



SECRETS and SPIES

by

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CHAPTER ONE

“What do you mean you’re going to Mexico?” Andrew Wilbury didn’t quite look at his girlfriend as he spoke. He found the view beyond Mott’s plate glass window far more intriguing. Casey Summers, the supposed girlfriend, scowled, noting the pale ass cheeks of the girl on the sidewalk. Her tattooed skin peeked out from under a leopard print skirt. Casey wondered why the girl didn’t give the rest of Broadway the benefit of the view instead of torturing the customers inside Mott’s, a hot new diner and her current place of employment. Not that there were many customers at the moment, which was why Jacques had finally allowed Casey to take her break.

Andrew finally pulled himself back to the conversation. “What about my sister’s wedding? You’re my date.”

“I won a raffle, a free trip,” Casey said. “I’ve never even been out of the country.” She didn’t mention that the ticket was open ended, but the thought of going to that black-tie wedding with Andrew’s stepmother...ugh! The anorexic woman was sure to treat Casey as if she’d entered the reception with toilet paper strung from her butt. And the temptation to knock over Mrs. James Alexander Simpson III’s cake with a flick of her finger would be entirely too much to bear.

“But why now?” Weren’t males supposed to grow out of the whining stage by age eighteen? “Did Jacques give you vacation?”

Casey glanced over at her superstitious boss as he threw salt over his shoulder. He always did this when cleaning table thirteen. Casey had suggested that he change the table numbers to letters for better karma, but he’d waved his hand in front of her face, tscking, as if she had no idea how the real world worked. A cross pendant clanked against the Star of David on his chest, as he swayed his hips to the hip-hop music coming from the open office door behind the counter. Jacques was quite a character, but a character Casey’d had her fill of during the last six months of double shifts and a ten-hour food service safety conference. The conference was where she’d spent her thrilling weekend, a weekend she’d willingly forget if not for the serendipitous raffle.

“Actually,” Casey said, noticing that Andrew was still peering out the window with rapt attention. “He fired me.”

Oh, that got him to look away from Too-Short-Skirt and the muscle-bound man intent on washing her tongue. “You got fired? How are you going to pay your rent?”

“Nadine’s not worried, so why should you be?” Nadine was her roommate, and she agreed it was about time that Casey spent some time away from Manhattan. Away from Andrew. Casey was finally realizing just how right her friend was. She’d willingly ignored Andrew’s faults for too long since he was one of the few guys who didn’t press her for sex, a fact that had made Nadine immediately suspicious. It was time to cut loose and have an adventure.

Problem was, a certain sort of adventure followed her everywhere, the sort she could do without, like the limo that’d just hopped the curve and was barreling toward the tongue-wrestling couple on the sidewalk. They obviously thought they were auditioning for a porn film, since the sound of shattering Plexiglas—the bus stop shelter—and skidding metal—the limo’s lame front fender—did nothing to end their make-out session. Andrew, sitting in the chrome and plastic chair across from Casey, lurched from frozen shock to skittering crab in two-seconds, leaving his

girlfriend to face the out-of-control car on her own. Definite hero material there. Not! Oh well. Saved her the guilt of breaking up with him before that damned debutante wedding.

Casey stood and lifted her arms as the power flowed from the Earth through her as if she were merely a conduit. She flung the wave forward where it smashed into the bus shelter as the hulking wreck screeched along the sidewalk. The shelter crushed as flat as a crepe against the force, as did the first twelve inches of the black limousine. Sparks flew everywhere, as did dirt and glass and three-day-old trash.

Casey snapped her hands down as soon as the limo's forward momentum ceased. Some guy in shredded jeans and a dozen gold rings jumped out of the back of the dead vehicle, screaming obscenities at the driver while keeping a cell phone glued to his ear. A medallion on a chain flapped against his chest. Should she recognize him? Casey wondered. He had to be famous, right?

Too-Short-Skirt bent over so that Casey had a pristine view of her ass once again as she fanned beefcake guy, who'd fainted on the sidewalk. Casey turned to find Andrew cowering behind Jacques, clutching his biceps and whispering furiously. As she faced them, her boss crossed himself, then grabbed his pendant and held it out in front of him as far as it would reach.

Here we go. Casey slumped back into her chair. She wouldn't need to break up with Andrew after all. He was about to run screaming from her strangeness.

Even though she knew he wasn't right for her, it still hurt when that one word floated in her direction. "Freak." How many times had she heard that in the past? You'd think someone would be more original. Andrew backed toward the restaurant door, whispering 'freak' a few more times before he reached it.

Casey cleared her throat. "Does this mean we're breaking up?"

Andrew nodded, wide-eyed, then dashed out to the sunny sidewalk. Well, good. Screw the wedding anyway and hadn't he just been a little too friendly with Jacques' arms? Maybe that explained why he'd never pressed her for sex.

Casey turned to Jacques to await his conviction. Jacques avoided ladders, closed the restaurant on Friday the 13th, and read his horoscope daily. Would he stand tall in the face of her weirdness? No. He crossed himself again and seemed to be chanting. Hail Mary's, Casey realized.

"So I'm still fired, right? Do you want me to finish my shift?"

He shook his head.

"Well, I'll just finish my cappuccino."

Jacques nodded and scurried toward the backroom.

Casey sipped the lukewarm drink and sighed. This had happened so many times in the past that she was downright nonchalant about it, but it felt worse this time for some reason. Not because of Andrew or her job. There'd been a dozen Andrews and a dozen jobs. She just couldn't face the prospect of her life continuing on this path. Something had to change...for the better for once.

Forty-five minutes later, Jacques told the police a less-than-credible story about Casey's mysterious powers stopping the accident. After which, Casey calmly recounted Jacques various superstitious habits. She wasn't out to hurt her ex-boss, but she refused to reveal her powers to a government agency ever again, and the police found her version of events much easier to believe. Free to go, Casey returned her uniform to Jacques and walked to her subway stop in a daze. Life whirled around her, but she didn't belong to it. She was as alien as ET. In fact, ET would probably feel more at home in NY than she did.

Before the melancholy could settle in completely, she spied the travel agency across the street, the one from the raffle. She marched determinedly to the crosswalk and flowed with the gaggle of pedestrians to the other side. It was time to change her destiny, take control of her life and

her power. When she entered the agency a bell tinkled, a woman smiled, and a poster for Mexico caught and held her attention.

* * * *

Parker Nelson flexed his arms and stared at the bullets as they rolled across the ink blotter on his desk. His gun rested next to the ringing phone. He ignored the phone. He knew who it was and he refused to listen once more to his boss's spiel. The man continued to insist that Parker take a vacation. The mere thought gave him hives. What would he do with two empty weeks?

He would think. He would remember.

Not gonna happen.

Of course that's what Assistant Director Peter Brandon thought he needed. Time to remember, time to truly grieve. Hell, it'd been two years. He was done grieving. What he needed was to solve this case.

He shoved the bullets, one after another, into the clip. He planned to evade Brandon by spending a couple hours at the shooting range. His secretary, Mrs. Mocowski, would page him if anything came in on Missy Ryan's case. The San Antonio cops had found her backpack that morning. They'd handed it off to forensics and now Parker waited, without any hope really, to hear if they discovered something.

He had the sick feeling in his stomach that Missy was out of the country by now, snatched by enemy agents. At age ten, she was the most incredible code cracker Parker had met in his life, and she was gone. His fault. The safehouse had been compromised. He should've known, should've seen it coming—somehow—and he couldn't turn his mind to a new case until they had her back.

Brandon had already threatened to turn the case over to the European team, calling Parker obsessed and burned out. Worse. Parker had been ordered to get his annual physical. He'd put it off as long as possible, until his boss had reminded him that he could be disciplined for noncompliance. Parker had known something was wrong, though he did fifty sit-ups and push-ups each morning, followed by a run in Virginia's ninety-degree heat. But lately he'd experienced dizzy spells that would quickly pass, and sometimes his blood throbbed in his temples as if he were going to burst a vessel.

High blood pressure. Extremely high, according to the doc.

Since Brandon and the doc were golfing buddies, it was no doubt the doc who'd narked on him. Parker had refused the pill prescription. He realized now he should have taken the slip of paper, stuffed it in his pocket, and forgotten about it. Then no one would be the wiser as to whether he took the damn pills or not.

Shaking his head, Parker shoved the clip into the gun with a snap and stood. A knock at the door was closely followed by the turning handle. Brandon was never one to wait for an invitation.

Damn. No escape.

"Going somewhere, Parker?" His boss rolled up his shirtsleeves. His silver-black hair had been slicked back with gel this morning, but several strands had escaped during the day and now stood out at odd angles on his head.

"Shooting range."

"Something wrong with your phone?"

"Did you call?"

Brandon nodded.

"Must be then."

The man shook his head and gestured for Parker to sit, which he did with a sigh. Brandon took the opposite chair and relaxed back, crossing his gangly legs at his ankles. Never a man to

tiptoe around his point, he dove right in. "I have a new assignment for you."

"Not a vacation?"

"No, you've made it very clear you will not accept that, and I really would hate to put an unnecessary black mark on your record by suspending you." He paused to make sure that point sunk home. Parker nodded, so he resumed. "The new assignment will involve a trip."

"Uh huh." Parker sensed Brandon hid a bomb in these simple statements.

"Mexico. You leave tomorrow."

"And what am I to do in Mexico?" This sounded suspiciously like an assigned vacation.

"You're to protect Acacia Summers."

He didn't know the name. "Who is she? What am I protecting her from?"

"She's a café worker from New York—likes to be called Casey—who won a trip to a resort in Mazatlán."

"That can't be all she is if this agency is being sent to protect her."

"The rest is need-to-know."

"And I don't need to know? How am I going to protect her if I don't know what I'm protecting her from?"

Brandon nodded his understanding. "From what I'm told, this assignment should be very simple. Nothing to worry about. They're just afraid she'll be more vulnerable out of the country away from her usual routine."

Parker waited a beat. "That's all you can tell me? Are you sure this isn't just some bogus assignment meant to force me to take a vacation?"

Brandon was a terrible straight man. His lips quirked up and his eyes crinkled. "She's important to national security. I expect you to be completely vigilant."

Parker scowled. "What about Missy?"

His boss sobered. "Chin's got it covered. We'll find her."

"But what about Missy?"

"Parker, you know she's most likely gone. Once we have intel on her, The Company will send in a retrieval team." He held up his hand as Parker started to speak. "You're too wrapped up in this. You treat each and every case as if it's Deanna's case."

Parker squeezed the clip until his knuckles turned white. He hated it when his boss referenced his dead fiancée. "Is it wrong to care about a missing ten-year-old girl?"

"It's not wrong to care about the girl. It is wrong to obsess to the detriment of your health. Who are you going to help if you collapse in the field from a stroke or heart attack?"

Looking anywhere but in Brandon's knowing eyes, Parker fought back the one thought he would never admit to Brandon, his doctor, or even Chin, his partner. The thought that he wouldn't mind taking a bullet in the field. Searing pain, even death, had to be preferable to this hollowness in his gut. It wasn't sadness anymore. Deanna had been dead for two years now. Murdered at the hand of a psychopath. It was just a void, nothingness.

"Parker?"

He shook his head and refocused. "You're right."

"But this isn't a bogus assignment. The Bureau has had a discreet tail on Miss Summers for years. I talked to Link and Tom, since they were the last ones assigned, but all they said was she's a great girl." His lined face split with a grin. "They said for you to have fun and don't let her out of your sight."

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

"Nope." He flexed a thumb across his lips. "One more thing."

Parker waited.

"You're not to let her know that you're protecting her. Don't even tell her that you work for the government."

"Oh?"

"She has a thing against the government apparently, something to do with some project she was a part of. She rebelled against her first bodyguards."

"Rebelled how?"

"Don't know exactly, but one of them wound up with a broken leg. You don't want her to run off because she discovers you're with the government, so make up some story to stay close to her. Got it?"

Parker nodded, wondering if she was a martial arts expert. His boss tossed a file on his desk, and the fanning pages revealed thick strokes of black ink over most of the intel. Brandon stood, his expression grim, straightened his jacket, and left the room.

* * * *

The security access card slid through the reader, turning the light to green and allowing Brandon to enter the emergency stairwell. He jogged two flights to the roof and exited through a metal door. Gravel crunched under his feet as he moved toward the main bunch of air compressors, the hub of the building's cooling units. An arm waved him closer. That's all he could see was the arm, encased in a white shirtsleeve, coarse black hair curling up the back of the hand, a chunky ring on the middle finger. The rest of the man was in shadows behind hulking metal. Brandon had never seen his boss's face clearly.

Once he was close enough to see his superior's gray overcoat and fedora, Brandon slowed for breath. The rumbling of the fans and a nearby helicopter made it extremely hard to hear his first words. Brandon leaned in closer and cupped his ear.

The gravelly voice said, "Did you give him the assignment?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"Absolutely." Parker was the one man Brandon would trust with his life. "He's no traitor."

The shadowy face looked grim as he nodded slowly. "We need to stop this leak, before we lose any more of this country's assets."

"Absolutely, sir."

"And you're sending him alone, correct?"

"Yes, but I don't like it. Are you sure...?"

"He must be alone, Brandon. No one else can be trusted."

A scuffling, scratching sound near the wall made Brandon think rat. They didn't have rats in his building, did they? "He'll likely call Malone for back-up."

His boss pulled the fedora lower on his brow. "Malone will know even less than he does. I think that will work out fine."

Brandon almost saluted, because his superior always made him think of an admiral or general, someone deserving the utmost respect. Instead, he nodded curtly and turned to leave. When he turned around again, the man was gone.

* * * *

John Chin, a wiry man radiating energy, entered Parker's office a few minutes later. He'd obviously been waiting for the big man to leave so he could get the scoop. "So what's the assignment, man?"

"Vacation in Mexico apparently, and some girl to watch."

Chin smiled wide, showing amazingly white teeth next to his tan skin. “Just what you need. My wife and I went last year. Parasailing, surfing, scuba diving. Who’s the girl?”

