatever my parents passed along to me absorbed

the toxin. Changed me instead of killing me." He wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Their genes." Jessie's eyes widened. "Of course. Your father's unnatural flexibility combined with your mother's absence of pigmentation. You must carry both as recessive genes."

"I don't know. Maybe. I'm no scientist," he said. "All I know is it surprised the hell out of me when I found out. It took time, and practice, but I found I could change into anyone. At will."

"How long can you maintain a change?" Jessie asked.

"As long as I'm awake, indefinitely." His lips quirked. "For some reason, I can't do it in my sleep."

"Does it hurt you, when you do this?"

"No. On the contrary. It's been known to save me considerable pain," Jack said, and his face was replaced by the craggy, good-natured aspect of Harv Allen.

"It was you, that day at the sideshow!" She smacked him on the arm. "I should have guessed you'd tricked me."

"I've done nothing but trick you, chere." Harv's features began scaling over. A minute later the Manigator looked at her. It was as if they had returned to that day in the tent. That first touch. Now it was easy for Jessie to lift her hands. Hold the distorted face between her palms. Stare into his tormented eyes.

"Jack." She kissed him without flinching and pulled his head into the curve of her neck. "What you must have suffered, bearing this alone, all these years."

The Manigator's lipless mouth nuzzled her neck. "You should be screaming in terror, baby, not feeling sorry for me."

"It doesn't matter to me what you look like," she said. "And don't call me baby."

"It might." The Manigator melted back into Jack. He turned his head and pressed his lips to her palm. "I'm not exactly the boy next door, am I?"

"Did it matter when you discovered I had killed my Father?"

"You defended yourself against a monster. I am a monster."

"No!" Jessie said. Curled her fingers in his black hair. Yanked his face back to hers. "I know what a monster is.. What one can do. You have never hurt me. Never taken from me. You never could. You never will. Don't you ever let me hear you say that again!"

He seemed astonished by her anger.

"I mean it," she said, and released a sigh. "Trust me, Jack. I know what I'm talking about."

"Until I met you, I never trusted anyone with this.. Not even my own Father," he told her. "It's one thing to pretend to be a freak, but to actually become one?" He uttered a short laugh. "I'm glad you haven't fainted. I thought you might." The black gaze went from warm to hot in a blink. "I'm never going to let you go, Jessie."

"Who asked you to?" She ran her hand lightly down his chest. Smiled at the way the solid wall of muscles contracted at her touch. "Now, we were about to make love, weren't we?"

"More KGB tactics?"

"Whatever works," she said against his mouth as he lifted her up against him.

"I don't have any protection," Jack said.

Jessie smiled sadly. "I don't think we need to worry about it."

"If this is the last time" -- Jack's mouth raced over her face and neck -- "we'd better do it right."

"Oh, yes." Jessie moaned as his hands tugged apart the front of her blouse. Her skin flushed. The heated air felt cool against her hot skin. Then his hard, clever fingers were touching her.

His mouth caressed her ear. "I'm going to kiss the breath out of you."

"That's not possible." Jack filled his hands with her breasts. "Then again . . ."

Jack unbuttoned the blouse. Backed Jessie away from the hatch. Lowered her down to a heap of straw between two containers. Her back arched as his mouth ran from her hair down her throat. He sampled and suckled, his head moving back and forth, first one hard nipple, then the other.

Jessie urged him up. Pulled the shirt from his torso. Moaned as the naked wall of his chest collided with her sensitized breasts. His thighs pushed hers apart. The thick ridge beneath his jeans pressed urgently between them.

"Let me." Jack's hands pushed the unfastened jeans over her hips. Lifted her to strip them off. Held her as he shoved their discarded clothing under her. "You're going to get scratched."

"I don't care." Jessie reclined on the straw.. It felt like a feather mattress. She lifted one foot and rubbed her toes against his chest.

Jack jerked the remainder of his own clothes off, his movements impatient, his eyes gleaming with hunger. She contemplated his muscular perfection, her lips parting.

If he didn't touch her soon, she'd scream. Her arms stretched out. "Come here." He covered her body with his. Mounted her with an urgency that made her arch into him. "If we live, Jess . . . " he shuddered as her lips caressed the damp curve between his neck and shoulder. "If you get pregnant . . . "

"That's a lot of ifs," she said, pressing her hips up into his, caressing the rigid column pulsing there. She rocked slowly against him. "I'd love to have your child."

Jack went instantly motionless. His head lifted. Despair made his expression bleak. "I don't know what kind of child I would give you, Jessie. Chances are it wouldn't be normal."

"It would be our child." Jessie pressed her palm to his cheek. "I'm willing to take the risk. Are you?"

For a moment, he stared down at her. "You'll marry me?"

She stroked his back with her hands. "Yes."

He shook his head, but the despair was replaced but something much more vital and determined. "Do you even know what you're getting into, chere?"

"Yes." Jessie stroked his back with her hands. She had never been more sure of anything. Ever. "Trust me, Jackson."

"All right." Jack worked his hands under her bottom to lift her. The smooth, satiny tip of his penis parted her at the same time his tongue moved between her lips.

The simultaneous penetration sent wild currents of excitement streaking through Jessie. She opened her mouth, her thighs, her soul.

Her hands clung to his back as Jack moved. The silken emptiness was suddenly stretched. Invaded. Filled. Jack's fierce dark eyes gentled. He lifted his mouth from hers.

"No one has ever made me feel this," he said.. "Only you, Jessie."

Jessie trembled as he began to move within the tight clasp of her sheath. Still unaccustomed to love making, she at first tensed. Jack immediately slowed his thrusts to a gentle rhythm.

Jessie wanted no part of that.

"I need you," she said. Grabbed his hips. Tried to pull him in deeper. "Please, Jack."

He pushed her knees up, angling her body to his. Jessie savored the deep, eager thrust of his shaft into her softness. Savored the groan that came from him as he quickened. Her back arched as the first climax caught her unprepared. The smooth contractions of her body seemed to inflame him. Jack began to drive into her with the rapid, deep strokes she so desperately wanted. Her eagerness to meet his strength pushed them together over the edge.

Jack's body bowed as he erupted into completion. A shout of elation burst from him at the same time Jessie cried out.

"Jack!"

They drifted down. Arms and legs entwined. Skins slick with sweat. Jessie gloried in the turbulent pleasure coursing through her limbs. They lay together for a long time. Silent. Wrapped around each other.

"Still worth dying for?" he said against her breast.

"Absolutely," she said. When she would have started all over again, Jack lifted her. Disengaged their bodies. Knelt and reached for his trousers.

Jessie frowned at him. "Jack?"

"We're going to live." He pulled her to her feet. "Come on. There's a way out of this hole, and we're going to find it. Now."

#

Dubious of success but willing to try, she dressed quickly. Inspected the hold compartment once more. Watched Jack. He appeared to be going over it inch by inch.

"Steel hull. Rivets and welds are tight. No place to hide," Jack chanted under his breath. His eyes swept the area over and over.

"What would an action-adventure hero do in this situation?" Jessie mused out loud. When he glanced at her, she explained Kryukov's joke.

"Someone like MacGyver would have made a plastic explosive out of bubble gum and nail polish remover," Jack said.

"Um - we don't have those items."

"I'm no MacGyver." His lips quirked. "What would an action-adventure heroine do?"

Jessie thought of all the movies Alek had made her watch. A light went off inside.

"Aliens!"

Jack pretended to look around. "Where?"

"Stop it." Frantically she dug one hand in the pocket of her jeans. There it was, she thought. A beautiful smile spread across her face. "Oh, Jack, I'm so glad Alek was a devoted Sigourney Weaver fan." At his uncomprehending look, she said, "Did you ever watch Aliens? Remember the scene, when Sigourney Weaver and the little girl are trapped in the lab with those crawly face-sucking things?"

"The fire alarm system." Jack's eyes flashed up, and spotted the standard sprinkler system overhead. "I'll be damned. Problem is, neither one of us has a lighter."

"No lighter, but" --she produced the matches-- "something Cutter dropped one night."

He contemplated the straw. "We could start a fire, to create enough smoke to give us some cover." He looked overhead, and nodded with satisfaction. "You've done it, baby."

She hadn't thought about the straw part. Jessie frowned. "We could burn to death in here, too."

"No, the sprinkler system has automatic sensors. Ivan will come running." His smile was unpleasant. "Now all we have to do is figure out how to surprise them."

"There's no place to hide, except the containers. Even a chameleon like you can't fool them . . . into thinking . . . " She stared at the steel hatch. "Chameleons . . . "

She walked over, and put her palm against the gray steel wall. Her white skin stood out against the metal. Her eyes went from her hand to him.

"You're reading my mind." He came to her side. "But I've never tried anything like that before. Step back. You'll have to watch me, tell me if I have it right."

Jessie backed away as Jack took position against the wall. It was incredible to watch his body's natural coloring fade and become a smooth, even gray.

"Take off your clothes," she said. Jack stripped to his skin, then stood back again. "You're too dark. Compare your hand to the steel. There." She couldn't see him. Not in the dim light from the single bulb.

"I'll have to bundle these up and carry them." Jessie picked up the sweater and jeans. "What do you want me to do?"

The man who wasn't there smiled. Like a Cheshire cat, the grin floated against the wall of steel.

"Here's the plan."

#

Nancy paid no attention the FBI agents who had detained them. The long row of ships made her brood. Why would Jack think Jessie was hanging around the docks? Why would Jessie come here, for that matter? She rubbed her bearded chin, and caught the younger of the two men staring at her.

One shaggy brow rose. "You got a problem with hairy women, pal?"

Her bluntness appalled him. "Yes, ma'am. I mean, No, ma'am. It's just -- I -- couldn't the doctors -- "

"No, they couldn't." Nancy chuckled and stroked her beard. "Believe me, if there was a cure, my mother would have found it. Or invented it herself."

The agent in charge handed Harv's wallet back to him. He inspected Nancy and Doc with a jaded eye, shaking his head the whole time..

"You are interfering in a government investigation," the FBI agent said. He used the standard "official business" tone. "You'll have to leave at once."

"Two of our show's performers are missing," Doc said. "We need to find them and get back to the carnival."

"Now is not the time to be here, sir."

Nancy wasn't going to leave without a fight. "Hey, there's no law against looking for our friends."

The agent in charge glared at her. "The three of you must leave this area at once."

The Lady Wolf assumed her best feral expression. "Last time I checked, America was still a free country. We're staying."

"You are violating --"

"Oh, please," Nancy interrupted, her hands up. "I watch the X-Files, you know."

The two agents looked pained. Doc shuffled his feet. Harv said, "Nancy."

She turned on the Texan. "You know that guy Mulder never bothers with the civilians when he's on a case. He goes after the bad guys." Both agents frowned at her eloquent look. "Well? Why are you two wasting my tax dollars?" She flung out an arm. "Go get them!"

"This isn't television, Ms. Carguitto. Leave this area immediately, or I will have you arrested and held for questioning."

"C'mon, Nance," Harv said. "We don't want to end up in the hooskow.

Gentlemen." He nodded to the agents and led the Lady Wolf off the pier. They immediately headed for the alley where they had parked Doc's car.

"Wimps," Nancy said before they were out of earshot.

"Federal wimps." Harv clucked his tongue. "Girl, you got to put a muzzle on that mouth of yours one day. Soon."

"Harv's right." Doc ganged up with him. "Last thing we need to be doing now is bailing you out of jail."

"I do watch the X-Files," Nancy said. "And they're not so tough." She let out an exasperated breath. "We still don't know where Jack or Jessie is. What are we going to do?"

Doc exchanged a worried look with Harv. "You think Jack went on one of those boats?"

"No reason for him to do that," Harv said.

"Connie said something about smugglers." Nancy looked thoughtful. "Smugglers and boats go together."

"It's probably some kind of drug bust," was Doc's theory. "We have to find out which boat they're on. If we split up, one of us can probably get around those FBI men."

"I would not recommend that."

The carnies collectively turned. A tall man with pure white hair was standing just outside a warehouse entrance. He wore an immaculate suit. Beside him, an exotic redhead in a belly dancer's costume smiled at them.

Harv covered his eyes. "Imogene is never going to believe one word of this."

#

Jessie opened the pack of matches. Inside the cardboard cover was a series of numbers written in pencil. Jack finished heaping straw just to the side of the hatch, and came to her side.

"What do you think this is?" She handed it to Jack.

He scanned the unfamiliar numbers. "I don't know. If Cutter wrote it, it means something important. We'll hold on to it." He struck a match. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

He knelt and held the burning match to the straw. When it began to smoldered, he shook the flame out.

Jessie pointed overhead. "Shouldn't we do the sensors up there, too?"

"Only the straw for now. When the system comes on, it's going to activate the sprinklers. It will hit the burning straw, and create our smoke screen."

"Won't the water put out the fire?"

"Not on a boat. The system can't deliver too much water, the compartment might fill up. It's probably designed to alert and contain, not extinguish." He pointed to his bundle of clothes. "Rip some wide strips from the shirt I was wearing. We'll need to tie them over our mouths and noses."

By the time Jessie had fashioned the makeshift masks, the straw was blazing. Her eyes burned. She began to cough. Jack tied the cloth over her nose and mouth. His hand pushed her down toward the floor.

"Heat rises, so does smoke. Keep your head down here for as long as possible."

He struck another match, and held it to the overhead sensor. Seconds later a klaxon alarm went off. At once a fine mist descended over everything. That created even more smoke.

"Get ready!" Jack said.

Jessie flattened herself against the side of the hatch opposite the burning straw. Jack's nude body covered her. She squinted against the smoke, and saw his flesh turn solid gray in color. He tore the cloth from his face.

