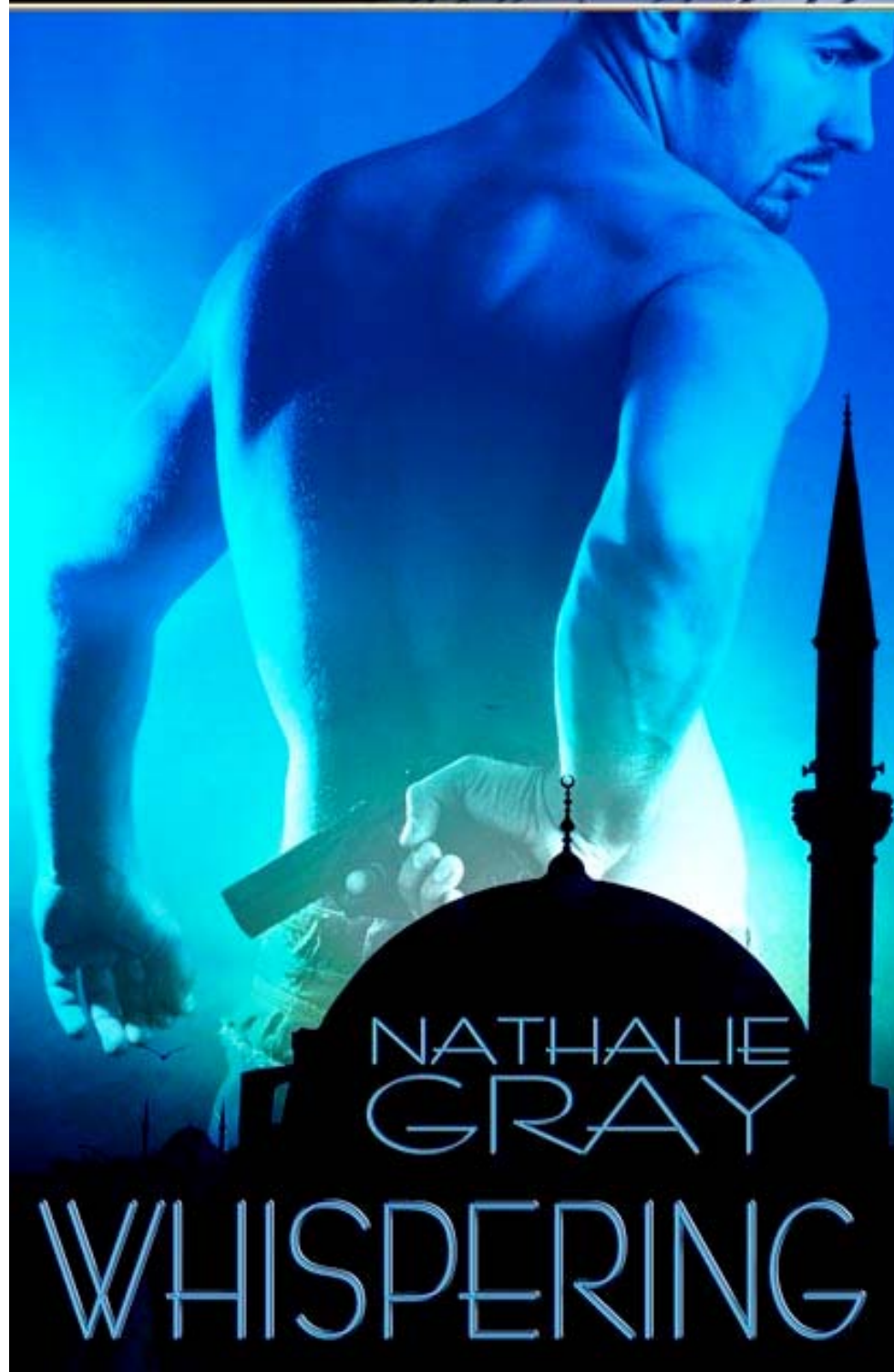


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



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Whispering

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WHISPERING

Nathalie Gray

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Prologue

Established more than twelve years ago, Gentlemen Inc. is a global male escort agency that caters exclusively to a female clientele, offering a wide range of services at home and worldwide. At Gentlemen Inc., we understand some needs transcend the regular fare offered elsewhere, be it for a chic affair or a show of force.

Wish to make a splash at a corporate or social event?

Need a bodyguard on your travels?

Require someone to show a belligerent ex-flame the door?

All our escorts are multilingual, pleasing to the eye, cognizant in proper etiquette from various regions of the globe and well versed in martial arts or other close protection protocols.

Give us a call. We at Gentlemen Inc. look forward to meeting your every need.

Chapter One

"There is beautiful vulnerability with the back of a woman's neck," Kivanç murmured in the woman's ear as he poured wine into her glass. Goose bumps pebbled the skin of her forearm. "How the fine hairs converge to the spine and the base of her skull. It is like a sensual consent, a subtle submission. Nothing, in my opinion, is more arousing than a woman denuding her nape for a man's fingers to caress, his lips to taste." He dabbed the bottle mouth with the linen serviette as he straightened.

"Ever the charmer, Kivanç," Darlene said. Her round cheeks blushed as she looked over the restaurant table at her husband, who smiled and shook his head. "I think we'll kidnap you and take you home when we go back to Canada."

Kivanç grinned, poured wine the color of liquid rubies in the husband's glass. "What can I say? I love women."

"And women love you," her husband replied. His wide shoulders shook when he laughed. Canada's consul to Turkey, Andrew Moss looked exactly how Kivanç would expect from a man of that nation—hardy and genial.

By the corner of his eye, Kivanç noticed one of his employees trying to gain his attention with not-so-subtle hand gestures. Smiling at his favorite patrons, Kivanç bowed slightly then joined Nihal as she stood and nervously wrung her hands.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Kivanç," she said under her breath. "But they demand to see the manager."

Kivanç knew the type. "I will take care of it. Thank you."

Obviously relieved, Nihal smiled then rushed away to greet more patrons standing at the door. He had opened The Marmara only a couple of years before and already had attained the prized title of Best Table in Istanbul. Hard work always paid off in the end. Smiling, Kivanç made his way to two couples who sat at the table nearest to the rooftop terrace. His own design. The restaurant occupied the last floor of a grand old building. He had commissioned architects and designers to turn the old bank into an oasis of gourmet dining amidst warm, earthy tones with exposed beams and mosaic walls that opened onto a large terrace. He had potted plum trees set all around the edge of the rooftop, their branches strewn with tiny amber lights. Cream-colored draperies, matching the restaurant linen, festooned the massive wooden kiosk a skilled artisan and his sons had built for him. As if one ate outside under the stars. Plus, the view of Istanbul was the best in town. His own little Garden of Eden.

"Ladies," he said, smiling at the two women and keeping his gaze on them alone. He usually ignored men if they were accompanied. "How may I assist you?"

"The lamb," one of them said, her dyed red hair reflecting the closest oil lamp. He could not place her accent other than northern Europe. "It is underdone."

Kivanç did not tell her his chef would cry that the meat on her plate, when cooked properly, *should* be pink and not burned to a crisp. Instead, he acknowledged her request with a nod. "Of course, my apologies." He bent a bit closer to her, his gaze still on hers, and gently leaned on the corner of the table with his fingers. "It would be my delight to rectify this situation. What would please you?"

She blushed, glanced at one of the men sitting diagonally from her. Kivanç would not be able to recognize him in fifteen minutes. "Well, erm, maybe cook it a bit more?"

"I will have my chef prepare another plate for you. Cooked to your specifications. And I notice that you have no wine. Could I offer you one of my personal best? On the house."

He left them nodding and smiling and with one last look at the woman who preferred her meat charred, strode across the kitchen, calling requests. Chef must have been busy because he did not rail against the vile populace who knew nothing of his culinary genius and just set to the task. Three levels down, past his own apartment underneath the restaurant and into the wine cellar—an old stone vault—he found the bottle he knew would impress and please his patrons. On his way back up, his cell phone's text message alarm bleeped. He stopped to check it...and almost dropped the bottle on the steps when he saw the sender's name.

"Adriano," he murmured, flicking the cell phone on with his thumbnail.

A few years ago and through a mutual acquaintance, an Italian man had contacted him with a most outlandish offer—freelance as an escort to women. More than mere escort in fact, but play roles. Companion, accessory and even bodyguard. At first, Kivanç had wanted nothing to do with any of the crazy enterprise. But Adriano had been persistent and in the end, with the help of several case files stripped of any identifiers, Kivanç had come to view the man's agency as filling a genuine need. He had joined Gentlemen Inc., fulfilled his first task, given the golden card to his happy "client" and never looked back. To date, with seventeen cases, he surmised he was Adriano's second or third most prolific member. He had also come to view all women as Ladies, a trait shared with his shadowy employer, who always referred to them with a capital L, in every instance of the word.

Kivanç set the bottle on the step and accessed his message.

From: Adriano

To: Kivanç

Subject: Lady Jillian Moss

Buongiorno, Kivanç,

The Canadian consulate will host a gala in honor of its national day tomorrow 1 July...

Kivanç laughed out loud. Such coincidences never happened. The consul and his wife presently sat a stone's throw away. Was Adriano in town? Indeed sitting here at The Marmara? He looked up when one of his employees poked his head in the darkened stairway, drawn no doubt by the sound of laughter, noticed Kivanç on the phone and offered an apologetic smile. He mouthed the word "Sorry" as he withdrew.

Adriano had access to very, very fresh information. Which could have been worrying had he not always acted in the most circumspect and courteous way. Kivanç read on.

The consul's youngest sister Lady Jillian is due to land in Istanbul sometime tomorrow morning. She will need a companion for the gala. As usual, any of her passions should be met with enthusiasm and support, no matter how peculiar they may seem. From what I have gathered, she is quite the adventuress.

Kivanç could not remember a single time where Adriano had exhorted him to meet a Lady's "passions". Unless something had become lost in translation, which was plausible since they corresponded in English with neither of them being a native speaker.

If you accept the task, I will e-mail you a file with the pertinent information on the Lady and will make the appropriate deposit once you contact me with your decision.

Arrivederci.

AdL

Kivanç replied to his secretive employer, half expecting to hear a cell phone going off in the dining room. His reply was brief.

From: Kivanç

To: Adriano

Re: Subject: Lady Jillian Moss

Buongiorno, Adriano,

I look forward to meeting Lady Jillian. As per our initial agreement, please make the deposit to the account on file. Thank you.

Now all he had to do was secure an invitation to the gala. And he knew just the two persons to ask.

* * * * *

"I like your shirt." The flight attendant smiled.

Jill pulled on the edge of her turquoise T-shirt, looked down at the black-and-white message that read *If you can read this, you're in my roundhouse kick range*. She grinned. "Yeah, a woman can never be too safe."

"Have a pleasant stay in Turkey," the agent replied, already on to the next passenger.

"Oh, I *will*."

She'd come to Turkey to take a break, hang out with her brother and sister-in-law. Take a breather. Not necessarily from her translation work, which was most excellent and paid well. It was from her extracurricular activities that she needed a break.

Jill followed the throngs of passengers through the accordion tunnel, maneuvered through a particularly thick cluster of young, boisterous travelers—a sports team maybe? After clearing customs and bypassing the luggage carousel—she always traveled light, one backpack presently on her shoulder and that was it—she entered the arrival terminal and scanned the expectant faces for one she knew. Andy had said he'd be there himself if he could, or would send the chauffeur.

"Jill!"

She turned at the excited voice of her sister-in-law, who was brandishing flowers, balloons, a purse and cell phone. Multitasking was an art form with Darlene.

"Hey! It's good to see you!"

Jill dropped the backpack and opened her arms a split second before a vortex of nylon ribbons, plastic wrapping paper and hard leather purse corners slammed into her. Darlene was many things. Subtle she was not. A perfect fit in the family of intrepid and opinionated Moss women. Her mom, sisters and she had loved Darlene on sight when Andy brought her home fifteen years before.

With a grin bright enough to power a nuclear plant, Darlene relinquished flowers and balloons. "Did you have a good flight? Here, let me help with that." She grabbed the backpack strap. "Is that all you have?"

"That's it. And yeah, I had good flights, plural, all three of them."

"*What?*"

"Got delayed in Toronto then in Frankfurt. Did you know folks can smoke almost right off the airplane there? Man, it reeked. Then I was told that flight had been rerouted through Munich instead."

"Oh my God!" Darlene shook her head. "Europe and smoking. It's getting better now."

Two abreast, they cleaved a path through the crowd and dodged runaway luggage buggies. Darlene reached the exit doors' rubber mat first. The glass panels slid into the walls. "Did you get my text?"

"No, why?"

"Damn. I was sure I'd get you before you left. There's a function tonight for Canada Day. A gala."

Jill groaned but gave her sister-in-law a big grin when she turned, beaming.

"All kinds of gowns, Jill, very exciting. Lots of shiny. And the men...mmm. And can you spell sequins!"

"I'd rather not," Jill replied, laughing.

As translator for the Canadian government, she *could* spell sequins and its French equivalent *paillettes*. But the thought of a gala... Ugh. So unlike her regular life at home. She loved traveling and meeting new people, visiting ancient sites. One of her – many – goals was to swim in all five of the world's oceans. Or at least dip a foot.

"I'll lend you something." Darlene waved to a pair of men waiting by a black sedan with tinted windows. One wore a military uniform.

"Not a dress!"

They shared a laugh. "Dress pants and a nice top?"

"Perfect."

"Hi there, thanks," Jill said to the soldier who popped the trunk for her. Smiling, he took her backpack, looked around for the rest.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

As the women sat in the back, both men took the front seats with the one in regular clothes driving. Smoothly, he pulled out of the terminal parking, stopped at a booth to show some sort of ID. The man in the booth languidly waved them by. Despite the AC blasting out the vents, Jill still felt the oppressive heat.

While Darlene gave her a full report of the last three days – they called each other often – Jill looked out the window to take in as much as she could of this fabled city. She'd read about it, watched movies filmed on location, but any kind of rendition paled compared to the original thing. A gem. A true gem. Modernism and history battled for real estate. In one city block, she saw shiny Mercedes-Benzes, a pickup held together by willpower alone, more mopeds than in her entire life and even a donkey lugging some type of leaves. Mosques, bridges, markets, churches, trams, shops, street vendors. Buildings flashed by, some of them old, others older. Rubbing elbows with Ottoman architecture were glass and steel banks and insurance companies' headquarters that stabbed upward into the blue Turkish sky. There was energy in Istanbul. Energy that bordered on frenzy. She *loved* it!

They finally pulled into a narrow street bordered with huge trees. White stately façades peeked from behind branches and tall wrought iron fences. Turkish security guards – whoa, talk about tight uniforms...not that she minded – moved temporary blockades aside. The driver skillfully navigated the S-shaped entry while more guards, this time Canadian military police, made room for the car to pass into a low arch. Inside the compound proper, the driver parked under a carport that could easily fit a fleet of school buses.

"Are you hungry?" Darlene asked. The question pulled Jill out of admiring the way pants fit those soldiers' legs. Nice.

"Nah, later maybe. I'm jetlagged like it's not funny."

"I'll show you to your room then. Andy's in a meeting for tonight."

"Oh yeah, the gala." Fun. Not.

Darlene had a grin on her that instantly put Jill on full smell-o-fish alert. "What?"

"Nothing." She shouldered the backpack the driver had just given her. Let Jill take care of the welcome accessories.

Jill overtook her before Darlene could use the doorway as an escape route. "No, really. *What?*"

"What? I told you, *nothing*. There's just a formal gala. That's all."

Jill groaned. "What's his name?"

Darlene's grin widened. "Damn. You're good."

"So 'Damn' is his name?"

"Kivanç. Kivanç Demir. Andy figured you'd like company so he paired you with Kivanç." Darlene said the first name "Kee-vahnsh" with a sigh.

"That good?"

"You know that guy in the movie *The Mummy*? The Egyptian guy with the tattoos on his face? Almost like that, but no mustache or beard, and that accent... Plus, he's very, very nice. He'll meet us at the party."

Jill rolled her eyes. It wouldn't be the first time Darlene and Andy conspired to find her a companion, short- or long-term. She enjoyed uncomplicated sex with clean, nice men, not long-term relationships, but if he was that handsome *plus* nice, maybe the gala wouldn't be such a drag after all.

"Okay, I'll play nice. But I'm telling you, Andy's getting an earful when he gets here."

"That so?"

Jill couldn't help the *squee* of pleasure as she turned to find her big brother in the doorway. A bear of a man, he practically filled it. She didn't even slow down when she threw herself at him, arms wide for a tackle-hug that made him *humph* loudly. She collided against a chest both wide and rock-hard. She'd missed him so much.

He easily lifted her with his hug. "I missed you, Jill."

"So did I." Another couple of seconds of hearty squeezing before she was deposited back on earth.

"So, what's with this Keeee-vahnnnnsh?" Jill moaned in a breathless imitation of Darlene.

"You'll thank me tonight, baby girl." Her sister-in-law seemed sure of herself. The guy must be something else.

"We'll see."

Andy winked. "Did you bring it?"

Jill played along. "Bring what?"

"Maybe Darlene will only have dresses to loan you —"

"Backpack," Jill cut in. "Two bottles of genuine Nova Scotia maple wine. You realize I took valuable backpack space to bring you those. Plus the bubble wrap."

Andy's face lit up with a big grin. "I do. I owe you one."

"Two."

Darlene and Andy each took something from her until she had nothing to carry and accompanied her to the guestroom, a large, airy bedroom with its own three-piece bath. Mosaic tile floors, white stucco walls, Ottoman and Canadian décor. As soon as a short silence settled—a feat in itself with three motormouths in one location—Jill started to pick up faint voices as if carried on a breeze. They grew louder until she had to squint to concentrate on the two people with her in the room.

Focus.

"Are you okay?" Andy asked.

She didn't tell him about *them*. Had never told anyone. Not because she was embarrassed by her singular "gift" but because she didn't want to have to deal with the explanations and the questions.

After some crunchy gossip, enthusiastic rummaging through the backpack for those prized bottles and other gifts, they left her so she could get a quick nap. By the time she put her stuff away in the armoire and had taken a quick shower, she was dead on her feet. Good, because she didn't want to lie awake, listening to *them*. The faint ribbons of conversations still reached her, like static or a radio channel not quite on the proper number. This time in languages she couldn't understand.

Because like that kid in the movie, she could "see dead people". No, actually, she could *hear* them. Could hear ghosts.

Chapter Two

"Lord thunderin' Jesus," Jill exclaimed. She forgot too late to keep a leash on her loud voice and the closest guests turned to her with amused expressions on their faces.

"Fancy, eh?" Darlene replied through a politician's smile. "My feet are killing me and I'm still in the doorway."

Jill froze in the entrance as she surveyed the crowded hotel ballroom, which had been decked in red and white to celebrate Canada's national day. Giant honest-to-goodness candle chandeliers spilled twinkling, golden light down on the hundreds of people. A few of Andy's closest friends... They were so alike yet so different. They shared their dad's hardy frame and loud laugh, their mom's light brown hair and blue eyes, but if Andy had dozens of friends, she barely had a handful. She stepped back and rejoined Darlene and Andy in the cloakroom.

She much preferred being chased by angry ghosts or exploring reportedly haunted places than standing here in a crowded ballroom. Although the chandeliers did take her breath away. "It's *packed*."

Packed with men dressed in shiny black or navy blue tuxedos, some in uniforms too. Packed with women in gorgeous gowns of every known color. And packed with echoes of conversations from people long dead. Jill ignored those. Easier here since she couldn't understand the language. She wasn't here to chase ghosts or adventure. She was on vacation.

Yeah, Moss, right.

All these beautiful people. She looked down at her loaned black pants, silver halter-top and strappy sandals. That'd teach her to argue with her sister-in-law—who wore a traffic-stopping gold gown—about dress codes. She patted her loose up-do that allowed some of her curly hair to spill down around her face and neck. Darlene's expert touch.

"You look great," Andy said with a warm smile. He checked his watch. "Kivanç is never late. He should be here any second."

Jill *humphed* when Darlene gave her a sharp elbow in the ribs. She followed her sister-in-law's gaze and turned toward the foyer. She didn't need Darlene's hissed "The tall one, that's *him*" to know exactly who she was talking about.

Six feet something of pure male perfection.

He wore black from stylish wide tie, shirt—French cuffs, thank you very much—to tuxedo and polished shoes. Smooth brown hair long enough for a tail but instead just loosely styled back. Sculpted cheekbones and jaw. A long and elegant Grecian nose and lips curved in a half smile. Despite the gorgeous rest of him, it was the man's eyes that gave her tunnel vision. The color of dark honey.

He cleaved a path to her, his dark gaze on her and her alone, until he stood a pace away. She couldn't talk. Could only breathe. Barely.

"You must be Jillian," he said, smiling. A glimmer of tongue behind stark white teeth. He proffered a small, clear plastic box. In it, an orchid the color of bubble gum. "A small gift."

Darlene "oohed" at the corsage and patted the box. "It's beautiful."

"Kivanç," Andy said, grinning like a loon. He was going to pay. But later. Much later. "My little sister Jillian. She landed just this morning. Don't you wish you could look that good jetlagged?"

"No one looks that good. Period," Kivanç replied. His honey gaze never left hers.

Jill was still staring when he gently scooped her hand in his, brought it up to his lips for a light kiss. A blushing Darlene and Andy both received a kiss on each cheek from the Turkish equivalent of James Bond. Her brother straightened, cleared his throat and tried to act as though he did that every day, kiss guys.

"May I?" Kivanç showed Jill the little corsage. She nodded before remembering she wore a halter-top. Not much room for pinning a flower.

"Erm..."

"For your hair then," he offered as he opened the box. "There is a clip as well."

While Darlene busily made last-minute adjustments to Andy's askew bowtie, Jill held still when Kivanç approached her, very, very close, and delicately proceeded to clip the flower to her hair. When his wrist touched her against the nape, skin on skin, a spark of static electricity made her start.

"Pardon me," he murmured almost in her ear.

"That's all right." She angled her face away so he could clip the thing. Her knees felt like jelly. A chair would be nice. A forklift even better.

When his fingers suddenly froze, Jill wondered what was going on.

"Your neck... It is beautiful, Jillian." Kivanç's voice felt like velvet against her nape. She shivered. For some reason she couldn't explain, she knew he wanted to say more but didn't. She heard his breath catch before he let it out slowly. It stirred the loose ringlets around her neck.

"May I call you Jillian?"

"Just Jill. That's what everyone calls me." How she could talk when her throat was suddenly Sahara-desert-dry, she didn't know.

When he straightened and looked into her eyes, her heart skipped one beat then resumed at twice the cadence. His irises were almost completely gone, swallowed by dilated pupils like twin windows to space. She could've stared into those eyes all night.

"Are you ready?" Andy asked. A very smartly uniformed young woman came over and murmured in his ear. He nodded. "We'll go in, mingle a bit. Then the band will play 'O Canada'. The buffet will be served around eight. We'll finish with a round of raki, courtesy of The Marmara restaurant – thank you, Kivanç."

"The pleasure is all mine," her companion for the evening replied, never lifting his gaze from her. God, talk about great eye contact. As if nothing else mattered but her. She could get used to this.

Andy and Darlene entered in front, Kivanç and she followed. A couple of women gave her the "what does she have that landed this guy" look as she passed them, Kivanç the perfect gentleman holding his forearm up for her to clasp. Maybe they were giving her the "would you check out that outfit" look instead.

Eat your heart out, ladies.

"If you need anything," Kivanç said as he leaned into her. "Tell me. It would be my pleasure." His cologne reached her, male but subtle. She took a long whiff, fought the urge to sigh as she exhaled. Nice.

"Thanks."

Events unfolded the way Andy had listed. They stood in respectful silence as the national anthem was played. If *they* could shut up as well, it would've been even better. The ghosts' incessant chatter made her head hurt.

She was introduced to so many people that in the end she could barely list the nationalities, never mind the actual names. Good thing Kivanç seemed to know a lot of them and would often bail her out with some apropos comment or shrewd remark. He made her laugh. A lot. And in turn, he seemed to find her genuinely funny because the smooth gentleman veneer cracked a couple of times to reveal a wickedly sharp wit and irreverent sense of humor.

"That man over there," he said after she'd had her second—or was it her third?—glass of white wine. It was hot, she was thirsty and her swollen feet were killing her.

Plus, she could hear *them* getting louder, despite the noise. Like static from a radio. She'd become adept at ignoring *them* unless she was on a case. Her extracurricular activities didn't involve theaters and restaurants, bars or even the gym. Instead, she preferred to hang around people weirder than even her, chase ghosts down Alaskan mineshafts or up dusty New England barn lofts, around Mexican caves or English country manors. She'd quickly realized some of the supposedly experts in the field of ghost hunting—God, she hated that word, more like ghost *meeting*—were yanking people's chain. She could hear *them* for real though, and *they* knew it. Back in the spring, she'd gone to Maine to explore a purportedly haunted house. There'd been ghosts all right. All of them children. Her digging around had unearthed—literally—a sordid story that the US child services was still sorting around.

"Jill?" Kivanç's worried eyes were the first thing that came into focus.

"Oh, I'm sorry... Jetlag, you know." She straightened, mortified she'd zoned out. She narrowed her eyes to focus. "Which one? That guy over there, you mean? The one with the zoot suit?"

Kivanç's laugh was like the rest of him—a smooth, sexy thing. "What is a zootsuit?"

"Gangster-wear, you know, black suit and white stripes. Not the rock band, I mean. So, what about him?"

"He wants you."

Jill couldn't hold it in, the laugh that turned heads in theaters. "I doubt that. Plus, he has that six-foot-tall model at his arm, complete with pout and nail extensions. Why would he want anyone else?"

"Because she is a girl, not a woman." Kivanç set his untouched champagne flute on the windowsill and turned to her. "You are a woman. Therefore, as any man would, he wants you."

"My, that's a nice bracelet you have."

Smooth transition, Moss. Very smooth.

For once, she wished she had her brother's diplomatic skills instead of being gifted with the finesse of a bulldozer. She ventured an index finger to touch his wrist. "I've seen a lot of people with these blue beads since I landed. Do they mean something?"

Kivanç nodded. "They are called *nazar bonjuk*. They protect against the evil eye, keep bad fortune away." He pulled his sleeve up, which made the silver stud for cufflinks glimmer, and showed her the gorgeous string of beads crafted to resemble bright blue eyes. She tried to focus on the bracelet and disregard the smooth, tanned skin on either side.

She touched one with the tip of her index finger. "Sometimes, I think I could use something like that to keep them away."

A shadow crossed his golden amber eyes. "Keep whom away?"

Shit.

Jill offered him a big, fat fake smile. "Bad fortune, as you said."

"Is someone making trouble for you?"

The question sounded polite and composed enough, but she couldn't miss the suddenly hard set of his mouth or the way his eyes had darkened to bronze. Talk about protective instincts.

"No, no one's making trouble for me." She downed the last of her wine. God, she was so uncomfortably hot. Canucks weren't meant for Turkish summers.

"Would you like to go outside?" The smooth gentleman was back. "There is a garden with bird of paradise flowers growing wild. And also a fountain and a hamam."

"Fresh air, yes, that'd be great. What's that last thing you said? Ammam?"

Kivanç gave her a charged look. "Turkish bath."

Oh. She'd heard about *those*.

He opened the French door for her, waited until she passed then accompanied her down a crushed gravel path. Cool evening air caressed her feverish skin. God, it was so good to just be able to breathe. Beyond the stone wall encircling what portion she could see of the large domain, Istanbul's skyline bristled with buildings, mosque minarets and

church steeples. Browns and purples slashed the sky. A breeze smelling of the sea tickled her nose.

"Have you ever had one?"

Jill couldn't ignore the heat of his arm against her. He walked close enough for her to touch just by twisting out her hand. Maybe she should and see what he did. "No."

"Would you care to try?" Moonlight and the few *torchières* cast an amber glow between pools of shadows created by large trees.

"Don't you have to be naked for those things?" Not that she'd mind getting a front-row seat to watch him undress.

Kivanç laughed. "Not necessarily. There are bathrobes and towels for visitors."

"You mean prissy tourists."

"Everyone has their own mores and customs. It is what —"

Jill's heart skipped a beat when a conversation reached her as if through a tunnel. No real live voice could make that sound. She instinctively cocked her head to focus on Kivanç. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

He stopped, scooped her hand in his. "Are you all right? Your hand is cold."

"I'm all right."

Dammit. She couldn't help *them*, couldn't even understand what they were saying, except that one of them sounded angry. Jill grimaced even if the events had happened a long time ago. Someone had died unpleasantly in this hotel.

"Would you prefer to go home? I could drive you."

Jill cursed mentally. "Absolutely not. I'm having a very nice evening with you. In fact, I'd like to see that hamam. Is it far? Because my shoes are killing my feet."

"Not at all. It is probably closed, but I know the hotel owners. They will open for us."

As they walked deeper into the garden, Kivanç placed a quick call on his silvery cell phone. Another one of those blue glass beads dangled from the phone. Superstitious? As soon as they entered one of the hotel's pool pavilions—that pool looked very inviting—a young man in white uniform was waiting with keys. Her companion thanked him and the young man left. He unlocked the massive wrought iron door, which opened into a circular interior courtyard. Tiles in flower patterns on the floor and walls gleamed softly when Kivanç switched on one of the sconces shaped like a flame.

"Wow."

"Wait until you see the inside." Was it her imagination, or did he wear a half smile that was even more wicked in the amber light?

She wowed again when he opened the door leading to the... A word that ended in "click". She was too busy looking at his hands to pay attention to what he said. He had nice hands, well formed and smooth. But surprisingly, calluses covered the knuckles. So

he wasn't some idle rich man with nothing to do with his time. She liked that. Hands spoke volumes about people.

"This is the hot room," he explained. A steam room to her. Circular, covered in tiles, with a large stone dais in the middle and tiny copper fountains along the wall.

"Would you like to try?"

"I'd love to, but I don't want that poor kid to have to come back. I'm sure he's had a long day."

"He would not have to come back."

"Oh... You?"

"Yes."

Was she on vacation or not?

"Sure, why not?" Maybe it was jetlag. The wine. The heat. Or her incredibly sexy companion.

A wolfish grin flashed for a second before warming to the genial, polite gentleman who had brought her a corsage. A tingle spread down her spine.

He accompanied her to the women's section where he explained in detail what went where and how she should do things. He'd meet her in the hot room. For a reason she couldn't explain—she'd just met the guy a couple hours before—she trusted him. Animal instincts perhaps? Or ulterior motives. Ha.

Jill stripped of her clothes, used a corner of a towel to wash the essential parts then quickly wrapped another towel around her middle and a second around her chest. No safety pins or clips anywhere. Damn. In the mirror of the posh marble bathroom, she looked cool and collected, her usual happy-go-lucky gal from the Maritimes, even if inside was a whole other story. A few minutes later she padded barefoot on the mosaic tiles back to the hot room where Kivanç was already at work turning knobs cleverly hidden in an alcove. God, the man's body was even better than she'd expected. Lean muscles corded under tanned skin, a sharp contrast to the white towel wrapped around his tight waist. The man's legs were long for his height, and what she could see of them, nicely shaped with great calf definition.

She grinned sheepishly when he straightened and turned to her. Caught in the act.

"Istanbul has long been reputed for its *sights*. Have you had time to enjoy them?"

Oh, and he was proud of his comeback too. "Not long enough."

"Would you like to remedy that?"

"Very much so." The wine. It was all the wine.

"Do you have plans for tomorrow?" he asked, a glint of playfulness in his eyes. He dimmed the lights until a warm, amber glow allowed shadows to pool by the dais and each fountain.

Jill sat on the corner of the tile bench. "No."

"I will not bite, Jillian. You can sit closer."

Atypical for her but she blushed, and, hating herself for it, stood to sit right by him on the stone dais. There, much better. He rearranged the towel on his lap. Sweat was already starting to create a sheen on his body and a glistening patina on his sculpted face.

"What happens in the hot room?" Her hair was probably a mess of curls by now. Tiles began to glisten with moisture.

"First, we let the vapor enter our skin." He stood so he could collect a copper ladle from one of the fountains. He dipped it in, returned to her side. "Tell me if it is too hot."

Slowly, he let a thin filet of water – damn, it was hot – slip over her knees and shins, her shoulders, down her arms and back. Water seeped into her towels. Jill couldn't suppress the sigh of contentment. He repeated the process for himself. She almost offered to help.

"Then what happens?" she asked. Was that her voice?

With a charged look, Kivanç patted the dais. "A person lies on the stone so the *tellak* can do his or her work."

"What's a tay-lac?"

"Someone who performs the massage."

"Oh."

"If you do not want to receive one, we could move to the warm room for washing and relaxing in shallow pools. They add scented oils to the routine in this particular hamam. It is very pleasurable. You decide, Jill."

Pleasurable? She had no doubt it was.

Chapter Three

Kivanç feared for a moment Jill would not want to continue with the hot room. But to his delight, she nodded and rolled onto her stomach on the hot stone dais. He closed his eyes for inner strength. Being near the curvaceous woman required all his aplomb. Already he fought the first stirrings of an erection. Never in his life had he wrestled so hard to keep his physical response under control. Difficult to achieve around a woman who embodied femininity and strength. Yet there was a mystery in those eyes the color of a summer sky. Who could “they” be from whom she wanted to get away? Anger flared in him. He would not mind having a word with whoever bothered her. Born on a farm then moving to the city’s poor neighborhoods had toughened him. He would have no qualms about rolling up his sleeves and giving whoever bothered her a piece of his mind.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked.