“Hell, if I know.” He’d already shoved the file into his briefcase. He’d read it more on the plane, and judging by the amount of black, that wouldn’t take him long at all. “Probably some senator’s daughter. And it is an *assignment*, not a vacation.”

“Sure, sure. You’ll like the view by the pool, too. My wife hit me every time I tried to take them all in.”

“Them?”

“The babes, man. The bikinis, and some were topless.” He whistled. “Really nice. So they didn’t tell you more about this girl? Is she as young as Missy?”

Parker leaned back in his leather chair. Topless babes--that had possibilities. “I gather she’s an adult since she won a trip to Mexico.”

Parker folded his hands in his lap. He supposed this babysitting job was better than a forced vacation. He could work on his tan, knock back a couple Dos Equis, and keep up with Missy’s case via Wi-Fi on his laptop. He grinned at Chin, causing his partner to narrow his eyes in suspicion. Yes, he’d relax and get his blood pressure down.

Even if it killed him.

CHAPTER TWO

Casey lugged an overstuffed carry-on bag past the stewardess and through the open door of the plane, feeling ever so grateful to have returned safely to earth. Funny that. She had no problem fighting off muggers and rapists in Central Park or dueling with semis on the New Jersey Turnpike, statistically far more dangerous, but this flight had had her white-knuckled and hyperventilating from Newark to Miami and from Miami to Mexico City.

She'd arrived, though, and was now officially starting her vacation. No, vacation didn't cover it. Her adventure. Her quest. That was it. She was on a quest to learn the purpose of her 'gift' and either how to return it to sender or control the damn thing. If she could shut it down when she wanted, then maybe she could build the semblance of a normal life. As it was, it tended to have its own agenda.

Casey took a step onto the rickety rollaway stairs. Most of the other passengers had already disembarked and were now walking across the sweltering tarmac toward the main terminal. Another step and Casey's bag snagged on the railing, knocking her off balance. The bag dropped from her hand, her loafer flew off her foot, and she fell. She heard an 'oof', likely indicating that the shoe had hit some poor soul in the leg, but she had no time to apologize as she glared at the forthcoming pavement and released her power.

A steadying hand gripped her elbow at the same time a gust of power surged against her body and propelled her back to her feet. She nearly tipped too far, but something warm, solid, and male stopped her reversal and sent a frisson of awareness through her body.

Dammit! She'd sworn to lay off the power usage during this trip, at least in public. She planned to practice it in private, gain more control, while pretending to be normal for a little while.

Casey turned to face her would-be savior and saw that he held her shoe in the hand not cupping her elbow. She glanced cautiously at his face—a very yummy face—wondering if the man had any inkling of what he'd just witnessed.

He squinted his eyes against the bright sun. Green eyes, Casey noted despite the squinting, almost emerald, like the tree line in Central Park. "Did you feel that?" he asked.

Pulling herself back to the situation at hand, she decided her best defense was to feign ignorance. She cocked her head and widened her eyes. "Feel what?"

He was really quite nice looking. More than nice looking. In fact his looks likely attracted drooling women the world round. It would be all too easy to get lost in those dreamy eyes of his. She couldn't bear the thought of ruining her chances with him at the outset by telling him the truth. Far better to scare him off in the bedroom like the others.

His eyebrows lifted. "That strange wind."

She lied easily. "Oh that. Yeah, that was weird, wasn't it? Maybe it has something to do with being on top of an ancient lake?" Uh huh, that made sense. Casey nearly snorted at her tall-tale, but thinking about her sexual problems had depressed her too much.

The delectable man with muscular arms encased in white shirtsleeves shook his head as if she was daft and offered her the loafer. "I believe this is yours."

Casey couldn't stop the rush of blood to her face. "I'm so sorry! Did it hit you?" Then she

noticed the scuff mark on his pant leg. “It did!” She reached down to wipe off the smudge as if she were a mother and he a 6-year-old. He stepped away from her hand, so Casey looked up to find him flexing his solid square jaw in annoyance.

She froze. “Uh...” Lowering her hand, she hid the offending appendage in her pocket. “I’m sorry...again.” She tried for a smile.

Suddenly a grin lit his face and all seemed right in the world. “I’m Parker Nelson. You are?”

“Acacia Summers. Just call me Casey.”

“Hi Casey, nice to meet you.” He stuck out his hand.

Casey grimaced as she shook the proffered hand, trying not to notice how the heat of his touch affected her system. “Hardly nice, I’m sure, since I beat you with my shoe.”

“Really, it is nice to meet you.” They continued down the stairs, where Casey retrieved her zipped carry-on. It had landed upside-down on the tarmac next to the bottom step. Now well behind the rest of the passengers, they continued walking until they’d entered the air-conditioned terminal. Casey expected the handsome man to ditch her immediately, but he kept pace with her and asked, “Are you here for business or pleasure?”

“Pleasure.”

“Yo tambien.”

“Huh?”

He pulled a small Spanish dictionary out of the back pocket of his khakis and tapped it. “I also.’ Learned it in here.”

“Oh. I’m a bit rusty on Spanish,” she lied. She wasn’t rusty. She was clueless, which was an insult to the culture she planned to spend time getting to know. She’d consider it an immersion class. Surely hearing it spoken all around her would allow her to learn via osmosis.

“May I help you?” A young Hispanic porter blocked her path with a wheeled cart, speaking English like an American. Beyond him the terminal bustled with equal parts tourists and natives, sounding a bit like Babylon and nothing like a Spanish language tape. Blinding sunlight passed through large windows along the hallway, illuminating white tiles and chrome baggage carousels.

“No gracias.” Parker even had the accent down. The boy nodded and set off in search of his next prey.

Parker guided Casey to the baggage area, fending off eager porters with a cold glare.

“Gee, you’re good at that.” She glanced his way, spotting the smile that touched his ultra-kissable lips. With a gulp, she focused on the armies of luggage meandering past on the carousel. “I bet you’re somebody’s boss somewhere.”

“Actually, no. I’m just an underling.” He neglected to mention what line of work he was in.

That’s okay. I have my own secrets to keep.

“What color is your bag?” he asked.

“Multi. Tapestry actually. Kind of reddish I guess.” Deep in thought about the actual color of her bag, Casey almost let one piece pass her by. “Like this.”

It was the lighter bag, so she easily pulled it off the track and plunked it down next to her feet. Just before checking the bag in at Newark, she’d tucked a folding metal carrier inside the suitcase, knowing she’d need it to drag her hulking suitcases through the airport and customs. Unzipping her bag, she found a wheel and yanked the contraption out.

Parker eyed her cart. “Good idea.” He extricated a black wheeled suitcase from the moving track. A moment later, the last tapestry bag—better known as ‘the monstrosity’—zipped around the bend, but Casey had her arm deep inside the first suitcase searching for the Bungee chord she used to hold the luggage to the cart, so she couldn’t get to it.

“Wait, my other bag!”

Parker rescued the monstrosity from the carousel before it passed by, biceps straining with the effort. So there was a good reason to pack the kitchen sink after all!

“I believe this is yours.” He grunted. “What do you have in here?”

Casey was too enthralled with the memory of his muscles bunching to answer, so Parker dropped her bag rather close to her nose, seeming a tad annoyed. Bungee in hand, Casey straightened and smiled. “Thanks! And I’ll never tell.”

“Tell what?”

“What’s in the bag.”

“State secrets?” Parker’s grin was stunning, nearly knocking Casey off her feet from the impact. But she swore there’d be no more falling off of feet this trip, and there would definitely be no more public displays of her telekinesis.

“Yes indeed. Confidential.”

* * * *

Parker’s suspicious side sprang to life. What was she hiding? What could possibly weigh as much as that bag did? He watched as Casey strapped the luggage to her cart. Guns? A bomb?

You’re on vacation, Parker. Get a grip. She’s a woman. She’s probably got the entire cosmetic section of Macy’s in there. It was the nature of his job to be suspicious, and he was assigned to protect her. Or was this just a ruse by Brandon? Maybe her file was all blacked out because there was nothing to see. Parker flexed his fingers. *You’re here to relax, bud, so relax.* Here, in a humid, crowded airport in Mexico City with hundreds of potential criminals walking around him. He could feel the blood throbbing in his temples already.

He did ease a chuckle out of his clamped lips as he watched the cute female maneuver her cart. Casey looked like the Hunchback of Notre Dame by the time she got the thing onto its feeble wheels. He walked behind her with a single suitcase and an overnight bag, and couldn’t help but admire the view. Unlike the anorexic models he sometimes dated, Casey had curves. Her bottom swayed from side to side. Though she wore a fairly baggy T-shirt, her breasts rounded the fabric, and his palms itched to cup them, feel their weight.

Of course, standard protocol was for the man to offer his help to the weaker sex, but he was ill, high blood pressure and all. Hah! He just didn’t want to give up the scenery. Plus he’d known quite a few members of the ‘weaker sex’ that could kick his ass—and this one *had* broken an agent’s leg already.

Finally the gentleman in him won out. He lengthened his strides until he walked alongside her. “Do you need help with that?”

Casey was red in the face and gasping. “Now you ask?”

“Better late than never, right?” He laughed as he grabbed the cart handle. “If you could take this bag?”

“No problem.” Casey took the leather strap and gamely rolled the bag behind her. “Are we heading to the same place, though?”

“Mayan Tours?”

Casey’s smile revealed dimples in her cheeks. She looked really young because of her petite size, until Parker focused on her eyes. Gray eyes. Ancient eyes glinting with intelligent blue flecks. Eyes that held wisdom far beyond her years. Her lashes descended, blocking the mesmerizing color and breaking the spell. Parker straightened his spine. Hypnotic, that’s what they were. He shook himself, concentrating on the brown color of her lashes, perfect matches for her hair, tied in a loose chignon at her nape.

Again Parker had to give himself a mental shake. He'd never thought of himself as an imaginative person, except in the bedroom, of course, but here he was thinking all sorts of crazy thoughts. Maybe it was altitude sickness? It had been months since his trip to the Andes. Had he lost his conditioning already?

"That's it!" she said, interrupting his thoughts. "So you'll be staying at the Luna Resort as well?"

"Yup."

"For how long? I mean, if you don't mind me asking. I'm staying two weeks." Her eyes widened as if she hadn't meant to say so much.

"Two weeks? That's quite a vacation."

"A sabbatical really."

"You're a teacher?"

"No, presently unemployed. By choice, though. Don't frown."

Parker hadn't realized he was frowning. He usually kept a carefully blank expression pinned in place when around strangers. Funny how Casey broke down his guards. "Uh, I'm not sure how long I'm staying. It's kind of open-ended at the moment."

They continued their trek. "You're not unemployed, too, are you?"

The thought sent spasms through his right eye. "No. I just needed some time off."

"Exactly. To find yourself."

Parker couldn't repress his smirk. "To find myself? Hardly."

"Oh."

Struck a nerve apparently. "Are you here to find yourself?"

Casey's face reddened. "Well, you know...."

"Hey, don't worry about it. It's good you're taking the time now before you're tied down by a career and a family." One of the few things not blackened out in Ms. Summers' file was her marital status: single. Not that he should care. "Do you have a family ... of your own, I mean?" he asked, just for form.

"No, not married, no kids. I left my Chihuahua with Nadine."

"Nadine?"

"My roommate. She's great. Working on her doctorate, so she's usually in her room with her door closed."

"Best kind of roommate."

She reddened again. "I don't mean to say I don't want to spend time with her. She's really sweet."

"You just like your peace and quiet."

"Exactly."

"Me, too."

"Oh."

"I like fun, too, of course," Parker said quickly. He didn't want to sound like a stodgy stick-in-the-mud. His orders were *not* to scare her off, after all.

Casey adjusted her fingers for a better grip on the luggage strap. "What kind of fun?"

Hell if he knew. That question should be easy to answer, but nothing popped into Parker's mind. Down the hall a short man with a shiny scalp and a ponytail held a sign that read "Luna Resort." Parker could easily change the subject by pointing him out, but he wanted to answer the question. In fact, the thought of not answering the question brought a flutter of panic to his chest.

"Target practice," he blurted out.

“Excuse me?”

He realized Casey had also spotted the man with the sign. God, was that the best he could come up with? Playing with guns? *What about not scaring her off, butthead?* He’d obviously been out of Casanova practice for far too long.

She focused her eyes on him. “Did you say you shoot at targets for fun?”

“Yes.”

“Wow! Is it loud?”

“Well, you wear”

“*Señor, Señorita, como estás?* You are here for the resort, no?”

Casey nodded and Parker grimaced at the interruption, but he also took the time to give the lady back her suitcase. She certainly wouldn’t want to go through customs with his Bag of Horrors.

The bald man lowered his cardboard sign and grabbed the handle of Casey’s suitcase. “Let me help you with that. The autobus is just outside, but first you must go through customs. I will help you. Follow me.”

“Thank you,” Casey said as she rubbed her wrist. “And you are?”

“Oh, my name’s Fernando Leon. Call me Nando.”

“Nando, I’m Casey Summers. Very pleased to meet you.” Casey smiled and the man seemed stunned for a moment.

Parker knew how he felt. He clapped a hand on the man’s shoulder. “I’m Parker Nelson.”

“Ah, Mr. Nelson, mucho gusto!” He dropped the sign and offered his somewhat sweaty hand. Parker liked the way the short man met his eyes. He could tell a lot about a person that way.

“Is there anyone else heading for the resort?” Casey asked.

“No today. Most have already arrived, and I believe we are expecting *uno más mañana*.”

“*Uno más mañana?*”

“One more tomorrow,” Parker translated for her.

“And one couple has decided to stay in the city overnight,” Nando continued.

Casey gave Parker a sidelong glance. “You don’t need that dictionary, do you?”

Parker slipped a smile onto his face, despite his misgivings at having given away an aspect of his cover so quickly. “Not really.”

“Aha! Well, perhaps you could lend it to me while we’re here, because I do need it.”

“No problem.” He pulled it out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her as they fell into step behind Nando.

