

FOX hollow



Libby mckinmer

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“Is it possible you signed anything that would make you liable for Jackson’s or Fox Hollow’s debts?”

“I suppose so. I’ve signed many documents over the years.”

“What about recently?”

“Well...Jackson was complaining about a fall-out with his bankers the night before he went away.”

“Did you sign anything?”

“Of course. We had some new clients interested in purchasing, and my name has to be on the documents, too.”

“Is that all?”

“I really don’t know. He told me they were regular sales agreements and design contracts.” Fear was beginning to curl around her voice. “And I can’t get into the safe where we always keep those kinds of paper.” She gestured to the black box in the corner. “The combination’s been changed.”

Rees felt his disgust for Tobin build. For some reason, Melissa was being left to hold the bag...the very empty bag John Axelson would expect to have filled with cash. “We need to get into that safe.”

“But I don’t have the combination...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a friend who is a locksmith. I’ll call him and he’ll get it open for us.” Rees squeezed her shoulders gently and ran his hands down the outside of her arms. He could feel the fine tremors running through her body. His heart clenched. This young woman was in more trouble than she could even begin to imagine...

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Tracks

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FOX HOLLOW
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*As always, to Doug,
against whose heart I'm always tucked.*

*And to the real Augie,
Van Floriks Friendly Ghost, for providing
the inspiration for Fox Hollow's Augie. Thanks to Augie
and his people, Amy and Pete Haskell, there will be
many rescued Keeshonden helped.
And another thanks to Flo Bastuba,
breeder of Augie.*

CHAPTER 1

Melissa rolled her neck and hunched her shoulders in an attempt to release the stress. Reaching up with her right hand, she massaged the knots along the left side of her neck and sighed with relief as the muscles relaxed and she felt the tension ease. Looking at her watch, she was surprised to see it was almost six in the evening.

“Great,” she muttered pushing back her roller chair from the slanted design table. Hastily, she covered the blueprint on the table and gathered her purse and jacket. “Now I’m going to be late. Come on, Augie.”

The grey-and-black furry dog instantly leapt up from his place under her work table and wagged his curled tail happily at her. She ruffled her fingers through his mane and grinned. Augie always brought a smile to her face, no matter what was going on in her life. She really didn’t know what she’d do without the Keeshond who kept her company during the long hours she spent at Fox Hollow estate developments. Often, he was the only companion she had all day.

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Straightening, she trotted across the room with him beside her. Without a backward glance, she turned off the light and closed the door behind them. Reflex made her double-check it was locked securely. Dashing for the Jeep Cherokee angled into the closest parking space, she dragged her arms into a wool double-breasted jacket.

Even though she was in a hurry, she couldn't help but pause to admire her new vehicle. Its dark green exterior and solid go-anywhere look suited Melissa. With her Jeep, she felt comfortable whether she was headed to a construction site to supervise her design or downtown to the theatre, like she was now. And it had plenty of room for her canine companion when he accompanied her to work.

Unless I really get a move on, I won't be able to hook up with Jackson until the end of the first scene. And Jackson, stickler for schedules that he was, would be less than pleased.

"Well, might as well call him now and tell him to meet me at the theatre," she decided aloud as she unlocked the driver's side door. Tossing in her purse after Augie popped onto the passenger seat, Melissa realized her cell phone was still in her briefcase—safely locked in the office she'd just left. With a growl of irritation, she told Augie to stay and jogged across the lawn to the front door of Fox Hollow Development Corporation, jiggling her keys as she went.

If any of the staff had still been working, they'd have stopped to watch Melissa. Her job as an architect allowed her to dress casually unless she was meeting with clients, so she was comfortable wearing a pair of burgundy slim-cut pants and flat shoes along with a silk blouse and the hound's-tooth wool jacket she'd thrown on during her first trip to the truck. The burgundy and silver tones of the outfit perfectly complemented her short, shaggy, ash-blond hair and soft complexion. Even though the day's makeup had faded, Melissa was a beautiful woman.

Hers was not a classic look, though. Her nose was straight enough, but her mouth was too wide and her hair too individual for perfection.

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Her beauty flowed from a deep well of courage overlaid with a patina of sadness, combining to keep her from being too exotic. Over the years, many people had compared her to Meg Ryan, but Melissa felt she didn't look at all like the bubbly film star. For one thing, Melissa insisted, she was at least two inches shorter than Meg and had grey eyes, which had been known to flash an electric silver when she was extremely angry or aroused. And right now, as she struggled with the lock, those remarkable eyes were starting to spark.

More hurry, less speed.

With a final shove, the door gave and she rushed into the room, glancing left and right for her missing briefcase. She spotted it peeking from under the couch. Melissa squatted beside the furniture, grabbed the leather pouch and started to drag it out. It caught on something under the sofa. Melissa was forced to lay flat on her stomach and reach under to wedge it free. Finally hauling it out, Melissa pushed herself into a sitting position and leaned back against the side of the couch. She flipped open her leather satchel and reached inside for her cell phone.

Closing her eyes she hit a speed dial button and listened to the warble of Jackson's phone. She could picture the flat phone tucked inside the breast pocket of her fiancé's Hugo Boss suit—navy, of course, with a white button-down shirt and red-and-navy striped tie. His wingtips would be deepest black and polished to the highest shine like they were every morning. Jackson had the right look for selling the upscale estates she'd been designing for his firm, Fox Hollow Development Corporation, for the past three years. He moved easily among the doctors, lawyers, businessmen, corporate magnates and other professionals who could afford the individually designed Fox Hollow homes that started at two million dollars.

As Melissa well knew, Jackson's phone was far too polite to ring and interrupt someone; it merely vibrated for Jackson's information, and if he was unable to extricate himself tactfully from his conversation within four rings, the caller was immediately sent to a service. Not a

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machine for Jackson. His callers were too important to talk to a machine. They deserved a real person waiting twenty-four hours a day to take their messages and relay them to Jackson. So, Melissa knew she would reach Jackson or his service quickly. And Jackson always checked in with his service within minutes of his phone alerting him to a call. If she didn't reach him now, he would phone her back while she was on the road home. But on the third ring, the connection clicked.

"Jackson Tobin speaking." His voice was cordial, clipped and without inflection.

"Jackson, it's me."

"I do hope you're already on your way over here, Melissa." Still no inflection.

The "hope" was merely an expression, she knew.

"Well, I'm just now leaving the office." She waited.

"You realize it's after six already?" Now there was a definite inflection in his voice.

"I was working on the Dykstras' house and just five minutes ago noticed the time. I'm on my way out the door right now."

"Are you dressed for tonight?"

"Well..." Melissa knew Jackson would not find her outfit appropriate for the theatre, and unlike him, she didn't keep a set of formal wear at the office. Besides, she intended to take Augie home before she went to the theatre, but Jackson would get upset if she told him that. As far as he was concerned, the dog could sit in a parking garage until the play was over. And there was no way Melissa would ever leave her dog alone in a vehicle. There were too many people who could break in to steal him.

She didn't want to start an argument with Jackson that they'd had before, so she simply said, "I want to change into that new black dress I got last month." She paused, but not long enough for Jackson to speak. "It'll look wonderful with the pearls you gave me a couple of weeks ago."

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"That it will. I think it'll be best to meet at the theatre. I'll leave your ticket at the 'Will Call' window in case you don't make it before the first curtain."

"Great, but I'll really try to be there in time."

"I can't see how you'll make it home to change and all the way downtown by eight."

Melissa felt her mood drop. "I'll give it a try anyway. See you there."

"Good."

Melissa knew better than to say "goodbye." Jackson never terminated a phone conversation with her with goodbye. He never had, but simply hung up when finished talking. Early in their relationship, Melissa had found herself talking to a dial tone more than once. Now she knew. Once he'd received the information he needed, Jackson was no longer interested in a telephone conversation.

And, he acted the same in person.

Appalled at her traitorous thoughts, Melissa jumped to her feet and dashed for the door again. She could almost hear her friend Sharon saying, "Well, he could be a bit more interested in other people, you know."

But now wasn't the time to worry about it. Unless she really hurried, she wasn't going to make it to the theatre in time. Racing to the Jeep, she tossed in her briefcase, placed the cell phone on top of her purse, and slid behind the wheel. She ruffled Augie's fur once more in a futile attempt to relax, and in moments was on her way home.

Thirty minutes later, Melissa pulled into the driveway of her two-story stone condo. Still rushing, she stepped out onto the interlocking stone of the driveway and reached back into the vehicle, groping for her purse and briefcase. Augie pranced beside her, obviously hoping for playtime in the back yard, jumping on and off the agility equipment she'd installed the previous summer.

As she jerked at the handbag in her hurry, the shoulder strap caught

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on the edge of the door. In an instant, the contents of her purse were strewn across the paving stones. Melissa sighed and shook her head as she dropped to her knees and fumbled under the Jeep for her lipstick.

“Damn,” she muttered as it skittered away from her fingertips. Finally, it was within her grasp and she shoved it back into the purse with the rest of her personal items. With the purse dangling from her shoulder and the briefcase under her arm, she tore up the walkway, unlocked the front door, rushed into the house and dropped everything on the foyer floor. Augie flew through to the kitchen where the housekeeper, who worked two afternoons a week, would have set out his bowl of kibble with a cut-up hot dog on top—one of his favorite treats.

Not slowing down, she headed for her loft bedroom overlooking the living room. She took the stairs two at a time, undoing buttons and peeling off the jacket as she ran. Melissa dropped it in a heap on her queen-size bed as she swung towards the mirrored closet doors.

In less than a half-hour, she’d repaired her day-weary makeup, changed her clothes, refreshed her hair and was ready for an evening at the theatre. She was clad in a soft, clinging, black silk dress that just skimmed the tops of her knees. When she had seen it at an upscale department store, she’d had to have the dress—one of her few extravagances—because of its spectacular design. The demure front neckline was offset by a deep-plunging back. Melissa felt sexy just slipping into it.

Her long legs were now encased in black silk, too. Jackson loved her in stockings and a garter belt, and Melissa thought the surprise might help make up for being late. Sliding her feet into black evening sandals with four-inch heels, she grimaced.

It was one more of Jackson’s fantasies she indulged when they went out. Even though she was tall, he was taller and had a penchant for women in heels. She knew her feet would feel crumpled within minutes, and if they had to stand around at intermission, she’d secretly

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kick off the heels during the second act.

“Oh, well, Jackson’ll love the look.” Melissa pulled open her jewelry box and removed the pearls Jackson had given her.

Unlike anything else she owned, the faux necklace was showy and hung in a triple loop to a mid-point between her breasts. The clasp was highlighted by dozens of rhinestones, as were the earrings. Each consisted of a button of pearls surrounded by rhinestones that fit against her ear. Attached was a long oval drop of pearls encircled by more rhinestones. The effect was a gaudy contrast to the simple silk dress, but Melissa had already put off wearing them out for almost two weeks since Jackson had given them to her. Wearing them tonight was another way of apologizing for not watching the clock.

With a final glance in the mirror, Melissa pulled a small evening bag off the closet’s top shelf and grabbed a cashmere wrap. At least it would cover the jewelry part of the time. On her high-heels, she tottered down the stairs to the foyer, where she quickly retrieved her keys. Rummaging around in her purse, she pulled out her lipstick, wallet and perfume and tossed them into her evening bag. Applying a few drops of Chanel, she hurried, as much as the shoes allowed, to the kitchen and grabbed an apple out of the fridge. It was all she would get to eat until after tonight’s performance and, as it was, she would have to eat it as she drove downtown.

Glancing at her watch, she realized if she left now and was lucky with traffic she would make it just in time for the start of tonight’s performance of *Grease*. She gave Augie a quick kiss on the top of his head, and made sure his doggie door was unlocked so he could go into the fenced, private back yard at his choice.

“See ya, buddy. We’ll have a big cuddle when I get home.” She dashed for the door.

Melissa was blessed with both light traffic and a valet waiting to park her Jeep when she pulled to the front of the Majestyk Theatre. It was less than five minutes before the eight o’clock curtain. Hurriedly,

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she exchanged her keys for a claim chit and trotted as quickly as her heels would allow to the box office. She found the “Will Call” window and, in moments, had her ticket in hand. The seat was eight rows back from the orchestra, second seat in from the aisle—Jackson’s favorite location. As she made her way down the aisle, the house lights flashed twice. She had only moments before they would dim for the start of the play.

Reaching their seats, she leaned forward and touched Jackson’s shoulder. With a smile, he turned and stood. They had but a moment to touch lips, and Jackson’s hand at the small of her back guided her into the row as the lights dimmed and the music swelled.

“You look delicious,” Jackson murmured with a smile as his lips brushed her ear. “And you smell divine. I appreciate you getting here in time. You must have flown.”

“Well, I didn’t waste any time,” she whispered back as the music rose.

As the first toe-tapping song began, Jackson slid his arm to the open back of her dress. She started as his hand crept along her ribs and his fingertips brushed the side swell of her breast. His fingers continued to explore and stroke her sensitive bare skin as Sandy and Danny discovered teenage love on stage.

Melissa was surprised by Jackson’s attentions. Because they both worked hard and dealt with deadlines and the attendant pressures, the physical side of their relationship had dwindled of late. Recently, she’d had to initiate such activity between them, and she’d found herself less and less interested in doing so. In response to tonight’s attentiveness, Melissa leaned closer against him, allowing his fingers easier and more complete access. Guilt swirled in the back of her mind as she reconsidered her earlier critical thoughts about his distant conduct.

Banishing his previous cool behavior on the phone from her thoughts, she whispered, “I’m wearing those stockings you brought back for me from Paris.”

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“Wonderful,” he breathed in her ear accompanying it with a quick flick of his tongue. “Perhaps later you can model them with just the pearls and heels.”

Melissa was shocked by Jackson’s sudden and overt interest. *Things must’ve gone well at the bank today or he wouldn’t be so relaxed.*

She knew the stress of running Fox Hollow had to be incredible as each huge estate home was built to specification on ten acres for a wealthy, but often fickle and indecisive, client. At times, Jackson juggled up to a half-dozen closings in various stages of completion. Bankers were understandably nervous about the vast number of dollars they often had to advance to Jackson based on Melissa’s blueprints and a client’s mortgage approval limit.

‘I’ve never met a banker with creative vision’ was one of Jackson’s favorite expressions. While Melissa couldn’t really blame the bankers for their occasional reluctance in the face of Jackson’s business exuberance, she could understand Jackson’s frustration at what he viewed the money men’s short-sighted hesitation.

“These are the most beautiful estate properties in this part of the country,” he would brag. “Whatever interests my clients have, at Fox Hollow we’ll incorporate it into their home. They just have to name what they want—horses, tennis, squash, even artist’s studios and complete gyms. Once I had a client who wanted to learn to fly helicopters, so we built a heli-pad for her. Whatever the client can afford, we can include.”

Melissa was the talented architect who made it all work.

Jackson had purchased over five hundred acres of rolling hill property within easy luxury-car commuting distance of Toronto. He had subdivided it into ten-acre lots except for two twenty-five acre parcels he had retained. He always said that one of the larger parcels was for the home he and Melissa would live in one day. The other was for an as-yet-unapproved client. Which proved Jackson’s genius for catering to the unlimited disposable income set. Two multimillionaires

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were currently in a bidding war to win the exclusive property. What they didn't know was that Jackson had discussed selling the twenty-five acres set aside for his and Melissa's home to the loser of the auction for the same price as the winner.

Melissa wasn't comfortable with such business practices, but she had little if any input into that end of Fox Hollow. Her job, which she loved, was to meet with the clients who had already purchased a parcel of land for a home. After compiling their wish list, she would design the house of their dreams with no expense spared. From marble foyers to gold bathroom fixtures, Melissa had seen the gamut of extravagant accessories.

So far, her favorite design had been created for a middle-aged orthopedic surgeon and her artist husband. Their country retreat had been built on a small hill overlooking a natural pond. While not wanting a huge home for themselves, they had requested a series of guest cottages for their three married children and grandchildren who visited regularly.

"We love them," the surgeon had explained while taking her husband's hand and stroking his fingers gently. "But we cherish our privacy. So, while they should feel welcome to come anytime and stay as long as they wish, we want our home to ourselves."

Melissa had seen the passion shimmer between them like a web shining in sunshine. These two had quickly approved her designs for a one-bedroom home, complete with a perfect northern-exposure studio for the husband, an indoor pool and exercise room, and a gourmet kitchen for the surgeon's hobby of German cooking. There was a double-sided gas fireplace with one side opening into the massive master bedroom and the other into the master bath with its made-for-two Jacuzzi and shower.

Each of the guest houses was customized for their children's favorite hobbies—from a billiards room for their oldest daughter's family to a kennel room for the three St. Bernard's who traveled

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everywhere with their son and his kids. The third family was addicted to tennis, so their cottage faced tennis courts, complete with ball machines. Melissa had found great joy in creating this cozy complex for the close-knit family, and she'd been welcomed into their midst.

Working on the project had sparked bittersweet memories of her own family life and the vast depth of her parents' love for her—and between them. It had been a cushion of comfort and safety that had just vanished one bright September afternoon when Melissa was fourteen. Her parents and their plane had gone down in Colorado. Then a sudden, out-of-season snowstorm had meant a week's delay before rescuers could reach the crash site. It had been too late.

The terror of not being able to reach them...not knowing where they were, how they were...had stayed with her into adulthood. It had been the worst feeling in the world, not knowing how to find them when she needed them most.

With no family except her parents, Melissa dropped into the social service net. Despite the best efforts of Annie Steiner, her mother's best friend, to adopt her, Melissa spent the next three years in a series of foster care homes.

When she'd finally gone to live with the Steiners, Melissa had been seventeen. Within a year-and-a-half, the couple had divorced. He had remarried his secretary and transferred to a branch office in Europe. Crushed by her husband's infidelity, Annie withdrew to her club and spas, and a series of younger men. By this point, Melissa had gone away to school, shaken by the period of upheaval, which had only magnified what she had lost when her parents died.

Now, Annie was more settled and had started to design a series of retirement homes for a small architectural firm. Melissa and Annie had grown close, bound more by a sense of what each had lost than by a friendship that had evolved over the years.

When she graduated at the top of her class and began looking for jobs, Melissa had been surprised when Jackson Tobin approached her.

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Fox Hollow was only in its infant stages. He had just closed escrow on the land and was searching for the right architect. He told her he wanted someone new and fresh who would bring youth along with a classic approach to the project. Jackson later told her that a couple of her professors had recommended her, touting her sense of space and ability to incorporate details into a design that made it unique.

Thrilled and flattered by the prospect of such a huge undertaking, Melissa had accepted Jackson's offer. When she'd first started, there had been two other architects at Fox Hollow, but they had moved on. Jackson had told her they lacked the vision he and Melissa shared. She had become the prime design architect for the Fox Hollow estates.

During that same time, Jackson courted her, slowly and carefully building a relationship based on more than just business. Melissa was not swept away by her passion for Jackson, but she was comfortable in the relationship that had grown between them.

She'd known him since childhood, and their parents had been friends. Jackson had even lived with them for a few years when she was a pre-teen. She'd had a huge crush on the "older boy" at the time, and remembered chatting and giggling about him with her girlfriends at pajama parties. She'd told them she was going to marry Jackson one day.

Thus, while she normally would not have been relaxed with Jackson's hand caressing her so intimately in public, tonight Melissa leaned against him and sighed softly with pleasure. As the final song of the first act ended, Jackson leaned in closer to her as if to speak. Instead, his large hand completely cupped her breast and he flicked his nails quickly across her suddenly puckered nipple. Then he was on his feet extending his hand to help her to her feet. She looked up at him, surprised, but took his outstretched hand and rose.

"Shall we mingle in the lobby?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Of course," she replied still drifting in the conflicting emotions his hands had aroused. How he could move so easily from one feeling to

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another still amazed her.

As they wandered up the aisle to the lobby, Jackson stopped a number of times to talk to prospective clients, chatting about the attributes of Fox Hollow and dropping the names of people already living there. Melissa remained at his side as he talked to these people, smiling and moving from group to group. When they reached the lobby, Jackson looked over the room assessing his contacts.

“Would you like a drink, Melly?” She nodded, unconsciously flinching at the use of the hated nickname.

He moved toward the bar, stopping to chat with the various acquaintances he encountered. Waiting for their drinks, he laughed and joked, then made his way back to her, drinks in hand, reconnaissance mission accomplished.

“Come with me, Melly. I want you to meet the Switzers. They’re considering the parcel on the west side of Owl Hill.”

Melissa nodded, seeing the beautiful tree-studded piece of property in her mind’s eye. It overlooked a shimmering stream and was a site for which designing a home would be a dream.

“Okay, Melly, he owns his own plastics firm and she’s an eye surgeon at University Hospital. They have two teenage kids, the family is really into spelunking and she collects antique tapestries. He drives a Lexus.” He tossed in his favorite detail of measuring a person’s worth. “And she’s got a four-by-four Toyota.”

“Have they optioned the land?” she asked.

“No, but they’re teetering on the edge, so let’s put the pressure on them, babe.” Without another word, Jackson’s hand was on the small of her back dryly and coolly brushing over the skin left bare by the dress. His finger pressure guided her on a diagonal toward the bar and up to a small group of people that included a tall, bald man wearing half-glasses and a very elegant woman with an upswept hairdo and exquisitely refined gold jewelry. Jackson ignored everyone but his targets.

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“Gerry. Helena. This is Melissa, our architect at Fox Hollow.” Jackson’s voice flowed smoothly over the group. “I personally have fallen so in love with this young woman’s incredible architectural vision that I’ve asked her to marry me.”

There was the requisite laughter, but Melissa’s felt forced and she knew her face was flushed with embarrassment. Helena looked at her and smiled as she extended her hand.

“Ms.?” Helena asked.

“Miller. Melissa Miller,” she stammered. “But please call me Melissa.”

Grateful to the gracious woman, Melissa shook hands all around and the awkward moment passed. The conversation turned to famous homes and what made them special. While the topic was general, Melissa could feel Jackson taking mental notes. She knew his observations would be dictated into his tape recorder tonight and logged for future reference when Melissa designed the Switzers’ home.

Just as the Switzers’ friends were asking about an adjoining parcel at Fox Hollow, the theatre lights dimmed twice calling everyone back to their seats. As they made their way back inside, Jackson continued to work the room stopping momentarily to chat with those he’d missed on the way out. At each group, the women glanced at her pearls before looking away and concentrating on not looking at them. Many unwittingly touched their own jewelry and Melissa felt her dislike of the gaudy pearls growing.

Just a few rows away from their seats, a tall, handsome man with graying dark hair merely nodded at Jackson, but shook hands gallantly with Melissa.

“Jackson, aren’t you going to introduce us?” There was just a hint of the Carolinas in the softly spoken question.

“Of course. Melissa, my dear, this is Rees McAllister and his famous sister, Dr. Antoinette Horton.”

Melissa recognized the name of the world-famous physicist at once

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and smiled at the two people beside Jackson. Her pulse raced, increasing mysteriously as she looked up at Rees. “How nice to meet you both. Are you enjoying the performance?”

“I certainly am—”

“Good,” said Jackson. “Well, Melly, let’s get back to our seats before the second act begins.”

Without another word, his hand nudged Melissa down the aisle to their seats. All she had time for was an apologetic glance at Rees before she had to turn and pay attention to where she was going in the stilettos. Jackson’s hand at the small of her back was propelling her along so fast she had to jog to keep up, and that was no small feat in the heels she was wearing.

When they were finally back in their seats for the conclusion of Danny and Sandy’s love story, Jackson settled himself in his seat and began to slide his hand under Melissa’s dress back, but this time, instead of pushing closer to him, Melissa readjusted herself in the seat so he couldn’t reach his target. Soon Jackson’s arm draped over the chair’s back, and there it remained until the show ended.

CHAPTER 2

When Melissa awakened the next morning, she stretched luxuriously and reached over to the pillow on the other side of the bed.

“Well, Augie, my sweet fur ball,” she murmured stroking one finger up the dog’s face. “You seem to have made yourself very much at home.” Augie’s only response was to open one, chocolate brown eye and yawn hugely. “Just how I feel, too.” Melissa couldn’t help giggling at her pet’s self-indulgence in remaining barely awake.

After the theatre last night, Jackson had taken her to Grano’s for pasta, but Melissa could tell his mind was on the impending deal with the Switzers. He dictated everything he had noted during their intermission conversation into his hand-held tape recorder, constantly bombarding Melissa for more details.

“Do you think Helena liked the idea for a tapestry room?”

“I think so but—”

“What about separate his and hers garages?”

“Well, that wouldn’t make much sense if—”

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“Their kids should each have a suite of their own.”

“Why don’t you take a break?” advised Melissa. “Eat your dinner, Jackson. You know, they’ll probably call by noon tomorrow.”

Jackson had merely stared blankly at her and continued to dictate. He even made a call to Alyce, his assistant, asking her to be at the office by seven a.m. to go over the Switzer particulars. Finally, with his spaghetti *carbonara* barely touched and her plate of *fettucini primavera* practically licked clean, they left.

All the way back to where her Jeep was parked, Jackson had discussed whether the Switzers would actually buy the Owl Hill property. Then he worried about how Melissa would need to work on their design nonstop through the next six weeks to have it ready so the house’s outer shell could be completed before winter weather struck. Otherwise, costs for putting up a huge plastic bubble to work inside would be added to the project. Not that he was particularly concerned about costs, but he wondered if it would be a deal-breaker for the Switzers.

He was just beginning to panic when the young architect reminded him of how well the Collins project was progressing. Melissa had even had time to work on some programming for her computer to facilitate new design ideas. Recalling how this streamlined the initial creative process with home buyers, Jackson relaxed, at least enough to turn off his tape recorder and drop the ever-present phone back into his pocket.

Melissa had worked on the program so clients at Fox Hollow could take home a computer CD allowing them to browse through thousands of designs that became three-dimensional on their computer screens. They felt like they were walking through the rooms as they viewed each from a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree perspective. Then it was a matter of picking out whether they liked a Victorian-style mansion, a Cape Cod, a one-story rambling bungalow, a Georgian look or one of the other multitudes of options. The program also gave them a sense of how much square footage they needed or wanted.

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Melissa had worked to make the program friendly and interactive. Rooms and concepts from one house style could be moved into another and the people could see for themselves how putting an attached pool onto a Victorian really looked before they opted to do it over their architect's advice and then wished they had chosen the recommended pool house and gazebo in the garden. Because clients could view their ideas "in the flesh," endless discussion was avoided. They could choose a design or make modifications, even though they were unaccustomed to reading blueprints and, under circumstances without the computer program, would have had difficulty envisioning what the plans would really look like when constructed.

Jackson had been delighted. His selling job had suddenly become easier. He'd been even more delighted with the sudden significant drop in the number of renovations made during construction.

After a property sold, he conveyed the clients directly to Fox Hollow's architect. Melissa loved working with the couples and families to create the perfect home for them. She was never too busy to look at their ideas or to help them focus on what they really needed.

Once the basic house size and number of levels were chosen by a buyer, Melissa began to add the special touches for which she was building a reputation. A mullioned window set to capture perfect sunsets and carry them into a sitting room, a gliding window seat in a nursery, glimpses of landscape scenes that seemed to flow right into a great room, stained glass skylights in a spa-like master bath. These were some of the most popular details of the homes she had already designed for Fox Hollow.

Clients were also enthralled by her use of stone, wood and glass. While she could create a modern metal and mirror glass structure, Melissa much preferred to work with natural materials and conceive residences that seemed to emerge out of the earth of Fox Hollow. She felt at home with such elements and would often walk a site for hours, Augie at her side, while she envisaged the house her clients wanted and

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where it should sit on the acreage. Only then would she retreat to her computer and her design table, her imagination fuelled with visions of cedars, ponds, hundred-year-old maple trees and sky views.

* * *

The next morning, as Melissa lay in bed thinking about how much she'd enjoyed the previous night's performance, the ringing phone abruptly ended her reverie. She groped for the receiver of her cordless on the bedside table before she remembered she'd last been using it in her office down the hall. Jumping out of bed, she snatched her robe off the chair in the corner as she headed out the room.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she shouted to the invisible caller. Just as she dashed into her office, she heard the machine click on. The outgoing message had barely ended before Jackson's impatient voice demanded attention.

"Melissa, pick up would you?" He barely paused. "Okay then, I'll call you at Fox Hollow."

"Jackson? Hold on, I'm here," Melissa gasped. "Just a second. Okay, what is it?"

"Oh, you are there. I sort of assumed you'd have left for work already."

"At—" Melissa glanced at the crystal clock on her desk. "—six forty-five in the morning? Are you serious, Jackson?"

"I've been at the downtown office for fifteen minutes already."

Melissa had no interest in getting into the debate about how early successful people went to the office. She sighed and admitted, "I wasn't even out of bed yet. In fact, I was lying there thinking about last night. It was terrific."

"Yeah, I think it went great with the Switzers, too. And if everything works out, their friends might even grab that adjoining acreage. Anyway..." He paused again but only briefly. "I've got to go out of town for a few days. I just wanted to make sure you were on track with the Collins' place, that the O'Rourke design is finally what

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they want, and to remind you the Bartons wish to meet with you and pick up the house design disk in the next few days.”

“Out of town? When? And how long?”

“Tonight, but just for about ten days. Are you set on these projects, Melly?”

“Yeah. I talked to Dawn Collins yesterday. She’s really interested in adding the playroom for the kids and wants to get together to discuss details. We’re doing that this morning.”

“Great. How about the O’Rourkes’ outside woes?”

“Well, Shelley would like to put a tennis court outside the solarium, but that’s where Ken wants his putting green. We’re meeting this afternoon to look at some ideas I’ve put together for them. Don’t worry. It’ll work out just fine and they’ll both be happy.”

“And the Bartons?”

“I called them two days ago. We’re meeting at their site today to walk the land together and get some idea of where they’d like to locate the house, the barn and the riding arena.”

“Do you have a design CD ready for them, too?”

Melissa could practically see the checklist Jackson was running down to be sure she had everything in place. She sighed.

“Of course.” Melissa controlled her irritation, doing her best not to let it show in her voice. “We’re going back to the office and I’ll give them a demonstration before they work with it for a while themselves. Then they’ll take it home and get back to me when they’ve had a chance to go through a few houses. It’s the same way I always work with new clients, Jackson.” She pushed down her displeasure at his nitpicking. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he answered quickly. “Nothing at all. Why don’t we get together for lunch or dinner today?”

“Dinner would be better for me.”

“I’ll make reservations. Italian or French?”

“How about I cook dinner here?” Melissa loved to cook, but rarely

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had the chance. "I'll throw something together that will tempt you." She paused waiting for him to take the hint, and when he didn't, she continued, "How about we meet at my place around six-ish?"

"Could we make it about eight? I have to meet with some prospective clients and Alyce set it up for drinks around six."

"Sure. See you whenever you get here."

A click dismissed Melissa from Jackson's morning, and she knew she wouldn't hear from him again until he arrived for dinner that night. *That's okay. We both have a very busy day ahead of us.* Although, when she stopped momentarily to consider it, she still had no idea how Jackson was spending his day while he knew exactly where she was going to be and what she'd be doing. Oh, well, the beauty of cell phones was that she could reach him anywhere, anytime she might need him.

Collecting the latest trade journals from one corner of her desk, Melissa wandered back to her bedroom. Augie was still cuddled in the covers and watched her put on the robe she'd grabbed minutes before but hadn't donned yet. He hopped down and brushed against her legs. Melissa bent over and kissed her Keeshond between the ears. She made their way to the kitchen, magazines in hand, Augie prancing along beside her.

"Ready for breakfast, bud?"

Augie woofed in his best I'm-starving-right-before-your-eyes tone and raced ahead of her.

Melissa smiled as she entered the kitchen. Facing east, it was one of the few personal indulgences Melissa permitted herself. The rest of her home was designer perfect with the latest colors and decorating trends flawlessly displayed. But the kitchen was her domain with lots of brick and wood offset by stainless steel appliances and work surfaces. Her well-used pots and pans hung from the ceiling over the island workspace that contained a ceramic cook top and small vegetable sink along with a generous granite counter top. The kitchen's east wall

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consisted of floor-to-ceiling windows with French doors leading to a brick courtyard. Beyond that was the tiny greenhouse where Melissa's treasured herb garden flourished year-round.