“It’s not bad, actually. For rock, I mean.” She twisted to look at him, offered one of those irreverent grins he had come to love in quite a short time.

“Moisture and heat change everything, do they not?”

She agreed with a nod.

Physically, with enough curves to lose a man and an ampleness that suggested long nights of discovery, Jill reminded him of classical paintings. Light brown curls growing frizzier with each second spent in the steaming room called to him to coil his fingers through, detach each strand from their pins and let it tumble down her shoulders.

When she turned away to lie back on the dais, Kivanç’s breath caught in his chest. Her nape... Exquisite. He had been trapped in his admiration earlier as he clipped the flower to her hair. And again now as she presented the back of her neck to him. The pads of his fingers tingled with the desire to touch her. He cleared his throat.

“One starts with a gentle massage. Then as the body becomes hotter and more pliable, the massage deepens. It can become quite personal.”

She crossed her hands under her chin and let her head loll to one side. He took this as leave to start.

With a breath he knew would not suffice to calm his heartbeat, he placed one hand then the other in the middle of her back. Through the towel, he could feel her warmth. In a selfish part of him, he wished she were naked so he could properly treat her skin the way it deserved to be. But he realized this was already a giant leap of faith. She did not know him, even if he knew her.

The file Adriano had sent, though sketchy at best, still relayed Jillian Moss’ personality well. A translator for her nation’s government, she lived in Halifax, Nova

Scotia, owned the only red Smart car in town and traveled extensively. Kivanç had had no need of Adriano's picture of Jill to spot her among the crowd earlier in the evening. She would have caught his eye anyway. A classic beauty only the likes of which Vermeer could paint. A classic beauty who could kick a door down.

"You've done this before." Jill's voice was muffled. She sighed, which made his ego swell to unreasonable proportions.

"Only a few times."

"Liar."

He grinned, traced serpentine shapes on her shoulders and what portion of her back he could reach. "It would work better without that towel." He pinched the one she had wrapped around her torso.

"Just pull on it." She cocked her arms on either side and lifted her torso a bit off the stone dais.

Kivanç gently tugged the towel from underneath her. He loved her casual ways. No pretense, no coy affectations. Comfortable with herself and her world. Self-knowledge and confidence had always been highly aphrodisiac to him. Nothing thrilled him more than making love to a woman who knew what she wanted and how. And nothing fired his blood quicker than giving a lover *exactly* what she wanted.

When he denuded her back and waist, her pale, freckled skin came into view. Like milk and cinnamon. Lust flared like a fever. He could not remember any other occasion that he had experienced such a strong and immediate reaction to a woman's naked back. If she were to turn around right now, she would see just how much effect she had on him. Despite his best efforts, his cock tented the towel.

With the pads of his fingers he pressed down on either side of her spine, which did not protrude so grotesquely as with some other women. In tiny circles, he rubbed all the way down to her waist. Judging by her shivers and small sighs, she enjoyed this. He repeated the movement, deeper this time. A small moan rewarded him. After retrieving the ladle, he reached to the wall, filled it from the closest fountain before he let a tiny ribbon of hot water drop along her spine.

"Oh God, that's *good*," she breathed. A frisson shook her shoulders. She pulled her hair out of the way, completely exposed her nape.

Kivanç almost lost it then and there. The urge to press kisses on her back and neck cramped every muscle, fired every nerve ending. His erection tightened painfully.

After a deep, steady breath, he refilled the ladle, trickled another pass down her spine, quickly followed by a deep massage with his fingertips.

"And now we move to the warm room," he murmured, bent over her nape. So close. His lips tingled.

"Mmm, it's so nice and hot in here."

"It will become too hot before long. And in the warm room there are scented oils."

Jill tilted a shoulder back so she could look up at his face. Their gazes met and held for several seconds. In the amber light of the one sconce he had left on, her blue eyes resembled two beads of bronze.

She licked her lips. "Can I have my towel back, please?"

"Certainly."

He passed it to her, turned away to give her time to wrap it around herself. He used the short reprieve to tame his erection. She would still see it though. That could not be helped.

"Okay," she announced, rolling to her side.

He turned to face her. As she stood, her gaze lowered to his waist. Despite the dim light, he saw her blush.

"Oh."

He could have apologized but knew this was a woman who would not shrink in horror or shock from a man's attention. "This usually does not happen."

A lopsided grin rounded her cheek. "I guess I should feel special."

"I would not pretend to tell you how to feel, but you *are* special."

Another blush, this one darker. She fisted the towel around her torso and hooked her thumb over her shoulder. "The warm room is this way?"

"Yes. Allow me."

He walked by her but misjudged. Instead of moving away to make room, Jill appeared to ensure their arms and shoulders connected. He bumped into her. The contact of their skin, wet and hot, had the effect of a jolt of electricity.

"Should I interpret this as an overture?" he asked.

"I can't tell you how to interpret anything, but it *is* an overture."

Kivanç grinned—knowing his smile had entered into the carnal range—noddled then pushed the narrow wrought iron door into the warm room. As she passed, he pressed his palm on the opposite side, effectively barred her way. "I had not planned for this to happen, Jill."

She adeptly stepped under his arm and into the warm room, still in the dark. "Neither had I."

With a hand that shook from trying to keep from bending her over and taking her, he flicked on only one of the wall sconces in this room as well. Jill stood in the center of the circular room. Entirely made of mosaic tiles in shades of blue with recesses to form baths and a small round pool in the middle. On a tile ledge that was part of the wall proper, bottles had been lined according to their uses. He left Jill standing by the pool and retrieved one of the soap bottles. Pearls of scented oils floated on the surface.

"Lemon and rosewater?"

She faced him. Water still glistened on her skin and made her towels stick to her strong body. "Sounds perfect."

"If I asked you to remove your towels, would you?"

"Only if you did too," she replied.

Kivanç set the bottle by the pool edge. "I would never ask if I did not intend to join you." With one hand, he pulled his towel off and dropped it.

He was used to women enjoying his body. He took care of it, kept it fit with regular exercise and martial arts. Kendo, he had discovered, appealed to women. He had met many a lover this way, during practices or tournaments abroad. Although he no longer took part, he still maintained his level of skills. One could never be too careful with one's safety. Plus, Gentlemen Inc. required he maintain his martial abilities. In case of trouble. Still, when the towel dropped and Jill's eyes flared the size of coins, Kivanç could not help his ego inflating somewhat. Male pride.

Before he could recuperate from his brief lapse in composure, she tugged the towel off from around her torso, let it fall by her feet before doing the same with the one around her waist. Curves. Her body was all about curves and tempting shadows. Breasts large enough to fill his hands—and he had long hands—rose and fell with her shallow breathing. Hips he knew would make perfect anchors teased the coppery light gracing them. He wanted to touch her. Now.

Water made his hair spill down over his shoulders. It was much longer than she'd thought and almost reached his nipples. That chest was the nicest she'd seen. Not freakishly developed but muscled enough. Just right, like the rest of him. His hard-on pointed straight at her. And this too was just like the rest of him. Hard-looking and shiny. She shivered. Because she was turned-on like never before and because compared to the first room, this one was cooler. Although she was rapidly heating right back up and it had nothing to do with the steam.

Instead of coming for her, Kivanç retrieved his towel from the tiled floor and put it down like a mat by the pool. He stood back from it, hooked his index finger at her.

As if he held an invisible fishing rod and was reeling her in, Jill approached until she stood practically under his nose and on the towel. Another inch and his cock would press into her belly. He leaned into her, filled her vision with his beautiful face and intense honey-colored eyes. Before she could ready for it—if she was ever ready for this mouth—he pressed a light kiss to her lips. A strand of his hair tickled her cheek. More kisses followed, to her cheeks, eyelids and the flower he'd clipped to her hair. The sound of his breathing created a jumble of responses between her legs. She wanted to hear him pant in her ear as he pushed that magnificent shaft into her. She wanted to hear him growl her name, say all kinds of wicked things in his language, even if she couldn't understand.

"Stay here," he murmured.

He gathered both her towels, let one rest by the pool while he dipped the other one in, emptied half the bottle down its length before rolling it lengthwise to make a "rope" of it. Soap bubbles squeezed out of the creases. Jill could smell the lemon readily and

rosewater a few seconds later. He repeated the process, knelt by the pool, dipped the towel, poured the remainder of the bottle then rolled the towel. With a flick of the wrist, he expertly whipped the towel half a turn. It made a loud *splat* when it landed on the tiled floor. Jill's toes curled upward as she imagined it landing on her back or butt.

With a wicked grin, he patted the towel he'd used as a mat.

Heart beating hard, Jill crouched and did her best to get down on her belly with the most grace she could muster. Which wasn't much. On her front, she set her chin on her bent arms. Kivanç knelt by her hip.

To her surprise, the water wasn't cool at all and almost as hot as in the previous room. Saturated as it was with the oil and soap, the towel landed with a *splat* by her hip. Another flick of his wrist and the towel landed on the back of her thigh. Hot water splashed up to her back. Soap and oil rendered the "whipping" a sudsy, creamy affair. She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her bottom lip. God, that was good.

"If it becomes too much..." Kivanç started, flicked the towel onto her back and teasingly dragged it over her butt. Hot moisture accumulated between her thighs and it wasn't all water.

He "whipped" her this way until she quaked for more, until she could barely suppress the impulse to grab his wrist and pull him down onto her so he'd take her before she went up in steam. Each *splat* filled the room a split second before her voice did. Low groans gave way to louder ones then louder still. By the time Kivanç had covered her body in a thick layer of warm, scented soap, Jill was ready to chew through that damn towel.

"Turn over."

She gave him a narrowed look. He wasn't going to...

"There are many ways to do this," he said to her silent question. With a lascivious smile, he ran his hand down the towel to gather more lather and used it to rub her butt. "And each one is better than the other."

Fighting against inhibitions and feelings of vulnerability, she rolled onto her back, bent one knee to anchor her heel on a crease in the towel. She felt so exposed, even if he was as naked as she. Wet hair hung in black ribbons on either side of his face.

Instead of "whipping" her with the heavy towel, he instead let it land over her shoulder then inch by inch, teasingly slowly, he dragged it down to her shins. When it passed over her breasts, Jill arched her back. And when the wet towel followed the contour of her mons, she rolled her pelvis to meet more of its wet heat. He nodded in satisfaction.

He switched towels. This time, no soap or oil, just hot water. He rinsed her nice and shiny. In the amber light, she appeared covered in glitter.

After he bent over to kiss her, he walked around her, entered the pool and came back by her side. He used his hands to cup water and splash her belly and breasts with it. She bit her bottom lip.

"What happens after this?"

"Normally?" His eyebrow arched.

"Yeah, normally, what would happen?"

"You would be offered fresh fruit juice and sweets like Turkish delights. Have you ever had those?"

She nodded. "At a fair last year. They're these little cubes, right? With powdered sugar?"

A small nod and his hair cascaded over his shoulder. "But tonight, I have another feast in mind."

Jill opened her mouth when he bent over and trapped her nipple between his lips. Her back arched hard enough to grind her tailbone against the tiles.

He pulled against her breast, released it with a wet *pop*. "Raise your arms. Like this."

Kivanç gathered her wrists in one of his long hands and pressed them above her head on the floor.

Sensualization started in her core and spread right down to her extremities. She felt even the minutest sensation his lips triggered as they traveled over her. He began with her mouth, her throat, breasts and belly. Licked her mons as though he knew this was the key to unlocking her knees, which bent of their own volition. She parted her thighs to make room. But it wasn't enough for him. He looped his arm under her leg closest to the pool, lifted it up until her heel rested between his shoulder blades. Bent over her this way, with his glistening hair and tanned skin, Jill didn't think she'd last long before she—literally—threw herself at this gorgeous specimen of man.

Tender at first, he kissed her pubis, the insides of her thighs. As if burned from within, he deepened his kiss, made his fingers more demanding. Jill forced him harder against her by cramping her leg muscle. When he started to suck at her sex, fingers parting her wide and thumb rolling her sensitive clitoris, she bit down and moaned. Loudly.

He said something she didn't understand. Turkish, she gathered. It rolled off his tongue, that magnificent and wicked organ. Jill cupped her breasts and squeezed them in the middle.

His eyes rolled up to stare at her. Intense and feral. So unlike the smooth gentleman who'd accompanied her at the gala. He retrieved the wet towel still full of soap. "Give me your wrists."

Her first reaction was to balk at his tone. But if her intellect rejected the command, her body took over. She gave him her wrists, one crossed over the other. His gaze on her, that sexy and implacable look, he tied her wrists together. It never crossed her mind she was trapped for real. Not with a *wet towel*. But the sensation of weight on her arms as she pressed her hands back against the tiles over her head produced a fine little

peak of sexual energy. Her pussy squeezed at the prospect. It'd be good. Very, very good.

One last look to make sure she wouldn't move her arms, Kivanç resumed his feast between her legs. Soon, potent little cramps heralded release. While he nibbled at her labia and licked her in wide passes, Jill squeezed her eyes shut. She came. Violently. Tiny suns burst behind her eyelids, a kaleidoscope of golden stars. Spasms rocked her. Then a weight pressed against her hip. She opened her eyes to see Kivanç climbing out of the pool. That glorious cock hung heavy as he positioned himself between her legs. He still wore one wrapped around his shoulder. Muscles corded and twitched on his chest and belly, his shoulders and thighs. Long hands steadied her. And with his gaze riveted to hers, with remnants of orgasm still clenching her sex, he pushed inside.

To say she cried out would be the understatement of the year. His cock filled her so nicely, so smoothly that a veritable battle cry left her. It seemed to spur him on because he retreated to the glans, waited for a few seconds. If he was gauging her reaction, she gave him one—impotent rage. She rolled her hips hard to force him into her. But he displayed incredible strength and managed to keep his cock barely inside while she bucked to spear herself to him. Tease. The damn—

“Ah!”

He'd just pushed inside. A frank thrust that lifted her off the floor. Another. Then another.

She greeted each push with a moan of pleasure. With his long arm, he reached over her head to fist the towel. She thought he was working it off but no. Using it as a handle, he positively plastered himself against her, crushed her hips against the floor. Her thigh burned from having her knee hooked around his shoulder. But she'd rather chew bees than change a single thing. Powerful hip work reduced her world to light and shadow, to smells of this man's body taking hers, to his mouth, which he'd clamped on hers. She could taste herself on his lips, his tongue. Mixed with his own taste. A lethal cocktail to her inhibitions. She groaned under his weight, groaned commands and pleas. He met each. Her voice rose. Whimpers and cries. Ah. Ah. *Ah!* Shoulders ached from the position, as did her back. Yet the wet heat from her distended sex—he was a well-endowed man—traversed her belly to warm the rest of her. Breasts were crushed beneath his chest, sex under assault, Jill felt another wave. This one massive.

Ecstasy exploded in her. A long, raw yell deflated her lungs. Kivanç's hips pushed in a series of arrhythmic thrusts. Growling in his language, he pulled out of her. Came on the towel between her legs. Hair hid his face as he bent down and placed a kiss on her belly. Shaking, he released her hands. Jill groaned when she bent her aching arms and rid herself of the towel. Shivers shook her, as they did him.

He raised his face to her. Gone was the smooth gentleman, the suave companion. In his place was a hunter, a feral lover who'd known just what her body wanted and how to give it. The mix of gentle touch and overpowering claiming.

Heat radiated all through her. She could've slept right then and there. On ceramic!

He backed into the water but stayed high enough to lean his chin on her mons. "You are beautiful."

She still couldn't breathe normally so only smiled and caressed his face.

"Tomorrow," he went on, gave her thigh a long suck that left a mark. "We could visit the city, if you wish. I would love to be your guide to Istanbul."

"Are you from here?" She sucked her mouth to produce saliva. She was parched.

"No, I was born on a small goat farm near Antalya."

"Farm? That's why."

"Why what?" He kissed her sex, lazily played with her flesh. A spike of heat spread through her.

"Your hands... Mmm, that's good. They're not a restaurateur's hands. I was wondering."

He looked at his hand before pressing his palm against her pussy. In small circles, he brought her close again. The man knew how a woman was put together. She gritted her teeth. An orgasm swelled. Close. Closer.

"I worked for a few years in one of the many textile factories near my home. Farming was not for me." He smiled knowingly when she swallowed hard and parted her thighs. "I made enough to pay for two years of university in England. I finished my degree here in Istanbul."

"Were you a—oh God, don't stop—were you a chef before you started your own restaurant?"

He grinned, shook his head. "I love food but was never a great cook. It is meeting people that draws me to this profession. I love watching people sit and eat, drink, talk, come together over a good meal and share slivers of themselves. I just facilitate their enjoyment."

On a long sigh she released into his hand. He used the moisture to rub her flesh in wider circles, still with his palm pressed to her. "Thank you," he breathed against her sex before kissing it. "For this gift. And those to come."

"Oh?"

A wicked glint of tongue appeared when he grinned. "What? Did you not enjoy spending time with me?"

"I did," she conceded.

He suddenly beamed. "I know exactly what would please you."

Jill stretched like a lazy cat and accepted his hand to sit by the pool. "Yes, I think you do."

"Istanbul is thousands of years old, built layers upon layers. There is a veritable city right under our feet."

"An underground city?" Shivers of excitement raced over her feverish skin. An *underground* city? "There is? Really?"

"I could take you there, if you wish. I know the guardians."

"Do you know everyone in this city?"

Kivanç smiled. "I am working on it."

"What's the dress code?"

"Most of it is flooded because of the Bosphorus Strait seeping into the land and the reservoirs and lakes to the north. So wear whatever you would on one of your adventures."

As soon as the words were out, Kivanç's face tightened. He looked away, gathered the towels. "I guess we should go back before your brother and Darlene start to worry."

My adventures. Yeah.

Darlene's big mouth again. Her sister-in-law must have told him of Jill's trips. To Darlene and Andy though, Jill's "adventures" were just that, trips to exotic locales, filled with culinary escapades and things getting lost in translation. Which was true. She *had* once unknowingly eaten veal brain in Scotland and *had* lost her passport and everything else running away from angry ghosts holed up in an old Maine barn. That trip had *cost* her. Personally and financially. Her family and friends only knew about the funny parts and not the rest.

She always left out the part about ghosts and other dangerous aspects of digging in the past. This, she kept for her.

Chapter Four

Kivanç turned out to be a thrilling guide. He showed her parts of the city she knew she never would've seen otherwise. He was knowledgeable, fun and indeed seemed to know everyone. Women would smile wide as soon as he'd come in the door. Some of the grins faded or turned upside down when Jill showed up in his wake. Jealousy was such a waste of energy. Still, she'd be lying if she didn't admit, even privately, that she derived a tiny—okay, not-so-tiny—buzz from hanging out with a man who turned heads everywhere he went. That no heads turned for her didn't matter.

They visited the huge Blue Mosque for which Istanbul was known and which throned over the city skyline. She must have taken two hundred pictures of its pale domes and graceful minarets. After a whirlwind visit of half a dozen monuments she couldn't name—Istanbul was such an architectural gem—they had supper at a street-corner restaurant that served pita breads filled with spiced meat dripping with a whitish sauce she couldn't identify except for the garlic. Jill watched Kivanç stand on his feet when an old woman came around the counter to greet him. He kissed the lady's hand, pressed his chin to her knuckles, to his forehead then smoothly transitioned from Turkish to English as he introduced her. Jill was treated to a hug and a pair of kisses on each cheek.

An hour later—after refusing a third helping of something called *patlıcan salatası*—eggplant something-something-salad—they left the tiny restaurant. Although she'd remember the name, she'd never be able to return if she wanted for the mazelike streets leading to it. But damn if that hadn't been the best meal ever!

Belly full the way she liked it—Kivanç ate like a *horse*, she had no idea where he put all of it, those long legs of his must have been hollow—he drove her in his dusty and dented BMW. She hadn't expected that kind of car for him and had asked about it. He'd jokingly replied a present was *inside* a box, not on it. Plus, he'd added, this car was for driving around the city center, choked with traffic and tourist buses. Which it was.

With the sun slipping below the hill and highlighting the Blue Mosque, he parked at an acute angle to the cracked sidewalk—actually, half the car was *on* the sidewalk—and climbed out. Despite her protest, he'd opened and closed her door all day. This time though, he shoved his hands in his pockets, rolling on his feet from toe to heel.

"Thanks," she said as she stepped out. He glanced at her door, clearly itching to close it for her but resisting, for which she was glad. It showed respect, in her opinion. She hipped the heavy panel closed, rubbed her hands excitedly. "This is gonna be a treat. Thank you so much, Kivanç. You taking a day off like this, it's very kind of you."

"My motives are not all selfless." His honey eyes darkened to bronze as they had the evening before. A frisson traveled down her spine when he leaned into her, with an

index finger traced the collar of her polo shirt under her sweater. The things he could do with those long digits—she should know. A thick, glossy strand of hair escaped from his ponytail when he placed a kiss where her jaw met her ear. “I look forward to spending more time with you, if you are interested.”

She required a deep breath to dissipate the haze of sexual tension coiling between them. Jill wanted him again with an energy that surprised her. And it wasn’t all about sex, either—even if it did play a large part. She just loved being around him, basking in his attentiveness and easy charm. “I’m glad you offered because I’m *very much* interested.”

Kivanç’s lips glistened after he moistened them. “Please do not think I am a brute, but I have been thinking about doing very wicked things to you. All day.”

“Wicked things, eh?” She ignored the blush or how Kivanç seemed to notice it. Instead plowed on through her inhibitions. At thirty-eight, she was past coyness. Plus, she knew what she wanted from life, and for the last twenty hours what she wanted stood right in front of her.

“Yes, *wicked* things,” he confirmed.

“How wicked are we talking about? Use-her-bra-to-tie-the-gal-to-the-bedpost wicked?”

He laughed. The wide grin stretched his luscious mouth. “If I delve on details, all my blood will ‘go down south’ as you say in North America. But tying you up with your bra does sound fun. Hmm.”

Jill chuckled. “Yeah, I guess we should focus on the visit.” She met his intense gaze and held it. “For now anyway.”

His eyes flared. A word she couldn’t understand left him on a long sigh. After a few seconds of charged body language, he straightened, rearranged his brown leather messenger bag on his hip. “What man would not enjoy spending time with a lovely woman? And I am discovering Istanbul all over again through your eyes.”

As they crossed the street, she could still hear the din of traffic and activity from beyond concrete walls lining both sides. Twenty or so paces uphill—Istanbul was all about hills, kind of like San Francisco in fact—a chain link fence served as a door in an aperture in the wall. She never would’ve have seen it had Kivanç not stood directly in front.

“This is only one of the many entrances,” he said. “It is not open to the public, so we will have this cistern all to ourselves.”

It was closed to the public but apparently not to Kivanç. An older man in a tan uniform poked his head from behind the fence. As he unlocked it, he smiled wide and exchanged niceties in a mix of Turkish and broken English—Turks were turning out to be the most gracious hosts and it wasn’t all because of her handsome companion. She could see why Andy and Darlene loved it here.

The guardian took them to what resembled a subway station—a rusty, U-shaped handrail around stairs going down. Adrenaline pumped so hard she felt like jumping on the spot a few times.

“We better make sure they work,” Kivanç said as he pulled a pair of matte black flashlights from his bag. He gave her one. It worked.

“Will our cells work?”

She’d borrowed one from Darlene but only after she’d had to relinquish a bit of the previous evening’s details, to her sister-in-law’s delight. A hamam with Kivanç Demir! she’d cried out. Half the women at the party would’ve given their last pearl to be in Jill’s place.

Nosy families.

“I doubt it. It is fairly deep.”

He shook hands with the guardian, preceded her into the gloomy metal staircase. He’d dressed for success that day and easily could’ve been pulled right out of an outdoors magazine with black cargo pants and a gray T-shirt that molded his muscled torso. Mountaineering boots made his feet look even bigger.

“So what do you do for fun?” she said to the back of his head.

“I used to climb a lot back home in Antalya. The Taurus Mountains are not very far. You?”

I listen to dead people yammer away.

He tried the metal door when they reached the bottom of the stairs. It didn’t budge. He put his shoulder to it. The door clattered against the wall. Something shiny landed with a dull clang on the concrete floor. He bent to pick it up.

“I like to travel. Did a bit of spelunking—caving, you know? Some hiking when I have time and it’s not raining cats and dogs. Do you miss it, home I mean?”

“Sometimes. Especially since my parents will not move back to Istanbul. As soon as I was able to afford it, I bought their old farm back, renovated it with my father. But I go see them often.”

“What’s that you found?”

He angled his hand to show her a padlock. “This is strange.”

“Why?” She took it, turned it around then looked for the place on the door where the thing could fit. Whoa. Scratches spread in a spider web pattern around the actual lock. Someone had done a number on it. Maybe someone had broken in recently and the authorities had put a padlock as interim measure.

A frisson crawled up her back. She tried to shake the unease. Failed. Something was bugging her.

“The guardian upstairs was just saying how long it had been since someone had used this door. Yet this lock has recently been broken. The metal is still shiny.” He narrowed his eyes at the padlock as he looped it back on the handle. “I will inform him when we come back up.”

She looked around for signs of occupancy. "Squatters?"

"Thieves most probably. Istanbul is a gold mine of antiquities still sleeping under the streets. As soon as someone starts digging, for any reason, renovations, repairs or building, it is very common to find artifacts. That is why some of the houses you have seen are on stiles. So they do not have to stop their project while the archeologists do their work."

"So Istanbul is how old exactly, do we know?"

He preceded her down the gentle incline leading to another door, this one a corrugated metal panel pushed against the wall. Whew. A musty tang hit her like a wall. Beyond, darkness swallowed the faint light from the corridor. Smells of water and earth mixed with the dust and humidity. Jill crinkled her nose. Smelled like a cave she'd visited in New Mexico. The region's infamous "ghost" there had turned out to be a natural river "whispering" underground. She'd still enjoyed her trip though.

"Istanbul has had many names and even more rulers. Anatolian, Roman, Greek. Byzantion or Byzantium during the Byzantine period, Constantinople around the times of the Ottomans. It has always been at the center of wars as well. Of religions or for commercial interests."

Only when Kivanç had stopped talking did Jill realize what had been bugging her. No sound came to her. None whatsoever. As if she stood in a giant soundproof tank. Surely, the age of this place made it plausible that it'd be filled with *them*. Yet she heard nothing. A frisson made her roll her shoulders.

Kivanç twisted the pommel of his flashlight. She directed her own into the darkness. At one point, Kivanç's beam of light crossed hers. She couldn't help it. "Don't cross the streams."

"Pardon me?"

She forced a chuckle. "Old joke. Well, that is *something else*."

The white beams illuminated a large subterranean chamber the size of a cathedral. A big one. Neat rows of ornate marble pillars reached up into the darkness, created a veritable forest of stone. And each had its base in water. She couldn't tell how deep it was, except that it was ink-black and very still. A stone forest standing in a lake. All underground.

"Is it very deep?"

"Mostly not, maybe waist high," he murmured. Darkness seemed to swallow his velvety voice. "But some places are so deep no one has been able to test their depths. Please, be careful."

"Always."

He gave her a strange, quizzical look before stepping out of the doorway and onto a steel gangway she hadn't noticed that ran along the wall to their right. Still no whispered conversations or echoes of past lives reached her. Complete silence owned the underground chamber. Eerily quiet, in fact.

"What is this place?" she whispered. "A church?"

"A cistern. Some say the Romans built it, others argue it predates that era. No one really knows because there have not been many digs in this part of the underground complex. More popular sections like the Basilica Cistern have received extensive funding. But here, not so much. There would not be time, anyway."

A cistern? She shivered. No way. There was something...wrong with this place. Jill pressed her hand against the age-old stone. "Why not? Is the water rising?"

"That too. And the city is boring another metro tunnel."

"No," she retorted. "They're gonna dig right through here to build a tunnel?" She couldn't believe someone would sacrifice such a place. As creepy as it was. The silence was becoming oppressive.

"Istanbul has its roots in the past, but it is also home to over eleven million people. The government is usually very good at preserving our cultural heritage, but sometimes things cannot be helped. Look over there, can you see her?"

"See what?" She followed his gaze down a particular row of pillars. Near the very edge of her light beam, she spotted a stone head the size of a small car set on its crown. A woman's head. What the hell was that?

"The Basilica Cistern has something similar too, but a pair of Gorgons instead and much smaller."

The gangway ended with a small rowboat filled with cleaning supplies, brooms and a shovel. She eyed it for a second, turned to Kivanç, who was watching her with a half smile.

"Do you think they'd mind?"

"Why did I know you would ask this?"

Jill crouched by the rowboat, moved some of the stuff aside then leaned against the side to see how worthy the craft was. No water pooled in the bottom. She scanned the length of it with her flashlight, found nothing wrong with the boat.

"It looks okay."

They looped the rope off the tubular handrail then, as Kivanç held the rowboat still with a foot on its bow, she deftly stepped in the middle, grabbed the pair of old oars and used them as balancing poles while her companion joined her. His greater weight rocked the boat.

"Allow me." He sat to man the oars while she claimed the first bench and used both flashlights to light the way.

Smoothly, he turned the small boat around. Water sounds reverberated on the stone walls. Aiming for an aisle of pillars, he sometimes rowed, other times pushed off columns to gain momentum. The boat scraped against the floor in some places while in others she couldn't see the bottom despite aiming one of the flashlights directly into the inky depths.

He brought them to the statue's head. It looked so strange, so sad, sitting there upside down without a body in sight. Large, grave eyes stared stubbornly into the darkness, as though daring anyone to make her blink. And that head hadn't toppled off by itself. From the uneven surface and jagged edges, the head had been crudely chopped off. A decapitated statue.

That was when she heard it. Quiet sobs. A woman's.

The voice felt familiar yet she couldn't place it. Jill knew it had happened long ago, that the woman had already died and only the echoes of her life remained, still, the pain and anguish felt so real to her that she almost cried herself. That'd be a first. As long as she could remember, she'd never cried. For anyone or anything, even if she'd lost precious friends and family members. She ached, she raged and carried on, but she'd never, ever cried.

Upon closer inspection, a couple of feet or so beneath the surface, the statue had a circular recess depressed in her forehead.

"Why would someone do this?" Her voice came out strangled. What was wrong with her?

"I am not too sure, perhaps to affront gods into which they did not believe?" He rowed past the large head and used the oars to keep the boat still while she took a few pictures. It didn't feel right and she put the camera away.

"They punished her."

Kivanç turned to her, eyebrow arched. "What makes you say that?"

She shrugged. "I... I don't know." She squinted at the statue, tried to ignore the heart-wrenching sobs floating all around her. God, that poor woman had suffered. "I think they defaced her statue to punish her, to get even."

The boat bumped against one of the pillars and Jill lost her balance. One of her hands slipped from the ledge and touched the water. She cried out. "Damn! That's cold."

"The reservoirs to the north are barely above thirteen degrees Celsius." Kivanç reached over to touch the water, cringed. "That *is* cold."

Jill shivered as she hurriedly wiped her hand on her khakis. Numbness spread from the tips of her fingers to her palm. She cocked her head, waiting.

The sobs had stopped.

With her heart beating hard and fast, she turned to check the statue, had no idea why she did. That stare... Jill angled her head the same as the statue. At first she didn't see anything special about the wall opposite. But as she scanned with one of the flashlights, something caught the edge of the beam. Or more aptly, something *didn't*. Near the corner of the huge chamber, a dark recess swallowed the light instead of reflecting it. Waves of frissons tightened her shoulders. As if the statue stared into that black recess. Was she waiting for something to come out?

And still, no heartbreaking sobs. The dead woman was perhaps waiting, holding her breath? Not that she had one.

"What's over there?" Jill murmured. Her voice carried enough as it was. "Another chamber?"

Kivanç shook his head. "There should not be." He followed her gaze, shrugged. "Maybe a trick of the light?"

He didn't sound convinced and neither was she.

"Let's go see. Do you mind?"

"I find your curiosity very..." He leaned toward her. Indirect light made his sculpted face a mask of amber skin and inky-black outline. "Sexy."

A zing of sexual energy traversed her. Before she could add to this, he rowed toward the darkened recess. They were still twenty or so feet away but already Jill could tell this was no mere recess. It was a manmade tunnel, perfectly rectangular like a doorway a foot above water level and leading far before swerving to the right. Carved stone gave the walls an appearance of life.

"Look, there's the door." A large slab of stone had been summarily carved out of the wall and dumped on its side. A corner protruded from the surface. And there again, a circular recess similar to the one in the statue's forehead.

"I have never heard of this place," Kivanç murmured. He leaned sideways to look inside the tunnel. "I wonder how far it goes."

Jill was already clawing at the tunnel edge to bring the bow closer.

"Jill –"

She'd climbed out of the wobbly boat and stood in the tunnel entrance. As soon as she did, she heard *them*. A lot of them. Dozens, hundreds.

Like static, their voices reached her. Voices from long ago. The dead were speaking. Shouting in fact.

Jill had to lean against the wall for the sudden assault on her mind. Good thing her companion busily used one of the oars to keep the boat from floating away. He wouldn't see her reaction. Damn, the noise was deafening. Voices rose in anger. She rubbed her temple. And always the same word. Over and over.