Maybe this ‘vacation’ would turn out all right after all. Parker tucked his hands into his pants pockets. The left pocket held a few pesos; the right hid an M40 Firestar, an easily concealed compact pistol. He also had a SIG-Sauer P-229 holstered under his shirt with a T-shirt under that to keep it from chafing his skin. As sweat rolled down his back, he realized he’d likely have to stash the SIG under his pillow while he was here since it was too large to hide in his swim trunks.

The more pressing problem was getting through customs without Nando or Casey seeing his weaponry or hearing the metal detector go off when he walked through. He did have the appropriate paperwork to wear concealed, which had taken an awful lot of string-pulling, even for his agency, but he’d prefer not to advertise the fact.

“*Oye, donde es el baño?*” Parker addressed Nando in Spanish, then translated for Casey. “I need to hit the bathroom. You guys go ahead and I’ll meet you at the bus, okay?”

“Sure.”

Nando pointed back down the hall, then led Casey toward the busy customs area. Parker watched from a nearby corner until they had successfully passed the customs inspection. Once they

were walking through the exit door, Parker sauntered up to a customs agent, pulled out the appropriate paperwork and his passport. Then, at the agent's request, he placed both guns, two daggers, and a cell phone onto the counter.

The grim agent gestured him through the metal detector. No alarm. She made him walk through twice and scrutinized the papers thoroughly. The rest of the line tapped their feet, rolled their eyes, or glared, whether at Parker or the agent, he couldn't say. The woman's eagle eyes never left him as he bent over to put the daggers back in their ankle holsters. She offered him his phone to help speed the process along, but as he reached for it, her fingers uncurled and she dropped it. The small flip phone smacked against the cement floor. He glanced into her eyes, but she wore a look of innocence, as she stamped his passport. He grabbed up the phone, hoping it wasn't dead, and replaced the guns.

"*Buenas dias*," Parker said. She didn't respond as she returned his passport and turned to her next victim.

* * * *

Casey dutifully followed Nando through the glass doors that led to the parking lot. The sweltering heat blasted her, and the humidity produced instant sweat across her brow. She must look just charming at this point in her journey, and she doubted a long bus trip would help the situation.

"Is the resort far from here?" she asked Nando. She had a general idea of the geography of Mexico, but it was hard to imagine the true size of the country when looking at a map in a tourist guide, especially when one considered a walk from Central Park to Times Square to be a hike.

"No, not far. Five hours, maybe six."

"Five hours! Six? Will we stop along the way?"

Nando held his hand over his eyes against the sun and appeared to be scanning the parking lot. "Oh, we'll stop if you need to, but I don't recommend using the facilities."

"Why not? That's why I'd want to stop." Tourists crowded the sidewalk and taxicabs jockeyed for space along the curb. Beyond that, several buses and a few limousines were parked, and everyone seemed to be honking a horn. Casey felt right at home.

"I think you may find the facilities primitive."

Outhouses? Holes in the ground? "Oh," Casey said. She considered this, then realized Nando was looking for something. "Have you lost the bus?"

"No, no. It is over there, but I have lost *Señor y Señora* Petrov."

"The couple that is staying in town?"

"Sí. But I have their carry-on bags on the bus, which they will probably need with them for this evening."

Just then a spry Mexican boy charged through the crowd of tourists, oddly enough, heading right for Casey. He ran past. She blinked. Suddenly someone pushed her from behind and she stumbled forward toward a taxicab. She bit her lip to keep her power tucked away, since she still felt guilty for using it for such a mundane issue earlier on the steps. Of course, if she had fallen and hit her face on the asphalt, it would have seemed much less mundane.

The door to the cab opened and a man appeared, an extremely blonde man with perfect white teeth. He reached out, grabbed her hand as if to help, and pulled.

"What are you doing? Let go!" she yelled.

She heard Nando calling her, telling her that she didn't need a cab. Did he not realize...?

The strong man yanked Casey across his lap into the backseat of the cab. Someone on the sidewalk slammed the door closed. The little boy. He was in on this. Then the car squealed away from the curb.

Casey struggled to sit upright. “Who are you? What are you doing?”

Before she could process what was happening the blonde man whipped out a length of rope and pulled her hands behind her back.

CHAPTER THREE

Casey could barely see Nando through the crowd on the curb and the grimy windows, but he didn't seem to be coming to her rescue. The smell of cigar smoke and sweat bathing the cab's interior activated Casey's gag reflex. She coughed, longing to throw up in her attacker's lap, but the bile stayed in her throat as the rope dug into her wrist.

Oh, I've had enough of this.

She'd never used her power with one hand tied behind her back before, but figured this was the time to try it out. She spread her fingers wide and gave a little flick, and the rope slapped against the back window while blonde man flopped against the back seat. Casey struggled to face him as her power pushed his arms wide, revealing a shirt unbuttoned to his belly button. *Get some style, bud!* A medallion swung against the matted blonde hair on his chest as he swore in an unfamiliar language.

Something about the medallion

The driver slammed on the brakes, giving Casey whiplash.

"Sven!" The driver grabbed her hair from behind, snapping her head against the driver's headrest. Was that Swedish the two were speaking?

"Hey!" And now blonde man number one—Sven—attacked again. Casey kicked and twisted and zapped out her power, glad he hadn't had a chance to knot the rope. Since the driver wouldn't let go of her hair, even when the wave of power pushed him hard against the steering wheel, pain seared through her skull. She supposed she'd have to sacrifice a hank of hair to get out of this mess, but what would Parker think of that?

Gee, thinking of boys at a time like this. She might as well be back in high school.

She turned toward the front of the cab to make her hair harder to reach, and again aimed her power at the two men. The driver's elbow hit the horn, and Sven, plastered against the far door, yelled something. Casey noticed that a crowd of spectators had gathered outside of the vehicle. The two goons suddenly produced matching smiles and nods. Unbelievably, the driver let go of her hair—what was left of it—and attempted to pat it back in place, while Sven opened the door and gestured for her to climb out. Well, these wuss goons obviously feared attention more than their boss if they were letting her go just because of the crowd.

Casey wanted to demand some answers, but self-preservation took over. She scrambled across the backseat and got out of the vehicle, emerging into the sunlight. Sven rattled off what sounded like apologies in Swedish or whatever language it was, then scooted back into the car. The minute the door was shut the car sped off.

"Wait...! Well damn." Several women patted Casey's limbs, apparently to make sure she had them all, as she tried to catch her breath. She didn't think of trying to read the license plate until they were long gone. Casey pushed the fawning women away as graciously as possible, so she could peer through the crowd for Nando or Parker. The whole escapade in the cab had only lasted a couple of minutes. Had they even realized she was gone? A zoo of gesturing hands and Spanish voices floated around her. She ignored the questions and offers of help as she limped back to the curb.

"Ah, there you are," Nando proclaimed. "Why did you get in the cab? The autobus is just

here.” He gestured toward a row of dingy buses. Then he seemed to notice her hair, and did she have a couple of bruises blossoming on her arms? “What has happened?”

Why worry the little fellow, Casey thought? Plus explaining the incident might require revealing her telekinesis, which would end all friendship or romantic possibilities. Not that she was thinking romantically of Nando—but he might tell Parker.

“A misunderstanding,” she said.

Parker emerged from the airport doors, and he looked so good, so masculine, so capable, that Casey stared with longing, wishing for just a moment for a white knight. What if she ran to his broad chest and sobbed out the story of the evil Swedes? Not just what they did, but why. Casey knew what. He’d freak, just like all the other guys. No need to test that theory. She refocused on Nando. “You still have my bags, don’t you?”

“Sí, but”

Parker sauntered up. “Sorry I took so long. Real dragon lady back there. I thought she was going to send me back to the States rather than let me through.”

“She must have disliked your shifty eyes,” Casey said, keeping a straight face.

“My shifty eyes!” He sounded offended. Casey grinned.

* * * *

The first thing he noticed about her this time was her legs, which were hot as hell, then he noticed her well proportioned chest and the fact that her shirt was crooked somehow. He wanted to reach out and straighten it. It went against his sense of order. But the most bizarre change in Casey’s appearance was her hair. Clumps of it seemed to be sprouting from her ears and other portions stood out at odd angles defying the laws of gravity.

“What the hell happened to you?”

“A misunderstanding,” she said, smiling innocently.

“A what?” The blood throbbed in Parker’s skull. “With who?”

“With a cabby.”

Was that his chest aching? “A cabby did this?”

“Did what?” She rubbed her arms and he noticed what looked like finger marks there.

His breath grew shallow. “Your hair, your arms!”

“Oh, he just really wanted my fare. You know how territorial cabbies can be.”

Parker didn’t know how to respond. She’d been attacked on his watch? Already? Brandon wouldn’t have sent him on this job if there was going to be real work involved. Right? But he’d failed. He’d let her down. His chest tightened and he opted for no response—there were really no words to say—and concentrated on deep breathing. He hated this weakness, feeling light-headed and dizzy over something so stupid. Relax, he ordered himself.

Ignoring their exchange, Nando waved frantically at a man approaching on the sidewalk. Casey continued to project a blank look as if nothing was screwy about a cabby rough-handling her the first moment she stepped out in Mexico.

Nando spoke to the shorthaired man—was there something familiar about him?—handed him some luggage and came rushing back. “That was Mr. Petrov, retrieving his overnight bags.”

“Who will take them to the resort tomorrow?” Casey asked. Parker guessed she was glad for the change of subject.

This girl attracted trouble, though, he could tell, whether she was a spoiled senator’s daughter or something else entirely, and that would be totally counterproductive to his main mission: getting his health back. He knew that was why Brandon has sent down here, no matter what the official report stated. Yes, he’d given him this assignment, but it was the blood pressure

his boss was worried about.

Of course, sex had been known to relieve stress. Wasn't it supposed to make men live longer? But sex with Casey...Parker had the feeling that would be far too stimulating for his heart.

He barely paid attention to the rest of the conversation as Nando guided them to the bus. He'd made his decision. Since his assignment wouldn't let him keep clear of Casey and find some simple *señorita* for uncomplicated physical therapy, Parker would vow to keep his emotions strictly off-limits and his libido firmly in check. No complications allowed. However, romancing the sprite might be the perfect strategy for keeping an eye on her without arousing her suspicions. He was a trained agent, so he'd have no problem keeping his emotions disengaged while playing Romeo.

All he had to do was think of Deanna.

An ancient VW bus idled at the curb, the words Mayan Tours inscribed on its side. The bus had originally been white, Parker surmised, but years of grime had changed it to gray. Even the windows were gray. *So much for viewing any scenery on the way to the resort.* Parker smirked. The only scenery he wanted to view would be inside the bus. He took Casey's elbow, but she gave him a women's lib look.

"How was the bathroom?" she asked. "Nando was warning me about the facilities."

Parker paused, caught off-guard by this unladylike change of topic. The bathroom? Oh yeah, customs. "Not too bad. Could use a good cleaning, though."

Casey cringed. "I can only imagine."

Parker turned to Nando, who was still bogged down with bags. "Shall we go?"

"*Sí señor.* After you."

They boarded the bus, followed by Nando, who positioned himself on the driver's seat. The large steering wheel was the same height as his shoulders. Parker wondered that his feet even reached the pedals. In a moment, though, the engine roared to life and the bus jounced down the barely-paved road, leaving clouds of black smoke in its wake.

* * * *

Casey covered her mouth to stifle a cough from the lung-full of exhaust she'd just inhaled. She almost wished she were back on the plane as the seat springs dug into her butt and the green vinyl stuck to her thighs. Parker sat across the aisle from her, arms crossed over his broad chest, eyes closed.

Could he really sleep during this? Casey thought about opening a window, but decided that would only give the exhaust more access. So instead she pulled a pack of wipes from her purse and used them to clean a circle on the window. It took three wipes, but now she could view the congested streets of Mexico City. They obviously needed a few more environmental controls on car exhaust systems. Colonial architecture and pavement soon gave way to the gray dirt streets and shanties of the poor. She watched women sweep the ground as if it were hardwood through doors that were nothing more than cloth, as children played in the streets. Soon she viewed fewer buildings and broader streets, stone churches, scrub brush, and red clay.

The bus hit a particularly large bump. Casey's forehead banged the window glass. "Ouch!"

"Are you all right?" So Parker was awake. Just didn't want to be social.

"Fine thanks. Go back to sleep." She knew she sounded peevish, but this endless bus ride was getting to her.

Parker smothered a grin. He seemed to know what her problem was and find it humorous. How irritating. "I'm sure we're almost there."

"Really? I'm beginning to think we're traveling to the end of the earth."

"No, only the coast, and this is not exactly a race car."

“Or even a minivan.”

His eyes widened in shock. “Do you own a minivan?”

“No. I’m a New Yorker. I don’t drive if I can help it. My sister moved to Trenton, though, and has one. It even has a TV and DVD player inside and automatic doors.” She sighed at the thought of supple leather seats and air conditioning, as well as the niece and nephew she rarely saw because her sister thought she was a bad influence.

For a moment the bus interior returned to silence, so Casey glanced out the window again. A tractor eased down the road in front of the bus, infuriating Nando. He gestured at the farmer and spoke in rapid Spanish, words Casey was sure she didn’t want to know. To the left of the road was a small town with boxy flat-roofed buildings and a dirt road traveling down the center hemmed in by ancient American cars. Scrawny, dark-haired children played soccer in the street.

The slow movement of the bus allowed Casey to take in the whole scene. At the town entrance, an old man struggled to lift something onto a truck. Two younger men lounged on barrels nearby, smoking and jeering, not lifting a finger.

That poor man, Casey thought, touching the window with her fingertips. Her power radiated through the glass before she’d even made the conscious decision to help, as it always did. The sack the old man had been struggling with flew out of his hands and into the air in an arc, landing with a thump on the truck bed. All three men jumped back and stared, amazed.

A hand touched Casey’s shoulder, so she jumped, too.

“Did you see that?” Parker’s sexy voice whispered against her ear.

“Wh-what?”

The hand settled more firmly, heat radiating from it through Casey’s shoulder and down her arm.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t see that.”