The hatch was shoved open and two Russians barreled in. They immediately stomped on the burning straw, cursing, holding their guns ready to fire. Jessie held her breath as Jack edged toward the door. One of the men looked directly at him, then pivoted and squinted as he searched the smoke-filled compartment.

"Geedyea nahoedeetsa?" he shouted.

"Zdyace!" the other guard pointed toward the containers. Jack had moved them, making it appear as though they might be hiding in them.

Both guards hurried over to the containers. Jessie used the distraction to slip through the hatch. Jack followed. Slammed the door shut. Secured the bolt.

"Move!" he said, jabbing a finger toward the opposite side of the deck. Jessie saw the hatch leading topside just above them was opening. She ran. Behind her were the voices of the men as they climbed down from the upper deck.

Jack shadowed her to the opposite end of the hold. Shadowed her up the stairs. Motioned for her to stop. He lifted the hatch carefully, holding it open a few inches, then nodded to her.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

Kryukov had already dispatched the last of his men. Furiously he ordered the Captain to disconnect the alarm before the harbor patrol decided to investigate. He saw a furtive movement from the corner of his eye. Silently he picked up one of the machine guns, slipped out of the cabin and started toward the stern.

"Halt!" he shouted when he saw the woman dart behind a pile of nets. At the same time, the stern hatch was flung open. Kruyokov's mouth sagged open as someone climbed out of it.

It was enormous. Powerful. And not human.

The Manigator's massive jaws parted with a terrifying growl. Tail thrashing, claws slashing, the monster charged toward Ivan. "Shto etta?" Kryukov was absolutely paralyzed by the sight of the creature bearing down on him. "Nyet!" At the last moment, the Russian remembered his weapon and lifted it to fire at the monstrosity.

Jessie had used the distraction to work her way across the deck and behind Kryukov. Her swift hands knocked the barrel away from Jack as she wrenched the gun from Kryukov. She grasped it firmly and held the business end of the machine gun to the Russian's throat. "Easy, Akoola. Don't be afraid, I won't let him hurt you. Much."

The Manigator came to a halt a foot from Kruyokov. The Russian's eyes bulged as the monster metamorphisized into a naked Jackson Hamilton.

"What are you?" Kruyokov asked, now completely dazed.

Jessie shoved the end of the weapon against Ivan's neck.. "Not another word."

She tossed the bundle of clothes tucked under her arm to Jack. "Here. Hurry."

Seconds later Jack was dressed and took the gun from Jessie. He held it against Kruyokov's spine. Several of the Russians had appeared on deck. All were stunned to see their leader being held hostage.

"Call off your men," he told Kryukov. "Tell them to go below." With a furious curse, Ivan complied. Once the men had disappeared, Jessie secured the hatches.

"Now we're going for a walk, Akoola," Jack said. "Nice and slow. The FBI are anxious to talk to you before they turn you over to the CIA and the State Department."

Jessie followed as Jack forced Kruyokov to walk before him down the docking ramp. On the pier below them, two federal agents watched in disgruntled astonishment as the three approached. One of the agents realized Jack was armed and whipped out his own gun.

"Sir, put down the weapon."

"I'm Hamilton. Covert operations," he told the agent. "This is --"

"Sir, I don't care who either of you are," the young man said. "Drop that weapon. Now."

Jessie nudged him. "Do it. He looks like he just graduated. Probably needs a refresher course on hostage scenarios."

"Okay." Jack carefully placed the gun on the weathered boards of the pier, and held up his hands. "I'll give you a number to call. Parker will confirm my ID."

Kryukov chose that moment to make a horrible retching sound. His arms clutched his ample belly. He doubled over, choking. Straightened with a smooth movement. A knife flew from his hand and buried itself in the shoulder of the agent holding the gun.

"Jack!" Jessie shouted.

The Russian scrambled for the weapon Jack had discarded and grabbed it. He pointed the gun toward the second FBI agent.

"Throw down your weapon," he said. Krutyokov began to back toward the edge of the pier. He made a curt gesture with the weapon. "Miss Kelly, you will return to my vessel. Immediately."

"Not in this lifetime," Jack said, snarling.

Kryukov smiled. "You, too, Mr. Hamilton."

"Jack?"

Jessie's head whipped around. Nancy Carguitto walking down the pier toward them.

"Nance, get out of here!" Jack said.

Ivan's fingers smoothed the frayed ends of his mustache as he regarded Nancy.

"Why am I not surprised? Please. Join us, dear . . . lady, is it?"

The Lady Wolf planted her hands on her hips and stared at the Russian. "Look, mister, I don't know who you are, or what your problem is."

"That would require a lengthy explanation," Krutyokov said.

"You're welcome to do what you want with her." Nancy pointed to at Jessie. "Just let Jack go."

"And you are . . . ?"

"His girlfriend," Nancy said. "Come on, be a nice guy and let him go. He doesn't have anything to do with this."

"On the contrary. I'm sure a certain scientist that belongs to our group will find Mr. Hamilton . . . an excellent research specimen. As he would you, my dear, had I the time and inclination to deal with three prisoners." Ivan gestured toward Jack again. "The two of you move back to the ship. Now. Or I will shoot this dog woman in the head."

Nancy's teeth flashed. "What did you call me?"

Jessie saw Harv Allen's head appear just above the end of the deck. Directly behind Krutyokov. She coughed lightly. Caught Jack's attention. Used quick eye movements to direct his gaze. Now Nancy's dramatics made sense. She was simply providing the distraction that would allow Harv to approach Krutyokov unnoticed.

Krutyokov laughed. "Come now, surely you are not sensitive? Do you not capitalize on your unfortunate problem?"

"At least you can see what I am on the outside," the Lady Wolf said, never once looking at Harv. "People like you are the real freaks, but no one can tell."

Ivan laughed even harder. "How true. How true indeed."

The Russian never saw it coming. Harv's hand hooked around his ankles, jerked back sharply, and pulled Kruyokov over the side of the dock. There was a bellow of rage, a resounding splash, then absolute silence.

Jack and Jessie rushed over to the side, while Nancy went to the fallen agent.

Harv was clinging to a piling. The Texan grabbed at Jack's offered hand and pulled himself up onto the pier. He handed Jack the gun he had snatched from Kryukov's grasp when the Russian went over the side.

"Thanks, Harv."

"Not a very nice fella, was he?" he said, and looked back over his shoulder.

"Where'd he go?"

They all scanned the turbid water, but there was no sign of Kryukov. Doc appeared in the midst of this. Knelt by the wounded agent. Glanced up. "Let's call 911, please."

Jack paced along the edge of the dock. Jessie followed close behind. Both inspected the rippling surface of the muddy water. "Where is he?"

"Maybe he can't swim," she said. "You want to jump in after him?"

Jack smiled. It wasn't pretty. "Let him drown."

The second FBI agent made the necessary call for aid on his cellular phone, then joined them. "I'll contact the harbor patrol.. We'll find him." He regarded Jack and Jessie. "Would you two mind explaining to me what exactly is going on here?"

"Sure." Jack pulled Jessie into his arms. "In a minute."

Jessie quickly discovered it was possible to kiss the breath out of someone, after all.

Doc volunteered to accompany the wounded man in the ambulance. That enabled the other FBI agent to alert the Harbor Patrol. The Coast Guard were notified to conduct an immediate search and seizure of the Russian boat. Local cops joined forces with arriving FBI back-up to remove and detain the remainder of Kruyokov's men. Only Ivan himself was still missing by the time Jack and Jessie were released to go.

"That slippery bastard is out there," Jack said as they walked away from the docks. "I can feel it in my gut."

Jessie was worried, too. "I heard one of Russians identified the body in the hold as one of Kruyokov's men. Cutter may still be alive, too."

Jack pulled her to a stop. He was suddenly grinning. "Want to go and have a drink?"

"After what happened the last time?" She made a face, then the connection when he produced the pack of matches. "The bar, of course!"

Jack tossed the matches to her. "I'm supposed to check in with Harry so he can officially chew me out. You?"

"Alek is undoubtedly planning to tear my skin off, an inch at a time," Jessie said.

"Then let's go and have a drink, chere."

Jessie's fingers lifted to the bruised side of her face.. "I forgot. I can't go anywhere looking like this."

"Sure you can." Jack came to her and took the end of her braid between his fingers. He began unwinding the long cable, watching Jessie every moment. The simple act of releasing her hair was making him hard again. It had a definite effect on Jessie, too. Her eyes went soft and liquid. The silky golden brown shimmered around her face as he spread it over her shoulders.

"Your mouth is swollen," he said, tracing the full curve with his fingertip, "but not too bad. It will look as though you've been doing this for a few hours," he breathed the last word against her lips, then kissed her.

"Jack," she whispered as he lifted his mouth from hers.

His hand arranged her hair to veil the bruises. "Keep it like this. It will be dark inside the bar. No one will notice." He slid his hands beneath her hair and cupped her nape. "When this is over, we're going away together. For a month."

"Where?" Her hands gripped his upper arms tightly.

Jack smiled. "Anyplace with a large bed, food, and a door that locks. Come on."

Nancy and Harv had been released by the federal agents after giving their statements. They were waiting by Harv's truck when Jack and Jessie arrived. Doc's car was parked alongside it.

"I want to know exactly -- exactly- - what that was all about," Nancy said, then grinned. "As soon as you two are done catching the bad guys." She went around to the back of Doc's car. Popped the trunk. Pulled Jessie's harness from it and brought it back. "Here."

Jessie had to squelch a shudder of revulsion as she took it from Nancy's hands.

"Why did you bring this?"

"I was going to show it to the cops so they'd bust you." Nancy's smile became gentle. "Sorry I gave you such a hard time, Jessie."

"You all heading back to the show with us?" Harv asked.

"Not right away," Jack said. "We'll see you back there later."

Nancy put a hairy arm around Jessie. "I don't know whether to hug you or knock you on your ass." The Lady Wolf gave her a quick, hard embrace. "I'll knock you on your ass later. Be careful.."

Jack told Jessie to wait for him, and trotted back over to the remaining FBI agent on the pier. When he came back, he was carrying the man's gray suit jacket.

"Here." He handed it to her.

"What do I need this for?"

Jack told her.

Chapter Eighteen

The Hot Sax was located in the less-frequented part of the French Quarter.

Above the narrow banquettes, rusting iron grillwork with swirls shaped like rounded letter "W"s encased the shabby building's upper balconies. One ancient magnolia tree struggled from a two-foot square patch of dirt at one side of the building. A woman's black lace brassiere fluttered from a sagging flagpole.

"How . . . quaint," Jessie said as Jack steered her toward the entrance. No windows, only a steel door with a square eye slot in the upper panel. A sign above that read Prive. "Private. Is there a password?"

"Yeah." Jack rapped on the door with his fist. The slot opened. He held up a twenty, which was snatched through the opening. "Alexander Hamilton." The door swung inward.

The interior of the bar was dim. The air marbled by cigarette smoke. Two women hovered over an ancient jukebox in one corner, their faces yellowed from the lighted selection display. Every stool at the long bar was occupied, as were the postage-stamp sized tables clustered along the walls.

A couple walking out of the bar nearly collided with them. Both the short, bleary-faced man and the plump blonde wrapped around him were obviously inebriated.

"Excuse us." Jack tried to guide Jessie to one side of the pair.

"No sweat, my man," The blonde's companion grabbed Jack's arm with one hand as if to steady himself.

"Excuse us," Jessie said as the couple continued to block their path.

"C'mere, honey." The woman squealed as the man's stubby fingers plunged into the front of her low-cut tank top. "Ever seen a pair like these, my man?"

Jessie shoved her hands in the gray jacket's pockets and looked away. The drunk had pulled down his companion's knit top, completely exposing her breasts. The woman herself didn't seem to mind. On the contrary. She thrust out her chest to further display her considerable charms.

Jack managed a polite smile. Wondered if the woman had the sense God gave a mosquito. "Not like that." He gave Jessie a push and went around the pair.

"You take me to such nice places, Jackson," Jessie said with a perfectly straight face. He could feel her shoulders shaking beneath the jacket. "Imogene is going to love this."

"Very funny," he said. "Mardi Gras always brings out the les animaux. And you can't tell Imogene. This operation is classified."

"Oh, was that a classified disclosure?" Jessie's shoulders shook a little harder. Jack grinned in spite of himself. "Come on."

Ceiling fans turned slowly above, but they didn't do much to dispel the heat of so many bodies. On a small square stage in the center of the bar, a large, bald man with a saxophone stepped up to a microphone. Someone brought him a high stool, which he perched on and nodded to the scattered applause. The blaring jukebox was abruptly disconnected.

Jessie eyed the musician as he began to play. His plum-colored skin was already glistening with sweat. The wailing, lonely sounds emanating from his

instrument made her shiver. "What is that he's playing?" she asked as Jack guided her through the gauntlet of drinkers.

He bent close. Thought about nibbling on her throat. Reminded himself he still had a case to wrap up. "Nawlins jazz, baby," Jack said against her ear. "The stuff that makes angels cry."

"I like it."

"Good." Jack nipped at her earlobe with the edge of his teeth. Enjoyed the resulting shiver that ran up her spine. "It's all I listen to."

"Stop that," she said. "Do you see anything promising?"

Reluctantly he raised his head and scanned the remainder of the room. Spotted a familiar face. Pressed his fingers against her arm. "Look who's here."

At the end of the bar, Lloyd and some of the men who had attacked Jessie were drinking over a half-eaten platter of steamed crawfish. Their loud, belligerent voices drifted across the room. Jack felt her stiffen as she recognize the group. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a bar stool become vacant. Before someone else could claim it, he maneuvered Jessie over and sat her down.