Kivanç joined her in the tunnel entrance. "This might not be safe—" He abruptly leaned into her, peering into her face. "Jill, are you all right?"

"Yeah," she lied. "What's wrong?"

For the first time in her life, she wished she could tell someone about what she heard. Could share the thrill and wonder and myriad questions her gift inspired. Who was the weeping woman? Who were all these people? What did they want? Why were they so angry? Above all, she fervently wished she could understand what they said because right now all she got was the white-hot *fury*.

"You look pale." He directed the light a few inches above her face. "Your eyes are red. Maybe we should turn back."

His genuine concern touched her but she'd be damned if she was passing this opportunity. Plus, something drew her into this tunnel. More than curiosity. Something deeper.

"I'm fine," she replied through a forced smile. "Really." Jill turned back to face the statue. Oh yes, she really was staring into this tunnel. From this angle, it was easy to see.

"Look at her." Jill pointed to the severed head. "She's looking right at us now. Right into this tunnel." She turned around to peer into the darkness. "As if she's waiting..."

"Maybe her head is only angled this way after it was separated from its body. It could be a coincidence."

Not it *was* a coincidence, but it *could be*. Warmth flared inside her. Astute, open-minded and gorgeous beyond words. She was enjoying this man's company more and more.

When they took a few steps deeper into the corridor—this was no natural occurrence, human hands had carved this—the magnificence of it revealed even more beautiful details. Scenes arranged in tiles covered the walls. And above each scene, a single, larger tile with a crescent and a star.

"What are they doing? See this tile here? Hmm." She walked over to a set of tiles about chest-height and squinted in the dim light.

Kivanç leaned over her shoulder. His breath stirred her hair. Smells of his cologne tickled her nose. "They are fighting, I think. Look at the spears."

They stood in silent study of the scene before them. Colors she'd never seen graced the tiles. The brightest blues and deepest reds, rich ochre and lush emerald green. As they walked from one tile to the next, a story revealed itself to them.

First tile, an army with pointed helmets and spears, led by a tall, bronze-skinned woman in only a simple blue robe, faced a trio of giant black waves stacked one on top of the other. Second tile, the same army encircled a city built on hills. Jill counted seven. Wasn't Istanbul built on seven hills, like Rome? The woman stood between the black waves and the city. Protecting it. Third tile. A scene of chaos. The waves separated in several tentacle-like appendages, reaching between soldiers, who lay on their backs, mouths wide in silent terror. The fourth tile made Jill press her hand to her mouth. Only the woman was left standing, her robe in tatters and covered in blotches of bright red blood. She had a bowl of black liquid that she was about to drink.

"Don't drink that," Jill murmured. As though the woman had decided to drink the black waves until they were gone.

"Symbolically, the black waves must be an invading enemy," Kivanç whispered. With his fingers, he pointed without touching the fourth tile. "Istanbul has known many sieges. Maybe this woman warrior ended the siege by taking in the enemy? Perhaps she married their leader? Abdicated her throne? A pragmatic leader would do this."

Jill nodded. "What's the only way to eat an elephant? Bite after bite. So she took it into herself. She took the black water into herself, little by little, bowl by bowl, but she did it." She turned back to the tunnel entrance, directed her light at the upside-down head. "Didn't you? You stopped that black water right in its track."

Ghostly sobbing answered her.

Kivanç leaned closer to the wall, his nose almost touching. "You are right. She *is* the statue. Look at her forehead. The same symbols. I have never heard of this warrior queen."

"Maybe she's not a queen. Whoever she is, I want to research that story. Do you think it'd damage the pigments if I took pictures?"

"To make sure, do not use the flash. Here, this should do." He stepped back and held both flashlights at a crossed angle—*crossing the streams, nooo*.

Trying not to run down the tunnel and get to the bottom of this was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. That poor woman. Such sacrifice.

Jill dug in her daypack slung over one shoulder, pulled the camera then as she fiddled with the controls to disable the flash, she took her pack back to the boat and left it on the bench. Damn. New machine wasn't worth half of her old one. Too bad she'd lost it on her last trip.

A sudden chorus of ghostly voices drowned the sobs. She faced the deep end of the tunnel. Whoa. What was going on? Was it her imagination—

There it was again. Even louder. A cry. Many voices rising in unison. Coming closer.

It honestly sounded like a warning. The same as a crowd going "ooh" when a stunt went wrong. And noises? That'd be a first. She'd only ever heard voices, never any noise the ghosts made.

"Did you hear that? Like a shuffling sound?"

Kivanç nodded, turned toward the end of the tunnel. The rubber grip squeaked under his fists. "Take the pictures. Quickly." Gone was the suave gentleman.

Her hands shook. Badly. As she was about to hit the button, movement from the corner of her eye made the hairs on her arms stand on end. Danger bells tolled in her soul. Coupled with the ghosts' rising cry—a warning, no mistake—she had to move. Do something. She shoved Kivanç aside.

"Watch out!"

Thunder ripped the silence. Burning pain erupted in her biceps. She cried out, pressed on the button and snapped a picture at the same time as Kivanç whirled around, both flashlights pointing down the tunnel. With her flash, which she hadn't had time to turn off, the image burned an imprint of itself in her retina. Several forms were coming at them. Fast.

And they weren't ghosts.

Chapter Five

His first reaction was to extend an arm to break his fall, in so doing he knocked his elbow against the wall and dropped one of the flashlights. A beam of light went spinning around the tunnel in crazy, dizzying circles. That woman had some arm! When her camera went off, ruining his night vision, it also illuminated a scene that congealed the blood in his veins.

Brilliant light. Split second clarity before darkness. From down the tunnel came a group of men. One had a gun pointing directly at Jill, to his left.

Adrenaline hit hard.

Kivanç did not even need to think and hurriedly stepped in front of her, brandished the remaining flashlight at the same time as the gun went off. He felt nothing, hoped she had not either. With a flick of his thumb, he switched his light off. Jill yelped when darkness fell. In front of them, tiny glimmers—a buckle here, a snap there—heralded imminent contact.

“Don’t let them get away!” roared one of the men in heavily accented Turkish. Not a Turk although he spoke it.

A new voice yelled back, “Shoot! Shoot!”

Another shot. This time, the bullet ricocheted by the wall to his right. Dust and mortar peppered his face. He felt the change in the air. Like a tiny slap of wind. Too close.

Going by memory, he grabbed Jill by the arm and turned around. Water was their only chance.

“Dive,” he snarled under his breath. Behind them, he heard the men continuing their charge.

As fast and fit as she was, Kivanç knew she couldn’t match his longer legs so he literally *hoisted* her the last few steps before propelling her forward, clear over the boat moored at their feet. He gave it all he had, literally launched her right over. He followed with a leap sideways to clear the obstacle the best he could. But he had given everything he had for her and hit the bow hard. He snarled, rolled sideways into the water. It was *glacial*. His belly cramped. His thighs and calves as well.

Before he dove under, he reached blindly behind him, grabbed the first thing he could reach—a broom, great, he had hoped for the shovel. Two shots were fired into the water. He did not hear Jill cry out in pain and wanted to weep in relief. Brave woman had probably dived under the surface by then.

“They’re in the water! Follow them!”

Furious splashing announced the men had joined them in the water. He heard their expressions of shock and pain. The water was unearthly cold. Something touched him on the calf. He almost whipped the broom down to skewer the intruder. Only at the last second did he pull back.

"Kivanç," Jill breathed.

"If something happens to me, keep going. Do not look back."

"Like hell I would."

He wanted to laugh. Had the situation not been perilous—deadly—he would have laughed at her reply. Such spirit. Kivanç frantically twisted the head off the broom to keep only the stick.

His relief was short-lived when one of the men yelled, "There! By the wall!"

Damn.

As more shots resonated in the cavernous chamber, he pushed Jill's head under the surface and joined her there. Such cold as to feel like a burn filtered into his ears, down his spine. A violent shiver shook him. Why was this water so numbingly cold? And so thick!

Kicking off the wall as hard as he could, he propelled himself a good ways forward. By his side, he felt Jill do the same. Was there any other woman like her on this planet? His heart swelled with affection and a deeply ingrained instinct to protect her. If something happened to her... He would *kill* them.

The first row of three-foot-wide pillars provided temporary shelter. The source of noise seemed to become many, came from different angles. Their pursuers must have separated to search the chamber. He stood to plaster his back against the column. Water reached his waist. Froze his gut and numbed his legs. There was something wrong with the water. Too cold for this time of the year. And too *thick*.

Jill's body pressed against his as she did the same. Her breathing sounded labored. "Are you hurt?" he whispered.

"N-n-no," she stammered. "God, it's s-s-so cold... Who *are* those guys?"

"I do not know..." A violent shiver interrupted him. "But they are equipped. And trained."

He could not see a foot in front of him. In fact, he held the broomstick close to his face yet could not even see it. Darkness owned the echoing chamber. The sound of renewed splashing grew louder. Closer.

"Come," he breathed in her ear.

With the back of her sweater in a fist, he slowly sank into the water—his heart squeezed painfully at the drop in temperature—and made his way to the next row of pillars. The tip of his boot hit the stone and he stopped there.

"Find them, you idiot!" one of the men growled. A beam of light traversed the chamber. Someone had a flashlight. "Over there!"

From his right, water gurgling gently alerted him. He slowly maneuvered to keep his body in a direct line between the sound and Jill.

"Keep going," he breathed. "To the very end."

As noiselessly as they could, they walked away from the searching light. Used columns to hide, dipped low into the frigid water to reach the next row. Then the next. So far, the men had not followed. Yet.

They were running out of time. Eventually, the men would find them. He fished inside his messenger bag, pulled his cell phone out. Perhaps water had not damaged it yet. He would not turn it on for fear of the little screen attracting one of their pursuers. So he slipped his hand under his T-shirt, thumbed the screen, praying the thing still worked. No light. Shit.

He felt Jill tense by his side. Her mouth pressed against his ear. "Ten feet to your right," she breathed almost too faintly for him to hear.

How could she know a man was there?

But one did not look a gift horse in the mouth. He nodded, knowing her mouth still pressed to his cheek would relay his understanding. Cell phone in the back pocket of his cargo pants, he slowly cleaved water toward his general right. She was correct, there *was* someone. Ribbons of heated air indicated a warm body.

Kivanç did not wait to know which way the man faced. Pulling the broom handle out of the water and hoping no droplets would give him away, he raised his joined hands high in a kendo hold, as if the humble broom had become a bokken.

Empty mind. Awareness of his center of gravity.

Higher.

Once at the apogee of his swing, he waited for one more second. There, a bit farther to his right. Something glimmered.

He brought the handle downward and at forty-five degrees to maximize his chances of striking the target. The impromptu weapon *whooshed* as it descended. With all the force a ten-year practitioner of kendo could. His roared "*Kiai*" exploded in the chamber.

He hit hard and true.

The force of the impact reverberated up Kivanç's arms and shoulders. Without a sound, he felt the man sink into the water. Warmth grazed Kivanç's wrists when he approached. Blood. The body bobbed into him. Out of humanity the aggressor did not deserve, he rolled the man onto his back and quickly searched the many pockets and flaps for something to use.

"Aydin!" another man growled not far to his left. "Search the boat! Then sink it!"

No reply came forth.

"Aydin!"

Kivanç surmised the man he had just downed must have been the Aydin in question.

Loud banging followed. A faraway crunch. The moan of nails being bent out of wood. Water splashing and groans of men working hard. They were destroying the boat.

"Get the bag," one of them ordered.

Swinging his weapon left and right, Kivanç retreated until he felt his boot hit a pillar.

"Jill?"

Instead, a male grunt answered him. He swung. Gunshot erupted. A tiny strip of wind hit his cheek as if someone had blown air through a straw. A bullet!

The muzzle flash illuminated a face he did not know. Lightning-quick, he brandished the weapon high overhead, stomped forward at the same time as he struck. Again, his "*Kiai*" reverberated like the roar of a dragon. If he missed, at least his battle cry will have given him a split second to destabilize his enemy and attack again.

He did not miss. A loud yowl of pain rewarded him. Unfortunately, his weapon broke.

Without waiting, he dropped into the water, hands searching. Shoes crushed his fingers. Water seeped into his mouth when he snarled a groan of pain. It numbed his tongue, made his teeth ache. A knee struck him on the chin.

Above the surface, he heard Jill yelling.

Kivanç used his long reach to encircle the man around the waist and hoist him back violently, as though he meant to do a fireman's carry but only high enough to unbalance him. A punch to the gut made Kivanç grunt. He returned the favor. Once, twice. The attacker's mouth felt strangely soft under Kivanç's knuckles. Warm liquid seeped between his fingers.

"Ow! Ow!" Jill's voice pulled him out of pummeling the hated face into pulp. He pushed off, half swimming, half running in the direction of her voice.

Another voice called hesitantly in the distance. He recognized the old guardian. "What's going on? Who's there?"

"Robbers!" Kivanç roared. His voice took on angry-god proportions in the echoing stone cistern. "Run! Call the police!"

Something hit him in the back. Too high to be Jill. He whirled around, fist leading. Encountered what he knew to be a forearm blocking. They had had training, these men. Hard and sharp, something cold struck him across the chin, made pain explode in his mouth and cheek. Gun? Kivanç threw himself at this attacker, made sure to keep the man's gun-hand high in both of his.

"I have them!" his attacker yelled. "Here! Over here!"

Kivanç snapped his knee high, crushed the man's crotch and silenced him. The dangerous beam of light swept crazily past them a couple of times, searching, deadily.

"Watch out!" Jill yelled. Cursed. Another man grunted in pain.

Someone fired a shot not far to Kivanç's left. Muzzle flash. The resulting scene froze his blood. Water up to her waist, Jill had her arms bent back as she struggled to flee a man holding the back of her collar. To his shock, *she* had the gun.

His own attacker fired several shots at the ceiling while Kivanç fought him for the weapon. Like a disco light, a stroboscope of images caused by the shots burned into his retina. *Bang, bang, bang.* Marble pillar. Black water. Pitted ceiling. From amongst the pillars, more attackers coming for the kill.

Jill snarled a curse somewhere to his right. Something broke in his spirit. A dam. Rage spilled from the crack, overtook him. How dared they touch her! How *dared* they.

Someone yelled threats. The police was coming. A chorus of voices calling to get the hell out of here. A second then a third beam of light whipped left and right. Illuminated the pillars from several angles. Growing closer. Converging.

His attacker and he went stumbling into the water, knocked shoulders and heads against the closest column. Water got into his nose. Growling, he forced the man's arms lower with one of his, desperately tried to aim the gun away from where he thought Jill stood. A shot vibrated against his palm. He plunged the man's hands underwater. Another shot that made a strange gurgle. Something grazed his shin. Floundering to his feet and growling, Kivanç managed to wrestle the gun from the man's hand and pistol-whipped him with it. Knuckles to the mouth made Kivanç's head snap back. He saw stars, tasted blood on his tongue. He replied in kind with a fist to the man's mouth. Something broke against his knuckles.

He felt his attacker push back to flee. He tried to grip whatever he could to drag the man back.

"Coward!" he growled.

Jill yelled. "Kivanç! Dive!"

He did not know why he followed her warning. But as soon as he crouched underwater, a pulse of orange flashes above his head indicated someone had an automatic weapon and was not letting the trigger go. Muffled *pof-pof-pof* reached him through the blackish water. So cold. His face felt numb, some of the pain subdued. His first thought was for Jill. Had she had time to dive as well before warning him? Faint ribbons of warm water caressed his face. He could only guess what it was. His own blood no doubt.

Surfacing in Jill's direction—or so he hoped—Kivanç slipped his cell phone out of his pants pocket, flicked it on with his thumb. He half expected it not to work. To his surprise, it did. A faint blue glow illuminated a pillar to his left. Jill's face appeared in the trembling radiance. She bled from the nose. Her eyes were huge in her pale face. She had the gun in one hand and was frenetically pushing a man's limp, floating form away from her, murmuring, "Oh God, oh God, oh God."

"Jill," he breathed, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

She turned, eyes haggard but vigilant. "T-t-they saved us," she whispered. Her teeth chattered. "They warned m-m-me."

Who were “they”?

Kivanç did not have the luxury of asking when a flurry of splashing and cursing from all around the chamber preceded all-out retreat. Light danced and bobbed. He wrapped his arm around Jill’s shoulders and held her close to him as he sank against a pillar. Water reached up to their chins as they waited there, breath bated, eyes scanning the darkness. He felt her shiver against him, held her tighter.

The water was so cold... So very cold. He was so sleepy and weary. Perhaps just a few seconds. There, eyes closed. So much better.

“Kivanç,” Jill breathed. Searching hands found his arm. She gripped it hard. “Kivanç!”

He shook his head. Fought the tendrils of sleep clutching at him. Just for a few seconds...

Jill pinched his biceps. Hard. “Don’t. Fall. Asleep. It’s t-the cold.”

Except for remnants of water ripples and the sound of drops landing into the surface, silence once again owned the underground cistern.

“Are you hurt?” he whispered after a few seconds fighting with his increasingly heavier eyelids.

“I d-don’t know. I’m so *cold*.”

The tone of her voice felt like a slap to the face.

Wake up, man. She needs you.

He dropped the gun into the water—let the police search for it—so he could bring her closer against him. She was alarmingly cold to the touch and shivered violently. He was afraid she would go into shock. With himself not far behind. Actually, he had almost fallen first if not for her pinching his arm. He slipped his cell phone back in his pocket. Kivanç could hardly think despite the adrenaline sluicing his system. Men had attacked her. Someone had *shot* at her. She could have—

Several official-sounding voices erupted in the distance, barking orders in rapid-fire Turkish. Finally. “The police are here.”

He felt her nod. Slowly, with numb hands and legs, they peeled their shaking frames from the pillar, sneaked in a quick peek to make sure then called out their presence. After the first tense seconds of police beams of light searching the darkness, Jill and he were helped out of the water. The old guardian was there, explaining what he knew and gesturing for Kivanç to approach. He felt in a daze, answered questions even if his complete attention was on Jill as she received first aid. He shook even inside his belly. He had never been so utterly *cold* in his life despite swimming in open seas.

Her sweater hung on her elbows. Blood stuck the sleeve of her polo shirt against her biceps. As if it had been painted on. Had she been *shot*?

“Jill,” he said above his own medic’s shoulder.

She turned to him, smiled valiantly. “Ow.”

“Your arm...”

She looked down at it, grimaced, hurriedly looked away. "Just a flesh wound, sir," she joked through her teeth. But her chin trembled.

Admiration made him stare as she relayed what she knew to the police, who translated to various degrees of accuracy. He stepped in a couple of times to offer variations, which they seemed to value because they asked more questions than Jill and he could answer.

Did they know who the men were? No. What they wanted? Neither. Where they had gone? Again, no. Had they stolen something from either the cistern or Jill and him? Not that he knew. A pair of blanket-carrying medics was a welcome interruption. He waited until Jill had wrapped herself tight in one before he took his.

"That water," she began, shook her head. "Why it is so cold?"

"I have no idea. I have come here two times before and it was never that cold. Never warm, but nothing like this."

Someone came back with news they had found weapons and three men, two of whom were dead—one from gunshot wounds and another from a fractured skull. He did not care right now about their finds. All he wanted was to sit quietly somewhere warm and hold Jill's hand. Maybe a good, strong Turkish coffee would set him right.

Her face paled at the news. "Kivanç..."

He shook his head surreptitiously at her. "Nothing tells us it was not them shooting each another."

She nodded, bit her bottom lip and wrapped herself more tightly in her blanket. She shook so hard water droplets from her hair fell in arcs instead of directly downward.

"Come." He opened his blanket wide—the cool air made him shiver violently—wrapped his arms around her shaking frame when she came to nestle into his arms. Her pleasant curves pressed against him. Energy zinged back into his veins.

"Thanks."

"I told you, I do not always act selflessly." A kiss to the top of her head made her grin.

Back on the surface, waiting for them were police cars, one of the riot teams and its Mad-Max-like truck, and half a dozen state ambulances with blue lights flashing. Despite his minor injuries, he was escorted into one of the ambulances while Jill was taken to another. He would have preferred they shared one but remained silent.

Nerves finally gave because he saw her bend in half and begin to sob in her hands. His heart broke. *Nothing* could have kept him in that vehicle while Jill cried alone sitting on an ambulance bumper.

He shoved both medics away so he could limp-jog across the parking lot—he had hit that boat hard—and wrap his arms around a woman who had come to mean a lot to him.

He held her. For a long time. Until she stopped shaking. Until her breath regularized. Until she no longer clung to his sleeves.

How long did he stay this way, arms tight around her shoulders? He could not tell except that when she raised her blotchy red face to him and stammered apologies for “acting like goddamn wussy” Kivanç *knew*.

He had fallen for her.

Chapter Six

How could something that felt so *bad* simultaneously feel so *good*? Adrenaline and fear finally broke its hold on her nerves and Jill started choking dry sobs like a big wimp. In front of everyone. Goddammit. Yet as soon as Kivanç rushed over, pushed—literally *shoved*—his way through both sets of medics to get at her, she couldn't help the rush of warmth to her cheeks. And as he gently encircled her with his long arms and pressed her forehead to his chest, a long shiver of relief coursed through her tired body. She ached in places she hadn't known could, but it was all better. More than better. It was all right. She'd be *all right*.

From where did this certainty originate? She had no idea. And cared even less.

She raised her face to him and meant to thank him but his expression stopped her. Affection, rage, relief, admiration. It was all there on his chiseled face. Along with the blood. God, he'd taken quite a beating. His bottom lip was split, a dark mark spread from his high cheekbone, crawled over the bridge of his nose and faded over his other eye.

"You were shot," he murmured, eyes scanning her face as though wanting to ensure everything was where it should be. "They shot you."

She grimaced. "Yeah, right off the bat too, in the tunnel."

Kivanç snarled a long string of Turkish that sounded very scary and rolled off his tongue like verbal blades. Then his eyes flared. "That bullet was meant for *me*. I was standing between you and them... Jill, you saved my life."

"Yeah, and then you turn around and *bam*." She rubbed her eyes, her nose. Dry sobs, as always. Couldn't shed a tear even for herself. Ha. But Kivanç and she were alive. Nothing else mattered. "I think... I think I killed that man." A shiver rocked her.

From solicitous and kind, Kivanç's eyes turned dark and hard. The transition reminded her there was a lot more going on than the suave restaurateur let on. "And I hope he suffered."

She couldn't believe she'd taken the man's gun. And something else as well. As he'd struggled with her, pulled on her sweater and forced her under the surface—probably to shut her up so Kivanç wouldn't hear her warnings—she'd clawed at his clothes and dislodged something. It'd fallen into her hand almost at the same time as the gun. She had no idea why, but she'd pocketed the item while brandishing the gun and trying to strike the attacker with it. A shot had gone off, illuminating his face. Twisted in rage or pain. She'd probably never know. But someone did.

The dead.

They'd helped. She could swear to it. That first man who'd attacked them in the water? Neither Kivanç nor she had known he was so close. Without the ghostly voices calling loudly from that direction, she never would've looked and seen a tiny glimmer. Buckle, button. Whatever it was, she'd seen it moving. The ghosts had done that. She'd put her hand in fire. Later as well, she'd followed the voices to steer clear of the armed men, had found Kivanç by the pillar not long afterward. And all the while the ghosts had shouted the same word over and over. Something that sounded like "hay-cat" or "eh-kaht".

"What does "hay-cat" mean?"

"I do not know." Kivanç rearranged his messenger bag over his shoulder so he could sit closer by her side. "What is it?"

"Nothing, it's just something one of the men said."

He squinted as if trying to remember. "No, I cannot recall them saying that. Maybe when I was underwater."

She surreptitiously slipped her hand in the pocket of her khakis. The thing she'd taken from the man was circular. Like a coin, but with more defined reliefs. Her thumbnail dug in slightly when she pressed it against the surface. Hmm.

She moved her arm in the process and bright flares of pain shot down to her fingertips. Kivanç saw her reaction and retreated to let the medics—who'd stood back a bit but kept an eye on their recalcitrant patients—finally do their work. After a quick kiss to the forehead, he let the ambulance staff take him back to his vehicle. They closed the door before she could smile at him or give him the thumbs up. He looked so worried.

The drive to the state hospital took about thirty minutes. Half an hour of fearing for her life...or sending her dinner back up. Hollywood stuntmen had *nothing* on Turkish ambulance drivers. It wasn't until she'd been wheeled, despite her protests, into one of the emergency treatment rooms that she discovered her daypack gone. It'd been in the boat. Damn. And her camera as well. Gone. Lost during the fight. The medics relinquished her to a new team dressed in scrubs the color of peppermint candies—white, light pink and green. She couldn't tell which ones were doctors and nurses except that they treated her as one would the most fragile Fabergé egg. She was invited to write her name on a piece of paper since she had no ID. One of the team caring for her, an older man with thinning white hair and kind eyes, took the paper, studied her for a while before suddenly nodding and rushing out of the room. Had he recognized her? She didn't know him. Not ten minutes later, he brought her a cell phone, gestured that she should take it.

"Hello?"

"Oh dear lord, you're all right." Andy sounded so subdued compared to his characteristic booming voice.

"I'm good and Kivanç as well. We're both fine, don't worry."

"Don't worry, eh," he replied with a strained laugh. "Darlene and I are on our way. Do you need anything? Can I bring something for you?"

"I think they took my bag. My passport was in it."

A short silence followed. "Don't worry about that for now. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Okay. You know where we are?"

"Yes, they told me. I love you. Please, please, don't do or say anything until I'm there, okay? We don't want a diplomatic incident."

"I'll be good. Bye."

She couldn't find how to disconnect the call so she gave the phone back to the man with an apologetic smile and an impotent shrug. He grinned, turned it off for her.

"Thank you very much, sir."

He nodded and left the room.

She was subsequently x-rayed, swiped on the arm with orangey stuff that reeked to the high heaven, treated, sutured, bandaged, questioned by a pair of men in tan uniforms and olive-green hats and wheeled back into "her" treatment room. Andy and Darlene were both already there. She was hugged until she had to tap Andy's wide back and tell him he was cutting off circulation to her brain. He grinned, pulled away.

"God, you guys, it's not like I'm dying." Jill grinned. They both had tears in their eyes. Man, what a trio of fools.

Andy scowled. "You could've been killed. From what I've been told, those men had an arsenal with them. And no ID. Mercenaries, probably. Guns for hire. Jesus, Jill, I thought my heart would stop when the surgeon called me."

The kindly older gentleman. "He knows you?"

Andy nodded. "We play golf together sometimes. He said we had the same eyes but that you're much prettier."

She grinned. "Can you do something for me?" Jill pulled the flimsy gown away from her belly. The thing clung in all the wrong places. "Can you check on Kivanç? He can't be far. They brought us in together."

"I'll go, Andy, you stay with your baby sister," Darlene said from the door. Her eyes were red and puffy. She blew Jill a kiss and left.

"The police say there was no backpack on the scene." Her brother's face hardened. "Someone's got your passport, Jill. They know who you are. I'll arrange for a flight back home as soon as you can fly."

"What?" She swung her legs from the bed, held on to the back of her gown when the separation widened on her butt. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! I'm not going back home!"

"You *are*!" He stood, as though he could cow her with his presence. Didn't he know it *never* worked and would *never* work?

"So they got a Canadian passport to sell. I'll get another. I'm sure you can arrange for that, right? Aren't you the guy who signs those visa things anyway?"

"It's more than —" He stopped as he glanced at the doorway.

She turned to find Darlene and Kivanç standing there. He wore a gown similar to her own, except his was canary yellow whereas hers was fuchsia. Blue paper slippers completed his look.

"We're starting a trend." She smiled for the sheer relief of seeing him well enough to walk around.

He limped slightly as he came into the room and leaned on the wall. His tanned skin looked like bronze compared to the gown and his brown hair hung loose on his shoulders. The bruise over his cheek and nose had darkened even worse.

"How do you feel?" he asked after a nod to Andy. He played with his cell phone. She wondered if it still worked.

"Never mind me, I'm fine. How are *you*? You're limping, did they x-ray your leg to see what's wrong? Did you break anything?"

She stemmed the torrent threatening to spill over. She wanted to ask a lot more questions but shut up for now. He looked in pain, tired and in no mood to be embroiled in a family hissy fit, she was sure. Poor guy probably just wanted to go home and avoid Canucks for the rest of his life. She couldn't blame him.

Yet to her relief, a shadow of a smile rounded his cheek. The grin disappeared. "It is not broken. Soft tissue damage only. The police came to tell me the men took your bag *and* your papers."

Andy nodded. "They got her passport, the fucking —" He hissed a low curse, took a deep breath. "Someone out there has her *passport*. They know who she is, can learn where she lives in Canada, the whole shebang. I'm putting my sister on a plane as soon as she's fit enough to kick my ass."

Kivanç's face tightened yet he said nothing as he looked at her. Jill crossed her arms to ward off the cold suddenly creating a scree of goose bumps down her arms. Plus, she had no bra. All her things hung on the back of a chair, dripping on the floor.

"You're not putting anyone on any plane," she retorted. "And that's a guarantee."

Andy threw his hands up. The old temper was coming back. Darlene looked as if she would've said something but snapped her mouth shut and shook her head. "Kivanç," Andy said while he pinched the bridge of his nose, "can you tell Jillian that it's no longer safe for her here? They'll think she saw something or can recognize one of them."

"It is not for me to offer my opinion. And Jillian is an adult eminently capable of making her own decisions."

"Thanks a lot, buddy," Andy snapped. "You know what, I'll go talk to the police again. See what I can find out while we wait for the lawyer to show up." He stormed

out, Darlene on his heels. Her sister-in-law's shoes sounded like a tiny machine gun. *Tak-tak-tak-tak.*

"He is right, of course," Kivanç murmured as he peeled his frame from the wall and sat on the corner of the bed. Over and over, he rolled his cell phone on his thigh. He opened his mouth to say something, must have changed his mind and closed it again.

"What? Is something wrong—aside from getting shot, beaten and nearly drowned, I mean?"

"There is something I wish to—"

A pair of nurses came into the room, spoke to Kivanç in Turkish. They seemed to want him to go back to his own treatment room. They left soon after, one of them casting a long, hungry look at the man's legs. Jill could relate.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Check this out."

Jill retrieved her wet pants from the back of the chair. Fishing around in her pockets, she found what she was looking for. Heavier than she remembered. But then again, weight was hard to judge when one was dodging bullets. When she pulled her hand out, a large gold, coin-like disc rested in her hand. The size of a round sticky notepad, it glimmered softly like a brand-new thing. On it, a crescent moon and a star in raised relief.

"What is this?" Kivanç leaned over to look at her hand. "A coin?"

"I'm not sure. When I was trying to fight that guy off, I think I ripped his pocket and this thing fell into my hand." She turned it around. The flip side presented a smooth face.

"Perhaps the police would need to know this..." he began, sounding as unconvinced as she felt. "It looks very old. Can I see it?"

She gave him the disc. He took it, weighed it as one would a purse of coins then turned it over a few times. "It feels like gold. The weight certainly suggests it." He gave it back. "What will you do with it?"

Jill shivered from cold but was rapidly warming by Kivanç's support. Andy could be such a bulldozer sometimes. He meant well. But still...

"There's something down in that tunnel," she said, nodding as she looked at the thing in her palm. "Those guys, those thieves were after something. That tunnel, it has to lead *somewhere*."

The ghosts had been more than convincing. And what the hell did "hay-cat" mean?

"I frankly do not care what is down there," Kivanç replied. "I am worried about you. They have your identity in their hands." He reached out to graze her injured arm. Frissons accompanied the gentle index finger he brushed down her forearm before he scooped her hand in his. As he had the first night she had met him—hell, *last night*—he kissed her knuckles. "I have not even thanked you for saving my life."

She felt herself blush. "No need. You saved mine in return." She chuckled as she sat by his side and patted his thigh. "You certainly showed them not to mess with a restaurateur, eh? Kicked their ass right and proper."

Kivanç didn't mirror her smile. "They hurt you... I..." He took a deep breath. "When I heard you scream, all I saw was red. I wanted to *kill* them, Jill. All of them had I possessed the means."

Like static, voices rose in a low murmur down the hall. Ignoring them was easier since she didn't understand the language. But that theory didn't hold when she thought back to the weeping woman and the angry ghosts in the tunnel. They'd clamored for something. Their rage was palpable. Rage and *fear*. Were they trying to tell her something? What did they want? Her only hint was that the ghosts had helped her locate the robbers. So, clearly, they didn't view Kivanç and her the same way they had the armed men. That coin in her hand could be the key to the mystery. Maybe the men had stolen it. More than one, even. The ghosts wanted it back, perhaps? So many questions.

"Do you still want to research this?"

She nodded. "More than ever."

"Here." He took the coin, held it still while he aimed the phone's tiny camera at it and took a picture. "I know someone at my old university. Azya is not a professor but works in the office at the archeology department. She may know what it is, or at least where to start researching."

"Thanks." She slipped the item back in the pocket of her damp pants. "I hope they won't want to get the real thing though. Because it's going back." Jill sighed, rubbed her temple. "What now?"

"They might want to keep us overnight for observation —"

"I'm not sleeping here," she cut in.

He grinned. "I agree wholeheartedly. I want to go home, make a few calls and arrange a few things."

"You're probably regretting you ever took a day off to be with me, eh? I'm sorry."