“Oh, that sack. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes.” Was that suspicion she heard in his voice?

“That was something, wasn’t it? That old man must be stronger than he looks.” The three Mexicans were rattling on in Spanish and gesticulating wildly.

Parker fought the window down and listened to the voices over the roar of the engine. The hand on her shoulder tightened its grip. “The old man says he didn’t lift the sack at all. It just flew out of his hands.”

“Amazing.” Casey thought the high-pitched quality of her voice betrayed her, but secretly she was pleased. The younger men now viewed the old man with interest and perhaps a bit of respect.

“Finally!” Nando exclaimed from the front of the bus. Casey glanced to the right and watched the tractor turning into a field. It was barely off the road when Nando gunned the engine, throwing Casey back into Parker’s arms. Her weight caused him to lose his balance. He fell against the seat, his arms wrapping around her waist and holding her secure. All questions about flying sacks of grain were forgotten.

The bus barreled down the road with no thought of avoiding ruts or holes. Parker became Casey’s seatbelt, cushioning her against his lap after each jounce, making her feel warm and tingly all over. She grew extremely aware of his breath on her ear and of his solid thighs against her legs. If she was a wise woman, she would apologize and move away, but she’d never been known for her wisdom, at least where men were concerned anyway. Even when she knew she couldn’t have sex with them.

After a moment Casey noticed that she was having a definite effect on Parker, as well. His

chest pressed against her back and she could feel his heart race. His breath seemed to catch a bit, but the primary evidence pushed against Casey's bottom.

Whoa, she'd just met this man! Did she want his erection pressing against her ass? A dirty jouncing bus seemed like the wrong place for any sort of making out. And she shouldn't lead him on when she knew it would all end badly.

She made to stand, to slide off murmuring an apology, but Parker's arm tightened, snuggling her down even further against his legs and his boner. Something kindled in Casey's stomach and she clenched her thighs unconsciously. If only she were normal... With his free hand, Parker tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. Then she felt his lips there, just a brush. Her heart stopped and she held her breath.

Would he kiss her more?

CHAPTER FOUR

The soft edge of Casey's ear brushed against Parker's lips and for a moment his world stilled. They were no longer jerking about on an antique bus along a backwater road. The roar of the engine faded. The squawk of Nando's Spanish epithets disappeared. Only he and Casey existed, suspended for a moment, his lips against her ear.

What was he doing?

This was not wise and it certainly did not lower his blood pressure.

Parker knew what would though. He widened his thighs and eased Casey more firmly against that part of his anatomy that wanted her most. Her soft round derriere fit snugly against his legs, his stomach, and his extremely hard cock. Her upper body fit perfectly in his arms, firm luscious breasts brushing the top of his forearm. And her ear tasted so good, salty and sweet. How would her neck taste? He moved his lips lower and heard Casey's small gasp. She'd noticed how eager his body was for her weight and had tried to move away earlier, but he hadn't been ready to let her go then, and he certainly wasn't ready now. He wanted her ass pressed against him while his tongue trailed across her satiny skin.

Too bad they wore clothes. What would it be like to have her naked this way, to settle his cock between her ass cheeks and feel the friction as each bump of the bus caused his body to thrust against hers?

He licked a tiny circle onto her steamy skin. She squeaked in response. He could tell by her rosy blush that she was feeling self-conscious even if she was enjoying herself.

The next moment brought Parker crashing back to reality as the bus brakes squealed, sending the two passengers bouncing off the seat back and plummeting onto the somewhat sticky floor. Parker heard something crack and thought about his phone in his back pocket. He hoped that wasn't what he heard, especially since the custom's agent had already dropped it once.

After hours in the bus, Nando finally declared, "Here we are." Hopping from the driver's seat, he opened the front door with the lever near the steering wheel then turned to face the aisle. "*Vamanos*. I don't know about you, but I am hungry."

Hungry. God, yes, so hungry. But not for food.

The short man glanced out the window and smiled at something he saw there, which Parker noticed even though Casey was wiggling wildly against his crotch as she tried to get up. He wasn't helping her. He wasn't ready to let her go yet. She felt so good, making him harder by the second.

"And there is someone for you to meet," Nando said. He finally seemed to realize that his two charges were on the floor instead of in a seat, attempting to disentangle themselves. He quickly offered a hand to Casey, pulling her to a standing position.

Parker sighed at the sensation of emptiness as her weight and heat left him. He shook his head. Yes, she was sexy as hell, available and tasty, but that didn't mean he had to gobble her up. Bad idea.

His stomach growled and suddenly he realized he had to agree with Nando's assessment. Food, real food, sounded good. Though viewing Casey's shapely legs from this angle had him wondering which he craved more: sex or food. Plus he had this embarrassing bulge in his pants.

Casey avoided his eyes as he stood, so he didn't have to worry about her getting an eyeful.

Instead, she quickly turned and followed Nando off the bus, forgetting her purse and carry-on. He had shaken her up! Parker grinned. He tucked her purse under his arm and grabbed the handles of their carry-ons in each hand, willing his arousal to chill.

Pausing on the top step of the bus, Parker took in the scene before him. Detailed murals covered adobe walls, fiesta colored banners and piñatas festooned the archways, and a huge modern sign hung from ropes that disappeared at the second floor balcony. It read 'Luna Resort' and had a toreador with a red cape and a moon with horns, presumably about to charge. Tacky but fun. Below the arch a quartet of mariachis strummed guitars and crooned softly as a tall woman with silver hair greeted Casey and Nando. Parker stepped down to the path, a mixture of gravel and sand.

With a sweep of his hand, Nando said, "Lara, this is Mr. Nelson and Miss Summers."

Casey started and turned, apparently not realizing Parker had joined them. Her cheeks were slightly pink. She continued to avoid his eyes.

Nando grabbed the hand of the tall woman and pulled her forward. "*Con permiso*, Mr. Nelson. Allow me to introduce your hostess, *Señora* Cartoza."

Señora Cartoza appeared young and vibrant with smooth tea-colored skin, large brown eyes and full lips. Her silver hair snaked down her back in a thick braid, the only clue that she was likely older than she appeared. The top of Nando's head came only to her shoulder.

"Mucho gusto, Señor Nelson. Please call me Lara." She had a smooth voice, like aged whiskey. Her eyes scanned his body slowly, before filling with a knowing gleam.

To hide his discomfort, Parker offered his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Lara. And Parker is fine. 'Mr. Nelson' reminds me of my boss and work."

Lara's eyes widened. "Horrors. We certainly don't want to do that." She squeezed his hands with both of hers before greeting Casey with kisses on both of her cheeks. Then she glanced down at the bags and clapped her hands. Two skinny boys in soccer uniforms came running. "Manuel and Jose, please see to our guests' bags, *por favor*. Nando will open the baggage compartment for you."

"*Sí, Tía* Lara." The boys each grabbed a bag then raced around the bus, following Nando.

Parker recalled the purse under his arm. He leaned toward Casey. "You forgot this." He waited for her eyes to meet his. When they did, electricity zapped between them, and he handed her the purse.

"Come." Lara spread her arms. "You must be tired and *muy* hungry. I will show you to your rooms and you may join us in the cantina for comida."

* * * *

Casey could not believe the size of her room, a suite really, with a balcony, a small kitchenette, and a sitting area with a television. The TV, Lara had informed her, was attached to a satellite service so she could watch her favorite shows from the States. Casey doubted she would spend much time in front of the boob tube, though. She was in Mexico after all. She planned to swim, tan, and drink.

A queen-size bed covered with a hand-woven blanket filled the far wall of the bedroom. Casey opened a door to reveal a walk-in closet. Heaven. The next door led to a tiled bathroom with a claw-footed tub and antique bathroom fixtures. A high window allowed some light and a nice breeze into the room.

Casey discovered bottled water in the tiny fridge in the kitchenette. As she sipped, she debated what to do next. Hunger and fatigue warred for dominance, but the grunge factor won as the priority, especially when she imagined seeing Parker again. She shivered as she recalled those moments of closeness on the bus. More than closeness. She'd been afraid that at any moment he'd figure out how aroused she was.

She closed her eyes and took the memory farther into fantasy, imagining his hands delving between her thighs and his fingers brushing her nipples. His lips nibbling down the back of her neck to the sensitive spot between her shoulder blades. Naked. She had to be naked, so his hands could discover the fur at the V of her legs, so his finger could dip lower and touch her clit

Another shiver and a little wetness in her panties and she decided a bath was definitely the best course of action. A bath to allow her own fingers a bit of playtime.

As water jetted out of the faucet, steam rose from the tub. Casey stripped quickly, since food and Parker were still on her mind. She wanted to get down to the cantina, but once she settled into the all-encompassing heat of the water, she leaned back and closed her eyes. Oh heaven.

Again she recalled the feel of Parker's lips on her neck, so light, beckoning her to join him in his arousal. Man oh man had he been aroused! He'd felt like a solid steel pike pressing against her. Water lapped against her nipples as she let the memory fill her body. Clothes against clothes became skin against skin. Solid cock nudged her bare ass, spread the crease, slid lower to where she was wet and waiting. Casey dropped the soap into the bath with her, and, while maintaining her fantasy images, she glided the wet bar across her stomach and lower to her mons. She played with it between her legs, but the soap didn't give in the way she needed.

She barely knew Parker, so she knew the man in her fantasy was just that, a fantasy, but she pictured Parker's square jaw and imagined the scruff from his chin scraping along the back of her neck as he entered her from behind as she leaned over a bus seat. Her fingers moved in the bath water, massaging her inner thighs, spreading her outer lips, and finally slipping along the valley next to her clit. In her fantasy, he was taking her quickly, not because he didn't care, but because he knew she liked it that way, that it turned her on to know he was so out of control. His thick rod slammed into her in her mind's eye as her fingers pinched, pulled, and rubbed her clit. A moan sneaked out of her mouth. The soap flew out of the water and smacked her forehead, then dropped back to the water with a splash. She leaned her head back further, ignoring it but hoping nothing else would break, as she tensed her arms and legs while her fingers went wild. When at last she came, she knew she was too loud. Not quite a scream, but a long, glorious keening, but that sound was eclipsed by the crash of ceramic as the soap dispenser flew off the sink and crashed into the mirror.

Damn, she'd have to pay for that, but it was worth it.

Half an hour later, Casey felt rejuvenated. That bath and some clean clothes had put the spring back in her step as she locked her door and followed her nose to the cantina. She crossed a courtyard and walked through a mini-jungle area, where the light was dim from the denseness of the vegetation, before she found the building she sought. Entering through a stucco archway, she took in the dim yet brightly colored room. The group of mariachis gossiped at a corner table, their instruments leaning against an upright piano. Mexican blankets and bullfight posters adorned the walls. Dark wood rafters supported beer-bottle chandeliers.

Parker lounged at a center table, freshly clothed and combed, with a snifter of tequila in his hand, talking to the two soccer boys. They gestured wildly at the TV screen. Apparently the Mexican national team was playing against Brazil. Spicy smells wafted from the kitchen beyond the bar. Casey debated whether to join Parker. They had only just met after all, despite the scene on the bus and her over-active fantasies, fantasies that threatened to make her blush if she recalled them now while she stood gazing at him. Then she remembered sweeping up the glass and clay and that she'd have to tell Lara about the mirror. That decided it. She should stay away from Parker. But then he looked up, spotted her, and waved her to a seat. Her feet moved as if they had a mind of their own.

"Feel better?" Parker asked as soon as she'd slipped into the heavy black wood chair.

"Yes, much, thank you."

"You remember Manuel and Jose, our friendly baggage carriers?"

Casey nodded and gave the boys her bright smile.

"*Guys, ésta es Casey Summers.*"

"*Buenas tardes.*"

The other boy nudged him in the ribs. "English, remember? Good afternoon, Mrs. Summers."

Parker patted the boy, Manuel, on the shoulder. "I believe it's 'miss'."

"Just call me Casey." She glanced at the screen. "So what's the score?" She knew as little about soccer as she did about Spanish.

"Ten to seven." Before Parker could say more, the smaller boy, Jose, began rattling off the game highlights, unfortunately in Spanish. Parker didn't bother translating. He sipped his drink and watched as Casey nodded and smiled whenever Jose's inflection deemed it appropriate. Both boys had skin the color of creamy tea and large brown eyes, but Jose's eyes flashed with mischief and innocence, while Manuel's were friendly but intense. Manuel also had shaggier hair in contrast to Jose's close-cropped black hair.

Soon Lara appeared with a hefty tray of taquitos and nachos smothered in cheese and salsa. She set these on the table, then clapped her hands and said something curt in Spanish to the boys. They jumped to their feet, nodded at Casey and Parker, then bounded out of the room via the kitchen.

"You didn't have to send them away on my account."

"No, no. It is time for chores and bed." Lara smiled. "They have school in the morning."

"School at this time of year?"

"Sí. But it is only in the morning and just one more week before summer break."

"I bet they'll be excited about that."

"Oh, yes."

A man in white burst through the kitchen doors and yelled at Lara in Spanish. She replied in kind, then turned to Casey with a harried smile. "Would you like anything else?"

"No, thank you."

"Then back to the kitchen I go." She rocketed away, her braid bouncing against her back as she walked.

Casey dredged a nacho chip through salsa then popped it into her mouth, enjoying the mingled flavors of fresh tomato, jalapeño, and cilantro. A mouthful of chicken taquito followed, and this time she enjoyed the crunch of the deep fried shell. As she scooped up another nacho, she noticed Parker watching her with an amused expression on his face. Well, she might not look sexy shoveling in food, but she didn't care. She hadn't eaten since the bag of pretzels over the Gulf of Mexico. She swallowed and murmured, "I'm famished," before guzzling half a bottle of water.

"I see that." Parker helped himself to a taquito, chasing it with the rest of his tequila.

"Well, what did you eat on the plane?"

"Prime rib medium rare."

"What?" Casey glared at him. "No way. How did you rate?"

"First class."

"But you got off the plane after me." Casey snagged the last chip.