The bright light of autumn filled the room, causing the brick walls to glow golden amber and the counter tops to glisten. Melissa always thought the autumn sun, though more distant, seemed more burnished than the pale, hot sun of summer—as if somehow it wanted to provide a burst of color before winter's bleached light and monochromatic palette took over.

She dropped the trade journals on the small, round, oak table and opened the French doors before heading for the kettle and setting water to boil for tea. Pulling out her favorite old teapot, she warmed it by swishing hot water inside, then emptied it and dropped in two Earl Grey tea bags. As she waited for the kettle to boil, she watched Augie putter around his back yard, making sure none of the neighborhood squirrels had set foot where they weren't allowed.

Soon the fragrant tea was steeping and Melissa sniffed appreciatively as she poured her first cup of the morning. Relaxed, she caught up on the latest happenings in the architectural world as she sipped tea. Some ideas appealed to her and she made mental notes to talk to the architects involved while others made her smile, recognizing them for the retail gimmicks they were.

Glancing at the grandmother clock against the far brick wall, Melissa was surprised to discover it was nearly eight. Popping a sliced bagel into the toaster, she quickly poured kibble into a bowl for Augie and emptied her teapot after adding just a half-cup to drink as she dressed for work. Augie trotted back in through the doggie door, knowing his breakfast awaited. Melissa gathered up her magazines, bagel and tea cup, and headed upstairs.

Knowing she'd be spending more time outside than at her desk today, and grateful for that fact on such a perfect autumn day, she showered quickly. Shoving her arms into her robe, she rubbed absently

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at her hair with a towel while she thought about the battling O'Rourkes and munched on her breakfast. It took only moments more to slather on moisturizer and mascara and scrunch a dab of mousse into her hair. Melissa headed into her walk-in closet with purpose.

She'd wear a pair of jeans and a chambray blue silk blouse with a classic navy-and-grey tweed jacket that had seen her through plenty of meetings. It was a look that said comfortable and professional, and along with her favorite loafers, would be perfect for the busy day ahead, both on site and in the office.

Ready to face the day, Melissa trotted downstairs and found her purse and briefcase still in the foyer where she had dumped them in her rush the night before. She reached into her briefcase to check for the Barton file and felt her cell phone.

"Oh, no. I didn't put it in the charger last night," she moaned. "Great. No cell phone until it charges."

Melissa always intended to buy an extra battery pack and had yet to remember to do so. She'd have to use the office charger and hope she could get by with just her pager until the phone was ready to go by the afternoon.

Finding the Barton file in the briefcase, Melissa was ready to leave except for dumping the contents of last night's evening bag into her purse and scooping her keys off the foyer chair's cushioned seat.

She whistled for Augie who came racing and slid to a stop at her feet. "Ready to go to work, bud?"

A soft woof confirmed Augie was ready for another day at Fox Hollow.

* * *

The day raced by for Melissa with no time at her desk. First, she dropped off the revised design CD to Dawn Collins. It was a three-dimensional tour of the new playroom for the Collins' triplets.

"Do you have time for coffee?" asked the short, brown-eyed Dawn. "I'd love to load this while you're here in case I have any questions you

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could answer right away.”

“No problem. I think you’ll love the ideas. But I’ve got Augie with me.”

“That’s great! The kids will love to see him again. Bring him in.”

Fifteen minutes quickly turned into an hour and a half. Dawn, a former interior designer to the stars, loved Melissa’s playroom ideas immediately and had no changes and few questions. Then the nanny brought the two-year-old triplets and Augie into the great room where Dawn and Melissa were drinking coffee and talking about current design trends.

“Danny, Beth and Alexander, just look at you,” admonished Dawn as she scooped her three, dirty, smiling toddlers into her arms.

Augie threw himself on the cool ceramic floor, tongue lolling out as he caught his breath after a long play session with the children.

“Were you all digging in the garden?” Dawn asked the nanny who had as much garden dirt on her nose as her young charges. The young woman smiled and nodded.

“‘Litha,’ the youngsters lisped as they turned their attention to their mother’s visitor and raced to tug at her with grubby hands. “Come and thee our thandcathle. Augie helped uth build it.”

“Don’t let them get you all dirty,” worried Dawn.

“No worry,” returned Melissa as she allowed herself to be towed out the door by the threesome. “I love sandcastles.”

A short time later, the trio of children, one happy Keeshond and the adults returned to the house. While the nanny took the children off to wash and change, Melissa dusted the dirt off her jeans, asked for a bowl of water for Augie, and enjoyed a second cup of coffee with Dawn.

“You know, Dawn,” Melissa confided, “I’d have never been able to make the playroom as great as it is without the help of Alex, Danny and Beth. They have the exuberance and joy of play that we seem to lose as we grow up. Why shouldn’t there be a sandbox in the playroom? We just build it over a grated area so the sand stays in one corner and

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doesn't track everywhere. I couldn't see why we should only be able to wiggle our feet in the sand outside."

"It's uncanny how you understand exactly what people want, even when they can't express it themselves. And you always make it work," praised Dawn, reaching down to caress Augie when he pressed against her. "I know how hard it is. Interior designers have to be mind readers, too."

The women laughed, then Melissa headed to her appointment with the battling O'Rourkes. When she got there, she pulled around to the back of the house and unloaded Augie's exercise pen and set it up in the shade of a tall oak tree. She knew it was too hot for her dog to wait in the Jeep and she had no intention of rushing the O'Rourkes. After dropping a few Kong toys into the enclosure and putting water in the bowl that lived in the Jeep, she placed water bowl and dog into the portable pen.

She had set aside a couple of hours to walk the clients through their design conflicts, knowing she'd have to listen to each side's ideas, plus rebuttals, before she could find the conversation space to make her suggestions. Which was fine because she secretly admired how the long-married O'Rourkes could disagree without ever saying anything nasty about the other.

While the idea of a putting green beside the pool might seem useless to Shelly O'Rourke, the woman never confused the concept of a useless putting green with her husband. And so, Shelly and Ken did battle royal without ever getting truly angry at one another. It was the honesty of their disputes that intrigued Melissa, and she was ready for them when she rang the bell.

"Oh, hi, Melissa. Come on in," invited the rotund, retired Ken O'Rourke. "Shelly," he shouted up the stairs. "Your idea for a tennis court where my putting green should go needs defending. My architect is here."

She was grinning from ear to ear by the time Shelly bustled into the

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living room where she was seated with Ken. Melissa was just helping herself to some cheese and crackers when Shelly sniffed loudly. "Bribing your architect with brie are you, Ken? Well, suck it up, sweetheart, because I have a special treat for Melissa." Shelly headed for a covered tray sitting on a low table at the far end of the room.

"If you're looking for the caviar," said Ken innocently, "I did happen to notice Max wander by a while ago looking particularly happy."

"If you've fed that Persian cat of yours my caviar, you'll be wearing the brie," Shelly muttered.

"He just wanted a taste."

Melissa calmed the stormy waters by piling a generous helping of untouched caviar on top of her cheese and crackers. Ken and Shelly each grinned victoriously at each other and Melissa couldn't help smiling.

"Plying me with tidbits won't change a thing, you know," she said. "But I must admit, I was getting the munchies. It's almost lunch and this is a great way to stave off hunger pangs." She laughed out loud. "You two are the most fun clients I've had in the longest time. Are you always trying to get your own way from each other? And—" Melissa glanced at Shelley. "—more importantly, would you really have dumped brie on Ken?"

The O'Rourkes laughed along with Melissa and helped themselves to a snack. Each piled caviar on the cheese and crackers and talk turned to their new house currently under construction at Fox Hollow. Shelly had wanted a Georgian mansion and Ken had been set on a Cape Cod. They had compromised on Melissa's rambling Victorian with pillars supporting the front wrap-around veranda and dormers in Ken's office. Ken had demanded large open spaces in every room and Shelly had naturally disagreed. So, their home was a unique blend of open and traditional styles that, for some reason, worked.

By the time Melissa had reminded the O'Rourkes about the two

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long sides to their Olympic-size pool and that a putting green would be perfect on the south side with tennis court opposite, it was almost time for her meeting with the Bartons.

The O'Rourkes insisted she take the leftover cheese to Augie.

"He's probably bored silly and hungry," decided Shelly. "He needs a snack, too."

"Let me add some crackers," said Ken, unwilling to be undone in the treat department.

They followed Melissa out to where Augie waited, and insisted she didn't need to clean up after him, even as she did. Within a few short minutes, Augie's antics had earned him all the leftover brie and half a dozen crackers. He went through his full repertoire of tricks for the O'Rourkes and had them laughing in delight.

* * *

Melissa purposely arrived at the undeveloped property a few minutes before the Bartons. She wanted a few moments to wander the site and adjust to what was special about it. The clearing where she had parked was a natural one cushioned with a soft layer of grass and surrounded by tall maples slowly rusting into autumn glory. Melissa strayed under the trees and the rustling of the fallen leaves took her back to childhood walks through the woods.

A rabbit, startled by Melissa's meandering, hopped in front of her and bolted out of sight through the trees. Augie was exploring the other side of the clearing and missed the opportunity for a grand chase.

The area's serenity overwhelmed Melissa. This place needed a very special home respecting the land that would support and embrace it. Melissa could see a one-story building with quarry stone walls and wooden shakes on the roof. It needed to ramble casually from room to room. She knew exactly which way it should face and where the deck would become part of the surrounding woods. It would be a dream to design the structure to suit the locale with its innocent magic and beauty.

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Melissa had just climbed back into the Jeep with sketch pad in hand when the Bartons pulled into the clearing. Augie barked sharply, but quieted the instant Melissa spoke. She called him up into the Jeep and got out to greet her newest clients. They were in their mid-thirties. Al was a corporate lawyer and Lisa an investment banker. Melissa already had a sense of their busy lifestyle, and that it would probably include a lot of entertaining, although the pair seemed very down-to-earth.

"Hi there," Melissa called out as the Bartons' two cars glided to a stop behind her Jeep. Al climbed out of a steel-colored Mercedes and Lisa waved as she finished a phone call before alighting from her black BMW.

"Hey, Melissa, hope you haven't been waiting long for us," apologized Al. "I got caught in a last-minute meeting with some clients and it ran a bit longer than planned."

"I just got here a few minutes ago, myself. I had a chance to walk around and get a feel for the place."

"I still can't believe how beautiful this site is," stated Lisa as she joined her husband and Melissa. "It's like it's just been waiting for us to find it." She smiled in a slightly embarrassed way.

Melissa was delighted at Lisa's response to the lot. Investment bankers usually dealt in concrete facts and figures, not in how land made them feel.

"I know what you mean," said Melissa, smiling at the couple. "The first time I saw this tract, I knew it would speak to the right people."

"Well, it shouted at me," admitted Al.

"Let's wander around while we talk about what kind of a home the two of you picture living in," invited Melissa.

For the next half hour, the three roamed around the Bartons' property discussing where they would like to have the house, the pool, the guesthouse and the barbecue area. Lisa told Melissa she wanted a stone house and Al insisted that a huge deck be part of the house, so when weather permitted, they could dine *al fresco*. Despite their

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upscale professional lives, Melissa discovered Al and Lisa were both very attached to their extended families and enjoyed casual entertaining. By the time they had finished exploring, Melissa found she had more ideas for the house bouncing through her mind.

She escorted them back to the Fox Hollow offices where she gave them a demonstration of the house design CD and let them browse through it while she returned a few phone calls. Shortly before five, the young couple felt really comfortable with the process and headed out, CD in hand. They made arrangements to meet at Melissa's office in three days, Friday afternoon, to go over their choices.

Packing her briefcase full of more work, Melissa tossed in her now-recharged phone and headed for home. She didn't feel guilty leaving early. In fact, she knew that after dinner, she and Jackson would probably each curl up with files to review.

She looked forward to the time with her fiancé. She would turn on the gas fireplace in the living room and they could each work in companionable quiet. For the past few weeks, Jackson had been too busy to stop by for dinner. Instead, they often grabbed a quick supper and headed their separate ways in the evening.

* * *

Melissa hung up her jacket and slipped into a fleecy navy shirt with long sleeves and her favorite pair of well-worn jeans. The evenings were cooler now and she wanted to be comfortable while she cooked. Always her grey shadow, Augie followed his owner down to the pantry where she pondered the dinner's menu. Peeking in the freezer, Melissa discovered swordfish filets and banana bread she'd made the week before. As the fish defrosted in the microwave, she chopped fresh dill from her herb garden and dropped a generous amount into lemon juice and cracked pepper.

She pulled apart a head of red leaf lettuce and chopped tomato, cucumber and mushrooms. A couple of potatoes were quickly scrubbed, sliced and layered with onions and a drizzle of olive oil.

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They were ready for the microwave. Melissa dropped the swordfish into the lemon dill marinade and put the dish in the fridge. When Jackson arrived, she'd put them under the broiler and it would take only a few minutes to have dinner ready.

Melissa took a bottle of her favorite chablis from the fridge and poured herself a glass. Jackson would arrive in the next few minutes, but he'd prefer a Scotch and water so she put out the liquor and a crystal glass. Jackson only drank wine with a meal. Melissa carried her glass of wine through the dining room and into the solarium beyond. Filled with plants and flowers, it was a perfect place to quietly sip a good wine and relax. Melissa stretched out on a Victorian wicker chaise lounge and Augie dropped down beside her with a contented sigh. The peace and quiet was delightful after a busy day.

In a few moments, Melissa was drifting in a reverie. She laughed and scooped a double armful of colorful maple leaves then ran back to her parents who helped her toss the sheaves of color into the air. She sprinted to get more. This time, though, when she raced back with her arms filled with tinted leaves, Jackson stood waiting. And suddenly, it seemed silly to play in the leaves.

CHAPTER 3

When Jackson pulled into the driveway, Melissa had just put the swordfish under the broiler. The potatoes were almost done in the microwave. She headed for the front door to greet him, but the door slammed back against the frame before she got there. Jackson stomped in and threw his metal briefcase at the chair in the foyer. Bouncing off, it flew to the floor with a crash and two ceramic tiles cracked under the impact.

Augie stepped in front of Melissa and stared at Jackson.

“What happened?” Melissa gasped.

“Nothing you can help with,” growled Jackson. “Unless you know exactly how to part a banker from his precious money.”

“I thought everything was going well.”

“So did I, but apparently some kind of audit is going on at the bank. I was informed I need more collateral than the four-hundred-and-fifty acres left at Fox Hollow.” He stopped for a moment, panting in anger. “It doesn’t seem to matter I’ve sold five estates in the last three years,

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each one for more than a million dollars and two of them for over two-and-a-half million.

“Oh, no...even though there are options on six more pieces of property, designs approved for four more and construction started on another three, the bankers want more security for their loans.”

“What do they want?” Melissa tried to reason with Jackson. “Is it something impossible to meet?”

“No,” he grudgingly admitted. “I could easily sign the note they want and be done with it. It’s just the principal of the whole thing, Melly. Can’t they just trust my handshake is good?”

“Well,” she deliberated. “You’re trustworthy and Fox Hollow is a legitimate development, but I’m sure the bank must’ve been burned in the past. That’s probably why the auditors are being like this. Besides, we always get our clients to sign documentation so we don’t custom-build a house someone walks away from and we can’t sell.” Melissa took his hand and led him into the solarium. He sank down into a chair and shook his head glumly.

“You’re right, Melly. I know you are. It just bugs me so much that I get totally ticked off.” He smiled up at her, good mood beginning to resurface. “Did you meet with everybody you’d planned to today? What did the Bartons think of the property? Did Dawn Collins approve the playroom modifications?”

“Whoa,” said Melissa, laughter bubbling up at his good mood. “Well, let me see. Yes. Loved it. Sure did.”

“And one more question?”

“Shoot.”

“What’s burning in the kitchen?”

With a gasp, Melissa was up and running just as the smoke detector’s shrill warning pierced the air. Grabbing an oven mitt, she pulled the smoking swordfish from under the broiler and dropped the pan into the double sink. She cranked open the kitchen window and flapped her oven mitt to disperse the smoke. After a few moments, the

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detector stopped shrieking and the smoke had dissipated for the most part.

“So, what were we having for supper?” asked Jackson.

“Swordfish in lemon dill.”

“And now?”

“How about a grilled cheese sandwich and a salad?” Melissa tried to make a joke. “I have some perfectly aged Wisconsin cheddar in the fridge.”

“Whatever. Just call me when it’s ready, would you? I’ll be upstairs in your office on the computer for a few minutes. And don’t forget—” He flicked his fingers at Augie in dismissal. “—to put that damned dog outside when we sit down to eat.” Without another word, Jackson was gone.

She shook her head and squatted beside Augie, giving him a hug. “Don’t you worry about him.”

“Did you pick up my dry cleaning?” he called from the hall.

She blinked. *Oh, no.* “I didn’t get a chance, Jackson. I was on the run all day.”

“Well, you’d better get it tomorrow. I’m almost out of shirts with French cuffs and I have some important meetings in the next few days.”

You could always pick it up yourself. “Will do,” she answered instead.

Melissa heard Jackson pick up his briefcase in the front foyer and tried not to think about the cracked ceramic tiles imported from Italy.

Instead, she pattered around the kitchen, slicing cheese, buttering sourdough bread and getting out the salad she’d made earlier. She fed Augie, who hadn’t left her side since Jackson’s arrival. In a matter of minutes, she had the promised supper ready and called Jackson to join her.

As soon as Jackson’s footsteps were heard on the stairs, Augie took a final look at Melissa and scampered through his dog door.

Supper was uneventful as Jackson filled her in on his day, beyond

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his meeting with the myopic bankers. The Switzers had called and wanted to set up a meeting about the lot on Owl Hill. Their friends, the Gallaghers, wanted to book a viewing of the adjoining property. Alyce had arranged for Melissa to meet with Gerry and Helena Switzer on Friday afternoon, contingent on making the purchase arrangements during their meeting with Jackson the next morning.

“But I thought you were going out of town tonight. That’s what you said earlier.”

“Now it turns out I don’t have to go until tomorrow afternoon.” Jackson leaned across the table and took Melissa’s hand. He gently kissed her palm, then held it against his face. “And I’m going to miss you like crazy. But if all goes well...” Jackson didn’t finish the sentence, but smiled at her and kissed her hand once more before releasing it.

“Can you stay for a little while tonight, then?” she asked.

“Not too long. I’ve got to put together a financing proposal for the Switzers and now one for the Gallaghers, too.”

“You could work on it here if you want to. I’ve got the Barton house to start sketching.” Melissa was dismayed at the wistful tone of her voice. “Let’s put on the fireplace and work in the living room.”

“Sorry, babe. I left some of the figures at Fox Hollow. From there, it’s closer for me to go home than all the way back here. Especially since I have to be in early again tomorrow morning.”

“Sure. But let’s plan to spend a bit more time together when you get back next week, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan. We’ve both been working hard, but this trip is going to change everything.” Jackson pushed back his chair and stood up. “I left my briefcase upstairs. I’ve got some papers in it I need you to sign before I go. Just the regular stuff. I’ll be right back with them.”

As she started to gather the supper dishes to take to the kitchen, he offered to help. Melissa tried to ignore the little grimace accompanying the offer, and declined, suddenly and inexplicably wanting him to

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leave. When he brought her the papers, she signed as he briefed her on each of them.

Just a few minutes later he was gone, the Porsche roaring down the street and out of earshot. Melissa finished cleaning up and retrieved the Barton file from her briefcase. Defiantly, she pushed the button to ignite the gas fireplace, then poured herself a second glass of white wine.

Augie danced beside her, woofing gently and smiling up at her with his soft, cocoa eyes as she crossed to a big easy chair. When Melissa had settled comfortably, the Keeshond curled up with his head on her foot and sighed in total canine contentment.

Along with her own impressions of the land, Melissa quickly sketched general ideas for house location and room concepts Al and Lisa had given her as they'd explored their lot that afternoon. She jotted reminder notes about the building materials she thought would complement the house and which construction crew she wanted working on this particular development. Even as she worked, Melissa's mind kept straying back to the property.

She again felt the Bartons' excitement at starting the home they'd be sharing as they raised their children and developed their careers. She remembered how Al had taken Lisa's hand as they stood at the edge of the clearing and gazed across their land. She grinned as she recalled the handful of leaves Lisa had thrown at Al. He'd grabbed a leaf in mid-air and tucked it into his jacket pocket with a private smile to his wife. How happy they were, and how open that joy seemed to Melissa as she worked alone in front of the fireplace that evening.

* * *

The next morning was incredibly busy and, although she meant to, Melissa didn't have time to call Jackson before lunch. Two contractors had problems with suppliers of products Melissa had been promised would be ready on time. By the time she'd talked to the suppliers and eased the mind of a worried client about the wine cellar her husband

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wanted, it was almost noon. Hitting the speed dial on her phone, she flipped through her appointment book. Her afternoon was just as booked as her morning.

"Jackson Tobin's office." The voice brooked no nonsense. There could be no mistake this was a business office and Jackson Tobin was an important person.

"Alyce, hi. It's Melissa." When Alyce didn't fill in the waiting pause, Melissa continued. "Is Jackson around?"

"Sorry, Melly, he left for the airport about fifteen minutes ago. You want to leave a message. He's gonna call in later."

"No, that's okay. I'll talk to him tonight."

"Fine then. 'Bye." With an emphatic click, Alyce was gone.

Melissa was puzzled why Jackson hadn't called before he left for the airport, but she reasoned if his morning had been anything like hers, he'd have been lucky to get to the airport on time.

Her afternoon rushed at her like a cresting wave. By the time she got home and greeted Augie, who'd spent the day there, and crawled into her favorite sweats, Melissa was too tired to worry about how Jackson's day had gone. She figured he'd call her before he went to bed just like he always did when he was out of town.

Curling up with the newest Patricia Cornwell novel, Melissa was soon lost in Kay Scarpetta's latest adventure. Before she knew it, the clock on the mantel was chiming midnight.

"Augie," she murmured, stretching as she smiled at the grey dog. "That Kay can get herself into tighter situations than I'd like. Midnight? Time for us to hit the hay, puppy."

Briefly, she wondered why Jackson hadn't called, then realized her concern didn't make sense. He might not be back from an evening dinner meeting. Or, he'd had as hectic a day as she had, and was sound asleep already. She'd talk to him in the morning and he'd fill her in on the newest celebrity interested in buying a piece of Fox Hollow.

Although, a tiny, worried voice reminded her, *I don't know that he*

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was meeting with some celebrity. She'd only assumed that. He could be meeting with new backers since he'd been so ticked off at his bankers. *His flight had been to...*

Melissa's thoughts congealed. She didn't even know where he was. For a moment, her heart pounded erratically. Not being able to reach the closest person in the world to her made Melissa feel cut off. He knew that and Jackson never left her without letting her know his flight numbers and the name of his hotel. Where had he gone? Then she calmed down. She'd just call him on his cell. It was always with him, and if he was busy or sleeping, his service would be sure the message got to him when he checked in. No point in worrying all night.

She picked up the phone and punched in Jackson's cell phone number. It rang several times before disconnecting. That was strange. It always forwarded to his service if Jackson couldn't pick up. She tried again, thinking perhaps her nerves had caused her to hit a wrong number. The same thing happened.

Melissa told herself any number of things could be responsible for the odd situation. Maybe the battery was low, Jackson was out of range, or something had happened to his phone. *That's why he hasn't called.* She told herself she'd talk to him the next morning. He'd call for sure, like he always did. If nothing else, he'd have to fill her in on the Switzers' approved amount to spend on a home.

Restless now, Melissa went back to the living room, sketched for a few minutes before realizing that none of what she was doing for the Bartons was any good. She closed the file and dropped it on the coffee table, then turned off the fireplace and collected her wine glass. In the kitchen, she filled the kettle for a cup of tea to take upstairs with her.

It was a long night and Melissa slept only fitfully. She kept having the strangest dream. She was standing on rocky soil and Jackson stood about thirty feet away from her. He was waving and laughing. Then he pointed down. When she looked where he indicated, she realized she was teetering on the edge of a cliff. Hundreds of feet below lay the

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wreckage of a small plane.

* * *

When morning finally came, Melissa was as exhausted as she'd been when she went to bed. And just as worried. Peeking at the clock, she discovered it was just after seven.

Too early to call Alyce at the office. The office never opened before eight-thirty, and when Jackson was away, Alyce never came in earlier than eight-forty-five.

Melissa tried Jackson's cell several more times before the office opened. The same thing happened as the night before. Jackson's phone would ring and ring, then just disconnect. By eight o'clock, Melissa was too worried to sit still. She decided to drive to Fox Hollow's downtown office. She'd be there when Alyce arrived. Melissa could get Jackson's hotel phone number and call him using that connection, if necessary. She'd at least find out what city her fiancé was in and where he was staying.

He must've just forgotten to give me the information before he left.

Traffic was light and Melissa arrived a few minutes after the office opened. She pushed open the heavy oak outer door and stepped inside.

"May I help you?" inquired the blonde, attractive young woman sitting behind Alyce's glass-topped desk.

"Uh, yes," Melissa stammered, surprised not to find the ever-present Alyce in her usual place. "Is Alyce around?"

"No, ma'am, she not. I'm Jennifer, her temporary replacement. Alyce is sick today and the agency sent me over to cover."

"Well, I'm just going into Mr. Tobin's office for a few minutes."

"Sorry, ma'am, but I can't let you do that. He's away for a few days and I don't have any appointments listed in his book." A long, red fingernail traced an empty column in the appointment book that Alyce normally guarded like a bear cub. "Nobody's scheduled to be here today."

"I'm sorry, Jennifer, but I didn't introduce myself." Melissa stuck

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out her hand. "I'm Melissa Miller, Jackson's fiancée and the architect for Fox Hollow. I just need to grab a few things from Jackson's office."

"Oh, sorry, Ms. Miller. I didn't know you'd be in today. I was told you work out at the development site usually. Go ahead on in. Can I help you with anything?"

"Thanks, no. I should be able to find what I need." She started toward the closed door to Jackson's private office, then turned back to the temporary receptionist. "Could you please glance through the desk and see if Alyce left Mr. Tobin's itinerary there? I'm not sure what hotel he's staying at and I may need to talk to him later." Melissa registered the shock on Jennifer's face, knowing the woman was reacting to the fact she didn't know where her own fiancé was. She resolutely turned and continued to Jackson's office.

Pushing open the door, she flicked on the overhead lights.

Something was very wrong.

Jackson's desktop gleamed dully without a file or a piece of paper on it. Her glance flickered to the worktable, usually cluttered with in-progress work. It, too, was empty. *As if no one worked in the office.* There wasn't a used coffee mug on a table, a file to be found or even a pen out of place.

Melissa's heart was pounding madly as she hurried to the desk. Jackson must have made a note somewhere about this trip. She attempted to open the desk, but every drawer was locked. So were the filing cabinet and the fireproof safe with her blueprints in it. Melissa twisted the combination to open the safe, but when she pulled the knob, nothing happened. Carefully, she reworked the numbered lock. Still it wouldn't open.

Jackson must've changed the safe's combination and forgotten to tell me. She could feel her panic starting to rise at the loss of all contact with Jackson.

Jennifer called from the doorway. "Ms. Miller, did you find what you need?"

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“No. Not yet. Did Alyce leave the trip details?”

“Well, if she did, it’s not in the desk anywhere. And unless Mr. Tobin’s day book is in here, he must have it with him. Did you find it?”

“No.” Melissa could barely find the breath to speak. “I haven’t found it. Could you double-check out there, please? There must be something that’ll tell us where Jackson is.”

With a nod, the tall blonde was gone and Melissa spun around wondering where else she could look. Jackson’s Rolodex sat on the corner of the desk. She’d just call Alyce at home and find out what was going on. Having a plan calmed Melissa somewhat, and she sank into Jackson’s executive chair behind the desk. Pulling the Rolodex toward her, she struggled to remember Alyce’s last name. Was it Leblanc or LoBianco?

Rapidly she searched through the index until she found the number. A machine picked up and informed her, in Alyce’s voice, that her phone call was very important and if she’d leave a message and a number, it would be returned. Not knowing what else to do, Melissa quickly explained she was unable to reach Jackson’s cell phone and needed to know where he was staying. She left her own cell phone number, the Fox Hollow field office number and her home number, and requested Alyce return her call as soon as possible.

Now she didn’t know what else to do except go to the Fox Hollow field office. There was no point in sitting in Jackson’s office worrying. It was likely that Alyce, always obsessively neat, had cleaned up after Jackson left yesterday. Jackson’s phone was probably experiencing mechanical difficulties. Melissa tried to find comfort in recalling a compact disc player she’d once owned that, after a month, would only play every other cut.

And since they’d both been in such a rush the day before, Jackson had simply left his trip schedule with Alyce. *How could he know his assistant would be sick this morning?* She was probably at the doctor’s office right now and would get Melissa’s message when she returned.

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Alyce would call Melissa at her Fox Hollow office with all the details of Jackson's trip including the hotel and its phone number. By this afternoon, she'd be talking to him.

Besides, when she stopped to think about it, why was she so worried? Jackson was an adult accustomed to traveling on business. There was no reason to be rattled. Still, Melissa couldn't shake the images of last night's disturbing dreams.

Instead of concentrating on her fears, Melissa drove out to Fox Hollow's acreage. Walking around the lots would focus her thoughts and take them away from the gerbil wheel of fear on which they were spinning. Nevertheless, she made certain she had her cell phone tucked in her jacket pocket so Alyce could reach her.

Letting her mind envision the finished Switzer house calmed Melissa somewhat. She was even able to make a few notes on the right placement to get the best natural light for Helena's tapestry room. The bright sunshine trickling through the still-thick ceiling of leaves brushed with amber, gold and cranberry soothed her heart and quieted her jagged nerves.

When Melissa arrived at the field office, she couldn't resist checking that her cell phone was working. It was. Alyce hadn't called and left a message at Fox Hollow either, so Melissa tried the secretary's answering machine at home again.

This is too weird. Still no message from Alyce or Jackson.

Melissa phoned the downtown office and Jennifer informed her neither Jackson nor Alyce had checked in.

Now there was no way for Melissa to avoid her panic. It was totally unlike her fiancé not to phone her, especially when he was out of town. She hadn't heard from him for over a day-and-a-half now. Jackson appeared to be missing and she didn't even know where to begin searching.

She had to admit her worst fears to herself. She was alone again. Just like when her parents had died.

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If she called the police and it was all a misunderstanding, she could cause Jackson an incredible amount of embarrassment in front of potential clients. *But, her fear whispered, if something was wrong, every moment I delay finding Jackson could put him in more danger.*

Without knowing what else to do, Melissa picked up the phone book and flipped to the yellow pages. She looked under “Private Investigators” and was surprised by the number of ads. So many of them seemed garish, claiming they could provide proof of infidelity or find a deadbeat dad. Finally she spotted a tasteful ad for “UnderCover...the agency that uncovers the truth.” There were three investigators listed: R. McAllister, A. Lawrence and B. Gilford. Melissa punched in the number with trepidation and listened while it rang only twice.

“UnderCover...may I help you?” inquired a polite female voice.

“Uh, well, I think... That is...” Melissa stammered to a stop and took a deep breath. “I need help, but I don’t know if I need a private investigator or the police.”

“My name is Ashley Lawrence and I’m an investigator here at UnderCover,” said the voice on the other end of the phone. “Would you feel comfortable telling me a little about why you called us? Maybe you don’t need an investigator, but maybe you do. If you tell me what’s troubling you, I can tell you if we can help, or if you should call your local police.”

Ashley sounded so compassionate and professional, Melissa felt the day’s tension begin to ease. At least this was a starting point, and if a private investigator was the way to go, this seemed like a amicable agency. If she should be calling the police, Melissa had the distinct feeling Ashley would tell her that.

“I seem to have lost my business associate and fiancé,” Melissa blurted out.

“How long has he been missing?”

“I’m not exactly sure. You see, he went out of town on business

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yesterday.”

“And why do you think he’s missing?”