"Do not apologize for something not of your doing. And what I need to arrange is for proper thanks."

"Hey, I told you, there's really no need —"

Kivanç trapped her in that honey gaze of his when he turned and brushed her cheek with his knuckles. "I *want* to. I told you, I do not always act selflessly." A wicked glint appeared in his eyes. "Thanking you will be pleasurable for both of us. If you accept."

"You think I'd pass that?"

"I was hoping not." He placed a tender kiss on her cheekbone. "I will call you."

No other promise had ever sounded so good.

* * * * *

Kivanç did call, but only three days later. By that time, Andy and she had fought daily over her return home. Darlene had wisely stayed out of their verbal tennis matches until Andy threatened to use his consular powers to have his sister removed. Had he woken a sleeping dragon! Jill hadn't known her sister-in-law could be so scary. With both women after his hide, he'd backed down. A sort of implicit truce had fallen earlier that day. It was Thursday morning, a good day so far, and if Kivanç hadn't called, Jill would have. She wasn't one to wait around for a man. Although for Kivanç, she would have lasted a bit longer than usual.

When the chauffeur presently turned into a crowded street in an upmarket neighborhood, Jill stopped to admire the view. A slick, black little sports car gleamed as the sedan drove by. After he dropped her in front of a very elegant-looking restaurant, she bid the chauffeur goodbye, adjusted her linen capris as she stood on the sidewalk. A wood and brass menu case gleamed in the stone façade of a grand old building and beside it, a thick, cleated door beneath a burgundy awning. Posh. In brass, stylized letters *The Marmara* sparkled gold, which reminded her of Kivanç's eye color.

For the hundredth time, she made sure the coin was in her pocket as she lifted the brass doorknocker. The door opened before she could let it drop. If she thought a tuxedo fit him well, Kivanç in crisp, lavender—*lavender*, by God—dress shirt with white French cuffs and a pair of black linen pants just about made her brain melt. For a quite exotic touch, he wore brown leather sandals. The man knew how to dress to impress.

"It is good to see you again, Jill." He scooped her hand, kissed her knuckles before embracing her in a warm and nicely scented hug. The man had the manners of a Don Juan and the quiet strength of a fighter. She loved the duality. His bottom lip still looked a bit thick and the dark mark made his honey eyes even more striking. A fresh wave of rage hit her. Those assholes.

The same ones who had her passport right now.

"Are you hungry?" He retreated into a large marble foyer bathed in the golden light of a bronze chandelier. Mosaics on the walls depicted a rural scene while a colorful, long Persian carpet stretched down the hall.

"Yes, I am—*whoa*." She looked around. "What was this building before?"

"A bank. When I bought it a few years ago, it was a mere shell of itself. No floors left. Half a roof. Plumbing from the nineteenth century. If that." He grinned as he took her hand and led her deeper into his home. It smelled nice in here. His cologne and a hint of kitchen aromas—citrus, pepper, maybe a hint of mint?

"You didn't do all this yourself, did you?" She ran a hand along the tiled wall. Just gorgeous.

"Most of the tiles, yes. But not the rest."

"You're good." She narrowed her eyes when the faint echoes of a man's voice could be heard in the distance. As if he were counting or enumerating something. How sad for someone to die on the job. She wondered how long it'd been.

"How are you feeling?" Kivanç glanced at her arm, still bandaged.

"It's better. I'm just milking it so Darlene does my hair. I can do ponytails and that's about it. But she can do all these complicated up-do things."

He ran an index finger along her cheek and jaw. "You do not need any special attention to your hair to be beautiful. Natural beauty transcends everything else."

"So says the guy with the perfect outfit for every occasion. You probably own more clothes than I do."

His laugh made her grin. She loved that sound!

"And shoes as well. I am a shoes whore."

The crude word sounded sexy in his mouth. Especially with the accent. *Shooz Oarr.*

The corridor ended with a wooden door that stood ajar and led to a staircase. "Where are we going?"

"Upstairs on the terrace. The view there is one of the best in Istanbul." Kivanç preceded her so he could switch on a light at the top of the landing. Steps creaked when he reached the top. "And when the sun goes down, it looks as though the water is made of gold. Very pretty."

When she stood on the terrace of his deserted restaurant—he'd closed early that day, he'd told her—Jill understood why he wanted to take her there. She'd never seen anything like it.

"Lord thunderin' Jesus," she murmured in awe.

A place right out of a magazine, the rooftop dining room was open on three sides and faced out onto the water half a mile or so to the south. Plum trees heavy with fruit lined the roof ledge on two of those airy sides and cleverly hid the brick safety parapets while tiny lights worked into the foliage created golden haloes. Tables decked in cream-colored linen matched wide bands festooned in the central pergola's thick wooden beams. Silverware and tall wine glasses glimmered softly in the amber light. A low and wide glass bowl that contained cut red flowers she couldn't name floating in water occupied the center of a round table set for two. She turned to Kivanç, speechless.

As if this were nothing at all, he guided her to the parapet. A breeze caressed her face and arms. Nice. Even the din of the city wasn't so bad up here and with the splendid view... Well, damn.

"We are presently standing in Europe." He pointed across the water. "And across the Bosphorus Strait is Asia. Istanbul has a foot on each continent. For a long time, even before the Silk Road, it was the only passage between the two, and also between the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Even if Ankara is the capital, the true heart of Turkey is here, in Istanbul."

Right now it was the heart of her world, especially for the man standing by her side. She slipped her hand in his, squeezed it tight. "This is *beautiful*. No wonder you stayed here."

"I would prefer that my parents stayed here as well, but it is their choice. As it is mine to stay in the city." He turned his back on the view to look at her. A sky of orange and purple haloed his dark hair and created fanciful shadows on his strong facial features. His lips glistened after he moistened them.

"Now let me thank you properly for saving my life." He leaned over, placed a tender kiss on her mouth. Lingered for a few seconds.

Jill's breathing became a conscious struggle. She needed to focus just to pull air in and push it out slowly. She was lost in this man's gaze the color of dark honey. Lost and didn't want to be found, truth be told. She was happy right where she was. By his side, admiring a Turkish sunset.

"Not that I'm complaining," she murmured against his mouth, "but you thanked me already. Your word is good with me."

He straightened. For a reason she couldn't understand, he looked sad. As though he wanted to tell her something but couldn't bring himself to. A lascivious smile replaced the sadness so quickly she wondered if she'd seen it at all. "Unless you have other plans, thanking you will take all night."

A rush of heat warmed her face. She shook her head. "No. No plans."

Kivanç grinned. "Can I tell you how refreshing it is to be around you? There is no pretense, no double meaning. If everyone shared your honesty, this world would be a much better one."

"Not everyone enjoys my honesty, I can tell you that. Ask Andy... I swear, the man will drive me up the wall if he doesn't stop with his big-brother posturing."

"He only wants to protect you. Just as I do. Men are meant to protect the women they cherish, it is not something we can control."

"Well, we women don't always need the protection, you know. We can do it ourselves."

He conceded the point with a nod. "True. But our protective instincts do not devalue your abilities or strength. I wish to keep you safe not because I fear you cannot do it yourself, but because it is part of me. I do not *choose* to feel this way with you. Although, if I did have the choice, I would change nothing. And Andy loves you very much."

To say Kivanç's words didn't touch her deeply would amount to saying the copper sun dipping in the water didn't impress her.

To change her mind before she melted in a puddle of estrogen, she slipped the coin from her pocket. The thing reflected the early evening sun and cast golden flashes on Kivanç's wrist. His lavender shirt looked almost indigo in the exotic light.

"I bet you a Tim Hortons coffee the robbers found something down there. A grave, a temple, palace or a cache of artifacts. *Something*. And they took one to be appraised, maybe? See what they had?"

The severed head staring intently into the tunnel. As if she waited. For what?

Kivanç nodded. But he looked perplexed. "But look at this." He used his pinky to underline the crescent and eight-point star in sharp haut-relief in the center of the coin. "Look how elevated the symbols are. Even new coins would not be so sharp. It is as though this is more than a coin."

"What does it mean, the crescent and star symbol? It was all over the tunnel walls and on that statue as well."

He narrowed his eyes at the thing in his hand, as if the force of his will alone would make it tell all its secrets. Again, Jill was moved to share her own secret with him. He'd understand, she was sure. He wouldn't judge her. If she'd come to understand one thing about this great nation was that its people were wise and broadminded. Perhaps because they straddled two continents, had perfected over the centuries a balancing act between East and West, perhaps because they'd been around for thousands of years and had pretty much seen it all—wars, one great civilization after another, religions of every denominations. Maybe she *could* tell him. But then again, maybe she *shouldn't*.

"Our national flag bears a crescent with a five-point star," Kivanç murmured, still studying the coin front and back. "But this one has eight. Even before the days of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire, these two symbols have been part of our heritage. Modern Islam has in a way appropriated it to a certain extent, enough that they are now interchangeable. But it *is* Turkish in origin and in spirit."

"Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with a country. Didn't they make coins to celebrate rulers? Or maybe gods?"

"I am afraid I know very little about this subject. The gods of old have mostly been forgotten. Azya should be able to help us in that department. At least a little."

"Whatever it is, those guys who attacked us are probably kicking themselves in the butt."

Kivanç's expression hardened. He snarled a word in Turkish. "You are right. They will be looking for this. You cannot carry this around on you. We should give it to Azya, make it known publicly that they found an old coin during a dig. The robbers would hear of this and know you no longer have it."

Jill grimaced as she remembered the voices in the underground cistern. Somehow she knew *they* wouldn't want that coin to sleep somewhere in a university archive tray. They wanted it back.

"I think we should put it back down there."

"That would not be safe, those men may return, if they have not done so already, despite the police tape and occasional visit. It is a crime scene now."

"Sorry, but I disagree. I think that coin should be put back. It doesn't belong up here."

"How do you know?"

"I just do..."

Chapter Seven

Jill tried to ignore the way he stared at her expectantly. Was he waiting for something more? Could he tell she wanted to share with all her heart? That intense gaze of his, it spoke to her, held her, enjoined her to share with him everything that went on inside. But.

What if she *did* spill the beans? Then what? Did she want to see the awkwardness in his eyes, the doubt, or worse, the disappointment and derision? She didn't want to ruin a perfectly fine date with this man because she yearned to share her gift with him. Although dead people talking to her wasn't always a *gift*.

In the distance, a tiny bleep made Kivanç roll his eyes. "Do you mind? I forgot to turn it off. It could be Azya."

"No, go ahead. I'll admire the view."

He jogged to the bar, reached behind the gleaming copper counter and retrieved his silvery cell phone. The thing still worked? She couldn't understand a word he said but judging by the tone and the urgent beckoning, it must have been his friend at the university. Kivanç held his hand, palm up and motioned for the coin in her pocket. She gave it to him. He turned it face up, ran his thumb on the raised crescent and star, talking rapid-fire Turkish and shaking his head emphatically. She thought she recognized the word the ghosts kept repeating. Hay-cat. Kivanç did *not* look happy.

"I fear we started something." He closed the phone against his thigh. A deep line crossed his forehead. So this was what he looked like when he was pissed. Intimidating, given his height and dramatic facial features.

"What do you mean?"

"Azya said professors began fighting over her computer screen to look at the image. Apparently, this coin is unique because of its size. They wanted to know where it had been found."

"Had you told her?"

He shook his head. "It did not even cross my mind to tell her. They say it is Byzantine, perhaps even as old as the birth of Byzantium around 600 BCE."

"That old? Then it must be worth a fortune—don't look at me like that, I'm not planning to put it up on eBay. But these guys, they must want it back bad. Very bad."

"Azya also said they think the symbols are in tribute to the moon goddess Hecate, who saved the city from a siege in 337 BCE. Hecate, is that not the word you asked about?"

Something snapped into place.

It all made sense now. Not “hay-cat”, but *Hecate*. She’d saved the city, as depicted in the tiles. She’d defeated the black waves, whatever they represented, and saved Istanbul. But why the severed head? Had some remnants of enemy defaced her statue on their way out? And why were those ghosts—her army, no doubt—so enraged? They kept calling her name.

Could it be...? A tingle of adrenaline traveled down her spine. “That’s it. They keep calling. But she’s *gone*.”

Kivanç cocked his head. “Who kept calling? The professors?”

Jill aborted her first instinct—to tell the truth—and instead lied with a nod. The *ghosts* had been saying the word, her name, over and over. A chant, a chorus, a plea. The rage she had felt in the underground surfaced. That coin, whatever it was, the ghosts wanted it back. It was *hers*. They kept calling Hecate’s name but she never answered because she was gone. For some reason, Jill couldn’t believe Hecate—goddess or brave woman turned into a deity—would’ve abandoned her people.

“So what now? Do you think we should drop by the university and let them take a look at it? But what if they want to keep it, give us trouble over it?”

“That is a distinct possibility. From what Azya told me, one of the professors was so frustrated that he threatened to go to the police.”

“Could he?”

“I doubt it. I mean, he *could* go to the police and try to convince them we stole something, but I doubt they will want to cause further embarrassment with your brother. Despite the Cypriot War of the 1970s diplomatic relations with Canada have always been friendly and I am sure my country wants it to remain such. Still...”

She reached out, passed a fingertip over the moon symbol. “There’s something down there. More than just gold coins and loot. There’s something...alive. That water, it’s...” A shiver tingled up her spine.

He nodded. “I know. It is unnaturally cold.”

As good a word as any. She was going to say “evil”.

Shaking his head, he extended his arm, unclipped his bead bracelet.

“What are you doing?”

“Please, take this. You do not have to wear it if you do not want to. Only have it on you.”

“I can’t take it, it’s yours.”

The intensity with which he looked at her silenced her protests. “Please. Take it. I know you will think this silly, and I know it is not something you believe in, but I do. And I think it could help you. Especially now. Something is going on. Larger than us.”

“I thought I was the only one...” She chanced a quick peek. “You felt it too. There’s something going on with that water. It’s just too cold and too...thick? You know what I mean?”

He nodded, all grave eyes and tight mouth. "I do not know what it is, but while we were in the water, I felt this..." He seemed to search for a word. "Bad energy. Do you understand?"

"More than you will ever know."

She let him clip the *nazar bonjuk* to her wrist. Its beads—its "eyes"—reflected electric blue in the sun. "Kivanç, I don't know what to say. That was for *your* positive energy. What are you going to do now?"

Back to the suave gentleman. He arched an eyebrow, leisurely traced her jaw. "I will need to stay very close to them if I am to keep my good fortune."

Her stomach chose the two seconds of silence to make itself heard. God, great timing. A grin pulled one side of Kivanç's luscious mouth. She loved that half smile.

"I agree. We should eat."

They shared a laugh as he gallantly escorted her to the table, pulled her chair and waited until she'd sat before disappearing behind the bar across the dining room. Not two minutes later he reappeared carrying two small plates and a bottle of white wine, which he set in a rustic clay ice jar covered in condensation. Jill eyed the tiny green roll on each plate and tried to cough over her stomach's grumbles. He better had a seven-course meal planned because those little rolls, as good as they looked, would keep her stomach quiet for a whole ten minutes. If that.

The rolls—or *dolmas*, goat cheese and a rice mixture—were delicious, as were the next three courses, which consisted of grilled vegetables, one-bite pastries containing different combinations of spiced meats and cheeses with yogurt and sesame seed sauces. Night fell as Kivanç cleared the table for dessert and raki. A long and narrow tray of Turkish delights made her salivate. She was full but would be damned if she'd pass on the occasion. Life was too short to pass on dessert.

He put two narrow glasses between their plates, poured a couple fingers of raki in each. The clear liquid belied the strong smell of aniseed and grapes. "Have you had one at the gala?"

She shook her head. "Didn't you know? I was otherwise *occupied*."

With a grin, he poured water in equal measure to the raki. "Watch this."

As soon as both liquids mixed, the *mélange* turned from crystal clear to milky-white.

Jill leaned forward. "Cool. Why does it do this?"

"The aniseed mixes with alcohol," Kivanç explained as he dropped a cube of ice in each glass. "One must start with the raki then the water, otherwise, adding ice to the raki itself will cause it to crystallize." He gave her a glass.

She sniffed it. "Licorice? Nice." She squinted at the bottle. "Ass-lahn..."

"*Aslan sütü*. It means lion's milk. You feel like a lion after you had a couple of these." Kivanç winked. "Bravery in a bottle."

"Ah-slahn Sootoo. Ow, I think I hurt myself."

She tried a few more times, helped by the tears of laughter in his eyes and the lion's milk that did indeed make one feel very brave. After a second glass and growing increasingly tipsy, she decided she better eat the dessert before she pulled a Don Quixote and started doing battle with the plum trees.

"Mmm, Turkish delights. I love these things." She hovered between the pink rosewater one and the yellow honey-flavored pair by the end. Choices, choices.

"Here, try this combination." Kivanç delicately pinched the rosewater square dusted with powdered sugar, brought it to her mouth. "Bite half."

Her lips pressed on the tips of his fingers when she did. His nostrils flared while his eyes narrowed. He put the other half in his mouth, chose one of the honey-flavored Turkish delights and presented it to her. "Bite half then let the two melt a few seconds before you chew."

Jill kept her gaze on his while she bit half of the soft, sugared confection. As she let it melt, she watched him eat his half, all refinement and manners. But the man's unpretentious sophistication couldn't hide the raw animal intensity stretching like a lazy great feline. She loved the duality of his character, how he could talk about ancient civilizations and cuisine then turn right around and say things like shoes whore. And those sexually charged looks all but set fire to her panties!

True to his word, the two halves combined to make a very pleasant taste in her mouth. A hint of honey, rosewater, cinnamon and pistachio. Saliva pooled under her tongue. She swallowed while he watched, that great eye contact turning her dial into the red zone. Jill didn't know what he had planned after dessert, but she had ideas of her own, thank you very much.

"And?" He arched an eyebrow. With the tiny lights partly hidden in the plum trees and the play of shadows they created, his nose tended to the Aquiline more than Grecian, and lent him a predatory air she found very, very sexy.

"Very good," she murmured. She chose another bite-sized square, this one lime-green, and raised it to his lips. "Let's try this one."

When he bit down, a flash of stark white heralded his teeth pressing on her fingertips. He teasingly trapped her fingers there while with his tongue, he dislodged the sugared morsel. Jill's breathing turned shallow and quick. Despite the two glasses of wine, two of raki—and mixed with the oppressive heat—her foggy mind cleared in record time. After he released her, she chose one of the darker delights.

"What about this one?"

He nodded, a wolfish grin curving his mouth. Kivanç swallowed before she could give him the other half.

"Hey! Not fair."

He suddenly gripped her wrist, reversed it then nipped the tender flesh. The brusque move sparked a jolt of sexual energy right down to her sex. With his gaze fixed on hers, he slowly licked the inside of her wrist, pulled on her arm to force her to her feet, kept going until she stood by his side and his tongue had reached the crook of her

elbow. He closed his eyes, smelled her skin in a long intake. She wasn't wearing any perfume but he didn't seem to care. The chair scraped the tiled floor when he twisted sideways and pulled her between his legs.

From her position, the top of his head glistened like fine chocolate when he leaned over, gathered her wrists behind her back and forced her top up a few inches with his chin. His lips were burning-hot when he kissed the exposed skin on her side.

"We had no time the other night," he murmured against her skin. "But now we do. And I intend to take as long as needed to discover every secret..." He kissed her skin again. "Undo every riddle." Another kiss. "And reveal every enigma."

Jill shivered. They indeed had all the time in the world. "I'm afraid there aren't many secrets to discover." Except for one.

He enthusiastically sucked the skin over her rib cage. That'd leave a mark. "Women are walking enigmas. Like a knot of silk rope...I love figuring out what goes where and how one can release it then tie it all back up again."

The man could tie her legs into a knot if he wanted, as long as he kept talking that way. She was turned-on like nobody's business.

After he released one of her wrists so he could pull her top higher, the blue beads clicked softly. She ran her hand through his lustrous hair. It was only after she'd watched it for a few seconds that she realized something strange.

As soon as Kivanç had clipped the bracelet on her wrist, she hadn't heard *them* again.

Kivanç had never felt so torn in his life. Torn between protecting a woman yet stepping back to see her in full flight. Jillian Moss had wings that matched a condor's. Independent-minded, strong and witty. All he had ever admired in a woman. But the dangers nipping at her heels—both their heels—were real. And from this he wished to protect her. Shield her. Beat back the menace with all he had. He also felt torn between telling her or not about Gentlemen Inc. but was afraid she would never speak to him again. And rightly. The gold card he was supposed to give her at the end of his task would feel like a razor blade. He could not tell her. The chances were too high she would push him away. He preferred to stay in his bed of lies than take the chance he would not only hurt her but make her leave. What a coward he had become in the span of a few days. He could rationalize all he wanted—his fear of losing her surpassed his shame at lying to her.

He had also come to realize one thing when speaking to her about that damned—in every way—coin. They *had* to put it back. It did not belong to them and certainly not to the robbers. He was loath to relinquish it to the university, even if a small part of him agreed they would know what to do better than he. Still, something in the way Jill had insisted it belonged "down there" had validated his own feelings. It did belong to Hecate and those who had helped save the city.

And there *was* something wrong about that water. Something evil. He would not tell her about that. Foolish superstitions, no doubt. Still, there was something evil lying in wait down there...

When Jill presently made a soft sound deep in her throat—half mewl, half moan—Kivanç's attention turned to the here and now. There would be plenty of time to deal with the menace posed by being in possession of an invaluable, sixth-century BCE coin.

Slowly, each button a small implement of torture, he undid her white linen blouse, which had been driving him mad. Not that he was an animal, but every time she would move her shoulders—such as when she laughed, which she did often—a hint of white cotton bra would tease him mercilessly and call to him in a siren's chant. With her wrists in his hand, he had all the liberty in the world to part her blouse wider after each button and do it leisurely to enjoy each discovery. A series of small enlightenments. When he had thought he could not possibly desire her more, his need deepened.

"Your beauty would surpass that of a goddess," he murmured in Turkish. Felt her breath catch when he finally undid the last button. "I wish to taste every parcel and angle, each curve and precious gift."

"Kivanç," she murmured with her eyes closed. "That's so sexy. What did you say?"

"The words do not matter. You know what I have said. Your body knows too."

He pressed a kiss to her ample, rounded hip. No bone showing. Sublime. Linen capris the color of green olives teased him by sliding a bit downward when she took in a deep breath. The elastic waist of underwear matching her bra poked above the linen. White cotton.

He loved those natural fibers against her skin. No synthetic textile should ever be *allowed* near a woman's precious skin. It was bordering on defilement to have a substance like nylon or polyester touching a woman. They deserved only the best—purest silk, highest quality cotton, the rarest samite weaves. He would love nothing better than to wrap Jill in silk bands and gold adornments, only to enjoy the sheer honor and delight of unwrapping her again. A gift. Denude her to his mouth and fingers. Taste her. Like a plum—round and juicy and sweet. That she was fierce and strong only fired him more. He wanted all of her, every layer and angle. And he would have her.

"Come," he said as he stood and took her hand in his. "I want to see you in my bed."

Kivanç escorted her through the dining room, down the stairs but stopped on the second floor instead of going down into the hall. His apartment was sparse, even Spartan compared to the lush restaurant décor and the opulent foyer downstairs. He spent little time on the second floor anyway.

Down a corridor that had at one point led to a large corner office that was now his bedroom, he led her to the foot of his bed, turned her around and placed a kiss on her forehead. "Stay this way."

Jill arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

He retreated because he could not bring himself to stop looking at her, pawed blindly for the switch to the bathroom light. A soft golden glow kissed her skin. Like dawn on the statue of a goddess.

"You are *beautiful*."

"I wish I could understand what you're saying," she replied, smiling.

Had he spoken Turkish without realizing? That would be a first. He was usually very much in command of his response and body whenever he was with a woman. Although Jill was anything but a typical woman. And the first he had brought in his bedroom. The bed had never held more than one person. It should have made him sad but did not. Life was all about choices.

After he partly closed the bathroom door and shut the louvers on the corner windows, only a sliver of light still cut through the darkness of his bedroom and touched her body at an acute angle. He stood in front of her, towered over her by a good head.

"I would like to watch you undress for me. Would you grant this wish?"

"You bet. I've had wine *and* that raki stuff." Jill's laughter had nothing ladylike about it. One more reason he enjoyed her company so much. No pretension or demureness. She was all woman and knew what she wanted.

"We will accuse both over breakfast tomorrow."

"I'm staying the night, am I?"

Kivanç nodded. "Swimming in open seas and climbing mountains builds endurance and *stamina*."

She puffed another laugh. "Okay then, are you ready?"

He offered his most lascivious grin. "I am a thread away from pushing you against the wall and taking you." And it was no lie. His thighs burned at the thought of doing just that.

Her expression turned serious. With a roll of shoulders she let the blouse slide down her arms. The bandage on her arm had his temper flaring. Those men—scum of the earth—had dared touch her, hurt her. If there was natural justice, they would suffer greatly before life abandoned their carcasses. But he refused to let their deed sour Jill's and his moment. He tore his gaze from the bandage to settle on her face.

Instead of getting rid of the capris as he thought she would, she instead reached back with one hand and unclipped her bra. The sudden release freed her breasts, which dropped by a tempting finger or so. Kivanç fought the impulse to tackle her down onto the mattress. Pure torture.

"Touch them for me." He tried to modulate his voice to form a request, but the commanding note rang loud and clear. What would she do? he wondered. Acquiesce to his demand or balk?

His breath caught when, a mocking grin rounding her rosy cheeks, she weighed her breasts as one would ripe fruits, elevated them slightly with the nipples converging in

the center. Never in his entire life had he fought so hard for control. But it was slipping. Fast.

Jill enjoyed the look of feral intensity narrowing the man's gorgeous dark honey eyes. She could almost *hear* the tension coiling in him. Like a spring about to release. An amusement ride cranking up the first exhilarating hill. A great cat ready to pounce. And she intended to tease him until he did.

"Mmm. You liked that, didn't you?"

A wide, predatory grin answered her. Shivers shot down her spine and legs. Curled up her toes in her sandals. He took a small, tensed step toward her. Stood barely a pace from her. Surpassed her five-seven frame by at least seven or eight inches. She loved tall men.

He leaned into her for a teasing nip on her lobe. "Do it again," he whispered, straightened to watch.

She did. Squeezed her breasts together with a long exhalation. Stepping away from Kivanç, she kicked her sandals off, unsnapped her capris, let them fall where they may—a size too large but it'd been too good a sale to pass—but kept her panties as she knelt up on the modern steel and wood bed. Backed into the middle of the mattress. The white cotton duvet cover felt cool and crisp against her bare legs. A bit of light filtered in from the ajar bathroom door. She loved his bedroom, a mix of streamlined modern furnishings and a couple of exotic—to her—pieces. Like that tall pedestal lamp. Or that Murano glass vase in blue and black swirls in a corner of the room. Directly on the floor. Went well with the rest. Very masculine and minimalist.

Jill sat on her heels. "Take your shirt off."

His eyes narrowed dangerously. He stepped away from the thin beam of light until she could barely make out his silhouette in the darkened corner of the room. But she could see enough to whet her appetite to dangerous levels. God, he was beautiful.

He unbuttoned his shirt and cufflinks, smoothly shrugged it off before looping the belt off. He bent it in half, a fist on either ends. With a dry *clack*, he snapped it taut. Jill experienced a fine peak of sexual energy. He must have known because he did it again. The buckle made a dull *clang* when it landed on the tiled floor. He kicked out of his leather sandals. Then the pants followed. He wore nothing but a mocking grin when he stepped back fully into the light.

Her hands tingled with the urge to run them all over him. Dark hair parted his chest and belly, darkened his forearms and legs, pooled around the base of his shaft. He leaned a knee on the corner of the bed. Against the stark white cotton, his tanned skin created a sharp contrast.

Kivanç rolled his index finger around as if he stirred a coffee. "Turn around."

Jill did as he instructed. And backed up to the foot of the bed when he asked. Heat heralded contact. With precise hands, he unclipped her hair from the multitude of

Bobby pins Darlene had used. She heard each land on the floor. Kept her hair pulled on one side with a hand while he caressed her opposite shoulder with the other.

"This is the place that can unmake me faster than anything else," he murmured against her nape. "Right here." He pressed a hot kiss at the base of her skull. Shivers accompanied his mouth. "Nothing is more arousing than a woman exposing her nape to me. I could kiss and caress this one spot all night."

She wanted to tell him to just go right ahead but her breath failed her when he licked a long, thrilling pass up her spine. He did it again, this time wrapping her breast with a hot, hot hand.

"Bend over," he whispered in her ear. "On your elbow and knees."

Her heart like a mad war drum, she went down on all fours then on her elbows. She'd never felt so exposed and vulnerable with a man before. Long and strong hands gripped her by the hips. Dug fingertips into her flesh as though to test the freshness.

"I love your body, Jill, so strong yet so soft."

A kiss on her hip followed then one to her other. She felt him bite the back of her panties, pull then let go. The elastic snapped back against her and made her start. Liquid heat seeped into the fabric. She would've squirmed had he not held on to her to tight.

"Curve your spine for me," he murmured between kisses. "Show me where to kiss you next."

Jill rolled her hips down so her butt would stick out higher. He kissed her on the coccyx. But through the panties she didn't get half the heat she knew he packed. "Take them off," she snarled. "The panties. Take them off."

"All in due time. We have all night."

Damn.

She popped her right hip for him to kiss. His lips left a burning sensation long after he'd taken them away. Spreading her legs, Jill threw a glance over her shoulder. Would he get the hint? Oh, he did.

He licked the pads of two fingers then pressed them against her cleft. Despite the underwear, she felt the moist heat seep through and against her throbbing flesh. She backed into him for more. Instead, he leaned over and bit her on the back of her shoulder near the dawn of her neck. She moaned.

"Oh God, do that again."

"It is not as arousing when it is expected," he replied after a lick. "Maybe later..."

Jill couldn't take it anymore. She whirled around and dove for his cock. Kivanc growled a word she didn't understand as she fisted him. On her elbows and knees still but this time facing him, she wolfed him down. That cock was the best. Hands down. It glided in smooth as silk, hot as sun-kissed skin. Fists closed on her hair. Angled her head sideways. She mewled as she sucked, moaned and growled to let the steam out somehow. It was either that or bite down. His belly cramped with her sucks. She

worked her jaw to accommodate him, drew to the end before plunging back around his shaft. Hands and mouth merciless allies. Saliva mixed with his essence. She greedily sucked the cocktail she'd created. She cupped his balls and squeezed them as hard as she dared. Kivanç's fists in her hair accentuated their hold. The burn welcomed on her scalp. Transferred renewed energy to her mouth and hand. Up and down. In a corkscrew. No mercy. No break.

Kivanç twisted his hips away and left her there with her mouth wide. "Hey!"

She was about to voice her protest further when he leaned over her back and fisted the back of her panties. Hard. The pressure caused the fabric to rub up against her sex. A moan left her.

He did it again. Used the back of her panties as an anchor to pull her against him. She kissed, licked and bit what she could reach. A hip. A thigh. But it was that glorious cock she wanted. Damn!

How could a polished and laid-back gentleman turn into this forceful lover in the span of a few minutes? As if he'd switched something on. Or off.

"Roll onto your back."

He grabbed her ankles and raised them high as soon as she followed his instructions. Standing behind her raised legs, Kivanç stared down at her. The blade of light slashed his chest diagonally and illuminated one of his nipples. Small and dark with the skin around it the color of wet sand. Jill bit her bottom lip as she tried to guess what he'd do next.

Her ankles in two implacable vise grips, he slowly parted her legs. His shoulders corded, muscles played under the smooth skin. He formed a V with her legs. His gaze on her the entire time, he licked her calf from the back of her knee to her heel. Then he bit her. Instead of a yelp, Jill let out a whimper of need. It seemed to spur him on. He dealt her other leg a lick-bite treat. Then lower he went. Started at the juncture of her thighs, in turns licked upward to her knees, bit the inside of each. Moisture had long seeped right through her panties.

"Touch yourself."

"*You* do it."

Kivanç suddenly released her legs. "My bed, my rules."

She kept her legs up as though he still held them. "So if we ever make love in mine, I'll call the shots?"

He nodded. "Your bed, your rules."

She could deal with that. Pointing her feet, she pressed a hand to her mons and let her fingers follow the natural curve of her pubic bone. Kivanç nodded, gripped her legs again.

"Do it under the garment."

Trembling with adrenaline, she slipped a hand inside her panties. And waited.

"What do you want me to do to you?"

"This." She rubbed in small circles.

He kept that incredible eye contact of his while she pressed fingertips against her flesh and teased herself.

"What else?" Kivanç murmured. "Show me."

Jill would've closed her eyes but she'd never willingly shut out the handsome vision standing between her legs. With her other hand, she parted herself, slipped a finger in. A wave of sensualization rolled over her. She exhaled.

With fluid strength and precision, he tugged her panties completely off, sent them flying behind him. She heard his kneecaps connecting against the floor. A split second later, he was all over her. His mouth, his fingers. Inside her. Taking. Giving. Sounds like a starving man feasting on the most succulent meal. Sucking noises. Moist flesh against moist flesh. Demanding fingers spread her wide before an even more vigorous mouth took her. Fucked her.

Jill came like a storm. A strident, unequivocal note that stretched as interminable as waves on the sea before ebbing to a throaty whimper. Before she could draw another breath, Kivanç pushed into her.