"Well, I got into a conversation with this very nice flight attendant. Consuela was her name."

Casey rolled her eyes. She imagined Consuela as a young and busty bimchette, while she had had a short grumpy flight attendant who'd growled when asked for a pillow. "Lucky you."

Parker's eyes sparkled, and Casey found herself wondering how it would feel to run her fingers across the sexy stubble on his chin. "Yes, lucky me. Consuela spent fifteen minutes showing me pictures of her grandchildren. She has eleven of them."

"Grandchildren?"

"Grandchildren."

Casey blushed. Well her conclusion had been a logical one to jump to—hadn't it?—even if wrong. She decided a change in subject was in order.

"So what are your plans for this evening?" As soon as the words left her mouth she realized they probably sounded more like an invitation than polite curiosity. *Don't make him think you're pathetic already.* But she was pathetic. Pathetically horny, but it was better if he didn't know that since nothing could come from it.

He lowered his drink to the table. "I think I'll make it an early night. I'm pretty beat."

"Yeah, me, too." She was such a stellar conversationalist. She laid her cloth napkin on the table and noticed that night had fallen beyond the warm lights of the cantina. "In fact I think I might head up now."

Eating and running seemed like the best option, before either of them referred to the embarrassing scene on the bus. She stood, brushing crumbs off her jeans, and smiled at Lara as she came bustling out of the kitchen again, tray in hand. She seemed like a very nice lady. Casey hoped she'd have time to get to know her better during her stay.

Parker jumped to his feet. "I'll walk you to your room."

"You don't have to"

"I think our rooms are next to each other anyway."

Casey's eyes widened. She hadn't paid attention earlier since her relief at being safe in her room after the incident with the Swedes and the harrowing bus ride had been so acute. And she'd been glad to finally be away from Parker, who'd brought up more sensations than she'd wanted to dwell on. Of course, she had dwelled oh so pleasantly.

"Are they?" Suddenly she remembered the racket she'd made as she'd come and she blushed. God, had he heard her? Was that why he'd invited her over?

"Leaving so soon?" Lara returned, holding the now-empty tray under her arm.

"Yes, that trip wore me out," Casey said.

"*Y tu tambien, Parker?*"

"*Sí señora. Buenas noches.*" He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

"*Buenas noches.* And goodnight, Casey."

It occurred to Casey that perhaps Lara would get the wrong idea about her relationship with Parker if they left the cantina together, but she didn't know how to gracefully decline Parker's invitation without turning it into a big deal, which it wasn't. No big deal at all. "Goodnight Lara," she said. She promised herself that she'd learn some Spanish tomorrow. She could peruse Parker's dictionary while sunbathing by the pool.

Parker took Casey's elbow to guide her out of the cantina, and her nerve endings zinged, like lightening shocks to her core. She didn't know whether to think of the gesture as gentlemanly or overbearing, but she decided to choose the former since she enjoyed the warmth of his fingers on her arm. And she couldn't escape the idea that he might have heard her in the bath. Would that turn him on? Or had he just heard the crash? Yeah, he couldn't have heard anything else. She could relax.

Night sounds surrounded them as they followed the gravel walkway back to their rooms. The path curved and soon palm fronds engulfed them. Casey remembered thinking earlier that this section had felt like a jungle, humid and green, but at night it seemed more oppressive. No light leaked through the branches and insects buzzed around her head. When one landed on her ankle, she loosed herself from Parker and bent over to swat at the offending mosquito.

“What was that?”

“A mosquito is all. I obviously need to invest in some deet.”

“Not that. It was a different sound, almost like a whirl.” Parker’s deep voice reverberated in the thick darkness.

Casey straightened and swatted at a bug on her neck. “I don’t know, but let’s get out of here, before all my blood gets sucked out. Little vampires!” She reached for Parker, but he wasn’t there. She could hear him to her right. “What are you doing?”

“It sounded like... ah ha... here it is.”

“What?”

“A dart.”

That was the last sound Casey heard as something huge bit her on the shoulder, harder and deeper than any bite she’d felt before. It really stung and it made her feel sleepy. She closed her eyes and slumped to the ground.

* * * *

Parker fingered the dart, wondering who would shoot darts in the dark. Was someone after Casey? If she’d been a typical assignment that would’ve been a logical conclusion, but she was certainly not a spy. Had to be some senator’s daughter. Even so, why assign his agency to her?

Something made a whumpf sound. “Casey? Are you okay? Did you trip?”

When Casey didn’t reply, he stepped to his left, keeping his arms extended. He stumbled when his foot connected with a lump on the ground.

“Casey? Damn this darkness. Are you all right?” He reached down and felt the shape. Firm and curvy, nice, definitely feminine. “Casey?” He squatted closer and shook her a little. When she still didn’t respond he felt for her neck to check her pulse. Still living at least. He patted around her torso and found it, another dart, a tranq dart. Hadn’t Brandon intended this to be a cushy assignment? He shook his head.

“Damn”

He grunted as something whacked him in the chest, sending him sprawling backwards. He heard the next kick coming and grabbed the shoe, twisting it to the right.

“Oomph.”

“Gunter? Where are you? I can’t see a bloody thing in this darkness.” A male voice, definitely British.

Parker didn’t think he’d knocked the first man, Gunter, out, but he focused on the voice of the newcomer, using it to guide him forward. He stopped, listened, and heard a sharp intake of breath. He cocked his fist and swung. His knuckles connected with a woolly jaw, and though the moan of pain was satisfactory, a rustle from behind warned him that Gunter had gained his feet. Suddenly a penlight lit up a pinprick spot on Casey’s shoulder. Taking the offensive, Parker dived into Gunter’s stomach sending him to his butt with a thud.

He needed to get this fight into the open, which meant getting Casey out of here. He felt for her arms, gripped her wrists, and dragged her up the path. He ducked as another fist came at him. Two more feet and he emerged from the cave of palm trees, hands still wrapped around Casey’s wrists. Feeling resistance, he turned to look and discovered a black-masked man with some kind of

necklace around his neck gripping Casey's ankles, engaging Parker in a tug-of-war.

Casey moaned and her head flopped. Parker glanced down just as something whizzed over his head, something that had the distinct sound and velocity of a bullet. His opponent yanked on Casey's legs, loosening Parker's grip, but then the man in black slipped on a fallen palm frond. For just one second he let go of his quarry. Parker wasted no time. He hoisted Casey to his shoulders, letting her head and arms flop against his back. Then he ran, or loped rather. Casey's weight slowed him down considerably.

"What's going on out there?" a voice shouted from the hacienda's balcony. A door slammed.

"What is it, Frank?" They had an audience.

"I don't know, but that man there is carrying a woman over his shoulders."

"What?"

Parker lost track of the old couple's conversation as he burst through the double doors that led into the building. He hoped that the witnesses would send his attackers running if nothing else.

Red tiles and foliage surrounded a mosaic fountain in the center of the courtyard, open space that they'd have to cross, because their rooms were on the opposite side. He kept to the wall, making his way around slowly, careful to avoid the pools of light cast by the wall sconces.

He kept his eyes moving, scanning the area for any sign of movement, as he focused on catching the faintest rustle of sound. He heard nothing but his heavy footsteps and Casey's occasional grunts, which soon turned into moans. Parker needed to get her to her room before she woke up completely. He didn't have time just now to explain why she was hanging over his shoulder, and he felt certain she would demand an explanation.

Her bottom brushed against his cheek. If only he had time to appreciate the proximity of that soft, sexy ass. He didn't even have a moment to enjoy cradling her thighs in his arms. As he took the stairs in double time, he searched for the key in her pocket. His breath came in gasps, but he didn't slow.

Damn health! It was unreasonable for him to have health problems when he took care of his body the way he did, working out, eating right. This whole blood pressure thing sucked. Yes, genetics played a role—his dad's side of the family—and yes, he worked too much, but he was an agent, and he didn't have time to deal with this gasping crap.

"Ah!" A female moan. Shit, she was waking up. Fists beat his back as he fiddled with the door key. "What the...?"

"Hang on."

Parker swung the door open and nearly dropped Casey as he stared in shock at her trashed room. Couch and chair cushions on the floor, drawers and cabinet doors wide open, clothes strewn everywhere, suitcases upside down and emptied.

He echoed Casey as he backed out of the room. "What the...?"

Deal with that later. Deal with that by calling Brandon and reaming him out for telling him this assignment would be a piece of cake. Then call those jerks at the Bureau and ream them out, too, for good measure.

"Put me down! Parker, what the hell are you doing?" Her voice grew louder and a face appeared at a door down the hall, eyes wide and disapproving. Great, Casey'd attract the attention of everyone in the resort if he didn't get her in the room and shut her up.

He reached his door and this time his fingers avoided fumbling as his key slid home. A quick turn and they were in his room, which thankfully had not been ransacked. Bugged perhaps? But no one should know who he was. He locked the room's dead bolt and flipped his struggling

bundle onto the flowered couch. His back would have bruises in the morning, and not from the attackers. Geez!

Casey glared at him. "What's going on?"

He was glad the tranq hadn't lasted long, so he didn't have to worry about any extended after effects, but he could have used some more time to process what had happened. Why was her room ransacked? Why had the Bureau boys not warned Brandon that there was more to this assignment? Or did his boss know more than he'd said and than was in the file? Casey didn't seem inclined to give Parker time to think, though.

She fisted her hands at her chest. "Parker, I really didn't expect you to turn into a Neanderthal."

"Thanks for the compliment." He wanted to ignore her voice as he sat down on the rattan chair opposite her. He needed to think. But she sounded so upset, almost in tears in fact.

Block her out and think. You've got more important things to deal with.

Professionals? Why were they after Casey? What were they looking for in her room? And they'd hit her with the tranq dart, but hadn't hesitated to use a bullet as far as he was concerned. He wanted to strangle the higher-ups. Why had they tied his hands with the cloak and dagger secrecy? Casey might know exactly why these thugs were after her, but he was under orders not to ask her directly, just because she had some *thing* against the Feds.

Maybe he could get her talking, and maybe she'd let something slip.

"White slavers," he said aloud with a nod of his head. It was the only thing he could come up with. "A beautiful white woman would probably fetch a high price on the black market."

"What?" Then a moment later, "Beautiful?"

Another wave of exclamations flew from Casey's mouth before Parker could answer. He considered slapping her to calm her down but thought that wouldn't go over well.

"Wait. Stop." He used the tone of command he'd perfected with his men when in the field. It worked.

Casey, silent for the moment, reached behind her and touched her back. Then she turned so that he could see the tattered remains of her shirt. Both shirt and skin were streaked with dirt and caked blood. God, he hadn't realized she'd gotten hurt. He should have thought to check.

"What happened to me?" The look she gave Parker then he knew he never wanted to see on her face again. It made his heart break, even though he knew he was innocent of the accusation in her eyes.

"It wasn't me." He jumped up and tried to touch her, to see how bad it was, but she jerked away. "Well, it was me, but not in the way you think."

She glared.

"The gravel ripped your shirt. I had to drag you." That explanation earned him widened eyes. "There were two men—I'm thinking white slavers—they shot you with a dart, a tranquilizer."

He pointed to the spot on her shoulder.

"That was a bug bite."

"Look." He pulled the darts out of his back pocket. "And they searched your room."

* * * *

Casey thought seriously about swooning like the heroines of old.

"I've got a first aid kit in the bathroom," Parker said gruffly. "Let me go get it."

The man towered above her, looking concerned, and she just wanted to wrap her arms around his waist, cling to him, even though he'd ripped her shirt and done God knows what else to her. He took her silence as consent, though, and left the room.

She was acting just like the heroines in the romance novels. How could she feel attraction at a time like this? She had to think.

He'd said they'd searched her room! No way. They'd shot at her and tried to take her! Could it be true? Was it the men from the cab again? She closed her eyes. Swooning would solve nothing, of course. It wouldn't make this absurd problem go away. Parker had said white slavers. Could that be right? No, she doubted it. That was just too out there. She stared unfocused out the sliding glass doors. The moon had risen, reflecting off the breakers as they rolled in on the ocean beyond.

They want my power. That was the only explanation that truly made sense.

Casey had gone the guinea pig route as a child. Her parents had given permission for myriad psych tests at a top-secret lab, thinking the U.S. Government had sanctioned the place. Casey knew her parents had believed it for the best since she'd already been expelled by the age of nine from five elementary schools for her telekinetic antics. If only they'd known the truth.

Casey hadn't known how to control her power, and her parents hadn't known what else to do with her. So Casey had been shipped off to the lab in upstate New York, locked away with several other children with psychic abilities. She'd learned a lot about martial arts and weapons, a little about friendship, but nothing about how to control her telekinesis. And that lack of control had sent a young girl to the hospital and possibly cost that girl her life.

Casey shook her head to focus. She refused to think about the accident and she refused to feel the guilt. If only she'd been able to find out what had happened to the girl. But that had been years ago. She'd been set up by a bunch of greedy adults, and another child had paid the price.

But maybe the research from the lab had gotten out?

Or maybe I'm being paranoid?

CHAPTER FIVE

Parker returned to the living room with a box of self-stick bandages and some rubbing alcohol.

Casey looked up. "What did they look like?"

His intense eyes seemed to be gauging her response. Well, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of going into hysterics.

"Black clothes, black ski masks. One wore a necklace." He paused on a breath, like he was about to say more.

"Go on."

"Maybe they'd been scoping the resort looking for a likely target, but that doesn't explain the mess in your room. You're not just a huge slob, are you?" The corners of his lips quirked up as he sat down on the couch next to her, but she involuntarily recoiled, still unsure whether to believe him.

"I'm not going to hurt you." His voice was soft, sincere.

Casey relaxed an iota and thought about the mess in her room. She actually wasn't an especially neat person, but she'd cleaned up the mess in the bathroom and she doubted the rest of her clutter could be mistaken for ransacked. Besides she'd just arrived, hadn't even had time to create her usual chaos. "What sort of mess?"