"Stay right there." He leaned over and covered her mouth with his. Kissed her until her hands crept around his neck. Lifted his head. "I'm the senior operative here, baby. That makes me the boss. Sit."

"If that jerk looks at you the wrong way, I'm coming over," she said in a low voice.

"And don't call me baby."

Jack left her ordering a soft drink and worked his way over to the group. Lloyd and his friends were apparently bemoaning the fact not one woman in the bar

would party with them. Jack's mouth curled. He recalled Lloyd's idea of a party. Maybe some of the women here had a little sense, after all.

Jack leaned between Lloyd and one of his cronies to order a beer. The elbow he jabbed into Lloyd's arm was well-timed. Lloyd didn't take kindly to having his bourbon spilled all over his hand and the bar. He spouted a stream of filth as he swung off the stool and shoved Jack away..

Jack raised his hands. Pretended to be nervous. Eyed the available space around him. Not yet. "Sorry, my mistake."

"Damn straight it was." Lloyd knotted his thick fingers into a fist.

"Lemme buy you guys a round, make it up to you," Jack said.

The offer of more liquor soothed Lloyd's ruffled feathers immediately. "All right, I will."

Jack smiled.

#

Across the bar, Jessie sipped the ginger ale and turned on the stool to watch the musician playing. Several couples had taken to the cramped area around the microphone and were slow dancing. The saxophonist didn't seem to mind. In fact, he appeared absorbed in his own world as he coaxed the wailing, lonely notes from his instrument with subtle mastery.

"He's good, ain't he?" a man on her right said.

Jessie glanced through the veil of hair falling over her cheek. Not quite a man. He was young, probably too young to be drinking the beer in his hand. His

earnest expression, coupled with the wavy brown hair falling over his brow, made him look harmless.

"Very good," she said, and turned back to the bar.

"That's a nice jacket. Armani?"

Jessie took a sip of her ginger ale. "Uh, I don't know. I just borrowed it. It's chilly."

"I know another way to warm you up. Want to dance?" Jessie glanced at the admiring hazel eyes and shook her head. "Aw, come on. Just one."

Before she could stop him, the boy tugged her from the bar stool and was leading her to the dance area. Jessie thought about pulling free, but decided the scene that would create was worse than the scant attention she might draw by dancing with him.

The boy pulled her into a friendly embrace and began to slowly lead her around the sax player. He was almost as tall as Jack, which put Jessie at the same distinct disadvantage. "Wow, you're just a little bit of a thing, aren't you?"

"Four feet, eleven and a half inches," she said, and hoped he wouldn't try to pull her too close. "Slightly taller than the little bit mark, I think."

"You know what they say. All good things come in . . . " he hesitated at her scowl. " . . . any size package they darn well want to."

Jessie gave him a regal nod. "Thank you."

His grin flashed. "Come to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras?"

"No. I'm working just outside the city."

"Yeah? I came down here with a couple of my buddies. Early spring break," he said, and expertly steered her around a less than graceful couple. "I'm Scott, by the way."

He might be young, but Scott was an excellent dancer. "Jessie," she said, trying to get a look at Jack. The other dancers blocked her view. "How long will you be here in New Orleans?"

"We're leaving tomorrow," Scott said, all exaggerated regret. "Unless you can give me a reason to ditch my Chemistry midterms." His frank gaze went from her eyes south. "Any reason at all."

Jessie inched back a fraction as they turned. "Sorry, Scott. I'm involved with someone."

"That big mean-looking dude you walked in with?" Scott nodded over her head in Jack's general direction.

Jessie lifted a brow. Mean-looking? Jack? Then she recalled her first impression of him and understood. "He's not as mean as he looks, I promise."

"He shouldn't leave you by yourself in a place like this," Scott was serious for a moment. "You'd think he'd take better care of such a pretty little, uh, pretty lady like you."

Jessie snorted. "I can take care of myself."

"I bet you can," Scott said, and chuckled. With an unexpected whirl, he spun Jessie around and dipped her over his arm as the song came to a finish. Her long hair touched the floor. She was careful to keep the bruised side of her face averted. Scattered applause made her roll her eyes.

"Okay, enough with the fancy moves already," she said, and he pulled her back up with another swift movement. Before Jessie could say another word, he bent down and pressed a light kiss on her mouth. "Scott!"

The hazel eyes were dancing with mischief. "I couldn't resist," he said. "Maybe that will get your guy's attention."

His attention? Jessie saw Jack staring at them from across the room. Yes, Scott had certainly accomplished that. Her big, mean-looking dude was definitely not happy about the kiss. In fact, he appeared to be considering the merits of assault and battery.

"Uh, thanks for the dance," Jessie said, and removed Scott's hands from her waist. She wasn't helping Jack by drawing all this attention, either. "Mind if I take a breather?"

"Not at all," Scott said, and escorted her from the dance floor. "How 'bout you let me buy you a drink, and you tell me all about you?"

She saw Jack's eyes glitter directly at her before he turned back to Lloyd. Well, it wasn't my fault, Jessie thought mutinously. He'd put her in this damnable position. What else was she supposed to do?

She tucked her arm through Scott's. "Sure."

#

By the time the sax player took his first break, Jack had successfully incorporated himself into Lloyd's group. The drunken men continued to rue that lack of cooperative females. He glanced again at Jessie.. She was still talking away to that baby-faced kid sitting next to her.

It irked him. He couldn't dance with her, not here, not now. And he wanted to. He wouldn't have held her with six inches of space between them. No, Jack would have taken her in his arms and held her heart to his. Moved with her. His hands on her slim hips. Her fingers laced behind his neck.

But that kid could put his hands on Jessie. And had. Slow- danced with her.

Kissed her, for Christ's sake. A primitive surge of possessive anger pounded on the inside of his skull. Jessie belonged to him. He could cheerfully beat that carefree, laughing boy to a pulp. Right then and there.

"Hey, Jack, old buddy," Lloyd clapped his heavy hand painfully on Jack's shoulder. "Want another beer, or you ready to try the hard stuff?"

"Beer," Jack said, and forced himself to grin. He would take care of this assignment, find out Cutter's identity, then keep Jessie in bed. For a month. "No way am I gonna try to out- drink you, Lloyd. I'd be on my ass in no time."

The redneck barked out a laugh, pleased by Jack's obsequious flattery. "'Nother beer for my good buddy Jack here!" he roared at the bartender.

As he sipped his second beer, Jack's attention wandered back down the bar.

Jessie and the kid were gone. Where the hell were they now? He spotted them at last, standing over the jukebox. Apparently choosing a song together. How sweet. He was going to rearrange that kid's baby face. Then throttle Jessie.

Where was this jealousy coming from? Jack wondered. He'd never felt so possessive about a woman in his life. She was just blending in, he told himself.

Like any operative would under the circumstances. Right. And when this was

over with, he'd carry her back to the show. Throw her in bed. And keep her there. For two months.

"So I was getting ready to stick it in her," Lloyd said, continuing his story, "Then this Mick showed up with a baseball bat. Had to be her old man."

Jack's attention took an immediate swerve. The drunk was talking about the night Jessie caught his knife.

"So what happened?" he asked Lloyd.

"The jerk got in a few lucky shots. I mean, I was trying to back off, you know? I got tired of playing with him real quick. So I chucked my blade at him, and what do you think happened?"

"I have no idea," Jack lied.

"The bitch tried to catch it! Got it stuck through her hand! Can you believe that?"

The men broke up laughing. Jack made his immediate snarl into a wide grin.

"Sounds like you're a real Cutter," Jack said. Observed the faces around him closely. Not a glimmer of reaction to be found.

"I sure did cut her!" Lloyd's subsequent roar of laughter halted abruptly, and his small eyes squinted. "I'll be damned to hell and back. That's the one."

Jack followed his gaze to the dance floor. Felt his belly knot as he saw Jessie dancing with that kid again. "Who?" He played along. Kicked himself for not sending her back to the show with Nance and Harv.

"Right over there, dancing with that punk." Lloyd pointed at Jessie. "She's the slut who got me and the boys thrown in the drunk tank." He slid from the bar stool.

Rubbed his hands together. Smiled with evil intent. "Maybe she wants another shot."

Jack got up, too. "Little scrawny thing like her? You got to be kidding!"

His derisive remark served only to inflame Lloyd's thirst for revenge. Before he knew it, he was trailing after the redneck and several of his friends as they headed for the dance floor.

Jessie saw them approaching, Jack noted, and tried to get out of the way. But the kid held on to her and only gave the small group of men a disinterested glance. Jack heard her voice as Lloyd stepped onto the dance floor.

"Please, Scott, I have to --"

"Look who's out carousing tonight, boys!" Lloyd said in a cheerful tone. "Our little carnival cutie."

Scott and Jessie stopped dancing. The other couples removed themselves from the dance floor at once. Jack kept close to Lloyd and glared over the heavy shoulder at Jessie. She never looked at Jack once.

"What do you want?" he heard her ask.

"Oh, I think you remember from the last time we met," Lloyd said. "But for right now, me and the boys want to dance. You and me first."

"No, thank you," Jessie said. She tried to step away from Scott, but the boy put an arm around her waist and kept her pinned to his side. The youthful face had lost its perpetual grin.

"The lady is with me, Mister," he said. His voice suddenly didn't sound very young at all, Jack thought. It was entirely too calm. And the eyes - where had he seen those eyes before?

"Share and share alike, that's my motto." Lloyd stepped up to the boy. His smile had evaporated, too. "Get out of my way, boy."

Jack stepped around Lloyd and got immediately in the redneck's face. "You don't want to kill the kid, Lloyd. Let it go."

"Stay out of this, Jack."

Scott pushed Jessie behind him. He held his hands open at his sides. Jack saw the subtle shift of his legs. Fighting stance, he thought. What the hell? The kid was trained. His dark eyes narrowed. And probably not a kid at all.

"Come on, punk. The lady wants a man, and I'm just the man to give her what she wants." Lloyd's friends were fanning out again, encircling the trio. Jack decided to step back. See what the kid could do. That way Jack could make sure no one touched Jessie.

"I'm telling you for the last time, mister," Scott said. "Take a hike."

Lloyd didn't bother to exchange further pleasantries. He lunged toward Scott, both fists ready. And got a solid sidekick to the center of his ample belly. The big man staggered back, gasped, then charged in again.

This time Scott merely shifted his body to one side at the last possible second, pushing Jessie behind him as he moved. Lloyd's momentum carried him past the couple and into a table crowded with half-filled drinks. The drunk rolled off and onto the floor.

Lloyd's friends closed in. Jack stood back and watched the kid who obviously wasn't a kid disable two of them with four moves. The others, scenting a losing battle, backed away. During the entire fight, Jessie had stood behind Scott in silence. Jack saw the way she was poised. Scott didn't realize it, but he had more than adequate back-up.

Jack decided to remove the largest irritant from the scene before it got uglier. He went over and helped Lloyd to his feet.

"That scrawny little bastard!" Lloyd came up blustering, his thick features nearly purple.

"Lloyd." Jack took his thick arm in a tight grip. "We need to talk."

"Later," Lloyd said. Tried to jerk free. "I said --"

"Now." Jack brutally forced the drunk away from the others and backed him into a dimly-lit corner. Three seconds later he had removed the blade from the man's belt and held it under his sagging chin. "I don't like you much, Lloyd."

He looked over his shoulder. Scott had led Jessie back to the bar. The other men were shooting glances at Jack and Lloyd, but unwilling to get involved. Lloyd swallowed and winced as the tip of the blade cut into the soft flesh of his neck.

"Hey, I ain't got no quarrel with you!"

"Yeah?" Jack moved in a little closer. Pressed the knife a little harder. A thin trickle of blood ran down and joined the sweat staining Lloyd's collar. "I think you do." He concentrated for an instant. Saw Lloyd's eyes flare as Jack's black hair lightened to red. His dark skin paled and shifted. Jack smiled, but Lloyd only saw Danny's congenial grin.

"J-J-Jesus."

"No, cochon," Jack's voice said through Danny's mouth. "Much, much worse." He released Lloyd's arm and reached down between them. The heavysset man moaned softly as Jack's hand clamped down. "I ever hear of you hurting a woman again, I will come after these." He squeezed the man's testicles even harder. "With these." He bared his teeth.

They grew longer. Sharper. Until all Lloyd saw were the fangs of a monster. That was enough for Lloyd. His bulging eyes rolled back in his head. Jack released him. The drunk slid down the wall to slump over, unconscious. When Jack turned around, he saw Jessie was gone from her bar stool. Scott had disappeared, too.

Jack instantly remembered where he had seen the kid's eyes before. Staring out at him from the foolish mask of clown paint. The kid was a player.

"It's been fun, Lloyd." Jack strode away.

He quickly determined Jessie wasn't in the bar. Cursed himself for not watching her. Hurried out through the front entrance. A block away on the street, he saw a small woman being shoved into the front seat of a dark sedan. The man forcing her in the car raised his head and saw Jack.

It was Krutyokov.

"Jessie!" he shouted, breaking into a run.

He hadn't crossed half a block before Krutyokov sped off.. The truck was too far away. Jack bellowed his rage into the chilly night air.

A car suddenly pulled up beside him. The driver thrust open the door. It was the kid Jessie had been dancing with.

"Get in!"

Astonishment made Jack hesitate. "Come on, Chameleon!" Scott shouted furiously. "I'm gonna lose him!"

Jack dove in the car a second before the kid hit the accelerator. It took a minute to get the door closed, then he turned on Scott, calm and absolutely enraged.

"You seem to know me," Jack said. "Now who the hell are you?"