She'd never had a man take her this way. With a mix of experienced power and measured ferocity. Exhilarating.

Skin clacked against skin. Hands like manacles around her knees, Kivanç used his greater weight to pin her underneath him and push into her, thrust and take and reign over her. On a cry of bliss, she locked her ankles behind his waist, dug in her heels. In the back of her mind, she knew she must have hurt him. She didn't care. *Couldn't* stop to care. She was too close.

As Kivanç abandoned her knees so he could grip her wrists and force them above her head, Jill heard her voice rise to unprecedented levels. The beads dug in her wrist bone. She didn't care. He took her there. To dizzying heights of awareness. Left her on the brink with each retreat. Only to drive her closer on the next thrust. Instead of the piercing note she'd expected, a soft whisper left her. His name. And as she came, as he took her one last time to the edge of them both, everything stopped. She ceased to exist. No emotion stirred her. No stimulus reached her. Sheathed deeply, Kivanç grew still. It'd never happened before with another lover. They came together.

She couldn't tell how long they remained thus, one encased in the other with a fit too perfect for words. Their breathing deepened, slowed. Sweat and each of their essences linked them intimately. Caressing his hair, which had come undone in his potent lovemaking, Jill smiled when he raised his face to hers. In the gloom, she could make out some details, the proud bridge of his nose, the arch of his eyebrows and the half smile she'd come to love.

She kissed the finger with which he caressed her cheek. "I have something to tell you."

Despite the lack of proper light, she saw him close his eyes for several seconds. His shoulders drooped. "Secrets are only for those who deserve them. I do not."

"I think you do."

He pulled away, kissed her raised knee before climbing off the bed. While she stretched like a lazy cat—God, her thighs and hips ached—he retrieved something from the bathroom. She heard the water going then stopping. Small sounds. Normal things. Ordinary yet thrilling.

He joined her again, a hot, wet facecloth in hand. She reached for it but he held it back. "This is a treat I have no intention of sharing."

She caught the flash of teeth and knew he was grinning. Jill let Kivanç rub the hot washcloth down her legs, over her sex, which throbbed and pulsated still. Remnants of pleasure rippled outward with the hot water.

"What if I told you I can see things not many people can?" she began tentatively. She hadn't rehearsed any of this, had never thought she'd tell anyone. Certainly not a man she'd met the same week. "Things that some people say don't exist."

"Please, Jill, such a gift is not for the likes of me."

"The likes of you? What do you mean?"

"We have only just met. You should not trust this with me."

Jill chose to ignore the warning his words caused. She also chose not to hear the quiet desperation in his tone. "Do you believe in ghosts? That some people stay behind as a sort of echo?"

"Echoes?"

Jill sat cross-legged. It was much easier to spill her guts to this man in the darkness. So she plowed on. "Yes, like the echoes of things you can't see. Do you know what I mean? Let's say someone yells a word in a large room and you can only hear the echoes of that word, not the source itself. It's like that...I think."

Kivanç lay across the foot of the bed. He patted the duvet. She took his invitation and lay by his side, facing him. For a long time only their breathing could be heard. She wondered what he thought about, was close to asking when he took a breath.

"When I was a young child," he whispered. "I had a friend who was blind. After school, I would walk by his house and find him gazing out at the field across his house. And every day he would wave to me and greet me by name before I spoke a word. One day, I asked him how he knew who I was even from a great distance. He replied that he knew the sound of my..." Kivanç stopped, seemed to be looking for a particular word. "My energy? It cannot be translated accurately."

"I understand," Jill whispered in answer. "He was a wise little guy."

"Yes. And when I asked him to teach me how to recognize people by the sound of their 'energy', he said he could not. Just like I could not teach him the color red."

Jill thought she'd cry. For the first time as far back as she could remember, she'd never been so close to tears. God, was she ever going to shed a tear in her life? Kivanç's words touched her more deeply than anything else ever had. Gone was the fear the first person she told would laugh or think her mad. And gone was the feeling she had to

carry all this by herself. Someone understood. Or at the very least accepted the notion she *could* hear the dead.

She reached out in the darkness, caressed his lustrous hair cascading over his shoulder. "Ghosts talk to me. That or they talk while I'm there to listen. I can never be sure. Sometimes, they'll just go on, but other times, it's as if they're waiting for me to hear and *then* they start talking."

Kivanç kissed the hand with which she caressed his hair. "What does it sound like? Their voices?"

"Like static from the old radios, remember those? When you'd tune between two channels and only get a bit of echo from the stronger?"

She felt him nod. "Have you heard them since your arrival? Do you hear them all the time?"

"In some places, yes." She didn't tell him about the man she kept hearing downstairs, listing something or enumerating. No use creeping Kivanç out with the notion that a ghost lived with him. "Like that underground cistern, for example, there were a lot of them down there. A *lot*."

"What were they saying?"

"I have no idea. They spoke a language I couldn't understand. But they sounded angry."

"Is this how you heard of Hecate? Was that what they were saying?"

Jill wanted to hug the man something fierce. "Yes. They did. Over and over. Like they were calling her, you know, but she wasn't answering. They sounded so angry and afraid. That's why I think we should put that thing back."

"They want it back," Kivanç whispered before he kissed her forehead. A faint creak from the stairwell made him raise his head.

"I think they do." She heard him sigh long and hard. "What's wrong?"

"I have a secret too, since we are sharing." A point of cynicism she'd never heard from him poked through. He sounded defeated, afraid, frustrated.

"As you said, we don't have to —" She frozen mid-sentence.

"What?"

"Shh."

Something caught her ear. Or more aptly, something *didn't*.

The ghost downstairs. She couldn't hear him anymore. Jill raised her head, turned toward the doorway. Nothing.

"Someone's coming," she whispered.

Chapter Eight

No worse timing in his life. He had been about to tell her. Everything. About Gentlemen Inc. and Adriano, about his knowledge of her, his task and the eventual payment he would receive. The thought left a sour taste in his mouth. He did not want the money. Not anymore. Not for spending time with Jill when he would gladly pay for the honor. Would give everything he had just for one more night. But after he told her, he doubted she would stay. The thought of not being around the irreverent woman made him want to lie in bed and never come out. Shut the windows, close the restaurant and just lie there in his self-made misery. What a cretin.

He had come so close...

But Jill's warning gave him chills. Coupled with another creak from the stairs. She was right, someone *was* coming.

"Get your clothes," he breathed.

"Already on it."

"Hurry."

With sandals and pants on, his shirt open, he grabbed the phone and his car keys from the dresser. "Do you have the coin?"

That damn thing. He should have insisted she give it to Azya. In fact, they would go to the university right this instant. Race across town and give them the thing so they could figure it all out. He did not want to risk Jill's safety. He would not be able to live with the consequences should things go wrong. And neither would those who hurt her. Cold rage quickened his heart.

"Yes." The sibilant hissed when she whispered the word.

The creaking stopped for a few seconds. Kivanç grabbed Jill's hand and stayed her. After awhile, whoever was in the staircase resumed his slow progress.

He turned to the window, reached out to peek through the louvers. Never had time. With a dry, breaking sound, they burst inward in a geyser of wooden shards. Moonlight spilled into the room.

Jill's yelp broke the silence. Thundering steps in the staircase announced the intruder was no longer trying to be stealthy. Kivanç pushed Jill aside a second before a heavy weight tackled him back from the window. They hit the ground in a snarl of limbs and heavily accented Turkish curses. He had been right. The men from the cistern.

"Run!" he yelled to Jill.

He delivered a bone-crushing punch to his attacker's face. The man's head snapped back.

Jill cursed loud and clear. "Close your eyes!"

A split second later, something crashed against the man's back and broke in a rain of crunchy bits. By the moonlight, he spotted Jill brandishing the broken pedestal lamp for another good wallop. The woman was unflappable!

He used the reprieve to elbow the man in the face. Broke at least his nose, judging from the sickening crunch. Rolled him off then kicked him in the belly in case the man had any ideas. A gun glimmered on the floor. He bent over to pick it up. Light abruptly flooded the room.

Two men stood in the doorway. Each with a gun pointed at Jill and him.

"Drop it!" one, a good head taller than even Kivanç, snarled.

Dressed in mismatched bits of dark uniform and civilian clothing, they separated to cover more angles.

Jill still gripped the lamp as one would a quarterstaff. The electrical cord had been ripped right off at the base. The men were lucky to have guns.

Despite being barely a finger away, Kivanç had no choice but to abort his grab for the gun, straightened to face the men. The one on the floor groaned weakly as he rolled to his side. Hatred blazed in the dark gaze he directed at Jill.

"The coin. Where is it?" the tall one demanded of Jill, who glanced uncertainly at Kivanç.

He stood by her side. "She doesn't speak Turkish."

"Then ask her."

"These men want a coin."

Jill set the disjointed lamp back on the floor and backed away from it. "I have no idea what they're talking about."

Clever woman had not named the thing or the university. The words sounded too much alike in Turkish and English. It could have given them a clue.

"Leave us alone. We don't have your coin," Kivanç went on in Turkish.

"Liar. The police don't have it. You took it from Aydin. Where is it?"

He motioned to his man on the floor, who was in the process of gingerly climbing to his feet before he pulled a long, serrated knife from a sheath at his thigh.

"I'll make her talk."

"We can't stay here," said the one who had remained silent. He looked out the window. "Someone could see us or the van."

"We'll take this elsewhere then," the tall one agreed. "Let's go."

Jill shook the knife-wielder's hand off her elbow but cried out when he gripped her by the upper arm and shook her. The bandage completely disappeared under the man's wide, dirty hand. She stood on the tips of her toes for the implacable grip with which the man hoisted her to his face. Rage engulfed Kivanç like a fever.

"Take your hand off her," he snarled, taking a threatening step.

"Keep it for later," called the tall one from the doorway. "Where no one can hear them. We'll see how talkative he gets when we're taking turns on his girlfriend."

Kivanç leveled an index finger at the tall one. "You put one hand on that woman..."

"Where are they taking us?" a grimacing Jill demanded as she circumvented the vicious knife-holder to stand by Kivanç's side.

He held her hand, squeezed it. "I think they are taking us back to the cistern."

She swallowed hard. "Shit."

"I agree."

"We can't let them do that."

"Again," Kivanç replied, trying to keep his tone neutral. The horrors of what the man had said froze his blood. He would not let them. He would be damned to all however many levels of hell before he let them put a single hand on her. "I agree."

"Got a plan? 'Cause I'm all out."

They trooped out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Once in the hall, the tall one poked his head outside, checked both ways then motioned for the rest to follow.

Kivanç preceded her in the doorway. "How fast can you run?"

"Under these circumstances? You'd be surprised."

As they exited his building, a dog barked in the distance. Another answered. Because The Marmara sat on a posh street corner flanked on both sides by another restaurant and a jeweler and was located in the middle of a commercial district, not many people actually lived around here. Traffic lights blinked yellow on all sides. A car sped by as the men took them to a nearby white van parked facing the wrong way.

The tall one pulled keys from his jacket pocket.

That was his chance.

Without looking at her, Kivanç said in English, "Do you know what an Opel GT looks like?"

Jill had to remind herself to breathe. Fear and adrenaline pumped her muscles, squeezed her throat. Nausea choked her for a few seconds when she saw the men's van. Kivanç's question about a car surprised her.

"The car, you mean? Yes."

She actually spotted one of the low-to-the-ground racing wet dreams not that far off and surmised it must have been his. So this was his "other car", the one he never took in the old downtown. She could understand why. Did he mean to make a run for it? They'd never get there in time!

"Catch!"

Kivanç threw a set of keys at her a split second before he tackled the tall man who still had his hand in his pocket, whom in turn crashed into the other two. They fell against the side of the van in a snarl of limbs and growled Turkish.

Kivanç turned to her. The love in his eyes couldn't be denied. It burned like a bright beacon. She stood to lose it all. She'd found a man with whom she was compatible, had discovered someone with whom she could truly share everything without fear of looking like a complete nut. And he could be taken away from her.

"Run!"

His roar snapped her out of it.

Jill ran.

Even if she didn't want to abandon Kivanç to those assholes, even if she wasn't sure she'd reach the car in time. She didn't even know if she'd be able to drive the damn thing. She ran. As if the devil were after her.

Sandals flew off her feet right away. Barefoot on asphalt. The sting of tiny rocks and debris. Fear and adrenaline fighting for control of her body. No gunshot. No sound except for snarled Turkish as Kivanç struggled to contain three men. With a *pweep*, she activated the auto-unlock. Parked four cars down, a black two-seat roadster that gleamed like oil winked its parking lights at her. Matte black ragtop, silver trim, widely spaced wheels. That thing could go *fast*. She wrenched the door open, jumped in and slammed it shut. As she started the engine—the thing roared to life with a vengeance—she kept her thumb pressed on the key chain's panic button.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three –

The car alarm started wailing.

Cursing and wrestling with the steering wheel, she kicked the clutch, shifted then tires screeching like banshees maneuvered the roadster around. Onto the sidewalk with a bone-jarring jolt. The engine roared in reply as she stepped on the accelerator. She scraped the hydro pole with the corner of the bumper. Feared for a second she'd send the thing crashing down on the convertible. The alarm still cleaved the night. Somewhere to her left, light came on behind a window. Then another. She spared a hand to honk the horn in long, angry blasts. Violently drove down the sidewalk. A tiny light flashed on the expensive control panel. Fuck. Whatever it was, she couldn't pay attention to it as she faced the fight.

Wheels spinning in place, she gunned it but kept her other foot on the brakes. The little car fishtailed with repressed acceleration. Her aim had to be perfect.

Kivanç was already on his feet with one of the men bent in front of him. His knee snapped up and the man went sprawling on his ass, knocked his head against the van's driver's side door, leaving her friend standing alone.

Perfect. She let the brakes go. The sudden speed pressed her back into the molded leather seat.

But the other two men, one of whom was the really tall one, tackled Kivanç down in the middle of the street. Directly in her path.

"Shit!"

Jill barely had time to react. Yelling incoherently, she swerved, tires screeching again.

One of the men must have thought that was just too damn close because he backpedaled, reaching inside his coat.

Oh no you're not!

She aimed for the van. Engine revving, she roared by. At the last possible second veered toward the retreating man and clipped the van on the back bumper. A god-awful metal-on-metal grating noise made her teeth rattle. But she'd sent the one reaching inside his jacket scrambling back. He dove for cover when she executed a hair-raising three-point turn, feedback completely different from what she was used to. She bumped up the sidewalk with the front left wheel. Bounced back down into the street and kept going. Another pass at the van ought to keep the two assholes occupied.

The third man kept at Kivanç, trying to kick him into submission and having not a stitch of luck. Kivanç stood and, to her complete shock, spun on himself fast to deliver a roundhouse kick that could easily fly right over her head. Holy *shit!*

The tall man took the hit right in the face. Staggering, he collapsed against a nearby car. This was her chance!

After a second fumbling with the controls, she unlocked the car doors, sent the car into a tight hairpin turn that must have made the rims want to come off. As quickly as she could, she gave a quick burst of speed to use the car as a shield between the van and Kivanç, stepped on the brakes a foot from him. He whirled around, jerked the car door open, was partly inside when she stepped on it again.

Gunshots followed them. She didn't wait to see if they'd hit anything valuable. That little blue light still flashed demandingly. Goddammit.

"You should not have waited for me!" Kivanç growled as he buckled himself tight. "But thank you!"

Heat like a wave rushed up to her face. "No problem! Where to?"

"Down the street! Right!"

Down the street she sped, took the corner hard and fast. Tires screeched anew. The engine sounded as though it'd come right out of the hood. Perfect donut—downshift to two, yank on the handbrake. She'd done it enough times to get the technique right. Only she'd done it on *snow*. Never on asphalt.

Pressure accumulated on the driver side when she swerved around the corner and drove onto a wide boulevard. Fishtailed the first few feet as she wrestled the monstrous engine into submission.

"Faster!" Kivanç urged by her side. He twisted in his seat. "They are behind us!"

Shit!

"At the light," Kivanç said, still looking back over the headrest. "Turn left then left again!"

She could see the van, all lights off, coming around the corner like an albino bat out of a cave. It grew in her mirror. A fucking *van*! Hands sweaty, she stayed in the middle of the road, astride the dotted line so they wouldn't pass her or try to ram the smaller car. Kept to the middle until Kivanç frantically pointed left and yelled, "Now!"

Literally *hanging* on the wheel, she gave a violent jerk that made the roadster veer left amidst a show of smoke and wailing tires. Shit. On the wrong side of the concrete divider!

"After the bank!" yelled Kivanç. He gripped the door handle. "Turn! Now!"

She followed his instructions even if she couldn't really see how the car would fit between those two buildings. There was *no street*!

But it did! Speeding up on the concrete incline indicating a pedestrian zone, the car roared. She swore she lifted off her seat. With only their headlights to guide them, Kivanç instructed her to keep as close to the left as possible. Behind them, no van followed.

"We will come to a small plaza, go right around the fountain."

There was and she did. High above them, a starry sky blinked past between lower buildings. She followed his instructions to "keep going" even if she scraped the car at least a dozen times on terrace dividers, umbrella stands and building corners. His poor car.

She checked behind. Nothing. "Do you think they're gone?"

"No."

Her wounded arm stung. She needed to pee badly. Nerves made her want to giggle. What a mess!

"There," Kivanç pointed straight ahead. "The fountain. Go around the right, keep to the right...good."

To their right a series of narrow streets led onto the wide boulevard they'd just left. "Are they there?"

"They must be. The van is too wide to come into these old streets. But they will wait for us to come out."

"We have to find a way out of here. These streets are getting narrower." Already she'd clipped the mirror a couple of times. "What's that for?" She pointed to the small flashing blue light on the console.

Kivanç punched the dash. "The tire warning."

"Argh, Christ, we don't have a *flat*?"

"Soon, we will."

Their little street widened onto a small, circular plaza lined with quaint little shops and eateries with signs in Turkish and English.

"Keep going." He pulled his cell phone and thumbed a number on the screen. Who could he be calling at that time? Two-oh-seven gleamed bright blue on the console. Right beside the symbol indicating low tire pressure. How long did they have? Damn.

"Don't call the police!" She swerved to follow the curving street. "Kivanç. Please, Andy will have a cow."

"I am calling Azya. We will give the coin to the university, make a public announcement. We should have done so earlier."

"No, we're not." The thing suddenly weighed heavier in her pocket. She could swear it did. "Kivanç. We have to put it back. They *need* it."

He patted the air for her to be silent as he put the phone against his ear. "And we need to stay *alive*."

While he spoke, she kept both fists on the wheel and her eyes riveted to the narrow street. She hoped no one had any ideas about coming out of their homes because there was no room for both an open door and the car. Plus, they needed to come out of this neighborhood eventually. The van was probably circling like a vulture. Kivanç flicked his phone closed.

"We will take the bridge. She will meet us at the faculty."

"Is it far? The tires."

"Not that much. Farther down, take that street there...good. Now at the corner, follow the white and blue signs."

"Those ones? On that pole there?"

"Yes. As soon as you reach the corner, the highway to the bridge will start. Take the exit marked Atatürk. Do it quickly or they could see us."

Just by the light at the end of the alley-like street, she could tell they were coming back toward the boulevard. She sat deeper in the seat, rolled her head.

Kivanç put a hot hand on her thigh. "You are amazing. Ready?"

She nodded.

"Go."

Jill pressed on the accelerator. If there was a pedestrian who decided to cross the street, she wouldn't have time to stop.

With a roar, the roadster raced out onto the deserted boulevard. Traffic lights blinked yellow. A traffic sign marking *Atatürk Kpr.* glowed when her headlights hit it. A slender minaret poked out from the right as she drove onto the highway, kept to the right lane with her gaze constantly flicking to the rearview mirror. A couple other highways led to the suspension bridge. No headlights.

"Are they there?" She rubbed sweat from her eyes.

Kivanç reached out and turned the air-conditioning on. "We are fine —"

Out of nowhere, a rust-pocked, white panel filled her driver's side window. The impact sent her leaning to the right, steering wheel included. The car swerved, hit the guardrail. She corrected just as the van came back for another hit.

"Shit!"

Kivanç braced both hands on the dashboard. "They are too heavy! Faster!"

Jill kicked the clutch and shifted to last gear. With a roar, the roadster pulled ahead. But try as she might, she couldn't lose the van. It grew in the mirrors.

"Come on! Jill!"

"I can't! It won't!"

When the car started pulling to the right, she knew. The tire—or tires—had finally given out. A loud flopping noise drowned the engine. The pull accentuated until she had to wrestle with the steering wheel to keep from driving into the guardrail. Behind them, the van sped up. A violent jolt rocked them both against the dashboard. They'd rammed them from behind. Then again. She yelped.

The bridge was about to end. "Where?"

"Left!"

Jill cut the van off as it was coming for another hit, drove over the concrete divider and took the left branch of the upcoming Y-intersection. In her mirror, she saw the larger vehicle had followed her but slower.

"Branch left! Now!"

She raced up a gentle hill. Wrong way on a one-way street lined on both sides with shops and commercial buildings. Jesus, they were going to kill someone! Where were the police in Istanbul?

"Keep going!" Kivanç twisted around, reached behind and pulled a slim fire extinguisher from underneath his seat. "I will open the roof."

"Are you cra—"

As soon as he pressed on a button, the roof detached from above the sun visors but with the wind snapped right off its hinges. In the mirror, she saw it crashing in the street and tumbling like an old umbrella in a storm. Cried out even if nothing touched her. Wind whistled through the broken armature. Unbuckling his seat belt, Kivanç grabbed the headrest and climbed up.

"Don't do that! Kivanç!"

"Just *drive*!"

As the van rapidly gained ground, she followed the one-way street until it came to an intersection. A more touristy sector judging by the large bus parking spaces. Freshly painted lines. Brand-new asphalt. Details zoomed by. Smells of the night. Wind and engine and flapping, blown tires competing in noise levels.

"The park," Kivanç snarled. "Drive in front of it...at the statue, go on the sidewalk."

Behind them the van loomed. The pull from the burst tire was close to keeping her from turning left. Smells of rubber and heated aluminum reached her. The rims. They must have been badly damaged. A shower of sparks arced out of the front passenger side wheel well. Shit.

She spotted the park and a couple of people standing in front of a bus. Amidst yells, she drove up the sidewalk, honked repeatedly for them to get the hell away and at the statue did as Kivanç had instructed and turned into the park proper. Gloom from a canopy of mature trees gave her an idea. She killed the headlights. Followed the central fountain. Behind them, the van followed but more prudently. She was past being prudent!

For a minute or so, she thought she had them. But no. The driver must have spotted her among the row of trees because the van suddenly roared closer. Too close. Their bumpers touched. She fought against the blown tire pulling the small car to the right. Smoke whipped out like convulsing snakes. The van hit again.

"Kivanç!" she warned. They wouldn't be able to take much longer. Already the car was starting to respond weirdly to her maneuvers. Other lights on the console blinked persistently.

With a grunt, he cocked his arm back and lobbed the fire extinguisher at the van. Caught the windshield right in the middle. Despite the gloom, she saw the spider web pattern zip out in all directions on the glass. Left and right, the van veered out of control. It clipped a concrete bench. While Jill slowed to take the gravel path leading out of the park, the van overcompensated and slowly, as if in slowmo, it angled up, way up. Kivanç plopped back in his seat as the van veered completely onto its side.

His long hair was completely messed up and in his face but he was grinning. He raked it back, yelled in Turkish.

Jill punched the wheel. "We got them!"

"Just in case, see the parking lot?" He pointed straight ahead. "Go through it. The faculty of Human Sciences is there."

"But they'll know we went to the university."

"It is vast. It would take them weeks to search it all."

She followed the instructions. On a lurch, the car cleared the parking lot. Large buildings with terra cotta roofs and white walls stood silent sentinels behind the park. Larger trees poked out over the roofs.

"The gate! Quickly!"

She stopped the car right beside a mammoth wrought iron gate wide open—Jesus Christ, she wanted barbed wire around that thing—and cut the engine.

Kivanç pocketed the keys as he climbed out of the car. "Hurry."

She ran on bare feet over crushed gravel, checked back several times to make sure they weren't being followed. An old silver car was parked in an otherwise deserted lot adjacent to the largest building. Night birds greeted Kivanç and her with a shrill note.

He leaped up the steps, was about to pull on the handle when the massive cleated door creaked and a beautiful brunette poked her head out.

"Come in," she whispered. "Quickly."

Jill had to rush by when Kivanç stopped just out of the door to let her pass first. He closed the door behind him, pushed the bolt into place. With a sigh, he pressed his forehead against the wood panel.

"Are you two all right?" the brunette asked. She wore a white cotton embroidered shirt that came down over the legs of her bejeweled jeans. Her flip-flops smacked against the tiles as she rushed down the corridor and turned a light on in one of the rooms. An office with a computer in a corner and gorgeous plants in colorful clay pots vying for any flat surface.

"Did they follow you here?" Her accent was much thicker than Kivanç's. "Should we call the police?"

Kivanç shook his head as he closed the door. He spoke a few words in Turkish as they embraced and exchanged kisses on each cheek.

"Please, no police," he replied as he held the stunning brunette at arm's length. "It is good to see you again, Azya."

She agreed with a nod that made the gold earrings glimmer softly.

Kivanç stood by Jill's side, scooped her hand for a quick kiss. "Jill, this is Azya, an old friend..." His eyes shifted downward. "From my university years."

Azya arched her eyebrow but smiled as she extended a hand to Jill. "*Merhaba*, Jill. You two really started something up here," she added, grinning. "I had to put a password on my machine to keep the professors out. They are *not* happy. Can I see it?"

Jill fished inside her pocket and retrieved the coin. To her shock, it was very cold and much heavier than when it'd rested in her pocket. What the hell was going on? Down the corridor, echoes from a couple of voices seemed to be arguing over something. She tried to shut them out. She couldn't understand them. Couldn't help. She couldn't help *any* of them. A feeling of hopelessness settled on her shoulders like a wet blanket. All these years she'd been able to help the poor souls stuck between two places. She couldn't explain any of it, not even to herself. Some people died but didn't actually "leave". They sort of stayed behind as echoes. She knew they couldn't hear the living, not the way she heard them. But they seemed to understand when she meant to help, would try to show her or guide her steps. Such as in the cistern when the dead made sure the living would not hurt Kivanç and her. But here in a place she knew practically nothing about, in a language she didn't understand, Jill had, for the first time, serious doubts about her abilities. God, what a mess.

Her heart beat so fast she feared for a moment she'd be sick.

Azya reverently took the coin, turned it over. "It is much larger than the picture lets on." She placed it on her desk, put a sheet of paper on top and gently rubbed a pencil over the surface. "There, that will give them something to argue over while we figure out what to do."

"I know *exactly* what to do with it," Jill retorted. "It's going back where we found it. Where it belongs."

Kivanç avoided the surprised look Azya angled his way. Those two had been more than just university friends. They seemed very, very comfortable with each other, seemed to gauge each other's moods and body language. Both of which required intimacy. An old girlfriend, maybe? A not-so-old girlfriend? To her shame and chagrin, Jill realized she was jealous. Actually jealous.

Great timing, Moss. Jesus.

"We will talk about this later," Kivanç murmured as he sat on the corner of the desk. He buttoned his shirt before tucking it into his pants. Jill noticed his hands shook badly. "We have to learn more about it."

Azya shrugged as she gave the coin back to Jill. "We can still make a mold. That would be almost as good as the real thing." She padded to a filing cabinet that had seen better days, pulled on the bottom drawer, which was filled with supplies of all sorts. She retrieved two blocks of gray clay, unwrapped them.

"Would you like some coffee?"

Jill tried her best to smile as she nodded. "That'd be super, thanks."

Before Kivanç could interrupt—and he seemed about to—Azya plopped the clay on the desk and left the office in a rush of flower-smelling perfume and lustrous black hair. Jill looked down at her bare, dirty feet and cringed.

"We *must* let them have it," Kivanç murmured, standing. "It is too dangerous to keep."

Jill held the coin in both hands, trying to warm it. So cold. Unnaturally cold. "We've talked about this before."

He threw his hands up. Oh, a bit of temper?

"Jill, listen to me," he retorted in a harsh whisper. "This thing is *dangerous*. Can you not see? These men will do anything to get it back."

"Yet you're willing to dump it on Azya's lap? Why? It wouldn't be dangerous to her? What, you trust her but not me?"

A look of anger flashed in the dark honey gaze. "It has *nothing* to do with trust! The university is large, the men would not know where it is, or if it is even here. The faculty would take it to the Museum of Archeology to study it, display it, make it public."

"The hell with all that." Jill shoved it in her pocket again. "It has to go back down. They *need* it."

"Who? The ghosts? How would you know? Did they *tell* you?"

"That was a cheap shot." Jill crossed her arms. She knew how that made her look but couldn't do a thing against it. "I don't need them to tell me, okay? I can feel it. It's like an elastic band pulling back. It *has* to go back, Kivanç."

"At what price? Your life? Mine? It destroyed my home, my car. It has you under its spell. Are you willing to go as far as these men over this thing?"

"You're not comparing me to those assholes, are you?" Heat like a fever rushed to her face. She blew air through pursed lips.

Kivanç seemed about to say something, abruptly aborted then pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course not, Jill," he murmured. His voice was back to his usual tone. "I would never think such a thing."

"Good. We'll figure something out for your car..."

Now that she looked at things from his perspective, the magnitude of his support shamed her. He'd done all he could, had pulled strings and sacrificed a lot on her word. She drew near, placed a hand on his forearm.

"I'm sorry I got all bitchy. I'm tired and I'm scared...well, a bit." She grinned.

Kivanç gave her a bone-crunching, side-to-side hug that made her shoulders want to meet in the middle. "Ah, Jill, I am the one who needs to apologize. For many things in fact."

She wasn't sure she liked the sound of that.

"What do you mean?" She didn't like the subdued quality of his voice. "What aren't you telling me? Is it about the coin and going back down there?"

Kivanç shook his head. "I was about to tell you. I had finally worked up the courage to tell you when those men showed up. I have a secret of my own."

The cold fingers of dread reached into her gut and twisted around. "Okay, you're freaking me out here, and after tonight, I don't need more freakin' out. What do you mean, secret?" She tried to laugh. "You mean worse than hearing dead people? You're not a one-upper, are you, trying to out weird me?"

He didn't smile. Sadness made his face the most poignant tableau.

"Come on. It can't be that bad."

Sadness turned into pain. "Worse than bad. I have lied to you from the beginning."

Blood pressure fell low enough to make her see stars. She fought the vacillation gripping her. "Oh."

"I knew of you before we met."

Jill clung to the hope. But it wouldn't support her emotional weight. Nothing would. Her heart sank. "Yeah," she replied, still unwilling to acknowledge the proverbial elephant in the room. "Darlene and her big mouth."

"Not Darlene. Someone else. A man for whom I work."

Not what she'd expected.

Kivanç's voice fell flat when he spoke. "His name is Adriano and he runs an agency. A male *escort* agency. The day before you arrived, he told me about you, that I was to escort you on your visit and —"

"You were *paid* to be with me?"

"Not to be *with* you in a sexual or intimate sense, no. I was paid to meet you, be your guide. The rest was my own choice."

Silence stretched for several seconds.

"Ah. I see." She licked her suddenly dry lips. "How, erm, how many women have you been guide – escort – to? Three, four, twenty?" Was this how he'd met Azya?

His sigh lasted a long time. She could almost see him deflating. "Many."

"How much are you getting paid? How much am I *worth*?"

"Jill, please, do not view things that way. It has nothing to do with a person's worth."

"Not view things that way? How the hell am I supposed to see this? Like you did me a favor?"

"No, of course not –"

"How did this guy know about me anyway? Did we meet somewhere? Is he like a perv, snooping on people? Going through my trash? What?"

"He is no pervert, I can assure you. Adriano is of the noblest character. But I do not know how he finds a Lady..." He shook his head. "He sends me the details through text messages or e-mails. I do not even know who he is in real life."

"*Lady*, eh? Ha! Good one."

"Jill –"

She made a beeline for the phone on Azya's desk. Her ears buzzed with her heartbeat. *Whoosh-whoosh*. Like a war drum. Gaining in intensity.

"You had me going, I'll give you that," she murmured, chuckled mirthlessly as she lifted the handset. "You lying sack of *shit*."

He flinched at the words. "Forgive me for my lies, Jill. I did not want to risk –"

"What? Huh? That I'd go ballistic on your lying ass? That I'd yell and curse and throw a fit? Lord thunderin' Jesus...I could – I could... Well, guess what? It's here now. So get the fuck outta my way."

She figured out the outside line, mashed the numbers. "You should've told me," she murmured. Was that her voice? So cold and flat?

"Yes. I should have. And I will live with my cowardice for the rest of my life." He murmured a short sentence in Turkish. Despite her anger, she wondered if he was praying.

"And I'll live with your *betrayal*."

A voice with a French Canadian accent answered. She spoke fast, afraid she'd start crying even if the chances of that were slim. She couldn't believe it. Kivanç, an escort. Paid to be with her.

Not sexually, she mentally parroted him. Fucking liar.

Kivanç waited in silence as she asked the consulate chauffeur to please come pick her up, supplied the proper address when she asked. Azya returned with a tray bearing a copper pot and three little glasses. She froze in the doorway.

"Ah." She shifted from foot to foot. "Did you do the mold?"