“I can’t reach him by phone. His cell phone disconnects after a few rings and that’s not like him. I mean he has a service that takes all his messages. And I don’t know where he went. We were both so busy before he left, we didn’t get a chance to talk. Then he had to rush to the airport and now his secretary is sick.

“I can only get her machine and I can’t find his itinerary. Plus his desk is cleaned off and locked. And the combination to the safe has been changed.” Melissa shook her head, forgetting she was on the phone. “I’m sorry to ramble like this. I’m so worried about Jackson since this just isn’t like him.”

“Well, why don’t you come over to our office about three this afternoon? One of the other investigators is a whiz at finding missing persons.”

“You think Jackson is missing?” Melissa couldn’t help asking.

“It hasn’t been that long, he *is* an adult and he was planning an out-of-town trip, so I wouldn’t panic yet if I were you. But if it’d make you feel better, we can probably pick up your fiancé’s trail quite quickly, or track down his secretary and get his itinerary. Is three o’clock convenient for you?”

In moments Melissa had scheduled her appointment at UnderCover. She gave Ashley her name and phone number, and told her if she heard from Alyce or Jackson before her appointment, she would call and cancel. She got directions to UnderCover; it turned out to be near the downtown Fox Hollow offices.

Then Melissa forced her mind to the Dykstra blueprints she’d abandoned on her work table. By two-thirty, when she hadn’t heard from Jackson and had gotten Alyce’s answering machine yet again, she loaded her briefcase and purse into the Jeep and headed downtown.

She found the UnderCover office easily and had just stepped into the reception area when her cell phone rang. A smile lit her face as she

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pulled it from her bag and answered. Maybe her appointment wasn't needed at all. The smile dwindled when it was Helena Switzer calling to set up a meeting for Friday. Politely, Melissa scheduled a time to get together at the Owl Hill parcel and signed off.

The red-headed male receptionist took Melissa's name and asked her to follow him. Just a few steps down a hall and the receptionist paused in front of a closed door. He knocked and a Southern-seasoned voice invited them in.

Melissa didn't have time to factor where she'd heard that accent recently before she was escorted through the door. A tall man with ample shoulders and trim midriff, emphasized by his button-down Oxford cloth shirt, stood. He ran his left hand through dark hair lightly sprinkled with grey as he stepped around the partner's desk. As he extended his right hand, Melissa noticed his sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms,

"Rees McAllister," he introduced himself. "I almost met you the other night at the Majestyk Theatre, didn't I?" His grin was wide and open. "It was during the intermission for *Grease*."

"Of course," recalled Melissa. "I'm Melissa Miller."

"You were whisked away by Jackson Tobin before we really had a chance to officially meet." Rees ushered her to a chair, and instead of moving back behind his desk, sat in the chair beside her. The receptionist backed out and closed the door. They were alone.

For a moment, Melissa forgot all her worries about Jackson and his seeming disappearance. She realized Rees McAllister was a singularly attractive man. He was not a pretty-boy model type, but rather had a face that had challenged what life could offer—both good and bad. He looked at her and something grazed Melissa on a level she barely recognized.

A fleeting flicker of understanding in his indigo blue eyes seemed to whisper that Melissa was safe now, that she would learn the answers to why she'd felt alone for so long, and that the murky loneliness deep

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inside would become a memory instead of her companion.

“How can I help you?” Rees’ voice flowed over the words and the intuitive flash dimmed as Melissa remembered the reason for her presence in Rees’ office.

“Monday night after we almost met at the theatre, Jackson told me he was going out of town.” She paused, frowning. “I guess you probably don’t know Jackson and I are engaged.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“We haven’t set a date or anything. I mean, we’ve been working together on Fox Hollow, his real estate development, for nearly three years now.” For some reason, Melissa wanted Rees to understand how things were with Jackson. “Sometimes I think we just found it easier to commit to the project and one another, than to do that whole singles thing.”

Rees looked at her with a gentle expression and she continued. “Anyway, Jackson told me he was going out of town. Then we both got busy and I don’t know where he went. Normally, he calls me every day, even if it’s only to check in about clients. But he hasn’t contacted me. When I tried to call him, his cell phone seems to be out of order. His secretary has called in sick and isn’t returning my phone calls. Do you think I should panic?”

“I wouldn’t get myself too worked up just yet, Ms. Miller,” declared Rees. “I can look into things for you and see how they stand if you’d like.”

Melissa nodded, her gratitude making tears flood her eyes. She blinked rapidly.

“I’ll need the full names of your fiancé and his secretary, their cell and home phone numbers if you have them, and any other details you can think of.”

Melissa gave him all the information she had.

“Let me see what I can come up with by tomorrow noon.”

* * *

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After Melissa left, Rees carefully considered the details she had provided him. From his skeptical perspective, it appeared, on the surface, that Alyce Leblanc and Jackson Tobin had collaborated on a vanishing act. He was already beginning to feel the telltale reverberations of a carefully covered trail. The questions were, why did they do it and where was Jackson Tobin now?

Rees figured he knew a few of the answers. Tobin had to be leveraged at Fox Hollow. Developments like that didn't come cheap. And experience had taught him that finances usually led the way for disappearances like these.

Rees worried how the answers would impact Melissa Miller, and he wondered just why he was so disturbed. A chill trickled down his spine. Not one of the probable reasons for Tobin's mysterious behavior did he want to reveal to his new client.

For some reason, Melissa's expression of trust as she told him her concerns came back to him as he considered the implications of Jackson's departure. It was her air of faith in his ability to help her that jarred Rees to his soul.

If he was right about Jackson Tobin, Melissa was not only in for a huge shock, but she was in incredible personal danger. He reached for the phone. It was time to find out what they were up against.

CHAPTER 4

Melissa headed back to her design office, relieved Rees was on the case. She knew he'd be able to find Jackson. And it would all be some kind of big misunderstanding. She and Jackson would laugh over how she'd set a private investigator on his trail just because there was something wrong with his cell phone. At least, she hoped so. She still felt the tickle of worry at the back of her mind, but resolved to let the handsome, southern PI find Jackson.

When Melissa arrived at the Fox Hollow office, she spread out the Switzer file and went over the notes Jackson had left for her. She knew it would be the first thing he'd ask her when they spoke....what had she mapped out to make them want to buy at Fox Hollow. She really tried to concentrate, but her inability to connect with Jackson was still bothering her. She decided action was what she needed. And maybe she could find something that would help Rees in his search.

Melissa got up and marched across the room to Jackson's private office. She tried the handle, and wasn't surprised to find it locked.

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Jackson had been spending more and more time at their downtown offices in the city. She retrieved her keys and, in moments, was inside the impressive oak office. Jackson had wanted only the best of the best when they'd designed Fox Hollow's showroom offices.

"I want these people with more money than they can ever spend, to feel at home when they come here for an appointment," Jackson had told Melissa on several occasions. "I don't want them to feel they've stepped outside their environment for even a moment."

He never cared that my desk just sat in the middle of a room. Melissa was surprised at the thought, but realized it was the truth. Jackson seemed far more concerned about his image, his deals, his development.

Melissa looked around, deciding where to begin her search. This office had the lived-in look of a person who was only gone on a short business trip. There were several files scattered on the desk, and the table in front of the coffee table held a couple more files and an empty coffee mug.

She started with the table, finding notes about two more prospective buyers. She also discovered a short note to her reminding her the Dobsons would be starting construction on their chalet-style home the first of the month. Jackson had also detailed all the sub-contractors she'd require, and Melissa felt the familiar frisson of irritation. She'd been designing homes for years now, and knew which trades people she needed on site and when she needed them.

"For Pete's sake, you'd think I was an idiot." Melissa slapped the file and the note back onto the table and stomped to Jackson's imposing desk.

After rustling through the files there, she'd found nothing to tell her where Jackson had gone, and how long he'd be away. The desk drawers were unlocked, and Melissa started at the top right-hand side. By the time she'd reached the middle drawer on the left, she was just about to give up. And then she spotted something she recognized—her

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cell phone number. It was written on a piece of paper with another person's name. *John Axelson*. She didn't recognize the name as a potential or current client.

Who is John Axelson....and why does Jackson have my cell number written on this piece of paper? Melissa could come up with no answer, but she placed the note aside and finished her search of the desk. Nothing else showed up that would even begin to help her locate Jackson.

The young architect pulled out the UnderCover business card and punched the numbers for Rees' direct line. He answered on the second ring.

"Rees McAllister speaking."

"Rees, it's Melissa...Melissa Miller calling."

"Did you hear from your fiancé, Ms. Miller?"

"No, I didn't. And please do call me Melissa. I'm really not the Ms. Miller type," she admitted. "What I did find was a note in Jackson's desk that strikes me as unusual."

"An itinerary?"

"Unfortunately, no, but I found my cell phone written down beside a name I don't recognize at all—John Axelson."

"Axelson?"

"Yeah. Do you know him?"

"I only know of him, but Axelson's not someone your fiancé is likely to be involved with, I don't think."

"Maybe he gave Mr. Axelson my number because he's thinking about buying at Fox Hollow?" Melissa tried.

"It's not the kind of place where he'd feel comfortable, but let me check into it and get back to you first thing in the morning. It's probably just a strange coincidence," said Rees before he asked where he could track her down in the morning.

Melissa did her best to concentrate for the next few hours to make up for all the time she'd spend trying to find Jackson. Her clients were

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counting on her to make their dreams a reality, and she wasn't about to let them down. By the time she was ready to head for home, and another evening alone, she'd roughed out a rambling one-story home with cathedral ceilings and plenty of windows for the Bartons. She was pleased with the beginning she had made, and resolved to continue the next morning—whether she'd heard from Jackson or not. At least, Alyce would probably be back behind her desk. Melissa had never known Jackson's assistant to miss more than one day of work in over three years.

* * *

Augie's enthusiastic welcome more than made up for Melissa's unsettling day. The young dog was waiting at the front door when she opened it, and he circled her, bouncing up and down, and barking in welcome. Dropping her ubiquitous briefcase onto the tile floor, she knelt down and snuggled her face into his fur.

“How was your day, fur-face?”

Augie woofed again and took off for the kitchen. Melissa picked up her briefcase and followed at a more leisurely pace, feeling the day's tensions falling into her wake.

By the time she'd changed into sweats and a comfy turtleneck and poured herself a glass of wine, Melissa felt calm enough to reheat the supper of jambalaya and crusty biscuits the housekeeper had left. She knew Pam would have also fed Augie so she carried her supper on a tray into the den. She switched on the TV and caught up on the day's news on CNN while she savored her meal, sharing little pieces of sausage with Augie, who sat in front of her chair like a statue, eyes fixed on her every move.

“You know what? I'm not going to work tonight. I'm going to find out what happened to Kay Scarpetta.” Melissa wandered to the living room for her book and returned to the comfort of the cozy den. She pulled a soft cashmere throw, a gift from Jackson, over her lap and dissolved into the medical examiner's case.

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At midnight, from force of habit, she tried Jackson's cell, but the phone cut off again.

Melissa let Augie out for a final run in the back yard, locked down his doggie dog, then toddled off to remove the day's makeup, slip into her flannel pajamas and climb into bed. She didn't expect to sleep, and was glad of her Keeshond's quiet companionship in the lonely bedroom. But, within just a few minutes of listening to Augie's quiet snores, Melissa drifted off to a dreamless, soothing night's slumber.

CHAPTER 5

When the clock radio clicked on the next morning, the two of them stirred, not really ready to wake up yet. Each stretched, yawned, and Melissa hit the snooze bar once. For the next ten minutes they drifted in that early morning haze between sleep and waking to face the day. When the radio came back on with the six a.m. headlines, Melissa threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. Augie hopped down to follow her. “C’mon, Augie. Do you need to go outside?”

The Keeshond tore down the stairs ahead of Melissa and was waiting beside his locked doggie door when she got to the kitchen. She unlatched the exit and he raced into the yard for his morning routine.

She pattered around the kitchen putting on water to boil for her first cup of tea of the morning. She filled the dog dish with his morning ration of kibble, placing a tiny piece of cheese on top, and went to the front door to collect the morning paper. She laid the paper on the table and made her tea and toasted half a bagel. She slathered it with light cream cheese and sliced a banana to top it off, and carried it to the

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table.

Then she sat down and opened the paper. Headlines featuring the gruesome murder of a local businessman shouted from the front page. Melissa skimmed through the unnerving story. A local gift shop owner had been found dead in his car...his throat cut from ear to ear, a handful of money soaked in his blood, in his lap. She shuddered and flipped to the lifestyles section to take her mind off reality. While she caught up on trends in fashion, Melissa munched on her breakfast and let her subconscious work on the problem of where Jackson could be. She couldn't figure it out, or why he'd left without letting her know where he'd be.

He'll be back in a few days anyway. So...why am I so worried?

What was she supposed to do when clients wanted to meet with him? Melissa was very confident in her ability to discuss the design, construction and landscaping issues for those purchasing Fox Hollow property, but she had no idea what financial arrangements or agreements were in progress. That had always been Jackson's venue. If he weren't back in the next couple of days, questions would be asked.

Melissa's heart rate increased. If the Switzers or their friends asked about any of the property costs, she was in trouble. She decided she'd better head to the downtown Fox Hollow office and go through the file cabinets to check prices on comparable property. And she'd try to figure out how to find out what Jackson had told them.

She glanced at her watch. By now, Alyce should be awake. She punched the numbers she now had memorized and waited while it rang and rang. Instead of a machine clicking on, a recorded message announced the number had been disconnected.

"Disconnected?" Melissa pulled the receiver away from her ear and stared at it as if it could tell her where Alyce was.

She looked up Alyce's phone number just in case, and tried again. The phone rang a couple of times before the same computerized voice explained to Melissa that the number had been disconnected. Not

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knowing what else to do, she called information and requested the number for Alyce LeBlanc. Another electronic voice informed her there was no listing for Alyce LeBlanc. Melissa's heart rate ratcheted up another notch.

How can this be? What's going on?

Melissa raced upstairs and into the shower. In less than fifteen minutes, she had showered, dried her hair, put on her makeup and was rooting around in her closet for something to wear. She decided her power suit was what she needed today, and slipped into the one Donna Karan she owned.

Hurrying back downstairs, she called Augie to her. "You're going to have to stay home today, bud," she explained. "I have no idea what's going on or what I'll be up to all day." She pressed a kiss to the top of his head as he stretched up against her, front paws resting on her lower tummy. "Pam will be here, so you won't be alone." Next to Melissa, her housekeeper, Pam, was one of Augie's favorite people.

* * *

Melissa stepped through the door to Fox Hollow's downtown office, hoping against hope she'd see Alyce behind the desk. The secretary would explain she was changing her phone number, Jackson was waiting for Melissa's call, and all was well in her world.

The pretty blonde from yesterday looked up. "Hi, Ms. Miller. How's it going?"

"A bit confusing, Jennifer. Have you heard anything from Alyce?"

"Not a peep. But the agency told me to count on being here all this week, if that helps."

Melissa felt her stomach swirl. "The rest of the week? Alyce must've called them."

"I guess. They told me before I started," the young receptionist explained. "I figured the lady I'm replacing has the flu or something."

"The rest of the week?" Melissa knew she was repeating, but couldn't get her mind around the fact Alyce had taken sick time for the

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same period Jackson planned to be away.

"Yeah...I figured she'd called you or Mr. Tobin about it. He told me you'd take care of any questions I have."

"Mr. Tobin..." Melissa grasped quickly at the straw that Jen held out. "He called?"

"Oh, sure. He called just before quitting time yesterday to see how everything was going." Jennifer smiled. "I told him you were really busy, that Alyce had called in sick and he said I sounded like I was doing a great job."

"Did he leave any message for me?"

"Yeah. I wrote it down to give you when you came in today." Jennifer pulled a note from under the edge of her desk pad and handed it to Melissa.

The young architect did her best not to snatch the paper from Jen's hand. She read to herself:

Reminder that the Switzers want to meet with you on Friday. Don't miss this one. And I won't be back in time to meet with Phil about the Fox Hollow loan, so you need to meet him at the development office tomorrow at six p.m.

What did he mean by meet with the banker about the loan? Tomorrow? That's today!

Melissa knew nothing about the financial running of Fox Hollow. She had her work cut out for her to get up to speed on that. "Jen, did Mr. Tobin leave a number?"

"No. He said he'd call again in a couple of days, so to collect messages for him until then."

"Did he say anything about where he is?"

"No. He just said everything was going well, and 'we'll' call in a couple of days."

"We... He said we?"

"Yeah, he did. I figured he was with a partner or something."

"Not exactly. *I'm* his partner."

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“Well, he said ‘we’ll call again.’ Then he told me I was doing a good job and hung up. He didn’t even say good-bye.”

Melissa forced a smile to her lips, even though they felt frozen. “Well, I’d better get to work. I’ll be in Mr. Tobin’s office. Can you please bring in the loan file?”

“Sure thing,” Jennifer answered. “I guess I need to know what bank it’s with so I can find it in the files.” She paused, waiting for Melissa to fill in the name of the institution.

Melissa could only stare at the receptionist. She had no idea who held the loans on Fox Hollow. She only knew they had no creativity as far as Jackson was concerned.

“I’m sorry, Jennifer. The only thing I can suggest is start with ‘B’ for Bank of Something or Other. I usually only handle the home designs.” With no further excuse, she headed for Jackson’s office and its totally clean desk.

Melissa could hear Jennifer opening file cabinet drawers and shuffling through files. Hopefully she’d find the banking information. In the meantime, Melissa could think of nothing else to do but break into Jackson’s desk. She’d just reached for the letter opener when the phone on the desk rang. It was Jackson’s private line.

Melissa grinned. Jackson had to be calling, since very few people had this number. He knew she’d be worried and hoped to catch her at the office.

“Hey, Jackson,” she answered.

“This isn’t Jackson,” growled a menacing voice. “This is Phil. I’ll be at the development office at six...and you better be there.”

“I will be.” Melissa’s terror raised her voice’s pitch. “But I have a couple of questions to ask—”

“Just be there,” Phil interrupted. “Or you’ll be sorrier than you’ve ever been in your wretched little life, bitch.”

“Wait...what bank—” The click in her ear told Melissa he’d already hung up. Phil sure didn’t sound like any banker she’d ever

FOX HOLLOW

encountered. Maybe this was some misunderstanding.

Yes, it has to be. No banker would ever speak to someone like that.

Melissa called out to Jen, "Any luck on the banking files yet?"

"Not yet, but I'm still searching, Ms. Miller."

Melissa sighed and grabbed the letter opener. Jackson was going to be pissed, but she needed to find out what was going on. If there was no information in the desk, she'd have to break into his private file cabinet in the corner. She had no idea how she'd get into the safe, if it got that far.

But first, the desk. She jiggled the point of the letter opener into the lock on the center desk drawer. Nothing happened, so she pushed harder. Suddenly, the round locking mechanism collapsed into the desk. Melissa gulped, but there was no stopping now. She pulled open the drawer to discover a bunch of pens, a few business cards, and handful of coins.

Sorting through the business cards, Melissa's alarm went off again. None of them belonged to bankers. Many simply stated "Consultant." Two were from escort services and across the face of another one was printed, "Phil Smith, Refinance Specialist." *What the heck is a refinance specialist?* She didn't have time to think about it as she shuffled through the rest of the desk. She found some credit card slips, computer software diskettes, last year's date book, and assorted paper, envelopes and other stationery.

But no clue as to where Jackson could possibly be.

She pushed back from the desk and sat for just a moment, staring at Phil Smith's business card in the middle of the desk. What was she going to do?

Walking out to the reception area, she asked, "Any luck?"

"Not yet, Ms. Miller."

"Jen, you should call me Melissa. How far along are you?"

"I've just got that one cabinet in the corner to check still." Jen pointed.

FOX HOLLOW

"I'll start there while you finish what you're doing."

The two women worked steadily, looking for anything that could explain what loans Fox Hollow had and with whom. They'd just completed their fruitless search when the door opened. Melissa looked up, and her heart tripped.

"Hey, Melissa," said Rees.

"Hi." She just stared until she heard Jen's soft cough. "Oh, Rees McAllister, this is Jennifer....I'm sorry, Jennifer, I don't even know your last name."

"Hechtman. Jennifer Hechtman." She stuck out her hand to Rees.

"Nice to meet you, Jennifer." Rees shook her hand then held up a file folder. "Melissa, have you got a few minutes?"

Melissa led him into Jackson's office, fear tickling her insides like flames licking at dry kindling. Rees had found out something. If it were a good something, surely he'd have said so. *Wouldn't he?*

* * *

Rees watched the gorgeous young architect's face blanch when he asked to speak to her in private. She must be expecting something bad. Well, why wouldn't she? Her fiancé had just disappeared without a trace, and she had no idea where he was. She'd been worried enough to hire a private detective to try and find the man, after all. But, somehow, Rees didn't think she'd be expecting what he had to tell her. And he dreaded breaking this news to her. His hand tightened on the file folder he held.

Rees looked around Tobin's office as he crossed to the couch where Melissa waited, a frozen look on her face, eyes staring blankly in his direction. The office suited everything about Jackson Tobin that he'd discovered. Indeed, it featured exactly what one would find in *Today's Upscale Office*, if there were such a magazine. The desk was oversized and a dark oak. The black leather chair behind it had padded arms, while the banker's lamp looked like an original Tiffany's. Oak bookcases spanned floor to ceiling, lit indirectly by halogen spots. The

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oriental rug under the black leather couch and oak table in front of it, showed just enough wear to be trendy. Built-in oak file cabinets completed the picture, along with a 1950s-era safe in a far corner.

The only real thing in the room was Melissa, Rees decided as he sank onto the leather couch beside her. He could see the fine trembling in her hands before she clasped them in her lap.

“Is he dead?”

Rees could barely hear her.

She cleared her throat and tried again. “Has something happened to Jackson?”

Rees admired her guts. She wanted to face whatever news he had to tell her straight up. He reached out and took her hand. It was icy in his, and he couldn’t resist the urge to stroke her skin in an attempt to warm it up. Her eyes were frightened pools of gray-green when she looked up at him. Every protective instinct in his psyche kicked into overdrive.

“Melissa, don’t worry about that. Jackson Tobin is perfectly healthy.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. “So, where is he?”

“Well, right now that is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. Let me show you what I’ve got so far.” He released her hand to open the folder on the table. “The first thing I did was track down his cell phone. There isn’t a problem with it. It’s been cancelled.”

“Did Alyce forget to pay the bill?”

“No. The bill was paid right up to date. He just cancelled his service with that particular company and moved to another one.”

“He must’ve forgotten to tell me.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t think so.”

Melissa tilted her head. “Why would you say that?”

“It’s not the only thing that’s been cancelled.”

He watched her face pale again as his words sank in. Her throat worked convulsively as she swallowed, and Rees couldn’t help but respect her internal strength as she gathered herself.

FOX HOLLOW

"Keep going, Rees."

"His bank accounts have been closed as well."

"What about the business accounts?"

"Every penny transferred out."

"The account is empty? Everything is gone?" Melissa shook her head and raised her eyebrows. "There had to have been thousands in there."

"Four hundred and eighteen thousand, six hundred and eighty-two and change." Rees watched her carefully. This was a lot of information...and none of it good.

"Four hundred *thousand*?" Melissa surged to her feet and began to pace erratically around the room. "Where did it go? Did he put it into his personal accounts?" she whispered, as if speaking were a task requiring too much effort.

"It's been moved off-shore." Rees' stomach clenched, knowing the rest of what he had to share would be no easier for her.

"Why would he do that?" Melissa's gaze was that of a child who has just been told that Santa is a myth. "What's going on?"

"I'm afraid there's more, Melissa. Will you come back and sit down?"

"I've got to keep moving, Rees. I can't stand this," she said, her desperation evident in her voice. "Tell me the rest."

He watched her legs carry her back and forth across the room. The skirt just brushed her knees, and his eyes were drawn to the sexy slit up the back, revealing tantalizing glimpses of her thighs. He shook away the thoughts tempting him to distraction. He was about to break her heart, and all he could think about was what great legs she had.

Am I some kind of creep, or what?

He forced his eyes back to the folder on the desk and shuffled through papers, more to give himself something to do than anything else.

* * *

FOX HOLLOW

Melissa couldn't stop the frantic churning of her out-of-control thoughts. *Jackson cancelled his phone? Moved his money off-shore? But he told me he was just going out of town for a couple of days. He left client instructions...*

"What about Alyce?" Melissa hated how little her voice sounded.

"She's disappeared, too. But let me finish what I've found out about Jackson first, if that's okay with you?"

Melissa could only nod.

"He acquired a passport about a year ago, he's turned in his leased car, and gave notice at his apartment building. The lease will expire at the end of the month."

"That's less than a week from now," she whispered.

"His credit cards have been cancelled, and it appears he's been moving a lot of money around."

"Some guy named Phil Smith called earlier about the loans," said Melissa. "I have his business card somewhere." She looked around. "Oh, yeah, it's on the desk."

She retrieved the bit of card stock and handed it to Rees. His expression told her nothing as he tucked the card into the folder in front of him.

"Has he refinanced with another bank?"

"I don't think so." Rees' voice was sympathetic.

"Okay, this doesn't look really great, I know, but it could be something he can explain as soon as I find him." Melissa nodded. "Tell me about Alyce."

"Well, she's not sick. Her home phone is disconnected, and so is her pager. No cell phone for Ms. LeBlanc, but her lease has also been paid out to the end of its term and her bank accounts closed."

Melissa felt the bottom fall out of her stomach. *Are Alyce and Jackson somewhere together?* She looked into his sympathetic gaze, seeing his reluctance to hurt her with the information he had. "They're together. Aren't they?"

FOX HOLLOW

“I do believe so. There’s too much coincidence to assume anything else. But I’m still working to confirm it.”

CHAPTER 6

A knock at the doorjamb interrupted Melissa's tumbling thoughts. She looked up to see Jennifer standing there.

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't help overhearing," she said. "It's not a very big office."

"That's okay," said Melissa with no emotion in her voice. She was beyond caring.

"I do think I can help you."

"How?"

"Well, this is a temp job for me. I'm an MBA, but with today's economy, I've been taking whatever temp job I can find since my company downsized and I was laid off."

"What can you do?"

"I'm an excellent forensic auditor. I can trace those funds wherever Mr. Tobin has attempted to hide them."

"Why would you do this?"

"It's a challenge, and who knows? Maybe someday you'll be

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running the company and need a good receptionist.” She smiled.

Rees stepped forward. “If you want to take this on, and Melissa is willing, that would be great! I’m adequate at chasing down hidden bank accounts, but I’m no expert, especially if he’s moved them out of the country.” He handed her the paperwork he’d accumulated on Jackson’s and Alyce’s financial affairs.

“I’m on it.” Jennifer took the papers, sorting through them even as she walked back to Alyce’s desk.

Melissa stared after her. “What do we do now?”

“Well, you have a business to run.”

“I don’t even know what’s going on. I design the houses.”

“Time for a crash course in business management, I guess. Or—” He gestured towards Jennifer. “—you do have an MBA sitting out there. Maybe she’d be interested?”

“Great idea!” Melissa felt her spirits rising slightly. “If she can find out how much money Fox Hollow owes...”

“She can start with the bank and find out what Tobin paid out when he terminated the loans there. It’ll give you a start.”

Neither of them expected what Jennifer found out in a few short hours.

* * *

“What do you mean, over two million dollars?” Melissa felt dizzy just listening to the amount.

“That’s what your fiancé owed the bank when he paid off all the loans.” Jennifer’s gaze was sympathetic

“You’re absolutely sure? They weren’t just kidding you?”

“Not too many bankers joke about loans. Especially multi-million-dollar loans.”

“Oh, my God. Where did Jackson get that kind of money? I always thought we were doing fine, but I didn’t think we were in a position to function without loans. It’s how the industry works.” Melissa’s gaze fluttered around the room. “And if we are free and clear at the bank,

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why didn't he tell me?"

"Would he have sold some of the land—even a few dozen acres—to pay the bank?" asked Rees.

"I'd have known if he did. We own the land together, so I'd have had to sign the sales papers along with him."

"Can you think of any place else he might've gotten the money?" asked Jennifer. "Because Fox Hollow doesn't owe its bank a penny."

"Did you get an extra large advance on any of the deals he's working on?" Rees asked.

"No, that money always goes back into the costs of developing the next estate and to the running of the company."

Melissa couldn't stop the sob that ripped out of her as she asked once again, "Where did he get that money?"

Jennifer voice was a quiet island in Melissa's despair. "I have found some traces of what he's been doing."

"What?"

"None of the money he used to pay off the loans came from Fox Hollow profit." She paused and looked at Rees, who nodded slightly. "It appears he got part of it from someone named John Axelson."

Melissa gasped. "That's the name I called you about, Rees. When I found it on that slip of paper with my cell phone number. But you never told me who he is."

"Axelson arranges...private financing," said Rees.

"Private financing?"

"It's a euphemism for loan shark, I'm afraid." Rees' voice was gentle.

Melissa felt his hand under her elbow, just as she stumbled and realized she couldn't feel the floor. He guided her to the couch. She felt like she was floating, suspended in disbelief.

A loan shark? Jackson borrowed money from a loan shark?

"I'm afraid that's not all of it," said Jennifer. "Mr. Tobin paid the bank with the cash in the various business accounts—"

FOX HOLLOW

"There were always several hundred thousand dollars in the operating accounts. So, what does Fox Hollow owe this loan shark? A few hundred thousand?" Melissa managed to ask.

"Not exactly..."

Melissa's breath refused to flow in and out of her lungs in any organized fashion. She gasped for air, trying to get control of something. Once she heaved in one, long breath, she looked at Jennifer, the question blazing from her eyes.

"Jackson borrowed extra from the Axelson organization," the young MBA explained. "It looks like he moved nearly four million dollars in total out of the country...to the Caymans...several weeks ago. Most of it was borrowed from Axelson, and Fox Hollow has been left holding the bag, so to speak."

"How do we get it back?"

"We don't."

"They're corporate accounts, and I have signing authority," Melissa insisted desperately. "Can't we just call the bank there and have it sent back?"

"He opened the accounts in the name of Tob-Blanc Enterprises."

"Tob-Blanc?" Melissa couldn't believe it. "As is Tobin and LeBlanc?"

"That's what it looks like," answered Jennifer. "They didn't leave the money there, though. Well, at least not all of it. Just under a million is in the Caymans, and the rest has gone to Switzerland, I believe. I'm waiting for an email to confirm that."

* * *

"Do you have any assets to borrow against, Melissa?" asked Rees.

"What do you mean?"

"You've got to pay off this Axelson as soon as possible." He knew the interest rate would be exorbitant, and that Axelson played for keeps.

"Won't I just pay him every week? Or month, or whatever? Until the loan is paid off?"

FOX HOLLOW

“It depends upon the arrangements Tobin made, Melissa.”

Her stare showed her lack of comprehension of anything to do with loan sharks.

“He may have agreed to pay back the whole sum plus interest at a given date...or payments on a schedule. We’ll have to find out.”

He could feel her gratitude like a warm ray of sunshine.

Rees turned to Jennifer. “You know anybody who knows anybody who can find out a bit about John Axelson?”

“Let me give it a try.” She smiled at Rees and patted Melissa’s back before she headed to the desk in the reception area.

“What am I going to do, Rees?”

“We’ll figure that out together.” He sank onto the designer couch and took her hand. “The thing you can’t do right now is panic.”

Melissa surged to her feet and resumed her frenzied pacing. “Not panic? How can I not panic? What’s going to happen to Fox Hollow?”

At that moment, Rees was far more concerned about what was going to happen to Melissa. From what he had already gathered, the bastard Tobin had set her up for a mighty big fall.

“Did you sign any of the loan papers, Melissa?”

“What— Loan papers? Maybe. Jackson always had something for me to sign. I don’t know...”

“Please think about it. It’s really important.” Rees stood up, stepped into her pathway and put his hands on her shoulders to stop her restless pacing.

She looked up at him, grey eyes as dark as a fall pond. “Jackson brought me papers on homes, lots, designs... I imagine I’ve probably signed something, somewhere down the line. Why?”

“Is it possible you signed anything that would make you liable for Jackson’s or Fox Hollow’s debts?”