"James Scott McCoy, out of the Analysis division," the kid said, and shot him a quick grin. "You can call me Scottie."

"You're Genius Boy?" Jack slumped back in the seat. "Jesus Christ, why did Harry send you in?" He answered himself. "Never mind. I can just guess."

"Never hurts to have back-up," Scottie negotiated a hard left turn with ease.

"Especially when it just so happens your back-up is also an authority on the authenticity of targeting technology computer boards."

The name finally sank in. "James Scott McCoy?" Jack repeated.

"Yeah." The kid grinned. "Mom met Dad at a Star Trek convention. Love at first sight. Guess it seemed appropriate, since I was conceived sometime between the showing of the Classic Bloopers film and a personal appearance by William Shatner. Hey." Scottie's cheerful expression dimmed as another car swerved past them in pursuit of Kruyokov. "We've got some competition."

#

Jessie saw Jack's image suddenly disappear from the rearview mirror. Was that Scott's car he was getting into? What was he thinking, involving a civilian in this? She had to get away from the Russian, now.. The gun Kruyokov held pressed to her side was the only thing that kept her from jumping from the car.

As if he read her thoughts, the Russian said, "I would not recommend it. The trigger is very sensitive. You would be dead before you hit the street."

"You have no where to go, Akoola. Your ship had been seized." She was too close to him. Her chance would come when they got out of the car. "Your men arrested. There is no way for you to return to the nest of vipers you call comrades."

"I'm disappointed, Miss Kelly. Surely you do not think I have no other avenues to take out of this country?"

The Russian drove at a reckless speed, turning in and out of the labyrinth of streets.

"Where are you taking me?"

"That, my dear, you must tell me." The gun prodded her. "Where are the designs?"

Jessie thought frantically. Someplace deserted. "Back at the docks," she lied.

"We hid them right under your nose." That much was true.

"That is a shame. And certainly not the truth." He jammed the gun harder against her ribs. "I don't have to kill you, Miss Kelly. Not all at once." The gun shifted from her ribs to the side of her arm. "Do you know, if the upper arm bones are shattered, the entire limb may have to be amputated?"

"Do it," Jessie said. "Jack will make you wish you had used it on yourself."

A sudden jolt sent them both into the dashboard. Kruyokov fought wildly to maintain control of the wheel. His eyes peered in the rearview mirror. "Someone appears to wish us both dead, Miss Kelly. Would that be Mr. Hamilton, do you think?"

The car following them rammed into the back of the sedan again.

"Jack only wants you dead," Jessie said as she braced herself.

Ivan didn't respond. He turned away from the steering wheel, raised his pistol, and fired, shattering the back windshield. Jessie clapped her hands over her ears as he continued to fire. The car behind them fell back abruptly and turned off into a side alley. So did a second car.. Kruyokov grinned and looked at Jessie. Just in time to see her shove open the passenger door and throw herself out of the sedan.

She hit the road tucked in a roll, and let the energy of the impact work to propel her out of the way of the car wheels. Jessie covered her head with her arms as she collided with the wall of a brick building, then bounced back onto the sidewalk. Her vision doubled for a moment as her body slid to a halt.

Only the threat of Kruyokov got Jessie back on her feet.. She staggered into the shadows. Someone was calling her name. A deep, familiar voice that made her heart constrict. Gasping, clutching her bruised body with her arms, she stumbled to a stop and turned.

Jack caught her and pressed her against his chest.

"Ah, Dieu," he said, his hands running over her head and back and arms. "Don't ever do that to me again, chere."

"How did you get here so fast?"

"Your boyfriend, Scott," he said. "He's one of mine. Harry sent him in to cover both of us. He pulled up just as the car following you and Kruyokov appeared." Jack looked back down the street. "He dropped me off when I saw you bail out. He's gone after the other car."

"We have to move," she said, and tugged on his arms. "Kruyokov will get here before Scott does."

"Come on." He pulled her back into a side alley. She realized they were in the industrial part of the city, surrounded by warehouses. There wasn't another soul to be seen on the empty streets. Only a dark sedan coming at them at high speed.

"Jack!"

He held an arm around her and kicked open the first door they came to. Jessie heard brakes squeal at the front of the alley. Jack shoved her through the doorway. A sharp sound made her freeze. Gunshot. She whirled around and saw Jack totter over the threshold. He sank to his knees. She reached out, trying to support him as he fell. "Jack! No!"

Blood was spreading over the left side of his shirt. "Jess."

Putting her hands under his arms, Jessie tried to drag Jack back into the darkened warehouse. He was so heavy she couldn't maneuver him more than a few inches at a time. A moment later Kryukov appeared in the doorway.

"You are as slippery as an eel," the Russian said, and leveled the gun in his hand at Jack. "Get up."

"Forget it," Jack said, his pain-glazed eyes glittering like dark stars. "Go, Jessie!" Kruyokov took aim at Jack, and Jessie moved around to stand between the two men.

"Get out of the way," the Russian said.

"Don't shoot him." Jessie was calm. "I'll give you what you want." She saw the Russian's thick lips stretch into a grin. Hoped the darkness was as concealing as it looked.

"That might persuade me not to shoot him," Kruyokov said.

She shrugged out of the agent's borrowed jacket. "I thought it might." With an unexpected movement, she tossed it to the Russian. "Here. Catch."

Kruiyokov's red mustache quivered as he swiftly searched the pockets. He soon realized there was nothing to be found. His eyes went to Jessie, who had moved several feet away. "What is this?" His breath caught as she stepped back into a stray shaft of moonlight.

Jessie was glittering, all black leather and silver metal.

"You lying slut!"

The first knife she threw struck his arm before he could fire. Kruiyokov jerked and screamed with fury. He managed to hold on to his weapon, aimed and fired directly at her. But Jessie was moving now. Flitting in and out of the shadows like an apparition.

"Come on, Akoola," she said, retreating deeper into the warehouse. "Come and get me!"

Got to draw him away, she thought as she dodged around cellophane-wrapped pallets. Keep him from Jack. There had to be night security around here somewhere. They would have heard the gunshots. They'd call the police. Right. If she got extremely lucky, and Jack didn't bleed to death first.

The darkness provided only temporary cover as she skirted around stacked boxes and between high shelving. Her eyes became quickly adjusted to the shadows. She knew Kruyokov's would, too. She was trying to assess what route to pursue when she heard his rapid footsteps. At once Jessie dropped and flattened herself to the concrete floor. A second later, a shot slammed into the wall behind her head. Concrete particles and dust rained down over her.

"Come here, you deceitful bitch!" Kryukov bellowed.

Jessie pulled four blades from her vest, two in each hand. Warily she rose. Saw Ivan advancing on her position. His breathing was labored. His cursing continuous. She shot up on her feet. Threw two more knives. Dropped back down and inched around another crate.

Kryukov screamed again, this time in pain. Thick grunts told her he was pulling the blades from his flesh. She heard both as they clattered to the floor.

"Not good enough, Shpik!" he called out. Released a bitter laugh. "Stand up, try again!"

She wasn't going to be able to stop him, Jessie thought.. She began to tremble. Her skin was clammy with cold sweat. Everything in the past returned in that moment.

She was Katarina, and she was going to die.

The knives that flew into the wheel landed too close, and slashed into her body.

"You moved!" Papa screamed, pulling the bloody blade from her side. "Stupid girl!"

"You couldn't have moved, Katarina," Dr. Martin Kelly pointed out during one session. "You were manacled to the wheel, powerless to stop him."

"Look at her throat," Detective Jess Sevin had said when he found her. She was riding the carousel. Papa's blood all over her. He had come to the hospital for nearly a year after that. His clever, narrow features haunted. Trying to help himself and her to understand why it had happened. Later, he told her, "You did what you had to, Kat.."

She had assembled her new identity from the names of those two men. They would be ashamed to see her now, cowering, awash in the horror of the past. Death was coming for her again.

"No," Jessie said. "I'm not going to die. Neither is Jack."

She thrust herself from the cover of the boxes. Two more shots whizzed directly over her head. Jessie navigated the narrow channels between the huge packing crates. Kept her head down. Listened for the heavy footsteps following her. Positioned herself.

When Kruyokov barreled around the blind corner, Jessie was ready. Her hands flew as two more blades whipped through the air. Ivan shrieked as each found a leg. Jessie was sure it was enough.

The Russian pulled the hiltless blades out, one at a time. He was still staggering toward her. "I am going to . . . cut you . . . into little pieces . . . "

Jessie turned and ran. This time she was not as lucky. Dead end. Kruyokov was not far behind. The sound of his dragging steps made it clear he couldn't stay on his feet much longer. She reached up and began to climb. A bullet smashed into the wooden slats of the crate she was scaling.

"Jessie!"

In horror Jessie saw Jack stumbling after Kryukov. One hand pressed over his wounded side. The panting, desperate Russian grinned..

"First I will take care of your lover," Ivan said. He turned, lifted the gun, and fired at Jack.

Jessie screamed as she watched the dark head jerked back. For a moment, Jack swayed. Then pitched forward to the floor. The sound of his collapse echoed in the silence. He didn't move after that.

Oh, no, she thought, her heart icing over. No. Jack. Her eyes watched the blood pooling under his head. Reality dwindled as her gaze moved to Kryukov. The Russian was wheezing. No. He was laughing.

Catlike she jumped down from her perch to land lightly on the balls of her feet.

"Bastard," she said. Eyes wide. Soul empty. She no longer saw Kryukov. "I'll show you how to cut someone into pieces."

Papa had proudly called it the Hail from Hell.

Two knives struck him in the chest. Three more in his arms and legs. Her hands were moving so rapidly now they were mere blurs. The gun wavered as he staggered backward from the force of the blows.

"Nyet, nyet -"

"Oh, yes." Jessie said. "I'll show you how to kill." Kryukov dropped the gun as more blades flew from her fingers.

"No . . . Jessie . . . " Jack's voice shook her from the trance. Her eyes went past Kruyokov. There on the dirty warehouse floor, Jack lifted his head. Blood masked his features. "Don't . . . "

Slowly she took the knives in her hands and sheathed them. Ivan was reeling, blood seeping from his many wounds. Jessie took the vest off. Flung it far away from her. Hurried to reach Jack.

"You won't kill me," Kryukov said, making her slide to a halt. He came at her, brandishing one of her blades in his fist. Behind her the containers created a boxed end. No escape.

Jack began crawling toward her. Jessie knew he wouldn't be able to stand or help. The vest was out of reach. She was going to die.

"I love you, Jackson!"

"Jess!" Jack was trying to pull himself from the ground. "Kryukov -- don't -- touch -- her!"

He was only a foot away now. Jessie cowered back against the wall.

"No, Shpik, I take her with me!" Ivan whipped the blade out. Jessie waited to feel the cold steel open her throat.

A series of pops shattered the moment. Kryukov froze, as if suspended in time.

The knife fell from his lax fingers. He pitched forward.

Jessie stared at the man standing behind him. "Sedoi!"

The tall, white-haired man replaced his pistol in a shoulder holster. Reached down. Helped Jack to his feet.

Jessie knelt to check Ivan's body. She found no pulse, nor any regret. "He's dead," she said, then straightened and ran to Jack.

"Jess," Jack said as she reached him. He pulled her against him. His mouth touched her lips, cheeks, brow. "Thank God." He gazed at the other man. "And you. Thank . . . you."

Jessie couldn't keep the raw sound in her throat or her hands away from Jack. "I thought you were dead."

"No, baby." He cupped her face with his bloodied hands. "We made it."

"You can discuss your good fortune in the car," the man said. Far off in the distance came the sound of approaching police sirens. "We must leave, at once."

"A moment, please." Jessie quickly retrieved the harness and slid her arms into it, then covered it with the jacket Sedoi handed her.

Supported on either side by Jessie and the white-haired man, Jack was able to walk the short distance from the warehouse to the car waiting outside. Jack slid in the back with her, while the white-haired man took the wheel. A moment later they were speeding from the warehouse district.

"Did he hurt you?" Jack's bloodied hands reached for Jessie almost at once. She shook her head. "You sure, chere?"

"Yes." She swallowed hard as she inspected the furrow in his hair where Kruyokov's bullet had grazed him. Her fingers barely touched his cheek when tears spilled from her lashes. "Oh, Jack, I was so scared."

"This would be Jackson Hamilton?" the man driving the car asked. Jessie met the flat gray eyes in the rearview mirror. Hesitantly she nodded. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hamilton. I take it you do not wish to go to the hospital."

"No." Jack shook his head. "No . . . hospital." He slumped over against Jessie in unconsciousness.

Chapter Nineteen

"Sedoi!"

"I know someone who can repair the damage with discretion." The man pulled the car to a sudden stop. A redheaded woman in a belly dancer costume climbed in the front passenger seat. She glanced over her shoulder at Jessie, then frowned at Jack.

"Zdrahvootsyeh. Is he all right?"

"Da," Jessie said. "Spaseeba, Krasnaya.."

"You removed the device?" Sedoi asked the redhead.

"Right here." She flourished the tracer.

"And the guidance components?"

Krasnaya made a childish face at him and pulled a slim case from her handbag.

"All ten boards. Much smaller than I imagined."

Jessie was amazed. "How did you get them?"

"Kryukov followed you when you left the dock this afternoon. When he parked outside the bar, I searched his vehicle, found the components, and made the switch."

Jessie frowned. "But how did you know where we were?"

"She put a tracer in the American's vehicle," Sedoi said.

"I wonder what the FBI will think when they search Akoola's car and find he has been hiding a make-up kit," Krasnaya said, and giggled.

"A make-up kit?" Sedoi glared at the redhead..