Jill shook her head as she squeezed past the stunned woman. She navigated the many hallways and darkened corridors and finally emerged into an airy foyer with glass doors and a dormant fountain in the middle. She sat there, where she'd get a clear view of the street outside.

She felt a presence behind her, knew it was him. She didn't want to see him. Lying jerk.

They waited in silence for her chauffeur, him sitting on a marble step and she leaning on the wall by the door with her back to him. Finally, headlights illuminated the night beyond the glass panels. She checked to make sure it wasn't a white van. Although the thing had flipped on its side. Those guys would have to find new wheels to chase Kivanç and her around. His poor car...

Jill turned to him. Didn't know why.

She shouldn't have. He sat there elbows on knees, despondent, with his heart in his eyes.

While hers lay at her feet in a thousand broken pieces.

Chapter Nine

Kivanç did not know how long he sat there. Long after Jill had left.

He stood, limped the first few steps for his thigh still ached. Walked to the front door to make sure it was locked. When he reached it, he noticed his *nazar bonjuk* looped around the wrought iron doorknob. His chest ached with a sudden spasm.

He retrieved the discarded gift, clipped it back on. But it brought none of the usual comfort. Perhaps the evil eye would find him this time and punish him for betraying a good woman's trust.

Back into Azya's office, he sat at the computer. She had left a note to meet her in the conference room when he was done. Her tight penmanship reminded him of the day he had met the stunning brunette. One of Adriano's Ladies. Although he had accompanied her to an important conference and shared a bed with her, Azya had stirred nothing in his heart except for affection and amity. He enjoyed her presence despite the flares of temper. Nothing more. Nothing like what he felt for Jill.

He found a bathroom down the hall. A bit of cold water would do him good—his cheeks and forehead burned. Kivanç leaned against the marble sink. Turned on the light. The bruise that covered his cheekbone and nose had lightened to an ugly shade of blue-green with yellow tinges. He sucked on his bottom lip, swollen still but doing better. Looked into his eyes. Merciless. Accusing.

The eyes of a liar.

Kivanç had never been one to hit inanimate objects. So his shock was complete when his reflection broke in long slivers. The impact traversed his knuckles and wrist, traveled up his forearm, right up to his shoulder. He pulled his fist back from the broken glass. Bits of mirror fell off the wall. A sound like nutshells underfoot. Flexing his fingers, he marveled he did not bleed. He *wanted* to bleed. *Wanted* to hurt.

The pain in her eyes... Pain he had put there.

He was going to contact Adriano. Right now. Nothing else counted.

* * * * *

Adriano's computer beeped from the next room. Back in his home in Tuscany, he had finally been able to sleep. Sometimes even four hours a night before the recurring nightmare began. Thankfully, the computer woke him before he jerked awake from watching his beloved Isabella disappearing into the waves. For the thousandth time. For the thousandth night.

He rolled out of bed. One of his gentlemen must have sent a message. Sitting at his desk, Adriano moved the mouse to activate the screen.

An e-mail from Kivanç, his Turkish agent. Adriano squinted at the bright light as he read the short message.

God...

Instead of rerouting his response as he usually did—or wait to use an anonymous Internet café in town—Adriano hit reply. Kivanç's words burned like black fire on the screen. Anger rolled off every turn of phrase, which were atypically blunt, even discourteous.

I have hurt a woman in whom I place much affection and respect. I realize now that I should have been more circumspect with my business associations. I will not be part of something that could hurt this woman's feelings again nor will I continue to lie to her. Our business is finished. I will wire the refund and expect no further communication from you.

K

Adriano could not remember a single time where Kivanç had been so abrupt.

When Adriano was done composing a short reply, he sent it. Somewhere, he knew, the message would be traced, dissected, analyzed and logged. *She* never missed any of the crumbs he let fall. Except that this time he truly had not meant to tease her. The situation warranted a direct message.

Adriano stood and stretched his tired frame. Mid-July. Istanbul would be hot this time of the year.

* * * * *

While Mel stared at a trio of computer screens that each showed a different image—Archer said she'd taken multitasking to an art form—a fourth, dormant until then, blinked to life from its floating Montreal Canadiens hockey puck logo. She dropped the graphic pen she used as a mouse, swiveled her chair so fast she knocked her dish of flash drives to the floor. She didn't care. This was a *ping*. A real, honest-to-manga *ping*. She copied the IP address from her custom-made tracker, pasted it in another window and hit enter.

"Gotcha," she murmured through a grin.

Adrenaline—and two cans of Mountain Dew—forced her to stand while she waited for the map to load. Italy. Yeah, she'd expected that. Windows finished loading the graphic with a triumphant "*poong*".

Mel put her index finger on the screen—something she never did, but this was a special occasion.

"Hellooo, Sienna, Tuscany."

* * * * *

Jill kicked the footboard. Good thing no one had waited for her or showed up at her door. Did she have an earful for them! Thankfully, the sleepy chauffeur had come for her, driven to the consulate and let her make her own way back inside the darkened mansion proper and to her room.

Kivanç, that lying, no good, son of a bitch.

She should've known he was too good to be true. An escort, for fuck's sake. *Paid* to be with her.

Part of her wanted to tell Andy and Darlene, sit back and watch her brother demolish Kivanç's handsome face. Although that kick had come from training and not some fluke. Another lie to add to the growing pile. The urge quickly subsided though. She couldn't hang on to the bitterness. But the pain though, that was another matter and entirely harder to ignore. And the shame. Heat flushed her cheeks. Yet she didn't cry. Why couldn't she ever cry like a normal woman would? For Christ's sake.

She shoved her fists in her pockets. The coin dug against her knuckles. She slipped it out. At once, the faraway voices that had traveled on the breeze fell silent. As though they held their collective breath. She turned the thing over and around. This was no coin. The symbols were too sharp to be coincidence or aesthetics. Plus, the *size* of the thing.

It came to her. Just like that. *Put it back.*

"If those assholes think they have me cowed," she snarled, stripping hurriedly.

Jill was pulling on a long-sleeved shirt over her cami and stepping into her hiking boots before the clock struck three a.m. The coin safely tucked into the zipped pocket of her cargo pants, she noiselessly rummaged around her room and the first floor of the silent mansion, looking for anything she could use. She found a flashlight in one of the kitchen drawers. Took that and one of the cell phones on the hallway table. It'd been charged recently, good. Some money from Andy's wallet. Darlene's GPS. Oh, she'd be pissed come morning. Couldn't be helped. Jill needed the database of points of interest if she wanted to retrace her steps to the underground cistern. She tried to find keys for one of the cars but couldn't.

So it was on foot that she left the consulate, jumped the fence near the street corner—the advantages of keeping good relations with countries, unguarded fences. She needed to hit the road fast before either Andy or Darlene woke to find her gone. The chauffeur would inform them of his nightly drive. They'd call Kivanç first, no doubt. Shit would hit the fan. The underground cistern would be first on everyone's list. The bad guys' as well.

Ghostly voices carried on the breeze. Broken, uneven like aural tendrils of smoke. Whispering or urging. She wished she could understand the language. On top of her native English and French for her work, she'd learned a bit of Spanish expressly for that reason, for her trips to Central and South America.

"I know, I know," she muttered as she quickened her pace. Istanbul was said to be one of the safest metropolises in the world. Probably true. She still felt a bit uneasy walking the streets all by herself.

But first, Google.

Finding an Internet café in the super-posh district of embassies and consular offices couldn't be that hard. On a wide boulevard bordered with potted palm trees and birds of paradise flowers in huge stone planters, she spotted a red and white sign with the commercial "@" symbol. On a smaller second line, *Open 24 hours* looked like gold bars to her. She crossed the deserted street, jogged up to the brightly lit window. A small chime accompanied her into the modern space. At one of the many glitzy computers, an older couple with an embarrassment of suitcases sat on either side of a young man with a T-shirt the same color as the store sign. He turned, made the international "one minute" gesture before clicking away. Both clients went "oooh" when he triumphantly printed a document. From what she could gather, they'd been stranded without a hotel for the night as they waited for their cruise ship. Poor folks. She felt stranded herself, actually.

"How may I help you?" the young man said in English that had a bit of British flavor.

"I'd like to use a machine. About an hour or two maybe? How much would that be?"

"Two Turkish liras an hour." He rang her purchase, gave her a slip. "Use that number here for login then this one for password."

The older couple turned expectantly. Clearly, they were stuck again.

"That's great. Thanks."

Jill sat at a machine that'd allow her a good view of the door. It wouldn't do to have anyone sneaking up on her. She hadn't been joking when she'd mentioned those crooks would want the coin back. Their van was totaled but they'd find something else. Maybe they were even now crawling all over the university.

The thought of Kivanç being in danger stopped her in the middle of the login process.

She'd left him there with Azya, in the last known location of the coin. The crooks would look there first thing.

Jill shook her head. Kivanç was a big boy, he could take care of himself. Her heart beating way too fast to deny her worry for him, she set to work.

"First, a map of the city then Hecate."

Two hours and thirty minutes later—and another three Turkish liras extra—Jill exited the café with a good grasp about the crescent and star symbol, the moon goddess Hecate and the story of her fight to save the city from evil, had printed a detailed city map with several points of interest marked in pink highlighter for her. The young man had been very eager to point out all he knew. After rummaging around brochures, he'd

found one that listed the many entrances to the underground palaces, cisterns and waterways. From her description, he'd highlighted two possible locations. After an hour of early morning commuter train and two different city buses, she stood at the first location.

"Murphy's Law," she snarled as she crossed off the spot from her map. Fifty-percent chance of hitting the wrong one first. And of course she *had*.

A good walker, Jill covered the distance to the second spot in record time. Down a steep pedestrian avenue with carpet stores and other souvenir boutiques, a narrow street caught her attention. She remembered that one. Kivanç had pulled into it, to her shock. She never would've guessed the narrow aperture between the two buildings was in fact a street. With tourists becoming more numerous—a snake of buses struggled up the avenue and fought over parking spots—she walked into the darkened alley. Yup. There it was.

Concrete walls. Chain link fence. Even the nice old man was there. She came up to the fence, smiling and waving.

"Hello!" she called. Remembered the greeting Kivanç had taught her. "*Merhaba*."

He grinned wide. "*Merhaba*." He checked over her shoulder. "Kivanç?"

She indicated her watch then showed him five fingers. "Kivanç will come later."

He nodded, unlocked the portion of chain link fence that served as door, motioned for her to come in. He timidly pointed at her arm. Gave her a shrug and a thumbs up.

"It's good. Yes, thank you." Jill smiled. Pointing to the underground entrance. "May I?"

After some internal struggle, the guardian nodded, yes, she could, so she did.

"Thank you!"

As she left daylight behind and retraced her steps back underground—where she'd taken a bullet in the arm for a man who'd turned out to be a liar—Jill couldn't help but wonder what she would do if the robbers showed up again.

She'd manage. She always did.

As they had the first time, smells hit her first. Then the cold. It was much colder that day, she had no idea why. Police tape, placards and discarded stuff from the medics littered the corridor leading into the cistern itself. Too bad the police hadn't found her camera despite sending divers looking for any clue. Andy had said the media hadn't carried the story because she was involved. No one wanted a diplomatic incident.

Flashlight on, she walked to the end of the gangway. Tied to the handrail waited a couple of small wooden boats and a yellow inflatable dinghy with black plastic paddles. She chose that one, gingerly stepped in to avoid touching the water as much as possible. Flashlight between her knees, she slowly maneuvered the small boat around, passed the first row of pillars, the second too, and was reaching the third when the expected echo rose in the stillness. The familiar voice. The weeping woman.

"I'm sorry," Jill murmured as she pulled harder against the paddle.

One paddle as a buffer, Jill turned the boat around to face the upside-down head. She switched positions and knelt in the rigid bottom of the boat, reaching out to stay herself against the statue. It was so impossibly cold. Water had eroded almost all of the head's underwater details. "Curls" in the woman's hair smoothed to mere bumps below the surface. As if it'd chewed at the stone. But it hadn't reached the eyes. Not yet. She was still staring out into the tunnel with that air of grave patience. As if she said, "Bring it on."

"So you're Hecate," Jill murmured at the upside-down face. That strange hole in the forehead. More defacing? "You saved the city, didn't you?" She looked into the black water. "You took that stuff into you."

The voices rose in volume. They didn't want her sitting on her ass, obviously.

"I don't understand!" she growled. "Show me. Do something."

It occurred to her they understood her no better than she did them. Languages, millennia and different realities separated them. Chaos of ghostly voices erupted.

"Stop it!"

Jill pushed off the statue, giving it one last look. Hecate's eyes stared into the tunnel. As good a starting point as any.

In a zigzag course—the damn boat was hard to maneuver—she reached the tunnel, climbed out and squeezed the rope into a crevice behind the broken stone door leaning against the wall. She did *not* want to have to swim in that stuff. Whatever it was. *Water, my butt. That's something else entirely.*

She reviewed the tiles again. The great fight, the greater sacrifice. Hecate had taken the enemy into her, that much was obvious. Then another series of tiles, these obviously from a different hand. A cruder, more lurid technique. She hadn't seen those the first time around. Hadn't had time.

Light on the floor so it wouldn't be seen far in front of her, she slowly crept to the elbow in the tunnel. More stone, more scenes etched in tiles. She aimed the light at the wall to see if she could interpret this new chapter in the story.

"Jesus," she hissed, snapping back from the wall as if she'd caught a jolt.

A scene of cruelty, of such vicious brutality that it made her gag, came to life in the trembling glow of her flashlight. Red. Everywhere. Hecate on her back, the blue robe gone, spread wide while those black waves... Yet the goddess's face was serene. Grave but composed. Like someone fighting a cancer by ignoring it. The disease may still be gnawing away, but it'd only be the body. The spirit was intact. Then beside it, the last tile.

Hecate's head on a pike.

The rest had been hammered off. Broken bits and pieces littered the stone floor. If she interpreted this story correctly, the enemy had exacted revenge on Hecate by adding tiles that depicted her as mortal, perhaps to goad the city's inhabitants. Then whoever had started the story had come again and started breaking off the crude

chapter. An ongoing fight. One side adding a chapter then the other, and all over again. Good versus evil.

One thing bothered her... How did one harm a *deity*? Symbolically, of course, but still. How could one behead a goddess?

Jill walked on, light scanning left and right and in front. The ghostly voices accompanied her, urging her on. She couldn't make out the words but understood clearly the urgency.

Walk on, they implored. Faster, faster.

Cool air caressed her cheeks. Either the outdoors or a large open space lay not far ahead. She determined it was the latter when the tunnel ended in a cave too large to make in dimension and lit by a soft green glow that came from the bedrock itself—lichen, perhaps? She clicked her flashlight off but kept it in a fist just in case.

"This place just never ends." Her voice fell flat as soon as it left her. No echo? How was that possible?

She could recognize several architectural styles here. Doric, Ionic, Corinthian. A mishmash of colonnades, broken arches, vaults. In fact, the jumble reminded her of Roman aqueducts but several levels high, all piled one on top of the other. And in the center, like Rome's coliseum but underground and with a lake in its center. The water appeared blacker than night. No reflection from the greenish glow and almost matte. But as she carefully climbed down the uneven stone steps, she spotted a few protuberances in the surface. There was something poking out. The water couldn't cover it all. A giant white foot? Knuckles from a hand? On the first level of arches she had a great view of the lake in the middle of the coliseum.

Jill understood.

Her head may be up in the cistern, but the rest was down here in the lake. So this was how they'd beheaded a goddess. By desecrating her statue.

"Hecate, my girl, what have they done to you?"

A giant statue of a woman lay on her back at the bottom of the lake. Water didn't cover everything though. Jill had no idea how she could grasp this, but she knew the water had *tried*. It'd risen, swelled and beat against the statue to cover everything, to choke it, blot out the light. But it'd failed. As the obsidian sea had tried to drown the goddess, she'd taken it into herself just as fast. And so the level had remained a constant threat but not overwhelming. Good and bad. The old battle.

"You're still saving the city, aren't you?" Jill murmured.

Around her, the voices turned from urgent pleas to quiet lament.

"That stuff isn't normal water, is it?" Silence was her only reply. As though they waited for her to find out for herself.

Jill climbed back down and reached the edge of the "lake".

As she bent over to check its depth, she saw...

She couldn't help the long, ragged cry of horror. She dropped the flashlight.

* * * * *

"What's wrong with you?" Azya demanded as she threw her hands up. Such fire. He had once tasted it in its many delicious forms. Yet how could it have satisfied him? Now that he knew how real fire felt—Jill's fiery embrace and spirit—nothing else would ever do. A man who had once tasted ambrosia from its source now forced to live on water.

"I couldn't *not* tell her."

"But why *now*? Why not wait until after this is all over? You think she needed to hear that here and now? You used to have more finesse than that, Kivanç."

Desperation could make a man do stupid things.

"And take the chance something happens to her or me and die with this lie on my soul?"

"You lied to me too, and look at us, we're still friends." She rubbed his forearm with a hand. Amicable. As a friend would. He did not want to be Jill's friend. He wanted more. Give her more, receive more from her. Friendship would be a consolation prize after her love. Although he had lost his chance and would now be content to just be in her presence, even if she glowered at him the way she had before leaving. How could he have been so selfish? In her time of greatest upheaval and need, he had thought only of himself, of how his lie made *him* feel. He had wanted to assuage his own guilt, never thinking about Jill's feelings at the moment.

"I see that you're starting to regret your timing." She never missed much.

"I don't regret the time, only that I didn't fight for her afterward. I never should have let her leave this way." He knew exactly where she was headed.

Stubborn, beautiful, witty woman whom he loved so much.

You should have fought for her, Demir. You should have fought for her and begged her to forgive your lie.

She shrugged. "I still think you *should* have waited."

"No."

Renewed impetus forced him on his feet. No, he should not have waited because they had precious little time. What if something happened? But he should have gone after her the moment she stepped outside the university hall.

Go after her. Do it. Now.

And actually, the more he mulled about it, the more he thought he should try to beat Jill to the cistern. Right now. Race across town and be there first so she would not have a choice but to accept his help. For the time being anyway. Until he could convince her he had never meant to hurt her, had fallen in love almost on the proverbial "hello". Yes, this is what he would do. He owed her that much. He owed her the support.

Azya narrowed her mascara-lined eyes. "You're not thinking about going back down, are you? It's crazy *and* dangerous. Just call the police and let them handle it."

Kivanç was on his way before she even finished her sentence. How could he have let Jill leave alone, knowing where she was wont to end up within hours? Already, he had wasted an hour feeling sorry for himself and wallowing in his shame. What a waste of time! Well, no more. He was going to fight for the woman he loved and nothing and no one would stop him.

Azya shook her head. Stood, kissed him on the cheek. "I miss you sometimes," she said, grinning. "We'll take my car, this way they won't know to follow."

"Let me borrow it instead. It's dangerous —"

Her smile widened. "I like your Jill. I think she's worthy of your love. Plus, I'd die to get a look at that cistern."

"Thank you, my friend."

Grinning still, she preceded him to the doorway but stumbled to a stop. A shudder traversed her and she collapsed without a word.

"Azya!"

Kivanç threw himself on his knees to catch her and, before pain exploded in his head and blackness closed in on him like a strike of black lightning, he saw two things —

Azya's blood pooling under her prone body. And a man with a serrated knife and bloodied nose standing not a step away.

Chapter Ten

Her brain required a good two seconds to process the vision at her feet. Yet even if her eyes saw, her brain refused to accept the possibility...

Fear gripped her. Jill backpedaled from the lake as fast as she could. Oh God, oh God... What was *that*?

There were people in that lake!

Hundreds, thousands...who knew how many? They stood shoulder to shoulder, hands above their heads a foot or so under the surface, reaching out, fingers like talons, mouths like maws. Worse than those grotesquely morphed images in music videos or scary movies. Nothing compared to the horror in this lake. Armors and dress of every known kind. Pale faces, dark ones, long hair and baldpates. Old and feeble, young and sturdy-looking. Soldiers and farmers. Everyone was down there. All of them. The dead.

Why? What kept them here in this black lake?

Ghostly voices rose in lament. In the water, bodies pressed forward against the rocky ledge. Envy, despair, greed, anguish and torment deformed their faces. They had their mouths wide in silent screams. They could see her?

"Why are you there?" she whispered. "Are you trapped?"

Rage was palpable around her. Voices rose in shouts. Echoes reverberated on the stone walls and around the many pillars.

God, she could barely look at them, even if her heart broke with pity over their plight. Those poor people. Dead but not gone. Trapped in water like black mercury. A putrid smell like roses and dead things emanated from the lake. She looked around the place and noticed for the first time that it wasn't really a lake per se. More like water that had pooled in the center. And from this low angle, she realized she stood in the middle of something. A palace, perhaps. If the statue had once stood in the middle before falling on her back – or being pushed – then Jill presently knelt in the middle of a colossal palace built over centuries. Perhaps even millennia. A palace dedicated to Hecate. Only it'd been defaced over the centuries. After her valiant fight against the black surge, her supporters might have built the statue in her honor. Then the enemy had managed to add its own version of events. No one had tried to remove the crude tiles, which may signify that over the centuries, Hecate's deed could have been forgotten, that her supporters had deserted her, hadn't passed the story down to their children. Hecate had fallen asleep and her palace forgotten. Until the robbers had found it again and stolen something from it. Maybe they'd woken the sleeping goddess? Or the dead.

"Jill."

Jill started, whirled around but found no one behind her.

"Jill."

This time, she caught it. A faint trace of noise like static radio distorted the voice. A ghost.

"Jill...?" the woman repeated. Fear crept into the tone. "Help me. Please."

Another complete turn. The voice sounded familiar. From her recent past. A hand pressed to her chest, Jill slowly leaned over. Crept toward the lake. Would she see the woman there? Would she know her?

A woman clung to the underwater edge of the lake. Some tried to push her out while others yanked on her arm to dislodge her tenuous hold. She angled her face up at Jill.

Her heart skipped a beat then resumed in an arrhythmic tempo.

"Oh no, dear God... Azya?"

Azya's once-beautiful brown eyes were huge, much too large for the rest of her face, which was pointed, elongated. She was turning like them. No! Why? How? It wasn't right!

Jill didn't even think. She dropped to her knees and stuck her hand into the lake. "Take my hand!"

Cold hit first. It numbed her hand, her forearm. She couldn't feel her fingers anymore. Then heat like a blast from a giant furnace. It buffeted her, sent her hair in a mad dance around her face. Something didn't want her there. It fought her advance, every half inch was pure torture.

Begone! it screamed in her head. She didn't belong there. But she fought it. Fought the urge to run and scream, drop in a quivering heap and pray for mercy. She resisted the primal urge to take her hand away from the pain.

"Azya!" Jill growled against the agony slashing her hand and arm. More heat whipped her hair. A chorus of voices clamored in unison. Like a chant. "Take my hand! Hold on!" She yelled in pain as she thrust her arm deeper into the stuff. Up to her biceps.

Azya reached high. Inches away. "Jill! Please! Help me!"

Not quite like them but quickly changing, Azya tried to reach higher but slid by an inch or so. She cried out. Fear and horror were etched deep in the once-stunning face. Around Jill, the ghostly voices rose in what sounded like alarm.

Jill realized with grief that somewhere in the city, the real Azya was fighting for her life. And losing.

"They have him!" Azya cried out. A man in a pointed hat and Ottoman armor tugged on her long hair. She grimaced, lashed out, which broke her hold against the rocky ledge. She slid in amidst the rest. A loud clamor rose. She faced Jill. Despair and fear. "They have him!"

Her voice echoed around Jill, soon joined that of the rest. Jill lost sight of her amidst the miasma of pressed bodies and reaching arms. Azya was dead.

They have him.

With a lurch, Jill pulled herself away and landed on her back. They had Kivanç. They'd killed Azya and taken Kivanç.

"Move, for Christ's sake, Moss."

Jill was loath to look at her hand but had no choice. It simultaneously burned and felt cold. Fire and ice. Both stinging. She ventured a glance at it, cringed when she studied the blotchy skin. Like frostbite. She worked her fingers, slowly, gingerly. God, it hurt so *bad*.

Feeling slowly returned to her limb as she climbed to her feet and turned on herself a few times. Poor Azya... So young and vibrant and with a full life ahead of her.

It was her fault. Guilt overwhelmed even the pain in her arm. It *was* her fault.

Kivanç and she had brought the dangerous men to Azya's doorstep. She was dead because of Jill. Why had she run away like that when Kivanç clearly wanted to explain? She could've given him a chance, let him tell her *why*. He might have lied about certain things but his eyes hadn't. Instead, she'd bolted from the ache in her heart—as if she could—and preferred to show everyone she could do things herself. She didn't need anyone.

What a lie.

She needed him. Kivanç Demir. How she *needed* him.

"Fuck," Jill snarled. She raked both hands in her hair. What now?

The ghostly voices suddenly tapered to hissed whispers then to nothing at all.

She froze mid-step. Waited. Fear paralyzed her for a good ten seconds during which her heart provided an internal metronome to the sound of water dropping somewhere in the cavernous palace. In the end, fear won.

Jill ran. Climbed back up to the first level of arches and crouched behind a broken Byzantine capital of white marble, all floral reliefs and thorny knots.

Men's voices rose in the grotto. A sharp cry of pain then nothing for several seconds. But she'd recognized the voice who'd yelled in pain. Kivanç.

No.

Instead of fear for him, rage engulfed her. White-hot rage. An old, old anger bubbling over and breaking the surface. The collective fury of eons and thousands. It wasn't hers. She didn't know how, couldn't explain it. It wasn't hers yet it *was*. The coin in her pocket warmed. Lightened. It didn't belong in there. She unzipped her pocket, placed the key behind a stone pedestal. She would need it later. But not now.

Jill's head suddenly felt light. A *key*? Wasn't it a *coin*? What the hell was going on?

Something made her stand when she wanted to hide and think things over, find the best angle, the most logical course of action.

It made her slowly come down from her vantage point and challenge the interlopers who would come to her home and hurt her man. Because this was what he represented to her. Her man, her friend and lover. And much more.

It opened new horizons and elucidated old mysteries. Broke codes and ciphers, made sense of chaos. Everything felt familiar. Nothing was beyond her understanding. She knew. Everything. Everyone.

On one of the stone terraces encircling the water, three men emerged. When they saw her, they froze. Kivanç had an arm looped around the shoulders of a much taller man and stumbled with his head lolling on his chest. Blood matted his lustrous hair and stained his ripped shirt the color of spring flowers. Lavender. Jill knew the word and the making of the actual flower even more intimately. It glowed white under the moonlight.

How would she know that?

"Let him go!" she called in a voice that thundered around the cavernous palace.

Her home, long ago. Now practically destroyed. No one to rebuild it. No one to even remember her name when hundreds and thousands had once come here for succor and answers, for strength and a beacon of light in the darkness. And so the evil had risen. Aided by ignorance and violence, by eons of mankind going about its business as though it had time. It did not. Already, the black tide reached high. Soon, it would menace the city as it had once before. Would gnaw at the very foundations and cause it to crumble inward to be choked by the earth. She had taken the Evil into herself for as long as she could, but these men had stolen the key. This could not go unpunished.

She looked over at the white statue, partly poking out of the foul essence. Where once stood a tall woman on a white marble plaza, a trap for the dead had appeared. Like honey to bees, except that it swallowed them instead. Trapped them like insects in sap. When men thought Evil had a horned head or taloned hands, instead, it silently flowed in the guise of black water. Too cold for life. So cold it burned. A mix of both and the stuff of neither. Death.

One of the intruders – greedy Tarik, son of Kemal, how his mother would weep if she still lived – dropped her beloved, who collapsed to his knees.

"Give the coin or your man will die!" he yelled.

Another smiled meanly. Little Serdar, now a man, one who would put a knife to her Kivanç's throat? That would not do.

She advanced on them, pointing at Tarik with an accusing finger. "You will leave my home, Tarik, son of Kemal, and never return! You are banned from this place!"

Fear and horror flared his eyes. He backpedaled, whimpered threats that would not put fear in the heart of a child, brandished a black shiny object. Thunder erupted. Then again. Kivanç cried out as he bolted to his feet and wrestled the thing away. Did he think this puny object could hurt her?

To her shock, both men staggered sideways, closer to the terrace edge and the foul lake below. Her long-dead army that the enemy had trapped in its Evil essence raised its voice in fear and anger. He was not meant for this. This was not supposed to be...

She rushed forward. But this vessel moved so *slowly*. One foot in front of the other when she meant to fly. To just *be* closer. She would not reach him in time.

Grappling, both men lurched far. Too far. Kivanç, still fighting like a lion—her brave and beautiful Kivanç. The pair toppled from the terrace and into the lake ten feet down. Without a splash or a sound, they crashed through the surface and fell into this eternal trap for the dead.

“No!” Her voice took on dragonlike proportions.

The pain slashed at her soul. Her once-again living heart squeezed painfully. She had known rage in her time, back when she had saved her beloved Byzantium from the foul water seeping into it. An elaborate system of aqueducts running through her temple had prevented a sinkhole and saved the city, just as she had saved its citizens’ souls by taking in the Evil. Yet that rage from long ago was nothing compared to the one burning up her present vessel. Despair turned to blood thirst. All-encompassing anger burned the last of the human’s strength. A godlike wrath swelled around her like an aura. Hecate could almost taste her former glory coming back to life. This mortal had untapped powers. Her affection for this man came from the entrails of the world, drew its source from the well of life itself. Nothing was more potent than this. Nothing was stronger than love.

To Hecate’s shock, the vessel she temporarily inhabited shut down.

Chapter Eleven

Kivanç was walking back from school. It was sunny and warm. Sweet smells from his neighbor's citrus trees reached him. He smiled in spite of the work awaiting him. Hours of farm work plus his studies. But his parents worked even harder. It was the least he could do to help, even if they never asked for anything. The many and varied responsibilities of an only child.

As he knew he would, Taylan sat in the shade of his porch. "Kivanç!" he called. "Your mother said your father's mending the fence today."

How could the young man know who was coming without hearing the person's voice? Was his tread so characteristic that Taylan knew right away it was him?

"Thank you!" he called back. On second thought, he neared the front fence, leaned on the wooden slats. Like the rest of Taylan's home, they needed repairing and painting. "Can I ask you a question?"

Taylan stood from his straight-backed chair and joined Kivanç by the fence. "I was wondering when you would."

"You know what I will ask?" He tried not to rub his nazar bonjuk for good fortune. How could someone know of the future?

"Of course I do. Everyone wants to know the same thing."

"Oh."

Feeling like a superstitious fool, Kivanç grinned and patted his friend's forearm. "So? How do you know it was me?"

Taylan cocked his head, adopted a pensive pose. Kivanç knew the one. Narrowed eyes, pinched mouth. Somewhere overhead a bird called in a strident song. "Only if you tell me what 'red' is."

"Red?"

"It's a color, I hear."

They shared a laugh. But Kivanç's mirth soon left him as he faced the task of describing the color "red" – or any color, for that matter – to his friend born blind. "It's the color of warmth," he began tentatively. "And blood. But also some flowers and birds." He tried listing objects that were red but soon gave up. "I'm sorry, my friend. I can't."

"Exactly."

Taylan turned and sat back in the shade, stretched his legs in front of him. Grinning teasingly, he waved Kivanç goodbye. "Don't hit your thumb again."

Kivanç woke in the back of a car. Legs bent and bound at the ankles. His wrists hurt with something cruelly tight around them. His first instinct was to fight against his bonds. Instead, he kept his eyes closed. The back of his head radiated with pain.

Something hot and sticky matted the hair at his nape. He had been struck from behind. Cowards.

Azya's blood. So red against the terrazzo floor. Like rubies.

Rage made him gag. The monsters. They had killed her. He knew she was dead. No one could survive such loss of blood. A bump in the road rocked him painfully hard against the car's bare metal trunk. He raised his head slightly. Not a trunk but the rear section of a silver hatchback. Azya's little car. Her smell still clung to the cabin interior. His heart ached with fresh rage.

Rain had begun to fall and created patterns like tiny diamonds on the rear window. In the front seat, two men sat and argued about the value of the gold coin they were about to retrieve while one—the tall one—silently occupied the back passenger seat. Kivanç knew where they were going.

The underground cistern. They meant to take the coin from Jill. Undoubtedly kill her as well.

Not if he had his say.

He intended to make their trip there as unpleasant and painful as possible. Deadly if good fortune was on his side. They would regret the day they had been born. Kivanç made a vow that if he was allowed one more day with his lovely friend, he would tell her everything. The love in his heart most pressingly.

After another bolt and a lurch, the car stopped. He closed his eyes again. Waited. Baited.

The hatchback door was opened. One of them accused the other of hitting too hard, to which the man replied that the young woman had lasted longer than Kivanç. He untied Kivanç's ankles. Circulation slowly tingled back down to his toes. Like fire ants.

"Wake him up," one said gruffly.

Oddly, a nursery rhyme came back to him, one his father would sing to Kivanç at night while his mother finished cleaning up.

Open the gate, head merchant.

I'll open it, but what will you give me?

Take the scoundrel behind me.

One rat, two rats, three rats.

Cracking an eye, Kivanç waited until the man had bent over. Waited...

Then he kicked. Both feet together, aimed at the man's face. A sickening crunch was heard when the man's head snapped back at an awkward angle. He collapsed without a sound.