"A big one." Parker went on to answer his own question. "No, it looked professional. Searched and tossed." His gaze drifted over Casey's shoulder. She realized he was deep in thought. But then he pulled some gauze from his shirt pocket and opened the alcohol. He soaked the cloth.

"Does it hurt?" he asked as his fingers moved some of the soiled shirt out of the way.

"Not bad. I'll probably feel it more tomorrow."

"I'm sorry I couldn't get you out of there quicker." He started dabbing the gauze against her cuts, moving the fabric out of the way to do so, shaking his head.

"Ow. Now it hurts!" The alcohol stung, but his touch raised the hairs on her arms.

"Sorry," he said again in an even lower voice. His touch became gentler. He breathed out of his mouth and Casey felt the warm breath on her shoulder, reminding her of earlier on the bus. She shivered.

"It doesn't look too bad." He smoothed the frayed fabric some. "That should do it, but you'll have bruises tomorrow."

Casey caught herself nibbling on her finger, an old habit she thought she'd broken herself of. Her nipples had grown stiff, which was totally embarrassing. "I should probably go see if anything's missing. Maybe it was simple burglary."

"No. Thieves avoid people. It's easier to get in and get out. Unless you have something they really want, then when they didn't find it in your room, they went after you for it." Parker capped the alcohol. "You mentioned 'state secrets' before."

He remembered that? "And you know I was only joking."

He turned her to face him and his eyes pierced her, gauging the truth of her statement. Casey couldn't help it. She looked away.

"There's something you're not telling me."

"Maybe, but it has nothing to do with this mess." At least that she knew of. This was close

enough to the truth that she could meet his eyes. She didn't want to bare all. She'd wanted to be normal for just a while. Was that too much to ask? Was it impossible?

Dizziness overcame her suddenly as well as a rash of coughs and some nausea.

Parker jumped to his feet. "After effects. Put your head between your knees and I'll get you some water. Lots of water will help move it through your system."

Casey complied, focusing on the cheap shag carpeting under her feet. That was strange. How did Parker know about the after effects of tranquilizers? What had he said he did for a living? Suspicion threw ice water over her dizziness. She sat up as Parker walked back into the room, glass in hand. He handed her the drink.

After sipping the cool water, Casey asked, "How do you know about tranquilizers?"

He ducked his face and cleared his throat before pulling a straight-backed chair from the writing table. Turning it backwards, he swung his leg over. Now seated, he finally looked up and met her eyes. Without a flinch, he said, "I'm a vet."

Well, damn, he's lying. Or was the jet lag and everything else conspiring to make her see shadows where there weren't any?

Her experiences at the lab and from her various failed relationships had made her overly suspicious of men, but if he had an innocent explanation, like he'd researched it on the internet, why lie?

Something's wrong with him.

Disappointment flooded her. She hadn't even had the chance to get to know him and she already realized there could be no relationship. Well, maybe a physical relationship ... if it didn't go too far, but then what was the point? He must have seen the truth in her eyes, but he didn't back away from the lie.

You lied, too. Casey's conscience spoke up. Not really. She simply hadn't volunteered personal information. She stared at the kamikaze mosquitoes smacking against the sliding glass doors. She would have felt sorry for the stupid bugs if they hadn't already sucked a gallon of blood out of her that evening.

"Casey?"

"What?"

"I lost you for a minute."

"Yes."

Parker seated himself on the adjacent couch cushion, leaning toward her and looking yummy despite his mendacity. "How's your head and stomach?"

"Fine, thanks."

"I don't think you should go back to your room tonight."

She started. "Why not? They've come and gone, right?"

"But if they're after you, which they seem to be, then they might return tonight."

Casey sighed. "I'll have to find Lara or Nando then. How late is it? Do you think they're still at the cantina?"

Parker rubbed his thumb along his lower lip. "It's probably not a good idea to involve them."

"But I'll need my room cleaned."

"Tomorrow I'll bribe the boys to help you put it back together, and an extra peso or two to keep it secret."

"You think knowing could put them in danger? Then we shouldn't get the boys involved either."

"I just think Lara and Nando might try to play the role of guardian angels. They might try to investigate on their own, and I think that could get them hurt."

Her voice lifted an octave. "So I should just deal with this on my own?" She took a deep breath to tamp down the panic. She could deal. No problem. She was a New Yorker after all.

"Of course not. You have me."

"And who are you? A vet?"

He focused green eyes on her. "I held my own out there tonight."

"Did you? I'm afraid I was unconscious at the time."

He chuckled, but then he sat next to her again, running his fingers down her arm.

"There's probably still a bit of the drug in your system, not to mention the adrenaline drain." He scooped her hair from her shoulder and pushed it behind her ear. The light touch sent chills down her spine. His eyes grew intense as he used his thumb to trace a path from her ear to her chin.

Against her will, Casey leaned closer, which she knew seemed like an invitation. Maybe it was. She wanted to feel his lips on her neck again and his erection pressing against her. How could this magnetic pull exist between the two of them when just moments ago she'd suspected him of hurting her?

Could he hurt her? She inhaled sharply. Maybe in a good way. She already ached between her legs. She could imagine him holding her arms above her head and pounding into her body, hard and fast. She could also imagine hurting him as she came and sent him flying across the room. It had happened before...

Casey's past sexual experiences had been disasters. The more in the moment she got with a guy, the more her power went awry. Objects would start flying, like blankets, lamps, the alarm clock, and the phone. And her body would burn unnaturally hot. Only one man had managed to ignore all of that and keep going, until Casey's climax had scared him away for good. Her release had sent her lover flying literally toward the ceiling. Then he'd landed just beyond the bed with a thud and scrambled backwards like a crab. He'd not even taken the time to dress before he'd escaped her apartment.

Since then Casey had remained celibate, partially out of fear, yes, but also because no one had tempted her or thrilled her since then. Maybe they hadn't thrilled her because of her fear? And maybe her power had been reacting to something other than the sex. She'd lied to each of those men, lied by omission. Maybe if she made love to the right guy, a guy who already knew the truth about her gift, just maybe the sexual sparks could fly without the paranormal ones?

But, back to the more immediate problem, did she think Parker could hurt her physically, intentionally? No. He struck her as a man who'd protect her. All she had to do was put her hands around his neck and lift her lips to his, and he'd take control. He'd take care of her. She swayed even nearer, so very tempted, but instead of taking her cue, he pulled back abruptly as if scalded.

"I'm thinking hot showers for each of us. You go first and I'll throw some sheets on the couch here for myself and you can stay on the bed."

"I'm not"

"Some warm milk would knock you right out, but I'd have to phone over to the cantina for that. Tomorrow I'll get a couple things for that little fridge." He gestured toward the kitchenette, inching away from her on the couch. "And the boys will clean your room and we'll get to the bottom of this dart thing. I have a friend who may be able to help"

"Parker?"

"What?"

"Why are you rambling?"

Why was he rambling? He met her eyes again, saw long lashes drifting open and closed over soft cheeks. He noted the light sprinkling of freckles on her nose before focusing on her luscious, kissable lips. The thought of her spending the night here had his cock perking up.

It had been too long since his last dating relationship, if you could call it a relationship. It had been basically two workaholics having sex and had left him hollow and disgusted, not with the lady, but with himself.

Casey was a very attractive, very vulnerable woman. She was shell-shocked from the attack and probably jet-lagged from the flight. It would be so easy to accept her invitation, and yes, it was an invitation. He knew how to read body language—a key part of agent training—and her body spoke loud and clear from her taut nipples to her open lips. Not only did he want to protect her, he wanted to

...Get a grip. What he wanted wasn't what was important at the moment. But he was only a man. His dick growing hard at a time like this would not put him in the running as hero material, not after what she'd been through. But in his mind he could see his big hands pushing her back against the couch cushions, pushing up her shirt until her bra was revealed, spreading her legs wide so he'd fit between them. Then letting his mouth explore, explore the smooth curve of her breasts above her bra, explore the flat contours of her stomach.

He realized Casey was speaking to him again and he hadn't answered her question. He needed to get a hold of himself. He'd certainly left his randy teenage years long ago. Think of her as a damsel-in-distress, which she certainly was, not a sex kitten.

"Parker, I swear, did they drug you, too?" She waved her hand in front of his face.

He lurched from the couch. "No." His hand slipped through his gritty hair. Showering was a priority. "Look, either you go shower or I will."

For a moment Casey looked surprised, then she stood and snapped her heels together, saluting him. "Aye aye, captain." She marched stiffly toward his bedroom, stopped, and turned. "Do you have a bathrobe or a T-shirt or something I could borrow since my shirt seems to be ruined?"

"Yeah, in the suitcase. I haven't had a chance to unpack yet."

She nodded in response and disappeared into the other room. Once Parker heard the water running in the shower, he decided to call his local contact from the Agency about the dart, get him to run a few tests on it. He yanked his cell phone out of his pocket and opened it.

Nothing. No lights, no sounds, no bars. Instead there was a deep crack running through the LCD display, which could have happened when the dragon lady at customs had dropped it or when he'd fallen on the floor of the bus or even during his fight with the ski mask guys. He didn't know which, but it didn't bode well for his phone. He'd try plugging it in and charging it, but he had his doubts that it would ever recover. So after digging out his charger and setting it up and seeing that it still did nothing, he resorted to using the land line in the living room. He dialed his contact.

"Yo," was the answer on the other end.

"Malone, I've got"

"Hey Parker, aren't you on vacation?"

"Not really. I need"

"Hey, I was warned you might call and given strict orders to avoid you like the plague."

"What?" Parker wanted to bang his head against the green linoleum counter.

"Your boss, man. He said you're here to relax even if it kills yah. He said you were on some piece-of-cake babysitting job and I was to steer clear of you."

"Piece of cake, my ass." He grinned. It was good to hear his friend's voice. The last time Parker had seen Malone the man had been shit-faced on a beach in Acapulco mourning the loss of

his true love to a navy pilot. Parker, in the middle of a case as always, had drowned him in coffee and told him to get over it. He'd always lacked good bedside manner. "Are you ready to listen to me?"

"I don't know, man. Might cost me my job."

"You know it won't. I think this babysitting gig has more to it than the big man expected. Now come on."

"Okay, tell me what you've got."

Parker related the evening's events and got a few whistles as he described Casey.

"You're smitten, man."

"Smitten? What kind of sissy word is that?"

"You've got it bad."

"I just met the girl today."

"Sometimes a day is all it takes." Malone spoke from experience as he'd gotten over his Acapulco love rather quickly and married Rochelle, an agent from California, within a week of meeting her.

"How is wedded bliss?" Parker opened the refrigerator door. At least he'd had Nando send over some beer earlier. He pulled out a bottle of Dos Equis and slammed the top against the counter to open it.

"It's great. I highly recommend it, but make sure you get a woman who can cook. Rochelle can't cook, man, and I'm afraid to tell her, 'cause I know she could whip my ass."

"So I also need someone without martial arts training?"

"Yeah, good idea."

Did Casey know martial arts? She didn't seem like the type to know how to cook. Parker shook his head. "So can I send you the dart to check out?"

"Sure. I don't need my hide anyway."

Parker hung up the phone and shortly afterwards he heard the water stop. He was leaning against the counter sipping his beer when Casey emerged from the bedroom clad only in one of his T-shirts. It stopped at mid-thigh, drawing Parker's eyes to the space between her legs as he salivated. Those legs began to move. Long, lean legs, smooth skin... To have those legs wrapped around him, urging him to fuck her harder, deeper.

"Hey Romeo, I'm up here if you don't mind." He looked up. Fire lit her eyes, and humor. Parker smiled. "Feel better?"

"Much, thanks. Your turn." Casey noticed the bottle of beer dripping condensation onto Parker's fingers. "Do you have one of those for me?"

He didn't answer. Instead he set his bottle on the counter and took a step closer to Casey. She resisted the urge to back away. His eyes focused on hers intently, and then he used his fingers to pull up one of her eyelids. She swatted at him. "What are you doing?"

"Just making sure the drug has left your system. Don't want you to mix alcohol with it."

"Thought you wanted me to sleep."

"Yeah, but naturally, and without a massive hangover tomorrow."

Casey's eyes felt gritty just at the thought of sleep. "Give me one beer, then I'll conk out wherever you put me, okay?"

A suspicious smile crossed Parker's face. What was he thinking? He rested his hand on her shoulder and he didn't back off or retrieve his beer. The smell of Dos Equis beer tinged his breath, and Casey's skin tingled where he touched her. Her lips parted and she was conscious of her breath flowing softly in and out. She swayed forward and tilted her face higher.

Kiss me.

Parker's lips brushed hers. Every nerve ending zeroed in on the sensation of soft, smooth skin against skin. After the brush, his lips lingered, hovering like a land speeder over the ground. She could feel the warmth radiating from his body, taste his breath in her mouth. Then...

Nothing.

He stepped back and picked up his beer. He tilted it back, took a long drink, then opened the fridge and handed her a chilled bottle.

"Here," he said gruffly. He pulled out a drawer, found a can opener, and thrust it at her before stalking into the bedroom.

What was that?

Casey stared at the bottle and can opener in her hands as if they were specimens from a space exploration. What were these for? Why had he kissed her so tenderly then walked away as if he was angry with her? What had she done?

Nothing--this time at least. He was a man. That explained everything.

Casey shrugged as she remembered what she'd meant to do with the cold beer in her hand. She opened the bottle and slapped the opener onto the counter. The wet beer sliding down her throat eased the tightness in her breathing and slowed her heart rate. She drank half the bottle where she stood.

The couch began to look irresistibly attractive and she pushed thoughts of Parker's kiss and all of her fantasies about him out of her mind as she settled onto the cushions. She drank the other half of the bottle with her feet up. Her limbs leaden, she set the bottle on the floor and repositioned herself on the couch. The comfy couch. The soft, heavenly, horizontal couch. In moments she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

* * * *

The steamy water pelted Parker's skin. He braced his hands on the tiled wall as he lowered his head and let the water sluice over his hair and shoulders. He couldn't remember being this turned on since high school. It was ridiculous. He was a grown man, an agent for the U.S. Government, for God's sake. He'd been with tons of women, women who would be considered by most men as more attractive than Casey. But that brief kiss had zinged through him like an electrical shock, and now fear clenched his stomach.