"Of course. My make-up was approximately the same weight and volume as the components. I simply switched the cases." Sedoi said something uncomplimentary about the Federal Bureau of Investigation under his breath. Krasnaya rolled her eyes. "At least you cannot complain about my abilities." "Only my judgment using you and them."

"Flatterer," the redhead said. She looked over the back of the seat at Jack. "You know, Galoobaya, without the blood on his face, he's very handsome. A pity he wouldn't give me a ride in his truck."

Jessie inspected Jack's side through the torn shirt. "Hurry, Alek," she said as she folded the shirt tail up to make a temporary bandage. "He's still bleeding."

Sedoi drove around the more affluent sections of the Vieux Carre, until he pulled up behind a discreetly elegant row of offices. A man was waiting for them at the back door. Josiah Frye was short, balding, and had an excellent tan. The physician seemed only mildly perturbed at the sight of the unconscious, wounded man Alek was carrying.

"This is what I gave up my afternoon tennis match for?" Dr. Frye glowered at Sedoi as he examined Jack. "Gunshot wounds to the head and outer abdomen. Both relatively minor. When did this happen?"

"Just before we came here," Jessie said. "Why?"

The doctor's brow furrowed as he probed. "These wounds appear to be nearly a week old."

Jessie drew in a quick breath. "He's in excellent health."

"Lucky him." Frye straightened and regarded Alek. "Bringing him here will, I hope, facilitate his continued well-being."

"I have great confidence in your abilities, Doctor.." Davydov was faintly amused.

"I'm relieved." Frye prepared an instrument tray. "Just don't kill him after I go to all the trouble of stitching up these wounds, will you?"

"He'll try to resist the urge," Krasnaya said to Frye, who never blinked once at her exotic costume. The redhead tucked her arm through Jessie's. "Come on, let's take a walk. You don't want to watch this, believe me."

Jessie gently detangled herself and went back to the exam table. "No. I'll stay with him."

The redhead's brows lifted as she exchanged a look with Sedoi.

An hour later, Dr. Frye finished suturing the edges of the head wound as Jessie looked on. "I know better than to ask how this happened, but did this gentleman hit his head when he fell?"

Jessie remembered the terrible moment after Kryukov had shot Jack the second time. "Yes."

"You'll need to watch him for signs of concussion, then. Wake him every hour for the next day. Ask him questions, like what day is it, or who the President is."

"I know what to do." Jessie briefly explained her own recent experience.

"Ah, an expert. You know the kind of headache he's going to wake up with. Tell him to try not to disturb the dressing on his side if possible. Change it as needed, and keep both wound areas dry. I've used dissolving sutures, so he won't need to have them removed." The balding man stripped off his gloves and hung his lab

coat on a wall peg. "I'm done here. Tell your boss to be sure to lock up." He paused. "Oh, and he owes me a case of Beluga for this. The good stuff."

Jessie grinned. "I'll make sure he sends it. Thank you, Doctor."

Once Dr. Frye departed, Jessie gently caressed Jack's scrubbed face. The closed eyes opened to dark slits.

"Hey . . . baby," his voice was rough and tired.

"Hey yourself." Jessie smoothed back the damp hair she had sponged clean of blood. "You're going to be fine." A wry smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"Don't call me baby."

"Salaga," Davydov stood in the doorway. Krasnaya bustled by him, pushing an empty wheelchair. "Time to go."

It took the three of them to maneuver Jack's heavy body from the exam table into the wheelchair. Jessie hovered anxiously as Sedoi pushed him out to the car.

"Perhaps I should call a taxi," she said as they transferred Jack into the front seat of the car.

"I have," Krasnaya said, "for us." Sedoi handed Jessie his keys as a bright yellow cab pulled up behind the car.

"I will contact you tonight." Alek glanced at Jack. "If you have trouble with the Americans --"

"I won't."

"Do Svedanya, Salaga." With a curt nod, Sedoi escorted the redhead to the waiting cab.

Jessie slid into the driver's side and turned the key in the ignition. When she glanced over at Jack, she almost shrieked.

He was sitting up, completely lucid and alert, checking his head wound in the visor mirror. He turned his head and smiled.

"You should have introduced me, chere," Jack said. "It isn't every day I get to meet the former deputy Director of the KGB."

"You were faking!"

"I wanted to see what the Iceman would do." Jack touched his head, then his side, and grimaced. Faking unconsciousness hadn't been as difficult as remaining absolutely motionless while Frye had been stitching him up.

Jessie reached over and smacked him on his shoulder, hard. "You scared the life out of me, Jack!" What he said finally penetrated her shock. "You knew Sedoi was Alek?"

"What could be more obvious, chere?" Jack replied. "Krasnaya, the Russian word for red. Galoobaya, for blue. Sedoi, for gray. Coded like shades of a Prism, right?"

Jessie glared through the front windshield. "Sedoi should have told me he assigned a second agent to this case." Her eyes darted to Jack. "And you shouldn't have been faking!"

"Why blue?"

Jessie's lips thinned. "Because brown was already taken."

Wisely Jack suppressed a laugh. "And what does Salaga mean?"

"It's a fish. KGB slang for a fresh recruit." She hit him again. "Oh, Jack, I could shoot you myself!"

"Hey, I'm an injured man!" He curled an arm around her. "I need some love, chere."

"You need--" Jessie's response was muffled as Jack slowly and thoroughly kissed her. When his head lifted, they were both breathing hard. Jessie's eyes were half-closed. "What was I yelling at you about?"

"We'll discuss it later." He pushed her gently back behind the wheel. "We've got a brief stop to make, then we'll head back to the show. I've got some explaining to do, to Nathan and Washington."

"What about the components Krasnaya took from Kruyokov's car?" Jessie asked.

"Your government is going to want them back."

"You mean these components?" Jack withdrew a familiar shape from the waistband of his trousers. Jessie's eyes rounded, and he laughed. "You and Red aren't the only ones with quick hands."

Jessie groaned. "Alek will have my head."

"They belong to the United States military," Jack said. "Alek can go jump in the Gulf."

It took nearly an hour to weave through the Mardi Gras parades. Jack directed her to stop at an anonymous-looking building on the outskirts of the city.

"Agency safe house?"

"Yeah. Scottie should be here by now, unless he caught the guy," Jack said.

They entered through the front of the building and were greeted by a sweet-looking elderly woman acting as a receptionist. She escorted them back through a series of empty corridors to a large office suite.

Scottie was sitting behind a large, hastily setup computer center, rapidly entering data on a keypad. He looked up and grinned as Jack and Jessie walked in. And immediately frowned.

"What did you do to her, Chameleon? Step on her toes while you were dancing?" Scottie's hazel eyes went to the bandages..

Jack smiled sourly. "No, I just got done talking to the last guy who put his hands my woman. We left him in Intensive Care."

"Can't blame me for maintaining cover, old buddy," the younger man said.

"Besides, I did rescue the lady from those drunks."

Jack nodded. "Okay, mon ami. I'll let you live." He tossed the case with the components at him. "Here. A gift for Harry."

Scottie peered into the case and whistled. "Harry will be very grateful."

"He'd better be, I just got shot twice for the damn things," Jack said. "Who was in the car following Kruyokov?"

"A damn good driver," Scottie said. He looked ready to spit. "I shadowed him for a twenty miles all around the city, and he still lost me in the Quarter." His ferocious look eased. "I didn't get a good look at him, either. I ran the plates. Car is a rental. Paid cash, used a bogus name and address. We'll probably find it abandoned somewhere tomorrow."

"All right. We're heading back to the show. Tell Harry I'm going after Cutter now."

Scottie eyed Jessie. "You sure you want to hang out with this big, bad-tempered Cajun?" His grin was engaging. "I'd love to take you dancing again, doll."

Jack didn't give her time to answer. He simply put an arm around her and said, "No."

"He'll start beating his chest any moment," Jessie told Scottie. But she didn't move out of the circle of his arm, Jack noted with approval.

"Oh well. At least I'll have the memory of the Hot Sax with you," Scottie said, his eyes twinkling.

Jack's lip curled. "Yeah, and if I ever hear you talk that trash about my woman around D.C., mon ami, you'll learn a few new moves. The hard way. Come on, Jessie. Let's go home."

From there they returned to the fairgrounds. They discussed what they would tell the carnies. What reports to make to their respective superiors.

She pulled up to the employee lot at the carnival. "If I'm lucky, Alek will take out his temper on Krasnaya." She darted a suspicious glance at Jack. "Just exactly what happened between you two?"

Jack grinned. "Not as much as I would have liked."

Jessie hit him again.

They stopped at Conrad's trailer so Jack could change out of his bloodstained clothes. Jessie's small hands moving over him as she helped him undress had the expected effect. Jack nuzzled her neck and murmured some suggestions.

"Oh?" Jessie's brows rose. "Do you think you can do that in all those bandages?"

"I'm game if you are, chere," he said.

Jessie simply went to the door and locked it.

"Damn." There was dried blood all over his lower torso, Jack saw as he eased his jeans down his long legs.

"Perhaps we'd better take a shower first." As she walked back to him, Jessie's gaze fell on the harness she had brought back from the warehouse. She hesitated. The revulsion she felt for it was only too apparent.

Jack's jaw set as he watched her. She'd never touch that thing again, if he had his way. "I want you to get rid of it, Jess," he told her, and nodded at the vest.

"I can't simply throw it away."

"You can. You will."

She turned her back on it. "All right. But later.."

With some creative maneuvering, they both fit into the trailer's tiny shower stall. Stood naked together under the steady stream of lukewarm water. Soaped each other with caressing hands.

"Your side is getting wet," she said as she tenderly washed the blood from his body.

One big hand slipped between her thighs, cupping her. She moved against his palm as he slipped his fingers into her softness. She was so slick. Hot. His for the taking. Despite the pain in his head, Jack suspected he'd go crazy if he didn't have her. Directly. "So are you."

Her dark eyes went liquid as her hips moved against his hand. "Jack. You have to contact Harry. I have to meet Alek --"

"Forget Harry and Alek." He grabbed her with one arm and lifted her against his chest.

"Jack!" she said as he walked out of the shower, through the narrow hall, and back to his father's bed. "Wait. You're going to tear your stitches. You can't."

"I can. I will." He dropped her on the mattress. Pain radiated from his side. He ignored it and sank down over her. "I have to." He cradled her head. Lowered his mouth to hers. Tasted her sweet, eager lips. His pulse hammered by the time he broke off the kiss. His brow touched hers as he closed his eyes. Tried to leash the sudden, raging need. "Jessie. We came close today. Too many times. I don't ever want to face losing you again."

"You won't," she said.

"Good." He pressed his mouth to her throat. "You'll give up your work for Prism?" Her hands clutched at his shoulders. "Yes."

"Throw away the knives?" He breathed in her scent before exploring the shape of her ear with his tongue.

Jessie was trembling. "Of . . . of course."

Jack smiled and lifted his head. Met the warm cafe noir eyes that had once been so wary and frightened. Now brilliant with emotion. Passion. Love. "We're still alive," he said, reminding her of her promise. "So you're going to marry me."

She went still. "I am? Just like that?"

"Just like that." Jack put one big hand over her belly. Looked at the darkness of his fingers against the translucent texture of her skin. "You could be pregnant already."

"A baby." She took a quick, startled breath. "But what if I'm not?"

"Then I'm going to get you pregnant," he said, stroking his palm up to her breast.

"Very soon."

A delicious whimper escaped her lips as he put his hand on her breast. Kneaded and shaped it with his fingers. Prepared the tight nipple for his tongue.

"Yes," she said, and urged his head down to her breast. "Give me your child, Jackson."

Her small, slender body rippled beneath him. Jack groaned as her cool hands slid all over him. She was driving him out of his skull. The need to pump himself into her was riding over his desire to be gentle. The low, beseeching sounds she made weren't helping. Somehow he held on. Suckled one breast, then the other. Her fingers tangled in his hair. "Jack!"

"Open your legs," he said. At once her thighs parted, welcomed him. The melting heat between them made him groan. "Chere." With controlled, steady pressure, Jack pushed into the silky harbor waiting there.

"Ah," she said as he filled her. "That's -- uh --"

"Exactly," Jack muttered. He propped himself on one arm, and curled the other under her hips. "Wrap your legs around me, baby."

"Don't call . . ." she moaned as he moved.

Jack stroked her with slow, deliberate movements. The skin above his brows beaded as he felt her slim thighs opening wider. He sank deep, until he could feel the touch of her womb. Then he went still.

"What was that you were saying?"

"Never mind." She gasped. "Jack, please."

Jack forgot about his wounds, her delicate body, and everything else beyond the wet heat enveloping him. A savage growl burst from him as he drove into Jessie. Hard. Fast. Without mercy. The only thing that could have stopped him was her resistance.

She gave him fire instead. Met every thrust with a strong surge of her hips. Arched her back, so that her breasts rubbed enticingly against his chest. Closed her eyes as the pleasure overcame both of them..

"Jack!" She cried out as she came.

He threw back his head as he followed her, his big frame shaking with the force of his climax. Sprawled on top of her for an breathless interval before he rolled over, holding her in place.

He felt her mouth brush his and opened his eyes. Her face and breasts were rosy with whisker burn. "You keep this up," he said, "and we're going to have a dozen kids."

"I'll try to restrain myself."

"You're amazing, Jess."

"Not so bad," Jessie said, "for a skinny, bad-tempered porcupine." She wriggled against him. Instantly he hardened inside her. As if he'd never touched her. In a heartbeat Jessie was under him. Her eyes flew open. "Jack?"

He shook his head, trying to clear it. The heat was growing again. They'd been too close to dying too many times in the last day. Adrenaline and Jessie was a potent combination. "I want you, chere. Too much."