The other two fell on Kivanç. A deluge of blows hailed on him. He did not care. He kicked with abandon. They wanted to hurt Jill? He would make them pay first. Then afterward too if the unthinkable happened.

Grunts accompanied each of his kicks. In the belly, in the tall man's legs. He received a hard knock on the head again. It made him see stars. Warm moisture trickled down his nape and cheek. One was able to reach inside and yank him out of the car by two fistfuls of hair. He hit the ground with a grunt. Feet came at him. Merciless boots. In the face. The belly. The genitals. But still he fought. The more he hurt them, the better Jill's chances would be. He gave all he had. Kivanç fought until each breath was a struggle unto itself. After awhile, the beating stopped. He was rolled onto his back. Rain felt cool against his feverish face. Blood seeped down the back of his throat. Nosebleed. He wheezed noisily.

"You're lucky we need you alive, scum," one snarled close to him. Kivanç spat up into the hated face. Received a fist on the mouth for his trouble.

"Get him up," snapped one of them. He sounded winded. Good.

Rough hands grabbed him by the shirt and hoisted him up. Stitching ripped under his sleeves and around his collar. He must be a *mess*. In his fight, he had lost a sandal. The asphalt was cold. Shoved and pulled, Kivanç was made to walk. But he would not. He let them drag him. They wanted him to move forward? They could *carry him*. To hell with all of them! If he were lucky, he would take them there himself.

He realized dawn was approaching. Brownish daylight filtered in between roofs. In the backyard of an abandoned concrete building—it reminded him of an old garage—the men dragged him along the broken fence, pushed and shoved and cursed him. Into a darkened doorway. Down some steps. He made them work for each speck of progress. At six feet four and two hundred and thirty pounds, Kivanç was quite the load to carry around, especially if he made sure to get stuck in every angle and tight corner. He could smell their sweat.

At the bottom of steps that smelled of urine and humidity, one of the men, the one with the knife—Azya's murderer—kneaded Kivanç in the lower back, yanked his head back by the hair. "If you give me any more trouble... I *swear*!"

Kivanç rolled his eyes to look at the man. "How's your nose?"

He grunted at the fist that made stars explode in his brain. His mocking chuckles sounded wet and rattled in his chest. He doubted he would survive the day.

"We need him alive! Otherwise she won't cooperate," the other snarled. An argument ensued, one Kivanç listened to intently in case he learned something he could use. Despite his best effort though, unconsciousness created gaps in the conversation. The men wanted to know from where the coin had come and to whom he and "his woman" had wanted to sell it. One of the two was named Demar. Kivanç had known a Demar once, a violent former fiancé of one of Adriano's Ladies. Kivanç had been tasked to show up at a party on that Lady's arm and teach a bit of good breeding into that

Demar. Kivanç still had a mark on his knuckles from the man's broken teeth. He wore it with pride. No man should go unpunished for touching a woman that way.

"Shut up," Demar growled when Kivanç began to chortle to himself.

He coughed, spat blood. "Go to hell."

"You'll get there first, scum."

Kivanç tauntingly kissed the air.

The tall man had to restrain Demar from coming at Kivanç again. "Your girlfriend will pay in your place! I'll make her *bleed*." He grinned meanly. "And it'll be on your soul."

With a mocking chuckle that ended in a cough, Kivanç replied, "If you think you're hurting now...wait until she gets a hold of you."

He must have passed out again. Kivanç realized they were not using the entrance Jill and he had taken the first time. They were nearby, but somewhere else. A metal door grated against concrete. Cool air accompanied smells of humidity. He opened the one eye that still could. Underground. A corridor with broken bricks and other debris. His one sandal scraped the floor as they carried him along, feet dragging, head lolling on his chest. The sound of water dripping echoed somewhere ahead. *Drip, drip, drip.*

"Someone's here," the one carrying him murmured. "One of the boats is gone."

Kivanç snapped his head up so he could see. Was it Jill? A pair of small wooden boats bobbed gently along the gangway. A bit of police tape was stuck to one of the oars and trailed in the black water. The cistern. There must have been another entry he had not seen. That water... A shiver tightened his shoulders. He vividly remembered how cold it had been. How unnaturally cold. Someone lit a flashlight. Then another. Perhaps he could drown one of them? He could barely stand. Warm moisture had seeped into the collar of his shirt and down his back. His heart hurt.

They loaded him into one of the boats. Beams of light danced on the walls. The tall man pushed off the gangway. Kivanç could not use his hands, which were still bound behind his back, but he could *kick*.

And he did.

The boat rocked when he cocked both knees high enough to touch his chin. The man's face registered shock and rage a split second before Kivanç's feet connected with his chest. He went sprawling on his back in the bottom of the boat. Using his feet again, Kivanç unhooked one of the oars from the mooring and kicked it away, was about to do the same to the second when pain exploded in his head.

Everything went black.

Her voice brought him back.

He *thought* it was her voice. But it sounded strange, amplified a hundred times. She spoke a language he had never learned yet understood. The men at his sides did too.

One murmured a short prayer. Kivanç struggled to keep his head up. An underground palace of stone arches and pillars, colonnaded porticos and flying buttresses. Roman, Anatolian, Greek, Ottoman, Byzantine. Every style that had touched the region was represented. Terraces of varying heights surrounded a sort of central cistern or artificial lake. It was black like a starless night. The men had brought him right along the edge.

Coming down from one of the many “streets” was Jill. If he had not already cherished her more than life, he would have fallen madly in love then. She looked magnificent and regal. A queen in her court. A goddess on her mountain. Her hair flew like snakes around her head. Static electricity created blue arcs that danced over her skin and made her clothes fret and ripple. He must have been hallucinating.

The one holding Kivanç upright dropped him. To his shame, he did not have the strength to stand and collapsed to his knees on the stone terrace.

“Give the coin or your man will die!” the tall man yelled. He reached inside his jacket.

The man with the broken nose, the one who had killed his precious Azya, pressed the serrated blade of his knife across Kivanç’s throat. He felt each barb dig in his skin.

At this, a terrible rage registered in her face. She advanced on them, pointing like a vengeful judge from her raised desk. “You will leave my home, Tarik, son of Kemal, and never return! You are banned from this place!”

The tall man backpedaled, muttering a quick prayer. To Kivanç’s eyes, Jill had never looked so beautiful. And terrifying. There was something divine about her, and timeless. She was the sea, the moon, the stars all at once. Yet she was woman. His Jill.

To his shock, the one she had called Tarik pulled a gun out and fired two shots in Jill’s direction.

Kivanç roared in outrage. Something broke against his wrist. He brought his bleeding hands in front of him, realized he had broken through the plastic tie-wraps. The gun. He had to get the gun.

Jill was still coming down as if bullets could not hurt her.

Out of strength born from desperation and white-hot rage, Kivanç flew to his feet and tackled Tarik, who stood a good head taller but weighed much less. They staggered sideways. Fought for the gun while the man with the broken nose, Demar, kept backpedaling and praying. Finally, Kivanç managed to use his greater weight to shove Tarik back. Unfortunately, he fisted the front of Kivanç’s shirt, overbalanced him and both fell off the terrace.

As he hit the strange black water, cold seeped into his very bones. Numbed him to the world. Dulled his mind, slowed his heart. Stillness enveloped him. Water seeped into his mouth, ears and nose. Eyes closed, he let the water rock him gently to sleep. His heart struggled.

One beat.

Two more beats like a felt drum in his head.

After a long wait a third beat.

Then no more.

And as he sank listlessly into the black depths, Kivanç Demir, son of Serra and Nidal, knew he had just died.

* * * * *

A hot breeze caressed her face. She lay on something hard and cool, the outdoors around her. She couldn't see it but felt the sun on her skin.

Jill opened her eyes, sat up from the stone ground on which she lay. High, midday sun bathed everything in golden light. She looked around. A city worthy of fables spread in all directions. Pale and slender towers reached to the azure sky. White colonnaded porticos, domed-shaped roofs and wide streets. It reminded her of ancient Greece but with an exotic touch she couldn't place.

She stood, looked around, recognized a few features. Istanbul? Different, newer and smaller. And without traffic. Only the chirp of unseen birds caught her ears. Even *they* were silent. No ghostly voices, no noise like static radio.

A breeze from the waterfront not far below her feet—she stood on a terrace with a thick marble parapet—stroked her face and bare arms. What was that she wore? A blue robe split up to her hips with a décolleté in a deep V that reached her waist. Silver threads in a thin leather belt encircled her torso and crossed between her breasts. This robe reminded her of someone else's. She couldn't place it. Neither could she put her finger on the inquietude gripping her. Something wasn't right. She should be doing *something*, not standing here and admiring the view.

Turning her back on the mesmerizing water, she walked a few steps up a wide and perfectly engineered avenue of white marble slabs the size of bay windows. Behind her, the sound of water splashing caught her attention. She turned back to look at the river, noted that the water looked much darker than she remembered. Black lines like floating ribbons crisscrossed the surface. Jill shivered and turned away, started walking again.

She met no one. Not a soul. White marble shone like an ice rink in the sunlight. Up the gentle incline the avenue plateaued and widened into a circular plaza surrounded by pale and beautiful buildings.

Throning in the middle of the plaza was a dry fountain. Her heart skipped a beat. A man sat there, looking dejected, staring at his naked feet. He wore leather armor gilded in gold over a bright blue knee-length tunic. Bronze-colored, a conical helmet let strands of long brown hair gently undulate in the breeze. A scimitar rested loosely in his hand.

Dear God...

An élan of affection made her quicken her pace. She knew that perfect face, the Grecian nose that tended to the Aquiline, the sculpted jaw and eyes the color of dark honey.

"Kivanç?" Her call preceded her to the fountain. She started running. Bare feet smacked on polished marble. "Kivanç!"

He looked up, eyes vacant. He appeared neither happy nor sad. Just...*blank*. Dust and blood smears covered him as though he'd fought long and hard. He looked so pale.

Jill barely slowed when she reached him and hugged him fiercely. He didn't return the embrace. He smelled of sweat and dust. She pulled back, her hands still on his strong shoulders.

"What's wrong? Kivanç?" Shocked, she touched the pad of an index finger to her cheek. It came back glistening with moisture. Tears.

Still, Kivanç sat there with his curved sword in a hand while the other rested flat on the fountain edge on which he sat. The knuckles were raw and bleeding. Tears now streaming down her face, Jill gently pulled the scimitar from his listless fingers. He let her. She placed it farther on the ledge, sat by his side so she could remove his helmet. He looked so sweaty and hot. Sun beat on the quilted leather armor.

"I'll take care of you, okay?" she murmured, sniffing. "I'll take care of you."

She unbuckled the bits of burning-hot armor covering him. Salty stains from sweat created white waves across his chest and under his arms. Jill managed to pull the short tunic up over his head. He wore nothing but a collection of bruises and abrasions. Where had he been? Who'd done this to him? She'd like a word or two with whoever had hurt him.

To her left, she realized she'd made a mistake. The fountain wasn't dry at all. Water like liquid crystal beads gently flowed from a central figure shaped like a fish doing a headstand. She wouldn't use his dirty tunic so instead she ripped the bottom portion of her robe, which she dipped into the cool water and tenderly pressed against his shoulder and neck. In his eyes, a glimmer of life valiantly sparkled. She knelt on the ledge, soaked the torn piece of her robe and let cool water dribble down his arms. A shiver created goose bumps along his tanned arms. Jill washed him the best she could until he sat dripping wet, hair slicked back over his high brow and a definite shadow of his former self in his eyes.

While she washed the sweat and grime and blood off him, she murmured soothing nonsense, sometimes in singsong, other times just desperate to fill the awful silence with something other than the sound of his labored breathing. Tears still ran down her cheeks. If she'd never shed one before, a dam must have been broken because they kept coming. Jill cried for him, for his pain and sacrifice. She didn't know how but she knew this—he'd given everything for her. Paid the ultimate price.

"I'm sorry, Kivanç," she whispered. Her chin trembled. "I'm so sorry they did this to you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before... I love you. So much."

The words sounded foreign. But they felt right. She did love this man. More than compatibility and affection. Nothing and no one had ever touched her the way he had. He'd found the core of her, the woman's heart, and unlocked the door to a cage she hadn't known existed around her. Yes, that *had* to be love.

From head to toe, she dripped cool water down on him. He seemed to enjoy this as a small sigh escaped him. He looked feverish.

"Are you thirsty?"

No reply. No sign he even heard her question.

She dipped his helmet into the fountain, swished it around to rinse what sweat remained before bringing it against his chin. Slowly, she let a thin film touch his lips. It didn't drip. He must have drunk it. Bolstered, she tilted the helmet and watched Kivanç drink, eyes half closed in long, silent draws.

Water glistened on his lips when he was done. She leaned over, slowly, gradually, and pressed a tentative kiss to his mouth. Mix of hot lips and cool water. No reaction. Her heart broke. As she straightened, Kivanç's eyes moved for the first time since she found him here. He looked at her. Really *looked* at *her*. A mere trace of that great eye contact but still some improvement.

"Please say something..." Her tears linked their cheeks when she hugged him again.

She felt something on her lower back. His hand. Gingerly moving up her side. As if he were awakening from a deep torpor, surfacing from murky depths. Coming back to life.

A faint ribbon of his breath touched her neck. "Jill."

Had he spoken or was it wishful thinking on her part?

The more she touched him, the more alive he felt to her. Heart hammering, Jill let her hands run freely over his shoulders and arms, the back of his head so she could rake her fingers through the hair that rested on the protruding vertebra at his nape. With her mouth she connected with him. Tentatively at first, then seeing as her touch seemed to awaken him further, she ventured a kiss on his mouth. She thought she felt him respond but wasn't sure. Jill deepened her kiss. Lips tender and light, she pressed them against his bottom lip, his chin, the corner of his jaw. He closed his eyes. Was that a small smile she saw rounding his cheek? Heartened, she kissed his eyelids, the bridge of his nose and each bruise down his neck and chest. Hands gentle allies, she caressed and lipped the width of his chest from shoulder to shoulder before centering on his pectorals, which she covered with quick little pecks. Under her fingertips, she felt his nipples tightening. He was coming back to her. Slowly. But he was coming back.

Tears of joy this time rolled down her cheeks and landed on his lap. She saw that his awakening had also engaged his sexuality because pointing proudly up, his penis sparkled with water droplets. Her tears? Or the fountain's life-giving water? No matter.

"Come back to me," she murmured as she wrapped her fist around his shaft. Slowly rubbed up and down the length of him. "Please, come back to me."

While she stroked him, she kissed him full on the mouth. A flash of tongue glimmered behind his teeth. She licked his bottom lip, sucked on it. Paid special attention to this man's fine mouth before moving down. Throat. Chest. Belly. She knelt

on the marble slab. Cool against her kneecaps. Air caressed her denuded thighs for the torn robe.

She lavished attention to him in the form of caresses and kisses. Zeroed in on his cock. Two-handed grip. Lips around his silken glans. A deep breath swelled his chest. Lean muscles corded. Jill deepened her claim, glided down as far as she could go. Both hands splayed on his lap, she took him deep into her mouth, retreated, sank back down. Each time he breathed in a bit deeper, exhaled a bit louder.

Jill wanted to weep in relief when one of his hands touched her hair, uncertain fingers threading her curls. How could such a simple touch elicit the surge of emotions assailing her? She loved him. So hard it almost hurt as much as it buoyed her. Sucking noisily and with feverish abandon, she gave everything to him. All that she had. All that she was. A faint pulse at the base of his cock heralded his imminent climax. She retreated to the glistening glans and angled him down so she could share in his apogee. On a long sigh, Kivanç came in her hand. Behind him, the fountain suddenly arced higher in harmonious accompaniment to the man's release. Hot cum linked him to her.

She sat by his side. Dipped her hand, glossy with Kivanç's pleasure, into the cool fountain. In thin tendrils, semen mixed with water before disappearing.

"Lie down," she murmured. Cradled his head in her hands, guided him until he lay supine along the fountain edge. "There. Isn't that better?"

He didn't reply but looked as if he thought that, indeed, lying down was just fine with him. Sun cast bronze accents on his chiseled and tanned body. Muscles corded here and there. She bathed his still-erect cock and legs, his belly. Cool water pooled in his navel, which she bent to kiss and lick. Her own needs became pressing.

"I love you, Kivanç," she whispered. "Can you hear this? I love you."

He looked so feverish still. A welcome shadow appeared over them both. She turned to find a plum tree heavy with fruit. She didn't remember it being there. Everything felt so strange. Disjointed. Vivid yet hazy. Leaves rustled gently in the breeze. Dotted with condensation and round with juicy flesh, purple plums hung in clusters. She stood and reached for one. It easily detached from its shoot and fell into her palm. After rinsing it, she proffered the fruit to Kivanç, who showed no sign of awareness even if he looked better than he had only moments ago.

"Here." She pressed the rounded plum on his bottom lip. "Try to get something to eat, okay. You'll feel better."

Slowly, he bit into the fruit. Juice burst from the punctured skin and pearled on his lips. He swallowed, took another tentative bite. She retrieved another that she rinsed and held for him to start while she finished the first so he wouldn't have to deal with the pit. It was surely the sweetest plum she'd ever had.

Shielded from the hammer-hard sun reflecting off white marble and polished alabaster, she fed him two more of the golden-fleshed fruits, had two herself. As she leaned into the fountain to rinse her fingers, she felt his hand on her thigh. Her breath caught in her throat. Burning-hot fingers traced the edge of her torn robe, higher,

curved under the fabric. She stopped breathing when his fingertips touched her sex. Brushed her lips tenderly, leisurely.

Jill bent over his face and kissed him. This time, he returned the kiss even if his eyes were closed and he appeared asleep. The taste of plum on his tongue fired her senses. Switching her hold so she could straddle him, Jill kept her gaze riveted to his face so she could spot any development. His other hand soon joined the first. His caresses were light, barely discernible, but they were the best thing that had ever happened to her. Joy swelled her chest. He was *moving*, communing with her, which meant he was doing better. Nothing else mattered.

Against her lower belly, his cock felt smooth and hard. She wrapped a hand around it again, but this time she didn't take it into her mouth. Raising herself on her knees, she angled him between her legs, rubbed in small circles to elicit a reaction. His teeth flashed when he tucked in his bottom lip. She loved when he did that. On a long sigh, she took him into her.

"My beloved," he murmured.

His hands reached up to cup her breasts. Squeezed then rolled her nipples. Jill gave a roll of hips that made him gasp. She did it again. Rubbed her clitoris against him, compressed her flesh around the hard length of him because if she didn't, if she failed at releasing the pressure building in her body, she would surely go up in flames. A moan left her when he gripped her hips. His eyes flared wide.

"Jill." His dark honey gaze riveted her to the spot.

The one word assuaged all her doubts, quieted all her worries. He was back.

By the force of his arms alone, he lifted her up against his face. He popped out of her. She moaned in frustration but soon arched her head back when he clamped his mouth against her sex. In greedy licks, he brought her to the edge. On all fours straddling his face, Jill widened her thighs to their limits until her muscles burned and her joints threatened to give.

"Jill," Kivanç murmured over and over. Spoke Turkish peppered with English words. "My beloved."

Her voice rose as his mouth hardened at its task. Sucking, licking, biting. Tongue and teeth and lips. One roll of hips brought her closer to her climax. The second unleashed it. On a long whimper, she came.

Kivanç forced her back down on him. Arms encircled her waist, he pressed her hard against his chest, took her from underneath. Hands slipping on the polished marble, she collapsed on her elbows before wrapping them around his head. He sucked hard on a nipple while he thrust. To the end of her, the end of him. Perfect fit. Hot and demanding and skilled. Kivanç was back. She cried out. Her voice reverberated. *Ah. Ah.* Another orgasm threatened like a storm. It rolled over her and brought in its wake frissons and spasms that rocked and shook her. Still Kivanç pumped hard enough to lift her knees.

"I love you," he snarled in her ear. Sweat linked his body to hers despite the cooling shade of the plum tree.

Tears moistened her cheeks. Of joy. Of relief. She'd found him, wounded and buried deep inside his spirit. She'd offered him life-giving water, fed him the sweetest fruit, healed and cleansed his wounds with her tears and the fountain's water. With her love she'd brought him back.

On a clear, crystalline note, Jill snapped upright with her head arched back, arms out wide and let Kivanç's potent lovemaking push her over the edge. Ecstasy ripped through like electricity. She came. She didn't how long her pleasure lasted. Everything stopped. Time stood still. A split second. Eternity. Life and death no longer meaningful.

Weakened, spent and empty of everything except her lover's flesh, she collapsed on his sweaty chest.

"You came for me," he murmured, kissed her hair and ear. "You came for me."

"I *brought* her to you," a woman said from behind them.

Jill whipped her head around to find a dark-haired woman in a long blue robe similar to hers standing by the tree.

Chapter Twelve

Jill was loath to relinquish Kivanç's warm body but had no choice. She kissed his mouth, stood and helped him sit. A grimace tightened his mouth. He looked in pain.

"Are you all right?"

He nodded.

"No, he is not," the woman replied. "He is bleeding inside."

Fear gripped Jill's guts and twisted. "What do you mean? Who are you?"

"You know me. You have heard the cries of my people and my own." On her brow, a faint crescent moon and star symbol gleamed like old scars.

"Hecate?"

A nod confirmed it.

Jill sat by Kivanç's side and encircled his shoulders with an arm. He'd grown pale again and had withdrawn back into himself. Fresh tears welled in her eyes.

"It's *your* fault," she snarled. "He was back. Now he's gone because of you."

Hecate came to sit by Jill's side. "And he will be lost to you forever if you do not act."

Her heart squeezed painfully. "Tell me and it's done."

With a long and graceful hand, the other woman let the back of her fingers graze Jill down the face and neck, lower over a breast before showing her cupped palm. Crystal-clear water filled it. "Your tears," she murmured. "Only they can save him. As mine did for my own beloved."

"The city you mean? That was your love?"

Another nod. "When I was a living, breathing and loving woman, an enemy more powerful than us came to our doors. My choice was clear."

"Couldn't your army fight them back?"

Hecate shook her head. "My people could not fight what they could not see. Only my closest followers and I could see the Evil's approach."

"The three waves? I thought they were only a symbol."

"It is said that water is life. But it is also death. One cannot exist without the other. The perfect balance." Her face like that of a Mona Lisa but darker skinned, Hecate looked up into the plum tree's foliage. Dappled shade played on her face.

Jill held Kivanç's hand in both of hers. He was so cold again. And so listless. As if he'd given up. "So what did you do then? If no one could see it?"

"I told my people to build the cisterns under the city, so that we could at least contain the enemy. Then I told them to leave and not return for two days and two nights." Rage and horror flashed on the beautiful face.

"That's when..." Jill whispered, unable to finish as she remembered the garish scene on a tile. She didn't remember where she'd seen the horrible scene, only that it'd been part of a larger story. A mere chapter, but one that would haunt her nights.

"First, I fought the enemy," Hecate murmured. Her voice could've been the leaves rustling in the wind. Organic. Ethereal. "In the end, I let the enemy take me instead of my city. I took it inside me." She looked down the wide avenue, sighed.

Jill followed the other woman's gaze and snapped to her feet. "Oh shit."

A black, viscous substance crawled uphill into the cracks between the white marble slabs. Thicker than blood, darker than night, it slithered in many directions at once. Yet each vein converged on one spot. The fountain.

"Kivanç, we need to get moving." She snaked her hand under his arm and pulled. He wouldn't budge. God, the man was heavier than he looked. "Hecate, help me. What is that stuff?"

"Evil."

"Yeah, I got that much." She managed to lift Kivanç an inch or so from the fountain. With a huff, she had to let him go. Just too heavy.

Hecate stood. "You do not understand." Frustration poked through the polished exterior. "Evil, the *entity*, not the attribute. A poison, a distillation of every vile thought and action, every amoral deed and abomination, every murder and rape and theft, each and every crime, sin and offense. Death is in this water. When it touches you, you die."

She looked down at Kivanç, staring at his feet. His bruises looked garish compared to his skin. Blood had started to seep again from the wide lacerations on his knuckles. "Kivanç is...?"

The last word wouldn't come out. *Dead*.

"You both are."

"What?"

"He fell into the poison and you followed him. And you abandoned the key."

Kivanç was dead? Because of her? Tears spilled over. She didn't even try to stop them. Let them come. What else was there if Kivanç was gone?

With a sigh, Hecate turned away and seemed about to leave. "I misjudged you. Just like the rest, you are weak."

Of pain, her tears turned into those of rage. "Weak? I'm not weak for loving this man! You hear me? I'd give anything for him! That's not weakness, that's love, okay!"

A few paces away, Hecate turned. A sad smile curved her luscious lips. "I fear you are too late to save yourself. But perhaps there is time yet for him. But are you willing to pay the price of his life?"

"Anything! Tell me!" Jill threw a panicked look at the black poison, snaking higher, closer.

"Take it into you. As I did for my beloved."

How the hell was she supposed to do that? "How do I do that?"

But Hecate was gone. So was the plum tree that had provided cool shade to Kivanç. She bent over him, hugged him fiercely. Tears landed on the top of his head and seeped into his lustrous hair.

"Come," she whispered, her eyes on the approaching black *thing*.

She helped him swing his legs into the fountain. She heard his sigh of contentment when his feet and calves sank into the cool water. More tears rolled off her cheeks and fell on him, his chest and thighs, his hands. She realized that each seemed to multiply a hundredfold and rinsed some of the blood, which had returned.

Only your tears can save him.

This was what Hecate had said. Well, it wouldn't be hard to cry right now. Jill's heart was breaking at the thought of Kivanç dying for her. Tears and rage and pain gave way to those of sadness. Real tears. Right from the heart. Her cries reminded her of something. She'd heard those heart-rending sobs before. The image of a statue's severed head came to her. A woman had cried when Jill had touched that statue. No, not a woman. It was *her*. She'd been the one crying.

She was going mad.

"You stay here, okay?" she whispered because her tight throat wouldn't let anything else pass. "You stay right here in the water. You'll be safe. I got you into this, I'll get you out."

He raised his gaze to her. Something stirred behind the seemingly lifeless orbs. A shadow of his former self. Then it was gone.

Jill kissed him, gave Kivanç one last hug—God, her chest hurt with real, physical pain at the prospect of what she was about to do. "I'll always love you."

Leaving Kivanç sitting despondently with his feet inside the fountain and his absent gaze aimed at the water, Jill faced the advancing wave of poison. Just in case, she put some distance between the fountain and her, crossed the plaza and stood on the terrace's very edge. The black ink-like substance followed her. Good.

"Yeah, you want me, don't you?" she taunted with tears running down her face. "That's it! Come over here!"

A foot below her, a thick limb of black, viscous poison glistened between two white marble slabs. It slowed its advance as though to assess her. The sun dimmed. The breeze choked. Hecate had been right—nothing could live in that stuff. Or near it.

After a last look at Kivanç, the man with whom she'd madly fallen in love—and mad was the proper word here, she could feel madness tickling the back of her head—Jill took a step forward. Without fear, without reserve. Because she knew she had to.

Because she knew it'd save him. She was taking the offense here. Would be damned if she'd let anything happen to him. No matter what it did to her.

Evil didn't touch her. *She* touched *it*.

Darkness enveloped her. Nameless things touched her, silent screams filled her head. A sarabande of lamentations, a requiem for all that lived outside the light, beneath the surface. Grotesques that inspired scorn and disgust but also sympathy, appeared in front of her, doing unspeakable things to themselves and each other, to her as well. She couldn't stop it. Any of it. Arabesques in blood filled her vision, spinning, converging. Defiled in ways she couldn't grasp and others she unfortunately could, Jill kept her mind on one thing – Kivanç. His own sacrifice.

Evil intensified its attacks. It wanted to break her. Monstrous debasements born in the mind of innate Evil. A ceremony of vices. But it couldn't take what she wasn't willing to give. She felt the rage swell around her. Like pus in a throbbing wound. It hurt her, tried to worm its way into her heart. But she'd closed it. Because inside rested something she'd protect to her last breath. It wanted her love for him. It yearned for it. Wanted to choke it, rape it, tear it from her soul.

Still she beat it back whenever it tried to reach into her heart. As if her love were too bright a light for the Evil trying to penetrate her, she felt it recoil, try another angle, sow seeds of doubts and envy, of jealousy and greed. Nothing it tried worked. She felt its wrath. Pain doubled. Her voice sounded raw in her head. Nowhere to hide. Torments at every turn.

Movement heralded a change in her surroundings. Voices rose around her. Cold became biting. Greenish glow replaced blackest night. Evil had tried to break her love.

And it had failed.

Jill gasped as she rolled onto her side. Damp clothes sticking to her. Numb with cold and shaking. Kivanç knelt by her side, her flashlight in a hand. He bled from somewhere on his scalp and bright red tears dripped between his eyes as if he cried blood.

Relief washed in a warm wave over her. "Kivanç!"

The cavernous palace surrounded them. Gone was the fabled Istanbul of eons past. Gone was the Evil that had tried to break her. She sat up, pressed a hand to her forehead. Dizzy and nauseous. Memories evaporated like dew in the sun. Shreds remained. If that. What the hell had happened?

"You came for me," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "You jumped into that *thing* and came for me."

He was crouching by the side of the artificial lake. Much too close. Couldn't he see them? Beneath the surface?

"Move away from them," she cried out as she yanked on his ripped shirt sleeve. He helped her stand, eyes searching hers.

"Who are they?"

She backpedaled from the water edge and forced him to follow her. "The dead. They're in the lake...Azya..." Jill closed her eyes. Cold made her chest tremble from the inside. Her teeth chattered. Everything felt strange. Like *déjà vu*. But she'd never been here, had she? Some of it came back to her. The men. They'd taken Kivanç. Azya had told her.

"I'm sorry. Azya..."

"You were not there. How did you know?" He wrapped his arms around Jill and squeezed.

"I...I saw her."

Kivanç closed his eyes and murmured a short sentence in Turkish.

Jill allowed herself a good ten seconds of just squeezing the man as if her life depended on the force with which she embraced him. She'd lost him. He'd fallen in that vile water... God, he'd *died* for a while, she was sure. Nothing could survive in the stuff. Did that mean...

She was dripping wet herself. And so cold. Kivanç said she'd come for him. Had she *jumped* into the lake? She didn't remember a thing after hearing his yelp of pain. Something had come over her. Rage of incalculable proportions. Wisdom from untold sources. Knowledge too vast to contain. Then pain. A world of it.

Kivanç held her at arm's length. The poor man could barely stand. Bruises, cuts and abrasions covered him. She'd seen him this way before. Memories of a sunlit fountain and a plum tree surfaced, helped chase away the cold gnawing at her limbs. She shivered.

He scowled at the lake. "We need to get out of here."

Jill checked around. "Where are the men?"

"One fell into the lake with me. The other, I do not know." Kivanç held his hand for her to take. "Hurry, we do not know if he will come back. We do not want to be here when he does. And this time, we *are* calling the police."

She agreed with a nod. They'd come too close. She could've lost Kivanç. *Had* lost him temporarily... Hadn't she?

Static noise bristled the small hairs on her arms. Voices swirled around them. Echoing. No more laments but urgent calls. What did they *want*?

Then suddenly a deep rumble spread under the soles of her feet. Somewhere, something heavy crashed. Earthy, rocky collisions resounded. The sound of water splashing forced Jill to turn toward the lake. Right in the middle of it, a thin ribbon of black water dripped from the ceiling and onto Hecate's statue.

"Oh no..."

Kivanç followed her gaze. "That water, it must be coming from the cistern above." Another rumble followed his words. "It will cause trouble down here. Look." He pointed at faraway pillars collapsing against one another. Dust rose in white-green clouds. "We must leave, Jill. Now."

You abandoned the key.

Where had she heard that? A woman had said this to her, but Jill couldn't remember when or where. God, her head hurt so badly her jaw ached and her ears buzzed.

The fountain. The plum tree. *Hecate!*

"Oh damn, the key."

"No time for this, we have to leave!"

She feebly pushed from him and started climbing the street up to the place where she'd set the golden coin. Behind her, Kivanç snarled a tight "Fuck" that made her want to grin. She'd never heard him swear in English before. It was *cute*.

"We need it! Hecate needs it!"

"Hecate?"

With the added water, the level would slowly rise and overtake the statue completely. Somehow, Jill knew that should this be allowed, something terrible would happen. Hecate had sacrificed herself to save the city. Perhaps the water rising would threaten it all over again? She didn't know much, but she did know this—she needed that key.

Kivanç joined her, pulled on her wrist. "Jill! Hurry!"

Rumbles became uninterrupted. Blocks of polished marble tumbled into the lake. This too would add to the level. The ghostly voices swarmed around her to terrifying levels. She pressed her hands to her ears. Where the hell was it?

"There!" Kivanç passed her, gingerly crouched behind a pillar and stood with the golden coin in his fist. "Now can we go?"

"Yes," Jill replied as she eyed the black lake. Faint ripples broke the matte surface. She could just imagine the chaos below the surface. Those poor souls.

But what could she do to help them?

"Jill!" cried a woman. Static distorted the voice.

"Azya?" Jill stopped dead in her tracks. "Azya? Where are you?" She ran back to the lake edge, forced herself to look within its horrifying depths. Faces and taloned hands. Hellish pits for eyes. Mouths like maws. She'd been there. She'd seen the Evil firsthand. Jill shivered as she ran along the edge. Behind her, Kivanç was yelling at her. Ghostly voices clamored for something. Her senses were overloading.