“I suppose so. I’ve signed many documents over the years.”

“What about recently?”

“Well...Jackson was complaining about a fall-out with his bankers

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the night before he went away.”

“Did you sign anything?”

“Of course. We had some new clients interested in purchasing, and my name has to be on the documents, too.”

“Is that all?”

“I really don’t know. He told me they were regular sales agreements and design contracts.” Fear was beginning to curl around her voice. “And I can’t get into the safe where we always keep those kinds of paper.” She gestured to the black box in the corner. “The combination’s been changed.”

Rees felt his disgust for Tobin build. For some reason, Melissa was being left to hold the bag...the very empty bag John Axelson would expect to have filled with cash. “We need to get into that safe.”

“But I don’t have the combination...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a friend who is a locksmith. I’ll call him and he’ll get it open for us.” Rees squeezed her shoulders gently and ran his hands down the outside of her arms. He could feel the fine tremors running through her body. His heart clenched. This young woman was in more trouble than she could even begin to imagine.

CHAPTER 7

“Jennifer, could you grab a phone book, please.” Melissa tried to keep the shivers running through her from showing in her voice.

She shook her head and looked at Rees. He was so big and solid. He didn’t have any pretensions. His suit was not Armani and his shoes looked like he bought them for comfort rather than a designer name. His smile was consoling. Melissa had the feeling she was in a great deal of trouble, but she knew this man would not abandon her...and it wasn’t just because she’d hired him to find Jackson.

Jackson! How could he have disappeared with all of Fox Hollow’s assets? She resumed pacing. And to start another company with Alyce!

“Rees, I must’ve closed my eyes to every clue about what Jackson was doing. Alyce used to call all the time when he was at my house. I figured she had a crush, but...

“When I thought Alyce was encroaching too much on our little bit of time together, I asked Jackson to talk to her. The calls did ease up.” The misery she felt was physical. “I guess I just drove their affair

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underground.”

Rees stepped forward. Melissa felt his arms close around her, and she leaned against his strong, muscular chest. She began to feel each breath he took, and found herself matching her respirations to his. His hands stroked up and down her back, and she felt a bit of her spunk return under his touch. She pushed away and looked up into his face.

“You, Mr. McAllister, must think you’ve been hired by the stupidest woman on the face of the planet.”

He shook his head. “No...I think you’re a woman who trusted her fiancé. You shouldn’t have, but you did.”

“What a mess, huh?”

“Yes, it’s a mess, but we’ll plow through it.”

Jennifer strode into the room, phone book in hand. “What’s up?”

“We need to get into the corner safe over there. I’m going to call a locksmith friend to come out and drill it, since Mr. Tobin has seen fit to reset the combination.”

“Shit, he’s some piece of work,” said Jennifer. She flipped through the business directory section of the phone book until she came to “Locksmiths” and glanced up at Rees. “Your friend’s name?”

““Open It Now Locksmith.””

“Got it...I’ll get someone over here as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, Jennifer. Ask for Billy and tell him it’s just like the Oxford safe he opened for me last fall. That’ll make sure he brings the right drill.”

Jennifer nodded and strode out of the room again. They heard her on the phone a few moments later, making the arrangements. She poked her head back in the door. “Billy’s on another job right now, but he’ll be here about three-thirty.”

“Sounds good,” said Rees.

“Augie!” Melissa said suddenly, pushing out of his arms.

“Augie?”

“He’s my Keeshond.”

FOX HOLLOW

“You have a Keesie?”

“I sure do...and he’s at home right now.”

“We’ve got—” Rees looked at his watch. “—a couple of hours before Billy can get here. Want to go home and pet him on the head?”

Melissa nodded gratefully. She couldn’t say why she needed to ruffle her fingers through Augie’s soft grey coat and feel him lean against her legs. She just did.

And Rees understood.

* * *

When they pulled in front of Melissa’s home, Rees noticed the dark van with tinted windows parked across the road and down one house. He automatically made note of the license plate. He’d bet Axelson’s people were already in place, if Jackson Tobin had set up his fiancée to take the fall for him like Rees figured he had.

Melissa hurried up the walkway ahead of him, and he couldn’t help but admire the view. She really was a very attractive woman, and Rees felt sorry for how Jackson Tobin was treating her. Rees knew the road they were traveling could lead to a great deal of hurt for the young architect. But he had to admire the courage she was demonstrating. *No lying down and crying game over for this one!*

Melissa unlocked the front door and held it ajar until he caught up to her. They stepped into the foyer, and he looked around. *Very nice.* This woman, if she’d designed this, had exquisite taste. He spotted a couple of cracked floor tiles and was surprised. It must have happened recently because he couldn’t imagine Melissa ignoring it.

Suddenly, a grey streak flew into the entrance area and slid to a stop. The grey blur became a wolf-like dog whose lips were pulled back in a happy smile as he threw himself up at Melissa. He leapt into the air in front of her, and without a moment’s hesitation, Melissa caught him, holding him against her chest and laughing as his tongue swept over her cheek.

“Augie, did you miss me?”

FOX HOLLOW

“Aaarooo,” was the joyous response.

Rees couldn't help the chuckle that began somewhere down near his toes. “He's a typical Kees, isn't he?”

“He sure is. Do you know the breed?”

“We had one when I was growing up. He was my best buddy for nearly fifteen years. Will you introduce us?”

As Augie wriggled, Melissa cradled him gently in her arms. “I can only hold him for a moment. Forty pounds doesn't sound like much—until it's launched at you at full speed.”

Her smile was everything Rees had expected.

“Augie.” Melissa set him down and snapped her fingers. Augie stared intently up at her. “Sit.”

The dog's butt hit the floor instantly.

“Say hello to Rees.” A hand gesture and Augie's head swiveled in Rees' direction.

Rees squatted and the dog trotted over and sat in front of him. Augie tipped his head to the right and looked up at Rees. The chocolate eyes melted his heart. “Nice to meet you, Augie. Do you take good care of Melissa?”

In response, Augie let his front feet slide forward until he crumpled into a down position, his front feet and head between Rees' knees.

“Aarooo,” he repeated.

“And hello to you, too, Augie.” Rees offered fingers for Augie's inspection.

Rees decided he'd passed muster when he felt the soft swipe of the dog's tongue on the back of his hand. He reached out and gently ruffled the velvety fur between Augie's ears. “Good boy.”

Rees stood up again, and caught Melissa watching him with her dog.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“More than okay...much more.” She smiled and clicked her fingers again. “Come on, Augie. Let's show Rees where the kitchen is.” She

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started down the hall and called over her shoulder, “Can I offer you a cup of coffee?”

“Hey, a P.I. never turns down a cuppa Joe.” He followed her down the hall.

* * *

Melissa felt joy trill through her. *Augie likes Rees*. He’d never shown that kind of connection with Jackson, and Melissa had always felt guilty. Augie was never allowed in the kitchen or dining room with them when Jackson was here for dinner. The dog had to stay in his crate when Jackson stayed overnight. Melissa smiled to herself. Well, Jackson *thought* Augie stayed in a crate!

“What do you want in your coffee?”

“Just black, thanks.” Rees dropped onto an oak chair, and in a split second, Augie was leaning against him, paw up on his new friend’s leg as they got to know each

Melissa hummed to herself as she pottered around the kitchen fixing coffee and making a snack plate of cheese, sliced pears and Jackson’s favorite imported crackers. She put big crockery mugs, the carafe of coffee, and a jug of half-and-half— her one indulgence—on the table. She slid into the seat across from Rees and filled a mug for him. She pushed it across the table, and as he took it, their fingers touched. Neither pulled away, and Melissa tilted her head slightly as she gazed at him. He smiled at her and pulled the mug of coffee his way.

No need to rush, ran through her head. She paused with her coffee mug halfway to her mouth. *Why did I think that? I’m engaged.*

“But he’s not much of a fiancé, is he?” Melissa didn’t realize she’d spoken out loud until Rees snorted with amusement.

“No, he’s not. The minute we find him, I think you oughta dump his butt.”

They both laughed freely, and from there, the conversation drifted to favorite hobbies, seasons and novelists. Melissa discovered they

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were both fans of J.L. Abbott's Civil War novels, and neither liked horror—either movies or books. Their musical tastes were opposite with Melissa being a huge fan of rock, while Rees tended to country. But both were fanatics about hockey.

“Were you surprised when Kariya signed with Colorado?” Melissa asked.

“Can you imagine the goals if they put him on a line with Sakic and Hejduk?”

“Powerhouse line. I sure hope Gilmour can play another season for the Leafs.”

“If, and it's a big if,” said Rees, “they can get his knee repaired, and he doesn't retire, he'll make a big impact...especially for the younger players.”

They sipped coffee, munched on their snack, and Melissa felt the tension dissipate somewhat. She felt she could face whatever Jackson had done. There were laws, and surely she didn't have to honor any deal he'd made behind her back with some criminal.

She glanced at the clock and was surprised an hour-and-a-half had passed. “We better get back to the office. Your locksmith friend will be there in just a little while.”

They quickly cleaned up the kitchen, put away the leftovers, and were ready to leave in a few minutes. Each patted Augie on the head, and he grinned at them, happy in the attention. Melissa closed and locked the door, and when she looked back as she headed down the walkway, Augie was on the window seat watching them go. He looked perfectly content.

* * *

Rees and Melissa got back to the Fox Hollow office shortly before Billy from Open It Now arrived.

Jennifer had just started to fill them in on the next step Fox Hollow's money had taken on its journey from the Caribbean to Zurich, when there was a clatter and a curse from the hall.

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“That’d be Billie,” announced Rees with a grin.

A disheveled man pushing a toolbox leaking bits and pieces stumbled through the door. “Hey, Rees! How the hell are ya, man?”

“Just great, Billy. I see you’re doing about normal.”

“Son-of-a-bitch of a toolbox handle. Stupid, friggin’ thing fell the hell off just as I climbed out of the damned elevator. Had to kick the bastard all the way down the freakin’ hall.” Billy paused and stuck out his hand at Melissa and Jennifer who stood, side by side, staring at the apparition.

Melissa took his hand and he shook hers vigorously. She felt the grease from his fingers coating hers and tried to shake her head at Jennifer to warn her. It did no good. A moment after dropping her hand, Billy had seized Jennifer’s and engulfed it in another active handshake. “Ladies...nice ta meet ya.” He turned to Rees. “Now where’s that bitch of a safe you need the hell opened?”

Rees clamped his lips together and led the way into Jackson’s office with Billy following, kicking and swearing at his recalcitrant toolbox.

Melissa managed to keep from laughing until the two men disappeared. When her mirth had faded a bit, she spoke. “Can you believe him?” she whispered reaching for a tissue and scrubbing at her greasy palm.

“I’ve got to say I’ve never met someone like that before.” Jennifer followed suit with her own handful of tissues.

They followed the swearing into the office, and were confronted by a tableau that nearly brought them to laughter again. Billy knelt on the floor in front of the safe, pants dipping to the danger zone of butt cleavage, while he muttered sweet nothings to the tumblers of the combination lock.

“Sweet, little whore, just open up...come on, come on. You skank!” His temper flared and he hit the front of the safe with the heel of his hand.

Rees covered his mouth and coughed heartily.

FOX HOLLOW

“Come on, you stinkin’ piece o’ shit,” coaxed Billy. He listened carefully, then turned to his toolbox. After rummaging through it, he brought out a large ball-peen hammer. He whacked it on the sides and top of the safe until he was huffing and puffing from the exertion.

“See if I do you any more favors, you old bitch. That freakin’ lock is bein’ drilled, and I’m doin’ it right this stinkin’ minute. You just sit there and think about how that damned drill is goin’ feel ripping into your tumblers, you bastard safe, you.”

Billy picked up a drill and set it on the floor beside him, then rooted around in the seemingly bottomless box of tools before pulling out a taped-up extension cord. He handed it to Rees. “Plug that whore in when I give ya the word, will ya?” Back into his tools he went, and come out with a series of bits, which he examined like a surgeon choosing a scalpel.

“This little pecker’ll do,” he muttered as he selected a particularly vicious looking bit. Billy stuck the bit into the drill and nodded to Rees who plugged in the ratty extension cord.

The whirring rattle of the drill took over the room as Billy chose his spot and prepared to open the safe. Carefully he drilled, bits of metal flying in every direction. He paused for a moment to spit something from his tongue, like a smoker trying to dislodge a tiny piece of tobacco.

The others stood and watched. Conversation was impossible over the racket, and Billy filled any conversation area as he swore at the safe and the drill equally.

Shrieking metal bit through steel, and the crescendo increased until Melissa thought the top of her head would explode. “Come on, come on.” She willed Billy to finish the job quickly, but the locksmith with the droopy work pants thwarted her wishes. Drill in place, he didn’t move as the bit buried itself deeper and deeper, chewing through the old-fashioned steel case with ease.

Melissa heard a small pop and Billy eased back on the trigger. The

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motor coughed to a wheezing halt. Billy coaxed the bit out of the combination lock and pulled open the now-useless safe door.

“Okay, let’s see what’s in here,” Melissa said more calmly than she felt as she squatted down beside Billy and peered inside.

She spotted a six-inch stack of file folders and reached in to pull them out. Without inspecting them, she passed the pile to Rees who set them on the desk. She felt around, but other than a small bump at the back of the compartment, the safe was empty.

“Where are my design plans?” she asked, her concern rising. “Rees, are there any CDs among those folders?”

Rees flipped through the folders in question. “Nope. Looks like contracts, agreements and a pre-nup.”

“Pre-nup?” Melissa didn’t have time to think about that. Panic was uncurling inside her again. *Where can my design plans be?*

She felt her eyes fill with tears, and refused to shed them. She could not let her fear tear her apart right now.

Melissa gazed up at Rees. He reached out his hand. As she felt the panic surge around her like a vortex in a river, she seized that hand.

He tugged her to her feet and right into a warm embrace. “Don’t worry, Lissa. We’re going to find a way out of this.” He stepped back, put both hands onto her shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. “First things, first. Let’s go through this paperwork and see what’s what.”

She nodded, feeling her resolve strengthen again. There was just something about Rees that spoke to her. And she loved how the nickname sounded on his tongue. *Lissa. I like it.*

Melissa strode to the pile of files and lifted the first one off the top. It was the agreement setting up Fox Hollow as a partnership between her and Jackson. She glanced through it, but found no loan documents. She was working her way through the stack as she heard the others leaving. Billy’s departure was heralded by colorful expressions, a certain amount of rattling and clanking, and the sound of a metal box

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striking wood.

Melissa grimaced and looked up to see what damage had been done to the door jamb, just in time to see Jennifer step close to Rees and smile up into his face. The lovely blonde rested her hand on Rees' forearm, and spoke quietly to him. He shook his head and Jennifer tipped hers to one side, pouting slightly. Then she tapped his arm with her forefinger and swung away, peeking back over her shoulder at him. Feeling the heat of a blush rush into her face from witnessing such a private moment, she flipped open the next folder without looking at it. It was the pre-nuptial agreement. Curiosity overcame her, and she began reading.

"What the hell..." she muttered at the second paragraph. "I'll assume any debt or any outstanding personal financial commitments of Jackson's? I don't think so!"

Fuming now, she read further. "Bastard!" she screamed, slamming the document onto the desk in anger.

Rees and Jennifer raced into the office. "What is it?" the P.I. barked.

"Look at this crap." Melissa pointed to the legal document she'd been reading. "This is beyond ridiculous. Thank God we never married." She snatched up the stapled papers and tossed them to Rees.

Adeptly he grabbed them out of mid-air and began skimming them. In just a few short moments, which Melissa used to stomp furiously around the desk, he looked up. "Did you get to the last page?"

"What? No. I was so pissed off after the third clause I stopped reading."

"It's worth your while to have a look at this." He pointed. "This paragraph puts the agreement into effect from the date of signature—not the date of your marriage."

"For crying out loud... Well, I'm glad I never signed it."

Rees cleared his throat, and held out the last page of the document. "Is this your signature, or should we add forgery to Jackson's

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repertoire?”

Melissa grabbed the proffered paper. It *was* her signature. “I don’t remember discussing this, let alone signing it.” She sighed.

My God, what a nightmare.

CHAPTER 8

Rees looked at Melissa's downcast expression. He could feel her disillusionment. The pre-nup just added insult to injury. And things were only going to get worse before they got better. Tobin hooking up with John Axelson ensured that. They needed to find the loan agreement and soon, so they'd know what they were dealing with. But he knew it wasn't going to be anything good...or easy.

"Okay, let's keep looking through these folders," he said getting her focused on doing something. "If he tricked you into signing the pre-nup, there may be other things in here you want to know about."

"You're right."

He watched her square her shoulders and turn back to the stack on the desk.

"I'll be in the outer office," he advised before signaling to Jennifer. He gently guided her out of Jackson's office with a hand at the small of her back.

The moment they were in the reception area, Jennifer turned into

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his body. "Couldn't wait to get me alone?" She pressed up against him and smiled.

"Well, that wasn't exactly what I was thinking. I want to know everything there is to know about John Axelson and his known associates." He lifted one eyebrow in his best Tom Selleck imitation and grinned.

"And what's my motivation?" Her lower lip pouted prettily as she waited for his answer.

"You're getting paid to be here and work until five..." He chuckled to take any sting out of the words, then his voice was serious again. "Anything else will have to be because you want to help Melissa." Rees couldn't believe his own words. Jennifer had made every effort to show him how interested in him she was, and he was turning her down.

And why am I turning her down? It's not as if there's another woman on the horizon. As attracted as I am to her, Melissa isn't likely to be interested in anyone right now. She had just gotten the shock of her lifetime and she sure wouldn't be looking for romance in the foreseeable future. He gave himself a mental shake. Looking down at the twinkling blue eyes, the long, flowing blonde hair and the tempting body, Rees decided he wasn't a monk. "And I'd really appreciate the favor, personally. Maybe I could take you for dinner one night to show my gratitude?"

"I'd like that," Jennifer purred. "I'd like it very much."

"Great." He turned to collect some paperwork. "So let's get started on finding out who and what John Axelson is."

Jennifer pressed against the length of his body once more, brushed her cheek against his, and whispered into his ear, "*Anything* you say, Rees." She stepped away from him and swayed her hips seductively on her way to her desk.

Rees smiled to himself. Here he was, flirting with Jennifer while he was finding himself more and more attracted to Melissa. Two days ago, he hadn't had a woman in his life for six months.

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He headed back to the office to see if he could help Melissa sort through the hundreds of documents they'd found in the safe.

* * *

Melissa stared at Rees' hand resting low on Jennifer's back as the two were leaving Jackson's office. She sighed. She could practically feel Rees' long fingers brush against her before she dragged herself back to the task at hand.

What am I doing? He's not interested in a very recently disengaged woman with money problems and a loan shark on her tail. But could he be? Melissa gnawed her lower lip. What am I doing? I've got to figure out exactly what kind of a lurch I've been left in, and why. I'm don't have time to look for a new boyfriend.

Melissa grabbed the next folder on the stack. A quick look through it revealed nothing but Jackson's notes on an older sale. The next three folders also contained notes on property, home designs, costing, and profit margins. When she reached for the fourth folder, her hand knocked against the pile, and it tilted to the left and avalanched toward the lip of the desk. She made a grab for it before it slid all the way off.

As she straightened the stack, she discovered one folder heavier than the others. Her heart in the back of her throat, she pulled it out and unsnapped the elastic bands from around it. One glance at its contents and she closed her eyes in relief. *My design CDs.*

Melissa flipped through them quickly. None of them were still in their jewel cases, so she was particularly grateful she'd used a marker to put the client's name on each CD when she'd created them. Nearly a dozen silvery discs, so none were missing. She set aside that folder and the one with the pre-nup in it. These she'd take with her.

The next half-dozen folders were client-related—sales agreements, correspondence, design notes, tax notices, services, copies of title documents—typical real estate files. Melissa was beginning to hope the pre-nup was all she'd have to worry about. Maybe Jackson had even paid off the loan shark. *Surely there'd be paper if he hadn't.*

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Rees strode back into the room, and Melissa was immediately aware of his presence, even with her back to the door.

"Find anything yet?" he asked kindly.

"Yes...I've found all my design CDs. I'd have been in trouble without them."

"Good, then, I'm glad you've found them. What else?"

"Some regular files with information on lots, surveys, taxes, costs...that kind of thing. I haven't found any other documents with anything to do with the finances of Fox Hollow." Melissa couldn't keep the smile out of her voice. "I think everything's going to be okay, Rees. I really do. If all that's in here is that stupid pre-nup—no loan documents, no promissory notes—I think maybe Jackson paid off the bank and the loan shark. Maybe all I'm looking at is a run-away fiancé."

"Maybe."

Melissa heard the world of doubt in the private investigator's voice.

Jennifer stuck her head in the door. "I'm going to call it a day, folks."

Melissa looked at her watch and started. "It's after five already. Wow, what a day! Thanks, Jennifer. Thanks, Rees. I really appreciate the help." Melissa began gathering up the folders. She'd take them home and finish going through them after she met with Phil Smith. "I've got a meeting at six, so I better get going, too."

"I'll help you carry these to your car," offered Rees.

"Thanks."

"Jennifer, we talked about having dinner sometime. What about tonight? Or, do you have plans?" he asked.

Melissa felt her tummy do a peculiar flip-flop. *What should it matter to me if he asks her to dinner?*

"Just a frozen pizza and some cable TV," answered Jennifer.

"Why don't we grab a couple of steaks down on Queen's Quay?"

"Sounds good. Let me grab my purse."

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The three of them divided up the folders and Melissa locked the door to Fox Hollow behind them. They loaded the files into the back of Melissa's SUV and parted ways, Jennifer and Rees climbing into his 4 by 4.

Melissa took a moment to gather her thoughts, flipped the radio to a rock station, then started the twenty-minute drive to Fox Hollow's field office where she was scheduled to meet with Phil Smith. As she drove, Melissa kept thinking about Rees. She'd found herself attracted to the handsome P.I., despite what was going on. She hadn't been able to understand why, but as she thought about it, she decided it was because he was an island of calm in the insanity her life had become.

Rees had been relaxed when she explained about her lost fiancé. She'd even been able to stop her panic mode when he'd explained how they'd search and find him. When it was time to break open the safe, he'd known someone who could do it. And Augie liked him. Melissa smiled as she thought of how the Keeshond had immediately responded to Rees.

And Augie's fondness has nothing to do with the broad shoulders, handsome face and great smile!

Melissa pulled into the lot of the field office to find a limo stretched across several of the parking spaces. She squeezed in her Jeep at the end. Which meant she had to walk the length of the impressive vehicle to reach the walkway. She'd never seen anything so spectacular. It was a black Mercedes limo that absolutely glistened. Not a spot of dust marred its perfect surface, even after the long drive down the gravel drive. As she rounded the trunk of the car, she understood why.

The tallest, most muscular man she'd ever seen unfolded himself from where he'd been crouched beside the car.

"Oh!" She jumped back. "You startled me."

"Sorry, ma'am." He tipped the cap on his head. "Just getting the dust off, ma'am." The chauffeur held up a cloth.

"Yes...well...good job," she stammered for lack of anything else to

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say.

Melissa rushed up the walk to the entrance. She paused with her hand on the handle, took a deep breath, and pushed open the door. There was another large man in the main reception area. He pointed to Jackson's office. Melissa strode to the doorway and stopped abruptly.

Yet another wrestler-type stood like a human mountain just inside the jamb. A second man was slouched into a visitor's chair and a third sat behind Jackson's desk. Melissa studied the man behind the desk, noting his thin blond hair, steel-rimmed glasses, and a Rolex decorating his left wrist. Both ring fingers sported large diamonds, and the suit was obviously from a top designer. He had files open and papers spread across the desk.

He looked up at Melissa's sharply indrawn breath. "Come in," he ordered. "And sit."

Not knowing what else to do, she wobbled on shaking legs to the visitor's chair nearest her and sank into it. Her heart pounded and her stomach felt as woozy as her legs. "I'm Melissa Miller."

"I know. I'm John Axelson, and this is my associate, Phil Smith." He gestured toward the man in the chair beside her.

She glanced at him. He, too, was dressed in a designer suit. His jacket hung open so Melissa could see the holstered gun on his right hip. He stuck out his hand, and by reflex, Melissa shook it. He squeezed tightly around her palm, and it took all her effort not to show how much it hurt.

"Mr. Axelson, I'll have to ask you why you have the Fox Hollow files out. They're confidential." Melissa was thrilled her voice didn't betray her terror.

Axelson laughed...a hearty, belly laugh. "These files, this development, and you, will be mine within the next few days. Your fiancé made an agreement with me."

"Well, my fiancé—" Sarcasm dripped from the word. "—had no right to make an agreement with you that give you title to Fox Hollow.

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It's a partnership." She ignored his reference to owning her. She stood up and moved around the desk. "Please get out of my chair."

Axelson looked up at her, smiled his reptile grin and stood. "I do so enjoy spirit in a beautiful woman."

Melissa merely looked at him, waiting for him to move.

"But I mostly enjoy breaking a snotty bitch like you," he said conversationally as he rounded the desk and dropped into the chair Melissa had vacated.

Shocked, Melissa could only stare.

* * *

Rees couldn't shake his uneasiness as he and Jennifer drove out of the parking lot. There was something going on here, and it didn't feel right. He shook his head in frustration.

"You worried about her, too?" Jennifer asked.

"I sure am."

"I don't think this Phil Smith is someone Melissa should take on by herself."

"Phil Smith?" Rees slammed the heel of his hand against the steering wheel. "Melissa's meeting is with Phil Smith?"

"Sure is. She's meeting him at the Fox Hollow field office at six. He left a message." Jennifer was clearly confused at Rees' reaction. "He's some kind of financial guy."

"Yeah, he's some kind of financial guy, all right. Phil Smith, as he's calling himself these days, is the front man for John Axelson."

"He's working for that money shark? Shit, he'll eat her alive if Jackson Tobin's made some kind of a deal with him. We can't let her meet with Smith alone, Rees."

The private investigator checked for traffic and spun the wheel on the big Dodge truck into a tight u-turn. "You've got that right. I'll drop you at your car, and head out there."

Minutes later, Rees was speeding toward the Fox Hollow field office. As he peeled off the main road, he spotted the limo and

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Melissa's Jeep in the lot. He skidded to a stop behind the big limo in a wave of gravel and dust. He didn't even slow down when the gigantic chauffeur unfolded himself from the front seat.

Rees jogged up the walkway, shoved open the front door and strode into the reception area. Two oversized bodyguards stood before him, one by the front door, another in the doorway of an office. Rees murmured, "Excuse me. I'm expected," and stepped into the office just as Melissa sank into the chair in front of the large, cluttered desk, a look of shock and fear etched onto her face.

"Sorry, I'm late, Ms. Miller," Rees said as he dragged a chair around the desk so he could sit beside her. "Traffic was a bear."

Before he sat, he leaned over the desk and extended his hand to the man in the chair directly across from him. Rees registered the cold expression, the expensive suit and accessories, and matched the loan shark's gaze without blinking as they shook hands. "I'm Rees McAllister, Ms. Miller's assistant. And you are..." He let the insult hang in the air between them as he dropped Axelson's hand.

The other man sprang to his feet, his outrage palpable. "This is Mr. John Axelson, the new owner of Fox Hollow."

Rees merely tilted his head and looked at the speaker without emotion. "I don't think so, Mr..."

"Smith. I'm Phil Smith," he spluttered.

"And do you spell that with an 'i' or a 'y'?" Rees stuck out his hand.

"With an 'i'." Smith took Rees' hand and attempted to exert his crushing grip.

Rees smiled calmly as he matched Smith's pressure, and exceeded it. "That's the common spelling, isn't it?"

Smith flexed his fingers when Rees released them, surreptitiously rubbing at them as he sat back down.

Rees turned to Melissa and spoke politely. "As I said, Ms. Miller, I apologize for being late. Have I missed anything important so far?"

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Her grateful gaze radiated at him, but her voice didn't betray her emotions. "Well, Mr. Axelson here just informed me he believes he owns Fox Hollow—and he's under some kind of mistaken impression he also owns me!" Her laughter trilled from her throat as if she thought it were all a great joke.

"Really? And what brings you to that erroneous conclusion, Mr. Axelson?"

"This piece of paper." Axelson slammed a document onto the desk with more force than necessary. "It gives me control of this piece of property—and that piece, too," he said crudely, pointing at Melissa.

"Well, it's the first we've heard of this, so I'm sure you'll understand if we ask you to excuse us. We'll reschedule sometime early next week after we've looked this over." Rees stood up, leaned across the desk and picked up the document in question. "I assume you have another copy?"

Axelson nodded tightly.

"Then please call our downtown office, and Ms. Hechtman, our office coordinator, will be glad to set up an appointment for you gentlemen." The word bespoke anything but gentlemen, and Rees continued. "Any time after one p.m. on Tuesday will suit us. And you?"

Axelson's voice was barely controlled fury. "I'll check my book and have my girl get back to you."

"You do that. And now, gentlemen, if I may escort out..."

Rees shepherded the two out of the office, where they were joined by their guards. With a quick wink over his shoulder at Melissa, Rees followed the group to the front door. "Until next week..." Rees tipped his head to the men, then closed the door, locking it behind them for good measure.

* * *

Melissa felt her knees give way and she collapsed into the chair. Her heart was pounding triple time and her palms were soaking wet.

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She rubbed them against her thighs in an attempt to dry them off, and convince herself she was still in one piece.

What would I have done if Rees hadn't arrived when he did?

She looked up when she heard him speak. "You'd have faced them down just like you were already doing, Lissa."

His deep voice caressed her name in a way that started a thrumming deep within her.

"I was so scared..." She stood again on shaking legs.

Of course you were." Rees walked across the room and enfolded her in his arms. "They're two pretty scary guys." His hands stroked up and down her back, and Melissa could feel the tension of the past hour fading away.

If only she could stay safe in his arms forever. But she knew she couldn't, so she nestled closer for a moment, then stepped out of his embrace. She rested her hands on his forearms as his palms remained on the tops of her hips. Just a breath away from him, all Melissa could think of doing at the moment was kissing him. His lips were so close... Melissa's lips parted and she reached up, softly pressing her mouth against his.

His lips were everything she wasn't used to. Firm and warm under hers, they responded immediately, moving against her own mouth in a way that made her eyes close and her lips open. Rees' tongue teased onto her lips, flickering lightly across her teeth, and teasing her tongue to play. Meanwhile, he stepped forward bringing their bodies into intimate contact from chest to knees.

Melissa felt her nipples bead in excitement, and Rees' body revealed his increasing arousal to her as their kiss deepened and continued. Melissa let her head tip back, allowing Rees deeper access to the warm cavern of her mouth. She felt more than heard the soft moan in the back of her throat.

This is what a kiss should be. Toe-curling, heart pounding!

With a start, Melissa pulled away and looked into Rees' eyes. She

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was not a free woman—not by a long shot—and this situation with John Axelson had just complicated things even further. She couldn't make even tacit promises to any man. And Rees was a free agent. He'd even been going out to dinner with Jennifer that night. Melissa felt the heat of a blush race to her face and ducked her head.

"Oh, Rees, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you like that," she apologized.

"Did you see me pulling away?"

"No, but—"

"Lissa, I enjoyed kissing you. Did you enjoy it?"

"Oh, yes," she said on a breath. "Very much."

"Good. I think we should plan to repeat it at some stage of the game."

"But you and Jennif—"

"Jennifer is a great person, and I think the two of you are going to make a terrific team running Fox Hollow."

"Together?"

"Yep. You're the architect and she's got the perfect business background to make a huge success of it."

"But you were taking her out to dinner tonight."

"Yes, dinner...not marrying her." He grinned to soften his words. "Besides, I met you first, Lissa."

Melissa smiled up at him and reached up to his lips again. "You're a dear man, Rees."

He grinned. "And you, my dear Lissa, are one hot architect."

CHAPTER 9

Melissa and Rees decided to head back to the office and go over the loan agreement Axelson had given them. Since they were both hungry, they agreed to order take-out Chinese food.

“If I had Jennifer’s phone number, I’d call and ask her to join us,” said Melissa.