When he would have withdrawn from her, Jessie held on. "No, don't."

"You want lagniappe, chere?" Jack smiled when she stopped and frowned her confusion. "It's a tradition down here. A little something extra, in hopes you'll come back."

"I want whatever you can give me," she said. Demonstrated her willingness to take it, too.

"You're still new at this," Jack said. Teeth gritted against the burning craving to take her. "I'll hurt you."

She wriggled delightfully beneath him. "I think that's a distinct impossibility." Her slim fingers reached between them.. Jack sucked in a breath as she boldly caressed the base of his erection.

"Wait." He rolled onto his back once more. With a sensual moan Jessie sank down over him. Gloving him. Scalding him. "There. Better?"

"Mmmmm." She moved experimentally. A voluptuous smile curved her lips. "Oh, yes."

"Two dozen kids," Jack said. His hands found her breasts. She needed careful handling. Not like porcelain. More like a blowtorch. "Unless I die in my bed of exhaustion first."

Jessie slid up, then down on him, thrusting her nipples into his palms. "Don't be afraid," she said. "I won't do anything you don't want me to."

Jack pulled her down by tugging on her hair. His teeth grazed the curve of her neck. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

He let her take control. Watched her hips dance above him in mysterious, languid patterns. She caught one hand and brought it to her mouth. The sight and feel of Jessie sucking lightly on one fingertip made him growl.

"You are going to be the death of me," Jack said.

"Can you die of this?" she said, and sank down. Her movements became swifter. Her eyes more sultry. Jack's arms reached for her as she brought him to the edge.

At the last moment, she bent down. "Now," Jessie gasped the word against his mouth. Jack took her with him into the fire.

It was much later, after they had showered together a second time and dressed, that Jessie picked up the harness. She deliberated for a moment, then placed it in the bedroom closet.

"You're going to get rid of that."

She nodded. "Soon." She handed him his cellular phone. "Call Harry. He's probably ready to send in the National Guard."

"What about the Iceman?"

She grimaced. "I have to think of how to tell Alek the wonderful news."

"Here's an idea: I quit."

Jessie chuckled.

"Well, if you're going to duck Davydov, you better find Nathan. Remember what we agreed on." Jack smiled with lazy satisfaction. "Then come back here."

She eyed him. "You really enjoy telling me what to do, Cajun."

"Get used to it, chere."

#

He watched her stride through the fairgrounds. Jessica Kelly looked different. Glowing. Her eyes were bright. Her smile warm. She was radiating sheer satisfaction.

The interfering bitch.

He had sensed Kruyokov's duplicity. The Russian had underestimated him. Thought he was a fool. Fallen for the bait. The FBI were probably scratching their heads over the counterfeit components right now. STAC would pay for their Comrade's mistake. They wouldn't touch the genuine boards until he was good and ready. And then only for double the original price.

The components alone were worthless. Cutter couldn't sell them without the schematics. Which Jessica Kelly still had in her possession.

All his careful planning had nearly been ruined, but now he had one final chance to make it work. He had watched Hamilton and the woman return from New Orleans. Knew they had spent hours making love in that trailer. Now Hamilton was alone. Wounded. Probably asleep. It would be easy to make it look as though Jessie she had murdered him. She was, after all, a foreign intelligence agent.

He'd wait in the trailer for her after he did Hamilton. It was a short walk to the swamp. Her body would never be found. If it was, well, by then he'd be on his way to South America with the boards and the schematics.

He checked his gear, then glanced at the hooded jacket. Smiled. He didn't have to wear it anymore. Krutykov was dead. His men in federal custody. No one would suspect him. There was no more need to disguise himself. He was just another member of the carnival's big, happy family.

Chapter Twenty

"No matter what happens," Nathan Stokes said, "the show must go on."

The day Jack was arrested, the show opened late. With Mardi Gras in full swing, Nathan Stokes had expected some decrease in attendance. There was the lure of the city's endless parades and amusements. Candy Corbin's murder was all over the local news stations. Who wanted to come to a show where a woman had been so brutally killed? Half of the ride and stand operators didn't show up for work.

Unfortunately, paying customers descended on the show. In record numbers. Apparently the lure of Mardi Gras was not as strong as cold-blooded murder. The barker swiftly redistributed the carnies to cover for the missing workers. He was forced to close two of the side shows for the night. Everyone hustled to make up the lack of numbers. When Nancy and Harv had returned from the city, Nathan was frantic.

"Where's Jessie? Did Jack make bail? Never mind," he said. "Tell me later. We've got a show to put on."

Doc had appeared after that at the sideshow, eager to know what had happened in his absence.

"Why weren't you with them?" Nathan demanded..

Doc looked at Nancy, who looked at Harv. "Well --"

"You see --" Harv started. Stopped. Sat back down on his bed of nails.

"It's a long story, Nathan," the Lady Wolf said, then began studiously combing her beard.

Doc had just grimaced and shook his head.

Just before closing, Jessie came from her trailer and found the barker shutting down the sideshow. She finished the story Nancy had promised Nathan. The barker listened to her in attentive silence.

"Sorry about all this, Nathan," she said when she was through.

"So Jack didn't murder Candy, and Nancy and the others didn't bust Jack out of downtown NOPD, and you all just stumbled in the middle of some DEA operation that no one would explain to you? And this is how you got bruised up, and Jack got a couple of gashes?"

"Basically -- yes."

"Jessica, honey," he said. "I appreciate the effort, but I know when I'm being conned."

Her smile wavered for an instant. "Nathan."

He winked at her and grinned broadly. "But at least I know I'm being conned by the best." His merry eyes fixed on something just past Jessie's shoulder. "There's Doc. Hey, Doc!" He waved him over. "Would you mind stopping by Connie's trailer and taking a look at Jack? He's pretty banged up."

"Oh?" Doc looked from Nathan to Jessie, surprised. "He looked fine the last time I saw him."

"A lot happened since then," Jessie said. Inwardly sighed at having to repeat the ridiculous story. "Come on. I'll fill you in while we walk."

She gave Doc the same fictional version of the events as they walked from the business trailer back down the midway. Doc smiled once or twice, but didn't comment. As they approached Conrad's trailer, Jessie noticed the lights were off. Poor Jack. He must have finally collapsed.

"How did it go with that FBI agent? Is he going to be all right?" she asked Doc as she climbed up the steps and opened the trailer door.

"He had some torn muscles that needed surgery, but he'll be fine," Doc said. "He was lucky. A couple of inches lower and the knife would have entered his heart."

"Jack?" Jessie called out softly. She listened, then turned back to Doc. "He might be asleep."

"Let him rest," Doc said. "I'll come back by in an hour."

Jessie agreed and stepped inside. She walked back through the trailer to Conrad's bedroom. Frowned when she saw the empty bed. Where had Jack have gone off to now? Had Parker demanded he report in? She'd have something to say about that --

There was a small sound behind her. She started to pivot, but it was too late. A heavy object slammed into the back of Jessie's head. Pain. Then darkness.

Across the fairgrounds, Imogene was through polishing chapter nine of her current thriller when Jack appeared. She peered over her reading glasses at him in utter surprise.

"Lord have mercy," she said. "Jackson Hamilton, what the devil have you done to yourself?"

"Long story, Genie." Jack crouched down next to her terminal. "Listen, I need to borrow your computer for a minute.. My cell phone is dead and I need to e-mail someone some information, fast.."

"Of course, dear boy." She exited the word processing program she was working in, then turned the swivel base of the monitor and keyboard toward Jack. A dark trickle running from beneath his hair down his lean cheek made her reach for a box of tissues. "You're bleeding, Jack."

"I know." Jack accessed the on-line program and swiftly input a series of numbers. He felt Imogene gently blotting the blood from his face. The damn bandage had been irritating the hell out of him. Jessie was going to have a fit when she saw he'd torn it off, too. "Come on, come on," he urged the computer. She was already back at the trailer and waiting for him, he'd bet. He didn't like her being alone for any length of time. As long as Cutter was still loose, Jessie was in danger.

An official-looking screen appeared. In large, grim language, it displayed dire warnings about FCC regulations and the penalties for violating State Department systems. Imogene caught her breath as she watched Jack entered an encrypted access code and bypassed the main system completely.

"That's some e-mail," she said, fluttering one hand above her layered lace collar.

"Try not to get me busted by the government for illegal access, would you, dear? I doubt they'd have a cell I could fit in comfortably."

"Don't fret about it, Imogene," he said as a communications screen appeared. In one corner, a live video square transmitted the image of Harry Parker seated

behind a large desk. He was sorting through an large file folder. He was not happy, either.

Jack began typing. Hi, Harry. Working overtime again?

The man in the video reacted with a roar as he saw the words appear on the screen. He surged to his feet. "Jack? Is that you? I'm going to kick your Cajun ass --"

Shut up, Harry, Jack typed. I'm on an open terminal and the nice civilian lady with me can hear every bad word you say.

"Great. Just great," Harry said. Tossed the file in his hands back on the desk.

Thrust a hand through his fair hair. "Okay, Jack, the fun's over. The Idiots Association is taking over the operation. You're fired."

Jack frowned and typed, What happened?

"Someone put a pipe bomb under my car this morning," Harry's voice dropped as his expression went cold. "I lent my secretary the 'Vette so she could go to lunch. Jack, Carolyn was killed in the explosion."

"Jesus, Harry." Jack had known Carolyn and liked her. He remembered how she talked about her two boys. "I'm sorry.."

"Not as much as you're going to be. I just got word from our favorite boy genius. The package you dropped off was not, repeat, was not the real thing."

Jack swore. Imogene thought about covering her ears, then decided it might behoove her to take notes. Her tough, cynical detective characters could always use new dialogue.

So Cutter is still alive.

"That's a brilliant deduction," Harry said. "Do you have any idea where the genuine package is, Jack?"

Cutter has it. He must have made the switch.

Harry planted his hands on the desk top and glared through the video. "What about the woman?"

She's working with me.

"Yeah, I got that impression. When this is all over, we're going to have a long talk with you about all the regulations that you and your girlfriend have violated in the last twenty-four hours. I'm thinking about waving the charges. Then you're fired."

She's on our side.

"Did she give you the other package?"

Not yet. She will. Trust me.

"It isn't a matter of trust, Chameleon. You know what we're dealing with here. Get the other package," Harry said.

Jack suppressed the urge to ram his fist through the monitor. He typed, Will get both packages and Cutter.

"You'd better." The video was slightly distorted due to line quality, but there was no mistaking Harry's grim stare. "You've got about two hours before the Idiots arrive. I suggest you use them to find Cutter, if you can."

Your faith in me is appreciated.

"Two hours, Jack. Move it."

Jack exited from the communication screen and back out through the on-line program. Imogene's small hand rested on his shoulder. He sighed and looked into her shrewd eyes.

"Chameleon?" she said, brows arching. "Tell me the mysterious people you work for have better imaginations than that."

The side of his mouth curled. "You were expecting double-oh seven?"

"I suppose it's better than something like . . . Iguana." She patted his back. "Tell me, what did that extremely upset man mean by 'the Idiots Association'?"

He took her hand and briefly pressed it to his lips. "Sorry, Genie. Everything you just saw and heard is classified. I can't explain." He glared at her. "And you can't tell anyone, either.."

"Good." She beamed unexpectedly. "Then I'll use my imagination and work it into the plot for my next book. Now, I wonder if I put a C before --"

"Jack? You in here?"

Jack and the Fat Lady turned to see Bobby Driswald and Conrad duck through the tent entrance. Jack's father was carrying, of all things, Jessie's knife-throwing harness. On one side was a ragged square of paper through which a blade had been thrust.

"We got a problem, son." Connie held out the vest, and Jack snatched the paper from it. There was only two sentences scrawled on it.

Follow the trail behind the carnival into the swamp. Bring the schematics, or she dies.

Jack's face flushed dark red with rage. He crumpled the paper in his fist. "God damn it! He's got Jessie!"

All at once he was surrounded. Nancy. The twins. Harv. Even Mae and a couple of the dancers from the strip show appeared. Everyone was talking at the same time. Imogene cleared her throat several times, to no effect.

At last Harv put two fingers in his mouth and emitted a piercing whistle. That instantly silenced the chatter.

"Listen up," Harv said. He turned to Jack. "Tell us what's happened, Jack. And none of that manure you and Jessie have been spreading around, either."

Jack looked around him. Saw Nancy's fierce gaze. Bobby's scarred mouth, tight with concern. The solemn cherubic beauty of the midgets. His father, shaky but sober. The exotic dancers, who were still in the process of buttoning up the clothes they had so hastily donned. Imogene, majestic as always, looking at him like a worried mother.

"All right," he said. To hell with security.. These were his people. "Jessie's in trouble. I'll tell you what I can."

#

Jessie tried to open her eyes, but couldn't. Her jeans were soaked from the knee down. She could smell rotted vegetation and stagnant water. Heard the night sounds of insects and animals coming from every direction. Felt the rope binding her arms to her sides cutting into her flesh. Behind her, the rough bark of the tree she was tied to scraped against her back.

She opened her mouth to call out, and something hit her in the face. A hard, broad hand. Her head rocked to the side from the impact.

"Not one word," Cutter told her in Russian. "You talk only when I tell you to." She nodded.

Another stretch of silence. The sound of water moving. A hiss. Her imagination began to fill in the pictures to correspond. Her stomach knotted as the thought came to her.

We're in the swamp. She remembered Jack telling her about the alligators and snakes and the leeches. Oh, God, what if he leaves me out here like this?

As if he'd read her thoughts, Cutter laughed.

"We're waiting for your lover to arrive. I left a message for him back at the carnival. When he does, you will do exactly as I say. Do you understand?" She nodded again. "Excellent."