"Jill!"

Finally, she found the young woman clinging to a portion of the submerged statue. "The key!" she implored as she fought with her closest neighbor for her spot against the statue. "Put it back!"

"Where? I don't know *where*?"

"In the lock!"

"Jill!" Kivanç roared. "Come back here!"

Crashing sounds grew in intensity. And closer. One thick pillar with a gorgeous Byzantine pinnacle fell over with a moan like a wounded beast before crashing into the lake a couple of feet from Hecate's shoulder. What if the thing had chipped it or broken the statue? What then? Without a guardian, the water would rise, Evil would spread, death would surface.

"I'll put it back!" Jill yelled above the din of crumbling palace and enraged ghosts. "Tell them! I'll find a way!"

Azya scratched at one of the deformed faces to her side before she turned away to cling at the statue of Hecate, goddess of the moon and the stars and Byzantium's age-old guardian.

As she joined Kivanç by the terrace leading up into the grotto, part of the palace complex, Jill gripped his hand and together, they ran as if the devil were after them. It probably was.

He had died.

Kivanç was as certain of his death in that lake as he was of his feelings for Jill. She had come for him. She had jumped into that...that vile thing and saved him. She'd done more for him but he couldn't stop to think about that right then. Later, if they survived.

Not if, when. He intended to make sure he was worthy of this strong and beautiful woman's trust.

"Quickly!" he snarled without looking back. He gripped her wrist tighter. If they made it to the tunnel, perhaps they stood a chance.

A car-sized chunk of stone ceiling crashed onto the path in front of them. It broke in several segments. Dust rose in billowing fists. They ran around the smaller bits to the right, head tucked between their shoulders, legs pumping despite the cold numbing them, the pain and blood loss. She held the precious "key" while he gripped the flashlight. A puny weapon but one he would use if need be. That vicious man with the knife was still on the loose and could be anywhere.

As soon as they were within ten feet of the tunnel entrance, he swung her ahead of him. She leaped into the entrance. He followed a split second later. Behind them, more blocks and portions of columns tumbled and fell all over the paths and tiled streets. An arch caved in on itself, which triggered a chain reaction. Choking dust chased them up the tunnel. It crunched in his teeth, filled his nose and ears, made his eyes water. He

twisted the flashlight on. The crazy beam of light danced in front of him in the cloud of dust.

"There!" he said when he spotted the small inflatable boat. There was no way they would live through another dip into that black water. "Get in! Hurry!"

While Jill cautiously climbed into the emergency boat the color of butter, he pulled the paddles from behind the broken door leaning against the wall. After giving her the flashlight, he sat, rowed them away from the entrance, which had begun to vomit great clouds of dust and small debris.

"Hecate!" Jill yelled above the roar of falling rocks. "Take me to her!"

"No! I am taking you out of here!"

"Not yet! Please!"

Cursing under his breath, he maneuvered the small boat toward the upside-down head of the moon goddess. When Jill leaned dangerously far over the bow, Kivanç thought his heart would stop. He abandoned a paddle to grip the back of her waistband and steady her lest she fall.

"What are you *doing*?"

"The lock! I know where it is!"

Stunned, he watched her take the coin, turn it around in her palm and, after a deep breath, shove her arm into the water, biceps-deep.

"Hold...t-t-the light!" she snarled through her teeth. Pain twisted her mouth.

Rocking the boat, he leaned over and shined the light into the statue's face. Jill had the coin pressed against Hecate's forehead, twisting her wrist furiously.

"What are you —?"

"There!" Jill yanked her arm out of the water and fell into the bottom of the boat, cringing and gasping.

Beneath the surface, the coin fit perfectly into a circular hole in the middle of Hecate's forehead. It gleamed like a golden star in a midnight sky.

Silence replaced the dragonlike rumbles from the collapsing underground palace.

"What did you do?" he whispered, aiming his light across at the tunnel entrance. Dust still rolled into the cistern. But the thundering cave-in had stopped.

Jill gingerly sat on the plastic bench, cradling her arm and cringing. "I-I put the k-k-key back in the lock. God, I'm sick of being s-s-so *cold*."

A low, grating noise drowned what he started to say. He directed the beam of light at several points around them and over their heads. The sound of water splashing made him brandish the paddle with his other hand. Slowly at first then with more speed, current carried them a couple of feet away from the statue.

He checked overboard. Ripples broke the thick, black liquid. "Something is moving the water."

They sat in tense silence while the boat gained a bit more speed. As though he had kicked away from one of the columns.

"I will row us back to the gangway."

"That's a good idea." She retrieved the flashlight from him, aimed it all around before zeroing in on a point at the other end of the large cistern. "What's that over there? Light?"

A greenish glow in a crescent shape glimmered like the reflection of an aquarium. It illuminated the wall in wavy patterns of blue green.

"I do not know... But we are moving toward it."

Jill widened her feet in the bottom of the boat. "Row." Her voice sounded subdued.

"Did you see anything?"

"Just row. *Hard.*"

Current intensified. Kivanç clipped both paddles into the moorings and began to pull as hard as he could. Despite the burning pain in his belly—something was wrong with him but there was no time to investigate every little ache and pain—he pulled on the paddles hard enough to propel them toward the metal gangway. As if to counteract their momentum, the current began to spin them around. Once. Twice. Then a few times in rapid succession.

Jill cursed. "What's going on?"

"It is too strong!"

Indeed, the current had grown so strong that Kivanç lost his grip on one of the paddles, which was ripped clean off, mooring included. Water sounds filled the cavernous cistern. Rushing water. Like an underground river...

The cistern was millennia old. Perhaps it had once been more than a holding tank for city water. Perhaps it had been...

"A river!" he yelled to be heard. "Sit in the bottom! Hold on to the handle!"

He joined Jill in the bottom of the boat but kept his outside foot over the edge. The glowing aqua-colored crescent turned out to be light tinted through the water. Light that came from an opening...directly into the wall.

"Shit!"

He had to agree.

Both of them yelling, their little craft was sucked toward the wide opening that had formed. Perfectly engineered and cleverly hidden all these years, he had time to admire the craftsmanship of this ancient aqueduct as they rushed closer to the tubular channel. Covered in the same glowing lichen as the palace complex, glazed tiles the color of grass fitted to perfection formed a glistening chute into which their boat was about to rush. Sideways.

"Hang on!" he yelled.

As they were about to tip over the edge and down the chute, Kivanç extended his leg as far as he could reach. Kicked the wall at the last moment and straightened their craft before it made the plunge. Forty-five degree angle. Dizzying speed. By his side, Jill's high-pitched scream drilled into his brain.

Then freefall.

Or close enough to it to turn his stomach into a fist.

Rushing water clapped like slaps of thunder. It drowned even his thoughts. Glazed tiles like green lightning strikes blinded him. Wind that smelled of fish and dank basement choked his breath. But surprisingly little lateral movement. Small comfort against the sheer speed whipping his hair back.

He gripped Jill's wrist to keep her put. "I love you!" he heard her shriek.

Elation made his heart beat hard enough to hurt. Pure joy shot through his wounded and battered body. If he died – again – he would do so a happy man.

An elbow in the tunnel projected Jill against him. He wrapped both arms around her strong frame and held her tight as she burrowed her face in the crook of his shoulder. Another elbow rocked them both to the left. The gradient steepened. Their boat practically floated above the rushing water. Ahead, a dark spot. Growing. Looming like a round mouth. The exit. Wherever it was. They shot out of the tunnel.

Air. freefall. Thundering water. Flashes of light. Then impact.

Kivanç could swear he heard people speaking... *Japanese?*

When he rubbed the water from his eyes, he realized the boat had landed right in the middle of the main cistern, the one opened to the public and one of the most visited attractions by tourists. A group of whom presently stood on a wooden pier overlooking the water and stared, mouths gaping, faces blank in the hoods of their plastic ponchos. Camera flashes blinded him a split second later. By his side, Jill faced him. He cared little that two dozen people filmed and photographed them kissing. Nothing would have stopped him from embracing the woman as hard as he dared and crushing his mouth to hers. They sat there in the gently rocking boat, kissing and murmuring in their respective languages – he could hardly remember his own name, let alone words in a language he had learned as a teen – until someone returned with the police.

In a case of *déjà vu* that made him grin like a fool, the authorities took control of the situation, for which he was infinitely glad. Because right now, he was busy loving his woman with all of his being.

Jill grinned through her tears. "I think I should get some travel insurance next time."

Her laugh reverberated in the large Yerebatan Saray cistern, almost an exact copy of the one they had left behind, except on a grander scale. Water barely up to a man's thighs kept their boat afloat. And contrary to the black stuff that had propelled them into the tunnel, the water in this cistern was normal and clear. He ventured a hand in it. Cool. Not deathly cold.

Jill leaned over the edge and gasp. "They're gone!"

"Who?"

She turned, buried her face in the crook of his shoulder. Her voice reached him muffled. "The dead. They're gone."

"Do you think they are...?" He kissed his bead bracelet before doing the same with the top of her head.

"Freed? Yeah, I think so."

Once they stood on solid land—he almost knelt to kiss the glorious dirt—he realized he could barely stand. Heat and a deep throbbing in his belly kept him bent in half. Despite his best intentions, he had to sit to wait for the ambulance.

"You two again?" a police officer demanded.

"The same men," Kivanç replied in Turkish. "They attacked us again."

"We know, we have the whole department up in arms over it. The Canadian consul is on his way." He sighed. "Can you keep your friend out of trouble from now on?"

Jill looked at the police officer then at him, eyes narrowed as if she were trying to translate, so he switched to English. "I doubt anyone could."

"Is everything all right?" she asked. Her concern touched him. He nodded but knew he would never fool the sharp woman.

"I'll take care of you," Jill said, bending over to rub his hair back from his face.

He had heard this before. In another time and place. Somewhere sunny and bright. Strange. "I fear I will make for a very demanding patient."

A grin pulled her beautiful mouth wide. Tears rolled down her cheeks. He pressed his thumb against one then kissed his fingertip. "No need to cry for me. I will be fine."

"I know. I'm happy, that's all."

"And the tears?"

"Of joy," she replied, knuckling them away. "Relief, joy...I'm a big mess right now. Don't mind me."

Kivanç smiled. "I can only imagine what I must look like." With his torn and bloodstained shirt. Poor Azya. "Will you give me another chance?"

She kissed him hard on the mouth. "You don't even need to go there, Kivanç. We'll deal with it later."

"No, Jill. It is important. I want to atone for my lie."

"Shh."

Kivanç kissed the finger she put to his mouth. Then with his gaze on her to catch her reaction—he needed to know if there was still hope for him—he teasingly pressed his teeth on it. Her eyes flared. He heard her breath catch in her throat. Kivanç had his answer.

"It may take some time," he murmured. Pain radiated in his belly. He heard the ambulance somewhere overhead. "But I will atone for my lie. Will you wait?"

"Of course I will." Tears made sapphires of her eyes. "I'll wait for you."
Kivanç nodded his thanks. No words were needed.

Chapter Thirteen

"Did he call yet?"

Darlene rolled her eyes. "Not since the last time you asked." She checked her watch. "Oh, three minutes ago. And my dear, you *will* hear the phone just like I will."

Jill paced back and forth while Andy spoke on his cell. It'd been quite the week. The flooded cistern had sat on a crevasse hundreds of feet deep and a couple of miles wide. If they'd bored anywhere under that neighborhood for their metro line, there would've been a cataclysmic sinkhole the size of a small town. Tens of thousands would've died. In a way, Hecate had once again saved her beloved city. But what made Jill's heart sing was how the authorities had caught Azya's killer as he tried to cross the sometimes-porous border into Bulgaria through the Strandzha Mountain. She hoped he rotted for a long time in a Turkish jail.

One of Andy's admin assistants strode into the living room, a small lavender envelope in her hand. She smiled as she came over to Jill and gave her the note. "*C'est pour vous, madame.*"

Jill took the envelope in both hands, feeling her cheeks flush. "*Merci.*"

Darlene didn't even wait for the young woman to leave before she rushed over and took the envelope from Jill's hands. "Oooh, it's from Kivanç." She teasingly smelled it, eyes half closed. "Nice. Very nice."

Jill snatched it back. "Just gimme that."

Andy snapped his cell closed against his hip. He sighed long and hard. "You're going to have to move that flight to the right by at least two weeks..." His eyes narrowed as he saw the envelope. "That's from him, eh? He's such a brown-noser."

Her sister-in-law and she both protested with various degrees of politeness – only Jill could get away with calling him a big, pushy twit.

"I wasn't planning on flying back home yet. For now there's nothing at work that can't be done over e-mails anyway." She resisted the urge to smell the envelope as Darlene had.

Darlene gave her husband a quick squeeze and a kiss on the mouth, which triggered Jill's ick response. Big brothers weren't supposed to have intimate relationships and sexual lives. "They want to see her again?"

Andy nodded. "They want you to join them in the cave –"

"It's a *palace*."

"They want you to meet them there and tell them *exactly* what happened and in *exactly* what order and how *exactly* you destroyed everything."

"I didn't destroy anything! Plus, I've already given my witness account to them."

Andy rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Jill. I forgot to tell you. It's the university and the Museum of Archeology I was talking with. They're the ones who want to know what 'exactly' happened. The guy used the word at least five times. *Jesus*."

Despite her wish to open the letter and read Kivanç's note, she instead retrieved her hiking boots from the foyer and met her brother at the car, which waited by the back door. They drove to the cistern, zigzagged between city crews, media vans and security lines until they reached the chain link fence. There, her brother and she were met with the consulate lawyer, who advised them to say as little as possible while still appearing to respond. Jill sighed. It'd be a long day.

* * * * *

Kivanç was about to close the restaurant for the day when he spotted a slight man climbing out of an Opel GT. The same car Kivanç had owned before Jill had—so superbly—totaled it, but instead of black in a gleaming shade of silver. Black sunglasses were pushed up into the man's longish black hair. His T-shirt was the brightest shade of pink Kivanç had ever seen on a man. But it suited him well. Expensive-looking black leather shoes pointed out beneath faded jeans of a perfect cut and shade. The man was worth a fortune just in clothes.

He approached and held the door to the glass casing containing The Marmara's menu while Kivanç unlocked it.

"Thank you."

"No problem." The man rolled his Rs on the tip of his tongue. Spanish? Portuguese?

"Unfortunately, we are closed for the day. Perhaps you would like to come back tomorrow? We open at noon."

"I know."

"Well, *merhaba*, my friend." Kivanç tried to modulate his tone in a subtle goodbye. He had somewhere to be that did not involve this man. He did not want to keep Jill waiting. *If* she decided to come.

The man smiled and cocked his head. "I will be quick, Kivanç."

Kivanç took a step back to get a better look at the man, who stood quite a bit shorter, perhaps five eight or nine. Definitely Mediterranean with a Roman nose and fine facial features. He looked like a soccer player. "Have we met before?"

"Not in person, no. But we have corresponded for several years."

The realization hit him like a ton of rocks. He felt his face tighten. "Adriano."

A nod.

"What are you doing here?" Kivanç wanted to slam the door in the man's face. He would not finish the task with Jill. Never! And he had already contacted Adriano to transfer the money back. All twenty thousand American dollars. It had never been

about the money anyway, for none of the Ladies. Pleasure had a way of paying much better dividends than dollars ever could. But Jill was different. He *loved* her.

"I told you—"

Adriano raised a hand in a call for peace. "*Prego*, please, wait. Yes, I did receive it. And I am delighted for you. I only wanted to make sure you were all right."

Oh.

"I am. Thank you."

Although he *had* spent days in the hospital being treated for a bruised kidney and some internal bleeding.

Yet now that Kivanç could look at his long-time employer, he realized the man was much younger than he had anticipated. Late-thirties, perhaps forty. There was also a great sadness in the man's brown eyes despite the half smile and cocky attitude. This, more than anything else, told Kivanç the man was no bored tycoon sipping espressos somewhere in an Italian villa while idly playing with people's lives. He truly was trying to help. In his own eccentric way. Kivanç softened his stance.

"I am better, Adriano. There was no need to come all the way to Turkey."

"Some things should be done in person."

"Such as?"

"Such as compensation and apology."

"You did not cause any of it," Kivanç said, rapidly committing every detail to memory. "And I already was compensated. Richly."

"Ah, but guilt does not work this way, you know that." Adriano smiled. "For you." He tossed a small black object that Kivanç caught in a fist. "To compensate for all your troubles." His accent made the word sound like "traw-bullz".

When Kivanç looked in his hand, he realized it was a set of car keys. The Opel lightning strike symbol glimmered on the black remote. He looked up just in time to catch Adriano's sad smile as he turned and walked away. His heels clacked brazenly.

"Wait!" Kivanç took a few steps. "Why? Why do you do all this? Why Gentlemen Inc.?"

Adriano slid his sunglasses down to cover his eyes as he turned back. The cocky smirk did not fool Kivanç—the man hid a terrible pain. "Never keep a Lady waiting. *Arrividerci*."

* * * * *

They didn't get to go home until past suppertime, by which time Andy was hungry—in other words cranky as hell, as was she—the lawyer had repeated himself hoarse and Jill literally quivered with anticipation as she patted the back pocket of her khakis. Kivanç's note still crunched despite the day's damp and cold activities. She must have told her tale at least six times to the archeological team's obvious delight and

excitement. They hadn't believed her at first. Then when they'd found what was left of the underground complex—after crawling through the collapsed tunnel—they'd left her standing there and taken off in various directions, talking excitedly in Turkish.

While they studied such or such broken bits of pillars or arches, she'd discreetly walked over to the lake. Hecate still lay in the middle, except the water had receded almost entirely. What little left was crystal clear and reflected the bottom—just regular marble slabs. Jill hadn't even tried to hide her relief. She still had tears in her eyes when she thought about it. *They'd* moved on. All those poor souls trapped in that vast Evil, they'd finally moved on. Wherever that was.

As they presently reached the consulate, Darlene waited for them outside. She looked pissed. "What's wrong with you, woman?" she demanded.

"What?" Jill stepped around the car. Another delay. Christ, could she just read her damn letter? And her arm ached. All she wanted to do was scratch the fresh scar from the bullet wound. A *bullet wound*. Ha!

"Kivanç called. He was worried when you didn't show up."

Her heart sank. "Show up where?"

"You *didn't* read his message?"

"No, never had time." Jill threw a murderous glare at her brother, who chose that moment to sneak into the house. Chickenshit.

Without delay, she ripped the envelope and read the short note. Kivanç had a very stylish, slanted penmanship that looped and curved.

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

"Yeah, I agree. Come on, I'll fix your hair at least."

"No time," Jill snapped, turning right around and about to give the address to the chauffeur.

"Never mind," her sister-in-law said. "Come on."

It was Darlene who drove her to where Kivanç waited. Two hours late. They pulled in front of the downtown hotel where the Canadian delegation had had its gala the week prior, where she'd met Kivanç for the first time. A lifetime away.

Darlene double-parked beside a gleaming silver sports car. "Get in there," she said after a brief but fierce hug. "Give me the thumbs up if everything's good, okay?"

Jill beamed as she rushed up the carpet-covered steps, wrenched the door wide and spotted him sitting in a brown leather chair by a potted cluster of bird of paradise flowers. The tuxedo espoused his lean and long form while the ponytail highlighted his sculpted features. Just as he'd looked the first time, he reminded her of a Turkish James Bond. His eyes were closed as he leaned his head against the backrest. A nasty bruise covered his nose still, he sported a fine shiner and one of his hands was bandaged. But he looked like a million bucks to her. As though he knew she stood there staring, he opened his eyes, spotted her and smiled.

Shivers raced up her arms. Jill hooked a strand of flyaway hair around her ear and waved at him. He joined her even if he'd have to walk right back down again when they entered the hotel proper. Made no logical sense. But the simple gesture touched her more than any fancy words ever could.

She sprinted back to the door and gave an enthusiastic thumbs up at Darlene, who'd leaned over on the passenger seat and looked up at the hotel front doors. She beamed, replied in kind then drove away.

Kivanç joined her by the entrance hall. "You look beautiful," he said through a wide grin. "I love your shirt. 'If you can read this, you're in my roundhouse kick range.' Very much Jill Moss."

Jill snorted a laugh as she looked down at herself. Boots stained with mud and dust, khakis a spotted mess and hair frizzy from hours spent in a humid underground environment. Oh yeah, she was one sexy lady. "I'm sorry I'm so late. I didn't get to read your message until..." She checked her sports watch. "About twenty minutes ago. We were with the university folks, spent the day underground."

"I would have waited as long as needed."

He proffered a small, clear plastic box she hadn't seen that contained a large and vibrantly *red* flower. She'd never seen such a vivid shade of red. It was gorgeous. "For you."

"Thanks." Her heart beat as madly as it had the first time she'd laid eyes on the handsome man.

He clipped it to the lapel of her wrinkled turquoise shirt over her tee. And him in a tux!

"I find this flower suits you much better than the first one. It is bright and cheerful and sturdy."

If he was trying to turn her on, it was working magnificently.

Kivanç scooped her hand to kiss the knuckles. "Do you believe we can go back in time?" Bruises and cuts marred his handsome face, but his eyes blazed with joy.

"After today, I'll believe just about anything."

He grinned. "I would like for us to start over. If you accept."

Jill raked her hand in her dusty hair. "Name the place and I'll show up. Flashlight and hiking boots ready."

"Well, there *is* an entire city built underground near my home in Antalya. Perhaps you would like to visit there someday. I am sure there would be plenty of adventures to be had."

Speaking of which, she could hear a few of *them*, their voices carried in from one of the windows.

"Adventures? I'm in. Plus, it looks like I'll be here for a while... So, you know... Might as well help a few of *them*." She rolled her index finger in a wide circle. "You Turks are chatty."

They shared a quiet smile.

"Tell me one thing. Where did you learn to kick like *that*?" She Kung-Fu-chopped the air in front of her.

"I hold a first kyu in kendo, a rough equivalent to a black belt."

"Impressive."

He sobered. His honey-colored eyes blazed with that great eye contact of his. "You have my heart, Jill. Always. Do you believe me?"

"I believe you," she replied, tearing up again. "And you have mine."

Relief flashed across his face. "I wanted to believe but until you said those words to me, in the boat, I was afraid my lie had pushed you away for good."

He smiled, kissed her knuckles then embraced her in a nicely scented hug that lasted a long time.

"I missed you," she murmured against his chest.

She felt him nod. "As did I." He retreated at arm's length. "This is where it began, where my lie began."

"Kivanç, you don't—"

He silenced her with a deep kiss that left her toes curled up. Always a good sign. He tasted of mint and man. "I want to. I think we should start over. Do you agree?"

She nodded.

He backed by a step, stuck his hand out. "*Merhaba*, my name is Kivanç Demir. I own a restaurant here in Istanbul. I used to work for an escort agency but recently quit to focus on one particular woman. If you are interested, I would love to show you this beautiful city in my brand-new car."

She couldn't help the snort of laughter. "That silver beast is yours?" Then sobering, she played along and solemnly shook his hand. So warm. "Hi, I'm Jillian Moss. Just call me Jill. I'm a translator for the Canadian government and I also do freelance work at Dalhousie University in Halifax. I drive the only red Smart in the city. And I can hear dead people."

"I am delighted to meet you, Jill. Are you hungry?"

She threw him a slanted glance. "For food? Not anymore."

His eyes narrowed. He licked his lips. "Have you ever tried a Turkish bath?"

"Only once, a long time ago."

He led her around a corridor lined on one side with windows, pushed against a French door leading to the crushed gravel path she remembered from the gala. The hamam gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

"There's no one here," Jill remarked, looking around. "Did they close the place for you again?"

He just smiled. "I know someone."

He opened the hamam door, closed then locked it behind them. With a tender hand, he positioned her against the wall. She let the cool tiles press into her back. The oppressive heat was starting to get to her Canadian blood. He leaned into her, put his mouth by her ear. "A hamam can be a very personal experience. Are you sure you are comfortable with this?"

"Yes."

His lips hovered a breath away before pressing lightly on her lobe. "I know we have just met," he whispered. "But I find it extremely difficult to keep my hands from touching you, my lips from kissing you. You must think I am terribly ill-bred."

"Not at all. I think we should all reach for what we want. You never know when you might lose it."

"Can I kiss you then? Right here?" He put the pad of his index finger on the pulse at her neck.

"Yes, you can."

Jill shivered when he kissed her throat. Tenderly, moving side to side. Heat from his hand heralded his cupping a breast. She tried not to moan. Failed miserably. With a hand that shook, she pulled her hair out of the way as she turned her head to present her bare nape. She heard his breath catch.

"Do you know that this is my favorite place to kiss a woman?"

"It is? I didn't know," she lied.

Now it was his turn to play along their rediscovery. "Yes. Nothing is more stimulating to me than a woman denuding her nape for a man's fingers to caress, his lips to taste. Perhaps even a loving bite or two, hmm?"

"I was hoping you'd say that."

When his lips pressed the tender skin at the base of her neck, she let out a long sigh of contentment. She pulled away to look into his eyes. Like amber gems.

"Let me get a shower first, okay?" she murmured. Pressed a kiss to his lips. "I'll join you in the steam room."

He nodded. "I will prepare a few things while you do."

Even if he really didn't have to, he escorted her to the women's room, helped her set it up, even put a nice, thick towel by the shower before branding her with his gaze. "Do not take too long. I just might come back here before you finish."

Shivers raced up her arms. He closed the door behind him.

She'd never taken such a quick shower before. She must have been done in under five minutes, tops. Towel wrapped around her torso, she padded light and quick to the steam room just in time to see a naked and aroused Kivanç sit on the central stone dais. He curled his index finger at her. Citrus smells greeted her when she entered the hot room where steam already began to gather in the air. Condensation pearled on the tiled walls and copper fountains.

"Come to me." A patina shone on his skin whenever he moved. Glorious.

Before she reached him, Jill pulled on her towel and tossed it on the stone. His eyes narrowed. A glimmer of tongue flashed behind his rapacious smile. The man could rev her up like nothing else! Frissons tingled on her nape. She'd used her one good fabric elastic band to keep her hair in a ponytail high on her head to denude the spot he enjoyed so much. A small gift but one she knew he would appreciate.

He patted the stone. He'd removed his bandage and kept only a thin strip of gauze tied around his damaged knuckles. "Here, rest your body."

She noticed he had his *nazar bonjuk* in a hand. Guilt burned her face. He must have seen her looking at the bracelet because he nodded.

"I'm sorry... That was bitchy of me."

"You only gave back something that had been part of the lie. I would like to give it to you again, but as a symbol of my sincerity. Would you accept it?"

She nodded. Kivanç clipped the bracelet on her wrist. It felt cool. "Thanks. It means a lot to me."

"And to me." He kissed her knuckles.

"How's your hand?"

A soft laugh rumbled in his chest. "You will see. Now..." He gave a pat to the stone by his side.

"Oh?"

She *was* tired and gladly sat by his side then leaned over so she could roll on her stomach. The stone platform was hot and wet. Nice.

Jill *humphed* when he applied both his palms to her lower back and rubbed upward in a deep massage. "That's *good*," she muttered against her bent forearms. "But don't hurt your hand, okay?"

"If you do not stop worrying about me, I may become used to it. Men are not known to suffer well or with dignity."

"Ha!"

Her bark of laughter turned into a whimper of delight when he massaged the back of her thighs. Cramps had kept her awake for the last two nights. Then *their* incessant chatter had kept her from going back to sleep.

"I love your body," he murmured, rubbing her calves.

To her admiration, he only massaged her, never once slipping into a more sexual touch. Not that she'd mind. Sex was exactly the thing on her mind. But to his credit, he was much stronger than her. At one point though, after a whole body rubbing and towel whipping—she'd demand one of *those* on a daily basis—and when he was gently rubbing the back of her shoulders, his fingers dallied on the back of her neck. She could feel his touch changing, slowly, lightening as he caressed her nape. She felt him moving behind her and sighed hard when he leaned over and kissed the back of her neck.

"I fear I can no longer resist," he whispered directly in her ear. "I must have you."

His body pressed against the back of hers. Hands and mouth covered every curve and angle. When he slipped a hand between her legs, she rolled her hips up against it. Fingers expertly parted her, entered her. She was so wet for him. Gentle rubbing against her clitoris turned more demanding, deepened to two fingers pumping into her. When he lay behind her, she hooked her leg back over his. Perfect fit. She came on a long moan that tapered into a whispered "I love you". To which he replied in Turkish.

As her heart rate returned to normal and her body stopped cramping, slowly, Kivanç rubbed her sex with his before pressing his glans until it sank. A whimper of need left her as she curled her butt back. Oh God, that was *so* good. In leisurely rolls, he slid in and out. Soon, the penetrations quickened. Deepened. Hardened. With his good hand against her hip, he pumped into her. Claimed and branded her all over again. From rhythmic, his thrusts became like physical hiccups. Then with one push that rocked her, he pulled back. She felt him grip his cock in a fist to choke back the release.

She reached back to stroke his thigh as he rolled on his back and panted a few times. It was her turn to plaster herself against him as he lay on his back, penis still pointing proudly up. His belly and chest corded with lean muscles with his deep breathing. Steam created a fog in the hot room. She couldn't see the domed ceiling anymore. Everything was shiny, both of them included.

"I was thinking about what you said..."

He turned to her, smiled. "Cappadocia is about two hours from my home in Antalya. It was once the Hittite homeland. I think you will love it. Especially since it is an entire city built underground."

Jill's laugh reverberated in the circular room. "Oops, sorry, got carried away." She toned her voice down. "I'd love to visit it, only if you come too."

"I would never let anyone else have the pleasure of fighting at your side. But we are *not* driving there."

"I bet that little silver beast is *fast*. You bought it this week?"

She felt him tense. "No, it is a gift from an old friend."

"That Italian guy? From the agency?"

A long silence preceded his reply. "Yes. I had never met him in person before. He is *different* from what I expected."

"That guy is *loaded*." Gentlemen Inc. Hmm. In a way, she didn't really dislike the idea behind it. Just that she'd been one of their "Ladies". Weird. "Different in what way?"

"Have you ever seen a man with a broken heart?"

The image of Kivanç sitting dejectedly in the university entrance hall flashed in her mind's eye. The pain and regret in his eyes. She nodded.

"He lost someone dear to him, but unlike me, he did not have the good fortune of finding her again."

"Poor guy."

They shared a slow nod.

"I have told my parents I might come home for a short visit. They were very happy."

Jill kissed his shoulder. The urge to bite was too strong. She did. Goose bumps pebbled his skin. "Did you tell them you'd have a crazy Canuck tagging along?"

He rolled over and pinned her underneath him. Took his time stretching out on top of her like a great cat. She basked in the hot pressure his long body created. Between her legs, his cock pressed a home along her tender flesh. Renewed fire boiled her blood.

"I told them a lovely woman with eyes like sapphires would grace me with her presence. But I did not tell them that I intend to do very wicked things to this woman each and every night. Starting now."

She moaned under his kiss.

Jill knew she'd found the one man for her. One who'd match and complement her, who'd be there to back her when she needed it and love her when she wanted to be. A man who understood her gift and wasn't afraid of it. A man meant for *her*. Warts and ghosts and all.

Epilogue

Adriano sat in the airport terminal, idly thumbing his cell phone to read his e-mails when one caught his attention. It was from his French Canadian “stalker”, the lovely young woman who was Archer’s best friend. So she had succeeded in tracing his e-mail address. Adriano shook his head. He would have to move again. And soon. Mélanie Girard may live across the world, but he would not put it above her to come all the way to Italy. He entertained the thought for a few seconds as he accessed her message. With her fresh young face—covered in freckles—but incisive and cunning mind, she presented a thrilling contradiction. One with whom he would love to be better acquainted.

Ciao!

Next time you mash the button “reply”, Mister I’m-too-sexy-for-my-car Adriano, make sure you don’t do it from your Sienna house... Just sayin’.

Talk to you soon,

Mel

Adriano grinned as he went on with his list. Such spirit!

He thumbed to the next message. One of his connections in Finland seemed to have finally discovered the whereabouts of a certain Lady whom Adriano had once tried to help with one of his agents. She had soundly scolded the agent and sent him on his way. She did not need anyone’s help, apparently. But there she was now, neck deep in trouble and no one to turn to. His connection maintained time was of the essence with her case. Adriano would not ask the same agent again—who probably remembered quite clearly the Lady’s forceful reaction. Closing his eyes, he mentally went over his Gentlemen, searching for one whom a fearsome school principal would not intimidate.

He knew just the one—a disciplined mind and quiet strength aplenty to face down even the terrible dragon lady. Perhaps they would find themselves along the way. Sometimes his pairings worked and they fell in love, as was the case with Lady Jill and Kivanç. No one should have to walk the Earth without someone to love at their side. He knew the emptiness of a life without a loved one. Knew the pain intimately. And this was why he had begun Gentlemen Inc. Somewhere in the world was a woman and a man destined to be together. And he had made it his duty since Isabella died to do all he could to help others achieve the happiness he had once known.

It was gone now. But he found a small measure of it every time one of his agents quit to be with the Lady he had been tasked to help. Or whenever he received a note from his lovely little stalker.

Adriano smiled. He hit reply and typed his message with one hand as he adjusted his sunglasses. He loved teasing Mel with bits of information. Perhaps he would not move after all. Perhaps he would wait for her.

About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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