“I don’t have her number either,” answered Rees with a smile.

“I was that obvious, was I?”

“A tad.”

As they drove back to the city in their two-vehicle convoy, Melissa reflected on her meeting with Phil, the Refinance Specialist, and his creepy boss.

I wonder what Azelson meant that he owns Fox Hollow and me, too? Did Jackson mortgage my architecture designs? Or my condo?

Melissa couldn’t figure it out, so she decided to let it go until she could read the actual loan papers and see what Jackson had committed her to. She flipped on her favorite CD by the David Shankle Group and

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let the vocals of “Calling All Heroes” carry her away.

When she got off the elevator, Melissa was surprised to see the lights on at the office, and was prepared for the worst when she unlocked the door. Rees signaled her to step to the side and he entered first, poised for trouble. When she saw his shoulders relax, she stepped into the reception area beside him.

“Jennifer!” Melissa hadn’t expected to see her there.

“Hey, boss lady, you okay?”

“Thanks to Rees. What are you doing here?”

“Just a bit of research,” Jennifer replied. “I’ve got a few things to share with you on the money situation.”

“We’re about to order Chinese and go over papers John Axelson gave me. Want to join us?”

“You sure I won’t be intruding?” asked Jennifer looking at the two of them.

“Not at all. In fact, I feel like I owe you a meal after spoiling your dinner plans with Rees tonight,” said Melissa, meaning it.

“Hey, that was just friends grabbing a bite to eat after work. But, if you’re buying, I’d like lemon chicken and an order of steamed rice,” answered Jennifer with a big smile. “No MSG for me.”

“Me either,” said Melissa.

“And that makes three,” inserted Rees.

Rees wrote down Jennifer’s lemon chicken and rice and Melissa’s shrimp lo mein and added his selection of broccoli beef and spicy noodles. “We’ve got to have egg rolls, too, okay?”

The two women nodded enthusiastically and Rees placed their orders. “I can pick up dinner in twenty minutes,” he informed them.

“I love a man who cooks,” joked Melissa and all three laughed.

While they were waiting for the food, they tacitly agreed to avoid business talk. Jennifer finished what she was doing on the computer, while Melissa brewed a pot of coffee and Rees decided to grab the file folders they’d loaded into Melissa’s Jeep earlier. He then picked up

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their food order at the restaurant across the street. By the time he was back, Jennifer was taking the last of the pages she needed from the printer.

They sat down to their impromptu feast and began to share what they'd all learned in the past few hours.

Jennifer filled them in on where the Fox Hollow money had gone. "After it left the Caymans, it headed to Zurich, where it made a short stop—really just a few hours—and was wired back to the Caymans to a different bank," she said. "This guy wants to make it difficult to follow because the account names were slightly different each time. The money was transferred from Fox Hollow to Tob-Blanc Enterprises, and then from Tob-Blanc to AlyJack Inc in Zurich, and back to the Caymans under Jackson LeBlanc, LLC.

"If the principals hadn't remained the same each time, it would've made it harder for my friends to track this the way they did." She pushed the take-out containers to one end of the table and showed them the paperwork documenting each movement of the four million plus dollars.

"Son-of-a-bitch," muttered Melissa vehemently. "He sure wanted to keep this money under wraps, didn't he?"

"Look like," answered Rees. He looked up at Jennifer. "Any way your friend can freeze this account, since it was a fraudulent transaction?"

"That's pretty close to the skin. If we find Melissa's signature on any of the transfers, he'll just claim she approved the whole thing."

"But I didn't sign..." The architect broke off as she thought of the pre-nup she hadn't known she'd signed either. "I don't *think* I signed anything transferring Fox Hollow's funds."

"When Jackson had stuff for you to sign, how did he handle it?" asked Rees.

"He'd give me a huge batch of papers needing signature at one time. I used to go over each one, but that was before we had a lawyer

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who prepared everything. For the past few months, Jackson would just tell me what each was for, and I'd sign."

With self-loathing, she looked at the two people across the table from her. "Pretty stupid, wasn't I? I thought Jackson and I were in this together...just the two of us. We were going to get married and Fox Hollow was our future."

"Hey, don't beat yourself up," said Jennifer. "You're not the first woman in the world to be taken in by a man who lied to her."

"But Jackson's parents and mine were friends for years. I've known him since I was a youngster. Why would he do this to me?"

"That's what we're going to find out." Rees' voice brooked no argument. "If Melissa didn't sign anything authorizing the transfer or at least we can't find anything—" His tone said they wouldn't find anything. "—could your banking friends in the Caymans tie up this account? Just delay it and let you know if Tobin tries to move it again?"

"They could sure put some delays on it." Jennifer made some quick notes on one of the printouts. "And I want to check where this Jackson LeBlanc company was formed. That may help us figure out where they are."

"I have some ideas on how we can find them, too, but first I want to see what Tobin cooked up with Axelson," said Rees. "Time to get back to work."

* * *

They gathered their leftovers, put the dishes and utensils in the garbage and headed back to Jackson's designer office. Rees could see the dread on Melissa's face, and decided to get the horror over with as soon as possible. The quicker they knew what they were dealing with, the sooner they could formulate a plan to fix it.

As Rees skimmed the agreement Melissa's fiancé had made with the most notorious loan shark in the city, he longed to have Tobin alone in a room for just a few minutes. The bastard had mortgaged not only

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the development property, but the downtown office lease, Melissa's condo, her designs, her contracts for designs for the rest of the development and for any architectural designs she might create over the next five years. And he'd made Melissa personally responsible for his own debt to Axelson. That clause stated Axelson could require Melissa's personal favors—*how archaic a term for what Tobin was proposing*—in payment in lieu of cash. It would be at Axelson's discretion after he met Melissa in person.

As the private investigator passed her each page, Rees watched Melissa grow paler with every paragraph she read. By the time she came to the clause detailing Axelson's use of her person to pay off her fiancé's debt, she was shaking like an aspen in a windstorm. She looked up at Rees as she passed that page to Jennifer. He watched her throat convulse as she swallowed the bile that had obviously risen.

"Can he really do that?" Her voice was no more than a whisper of horrified fear.

Rees sighed as he passed her the final sheet. "That's your signature, isn't it?"

Melissa took the paper, holding it in both hands because of how badly she was shaking. She looked at it, then up at Rees with new hope building in her eyes. "No," she whispered. Then louder, "No, Rees, that's not my signature." She laughed, hysteria curling at its edges. "It's damned close, but it's not my signature."

"You're positive?"

"Absolutely. I did not sign this piece of paper."

"But someone sure wants Axelson to think you did," said Jennifer. "And I get the feeling he'll be a hard one to convince you didn't sign it."

"True, but all we have to do is find Jackson and Alyce. One of them had to have done this," said Melissa. "We'll make them confess." She stared at the signature line, holding the page very close. "This looks like fountain pen to me. Alyce always uses a fountain pen." She looked

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at the two of them. "They made a real fool of me, didn't they?"

"Only if they get away with it," said Jennifer firmly.

"And we have no intention of letting that happen," confirmed Rees. "We have until sometime next Tuesday. That's five days from now. We find them, we convince them to come back here, and let them face Axelson's music."

"You make it sound so easy," said Melissa.

"It won't be." Rees and Jennifer spoke at the same time.

The three let the laughter relax them a bit. Something had to ease the tension, and that did it.

"Okay," said Rees. "Do you have keys to Jackson's apartment or whatever rock the cockroach lives under?"

"I do."

"You and I are going to head over there. I'm calling Pete Owens, one of my associates, to meet us here first, though. Jennifer, if you don't mind working with Pete, I want full background checks run on both Jackson Tobin and Alyce LeBlanc. We know Jackson's name is legit, but Alyce may not be."

She nodded.

"Pete is a whiz at finding out where people who don't want anyone to know where they came from, came from. And I need you to check out everything there is to know about their financial histories. If their parents started a savings account for them when they were born, I want to know what happened to that money."

"You got it."

"Melissa, grab any of those folders that have anything to do with the company or personal files on you, Jackson or Alyce."

"I'm going to start with Tobin's background. Melissa, do you have his social insurance number?" asked Jennifer. "And Alyce's, too."

"They should be somewhere in the payroll records, I think," answered Melissa.

The two of them began searching through the file cabinets for the

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personnel or payroll records while Rees called Pete.

By the time the other private investigator arrived, Jennifer was already typing personal data for Jackson and Alyce into the computer. Rees explained to the tall, dark-haired detective that he'd be working with Jennifer. The two smiled at one another, and Rees and Melissa could feel the sparks across the room.

"So, Pete, it's a straight background check right down to where each one went to public school. We've gotta find them as soon as possible because we need them back here, in this office, Tuesday afternoon. If we know where they've come from, maybe we can figure out where they went. Jennifer is working on financial history of each."

Pete nodded. "You got it, boss."

"We'll check in with the two of you later."

Pete and Jennifer were each engrossed in their searches within moments and didn't even notice Melissa and Rees leave.

* * *

Melissa's tension grew as they approached the upscale building where Jackson lived. Or where he'd lived until a few days ago. Would she find it empty? Or would she find his things still there? She's spent many evenings there, but now she thought about it, she'd never stayed over. Every time they'd spent the whole night together, it had been at her house. The thought she might find Alyce's things in the apartment gnawed at her.

"Doesn't matter if you find her things here or not, Lissa. It's not going to change what they're trying to do to you."

"I know. I guess it's more wounded pride than anything else that her stuff will be there."

"Think of it this way—those two deserve one another. And Jackson sure as hell doesn't deserve you."

Melissa felt immeasurably better the moment the words were out of Rees' mouth. "You are good for my ego, Mr. McAllister."

"At your service, Ms. Miller." He tipped his head in mock

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deference and they smiled warmly at one another.

Another time, another place... Melissa couldn't stop the wishful thought.

She unlocked the door and shoved it open. She knew, without looking, the place would be perfect...every marble surface gleaming; every glass-and-chrome table sparkling. There'd be no paper or book any place, no music playing quietly in the background. The whole apartment would look like a photo in a design magazine. And would be wholly lacking in any personal feel.

"Oh..." Her mouth fell open. It looked like a tornado had swept through the foyer. Boxes and suitcases were everywhere. The ceramic table she'd purchased for him on her last trip to Europe lay on its side, the top cracked. "What happened? Has Axelson been here?"

Rees looked around. "No, I don't think so. This looks like someone clearing out in a hurry."

Melissa, still in shock, walked into the living room. Framed prints stacked against the walls and collectibles were all on one *étagère*. "It looks like he's planning to move these things, but I can't understand why he'd do that. Jackson spent a lot on his art and collectibles. It was important to him. He said it gave the apartment the right ambience."

"I'll call Pete." Rees pulled out his cell phone. "He can check with all the movers to see where this stuff is going."

Melissa shook her head as she wandered through the rooms. Everything was in disarray, and she found her few personal possessions thrown into the bathtub. Shower gel had been drizzled all over her underwear, a sweat suit and the few pieces of jewelry she'd left at Jackson's. A favorite watch with a jade bracelet was soaked in the soap, and the wires on every pair of earrings had been bent out of shape. Melissa sucked in a breath at the unbridled violence to her things.

"Rees!"

He raced to her side and looked into the tub. "I'd take an educated

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guess it was Alyce who did this.”

“I think so, too, but I had no idea she hated me this much.”

“Hate may not be the right word. This looks like jealousy.” He reached in and lifted a nightgown that dripped with the congealing gel. It had been shredded before being thrown into the tub with the rest of her possessions and doused.

“I don’t want to look at this any more. I worked with Alyce for nearly three years, and this is what she thinks of me?” Melissa felt her anger building. “That pisses me off. I was nice to her when Jackson hired her and tried to befriend her. I’ve had her in my home for dinner. What a bitch!”

Melissa stomped out of the bathroom and headed to Jackson’s home office. “He chose to cheat on me with her. As far as I’m concerned, he deserves everything he gets...like something that’ll take antibiotics to clear up. And I’m sure as hell not taking the fall for him with that slime ball, Axelson.”

She rooted around in every desk drawer, pulling out what was left. There wasn’t much, but she stacked every bit of correspondence, every pen, every business card on the desk. Then she began sorting through them, checking for names.

Nothing.

She found his date book under the desk and flipped through it idly, not expecting to find anything at all that would betray where he’d gone. As she riffled the pages, an hotel bill fell out. “Rees, I’ve found something,” she called out in excitement. She held it out as he approached. “Think it means anything?”

“It might. Let’s check it out.” He looked it over carefully. “Do you remember Jackson going to Vancouver on business in February? For two or three days?”

“I don’t remember exactly, but I have his date book right here.” Melissa flipped back through the months to February, and ran her finger down the pages for that month. “Here it is. That’s right...I

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remember now. He had to leave on a Wednesday, and wasn't home until Sunday night. We had to celebrate Valentine's Day when he got home." She paused for a moment. She narrowed her eyes and ground her teeth together. "I also seem to recall that Alyce called in sick on the Friday morning, and I had to man the phones at the office."

Melissa looked at Rees, her anger seething at the surface. "I guess the two of them had a nice Valentine's getaway, didn't they?"

"It looks that way, but don't let it distract you right now. We've got to find them so they can dance to Axelson's tune, not you." He put his hand on her shoulder. "It's Jackson's loss that he can't be faithful to you. And it's not your fault."

"Thanks." Melissa smiled up at him. "I was started to feel pretty unlovable."

"Never."

"Do you think we'll find anything else here, Rees?"

"No, I really don't. We'll take everything you found in the desk, and his appointment book, but I really think we need to get to those folders and see what's in them."

"I don't want to be here any longer. Want to follow me to my condo and go over them there?"

"That sounds good."

* * *

When they pulled into the driveway at Melissa's house, Rees was questioning his wisdom in coming here instead of heading back to the office—hers or his didn't really matter—as long as it was an office with its attendant professionalism. Since she'd kissed him, he'd been longing to have her in his arms again. It had taken all his willpower not to hug her close when they'd discovered what Alyce had left in the bathtub at Jackson's apartment.

With a sigh of determination, Rees climbed out of his truck and followed her into the house. The moment the key turned in the lock, there was the sound of scrabbling feet and a rash of barking from the

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kitchen at the back of the house.

“Augie, I’m home,” called Melissa.

The grey streak torpedoed into the foyer, and any uneasiness Rees had felt about being alone with Melissa disappeared in a blur of fur, bouncing and barking between them. Augie was insistent that each person pat him in turn. Then he dashed out of sight down the hall. Rees looked at Melissa as they heard more toenail scrabbling on the kitchen ceramic before the Keeshond came tearing back into the foyer. Melissa began to laugh as Augie skidded to a stop in front of Rees, a synthetic bone in the dog’s mouth.

“That’s his prize possession, Rees, and he’s offering it to you.” Melissa wiped tears of mirth from her eyes.

“Should I take it?”

“Well, I think he’d think you very rude if you didn’t.”

Rees could hear the reverberations of laughter in her voice and he loved the sound. He’d do anything to hear that every day.

Reaching out to the dog sitting in front of him, he took hold of the soggy, obviously well chewed toy. “Gee, thanks, Augie,” he said as Augie let go and looked up at Rees adoringly. “Now what?” he asked Melissa.

“Generally, he likes you to take it and put it in his dog bed in the kitchen. His biggest effort is sharing it with you...but he doesn’t really want you to keep it forever.”

Rees and Melissa followed Augie down the hall to the kitchen at the back of the house. There, Rees made a serious production of returning the prized bone to the large dog bed in the corner. Augie wagged his tail the whole time, and threw himself into the bed when Rees straightened up, gnawing happily on the prize.

“He’s an easy boy to please, isn’t he?” said Rees.

“Yep, he is. And he makes me happy, too.”

“I can see why. Who wouldn’t want to come home to a welcome like that every night?”

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“You’ve got that right. And sometimes he even comes to work with me. Do you have any pets?”

“I’m owned by a Maine Coon cat named Mouse. With my schedule as a private investigator, I’m better to have a pet that’s a tad more independent than a dog...and that can use a litter box.” He smiled, and he was relieved she grinned back.

This was a much better basis on which to keep their interaction, especially since he hadn’t known her that long. Even though he knew a lot more about her than if they’d been dating for a month. He had to, due to the nature of his work. Despite his attraction, he needed to keep this on a professional keel...or Melissa could end up in Axelson’s stable of women.

“I’m going to put on some coffee if you want to get the files and spread them out on the table. Do you mind working in the kitchen?” asked Melissa.

“Not at all.” Rees rolled up his shirtsleeves and headed back to the foyer to gather up the files they both hoped held some information to help them find Jackson and Alyce before the deadline.

CHAPTER 10

After two hours poring through information in the nearly dozen files, they'd accumulated a pile of damning evidence against Jackson. It appeared he'd been preparing for his disappearing act for a long time. And for leaving Melissa in the lurch with some very dangerous people.

"I can't believe this," said Melissa, her voice mournful. "I spent the last five years with this man. His parents and mine were friends. When his mother died, he and his dad lived with us for six months."

"Jackson has some serious problems, Lissa. This is not your fault."

"But how could I not see it?"

"You trusted him."

It sounded so simple when Rees said it, and Melissa could almost believe it, until she looked at the mess she was in. "Okay, but that was a huge mistake!" She couldn't think of how to solve the problems that were towering over her. "Where is that document he signed with that loan shark? I need to know what I'm up against."

"It's here." Rees held it up. "Since your signature is not valid, he

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won't be able to enforce it."

Even Melissa, desperate to grasp at straws, could hear the lie in his words. "As Jennifer pointed out, he won't see it that way."

"That's why we're going to find Alyce and Jackson and get them back here. They're the ones who should be facing the music."

"I agree totally. Just—" She couldn't stop her eyes filling with tears. "—how the hell do we find them and convince them?"

Rees reached out and put his hand over hers. She flipped hers over and grabbed his hand tightly. "Rees, I'm so scared."

"Lissa, don't let the fear paralyze you. You need to focus to help us find them. Let's start with vacations. Was there a place Rees really wanted to go?"

"He never really wanted to travel. He always complained when he had to go away on business." Realization dawned. "Well, I suppose that was probably another lie, wasn't it? I went to Europe by myself twice, and he said he couldn't get away. Want to bet he and Alyce spent the time together?"

"Speaking of Alyce...when did she come to work at Fox Hollow?"

"Hhhmmm, I think about three years ago."

"And did you or Jackson hire her?"

"Jackson did," she answered. "He claimed he was so busy with calls and purchase agreements needing to be prepared and so on, he needed an assistant. I didn't have time to help him, so I guess that's when he hired her." Melissa refused to say the other woman's name.

"Through an agency?"

"I really don't know. It would be in her personnel file, I'd think."

"Okay, we need to call Pete and Jennifer and get that information. It might give us a clue where she's from."

Melissa hopped up and grabbed the cordless. "I want to find them as soon as we can."

Rees connected to Pete's cell and smiled at Melissa as he waited for him to answer. "Hey, Pete...Yeah, pretty good, and you

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two?...Excellent.” He put his hand over the phone and said to Melissa, “Jennifer’s banking friend said there has been a request to move money to a bank in Bermuda.” He listened again. “Right...okay...I think we should call it a night and meet at the downtown Fox Hollow office at seven in the morning. Okay with you and Jennifer?...Yeah, no problem. Yeah, see you then.”

“So that’s it for tonight? Didn’t you want them to check Alyce’s personnel file?”

“Let’s leave it until morning when we all meet at the downtown office.” He stood, rolling down his sleeves. “I’ll bring the coffee, if you pick up some muffins.”

Despite the circumstances and the fear for her future, Melissa couldn’t help smiling. “You got it. Any requests?”

“As long as there are no raisins in it, I’ll eat it.”

He gathered the folders into a stack. “If you hit the button to unlock your Jeep, I’ll throw these in for you.”

“Thanks.”

She and Augie followed him to the front door. She clicked the button on her key chain to unlock the Jeep, watched while he put the files inside and closed the door then locked it again. He tossed a final wave her way that she returned, and she closed the front door.

“Come on, Augie. One last trip into the yard before we call it a night.”

Augie obliged, racing through the doggie door.

Melissa had just turned to the sink to rinse out the coffee pot when she heard a click from the kitchen door leading to the garage. By the time she swung around, two men were racing through it. She opened her mouth to scream, and the shorter of the two dashed across the room and mashed his hand over her mouth. The second walked to the doggie door and latched it closed so Augie couldn’t come back into the house.

She felt her heart rate accelerate as she recognized Axelson when he straightened. *What is he here for? Is he going to kill me?* Melissa tried

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to get her emotions under control. If he were going to kill her, he stood no chance of getting back his money. She sucked in a breath as best she could with his henchman's hand over her lower face and glared at Axelson.

"Settle down, Ms. Miller," said the loan shark in his silky, threatening voice. "I'm not here to kill you."

She relaxed fractionally.

"We're not even here to rape you."

She gasped and felt the contents of her stomach heave. This henchman might just get a surprise on his shoes.

"We need to be clear on the situation, and it seemed that your gorilla doesn't want you and I to sit down together and chat about what's happening here."

Melissa tossed her head, attempting to clear her mouth so she could answer. Axelson nodded to his assistant and he dropped his hand. She spun away from him and put the kitchen table between her and the two men. Axelson pulled out one of the oak chairs and sat down, setting his briefcase on the floor beside him.

"You're not going anywhere, so you may as well listen to what I have to say." Axelson gestured at a chair. "Take a seat. And pay close attention. This is important."

Melissa dropped into the chair, heart pounding, palms sweating and doing her best not to hyperventilate. "And just what do you have to say to me?" She could barely believe her voice wasn't trembling. She was actually surprised that it worked past the huge lump of fear in her throat.

"Just a discussion of what is going to happen."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Under the edge of the table, Melissa squeezed her palms together, fingernails digging into the backs of each hand.

Axelson swung the briefcase onto the table, snapped the locks and flipped it open. Melissa couldn't see what was inside, but she saw

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Axelson nod to his associate. The man took something from his boss. He looked at Melissa and then back at Axelson.

“Get up,” ordered the loan shark. “Jones here has something for you.”

Melissa staggered to her feet, willing her legs to hold her upright. She steadied herself with one hand against the back of the chair.

Jones stepped toward her and Melissa unconsciously took a step back.

“Stay where you are,” he ordered as he approached.

Melissa swallowed.

Jones turned to the table on which he spread some clothes. Melissa couldn’t believe what lay before her. She hadn’t seen a halter top that small—and plunging—away from a beach. The bra had enough boning and under-wire to push someone’s breasts halfway to her chin. There’d be plenty of flesh showing there.

But it was nothing compared to the lace mini-skirt. Melissa decided it could barely be called a skirt. No more than fourteen inches long, the lace was sheer enough she could see through both layers to the wood below the skirt. Just then Jones tossed a tiny thong on top of the skirt. Melissa swallowed.

“What...what is this?”

“It’s what I’ll expect you to wear the first night you entertain me—and my personally selected guests,” Axelson’s voice rasped with controlled lust.

“*What?*”

“This is what you’ll be wearing...at least until the guests leave.”

“Not too likely.”

“Oh, it’s more than likely. I get paid the four million bucks by next week’s deadline, or you, along with Fox Hollow and everything you’ve designed and will design for the next five years, is mine. You will be mine.”

“Not in a million years.” Anger was overcoming Melissa’s fear. If

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this lowlife thought he would own her, he had another think coming. “I didn’t sign that agreement, and there’s no way slavery is enforceable. No judge—”

“Judge?” Axelson laughed and Jones joined in. “This doesn’t go to any court. You pay me four million dollars by the deadline, or Jones here pays you a little visit, and you’re not seen again until you’ve learned who owns you. And you’ve learned to do as you’re told.”

Melissa swallowed hard against the nausea that was threatening to embarrass her again. “Well, the deadline is not until next week, so until then, get out of my house.”

The two men laughed again as Axelson reached back into the briefcase. Melissa was sure he’d have a gun when his hand reappeared. She was almost relieved when she saw a pair of shoes dangling from his fingers.

“Put them on,” he said approaching her. Axelson ran his index finger up the outside of her arm to the shoulder.

Melissa flinched away. “Stop that.”

“Stop that? Or this?” He ran his fingers over her right breast, kneading at the tender flesh until he reached its center. He roughly teased and plucked at her nipple.

It lay flaccid, unresponsive to his touch. Melissa pushed his hand away. “Stop it.”

He laughed. “Cold, little thing, aren’t you? Well, we’ll fix that—one way or another, eh, Jones?”

“You betcha, boss.”

Melissa backed up another step, and bumped into the bulk of Jones behind her. He rubbed his hands over her bottom, growling in delight. She swung around and shoved him. He didn’t budge.

“You may be a frigid bitch, but you do have spunk. I’ll give you that,” said Axelson.

Melissa spun back around to face him. “Call off this pig,” she demanded.

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Axelson's hand signal backed Jones away from her. "That's only temporary, you understand. When your services are mine, I think I'll reward the employee of the week with an hour or two with you." He looked around her. "Sound good to you, Jones?"

"Sure does, boss."

"Well, it sounds sick and depraved to me," said Melissa. "And I have no intention of participating in whatever disgusting plans you have."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. You'll get your damned money—"

"If I don't, I will have you."

"Like hell," she spit, heart pounding in fear, and eyes narrowing with hot anger. Axelson stepped forward, his forefinger and thumb catching her under the chin. "When you're mine, you'll do what I say...or pay the price." His hand slipped under the front of her shirt and fumbled to find her breast.

She jerked away from him. "Well, you don't own anything here yet, so get out." She pointed to the door. "And take your trained gorilla with you."

Axelson chuckled. "When Jones is employee of the week, I fear you'll pay for that nasty remark, my dear."

He held up his left hand, from which dangled a pair of black sling-back heels.

Melissa stared in disbelief. "What are those?"

"These are the shoes you're going to model for us."

"I think not."

"Then perhaps I'll just take that little grey dog with me until you come to your senses."

Melissa swallowed hard. She couldn't let them hurt Augie. "Give me your damned shoes." She grabbed them and sat down. She'd only worn stilettos on rare occasions to please Jackson. But she'd never worn anything like these. The heels had to be more than four inches

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high. The toes were open and a slim strap would cup her heel.

"Put them on," Axelson ordered.

As Melissa slid her feet into the ridiculous shoes, Axelson continued in a conversational tone, as if they were chatting at a cocktail party. "These are similar to the Hollywood shoes of the '40s, known in their time as fuck-me shoes. Did you know that?"

Could he be any more of a creep? "No, I had no idea." Melissa's words were clipped.

"Got them on, Missy?"

She cringed at the nickname. "Oh, yeah." She stuck out her foot.

"Now stand up and model for me."

"Are you serious? No one could possibly walk around in these shoes."

"I think you'll manage, if you know what's good for you and that damned mutt of yours." His hand gesture sent Jones to Augie's dog door.

"For Pete's sake, do you spend all your time watching old Godfather movies?" Melissa asked, getting to her feet. She wobbled and grabbed at the chair back until she got her balance.

"Now walk."

Melissa complied, mincing around the kitchen as best she could, feeling ridiculous and terrified at the same time. "Satisfied?" she asked.

"For the moment, but you keep the shoes and practice."

Melissa dropped back into her chair and pulled off the shoes, dropping them carelessly on the floor. "Yeah, right."

Augie snuffled at the doggie door and butted it with his nose. Discovering it was locked, he whined and nudged it again. When it still didn't move, he scratched at the door and woofed. When nothing happened, his barks became sharper.

"Jones, let's go before that mutt wakes up the whole neighborhood," said Axelson. He slammed the lid on his briefcase, leaving the clothes on the table. "I meant it when I said practice," he

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warned Melissa.

The two men exited through the door to the garage, and Melissa ran to lock it after them. Then she dropped to the floor beside the doggie door and flipped open the latches. Augie raced in and threw himself into her lap, licking gently at the tears pouring down her face.

“Oh, Augie, what are we going to do?”

CHAPTER 11

After a few moments, Melissa gathered herself as much as she could and, with a final hug to Augie, clambered to her feet. She went directly to her purse and dug around until she found Rees' card. Sure enough, his cell phone was listed. She keyed in the numbers, praying he left his phone on after office hours. After three rings, he picked up.

"Rees McAllister."

"Oh, Rees, he was here. And he brought these hooker clothes and shoes, and he locked Augie in the yard and threatened him, and he made me wear the shoes. He's going to give me to his friends and the employee of the week." Sobs interrupted her rambling.

"Wash your face, plug in the kettle and I'll be there in ten minutes," said Rees. "Take it easy until I get there."

There was a sudden pounding at her front door and Augie began barking frantically. "Someone's here," Melissa whispered in desperation. "What if they've come back?"

"Take a deep breath, Lissa, and stay on the phone. Do you have a

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peep hole in the front door?"

"Yes."

"Okay, go and peek through to see who it is."

The door thundered again with pounding, and this time it was accompanied by a voice shouting loudly over the barking. "Melissa! Melissa, are you all right?"

"Sharon...oh, thank God!"

"Lissa," said Rees. "Who is it?"

"It's my friend, Sharon, from next door."

"Melissa, are you all right?" called the voice. "Open the door."

Melissa did so, and her friend rushed in. "What on earth is going on? Augie was barking like crazy in the yard."

Melissa took a deep breath and tried to smile at her friend, realizing she could not drag Sharon into her mess. She could not put Sharon at risk. Melissa held up the phone. "I was on the phone. Augie's dog door was locked and he couldn't get in. He got a bit upset. Sorry for the noise."

"Okay." The tall redhead enfolded Melissa in a hug. "I was really worried there. Augie sounded pretty upset."

"He was by the time I got the door unlocked." Melissa wiggled the phone. "Can you hang on for a second, Sharon?"

"Sure."

"Rees, are you still there?"

"I am, Lissa, and I want you to ask your friend to stay until I get there."

"Oh, I don't want—"

"I know you're worried for her, but as far as Axelson knows, she's a concerned neighbor. Offer her some tea, and I'll be there before you know it."

"Thank you. I'll see you soon." Melissa clicked off the cordless and turned to Sharon even as she pasted her smile back in place.

"I don't know what's going on, but until whoever Rees is gets here,

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I'm staying."

Tears filled Melissa's eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'm so glad you're here."

As she led the way back to the kitchen, the tears overflowed and the young architect did her best to wipe them away without Sharon seeing. It didn't work.

"You sit yourself right in that chair—" Sharon pushed Melissa down. "—and I'm putting on the kettle. You can tell me what's going on, and I'll see how I can help."

"Oh, Sharon, I can't," Melissa said on a hiccup.

"Yes, you can and you will." Sharon filled the kettle, plugged it in and turned back to Melissa. "Start talking, young lady."

* * *

By the time Rees arrived a few minutes later, the two women had mugs of tea in hand, Augie lay across the kitchen door leading to the garage, and Sharon's face was the color of putty. He leaned on the island.

"Pretty much of a mess, isn't it?" Melissa said looking at the two of them.

"Yeah, and your friend here hasn't heard the latest," said Sharon. "I'm going to scamper and let you fill him in, but rest assured, you're not going to be alone in this house for one minute until this is over."

Melissa smiled her gratitude.

"And when you can't take Augie with you, give me a shout and I'll take him to my house. That's the beauty of being a web site designer," Sharon said brightly. "I work from home, and he'll be safe as can be with me."

"Thank you," Melissa said on a sigh. "It means more to me than you can know."

"I know how you love that little fuzz butt," said Sharon as she stood up. She stuck out her hand. "I'm Sharon Connor, and I'm a friend of Melissa's. I live next door."

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Rees took her firm grip in his. "Glad to meet another friend of Melissa's. I'm Rees McAllister from UnderCover Agency, and I'm helping find Jackson and Alyce."

"Nice to meet you." She paused and tilted her head. "Is one of your partners Ashley Lawrence?"

"Yes." He was surprised. Ashley must have done some work for Sharon.

"Well, Ashley and I worked together on your website for UnderCover."

"Small world...and it's a great site."

"Thanks. Anyway, I'm out of here." She turned to Melissa. "No kidding. When you get home, I'm here. I'll be watching your back."

"You're a great friend, Sharon." Melissa stood and hugged the taller woman. Rees watched as Melissa followed her to the front door.