Jessie surreptitiously tested the ropes around her. She was bound too tightly to have the smallest hope of working herself free. Something slithered around her ankle. She clamped down on her fear. Carefully shook her leg. Whatever it was fell into the water just below her with a small splash.

"You've caused me a great deal of trouble, Katarina. Tonight you will redeem yourself and make me a wealthy man. Tell me, was your Father as much a monster as they said he was?"

"No," she said. "He was worse."

"Really? I find that very interesting. He was certainly famous and from all accounts, extremely wealthy."

Jessie said nothing. Cutter didn't know she had taken the money from her Father's estate and donated it to a center for abused and neglected children in Virginia.

The courier's voice continued. "I was not so lucky. My parents fled the Soviet Union when I was just a boy. They had heard the stories of streets paved with gold and a chicken in every pot." Cutter made a disgusted sound. "And when they arrived, they quickly discovered it was all a lie. America is not the promised land. Not for poor, uneducated peasants who couldn't even speak the language. You speak English very well. Did Sergei Yuscovitch make you learn it?"

"My mother. She was American," Jessie said. "She died when I was eight."

"Ah, so we are both orphans. My parents were dead before I graduated high school. Overworked by pathetic jobs that paid mere pennies. The American dream." His laughter was callous. "Sweatshops and digging ditches."

Jessie heard something buzz close to her ear, and flinched. "Just some curious fireflies, Katarina," Cutter said. "You should work on your control. An operative maintains cover at all times. Even when tied to a tree in the middle of a swamp." Jessie felt something landed on her face, near the blood trickling from her mouth.

She shook her head. "Why are you doing this?"

"My parents died and left me nothing. No money. No chance to better myself. I swore my revenge on this wretched country. I found I could get rich selling American secrets. There are always countries who covet their technology. They were more than willing to finance my schemes."

"So you became a traitor."

"On the contrary, I became a performer. Bringing my skills to the carnival circuit was a particularly brilliant decision on my part. There is no better way to transport stolen merchandise than while traveling with a road show." Jessie felt the gun touch her face again. A hard caress of damp, cold metal. "I will miss it, you know. Now, tell me, how would you like to die?"

"Quickly," she said, with complete sincerity..

"If Jackson Hamilton brings the schematics, I believe I can grant your request. If he does not --" Cutter broke off as the sound of something substantially larger than a firefly lumbered toward them. "And here he is. Hamilton must care for you deeply." Cutter's mouth came close to her ear. His voice lowered to a mere whisper. "This is how you will save his life. Call out to him. Tell him to place the schematics in the boat tied to the bank, then leave. Tell him I will release you as soon as he's gone." Do this exactly as I've told you, and I will let him live."

It was all Jessie could hope for.

He prodded her side with the weapon. "Call to him.. Now."

"Jack?" There was no response. "Jack, listen to me. He has a gun. He says he will shoot both of us unless you do what he says."

Faintly she heard Jack's voice. "Let her go, Cutter."

"No, Jack, listen to me," she said. "Put the schematics in the boat and go. He'll let me live if you do." She prayed Jack would have something -- anything -- he could place in the boat to make Cutter think it was the designs he wanted.

"Let Jessie go first," Jack called out again.. His voice was closer, but Jessie estimated he was still more than a hundred yards away. Too far to reach her before Cutter pulled the trigger.

"Tell him if he does not comply, I will shoot you in the head," Cutter said.

"Jack, please, do it! He'll kill me if you don't!" Please, please, do it and get out of here, she prayed.

"All right. I'm going over to the boat," Jack called. The sound of his steps slogging through the tangle of matted marsh grass and dead leaves was louder. "I'm putting the schematics in the boat. They're on the seat."

"Tell him to go," Cutter said. "Immediately."

"Get out of here, Jack," Jessie shouted. "Now!" She heard Cutter pull back the slide on his pistol, and prayed he was pointing it at her.

There was a sudden, enormous explosion.

Jessie felt heat and a blast of water smash over her.

Somewhere to her right, a gun went off. Heavy thrashing through the undergrowth grew louder. Closer. Cutter released a furious bellow of rage. Then another gunshot, this one close to her head. She twisted against the ropes, fighting to free herself.

Jessie went still as she heard Cutter's voice say in Russian, "Say good-bye to your lover." She held her breath. Prayed she would go quickly. The sound of a fist connecting with bone cracked next to her head. There was a choked-off cry. More thrashing of branches. Water splashing. What might have been a rapid, frantic retreat.

She remained still. Silent. Waiting for the last shot.. Jessie jerked as she felt four tiny hands touch her legs.

Gail Appleby's sweet voice asked, "Can you lean over, Jessie?" Jessie bent forward as far as she could. One of the small hands tugged the blindfold from her face. She saw Gail and Terence standing before her. Both looked quite pleased. She jerked her head from one side to the other.

"There was a man here with a gun," she said, but Terence shook his head as he removed a jackknife from his pocket.

"Not anymore. Jack chased him off. Hold still now." He sawed at the lowest ropes.

"Not there, you moron," Gail said. "Give me the knife. I'll do it."

Terence frowned at his sister. "I've got to cut them off."

"No," Gail insisted. "Cut the knot at the back and then we'll pull them off her!"

"That'll take too long!" Terence snapped.

"Will not!"

"Will too!"

"Gail. Terry. Please." Jessie held on to her temper. "Don't argue. We're in danger. Get these ropes off me."

The twins exchanged a furious look. Terence began sawing at the ropes again.

Gail went to the back of the tree and began tugging at the knot. It took several minutes, but at last Jessie was free.

She rubbed her numb arms and scanned the immediate area.. They were completely alone. "Where did he go? Where is Jack?"

"Don't worry about him," Gail said, and slipped her small hand in Jessie's. She gave it a tug. "Come on. We have to get back to the show."

Terence pointed to a narrow path leading through a tangle of dead vines. "This way."

Imogene was waiting for them when they emerged from the swamp. A custom-designed golf cart enabled her to ride short distances around the show. She waved to them, and pointed to the freak show tent.

"Hurry, children. We don't have much time left."

Jessie watched the twins disappear into the tent, then turned to the Fat Lady.

"Imogene? What is going on?"

"We've got a surprise waiting," Imogene said.. "Go on inside, Jessie. Harv will show you what to do."

Behind the fairground, Cutter stumbled his way through the swamp. His breath rasped as his eyes darting left and right. With every step he grew more certain. Someone was following him.

"Keep running, boy."

He halted. Whirled around. Fired two rounds in the direction of the ghostly voice.

When the echo died, he heard low, savage laughter.

"Try again," the same voice said, this time from the opposite direction.

He swept his arm back and squeezed the trigger once more.

"Is that the best you can do?" the voice asked from a third location.

Cutter ran. He spotted the lights of the carnival, and changed direction. Behind him, something was coming up fast. He burst through the trees. Saw the side

show tent. He didn't have Katarina anymore, but Hamilton had other weaknesses. Particularly for the freaks. He looked over his shoulder. No one was there.

The interior of the tent was completely black. Cutter squinted as he crept silently along the center of the display cages. Even if the others were gone, the Fat Lady would still be here. Hamilton had always treated the grotesque woman like a surrogate mother. Cutter smiled. Wondered how Hamilton would react to seeing a gun pressed to "Mom's" head.

He got to the partitioned section reserved for the Fat Lady, and yanked back the curtain.

The open end of Imogene's trailer was empty.

"Looking for someone?" he heard a high-pitched voice inquire.

He spun around and saw one of the midgets dart between the cages.

"Come back out here!" Cutter yelled.

"Now that voice sounds right familiar," Harv Allen's voice drawled from the other side of the displays.

Cutter ran to the Pincushion's cage and yanked back the curtain. It, too, was empty. He cursed, then went still as something moved just behind him.

"Did you buy a ticket?" The Lady Wolf said, and growled. "I don't think you did. Loser."

Cutter stayed where he was. "I want Hamilton and his girlfriend. Give them to me, and no one will get hurt."

"Put down your gun, honey," Mae said. "Or you're the one who'll be hurting."

After Cutter fired a shot in the direction of her voice, he heard her say, "Missed me, baby." Only now Mae was standing on the other end of the tent.

Cutter's shaking hand rubbed quickly over his face. He had never liked the freaks, and their game was beginning to wear. He began frantically searching the cages, one by one. They were all empty. He returned to the center of the tent.

"Give them to me, or I'll go out on the midway and shoot the first person I see."

"Take off your hood first, Cutter," Jessica Kelly's voice called out. "We want to see who you really are."

A bright light hit him directly in the face. Cursing, covering his eyes, he stumbled away toward the entrance. The light followed him.

"I'll do it!" he said. Peered through the blinding whiteness. Saw something loom up over him. It was the Manigator -- Hamilton! He lifted his weapon and fired.

Something smashed into his arm and knocked the gun away. The light blinked off. Then Cutter saw it was just the painted canvas from the outside of the tent.

Hanging in front of him, suspended from the top of the tent.

Hands descended from all directions. Cutter twisted as the freaks closed in on him. A huge, soft weight pushed him down on the ground. He screamed in rage as he was pinned.

"Lights, Bobby."

The freaks backed away as Jack approached the center of the tent. Imogene was sitting on top of the hooded man, looking very pleased with herself. Bobby handed Jack Cutter's gun.

"What a rube," Gail said with supreme contempt. "Does this guy really have the brains to be an terrorist smuggler?"

"Apparently not enough to be a very good one." Imogene daintily smoothed her somewhat ruffled curls as she shifted her weight on the man's back. Cutter groaned miserably. "Jackson, my love, do you have the means to restrain this villain? He's not at all comfortable to sit on."

"I've got some rope, Genie. Harv, Bobby, Nancy," Jack turned to the others.

"Help Imogene up while I take care of him."

The freaks assisted the Fat Lady as she rose up and off her victim. Jessie crouched down with Jack, ready to pin the hooded man back down. Cutter's arm moved swiftly, and a handful of sawdust and dirt hit Jessie in the face. Jack lunged, and got a kick to the abdomen that knocked him back two yards onto his back. Cutter scrambled to his feet and darted out of the tent.

"Damn it!" Jack swore. "Everyone, stay here!" He glanced at Jessie, then ran after him.

Both midgets would have followed, had Nancy not made a swift grab and caught them.

"Hold it, you heard the man."

"After all that," Imogene said, and sighed out her disgust. "Well, help me over to my divan, children. I'll contact the local authorities from my phone."

#

Jack returned from searching the swamp an hour later. Cutter had gotten away, melted into the night without a trace. The police and a pair Jack suspected were

CIA were still questioning the carnies. Nathan took him aside as soon as he saw Jack. Told him Jessie was waiting in her trailer for him.

"Stall them for me," he asked the barker as he nodded to the officers. "I've got to talk to Jessie."

When he walked into his father's trailer, Jessie was pacing back and forth. She halted at once and threw herself at him.

"Jack."

He hauled her up and buried his face in her hair. Kissed her roughly. Set her down again. "You okay, chere?"

"I'm fine." Her smile disappeared. "You didn't get him."

"Not yet." Frustration made his hands clench for a moment. "Did you get a look at his face?"

"No." Jessie rubbed the sore spot on the back of her neck. "Not even a glimpse."

"He's gone. I thought he ran back into the swamp, but I couldn't track him. I'll try again when I've got some daylight to work with."

"He'll be back," Jessie said.

There was a knock at the door, startling both of them. Jessie opened it and Doc stepped in. He looked tired, as if he'd been woken up. The carnival's physician took one look at Jack and Jessie's bedraggled appearance and sighed.

"I won't have to open a private practice," Doc said as he set down his bag. "I'll just stick around here. A metropolitan Emergency Room doesn't see this much action. Come on, Jessie, I'll start with you first."

After she showed him where Cutter had hit her in the head, Doc used a penlight to check Jessie's eyes. The smell of stagnant water rose from her damp, muddied jeans and he grimaced. "My, aren't you fragrant."

"I took a little walk in the swamp," she said, and glanced over at the man staring out the small window. "So did Jack."

"What were you two doing out there in all that muck?" He manipulated her neck, then peered in both of her ears. "Snipe hunting?"

"Trying to stop a nut case named Cutter," Jack said. The dawn was hovering just along the edge of the horizon.

"Sounds fascinating," Doc said as he listened to her heartbeat through his stethoscope. "Jessie, do you feel dizzy? Any numbness in your arms? No? Good. Say aahh." Doc looked over her tongue. "All clear. You let me know if you feel any change, okay?"

Jessie nodded.

"Your turn, Jack."

"I'm fine."

"Come on, Jack. Let me have a look at those gunshot wounds," Doc said. "Bayou water is a hotbed of bacteria."

"All right." Jack turned from the window and saw Jessie staring at him from over her shoulder. Her lips soundless formed one word. His blood went to ice.

Jessie casually got to her feet and started for the kitchen.

Jack said the first thing he could think of that made sense. "You want some coffee, Doc?"

"No, thanks," Doc said. He stood up and pointed a gun at Jack's chest. "Jessie, stop right there, if you would. Thank you. Don't move." He glanced quickly at her position. "I seem to remember Connie keeps his knives by the sink. Walk back here, slowly, or I'll shoot Jack in the face."

"Cutter," Jack said softly. "As in surgeon."

Doc inclined his head. He gestured with the gun as Jessie carefully edged around him. "Sit down on the sofa, Jack. Make yourself comfortable. Jessie, come here."

"What do you want?" Jessie asked.

"What I've always wanted. The schematics. Get them."

"If I give them to you," she said, "will you let us go?"

"Of course."

"No, Jessie." Jack stared at her. "He's lying. Don't give them to him."