Pretending to pursue Casey would work fine for his mission of staying close to her without giving away his identity and purpose, but he always maintained control. That was what made him such a good agent, and Casey made him feel like he was losing control, like he was free-falling off the pyramid at Teotihuacan, a sacrifice to the gods.

The water grew cold, easing his erection somewhat, so he slathered soap everywhere quickly, then rinsed it off. He dried himself with efficient movements and combed his hair. He'd shave in the morning. Of course, he was seemingly on vacation. He could grow a damn beard if he wanted.

By the time he returned to the living room, Casey was sound asleep on the couch, emitting soft snores from her cute, pert nose. Most entrancing was the T-shirt hem perched at the very top of her thighs. Her creamy legs were spread slightly and wisps of curly brown hair peaked past the fabric.

Parker swallowed hard as an image filled his mind, an image of Casey's legs spread wide across his shoulders, her T-shirt pushed up her stomach and his cheek pressed against her thighs as he lapped at her juices and sucked her clit.

The image was so real that he could feel the hair tickling his face and smell her sweetness.

How would she taste? He knelt on the floor next to her legs. He couldn't take his eyes off those few curls. The temptation to touch her drew his fingers to the couch cushion. They inched along, almost of their free will, though he knew it was his own lack of willpower that had him sliding the edge of her shirt further up her hip until it revealed more than just curls.

He stopped. What kind of hero was he, wanting to assault this sleeping beauty after all the trials she'd been through today? A horny one, dammit. He knew he couldn't touch her, wouldn't touch her, but the want was powerful, more powerful than he could remember feeling in the past. Looked like one cold shower might not be enough.

He forced himself to stand and moved to the other side of the room. For a while he stared out the patio doors into the star-dotted sky. When he drifted to the bedroom and relaxed onto the bed, his skin felt hot despite the fact that he only wore denim shorts with the top button undone. It took him a while to fall into a light sleep, but for once his dreams strayed from Most Wanted posters and work briefs to mysterious gray eyes and mounds and valleys of soft, silky skin.

* * * *

Casey woke with a start, disoriented and scared. Her power lashed out, sending a beer bottle skittering across the tile floor. A ceramic bowl flew from the coffee table and crashed against the far wall. Then she remembered.

The resort. Parker's room. Her face heated as she looked at the broken ceramic and glass on the floor. Had Parker heard? How would she explain? Damn, she usually had better control than this. Maybe she could get it cleaned up before he woke.

"I have to practice," she mumbled as she rose from the couch. She would never have control of her life if she didn't gain control of her power.

The bedroom door slammed open and a gun emerged followed by a half-naked Parker. "Are you okay?" he demanded.

At first Casey was stymied by the sight of Parker's flat tanned stomach against the V of zipper and denim. Not flat...washboard, that's how she would describe his abs.

Then she registered the gun.

"Why do you have a gun?"

Parker looked down at his hand as if he hadn't realized what he held there. He quickly moved the gun behind his back and slid it into the waistband of his cut-offs. She half expected him to say, "Gun? What gun?" But instead he said, "Ow!"

"Oh, Parker, look out." Too late. He'd already stepped on one of the shards from the bowl. "Are you all right?"

"What happened?" He looked down at his bleeding foot then around the room as he hurriedly zipped his fly and buckled his belt. "Did the attackers return? Where are they? I heard crashing."

"Don't move." Casey dashed to the kitchen for a wet towel. She didn't see a broom or brush so she grabbed a plate to carry the shards.

Parker remained frozen, looking dumbfounded as Casey touched his foot. Even his foot was sexy as were his well-defined calves. He must be a runner to have legs shaped so nicely and still so lean.

"Let me see," she said. She slid her fingers down his calf, coaxing it up so she could see the bottom of his foot. Hardly any blood. That was good. She pulled the sliver from his heel then pressed the towel against the small cut. As long as there wasn't lead-based paint on the pottery, he should be fine.

Parker remained frozen, but she doubted it was from pain. Perhaps he was thinking as fast as

she was, searching for an explanation for the gun as she searched for an explanation for the broken pottery. What could she say? She finally released his leg and plucked up the shards to put them on the plate. Bugs. Lame, but what wouldn't be?

"I...I saw a bug, a...a big bug. I tried to kill it."

"With a bowl?" He looked across the room to the broken bottle. "And what about that?"

"A...another bug, of course." She concentrated on finding any slivers remaining on the floor.

"Of course." She could hear the wryness in Parker's voice.

"What about the gun?"

"Gun?"

Oh, here he goes. He's going to deny the gun. "Yeah, the one in your shorts."

"For protection."

"On vacation?"

"There's crime all over."

"Isn't it illegal to bring a gun into the country with you? Even on the plane for that matter?"

"Nah." His denial sounded doubtful. Another lie.

"Ever since 9-11, I'm pretty sure it is."

He carried a gun, knew how to fight, and had knowledge of tranquilizers. It suddenly occurred to Casey that perhaps he was a bad guy. Perhaps he'd told her not to inform Nando and Lara because he had his own plans for her.

"Who are you?" Casey stood slowly, gripping a sharp piece of clay in her palm.

He eyed her weapon. "I'm Parker Nelson, just like I told you."

"And you know that's not what I mean. What do you want from me?"

"From you? I don't want anything from you. I'm trying to protect you."

"Why?"

"Why?" He ran a hand through his hair. "Hell if I know. I've got this stupid soft spot for damsels-in-distress I guess."

"And what makes you think I'm in distress?"

"Gee, only the fact that two men wearing masks shot you with a tranq dart, played tug-of-war with your ankles, and ransacked your room."

Casey blushed and fought back a smile. Yeah, that probably would inspire any male's protective instincts.

"And who are you? Do you think I believe for a minute that you used a bowl and a beer bottle to kill a bug?"

"It was huge. A mutant roach."

"Where's the body then?"

"It got away?"

They glared at each other, frozen in defensive stances, each waiting for the other to crack and tell the truth. Casey wanted to. She hated lies and deception and would love to have a real hero at her back, but she knew from experience that a man would likely believe her bug story before he'd believe in telekinesis. And Parker might look like a hero, all sinew and muscle, but she had no proof who he was and what he wanted from her.

A knock on the door ended the staring match.

"Oye!" Lara's voice floated in from the hallway. "*Señor* Nelson! Breakfast!"

"Breakfast? How do you rate?" Casey sniffed the air: eggs and fresh corn tortillas.

"You might rate, too. Maybe she does this for all the guests."

"I doubt it, and I really don't want her to find me here. I have the feeling I'll never hear the end of it."

"And I don't want her to see your room until we get it cleaned."

"Señor!" Lara's voice was entirely too cheerful this morning.

"Here." Parker took the plate of shards from Casey and glanced out the window. "Go out on the balcony."

"And do what?"

"I think it connects to your room."

"How do you know that?"

Parker heaved a huge sigh. "I scoped it out when I first got here. Now go before *señora* uses her key."

"Why would you do that? Are you a pervert?"

He chuckled. "Yes I am. Now just go."

Casey could certainly picture Lara bursting into the room judging by the boisterousness of her 'yoo-hooing'. She gave in, handing him the last piece of ceramic from her hand. Then she dashed to the patio doors, opening them and sliding through.

Glancing back into the room, she saw Parker shrugging into a shirt before he opened the door to the hall. Casey stepped left, out of view, and leaned against the stucco wall, breathing in the tangy sea air. A warm breeze caressed her face, distracting her from the scene inside Parker's room.

She'd completely forgotten that she was on vacation, that she was here to relax and evaluate her life. Had she only arrived yesterday? It seemed like a lifetime already.

A cobbled road lined with palm trees ran past the beach side of the resort. A dirt path jutted from it, leading to a rickety wooden dock at the beach. Several shrimp pots were stacked on the planks and a gray rowboat was moored to the post by a frayed, mildewed piece of rope. Waves gently rocked the boat, causing its sleeping occupant to groan. Casey peered more closely. The occupant seemed to be a fairly young Mexican girl, no more than eight or nine.

A particularly large wave rocked the boat, but the girl remained sleeping. She didn't notice when a boy, perhaps a year older than her, sneaked out from under the dock and cut the moor line. Nor did she notice when he gave the boat a shove toward the open water. He pulled the rope over his slim shoulder and proceeded to pull the boat out into the current. Then he let go.

Casey almost cried out, but Lara's voice boomed from just beyond the glass doors. She really didn't want to have to explain to someone that she barely knew why she was loitering outside of Parker's room. Besides the wind would have tossed her voice back into her face and done the little girl no good.

Instead, Casey lifted her hand and gestured as if calling the boat to her. The boy had climbed onto the dock to watch the dinghy float away, but his eyes widened as he realized the boat was headed his way at a much faster pace than even the waves could have caused. Worse, the girl awoke and began chastising him in Spanish. It sounded as if she knew the boy. Casey heard the word *mama* and watched the little girl shake her fist at him. He was in for it now, and he knew it. He didn't wait around for the end of the girl's tirade, but took off down the dirt path.

Casey lowered her arm. She was tempted to trip the boy, just to teach him a lesson, but he'd most likely intended it as a harmless prank. And judging from the girl's continued tirade as she leaped off the boat and gave chase, he was going to get his comeuppance very soon, without Casey's interference.

* * * *

Parker glanced toward the balcony. What was Casey doing? She seemed to be gesturing for

someone to come to the balcony. Who? And more importantly, why?

Parker's job required a certain amount of suspicion, but was he going overboard in questioning Casey's most likely innocent gestures and motives? Well, he'd been assigned to protect her for some reason. It could be something as innocent as a senior senator wanting an eye kept on his daughter, but why keep that confidential? To keep it out of the papers?

He listened to Lara ramble on about the resort's amenities, as he leaned forward, hoping to see who was on the street below the balcony. Lara snagged his arm, pulling him back, and handed him a corn tortilla wrapped around fresh avocado.

"You try this. Mucho vitamin E. Good for the stamina in bed."

That got his attention. Parker tried not to blush as he accepted the enchilada. Could Lara mean him and her? Nah! God, he hoped not. She continued to chatter on about romance at the resort as he ate. How could he get rid of his well-meaning hostess? Grilling Casey would make better use of his time, and he had to track down the boys to get them to straighten her room. Plus he needed to messenger the darts to Malone.

The pulse in Parker's neck grew louder and stronger. The room began to feel too hot, too closed in, and he felt a bit lightheaded. His blood pressure. Dammit. He wasn't supposed to be working. How could he get back to his real job and Missy's case if he didn't get this damn blood pressure back to normal? Casey didn't help matters—she increased the blood flow to several areas of his anatomy whenever she was around.

He took a last bite of the enchilada. "It's wonderful, Lara. *Muchas gracias.*"

"De nada. A big strong man like you needs his nourishment." She turned toward the door. Finally. "Now don't forget the Jacuzzi, and invite that lovely girl along." She blinked rapidly. "Good for *amor*, you know?"

"I'm not here for love, *Señora.*"

"Well of course you are. Everyone needs romance in their lives."

"Even you?"

"Sí. The prospects may be few, but I have many hopes." She smiled and drifted out the door that Parker held for her. "*Hasta luego.*"

"Yes, until later."

Parker shut the door, dusted his hands on his cut-offs, and rushed to the balcony doors. There was no sign of Casey now, and no sign of whomever she might have been signaling to. Could they be in her room? He decided to have a peek through her balcony door to make sure she was in there and alone. If so, then he'd call the boys and send them up to help her clean. They seemed like great kids. He had no doubt they'd be willing to help, especially for a bit of spending money.

She was sitting on her bed, he saw, staring into space with an absent smile. Interesting. What did she have to smile about? Hadn't she noticed the mess yet?

* * * *

Lara smiled to herself as she left Señor Nelson's room. She'd gotten just what she'd come for, which was a glimpse of Casey Summers on the balcony outside. Perhaps Casey had been innocently admiring the view, but Lara had noticed Parker's repeated glances out the sliding glass doors. There was definitely a romance brewing there, one she planned to help along if she could.

For starters, the avocado had been marinated in a special blend of herbs and spices that acted as an aphrodisiac when the right attraction was already in place, a recipe handed down from her mama. She also hoped to throw the couple together if they needed it. She often acted as a social director at the resort to keep the guests occupied and happy. And perhaps a few not-so-subtle suggestions would move things along.

Now if only she could put together a plan to work with her own love life.

She trotted down the stairs and out of the hacienda. Once on the path, she spotted Nando trimming hedges under the windows of the first floor rooms. He'd shed his shirt and his lean shoulder muscles glistened. He was so very different from the tall American she'd fancied herself in love with two years ago. That bastard, the father of Jose and Manuel, had given her trinkets and danced with her at the clubs night after night, while getting her to baby sit his boys during the day, supposedly while he went to work. Only he wasn't working. He'd been romancing Frida, the portrait painter at the tourists' market. Both women had bought his sob stories and given him money, until they'd compared notes one day and confronted him. Then the loco man had dropped them like hot tamales and taken up with Monica, who owned an American car. He'd coaxed her to drive him all the way to the border before he'd ditched her, as well. But worst of all, he'd left his boys behind, breaking their hearts.

Lara could have forgiven him for being a woman-loving, lazy man, but she couldn't forgive him for deserting his sons. She just prayed he never came back. This was their home now.

But Nando loved the boys. He played football (or soccer, as the gringos called it) with them, taught them a bit about engines and driving, walked on the beach and swam with them. Most important, he reprimanded them if they disrespected Lara. She knew she wasn't their real mother and she knew they were hurt and angry, but she was responsible for them now. Sometimes she didn't know whether to punish them or hug them, but whenever Nando was there, he'd pull the boys aside and have a chat. After that, the boys would apologize to Lara and cooperate with her once again. He was the male role model they needed.

Lara found herself staring at Nando's backside, until he looked up from his trimming and waved. "*Hola.*"

"Would you like some *limonada*?" Lara asked.