After locking the door securely after her neighbor, Melissa walked back to the kitchen and straight into Rees' arms. He automatically folded them around her, and let her nestle against him.

Strange how her head fits perfectly under my chin. It's where she belongs forever.

Suddenly, his concerns that he'd only known this amazing young woman for a few days faded in the light of how he truly felt about her. She was the other half he'd always been missing his whole adult life. She was the reason every other relationship had faded because he hadn't had the energy to nurture them. Rees knew he would nurture what would grow between them for the rest of his days, with no effort at all.

With his epiphany came the understanding Melissa had to arrive at this same conclusion on her own. *And her pain and fear right now are the emotions dominating her.* He smiled. *I don't care when she's ready. She'll be worth the wait.* Rees intuitively understood that Melissa would be with him forty years from now, tucked against his heart and cuddled to him just as she was at this moment.

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He stepped back slightly so he could tip up her chin and look at her face to face. "Sharon said there was more than just a break-in. What happened?"

Melissa sniffled once and reached around him to grab a paper towel. She dried her face and straightened her shoulders. "Axelson and some thug named Jones were here. They locked Augie outside, and had a little chat with me. Axelson reiterated he'd soon own Fox Hollow—and me!" She shuddered. "And then he..." Her words trailed away.

"He what?" Rees felt his anger begin. "Did he hurt you?"

"He touched me." Melissa looked at the floor. "I pushed him away, but then he let Jones touch me."

The rage built a hot fire in his lower abdomen. *These men will pay for this.* "Are you okay, Lissa?" His voice was gentle.

She nodded, but still couldn't meet his eyes. "They showed me those clothes laying there on the table, and told me that's what I'd wear while I entertained Axelson, his chosen friends, and whoever happened to be employee of the week."

Rees glanced at the skimpy outfit and snorted. "You'll never have to wear that shit, Lissa. It's Jackson who will bear the brunt of this situation."

He could see the hope in her eyes when she lifted her head. "You think?"

"Nope...I *know* that's how this is going to play out."

"Well, they also threatened Augie." The Keeshond lifted his head at the mention of his name. "And then they made me put on those shoes over in the corner, and walk around for them."

"They what?" He couldn't hide the anger in his voice.

"They made me put on those shoes and walk around for them."

"Well, that little stunt will cost Axelson big-time before this is over."

That brought a smile to Melissa's face. "Do you know how wonderful you are, Rees?" she asked innocently. "You're my knight in

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shining armor.”

“I don’t know if that’s how I’d define me, but thanks.”

“I mean it. I’m beginning to feel like I’ve known you for months instead of days. You know all my secrets, all my fears, and every detail of this horrible, horrible situation. I feel like I can tell you anything.”

“You can,” he answered, his heart swelling at her words. She was starting to have the same feelings he had. He knew it.

“Okay, but this is going to sound so awful.”

He took her hands in his. “Try me, Lissa.”

He could see her swallow and take a deep breath, then she looked him directly in the eyes. “What I’ve felt for Jackson for a long time now is not even friendship. It’s more like a working relationship, but one that’s out of sync.”

She paused and he sensed she was about to tell him something very private.

“I haven’t slept with Jackson in nearly six months,” she rushed out.

“Perhaps you’ve been picking up signals in your relationship subconsciously. You *have had* suspicions about Alyce and Jackson.”

“I don’t know what I knew before this all blew up in my face over the last couple of days. But I do realize I’d been less and less interested in marrying him. And then I met you, and I felt things I’d never felt for Jackson.”

Rees smiled and felt his heart open to her even more.

“But I can’t trust myself right now,” she said. “I want to know you better, and I want to see where this goes. But I’ve got to get this crisis resolved first. And then I’ve got to work things out with Jackson. And I have to make sure what I feel for you isn’t just hero worship.”

“I understand totally. Let’s just trust the friendship that’s growing between us for now.” He ran a finger gently down her cheek. “This is no longer a client-investigator relationship for me, but I’m in no hurry.”

Melissa’s smile lit his world. “Really?”

“Really. Let’s get Axelson out of your world before we worry about

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anything else.”

“And what about Jackson? We’re partners at Fox Hollow.”

“If Jackson walks out of this with his skin intact, I do think the authorities will be very interested in what he’s been doing at Fox Hollow. It is illegal to forge signatures and commit fraud, and it carries a pretty stiff jail sentence.”

“Will he be able to take me down with him?”

“I think it’ll be pretty easy to prove everything he did behind your back, and that either he or Alyce forged your signature on more than one set of documents. First thing tomorrow,” he said with a smile, “we go through every document with your signature on it and start building a case against him.”

Her hug crushed him firmly against her from chest to knees, and he felt her soft breasts press against him. He also felt the quick peaking of her nipples, and his own physical response was immediate and apparent. Neither was embarrassed; neither moved. They remained warmly in the embrace until Rees felt a soft nudging against his knee. He looked down and Augie stretched up to put his paws at their hips.

“I think Augie wants a hug, too,” he said breaking the embrace to scoop up the dog. He held Augie between them and they both hugged the Keeshond, who grinned with joy and licked both of their faces.

* * *

The phone jangled and Rees reached for it after a nod from Melissa.

“Hello...And who is calling?...May I get your number? Ms. Miller is busy at the moment...This is an associate who is working with Ms. Miller.” He smiled at her and mouthed “Alyce” silently. “No, I don’t know when she’ll be free. It would be easier to leave your numb— Well, feel free to try again tomorrow at the office...Best I can offer if you don’t want to leave your number.”

Rees held the phone out from his ear, and Melissa felt the mirth tickling at her despite the fear when she heard Alyce screeching down the phone lines. Melissa grinned and made a slashing gesture across her

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throat.

Rees put the mouthpiece back to his face, while keeping the earpiece a safe distant to protect his hearing. "Excuse me...*Excuse* me. If you'd like to conduct a professional conversation, feel free to call back!" He clicked off the phone before they both broke into laughter.

"Oh, I'll bet she's mad. Alyce is usually in a bad mood when things don't go her way."

"I think Alyce better be prepared to be in a bad mood, then, for a very long time."

"Hey, can we try calling *69 and see where she was calling from?"

"If she has half a clue, she blocked it, but she may not have."

Melissa grinned widely. "Let's see if she has half a clue or not." She took the phone from Rees and punched in *69. A long distance number popped up on her caller id. "Recognize the area code?"

"Nope."

"Me neither, but it won't take long to find it, will it?"

"Nope."

They grinned at each other. It was the first real break they'd had so far and it felt really good.

"I guess we've got something to work on in the morning," Melissa said.

"We sure do. And, if we're going to be downtown by seven a.m., we'd better hit the hay. Where's your spare room?"

Melissa raised her eyebrows. "Staying over are you?"

"You bet. Unless you want to call Sharon back to stay with you."

"No. She works late at night lots of times designing web sites," Melissa said. "What about Mouse?"

"I filled her dishes right before I left and I'd cleaned her litter box the night before. She'll be just fine overnight. And we'll stop at my place tomorrow after we're done, if that's okay with you?"

Melissa decided it was very okay. She wanted to see Rees' place. In her mind, she decided it would be very masculine with lots of leather,

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wood and sports memorabilia. She couldn't picture Rees in a pastel room with lace-covered windows and plenty of plants. As she considered it, she realized she was very much looking forward to the next evening.

CHAPTER 12

Which left Melissa with the problem of this night's accommodation. Where would she put Rees overnight? Jackson, the few times lately that he'd stayed, had slept in her room, each of them carefully on a separate side of the bed, not touching even in their sleep.

One of the spare bedrooms had been made into her home office with computer, fax, files cabinets and more. The other contained a drafting table and her art supplies, for those times when she wanted to work the old-fashioned way, or do some painting. With no family, she rarely had overnight guests. Annie Steiner lived in town, so she never stayed over when they got together for dinner or a movie.

"If you've got a couch and a blanket, I'll be perfectly comfortable," he offered.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep. I've slept on the floor and could do it again in a pinch, but a couch will be a bit more civilized," he said with a grin.

"You've got it. I'll get you a pillow and a comforter." She started

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up the stairs, then stopped and turned. "Are you hungry?"

"A bit," he admitted.

"Terrific! A midnight snacker like me. I'll grab your bed supplies, if you'll head into the kitchen and put on the kettle." She dashed up the stairs, happy despite the circumstances.

In moments, she trotted back down carrying a big down pillow, sheets and a comforter. She didn't even try to keep the smile off her face as she made up the couch. She could hear the sounds of Rees puttering around in the kitchen and talking to Augie.

I could get used to this.

When she walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, there was a pot of tea steeping on the table with two mugs and a jug of milk, along with plates, sliced apples and peanut butter. On the counter was another plate with three slices of sourdough bread waiting to be popped into the toaster.

"Okay with toast and peanut butter for a snack?" he asked.

"Yummy. I usually just eat a couple of crackers or maybe a yogurt."

"Toast and tea before bed is a tradition at our house."

Our house. How nice that sounds. "I'm open to new things." Oh no, did I really say that?

Rees just grinned at her and slipped the bread into the toaster.

Melissa busied herself pouring tea and soon they were seated at the table, enjoying a midnight snack.

"Okay to give Augie some toast?" Rees held up a quarter slice. "Half of my second slice is for him."

"You'll make a friend for life if you cater to his tummy," she responded.

Augie sat as prettily as he could and woofed quietly.

"There you go, buddy," Rees said as he offered the treat to him. Augie took it gently with his front teeth, careful not to get peanut butter on his lips. In one quick swallow, it was gone. "Okay, one more."

They went through the ritual again, then Augie, knowing there were

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no more treats coming his way, flopped down under the table between the two pair of feet.

Melissa and Rees chatted about everything except what was going on in her life. It was their time to unwind and touch base with the reality of life outside of her case. When they'd finished the tea and Augie had gone outside for a final pit stop, it was time to say good-night.

They walked into the living room, and without self-consciousness about what she was doing, Melissa stepped into Rees' arms and pressed her lips to his, relishing the connection between them. "Good night, Rees."

"Night, Lissa."

She trotted up the stairs, a smile on her face. It was the best evening she'd had in a long time, despite her earlier visitors.

* * *

Morning was a rush to get ready, jockeying the shower time and melding their morning routines. But, they were on the road, each in their own vehicle by six-thirty. Augie was a happy camper on his way to the office with Melissa. For her part, Melissa was confident he was safer with her than at home. Besides, she did not want to drag Sharon into her troubles if she didn't have to.

She looked over at her canine companion. His tongue lolling out, he was just delighted to be with her. He didn't care where they were going, she knew.

Pete and Jennifer were already in the office when they arrived. After congenial good mornings all around, Jennifer pointed to the conference table. "Coffee and muffins are in there," she said. "Let's all grab a chair, pour a coffee, and get caught up on what everyone's accomplished."

"Sounds good," said Melissa. "I had quite the adventurous evening."

As everyone got their breakfast and settled around the conference

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table, Melissa related her two meetings with Axelson from the night before.

“Whoa,” grunted Pete. “You’re one lucky lady. I’ve heard some nasty stories about that slime.”

“If it weren’t for Augie’s barking—” Melissa reached down and ruffled his mane. “—I’m afraid they would have come back. But he alerted my friend, Sharon, who came pounding at the door.”

“Good boy,” murmured Jennifer, giving him a small bit of her blueberry muffin.

Augie slurped up all the attention and treats offered him.

“What did you and Jennifer discover?” asked Rees before he popped a bite of muffin into his mouth.

“Well, Mr. Tobin hasn’t hidden anything about his past. His family is from New York and they relocated to Toronto when he was around ten. Tobin Senior was a pilot and made a good living. Jackson’s mother died from cancer when he was a teenager, and his dad started drinking.”

“They’d been good friends with my parents for years. We practically grew up together really,” Melissa interjected. “It was so sad when his mom passed away. Jackson had to go for counseling for a long time.”

“Yep,” answered Pete. “His counselor had just started to make real progress helping the teenage Tobin cope with his mother’s death, then his father died in a plane crash.” He looked at Melissa. She was staring at her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “That’s the same crash that resulted in the death of Melissa’s parents.”

Rees reached over and put his hand over hers. “Are you okay?”

“It’s still hard to think about, even after all these years.”

“I can imagine. Can Pete go on?”

She nodded.

“Well, it turns out Tobin’s father was the pilot that day, and they crashed heading toward Denver. There was a snow storm, but the

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NTSB did not think it contributed to the crash as much as the fact the pilot had been drinking.”

“What?” Melissa’s shock was echoed in her voice. “No one ever told me that. And Jackson said it was the storm that caused the accident.”

“After Jackson’s mother died, his dad started drinking and got his pilot’s license suspended,” said Pete kindly. “Your parents gave him his first piloting job when it was re-instated. I have a report from Anne Steiner that they were hoping it would get him back on track and working full-time. Everyone thought he had the drinking under control...including the license review board.”

“Oh, no,” cried Melissa. “They all died because he was drunk?”

“Well, he wasn’t legally drunk, but the authorities felt his judgment was impaired significantly enough he couldn’t react in time to save the plane when they encountered the storm.”

Melissa sobbed quietly as Rees stroked her back. “They died because of Jackson’s father? He never told me that. He never said they were trying to help his dad get flying again. He told me they all died in a freak storm. Nobody ever told me...”

* * *

“You were only a teenager yourself, Lissa. It would only have hurt you more to know, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t know...I just don’t know. Why didn’t he tell me?” She turned a tear-stained face to Rees, begging for answers he was only beginning to suspect.

“He must’ve had his reasons, Lissa. And we’ll find out what they are, don’t worry.” He soothed her as best he could. “What else, Pete?”

“There was a good-sized insurance policy from Jackson’s mother that his father had invested. Jackson used it to purchase the initial property for Fox Hollow in his name.”

“I gave him my parents’ insurance money for that...almost a million dollars,” cried Melissa. “We’re partners. It’s in both our

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names.”

“I’m so sorry, but it’s in his name as the sole owner,” Jennifer said. “Whatever he showed you, he registered the property in his name only. Fox Hollow belongs to Jackson Tobin alone.”

The tears stopped. Rees watched rage build in the young woman he’d come to admire so much over the past few days. Her eyes, a wet, mud grey just moments before, began to shine a cold, hard silver and narrowed. He could see her teeth clench and she took a deep breath.

“I paid for that property—at least a million dollars worth—and I’ve poured my heart and soul into designing homes on the lots. Fox Hollow is partly mine. And I intend to have it.” She turned to Rees. “What can I do now?”

“Let’s see what else Jennifer and Pete have come up with.” He nodded to the pair.

“I tracked Alyce back quite a ways,” said Jennifer. “She’s from the Montreal area originally, but when she moved to Ontario, she wasn’t exactly an administrative assistant to an executive.”

“Oh?” Melissa’s eyebrows raised in question.

“No, she was billed as Exotica and was a headline dancer at the Brass Pole.”

Melissa snorted. “I suppose that’s where they met.”

“We’re assuming so,” answered Pete. “I sent an operative over there last night to see what some of the dancers know about her. But I’m not holding out a lot of hope. It’s been about three years and these dancers move around a lot.”

“We’ll see what he comes up with.”

“Actually, Ashley volunteered to go,” Pete said.

The two investigators smiled at each other, and Rees couldn’t help thinking the dancers would get more than just interrogated by Ashley. Chances are, two or three of them would get information on how to get out of “the life.” Ashley, a former prostitute, was always willing to help other women start over.

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“Okay, when will she let us know what she found out?” asked Melissa.

“She wouldn’t have been able to talk to most of the women until after the final show I wouldn’t think, and Ashley will probably crash for a couple of hours when she gets home.” Rees looked at his watch. “If we don’t hear from her by ten, I’ll call her.”

Melissa nodded. “And we’ve got that phone number to check, too.” She pulled out the scrap of paper on which she’d scrawled the number and placed it on the table. “Neither of us recognized the area code.”

Jennifer glanced at it. “I think this is Bermuda. Hang on.” She trotted out to Alyce’s desk where the computer was powered up. Her fingers danced over several keys. “Actually 441 isn’t the area code, it’s the international dialing code. And yes, it is Bermuda.”

“How on earth did you know that?” asked Melissa.

“My banking friend let me know a request had come in to transfer several thousand from Jackson’s Caymans account to a bank in Bermuda. The first part of the number looked very familiar, so I just did a quick Google search.”

Rees looked at Jennifer. “If you decide to get out of the business world, you’d make a savvy investigator.”

“Thanks, but I’m still hoping to make the MBA pay for itself.” Jennifer laughed.

“Okay, Alyce is in Bermuda, and it’s a fair guess that Jackson is, too,” said Rees. “We’ve got to figure out where they are exactly, and get them back here by Tuesday. Ideas?”

“Well, Jackson isn’t likely to hide out in anything he considers less than the best,” replied Melissa. “Didn’t I read somewhere that Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones own a hotel there?”

“One minute,” called Jennifer from the main office, fingers flying again.

They waited.

“It’s just loading,” she let them know. “I’ve asked for all the top

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resorts on the island. From what everyone has said about Mr. Designer Suits, I don't think he'll be staying at Bermuda's equivalent of the Dew-Drop Inn. Ahhh...here it is. It's called Ariel Sands, and it has forty-seven cottages."

"What's the phone number?"

Jennifer rattled it off.

"No," said Rees. "Alyce didn't call from there. But she could have used a pay phone. I'll get in touch with the phone company...it'll be faster than trying to find it online."

"There are several other exclusive places to stay in Bermuda," offered Jennifer.

"I think there's only one way to find them," said Rees, looking at Melissa. "I think Jennifer and Pete should go there. You guys up for it?"

"I sure am," said Pete as he smiled at the lovely blonde.

"Me, too," said Jennifer, smiling back.

"Do you have a recent picture of Jackson?" asked Rees.

"Yes, I do." Melissa rifled through her purse and handed over a snapshot, then she looked at the receptionist with the MBA. "Jennifer, I'm totally serious about what I'm about to say. Once we get this whole mess sorted out, I'd like to sit down and talk to you about forming a partnership to run this development."

"Are you sure?"

"Totally. I can see what talent you have, and I'd be a fool to let you get away. I don't know much about the financial running of a business, as has been made eminently clear by this whole situation, but I'm the best designer around. I think we could make a very successful team."

"Wow," was all Jennifer could say.

"Think about it while you find that no-good, son-of-a-bitch ex-fiancé of mine in Bermuda. It'll take a lot of public relations to rebuild the Fox Hollow name when this all goes public."

"I will think about it," Jennifer answered. "Very seriously."

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* * *

“Great. Now, you better see what reservations you can find on the internet to get you two to Bermuda as soon as possible.” Melissa looked over to the corner where Rees and Pete were deep in conversation. She saw Rees pass Pete a credit card.

“Hang on,” she said. “I can’t have you paying for this trip, Rees.”

“This is the UnderCover card, Lissa. It’s normal for operatives to put all expenses on a credit card so we can itemize for the client.”

“Oh...are you sure?”

“Standard operating procedure.”

His grin warmed her heart. “I really am glad I called UnderCover, Rees.”

“So am I.”

“Okay, you two, break it up.” Pete laughed. “While Jennifer and I don our swimsuits to investigate, what’s the plan here?”

“I’m moving in with Melissa until we get Tobin back in town. I’m not taking a chance on Axelson making another unscheduled visit.”

“I’ve got to admit, I’m glad. I was really nervous about him showing up again.” Melissa said to Pete and Jennifer, “He threatened Augie.”

At the mention of his name, Augie lifted his head and wagged his tail.

“Well, we won’t have to worry about that now.”

Melissa couldn’t help but be delighted that they’d share the house for the next few days—despite the circumstances.

Maybe I do have something to thank Jackson for...

CHAPTER 13

By lunch, Pete and Jennifer had reservations on the first Air Canada flight to Bermuda the next day. They had a cottage booked at Ariel Sands, and would begin their search for Jackson and Alyce there. They'd also discovered Alyce had, indeed, used a pay phone in Hamilton, just a short drive from the cottage colony. Jennifer planned to take her laptop so she could stay in touch with her banking connections, and Melissa and Rees.

They'd also started going through every business document they could find. It appeared Jackson's career in forgery had launched when he provided Melissa a document faking their joint ownership of the Fox Hollow project. While his name appeared as the sole owner on every registration they could locate, Melissa's name was listed on every loan document.

"It looks like my signatures are valid on the banking papers," said Melissa, "but the ones with Axelson are definitely a forgery. So are those taking responsibility for any legal action by any of the

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purchasers.”

“It appears to me that the same person signed every one of them,” said Rees. “I’m not a handwriting expert, but look at the way the Ms are written. It’s kind of unusual and it isn’t exactly how you finish the letter, but it’s consistent on every one.”

“Let’s find something Jackson signed, and something Alyce signed,” suggested Melissa. She was tired of not knowing specifics and wanted to identify everyone involved in setting her up. “It’s got to be one of them.”

“My guess is Alyce since the writing looks feminine,” said Rees.

A few minutes later, they had a selection of signatures spread out on the conference table. Each of the four studied them carefully.

“Well?” asked Melissa.

“If I had to hazard an educated guess,” answered Pete, “I’d say Alyce has forged all these except the first one.”

“That was my thought, too,” said Rees. “He’d have to have forged the first one himself, since Alyce didn’t work here yet, and he had to convince Melissa that he’d registered both of them as owners.”

Melissa nodded. “That was essential to this scheme succeeding. And that’s what I don’t understand. We could do very well with Fox Hollow. Why is he sabotaging it?”

“Revenge?” asked Jennifer.

“But, for what?” asked Melissa. “He’s never said a word about being angry with me for anything.”

“Hhmm,” the other woman pondered. “Could it have something to do with Alyce? Something she egged him on to do?”

“I’m sure it does,” said Melissa. “At least at this stage of the game. But she wasn’t working here when he forged the original ownership.”

“Let’s find out what Ashley discovered,” said Rees. He punched a number into the phone. “Hey, Ashley...Yep, some of it...Downtown?...At the Fox Hollow office...Okay. See you in twenty.” He hung up. “Ashley picked up what she describes as some

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‘interesting tidbits’ last night. She’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

“Anybody else hungry?” asked Pete. “My muffin wore off about half an hour ago.”

They all placed sandwich orders and Pete ran out to grab lunch for everyone, while Jennifer made a pot of coffee, and Rees and Melissa cleaned up the conference table so they could have their lunch in there. By the time Pete returned, Ashley had arrived. Introductions were made all around and the group reconvened in the conference room and spread out around the table. Melissa was delighted to find Rees right beside her.

“Hey, Ashley,” called Pete. “I got you the closest to a vegetarian sandwich I could. It’s tomato on whole wheat with sprouts.”

“Great.” The short brunette filled her coffee cup and passed the pot to Jennifer beside her. “Coffee?”

“You bet.”

The coffee pot made its trek around the table, and everyone tucked into lunch. For a few minutes, there was no chatter. Everyone was hungry, and that took precedence for the moment. Once the edge was off, Ashley looked up.

“I talked to a few friends of Alyce’s last night,” she offered.

“Any of them know where she is?”

“No. They know she left the country with her lover—” She looked apologetically at Melissa. “—and they aren’t planning to come back.”

“We’ve found out they’re in Bermuda. Pete and Jennifer are heading out at seven tomorrow morning,” said Rees. “They’ll be on the ground in Bermuda just after lunch.”

“Well, that’s good news. A couple of these girls told me Alyce, or Exotica as she’s known in that world, wants to live the high life and she found a guy who promised it to her.” She took another bite of sandwich. “Alyce wasn’t long on details with the dancers, but she did tell them she’d never be dancing for a living again.”

Melissa’s fury at Jackson’s betrayal grew, but she couldn’t bring

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herself to speak. She just continued eating her cheese sandwich and drinking her coffee, tasting neither. She shared a generous portion of sandwich with her Keeshond shadow.

“Okay, good work,” complimented Rees. “I need you to get into Alyce’s apartment somehow and check for any copies of documents relating to Fox Hollow or Melissa Miller.”

Ashley nodded. “You got it, boss.”

“I’m going to talk to Captain Andyrnzak at the police station and fill them in on what’s going on. I’ll let him know Pete and Jennifer are headed to Bermuda to find the pair. But, Pete—” He glanced at the investigator. “—we just need to know where they are. If you don’t think you can convince them to come back voluntarily, don’t chance them running. If we need to, I’ll get Andyrnzak to talk to Bermuda police and they can stand by to arrest and extradite them.”

“Okay.”

Melissa stood up. “I’m going to take Augie for a walk while you guys get all those things organized.”

Augie was on his feet by the time the w-word was out of her mouth.

“Wait and I’ll come with you,” said Rees.

“You’ve got plenty to do. We’ll be just fine. It’s the middle of the day.” She clipped the lead onto the dog’s collar and checked her pocket for a plastic bag. “We’ll be back in fifteen or twenty minutes.”

Rees checked his watch. “Where are you going?”

“There’s a park—a tiny park—about two blocks south. That’s where we’ll be.”

Melissa and Augie left the office. She was grateful for a bit of time to gather her thoughts. *I was completely tricked by him*, she thought as she pushed the button for the elevator. *Taken in like some kind of idiot. Why didn’t I see him for what he is?* The elevator pinged, the doors opened and they entered the cab.

Augie hadn’t been to the downtown office many times because Jackson preferred he not be there.

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“Don’t you think it’ll be off-putting to the clients to see it here?” she remembered him asking.

And Alyce had spoken up. “It’ll make the office dirty. Get it out of here.”

Melissa had taken Augie into her office that day and closed the door to protect her precious dog from the glares Alyce had sent his way every time she spotted him. Thereafter, she’d only brought him when she came in on a weekend and neither Jackson nor Alyce were there.

Nevertheless, Augie had trotted into the elevator and sat beside her as if he rode it every day of his life. Melissa squatted down and hugged him. “You never liked Jackson, did you?” she asked.

She remembered how excited she’d been when Flo, Augie’s breeder, had approved her to add the bundle of fur to her life. She’d gone out and purchased a dish, a dog bed and a stockpile of dog toys before he’d even been weaned. And the day she’d gone to the airport to pick him up from the Michigan flight, she’d been beside herself with joy, even though Jackson had not come with her. Over the past two years, the architect and the Keeshond had forged a deep bond that Jackson couldn’t understand.

The elevator gliding to a stop jolted Melissa out of her reverie. She gave Augie one more squeeze and was rewarded with a quick tickle of his tongue on her earlobe. She stood up, smiled and said, “Come on, bud. Let’s go to the park.”

When they stepped onto the busy sidewalk, Melissa was surprised by the number of pedestrians. The tension and events of the past few days had thrown her out of contact with normal city bustle. She was almost surprised it wasn’t dark and raining, but rather, a lovely, sunny weekend day.

As they moved briskly toward the green space, many people smiled at the beautiful young woman and the striking wolf-looking dog walking down the sidewalk.

The car pulling away from the curb as they headed south, contained

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no one smiling in a friendly fashion.

CHAPTER 14

Melissa's head had cleared somewhat by the time they reached the small downtown park. *What Jackson chose to do was his business.* She was not a party to his deception, or to the forgery and fraud he and Alyce had perpetrated. She knew it would take time for her anger and deep sense of betrayal to fade, but she decided to let go of as much as she was capable at the moment. The sunshine and blue sky helped her find a measure of peace. She kept Augie on lead and let him explore the trees and bushes to his heart's content, wandering at his pace and direction.

They'd been meandering for less than ten minutes when she realized there were two men mimicking their every move. Since she was off the paths and letting Augie chose their direction, it seemed unusual to her. The men weren't walking a dog, but were staying just a couple of dozen feet from wherever she and her dog were.

She felt her palms begin to sweat and her heartbeat increased. As she looked around carefully, Melissa discovered there were no other

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people close by. Without looking obvious, she began to work her way back to the more populated part of the park. The men moved to cut her off. She swallowed convulsively and tried to flank them. It didn't work, and they approached her.

Augie stepped in front of her. She'd never heard him growl before, but she did now. He lowered his head slightly and his ears flattened just a little. He rumbled deep in his throat. The men hesitated.

"He's not very big," said the shorter one. "The mutt can't weigh more than forty pounds." He took another step.

Augie walked forward to meet him, legs stiff, and lips lifting away from his teeth. The growl was louder this time.

"Just kick him," muttered the taller of the two. "Aim for his head."

Augie broke into a flurry of angry barking as the two closed in on them. Melissa tried to back toward the busier part of the park, but she was being forced into a treed area. As one of the men swung his foot at Augie, Melissa flung the plastic bag of dog droppings she'd been carrying to drop in a designated park receptacle. It hit him square in the chest and the plastic popped open.

"You little bitch," he snarled. He reached for her and Augie launched himself, hitting the man in the middle and knocking him off balance so he couldn't get his hands on Melissa. Augie landed on his feet and kept barking loudly, showing his teeth and snarling as the two crept ever closer.

"Joe, go to the left and grab that slut."

"I don't want to get bit."

"You grab her and I'll take care of the stupid, friggin' dog. Phil said to have her there by two-thirty," said the taller one.

Melissa's stomach knotted. *They're Axelson's men.*

She and Augie were forced to retreat a couple more strides. She was just about to scream when a blur of muscle and anger flew past her.

Rees hit the first man with one punch and knocked him to the ground. He turned to the other man who'd pulled out a knife. Melissa

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called out a warning, but Rees's feet were like pistons as he kicked the knife from the thug's hand, then clipped him under the chin with a roundhouse kick. The knife-man was completely unconscious when he hit the ground with a thud.

While Rees had been busy with his cohort, the shorter thug had crawled out of range and clambered to his feet. By the time Rees spun around again, he was running across the park. They watched him climb into a black sedan with dark tinted windows. Its tires screeched as it tore away from the curb.

Rees looked down at the man on the ground and prodded him none-too-gently with his toe. He pulled out his cell phone and hit a series of numbers. "Inspector Corson, please...Ty, I've disabled a man in the park just south of the Scotia Towers. He attempted to assault my client...Walking her dog...She's fine. Okay, we'll wait here 'til then." He clicked off the phone.

Melissa felt the tremors begin in her lower legs. They spread quickly. "Thank you, Rees." Her voice was no more than a whisper. Augie nudged her and she reached down to pet him. "And thank you, Augie."

Rees knelt beside Augie and gathered him into a big hug. "What a good boy," he murmured. "I know it's not your nature to act like an attack dog, but you knew she was in danger, didn't you?"

Augie let out a big sigh and licked Rees' cheek.

"You're welcome." Rees laughed and let go of the Keeshond.

Augie suddenly stiffened and spun, staring at the man on the ground. He was trying to move. He was beginning to come around.

Rees strode over to him, pulled off his belt, and bound his hands behind him. "Can I borrow your belt, Lissa?" She removed it and handed it to Rees who trussed up her assailant's ankles. He smiled at her. "Don't worry. That'll hold him until the police get here."

Melissa was shivering as if it were a cold winter day. In fact, she could never remember being so cold. She stared at Rees, teeth

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chattering, and reached out her hands, wordlessly. Rees stepped forward and took them. She didn't even know he was chafing her frozen skin until she looked down. She still had Augie's leash wrapped tightly around her left wrist.

"Come on," he said, guiding her a few feet to a bench. "Let's sit here. We can keep an eye on our mugger over there and you can catch your breath."

For several minutes she could do nothing but sit on the bench and continue to shiver, terrifying pictures of what could have been flashing through her mind. She had no doubt those men would have taken her to Phil, who would have followed whatever orders Axelson had given him. Melissa took deep breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth in an attempt to calm herself. It was beginning to pay off as the tremors started to ease, and she felt warmth flowing back into her hands.

The police arrived and Rees took care of explaining the situation to them. The officer had a couple of questions for Melissa, and a warm pat on the head for Augie who pranced happily as if he knew he was a hero. The police removed the assailant's makeshift bonds, handcuffed him and led him away.

"Ready to go back to the office?" asked Rees.

She nodded. "But first, I have to thank you. I have no idea what would've happened to us if you hadn't come along." She shuddered. "Well, actually I've been imagining what would've happened if you hadn't arrived in time."

"At your service, madam." He tried to lighten her mood. "Come on. I'll take you back to the office."