"She doesn't have a choice." Doc smiled. "What gave me away, Jessie?"

"You just said you wanted to see Jack's gunshot wounds," she replied. "I haven't told anyone at the carnival that Jack had been shot. You didn't listen to me very carefully when I gave you our abridged version of the night's events."

"A stupid mistake on my part. I tried to force Kruyokov off the road when he took Jessie from that bar. I even watched him shoot you, Jack. I decided to leave when Davydov showed up." He sat down and smiled. "Get the designs, Jessie."

"No," Jack said. "Don't do it."

"Get them, or I will make Jack at the very least a paraplegic."

"Wait," Jessie saw a shadow move behind Doc. She kept her eyes on his face. "I have to drive into town."

"No, you don't," Doc said. "They're hidden in that knife vest over there." A glance at her face made him sneer. "It's the only thing I haven't searched." Suddenly his eyes widened and he made an odd, choking sound.

Jack was changing. His body sinking. Curving. His hair turning from black to blonde. Candy Corbin smiled at Doc.

"Did you miss me?" Jack's voice asked.

Unnerved, Doc took a step back. Wiped a hand over his eyes. "No. I killed you. I killed you!"

"Yes, you did. And I've come back for you, Cutter.."

The gun in Doc's hand was shaking. His voice was a strangled whisper. "It's not possible . . . stop it."

"Come on, sugar. Haven't you ever heard of living hell?" Jack laughed. "I'm yours."

Doc renewed his grip on the weapon. "It's a trick.. Just another of your damned carny tricks!" His eyes went from side to side. "How are you doing it, Jack?

Mirrors? Hidden projectors?" He pointed the gun at Candy's face. "Tell me!"

Jack's scarlet mouth smirked, then the light blue eyes rounded. "Dad, no!"

Conrad Hamilton had come out of the bedroom and silently moved up behind Doc. Before the last word left Jack's lips, Connie's elastic limbs wrapped around the smuggler. Jessie hit the floor, felled by a wild swing from Doc's arm. Jack's

changing form leapt across the space between them, his hands going for the gun.

Doc was faster. He smashed the gun into the side of Conrad's head, stunning him. The contortionist's arms and legs went limp. Doc grabbed the old man and rolled him over his shoulder toward Jack. Jack reached instinctively to help his Father and caught him. He tried to set Conrad to one side, but it was too late. Doc fired.

Conrad jerked in his son's arms. Twice.

Before Doc could fire a third time, Jessie swept her leg out. Slammed her shin across the physician's ankles. He fell heavily, the gun skidding away from his hand.

Jack held his father in his arms as Conrad sank down. Two small dark holes stood out on the back of his shirt. Jessie pushed herself up from the floor, trying to reach the gun.

"Too late!" Doc beat her to it, and tried to turn the gun toward her face. Jessie's hands seized his wrists. Alek had always admired the strength she possessed in her hands. Now her life depended on it.

"Let it go, Cutter." She was sick of being afraid for her life. Afraid for those she cared for. Enough people had died because of this man's greed. Jessie's fingers tightened. "Last chance."

Doc laughed at her, until the sound of bones cracking transformed his laughter into a scream. The gun fell to the floor. She thrust him off her and delivered a

single sharp blow to the back of his neck. He slumped over on his back, unconscious.

Jessie struggled to her feet. Saw Jack kneeling on the floor. Conrad was in his arms. One glimpse of Jack's starkly desperate features told her the old man was dying.

"Neat . . . trick . . . " the contortionist said, and lifted his hands to Jack's face. "I . . . love you, son . . . "

Jack cradled his father against him and looked at Jessie. She came over to Conrad. Knelt down. Held his hand. Then took Jack's.

The gaunt face lifted as he took a deep breath. Smiled at both of them. Then looked past their faces to some unseen place. He smiled in a way Jessie had never seen before.

"Marianne . . . "

#

Three days later, Jessie and Jack drove past the French Quarter down to the tree-shaded end of Canal Street. Just north of the residential area were the cemeteries, among them some of the oldest and most historic graveyards in the region.

"So many tombs," Jessie said. There seemed to be thousands of the structures. Some were modest, unadorned boxes of stone. Others were larger and grander. A few were the size of small houses. Statues and memorial markers decorated the spaces in between the shrines.

"We don't bury the dead in New Orleans," Jack said in a toneless voice. "Some of the land the city was built on is below sea level. There's hardly any natural drainage. Water's only a few feet down, wherever you dig."

They passed the Metairie Cemetery and turned in to the small ossuary where Jack's mother had been buried years before. As Jack parked the car, the long line of vehicles that had been following them began to fill up the lot.

When the news of Conrad Hamilton's death went out on the circuit, carnies from all over the South converged on the Big Easy. Darel and Marcella held a veilee -- the traditional Acadian wake -- in Connie's honor the night before in a French Quarter bar. Jack and Jessie had made a brief appearance. They had met many of his Father's friends, show people who mourned Conrad's loss as they would a member of their family.

The memorial service earlier that day at St. Louis Cathedral had also been well-attended. The tall gray spires and spare, elegant lines of the two hundred year old church seemed to endow everyone with a sense of peace. Now all that was left was to put Conrad Hamilton to rest beside his beloved Marianne.

Jack left Jessie with the carnies from Stokes' and went with Darel to bear his father's remains to the family tomb. Jessie was startled by the sound of a trumpet, then music. She saw a complete jazz band marching in solemn procession before the casket carried by Jack, Darel Nathan, Harv, and other members of Marianne's extended family.

Nancy, resplendent in black veil and dress, leaned over.. "It's sort of a tradition with the people here. I don't get it, either."

Jessie suppressed an involuntary smile, and took the Lady Wolf's gloved arm.

"Let's walk ahead."

Jack's mother was buried in a pure white marble vault. The tomb was simply adorned with carved marble roses and the family name on a scrolled banner.

Around it, Conrad had neatly planted miniature gardenias and the honeysuckle his wife had loved. The sweet smell of the flowers teased Jessie's nose.

She reached out and traced the letters chiseled into the stone. Marianne Jackson Hamilton. Beloved Wife. Devoted Mother. Less worn were the letters beside it.

Conrad Andrew Hamilton. Beloved Husband. Devoted Father.

"I'll take care of him now," she said. "I promise."

Jack and the others carefully placed Conrad's casket on the platform next to the vault. A retired priest from Jefferson Parish who had married Marianne and Conrad performed the brief funeral service. Jack stood with his arm around Jessie and said nothing as his mother's family and the carnies paid their last respects to his Father. He thanked everyone personally for attending.

Tante Fleur descended on them with tears. Marcella kissed Jessie on both cheeks and made her promise they would attend her wedding to Darel. Jessie stayed at Jack's side until it was over. Once the last cousin had departed, Jack went to the grassy space beside the vault. There despite the immaculate suit he was wearing, he sat down on the ground and leaned his back against the outer wall of the crypt.

"Are you okay?" Jessie asked as she sat down next to him.

Jack stared at the pale linen sky through the row of dogwood trees, his eyes shuttered and remote. "I will be." His hand found hers. "I know he's with her, Jessie. Don't ask me how."

She placed the white roses they'd brought on the grass and rested her head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jackson."

Jack pulled her to her feet and grabbed the roses. "Come over here for a minute." He took her around to the front of the vault. "Mom, this is Jessie." He touched his mother's name. "Jess, this was my Mother."

She went along with the rather odd introduction. "Hi, Mrs. Hamilton."

"Mom, we're getting married. I've probably gotten her pregnant, and you would expect me to."

"Don't be too hard on Jack, Mrs. Hamilton," Jessie said. "I seduced him."

"Yeah, you did." Jack kissed the top of her head. "You'd like her, Mom. She's a fighter, like you were." He looked over at Conrad's name. "Dad, I --" his voice broke. Jessie squeezed his arm.

"Thank you for saving Jack, Connie," Jessie said for him. "Be happy, wherever you are."

Epilogue

Harrison Lincoln Parker sat down in the uncomfortable hotel chair. His mouth was agape. He stared first at Jack, then Jessie. "You're joking, right?"

Jessie shook her head. "No, Harry. It's true."

"Colonel Davydov? Colonel Aleksei Davydov?" he said, to be sure. Jack nodded.

"Jessie works for the Iceman?"

"No, Harry." Jack was patient. "Jessie used to work for the Iceman."

"That's supposed to be better?" Harry's voice rose.

"Much better than trying to work a marriage around two agencies. Davydov and I had a little chat, and he's agreed to let Jessie retire. Permanently."

Harry's astonishment became more evident as he homed in on what Jack had said. "You spoke to him?"

"Yeah." Jack hadn't reported the fact the Davydov had intervened in the assignment several times and even saved their lives during the warehouse standoff. He had enough paperwork to handle. "He's not a bad guy, Harry. For an ex-KGB Director."

Harry was still trying to digest the news that one of his own men had a direct conversation with his worst enemy. "When did all this happen?"

"When he showed up for our wedding. Jessie invited him. If you'd been able to come, you could have supervised the entire negotiation."

Harry turned to Jessie. "Why did you invite the Iceman to your wedding?" A thought occurred to him. "Jesus Christ, you're not related to him, are you?"

"No. But I did need someone to walk me down the aisle." Jessie said. "Aleksei insisted. He's very fond of me, you know."

Harry didn't like the sound of that at first. Until the possibilities of having a direct link to the Iceman began to appeal to him.. He had wanted access to Davydov for a long time.

"Stop looking at Jessie like you're sizing her up for an assignment," Jack said.

"Alek has been like a fa- uh, an uncle to her all these years."

"Yeah, all right." Harry scowled. "Mind telling me what the hell I'm supposed to report back to Washington? It was one thing getting NOPD to overlook Jack's escape from custody and drop the murder charges. Explaining this to the National Security Board, not to mention the Chairman of Domestic Operations?"

"Will be as much fun as when I had to tell Aleksei that I was quitting," Jessie said.

"And marrying an American operative working for you."

Harry nodded. His shoulders slumped. Reality was sinking in fast.

Jack wisely changed the subject. "Did Scottie ever track down those numbers from Cutter's matchbook?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, as a matter of fact he did. They're Cutter's Swiss bank account. Scottie told me it's chock full of cash he earned selling out his adopted country."

"And the pipe bomb that killed Carolyn?"

Parker's expression went shuttered and bleak. "Still no leads. DC Police think it was some local gang bangers."

"You don't."

"I'll find out who did it," Harry said. The words were soft. Lethal. "However long it takes."

"Well, at least the Swiss account will close the case against Cutter. Nail it shut, too."

"You think so? I've got three cases still open that I need cleared." The department chief looked from Jack to Jessie with a glower. "By your husband, madam."

Jack grinned. "I did forget to mention I'm taking all that vacation time I have saved up, didn't I?"

"No." Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. "Absolutely not. You can't. That's three months or better --"

"Just enough time to get packed, transported and settled in," Jack crossed his arms over his chest. "Jessie and I are headed for Maine for the summer."

"Maine?" Harry looked blank. "Why Maine?"

"It's where my work -- my legitimate work -- is. Only for the summer," Jessie said.

"I have to finish a restoration job for a museum in Portland."

"She's under contract," Jack added with alacrity. "After that, we're buying a house in Maryland."

"Maryland?" Harry perked up. Almost smiled. "As in the vicinity of Washington D.C.?"

Jessie grinned. "Of course. Jack hates to commute, and we'll be busy once the baby arrives."

"The baby." Harry appeared punch-drunk now. "What baby?"

"Ours." Jack sat down on the bed next to his wife and patted her stomach. "We're already fighting over the names."

"There is nothing wrong with naming our baby Marianne," Jessie said.

"If it's a girl." Jack nodded. "There's just no way in hell you're calling my son Junior Hamilton."

"Wait a minute!" Harry sprang to his feet. "Shut up, both of you. That's it. I've had enough."

Both of them looked at Jack's boss in surprise. "Enough of what?" Jack asked. "Of what? What haven't you done? Jessie works for the Iceman. You've been chatting with him. The Iceman shows up at your wedding. She's quitting her agency, and you're taking off for three months from mine. Now you tell me Jessie's pregnant and you're moving to Maine!"

Jack thought it best not to laugh. "That's pretty much it, Harry. You can fire me again, if you like."

"Not on your life," Harry began to pace. "I don't plan on letting you two out of my sight!" He stopped and gazed at them with resignation. "I suppose you'll want to get out of field work. Now that you're going to be a father." He glared at Jessie briefly.

Jack nodded. "You've been telling me for years I'd make a good instructor for new recruits. I'd like a shot at it."

"Don't use words that have anything to do with guns," Harry said. "Not with the way I feel right now!"

Harry left soon after that, still muttering absently under his breath. From the window, Jessie watched his car drive off.

"Do you think he'll ever get over it?"

Jack stepped up behind her and laced his hands in front of the gentle swell that promised them a child in seven months. "Give him time, chere. I'm still reeling myself."

Despite the joy of expecting, both Jack and Jessie had worried, until the results of the amniocentesis had come back on their unborn child. The doctor told them

they could expect a healthy baby. Jessie wouldn't let him tell them the gender.

That, she said, would be like opening Christmas presents in July.

Now Jessie turned in Jack's arms. Smiled up at him. Pressed the slight curve of her belly against him. "I love you, Jack."

His eyes glinted as he cupped her bottom with both hands. "Is that right? Even when I look like this?" His face blurred, and the wicked leer of the Manigator made Jessie laugh.

She cradled his hairless head with both palms. "Especially when you look like that, love."

Jack changed back to himself abruptly. "I knew you had a thing for reptiles, baby."

"Only chameleons," Jessie said as he bent down to kiss her. "And don't call me baby."

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