"No. I want to be serious for a few minutes, Rees." She tugged on his hand and he sat down beside her. "I was very frightened. And I'm sure they meant me harm."

"I have no doubt they had their orders." He was deliberately vague.

"The taller one said they had their orders from Phil. The only Phil I

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know is the one who works for Axelson.”

“We’ll find out more from the guy the police took in.”

“They aren’t even giving me the time we all agreed on,” she said, hysteria dancing at the edge of her voice.

Rees put a finger under her chin and tipped up her face. “You will not be alone for one minute until this is settled.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“I mean it. You’ll be sick of me by the time we get this settled.”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s possible.” She leaned forward, rested her hands on his chest and brushed her lips against his. She was surprised at the sensation that rushed through her as her mouth and his linked.

His arms pulled her close against him, and Melissa relaxed into the embrace as they continued to kiss. *I could fall in love with him.* The thought startled her and she pulled back to look into his eyes.

He met her gaze and nodded. “Just give it time.”

“I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“The feeling is mutual. I suddenly understand why no other relationships worked.”

Melissa slid back against his chest and snuggled close. This was the man she’d been waiting for...the man she’d hoped Jackson was for so long.

Impatient with the human cuddling Augie woofed quietly. They laughed and stood up.

“Time to get back to the real world,” Melissa said on a sigh.

“Hey, the sooner we get this whole mess cleared up, the sooner we’ll have more uninterrupted time together.”

“You’re right.” She straightened her shoulders and nodded briskly. “What Jackson’s involved me in is ludicrous. And it’s bullshit. I intend to take back my life. Let’s get to the office and start nailing Jackson and his friend to the wall.”

* * *

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Everyone had returned to the office by the time Melissa and Rees arrived. The pair proceeded to brief the team about what had happened to Melissa and Augie in the park.

In the interim, Pete and Jennifer had each gone home, packed and were set to head to the airport, since their flight had been changed. If they flew out to New York City today, they could be in Bermuda by the time their original flight was just taking off.

Ashley had talked her way into Alyce's apartment. "The landlord thinks Alyce is in the hospital for surgery, and I'm her considerate sister taking her some personal belongings." Ashley held up the bag she was carrying.

"Good work," said Melissa. "What did you discover there?"

"Unfortunately, it looks like your fiancé has been spending quite a bit of time at her place. His toiletries are everywhere in the bathroom and his clothes are in the closets and the dresser drawers."

Melissa nodded. She now expected no less than complete betrayal from Jackson.

"Did you find any links to what they've been doing?" asked Rees.

Ashley dumped out the contents of the duffel bag. "I found copies of all the documents Alyce had forged. They're sure trying to set you up for a big-time fall," she said to Melissa. "And there were a couple of passports in different names, stamped for European and Far East destinations. These two have been working on this for the last few years, I'd guess."

"Let me look at those." Melissa sorted through the agreements and contracts Ashley had retrieved. "There are some here I don't even know what they're for. More property near Hudson's Bay? A tourist resort purchase?" She handed them to Rees. "This is *not* my signature on any of these."

"Okay. We'll hang onto them. Ashley, if you'll make sure they're put into the safe at the office? I think we've got everything covered for the moment. Pete and Jennifer, you're on the way to the airport?"

FOX HOLLOW

“Yes,” Jennifer answered. “I’ve got my laptop with me and I need a list of all the emails so we can stay in touch.”

Ashley jotted down individual email addresses for the UnderCover team and passed them to Jennifer.

Melissa said, “Mine is on my business card, along with my office phone, cell and home numbers.” She handed the card to the receptionist and took her hand. “Thank you, Jennifer. I can’t tell you how much your help means to me.”

“This is the best temp job I’ve ever had.” She pulled Melissa into a quick hug. “Don’t you worry. That money won’t go anywhere without my friends letting me know. And we’ll find those two weasels and get them back here.”

“Thanks.”

Pete shook hands all around, holding Melissa’s a bit longer and looking at her. “Jackson’s history...and so is Alyce. We won’t come back without a solution. Okay?”

“Okay.” She forced herself to believe her own answer.

They all left, Melissa last out the door. She paused and looked around before she shut off the lights. So many hopes and dreams had been contained in these walls. *Stop it. The dreams here were those of that son-of-a-bitch, Jackson Tobin and his mistress. My dreams are elsewhere.*

She turned off the lights, pulled the door closed and locked it firmly.

CHAPTER 15

On the way home, they stopped at Rees' house. From outside, it was a simple ranch-style home with a maple tree in the front yard and some shrubs around the house. *Easy care for the busy professional*, Melissa thought.

"The backyard is fenced," Rees said. "Let's let Augie stretch his legs a bit."

After they got Augie into the yard, Melissa followed Rees inside. She was very curious about how he lived.

"Wander around and make yourself at home," he said. "I'm going to get Mouse's gear pulled together."

Melissa did just that—she made herself at home. She decided he had a no-nonsense approach to decorating. The whole house was painted a rich cream color with recliners, a couch, a piano and a big screen TV in the living room. The kitchen looked like he cooked for himself a lot. In a small dining room, a few days' newspapers were piled at one end.

FOX HOLLOW

He likes to read while he eats.

The rest of the house was just messy enough to be lived in. Rees obviously enjoyed music since one of the bedrooms was set up as a music room with a terrific stereo and home theatre system. She browsed through CDs scattered on the coffee table—everything from Rod Stewart to the David Shankle Group to Cher to Tony Bennett. More CDs were in towers around the room.

He scored another set of stars when she got to his bedroom. There were no touches of a woman there at all. His navy duvet had enough cat hair on it to betray that he let Mouse sleep with him, and no clothes littered the floor. That had been one of her pet peeves with Jackson—that he expected her to follow him around picking up after him. Real curtains fluttered at windows open slightly to let in fresh air.

The bathroom had none of the clutter she expected from a bachelor—no razors on the edge of the sink, no pile of molding towels in the corner. The sink and tub were actually clean and the window in there was open, as well.

By the time she made it back to the living room, Melissa was all smiles. Rees was a real person. He wasn't a neat freak, but he was obviously well able to take care of himself. His home felt welcoming, and she knew she could enjoy time here.

"All set?" he asked coming into the room. He carried an airline style crate in one hand and the other was filled with dishes.

"Yep. Anything I can carry?"

He handed her the dishes and set the carrier on the floor. "I'll get her litter box and food." He headed back down the hall.

Melissa squatted beside the crate and spoke gently. "Mouse, kitty-kitty-kitty."

She was rewarded with a plaintive meow. She pressed her fingers to the front door and felt a soft waft of air as the cat sniffed at her. Then there was a most prodigious purring. "Oh, my goodness, you win the purr prize," she said to the cat and giggled.

FOX HOLLOW

* * *

Rees stopped in amazement. He could hear Mouse purring and Melissa giggling. The cat had won her over all ready? He looked into the living room. Melissa was sitting on the floor, grey Maine Coon in her lap purring up a storm and letting Melissa stroke her fur and tickle her chin. She looked up. "What a great cat, Rees."

"Well, she sure likes you. She's usually pretty shy around people she doesn't know."

"She has a wonderful purr," Melissa said. "Is that the last of her stuff?"

"Yep. I'll just load it into the truck and be right back for her. Then we'll get Augie and head for home." *Home*. He liked the sound of that, and that they were going together.

Once all Mouse's possessions, and Mouse, were in the truck, Rees went back for Melissa and Augie. "Think he'll mind sharing his house with a cat?" Rees asked.

"Augie loves cats. Remember, Sharon has cats. The only thing I'm really worried about is the dog door. I don't want Mouse to get into the yard."

"She goes out in my yard. Since yours is fenced, too, she'll be fine." Rees felt the comradeship of shared responsibility spreading through him. This woman had found her way inside all his defenses without even trying. And he found it strange...he didn't feel the need to protect her as if she were incapable; he wanted to be beside her and face her battles with her.

* * *

When they got to Melissa's, they unloaded both vehicles of pets, and took the time to introduce them properly. Within a few minutes, Mouse was wandering about, exploring the new house, with Augie right behind her.

Melissa looked at her watch. "No wonder I'm hungry. It's almost six o'clock."

FOX HOLLOW

“Want to go grab a bite?”

“If you don’t mind manning the barbecue, would you like to eat in?” she asked. “Let me look and see what I’ve got.” She rummaged around for a few minutes. “How about some steaks, a salad, and a glass of merlot?”

“Sounds delicious.”

“I’ve got some Italian bread. I can do some bruschetta for us to munch on while the steaks thaw in the microwave.”

“You’re going to spoil me.”

“I love to cook. I just don’t have the time very often.”

“How can I help?”

Melissa found herself humming happily as they put together their meal. While she made homemade garlic butter and sliced the bread for their bruschetta, Rees washed the salad greens, chopped tomatoes and cucumber, and corked the wine. He handed her a glass.

“To a wonderful evening.” He touched his glass to hers.

Melissa felt the funny feeling in her stomach that was becoming a common occurrence when she was around Rees. “And many more.” She touched his glass, then sipped the cold red wine, letting it slide down her throat like a promise of evenings to come.

“Do you want me to set the table?” Rees asked. “Or, if it’s okay with you, maybe we could take our dinner to the TV room and watch a movie?”

“That sounds perfect.”

Rees stacked up plates and cutlery on the counter so they could serve themselves buffet style, then took the steaks out to the barbecue on the interlocking stone patio. Augie trotted along behind him, perfectly happy to keep Rees company in the yard while he cooked the steaks. With a meow and a gentle thump, Mouse landed on a kitchen chair. Melissa took a few moments to stroke her back, eliciting a whole new chorus of purring.

While Rees barbecued the steaks, Melissa fixed the bruschetta. She

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carried the bottle of wine to the patio and topped off his glass before offering him a slice of bread. They settled into the Adirondack-style chairs and engaged in small talk as the fragrance of the steak wafted around them. Augie and Mouse explored the yard, finally settling side by side under the maple tree.

“How do you like it?” Rees suddenly asked.

Melissa felt the heat of a blush fan across her cheeks. “How do I like it?” she parroted, not sure what to say.

“Your steak...medium?”

“No, well-done for me, please.”

“You’ve got it.” He strode to the barbecue, moving one steak to the slower, lower heat, and keeping one on the hotter burner.

No argument about my choice. How nice. She couldn’t count the times Jackson had lectured her on the social inappropriateness of ordering a well-done steak. She’d gotten so she just ordered medium, even though she didn’t care for the taste or how her meal looked when the blood stained the rest of her food.

A few minutes later, dinner was ready and Rees loaded the steaks onto a platter. Melissa pulled the salad out of the fridge, dressed and tossed it and got out a second bottle of wine. They adjourned to the den, picked out a movie and slipped it in the DVD player. While they watched, they ate their dinner with Mouse and Augie companionably curled up with them.

Melissa couldn’t remember when she’d been so relaxed. After dinner, she nestled against him. “Want coffee or tea?” she asked.

“Not right now, unless you do.”

“Nope. I’m content just as I am.”

His arm tugged her closer and they snuggled as they watched the end of *Gladiator*. Melissa wiped away the tears as Maximus made his way to his family.

“My little softie,” Rees murmured and brushed away a tear with his forefinger.

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She tipped her head up and their lips met in a warm, natural kiss that quickly deepened to a dance of tongues, hot mouths eagerly exploring one another. Melissa was breathless as they broke away. Rees' fingers stroked through her hair.

"There's no rush, Lissa. Just enjoy," he said before he captured her mouth again.

Melissa hadn't spent time being explored like this ever. Her couplings with Jackson had never been exciting, but recently had become even more mechanical and formatted. She found it incredibly arousing as Rees touched her gently—her hair, running his hands down her shoulders and feathering over the backs of her hands, and back up the insides of her arms to brush over her tingling breasts. She raised her arms around his neck, both to bring him closer and give him better access to her curves.

Melissa felt her daring increase as she ran her hand down his chest, feeling the strength of the muscles there and at his abdomen. As her hand drifted below his waistband, she felt the heat of his excitement rise up to meet her.

Another way he's better than Jackson. The thought flashed through her mind before her hand slid down the long, hard length of him and on to his hips.

They continued petting and kissing, simply enjoying the sensations they brought to one another. Melissa felt pampered and honored as he journeyed over her body, bringing her sensations she'd longed to feel, and never had with Jackson.

Suddenly, Rees broke away. "This is leading to bed, unless we take a bit of a break," he said, fingers stroking her peaked nipples.

"That's where I'd like it to go," she confessed. "I want to sleep with you, Rees."

"Not yet," he said, reluctance clear in his voice. "I want us both free—and right now, you're not free of Jackson Tobin."

"He's no longer a part of my life."

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“But he is. Until we get this whole mess cleared up, he’s going to be there like a shadow.” His finger circled her nipple. “I want no shadows around us. What we’re about to have between us is so special, I want it to be perfect.”

Regret poured over her, but she knew he was right. She leaned into him, hugging him close to her. “You’re right. I don’t want you because I’m trying to escape something. I want you because you’re what I’m going to...with all my heart.”

He smiled at her. “Let’s get the dishes put away.”

The rest of the evening, Melissa was incredibly aware of every move Rees made, and she knew he was just as in tune with her. She could hardly wait to get her life back in order, so she could move onto her future. But she knew Rees was right. She wanted no shadow over their time together, either.

* * *

The next morning, they were totally relaxed, pottering around the kitchen making bagels with cream cheese, pouring orange juice and making a big pot of tea. As the sun brightened the patio, they decided to eat outside.

Melissa went to get the newspaper from the front porch. When she opened the front door, she looked across the street. A black sedan was parked there. She couldn’t see through the tinted windows.

Her heart pounded in her chest and she could not catch her breath. She grabbed the newspaper, scuttled backwards into the foyer and slammed the door. She leaned against it, chest heaving in her effort to catch her breath.

Rees tore into the front hall. “I heard the door slam. What happened?”

“There’s someone out there,” she managed. “A black car just like yesterday. I couldn’t see inside. But I know it’s them.” She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth and gnawed. “They’re just waiting for me. They’re going to try and kidnap me again.”

FOX HOLLOW

"Okay, I'll take a look," said Rees.

"No. I don't want them to hurt you!"

"They're not going to. I just want to get the license plate and call my friend at the police station."

"If you go to my office upstairs, you should be able to see from there."

"You have any binoculars?"

"No, but I have a camera with a telephoto lens. Will that do?"

"Yes. I'll head upstairs. You find the camera and bring it to me. Okay?" He reached rubbed her shoulder and upper arm. "They can't hurt you or kidnap you while I'm here. You know that, don't you?"

Melissa's smile was tremulous, but she nodded. "I know. They just startled me is all."

"Seeing them there would startle anyone. As soon as I get the license, I'll call Inspector Corson, and the police will take care of clearing them out of here."

"Good."

Within a half-hour, a black-and-white pulled up and the officer approached the car. It sped off before he got to the driver's door.

Rees laughed. "I think you've got them spooked, my dear. They're certainly afraid to talk to the police."

"Well, I hope it means they'll leave me alone for a while." She knew it didn't mean that at all, but thought saying it out loud would be reassuring—to both of them.

"Come on. Let's go back downstairs and eat."

They carried their breakfast to the round patio table, and shared the newspaper, reading tidbits aloud to one another. By the time they'd finished cleaning up, Melissa decided to get some work done on a couple of designs. She'd already had to reschedule the Switzers from Friday to Monday. She needed preliminary ideas for them by then, and she didn't want to fall too far behind. If she were going to save Fox Hollow, she had to have a satisfied client base. Word of mouth had

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helped sell more than one of the estates. She figured she'd have to do all she could to counteract the inevitable negative publicity.

Melissa looked at her photos of the property Switzers were considering and knew she needed to stand on the land and let the property tell her what should be there. "Rees, I'd like to head out to Fox Hollow. Okay with you?"

"Whatever you need to do. When do you want to go?"

"In the next few minutes. I'm supposed to meet with some clients tomorrow and I'd like to prepare. I may not have a lot of knowledge of the financial end, but I plan to give them sketches of what I can design for them, along with the lot price and quotations on house costs. I can also set them up with the CD program. Just some things for them to consider. When Jennifer gets back, she can help me with the dollars and cents end of things, if they want to negotiate."

"Sounds like a good plan. And it'll be good to get outside and walk around for a while," he said. "Want to take Augie-monster with you?"

"Yeah. He can run around and burn off some of that energy." She smiled. It would be very good to get out to the country and away from her worries.

Melissa collected her supplies and slipped into a pair of jeans, turtleneck and blazer. It was a sunny day, but it could be cool in the country. By the time she was ready to go, Rees had changed into jeans and a blazer, too. He'd put out food and water for Mouse, and filled a thermos with orange juice for them, some cookies, and a bottle of water for Augie.

"This seems more like fun than work," she said with a smile.

"Why not both on such a nice day?"

"Why not?"

They listened to the local rock station on their way to Fox Hollow, singing along with Celine Dion as she asked if they'd ever been in love. Laughing and joking made the thirty-minute trip fly. Melissa directed Rees to the property she wanted to walk, and pointed where to park.

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She gathered her sketch pad and hopped out, patting her thigh and calling to Augie.

* * *

Rees glanced around. He wasn't thrilled with being so isolated, but there wasn't much he could do about it except keep a close eye on everything around them. At least there was just one lane providing access to their location. Anyone coming through the forested area would attract Augie's attention right away. Rees reached around to the waistband of his jeans at the back. His gun was tucked securely out of sight, but within easy reach. He checked that he had a clear signal on the cell phone. That was fine, too.

He watched Melissa wander the site. *She is so beautiful. And she doesn't even know it.* He couldn't keep his eyes off her as she stopped, made notes, jotted details and moved on. The sun on her hair lifted golden highlights. When she turned and smiled at him, her eyes were glowing like liquid silver. She waved across the clearing to him, then turned back to her exploration.

He felt the beginning of his arousal again. She would always excite him, he knew. *Just a wave across thirty yards, and I'm reacting like a horny teenager.* He grinned to himself. When they had her problems sorted out, they'd have a night to remember.

He was allowing himself to fantasize just a little when Augie barked. Rees looked around. The little silver-and-black dog was staring down the lane. Rees followed his gaze. "Melissa," he called. "You need to come over here by the truck."

Melissa joined him without a word.

Just then, a deer picked her way onto the lane. She stood looking at them for a moment. Then Augie moved and she bounded into the forest without a backward glance. Augie relaxed and went back to sniffing around the trees and shrubs.

"False alarm, I guess," she said and Rees could see fear at the edges of her eyes.

FOX HOLLOW

“We’re better to be on alert. You know how important that is,” he said.

“I’ll only be a few more minutes.”

“Take your time. Augie and I have your back, you know.”

He was rewarded with a smile, and he went back to feasting his eyes on her as she got the information she needed to make her presentation the next day. The leaves drifted down and he loved to watch her kick through them. Gathering a small pile beside the truck, he was rewarded when she came back. She couldn’t see the heap of brightly colored leaves from the other side of the truck as she approached and he squatted quickly as she rounded the hood. He swept up a double armful and, as she swung around the front bumper, tossed them into the air.

She laughed, twirling in the orange-amber fall of leaves around her. Reaching out she grabbed one and held it tightly against her heart. As the leaves settled back to the ground, Melissa stepped into Rees’ arms.

CHAPTER 16

They returned to the Fox Hollow field office so Melissa could get her notes and ideas into the computer. She felt perfectly safe letting her concentration flow to the work at hand, knowing Rees was there, keeping an eye on everything. The designs flew from her notes. She had several sketches done within an hour or so...not detailed, but enough to give the Switzers an idea to start from, and to use when they worked with their design CD.

She was humming quietly to herself when Rees' cell phone rang suddenly. She looked at him as he clicked it on. "McAllister...Right here at Fox Hollow's field office...We'll be here." He signed off.

"It's Peter and Jennifer. They're going to call right back, so we can use the speaker phone," he explained. "They have news."

Melissa felt the familiar frisson of anxiety chase away the freedom of the day. "I hope they've found them."

"It sounds like."

The phone rang, and Rees pushed the speaker button. "Fox

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Hollow.”

“You both there?” asked Pete.

“Yes, we are,” answered Melissa. “You and Jennifer have news?”

“You bet. We found them.”

Melissa felt excitement swell. “Where are they? Have you got them? Are you bringing them back?”

Pete laughed. “Ariel Sands. No. And we’ll need help on that one.”

“What do you need?” asked Rees.

“This is going to sound strange, but I think we need John Axelson’s help,” he answered.

“What?” Melissa’s shock made her voice harsh. “That animal’s help?”

“Don’t forget the expression, ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend,’” said Rees.

Melissa thought for a moment and nodded.

Jennifer spoke then. “I’ve got their money locked up. And I’ve made friends with Alyce. I followed her to the spa, and chatted her up. She thinks I’m a wealthy socialite from Norfolk.” Jennifer tried out her southern accent on Melissa and both women chuckled. “As long as Alyce thinks I’m wealthy, she’s more than willing to be my friend. We’re supposed to meet for drinks before dinner.”

“Sounds like you’ve got her confidence.”

“Oh, yes. Unfortunately, I’ve been privy to more intimate details of her life than I’d care to know, but I have her on a string. And she’s bringing Jackson to us in a couple of hours.”

“We’ll have more to report then,” said Pete. “But she did tell Jennifer already that they had no intention of returning to Toronto. Far too provincial, in her words. They’ll be living in New York City and Europe.”

“I could barely keep a straight face while she was talking,” interjected Jennifer. “Thank goodness I had on a mud mask.”

Melissa turned to Rees. “Should we get the police involved?”

FOX HOLLOW

"Let's see what Pete thinks on that front, since he's in the thick of things. Pete?"

"Well, boss, I know the police could arrest them on the fraud charges and get them back, but it would be a long, drawn-out affair, don't you think?"

"I agree," answered Rees, a smile beginning.

"What?" asked Melissa.

"Since Jackson owes money to John Axelson, don't you think the loan shark would be interested in knowing where he is?" asked Rees. "Especially since we can prove you never signed the loan document guaranteeing repayment of his four million dollars?"

Melissa smiled broadly as she caught on to the plan. "When are you meeting with Jackson?"

"About six o'clock our time. Drinks on the patio, you know." Jennifer tried out her southern drawl again.

"Okay. Call us after you're back in your room," Rees said. "We should have more news for you by then."

"I'll try to make plans to go golfing with Tobin tomorrow," said Pete.

"Good. Become their new best friends. And remember, it's important we can reach you at a moment's notice."

"Cell phone is on 24/7, boss."

"Jennifer, if you've got heels with you, Jackson has a weakness for them," Melissa advised.

"You got it."

They signed off and Melissa looked at Rees. "Do you think it'll work?"

"I know Axelson wants you, but no offence, I'm willing to bet he wants his four million just as much."

"I bet he wants it more," she said honestly. "He can have any number of women, but the money keeps him in the lifestyle he likes."

"And if we do this just right, Axelson is going to go down, too."

FOX HOLLOW

"You think so?"

"He frightened you and touched you, and he's not walking away from that," said Rees, the cold steel of his voice assuring her he meant business.

"What do we do first?"

"First, we get in touch with Axelson and see if he's interested in getting back the money."

"He will be." Melissa was sure of that.

"Then we tell him, if he backs off you completely, he can get it from Tobin."

"But he doesn't know where Jackso— Oh, I see." Melissa smiled. "Him for me."

"You've got it. He sends Phil to Bermuda. He'll bring back Jackson, willing or not."

"And Alyce will follow along like his trained seal."

"Once they're here, we all sit down for a *tête-à-tête*. And I'll wear a wire. I'll get enough evidence on Axelson to guarantee your safety. Besides, he's going to be pretty busy dealing with Jackson, I'd think."

"There are dangers to this plan, you know," she said stepping up to him and resting her head against his chest. "They could discover you're wired. Jackson could try to double-cross us."

"I know. But we'll minimize everything we can," he said stroking her back.

"I don't want you to get hurt."

"I won't. I've done this kind of thing before," he reassured her.

"I haven't, and all I can see is everything that can go wrong."

"Try not to worry. We've got the upper hand here, and we'll set things up to our advantage. Plus I'll have Ty Corson there with us. He'll be pretending to be our accountant, and if anything goes wrong, he'll have the police move in."

"You're sure this is the right way to go?"

"Positive. Within a couple of days, you'll have your life back,

FOX HOLLOW

Lissa.”

Her smile filled the room with a glow. “To share with you, Rees. Just in time to share with you.”

* * *

Rees hit the cell numbers for Phil Smith from his business card.

“Smith.”

“McAllister. We need to talk.”

“Has the bitch got the money? Or shall I bring her a new outfit?”

“Not up to you to decide. But you do get a trip to Bermuda out of the deal.”

“I’m listening.”

“Tell your boss I want to talk to him. Give his this number—” Rees rattled off his cell phone number. “—and have him call me as soon as possible.”

“This better be worth his while.”

“It is.” Rees hung up and turned to Melissa. “Okay, Lissa, the plan is in motion. We need to get back to the city as soon as we can.”

“Let me save my work to a CD for the Switzers and shut down the computer. I’ll be ready in less than ten minutes.”

He appreciated her economy of motion as she got everything done. In about eight minutes, she was ready to go, Augie at her side.

“You’re serious when you say under ten minutes, aren’t you?” Rees was amazed. He’d been with plenty of women who’d say the same thing and never mean it.

“We’ve got lots to do. I’ll drive, so you can concentrate when Axelson calls,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Okay. Let’s get going.”

They’d been on the road for about twenty minutes when Rees’ phone trilled. “McAllister,” he answered.

* * *

Melissa kept her attention on the busy traffic around her, but still listened to what Rees was saying. It was hard to get all the details

FOX HOLLOW

hearing only one side of the conversation, but she knew Rees would fill her in on everything when he was through.

When he hung up, he turned to her as far as the seatbelt allowed. "Okay, as soon as I hear from Pete about how things stand, I'm going to call back Axelson. I'll give him the airport Phil should fly to. Pete will meet him there and take him to Jackson."

"Once Jackson changes his pants, they should be on the next flight home," said Melissa.

Rees chuckled. "Even better. Axelson is sending Phil on his private jet, so they're going to leave the minute Phil gets his hands on him."

"Cool." Melissa couldn't help the grin that tipped the corners of her mouth. "He was so willing to sell me out. I wonder how he'll like paying the piper instead?"

"Well, at least he has the money...or most of it."

"And part of that is thanks to Jennifer. If her contacts hadn't been able to slow down the transfer they wanted to make, it might not be there."

"His problem, Lissa, not yours."

"Well, Axelson might try to make it my problem."

"Axelson's quite clear on the point that you never signed those documents. He has forged loan papers."

"Do you think he's really concerned if it's legal?"

"Perhaps not, but you have a bunch of people who *are* concerned about who is paying him. And I've made sure he knows that."

"'Thank you' seems so inadequate."

"Hey, let's get through this...then being able to spend time with you will be my reward. We've got some time before Pete and Jennifer call back. Let's drop off Augie, feed the critters and grab some Chinese food. What do you think? Too soon since you last had it?"

"Not for me...and I think if you use that cell phone, we can pick up the Chinese food in fifteen minutes or so when we're almost home. There's a great place just around the corner from my house."

FOX HOLLOW

"You've got it. What's the number?"

Melissa gave it without hesitation.

"Have take-out from there often?"

She could hear the laughter in his voice. "How could you guess?" She giggled, then couldn't believe she'd done that. *How long has it been since I've giggled?* She literally couldn't remember. Life was always so serious with Jackson.

"What'll you have? Or should I just ask for Melissa's regular?"

She giggled again. "It's not quite *that* bad. I'll have a house special lo mein with no msg."

Melissa smiled the rest of the way home.

* * *

They'd just gotten in the front door when Rees' cell phone rang again. Melissa could tell from his side of the conversation that it was Pete, and that things were progressing very well. When he got off, he filled her in. "They had drinks with Jackson and Alyce, who've gone ahead and gotten married, by the way."

"Huh." Melissa snorted. "They deserve one another."

"Anyway, the Tobins really la-dee-dah'ed it up, as if she weren't an exotic dancer and he a common forger. They told Jennifer and Pete that they're purchasing land in Bermuda for a winter home, and are signing the down-payment papers next week for a townhouse in TriBeCa in New York City."

"Like hell," she snarled.

"You're right about that. They're both covered for tomorrow, too. Jennifer and Alyce are doing the shopping thing, and Pete and Jackson are going to hit the links. By the way, Jennifer sent her thanks for the tip on the heels. The louse flirted with her like crazy."

"Alyce must not have noticed, or she sure wouldn't be going shopping with Jennifer tomorrow."

"Apparently, Alyce had started drinking before they got together. She didn't notice a whole lot of what was going on." Rees went on,

FOX HOLLOW

“We’ve got them right where we want them. Now we just have to let Axelson know where to send Phil. But I do think I’ll fill in Ty...just in case Phil does something stupid in Bermuda.”

“You think of everything.”

“I want this to go according to *our* plan. Not Tobin’s and not Axelson’s. They deserve one another, and are going to end up with one another.”

Rees called Axelson’s number. “Send your jet and your associate to the airport in Bermuda by nine a.m. My operative will meet the plane and take Mr. Smith to meet Mr. Tobin. There better not be any double-crosses. We’ve made contingency plans.” After a pause, Rees continued. “Think anything you want, but they’d all better be back here shortly after lunch tomorrow...Melissa’s house. I do believe you know where it is.” He hung up without another word. He took Melissa’s hands in his. “We’re set.”

“I’m more than ready to have that son-of-a-bitch out of my life forever. The sooner this is over, the better.”

“If you want to get out the food, I’m going to set up things with Ty Corson.”

She nodded. Rees went into the living room and she carried the bag with their dinner back to the kitchen, Augie tagging at her heels. “Ready for your supper?” she asked. As they entered the kitchen, she called, “Mouse! Kitty, kitty, kitty.”

She heard a soft mewing and Mouse came trotting into the kitchen. She and Augie sniffed noses while she set out food for both of them. She included a bit of chopped-up hot dog on each one. “You’ve both been very good, you know.”

Melissa quickly washed up and set the table. She’d just started to put the containers of food onto the table when Rees entered the kitchen.

“All set for tomorrow?” she asked.

“It is. Now, let’s put it out of our minds and enjoy supper and an evening together.”

FOX HOLLOW

“You’ve got it.” She smiled and began to eat.

CHAPTER 17

The next morning, Melissa was awake half an hour before her alarm went off. *Today is the day I'm free. I can hardly wait for it to begin.* She curled up against Augie and dozed, daydreaming of how life would be with Rees until the alarm signaled the official beginning of the day.

By the time she'd showered, dressed in jeans and a roomy white cotton shirt, and gotten downstairs, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the kitchen. She smiled at Rees. "Good morning. Isn't it a wonderful day?"

"It sure is." He returned her smile. "The first day of the rest of our lives."

"By tonight, I'll be free. Will you stay?"

"You couldn't keep me away," he answered reaching out to stroke her cheek with the back of one finger.

"Good. Then let's get today going."

While they ate breakfast, Rees touched base with his operatives. In Bermuda, Pete was on his way to the airport and Jennifer had scheduled

FOX HOLLOW

a spa appointment with Alyce. At home, Ashley headed to the UnderCover office to pick up the documents that would prove Jackson's fraud. Rees then called Ty Corson and confirmed details of the operation with the police officer as well. In addition to Ty posing as Melissa's accountant and Rees planning to be wired, they'd arranged for police to be set up in Sharon's house next door.

"Sharon was so cool about agreeing to let the police be there," said Rees.

"Are you kidding? *CSI* is her favorite TV show. She's just thrilled to be part of the whole 'sting,' as she calls it." Melissa laughed. "This has made her day!"

"It's going to be a very busy, challenging few hours...are you ready?"

"As I'm ever going to be." She got up and went around the table to where Rees was sitting. Leaning over the back of his chair, she slid her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek against his. "With you to help me through this, I'm going to be just fine."

Rees rubbed his cheek against hers. "We're in this together."

"I know. That's what makes it possible for me to take my life back. The reward—" She kissed his cheek. "—more than makes up for any danger."

Rees reached around and tugged her down into his lap. "You've got that right, Lissa. You've definitely got that right."

She smiled against his lips just as his mouth captured hers in a kiss that touched the most secret part of her soul. She opened her mouth to his tongue's gentle insistence and reveled in the emotions he triggered. Moaning slightly, she wriggled against him as his arousal nudged at her hip. She deepened the kiss, loving the sensations flowing through her like a lava river of desire. The way Rees made her feel was addictive and she wanted even more.

His tongue danced with hers in an age-old rhythm that had her heart pounding, and a heavy, swollen throbbing in her breasts. She felt her

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nipples peak and rubbed them against his strong chest, frustrated by the clothing separating them.

She felt his hands sliding under the shirt, stroking and teasing as he made his way to her aching breasts. She leaned into the pleasure his fingers brought, even through her silk lace bra.

“More, Rees, please more.”

“Hmmm,” he moaned, moving his hands.

She relished the freedom as he flipped open the buttons on her blouse. His hands created new desire in her they drifted over her skin, dipping inside her bra, while she still enjoyed his mouth on hers.

Melissa fingers flew over his shirt buttons, so she could play with his skin as well. She discovered crisply curling hair dusted across firmly bunched muscles on his chest, and a flat plain of abdominal muscles. His nipples budded to her fingers’ attention and she inwardly smiled at his response to her attention.

Just then, the phone rang.

“No-o-o-o,” she complained.

“Yep.” He sighed heavily. “I think it’s time to get to work.”

It was Pete and he had Phil with him. He was going to meet Jackson for “golf,” and he and Phil would take him to the airport. Jennifer would get Alyce there, too, on the pretence Pete had called. They’d be airborne in less than an hour.

“Okay, I guess we have to put this on the back burner for now,” Melissa said as she buttoned her shirt and tucked it back into her jeans.

“Just for now.” Rees smiled at her.

The doorbell rang, and Augie barked sharply. He zipped down the hall to the front door, and Melissa hurried after him. It was Sharon and she had questions.

“Where’s Rees?”

“In the kitchen. Why?”

“Do I make coffee for these guys? Do I get to listen to the wire?”

“I don’t really know.” Melissa did her best to keep from laughing as

FOX HOLLOW

she trotted to keep up with her friend.

“Rees, what’s the drill on a stake-out like this? Do I make coffee? Offer food? Do I get to hear what the perps are saying?”

Rees held up his hand. “Whoa...just a minute there, Sharon. The police are going to be at your place as a backup. Just in case something goes wrong.”

“I know, but I’ve never had a chance to be involved with something like this. It’s like Grisholm would say—”

“It’s not TV,” said Rees. “What it’ll be is a lot of sitting and waiting, hoping nothing goes wrong. If it does, those guys are going to be out of your house so fast, you’ll hardly see them go. Don’t follow.”

“But—”

“These are dangerous people, Sharon, and I don’t think you want to know them,” said Melissa. “You remember how I was the night they came here.”

“I know.” Sharon put her hand on Melissa’s shoulder. “It’s just such a different thing than I’m used to, you know?”

“Trust me, it’s not something you want to be personally involved with.” Melissa shivered.

“Want to keep Augie with me?”

“No. I want him here,” Melissa said stooping to scratch her buddy behind the ears.

“Okay...well, I’m going to scram. I’ve got some oatmeal cookies that should be just about done.” She blushed. “So...it’s the closest I’m ever likely to come to cloak and dagger.”

“Enjoy the stake-out,” said Rees, and all three laughed.

Melissa decided to work on designs and proposals to get her mind off the upcoming confrontation. Rees flipped open his laptop and started working as well, catching up on the day’s emails and scheduling appointments for the following week. They worked in companionable silence, stopping only to have some fruit, cheese and tea at lunchtime, then got back to work.

FOX HOLLOW

Ashley stopped by with all the forged documents. She stayed for only a few minutes, updating her partner on a couple of other cases, and then had to leave. She was hot on the trail of an accountant who'd absconded with his clients' money. "All goes well, and he's nabbed by tonight."

Melissa and Rees each went back to work.

* * *

Mid-afternoon the phone rang, and Melissa picked it up.

"Hey, babe. Axelson."

"What do you want?" Her voice was as cold an Arctic cold front.

"Just letting you know they're in the air. We'll be there just around four."

"We're expecting you."

"I'll just bet you are," he said, a leer shining through. "I'll just bet you are. Be sure to wear those shoes for me, babe." He laughed and hung up.

Melissa slammed the phone into the cradle. "Bastard."

"Axelson, I gather. His plane is on its way?"

"Yeah. They're airborne. He'll be here around four."

Rees glanced at his watch. "Okay."

Melissa was restless. "Feel like going for a walk?"

"You've got it. I'll get Augie's leash. You grab the stoop-and-scoop bag."

Melissa set the pace and they moved along at a good clip, walking for nearly an hour before returning to the house. They'd picked up several Saturday papers to read, and spread them out on the kitchen table. They drank tea, read the papers, and pretended the tension wasn't growing with every minute. Augie laid under the table, never more than three feet from his beloved Melissa.

About three-thirty, there was a knock at the kitchen door. Melissa jumped, and Augie barked frantically.

"That'll be Ty Corson," Rees reassured her.

FOX HOLLOW

Hand to her throat, Melissa could only nod.

When Rees let in Ty, Augie kept himself firmly between Melissa and the newcomer. His eyes never left the policeman, even when Melissa stroked him and spoke to him gently. "It's okay, Augie. He's here to help us."

The three of them went over everything that would be happening. Ty made sure his wire was well-concealed inside his sport coat, and tested how he was being received by his backup.

"Okay, Artie? You got me?...Uh, okay." He turned to Melissa. "This is going to sound strange, but could you come over and talk into my lapel?"

Melissa grinned. It could only be Sharon. She leaned into Ty's chest and murmured, "This is Blonde Bombshell...do you read me, Red Hot Mamma?"

"She reads you loud and clear," said Ty. "And she's laughing like crazy."

With the clowning around, Melissa relaxed a bit, too. *We can do this. I know we can.* She smiled at the two men with absolute confidence.

CHAPTER 18

Augie growled low in his throat just before there was another knock at the kitchen door that led to the garage. Rees gestured to Melissa and Ty, and got up to open it.

“Your car’s in the garage?”

“Hidden out of sight,” said Axelson as he and two of his men stepped into the kitchen. “Hey, who is this?” He pointed at Ty. “You never said anything about any cops.”

“This is Tyrone Smythe, my accountant,” stated Melissa, glaring at her tormentor. “I’m not going through this shit again because you try to trick me.”

“Would I do that?” Axelson was all innocence as he stared at Melissa’s breasts and licked his lips. “I’m really kind of hoping this doesn’t all work out, you know.”

“Not work out? You don’t want your lousy four million bucks back?” she asked.

“Well, it’d be the most I’ve ever paid, but it might be worth it to get

FOX HOLLOW

you into my stable.”

Melissa surged forward, hands clenched into claws. Rees stepped between them. “My suggestion, Axelson, is that you keep a civil tongue in your head. I wouldn’t want to see anything unfortunate happen to you.”

“Like something I might do,” spit Melissa.

Axelson’s two bodyguards stepped forward, but he signaled them back and laughed. “That’s part of what I’ll enjoy the most—breaking that spirit of yours, until you do what I say, when I say, to who I tell you to.”

“Not in *your* lifetime,” she snarled.

“Okay, okay,” said Axelson. “Let’s get this settled first.”

“There’s no first about it, Axelson. When this is done, if anything happens to Melissa...if she breaks a fingernail, you’re the one who’ll be the first the police visit,” said Rees.

Axelson snickered. “The police. Yeah, right, like they could do anything.”

“And I’ll be the last person you ever see in this lifetime.” Rees looked the loan shark directly in the eyes, and Axelson turned away.

“Whatever,” he muttered.

The private investigator’s phone rang. “McAllister.” He was silent for a few moments, then said, “Got it.” He clicked off the phone. “They’re just about here. Everybody clear on what they’re doing?”

There was a round of nods, and the two associates who’d arrived with Axelson disappeared through the French doors. They left the glass open a couple of inches. Melissa knew they’d be within hearing distance. She planned to sit where she’d be out of the line of fire if they came in guns blazing at some code word from their boss.

A few minutes later, the front doorbell rang, then the door opened. Jennifer shoved Alyce through the doorway first, and followed her, hand firmly around the other woman’s upper arm. Alyce sneered. “I should’ve known we’d end up at the milk toast bitch’s house.”

FOX HOLLOW

Pete followed, with Jackson behind him. He moved slowly and Phil prodded him with a gun he held to his back.

"All present and accounted for, boss," said Phil.

"Come in," invited Rees. "Grab a seat around the table."

Jackson and Alyce were forced into seats across from Melissa. Alyce's glare betrayed all the hate she had for the younger woman. "Bitch," she spit. Before anyone could move, she reached across the table and slapped Melissa hard. "Stupid bitch. I hate you."

The sharp sting of the blow told Melissa there was probably a red handprint already appearing on her cheek, but she didn't move a muscle except to tilt her head to the left. "You're calling me stupid...Exotica?"

The sharp intake of breath told Melissa she'd scored a direct hit. "You think your past is behind you?"

"Yes. Jackson will take care of me for the rest of my life. He said I deserve a life in the lap of luxury."

"Lap? Interesting choice of words. Did he make this promise during a lap dance?"

"You bitch," hissed Alyce.

"No more Ms. Miller from you, huh?" taunted Melissa. "Sit your ass back down in the chair. Your just desserts are coming."

Alyce's eyes opened wide and she glanced from Melissa to Rees. He just shrugged and looked at John Axelson. Alyce followed his gaze. She swallowed and sank silently into her chair when she saw the look on the face of the loan shark.

Melissa turned to Jackson. "Well, my dear, it would appear your business trip didn't go so well, now did it?"

"We'll see. It's not me who is in trouble here," he said. "I do believe you have a few problems to iron out. In fact, I'm not exactly sure why I'm here."

"You're here to pay Mr. Axelson the four million plus dollars you owe him," Melissa said evenly.

FOX HOLLOW

"I don't owe him that money, Melly. You do."

"You think so?"

"I know so...you're the one who borrowed it from him."

"And who was my go-between?"

"I set it up, but as I explained to our friend Mr. Axelson, the loan is yours...and if you can't pay it in cash, you'll have to work out an alternative arrangement."

His smile was cold, and Melissa felt herself falter for a moment. *How did I ever think he loved me? How did I fall for his scheme?*

"Problem is, Jackie dear, you left a bit of an electronic paper trail." She watched his face blanch.

"And you know the temp agency you called to cover for Alyce?" She waited until he nodded. "Well, they sent over an MBA who needed a temporary job. She's a very good forensic accountant. Jennifer, why don't you tell my ex-fiancé here just where his money is now, and where it's been."

Jennifer filled in the details of Jackson's attempts to cover up the money trail. She finished with, "But the problem is, you're just not as smart as you think you are, Jackson...or as smart as Melissa here."

"You two snotty sluts think you have this figured out. Good for you," Jackson snarled. "All you figured out is where the money is. If Axelson is satisfied to get his money back with no interest, so be it. It has nothing to do with me."

"And Fox Hollow will fold without the cash influx that money provided. Face it, Melly, you've lost. I've destroyed you just like your parents destroyed mine." He laughed coldly. "You're alone, with no money, no future, no hope."

"That's where you're wrong again, darling," said Melissa. "When Jennifer found the money, she explained to her banking friends what was going on. She asked them to hold the funds. That's why you couldn't get that little transfer to go through to the bank in Bermuda."

Jackson glared at Jennifer who merely lifted her eyebrows.

FOX HOLLOW

"Jennifer also asked them to slide the money into a short-term, day-to-day investment that big accounts use. There is over four point five million in the account right this minute." She turned to the loan shark. "Is half a million enough profit for you on this? It's only been a few days after all."

"Sure, I guess." Axelson only glanced at her. His gaze flew back to Rees, who nodded at him. "Yeah, a half mill on this for a few days is fine."

"Jennifer, I'm sure Phil has provided you with the account number Mr. Axelson's money should be transferred to."

"He has. I've got my laptop set to make the transfer whenever you're ready."

Melissa turned back to Jackson. "Are you ready?"

"Like hell," he said. "I'll leave you out to dry with these gangsters. Axelson said he'd have you servicing him and his buddies in a week. Deal with them, you stupid bitch."

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry you said that." Melissa nodded to Phil.

Phil stood up and grabbed Jackson by his designer, Egyptian cotton shirt front. Several of the buttons popped loose as he hauled him to his feet.

"Wait," yelled Jackson. "Hang on. Let me think."

Phil twisted the shirt and Jackson yelped again. "Okay, okay. Let me have the computer."

"No chance in the world," said Jennifer. "You give me your account access code, and I'll make the transfer."

"Jalyfun," he muttered sullenly. He dropped back into the chair and glared at her.

"Would you spell that?"

"J-a-l-y-f-u-n."

"Isn't that too cute for words," said Axelson. "I want my money in my account, and I'm out of here."

"I'm making the transfer now," said Jennifer.

FOX HOLLOW

Rees spoke for the first time. "Axelson, you don't leave until you tear up your copy of any documents you have stating Melissa owes you one red cent."

"I'll do it."

"Yes, you will. Right here as soon as you have your money back. That's why I told you to bring them."

"Fine."

"Transfer is complete," said Jennifer.

"Documents, Axelson." Rees held out his hand.

The loan shark opened up his briefcase, pulled out a sheaf of papers and handed them to the private investigator. "Satisfied?"

"Nope. I want you to tear these up into tiny pieces right here and now."

"You people are anal, do you know that?"

"Maybe. But you'll have no hold on Melissa or Fox Hollow when this is over and done with. And that's how it's going to be."

With exaggerated movements, Axelson tore the sheets of paper into small shreds and scattered them across the kitchen table. "Good enough?"

"Just fine, thanks," said Rees. "Your part here is done. You can go now."

"Not soon enough," said Axelson. He nodded at Phil, then shouted to his two associates waiting outside the French doors.

In moments, they were gone.

"I'm out of here," said Jackson. "Come on, Alyce."

"No, not quite so fast," responded Rees. "We have a few more details to iron out."

"Fuck you."

"No...I'm afraid it's you who is fucked," said Rees conversationally. "There's still the little matter of a number of forged documents, including ownership of the land development known as Fox Hollow."

FOX HOLLOW

“That belongs to me.” Jackson slammed his hand on the table for emphasis. “My family’s blood paid for that land.”

“Not exactly,” corrected Rees. “Melissa’s insurance settlement on her parents’ deaths paid for the land, and you let her think the two of you owned it jointly. In fact, you did more than let her think that. You misled her into believing she had a share in the property when you’d registered it in your own name only.”

“There’s no law against owning land.”

“No, there isn’t. But there are several laws against forgery and fraud.”

Jackson snorted. “Yeah, right. You can’t prove a damned thing.”

Rees shook his head and looked around the table. “Again, so wrong. Jackson, don’t you ever get tired of being an asshole?”

“What?” He surged to his feet.

“I asked you if you ever get tired of being an asshole. Now sit down,” Rees said standing toe to toe with him. “You’re wrong about things more than you’re ever right. Take this whole family story you’ve concocted.”

Jackson sank back into his chair, slouching insolently. “I didn’t concoct anything. My family’s blood is on that bitch’s hands.” He pointed at Melissa.

“Not even close,” she answered. “My family did their best to help you and your dad after your mom died. When your dad starting drinking, where did you stay half the time so you wouldn’t end up in foster care? And when your dad convinced the licensing board that he was clean and sober, who hired him to fly them?” Her voice rose, pain threaded through it. “My parents did. And they paid with their lives.”

“They forced him—”

“Don’t try to foist your lies off on me any more, you piece of shit. I’ve seen the report from the NTSB. It’s not just your word now. Your father had been drinking and shouldn’t have been in the cockpit. My parents had no idea. They were trying to give him a chance to start

FOX HOLLOW

over.”

“Lying bitch.”

“No. You’ve told the lies so often you can’t remember the truth, Jackson. My family tried over and over to help yours when they needed a hand. And who wouldn’t need a hand with the death of a mother? But you couldn’t accept the truth. You’ve distorted it and twisted it until it matches your sick fantasy. Well, it’s over...all of it.”

“What else do you think I’ve done?” Jackson asked.

“You’ve forged—or had Alyce forge—my name on many documents. All of them set up to destroy me. I was personally guaranteeing loans, resale values on Fox Hollow homes, promising to refund all the money on transactions that went over budget by more than three percent. Shall I go on?”

“So what?” cried out Alyce. “You have no proof of any of this. You’re just hysterical because your boyfriend left you for me.”

Melissa laughed so hard, tears ran down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Alyce. I really shouldn’t laugh at you, but did you hear how you sound? It’s like something out of high school. Do you really think I’d engage in this discussion without proof?”

Melissa stalked to the folder on the counter and picked it up. She returned to the table and tossed it into the center. Paper slid across the glistening oak surface. “Pick one. Any one.”

Alyce reached out.

“Leave it,” barked Jackson, and she jerked her hand back instantly. “You have nothing on us.”

“The evidence is right here,” said Melissa.

“Ha! The deluded ravings of a woman trying to escape arrest when these schemes of yours start to collapse.”

“Not at all.” Melissa was amazed at how calm she felt. “These are from your safe. It would seem your darling Alyce forgot to clear it out after you left.”

“Stupid slut,” he snarled at his accomplice.

FOX HOLLOW

"You're one to talk," she spit back. "She got *your* money."

Jackson backhanded Alyce and she slunk down in her chair, snuffling and rubbing at the red mark on her cheek. "You're next," he threatened Melissa.

"Like hell. Your games are over and done with, Jackson. These documents will put you in jail."

"Not likely." He stood up and grabbed the file folder, shoving the papers back into it. Then he strode to the kitchen sink, pulling a lighter from his pocket as he went.

Melissa was right behind him, and she grabbed his shoulder with both hands in an attempt to spin him around. "Stop it. It's too late," she cried.

"No." He brushed her aside and kept walking.

Melissa hit the edge of the kitchen island with her hip and stumbled sideways, losing her balance. Rees jumped up and caught her before she fell to the floor. "You okay, Lissa?" His voice was soft.

Jackson sneered. "So that's how it is. I bet she's sleeping with you to get you to do this, huh, McAllister?"

Rees didn't even look up. "Shut up, Jackson. It's over and you know it."

"No way." He was at the sink tossing the contents of the folder into it, then flicked the lighter. "Kiss your *evidence* good-bye, sweetheart."

"No," Melissa screamed, surging to her feet in a vain attempt to get to the sink in time.

"Easy," soothed Rees as the papers caught fire.

"No," she moaned sinking back into his embrace. "He's burning the evidence of everything he's done to me."

"No, he isn't," said Ty. "Those are just copies. The originals are already at the prosecutor's office, Melissa."

"What do I care?" asked Jackson. "It's not my signature on those documents."

The air was torn by the wild scream from Alyce's throat. She ripped

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open her purse and rooted through it, yanking out a handgun. She pointed it at Jackson and pulled the trigger just as Melissa hit her arm yelling, "Look out!"

Melissa saw Pete flinch, then she spotted a puddle of red forming on the floor below him. Looking up, she saw the stain spreading across his shirt. Horrified, she ran to him flickering her hands over him searching for the wound, just as he slumped against her.

She cried out. "Ty, get help!"

Ty yelled, "Now! Get in here now. And get an ambulance."

Jennifer ran across the room, grabbing a dishtowel on her way, and dropped to the floor beside Pete and Melissa. "Where's he shot?" she asked as she folded the towel into a pad.

Melissa pointed with her chin to where her hand was pressed against his lower right side. "There."

Jennifer replaced Melissa's hand with the cloth and held it tightly against the wound.

"Pete, it's Jennifer. Hang on, darling," she begged. "Help is on the way."

There was no response.

CHAPTER 19

Jackson looked at Alyce and jerked his head toward the kitchen door leading to the garage. As the flames consumed the documents in the sink, he stepped to the fridge.

“You need ice for that,” he said to cover his movement. He pulled open the door and grabbed a frozen leg of lamb, striking the back of Rees’ head just as he started to swing around.

“Rees,” Melissa screamed as he slipped to the floor. She ran to his side.

Alyce looked at her and pointed the gun.

“Never mind,” said Jackson. “Let’s just get out of here.” He’d reached Alyce and shoved her toward the door.

At that moment, a grey blur flew from under the table and raced to the door. There, Augie spun around and faced the two humans who’d hurt his people and their friends. He lowered his head, bared his teeth and growled low in his throat.

“Get out of the way, you stupid mutt,” said Jackson. “Move it,

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Alyce. The dog's a big chicken. It's not going to hurt you...or stop us."

Alyce stepped forward tentatively, gun pointed at the Keeshond. Jackson shoved her and threw her off balance. Augie sprang forward, leaping into the air and grabbing her by the arm. Alyce screamed and dropped the gun. Instantly, Augie let go of her and went back to guarding the door and preventing their exit.

Jackson began kicking at the dog. Augie, ever agile, dodged to the side. Jackson tried again. This time Augie slipped slightly on the ceramic tile and Jackson's foot connected with his shoulder. With a sharp yip, Augie bounced back out of range, but would not abandon his post.

"Get the chair," Jackson ordered Alyce. "And push the bastard into the corner."

Alyce turned to get the chair just in time for Melissa to grab her by the hair. "You don't lay a finger on my dog." Her voice froze Alyce in place, and Melissa slammed her into the chair. "Ty," she called out loudly. "They're trying to get away."

Feet pounded down the hall as Ty raced back to them. Jackson stepped forward, kicking out again, but Augie had had enough. He seized Jackson's calf and held on tightly, even when the man rained down punches on his back and shoulders. He just grunted and absorbed the blows. The moment Ty reached the fray, Augie let go and sagged to the floor, whining slightly. Ty's fist connected with Jackson's jaw and the man went down without a word. The police officer clipped Jackson's hands together with a pair of handcuffs as Melissa rushed to Augie. She stroked him, shuddering as he whimpered at her gentle touch. "He's hurt," she whispered to Ty. "We've got to get him to a vet."

"The police vet is always available. I'll get a squad car here now." Ty punched a number into the phone and issued a series of orders.

Jennifer remained on the floor with the still-unconscious Pete, holding the temporary bandage in place. "Is the ambulance almost

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here?”

“It’s less than two minutes away,” said Ty.

“The bleeding has slowed, but I’ll be glad when they’re here. “ She tried a tentative smile. “He’s beginning to come around.”

Sure enough there were some moans and Pete began to move.

“Sshh,” Jennifer soothed him. “Just stay still. Help is almost here.”

“Rees?”

“Took a whack on the head, but Melissa is with him,” she explained.

Just then, three officers raced down the hall, guns drawn. “All under control, guys,” yelled Ty. “The situation is static.”

The officers holstered their weapons and began to help Ty get Jackson and Alyce on their feet. Jackson was groggy, but swearing up a storm as he came to.

“You stupid bitch,” he snarled at Melissa. “Your fucking family ruined my life. I nearly had you, though. Damned stupid son-of-a-bitch dog.” He tried to kick Augie again on his way past him. Melissa stepped right up to the man she’d once thought to spend the rest of her life with, stopping with her face no more than two inches from her former fiancé’s face.

“You touch Augie again, and I will personally see you dead on the spot.”

He paled at the conviction in her voice.

“Dead,” she repeated.

“Did you hear that, officer?” said Jackson. “She threatened me.”

“Not the way I heard it,” answered Ty. “I heard you threaten to harm her dog, and I heard her tell you not to do it. I’d suggest you take her advice to heart.” He pushed Jackson along.

“That ugly mutt bit me,” whined Alyce. “It tried to tear my arm off. Shoot it,” she ordered the officer.

He laughed in her face. “I don’t see a mark on you, lady.”

“It bit me,” she insisted sticking her arm in the cop’s face.

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“Where?”

“Well, right there—” She stopped. There wasn’t even a red mark. Augie hadn’t broken the skin, and it was unlikely she’d even bruise.

“Well, it bit my leg, and I’m sure I’m bleeding,” said Jackson.

“I’m sure he didn’t bite you, except perhaps to protect himself,” said Ty. “If you were attacking him, though, and the dog defended himself, we’ll just add animal abuse to your list of charges.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. Now get moving.” He shoved Jackson out of the kitchen.

Melissa knelt on the floor between Augie and Rees, stroking one then the other as she cried. “Please be okay,” she pleaded to each of them. “Please be okay.”

Rees began to stir. “Ty, he’s coming around,” she cried out. “Rees is coming around.”

Ty squatted beside his friend as Rees’ eyes flickered open. Immediately the private investigator reached for his gun concealed in his ankle holster.

“Whoa, there, Rees,” said Ty. “Everything’s under control. You took a nasty thump on the noggin, and Pete has a bullet in him, but we’ve got Jackson and Alyce in custody.”

“Melissa?” His voice was no more than a whisper.

“I’m fine, Rees. I’m right here.”

“Pete?” he croaked.

“He has a flesh wound in his side that bled a lot, but Jennifer’s got it.”

Rees moved his head slightly until he could see Melissa. “You’re crying.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay...and so sad Augie’s hurt.”

“Augie’s hurt?” He tried to get up.

Just then the EMTs poured into the room, and Rees couldn’t see her any more.

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* * *

It took well over an hour, but the paperwork, the checkups and the details were finally taken care of. The police vet had arrived with his portable clinic in a van and thoroughly examined Augie, including taking x-rays of his back and scapula. Pete had been taken to the hospital for treatment with Jennifer refusing to leave his side. Rees had promised to report for x-rays of his head once they knew Augie was all right. It had been impossible to get him into the ambulance. Melissa intended to make sure he kept his promise to visit the emergency room.

When the vet came back into the kitchen, he found Melissa curled up with her beloved pet on the comforter she'd put down for him. Her heart pounded as she waited for his diagnosis.

"Is anything broken?"

"No. The x-rays show no fractures, no dislocations."

Melissa's smile lit up the room. "Thank God."

The vet smiled back at her. "He's going to be sore for a few days, but luckily he's only bruised. He's one brave, little guy, you know. From everything I heard, he kept those two from escaping, or from hurting anyone else."

"He sure did." Melissa's smile was incandescent and she hugged Augie gently. "I've always known how special a boy he is."

Augie wagged his tail and swiped his tongue gently over her earlobe. Melissa giggled, and the vet and Rees couldn't help laughing along with her.

"If you ever decide to become a police dog," the vet said, ruffling Augie's ears, "you've got my approval."

Augie snuffed quietly and laid his head on Melissa's knee.

"I think he's found his mission in life," said Rees circling both woman and dog with his arms.

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Melissa climbed out of the Jeep at the Fox Hollow field site, Augie hopping down beside her. They'd closed down the city office and moved the whole operation out here. Melissa loved the relaxed, friendly, business-like atmosphere Jennifer had brought to the company since the two of them had joined forces and made the partnership official.

"Come on, buddy. Let's go into the office." He trotted happily at her side.

Pushing open the front door, Melissa was surprised to see there was no one in the main area. She called out, "Jennifer?"

"In the board room," her partner answered.

When Melissa pushed open the door, she found the room crowded with people. "Surprise!" they shouted.

"What's this?" Melissa asked looking around the room. She spotted

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clients, friends, associates and employees. Even Sharon was there.

Rees stepped forward and handed her a glass of champagne. “Today we celebrate! Fox Hollow is now officially yours and Jennifer’s. The loans are paid in full and the property is free and clear.”

She raised her glass. “I’ll sure drink to that.”

Everyone joined her in the laughter, shouting congratulations to the partners.

“But that’s not all we’re celebrating,” said Jennifer. “I got a call from the prosecutor this afternoon. Jackson and Alyce made a deal. In exchange for pleading guilty and providing all the details of the frauds they perpetrated, they each were given sentences they can serve concurrently. But—” She raised her glass and smiled. “—it’s going to take them a while to get those sentences served. Jackson got fifty years, and Alyce won’t see the light of day for thirty-five years.”

“It’s what they deserved,” said Rees. “For what they tried to do to Melissa.”

“Thank you,” she answered bowing her head in acceptance.

“There are a couple more things,” said Rees. “I understand you were nominated for a design award?”

“I was, and it truly is an honor just to be nominated. No,” she said holding up her hand to stop the catcalls and hoots. “Really, for an architect with my young portfolio, it really is an honor to be recognized with a nomination.”

“Well, your playroom design for the Collins’ finished first in its category. You’ll need to travel to Victoria in about six weeks to attend the presentation ceremony.”

“Wow!” Melissa couldn’t think of anything more to say. “Wow!”

“I think you could use some help on the acceptance speech,” said Jennifer, smiling. The group in the conference room laughed.

“I agree. Wow is how I feel, but I think they’ll expect me to be a bit more articulate.” Melissa joined the laughter, enjoying the moment with her friends and staff, but most especially with Rees.

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“There’s one more thing,” said Rees.

“Yes?” She turned to him.

“Augie,” he said. “Take it to Lissa.”

Obediently, Augie trotted to her, a woven handle clenched in his teeth. A beautiful, small, round wicker basket dangled below his chin. He sat in front of her and waited for her to take it from him. Once she did, he woofed to her.

“Look in it,” said Rees.

When Melissa peered into the basket, a gorgeous diamond ring sparkled up at her. She gasped. Tears glittered in her eyes as she looked at Rees. He stepped forward and sank to his knees beside Augie.

“Will you marry me, Lissa? Can we spend the rest of our lives together?”

She smiled at him and sank to her knees as well. “Of course.”

As the cheers of their friends surrounded them, Rees and Melissa joined in a kiss, each reaching out a hand to rest on Augie’s back.

LIBBY MCKINMER

Words have formed the cornerstone of Libby's life. Her father read poetry to Libby's mother during her pregnancy...and the love of reading and writing was born with her. She was a "library brat" as a child, visiting regularly to feed her desire to read.

Libby concentrated on a Bachelor's Degree in English Literature and Classical Literature and was the first to graduate from her university with a double major in this combination.

This writer has always been a voracious reader, too, and usually has several books on the go at any given time. Mystery, romantic-suspense, spy thriller or mainstream—if it's well-written and engaging, she enjoys it.

Libby has been the creative director of a radio station, a newspaper reporter and editor, the editor of one national and several corporate newsletters, and the senior editorial director of a regional women's magazine. Additionally, she has written dozens of freelance magazine articles from an interview with an Olympian to "How-To" articles.

In addition to writing, Libby is also an editor and has worked with many authors on award-winning books. "I love taking a good book and helping an author make it the best it can be. And if she or he wins an award with that book, I'm so proud!"

Outside of her professional life, Libby has always enjoyed having a variety of animals in her life. You'll notice most of her central characters have pets. "Main characters just aren't complete if there isn't a cat, dog, bird or some other pet in their lives. It helps me see what that character is like as a person," said Libby with a grin, surrounded by her furry writing partners.

Libby was a member of the Delta Society and developed one of the first pet-facilitated therapy programs in her community.

If you'd like to write to her, please feel free to do so at libbymckinmer@libbymckinmer.com. She's always thrilled to hear from her fans.

* * *

***Don't miss Tracks, by Libby McKinmer, available now from
Amber Quill Press, LLC***

*Loves Romances 2002 Reviewers Choice Golden
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All About Murder—Bloody Dagger Award Nominee!

When another crime of sexual assault is reported, detective Emily Evans is assigned the case. Find the serial rapist who's attacking successful, professional women while leaving no clues behind. Emily's younger sister had been raped and murdered three years earlier, and her murderer had evaded capture. Now Emily has the opportunity to stop a rapist in her own city.

But there's significant danger in setting a trap for so violent a criminal. The bait must be perfect and Emily has no plan to put anyone but herself at risk.

As she talks to victims, she discovers their common link is dating through the personals. That sends Emily to meet Mac Landon, the GQ-looking bachelor who edits the advertising section of The Yorkton Daily Gazette. Though Emily is attracted to Mac, her first priority, she tries to tell herself, is to solve the case.

Emily begins dating through the personal ads despite Mac's worry, and soon a darker presence begins to cast its shadow. And as the killer stalks Emily, will Mac find her in time to help her stop the rapist—or will their newfound love be stopped in its tracks?

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