He wiped his brow. "No, gracias. I will wait until I am finished. Not much more now."

Lara nodded, but inside she felt frustrated. Nando was a good man, a handsome man, and the man she wanted, but he wouldn't make a move on her. He was always the perfect gentleman, even when they were alone in the cantina at night. But sometimes a woman didn't want a gentleman. She wanted a man to take control and grab her about the waist and pull her to him and kiss her madly. She stared once again at his flexing muscles. She wanted a man who would take her to bed with him. She wanted *this* man to take her to bed. And she was getting damn tired of waiting.

* * * *

Half an hour later, Casey stood in her room and surveyed the mess. She'd fallen into a light doze shortly after coming in off of the balcony, so now she should have the energy to deal with the living room.

Or not.

She regarded the chaos. What had they been looking for? Did they think she'd hidden her valuables in the wardrobe or something?

She started picking up pieces of strewn clothing. Once she had an armload she carried it to the wardrobe to hang them up, smoothing out the wrinkles in each piece, since she had an aversion to ironing. Then she poked around the room. No jewelry missing. Nothing destroyed. Just a giant mess. Maybe they'd been trying to scare her with all this, but why? And if it was her power they were after, why search her room at all?

Lara never arrived with breakfast for her. She *was* favoring Parker, probably because he was a man, a handsome man. Casey found a neglected cereal bar in the pocket of her suitcase and munched on it sullenly.

The quiet was unnerving, so the knock on the door seemed inordinately loud and jarring. Casey went to open it, her heart increasing speed at the thought of seeing Parker again.

“*Hola, Señora.*” The soccer boys’ grins lightened her mood immediately.

Manuel elbowed Jose. “*Señorita, Jose.*” Then he corrected himself. “Hello, Miss.”

“Please call me Casey.”

“Miss Casey, *Señor Nelson* sent us to help you with your room.”

Casey smiled. “Come in.” She gave them space to enter. “Wonderful. Do you have a broom and dust pan?”

It took the boys a moment to mentally translate before they nodded vigorously in unison. Jose dashed to a closet in the hallway while Manuel righted chairs with Casey’s help.

“Who did this?” Manuel asked.

“I don’t know. Hopefully they won’t come back so we can find out.”

“A mystery! Like Sherlock Holmes.”

“Have you read Sherlock Holmes?”

Jose swept up the remnants of Casey’s bottle of body powder. She’d have to find a grocery store and buy some more. Manuel said, “We read one of the stories in English class. *The Dogs of the Baskervilles*. It was very good.”

“I think it’s *Hounds of the Baskervilles*, but don’t quote me on that. And wow, I’m amazed you’ve learned English so well.”

“Our father is American.”

“Is he? Is he staying at the resort?”

“No. He returned to Texas.”

“I see. How long ago was that?”

Manuel shrugged. “About a year now.”

Jose kept his face averted as he picked up shards of glass and flower petals from a broken vase, but Casey thought she saw a tear glistening on his cheek.

“You must miss him.”

“No.” Manuel said this gruffly and Jose nodded in agreement.

“Of course you do. He’s your father. There’s nothing wrong with missing him.” Casey’s heart went out to these two lonely boys, but in this case there was not a thing her telekinesis could do to help. She knew she was prying, but she wanted to know. “Is Lara your mother then? I haven’t heard you call her that.”

Manuel hauled the cushions back onto the couch. “No, Lara was a ‘friend’ of Papa’s. He made her sad, too. We used to call her *Tia Lara*, but we’re too old for that now.”

“I see.” They’d called her *Tia Lara* yesterday when she and Parker had arrived, so maybe not so old and independent as they’d like to believe. “And what does ‘*Tia*’ mean?”

“Aunt.”

Casey resisted the urge to ask about their mother. Instead she straightened and twisted at the waist to stretch before surveying the room. “I believe we’re done here boys. Thank you so much for your help!” She pulled a peso from her purse for them, but the older boy waved it away.

He grinned. “*Señor Parker* paid us well.”

“I bet.” She patted his head. Maybe he’d also given them a warning not to bilk her for more money as kids were prone to do?

Once the boys were gone, Casey fell onto her bed, too tired to do anything but nap once again. It was more the emotional stress of not knowing who was after her than the physical labor of cleaning up.

She awoke to the sound of knocking. Interrupted a damn good dream, too, one in which Parker played a starring role. She rubbed her gritty eyes before prying them open. The knocking seemed to be coming from the glass doors facing the balcony.

Casey pushed herself to her elbows and spotted Parker's face, accented with a slight smile, on the other side of the glass.

CHAPTER SIX

“Wake up Sleeping Beauty.”

Casey had the urge to stick out her tongue and tell him to go away. Instead she finger-combed her hair, not daring to imagine what it looked like after sleeping on it for an hour. Had it been an hour? She levered herself to her feet and opened the door. Parker’s solid frame immediately crowded her personal space and sent prickles racing along her skin.

“Have a good nap?”

Casey blinked and assessed. Her body seemed a little less achy than it had before. “Yes, thank you. Did you have a good breakfast?”

Parker’s grin broadened. “Still sore about that, are you?”

“She’s obviously giving you preferential treatment, most likely because you’re a man.” A man in tight denim shorts and a T-shirt that accentuated his broad chest.

“A good-looking man.”

She snorted. “Says who?” She certainly wasn’t going to admit her thoughts, which would only serve to inflate his head.

“Well me, of course. Do you think Señora Lara would bring breakfast to an ugly man?”

Casey chuckled. “Well obviously she would. You proved that.” Happy to see Mr. Ego frown, Casey said, “Besides I got the impression there might be something between Nando and Lara, so you better not go screwing that up.”

“You did?” He scratched his chin.

“Woman’s intuition.” Yeah, there’d been a look on Nando’s face as he’d introduced Lara. His eyes had lit up and his voice had held a note of respect.

“If you say so.”

Parker was still standing extremely close, which made Casey nervous, but she refused to give him the ground. Besides, what she really wanted to do was take that one step closer, bringing them body to body. Instead she said, “To what do I owe the honor of this visit?”

“I thought I’d walk you to lunch.”

“Did you?”

His frown turned into a scowl. “For protection.” Then he shrugged, as if he didn’t care if she went with him. “By the way, Nando came by a few minutes ago and told me that he’s taking a few of the guests into town to shop for souvenirs at the market tomorrow. He asked if we’d like to go. I told him we would.”

Casey lifted her eyebrows. “You answered for me?” Putting her hands on her hips, she resisted the urge to shove him. That would require touching his muscular chest. She curled in her fingers since they were itching to spread across the expanse of his shirt to his shoulders, weave through his hair, pull him in for a hot, long kiss.

The grin returned to Parker’s face. He was apparently amused that he’d riled her. “Of course.”

Goading her, was he? Well, Casey still owed him for last night’s caveman act. She’d find some way to get even. Maybe rib him about his love affair with Lara. No. That might hurt Lara’s, and possibly Nando’s, feelings. She’d never been adept at witty comebacks, so she’d have to mull

over revenge scenarios during lunch.

“So what do you say? Lunch?” His gruff voice did something to her stomach, made it clench in a good way. Well, not her stomach exactly. Lower, much lower.

Their gazes locked. The temperature in the room ratcheted up twenty degrees. Casey licked her lips and Parker’s gaze grew even hotter, enough to melt gold, silver—steel, too. Would it hurt to let herself go this once and have her way with him? She opened her mouth just the slightest bit and his eyes narrowed in on that small space between her lips. Casey matched his look, tracing his mouth with her eyes, imagining his lips locked on hers, his tongue searching her mouth for undiscovered treasure. Her breasts warmed and tightened and her vagina contracted.

When he looked at her lips like that, intense and demanding, did he picture her mouth around his cock, sucking him deep, bringing him to orgasm? Did it make him hard?

Finally, Casey cleared her throat. Holy shit! Where had her mind gone? Was she insane? Seeking a casual tone, she broke the moment and said, “Oh all right. Let me freshen up.”

Parker blinked as if coming out of a stupor. He looked confused. Likely he’d forgotten the whole point of their conversation, as Casey almost had. Geez, she needed some time in the pool to cool her heated body.

In the bathroom she patted a damp washcloth along her neck and chest. That helped a bit. Then she washed her face, did a better job with her hair, and felt reasonably pleased with her appearance when she returned to the bedroom.

“Shall we go?” she asked.

Parker still seemed mildly perplexed, but he nodded and gestured for her to lead the way. But when they got to the door that led to the hallway, he held it for her, as he did for each door, the one to her room, the one to the stairs, even the one exiting the courtyard. Ingrained manners.

Casey felt pampered by the gesture. As a born and bred New Yorker she was used to stalking down crowded sidewalks and elbowing her way into department stores. It wasn’t that New Yorkers were mean or rude. It was just the accepted mode. Women expected to be treated as equals, not as ladies. This, however, was a pleasant, if temporary, change.

When they reached the tiny jungle area, Parker paused to examine the trees and the path. Casey spotted a couple of scuff marks in the sand and gravel. Finding nothing useful apparently, Parker grunted and led her down the path.

In moments they reached the cantina, which was bustling with guests, most either in khaki or Bermuda shorts with cameras strapped to their necks or sticking out of their shirt pockets. All of the tables were full, except for the one next to the piano along the far wall.

Parker led the way, then smiled politely at the couple sitting there. “May we join you?”

The man at the table replied, “Of course.” He stood and pulled out a chair for Casey. Another gentleman. Wow, she needed to leave the US more often.

“Thank you.” As Casey sat, she noted the man’s pale skin, black eyes, and extremely short blonde hair. He seemed familiar. She also thought she detected a slight accent when he spoke.

Parker pulled out his own chair and seated himself next to the lithe woman who was also at the table. His type, Casey thought, observing the woman’s French manicure, sleek blonde hair pulled back into a French braid, and sparkling blue eyes framed by long lashes. She wasn’t sure why she thought Parker would match this woman so well, but instinct told her this was the type of woman he dated. And that thought, combined with the fact that Parker stared at her for an overly long minute, annoyed the hell out of Casey. Not to mention, this woman seemed poised and elegant, something she knew she’d never be. And another sense of déjà vu assailed Casey. Weird.

Before a word was said, Lara bustled over and patted Parker’s shoulder. “What can I bring

you?” she asked the table at large.

Parker gestured for the ladies to go first, but pale man seized the moment. “*Dos Equis, por favor, y carne asada y salsa verde.*” He seemed about to add more, before he noticed Parker’s glare. “Oh, you go ahead,” he growled at the ladies.

“Casey?” Parker touched her arm.

“Um, may I have a margarita and a salad, please?”

Lara smiled. “Certainly, *señorita. Y Señora Petrov?*”

Ah, the couple from the airport. No wonder they seemed familiar, though Casey had only seen them from a distance. Wait. Had she seen both of them or just the husband? She couldn’t remember clearly since all she’d been thinking about at the time had been the insane cab incident and Parker.

The blonde woman spoke, and her voice was throaty and sexy, a voice to envy. She knew Spanish, as well. Was Casey the only ignorant tourist? “*Tequila con jugo de tomate y una ensalada con pollo.*”

Casey leaned against Parker’s arm and whispered. “I’m feeling the need for that dictionary now.”

Parker seemed to sympathize with her plight so he spoke to Lara in English, requesting a beer with a plate of enchiladas. That was nice of him. Then he winked at her, and for some reason she had the urge to kick him instead of thank him.

Once Lara had hurried off to the kitchen with their orders, pale man said, “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Boris Petrov and this is my wife, Anastasia.”

“Anastasia is such a pretty name,” Casey said with a smile, receiving one in return for the compliment.

“Casey Summers, and I’m Parker Nelson.”

“Nice to meet you. And you are here together?” Boris asked.

That’s a rude question, Casey thought. Aloud she said, “No, actually we just met yesterday at the airport.”

“Ah.” An insinuating smirk formed on Boris’s lips. Casey wished herself elsewhere, like at that table with the middle-aged couple and their twins. Their melodic British accents floated to her ears, recalling to Casey’s mind the last Jane Austen book she’d read.

Parker carried on a lively conversation with Anastasia while Casey people-watched. The variety of people in the restaurant fascinated her, but her mind was focused on devising a plan of action for her practice. The beach would be the most private setting. From what she’d glimpsed yesterday, it wasn’t crowded and had several jutting rock formations that would block anyone observing from the resort.

The where was the easy part. Now for the how, since the thing she needed to practice the most was the ‘just say no’ aspect. She needed to make using her power a more conscious thing, something she could choose to use or not, not just something that happened whenever she saw someone in trouble. She could practice lifting rocks and crabs on the beach, but would that help her with her problem?

Lara emerged from the kitchen with a tray full of drinks. A man in white pants appeared at the swinging doors, saying something to her in Spanish. Lara scowled and turned her head to reply to the man, gesturing him back into the kitchen without breaking her stride. As she headed toward their table, she passed the table with the twins. One of the mischievous boys stretched his leg, putting his foot right in Lara’s path. She tripped, the tray tilted, and the drinks sloshed.

As usual, without regard to the consequences, Casey flicked her fingers and not only did

Lara straighten, but so did the tray and the drinks. Lara gasped and looked in Casey's direction, probably wondering where the strange breeze had come from. Casey couldn't resist one more flick, just the smallest movement, which sent the evil twin's drink tumbling into his own lap. He swore, jumped up and knocked his chair over.

Nando must have come in through the front door at some point during this little scene, because he rushed over to help Lara rebalance the tray, then grabbed a towel from the kitchen to help clean up the boy and his drink.

When Casey turned back to her own table, she found Boris staring at her. Had he noticed what she'd done? No. She'd had her back to him. Anastasia also seemed to be looking at Casey, but Parker was staring at Anastasia, which made her want to flick her fingers at his drink.

Resist the urge, resist the urge. Don't draw any more attention to yourself.

"Gracias!" Lara beamed at Nando after he'd finished cleaning the boy off. He offered to take the tray from her, which she allowed him to do, and probably Casey was the only one to notice the pause as their hands brushed together. Nando easily balanced tray and drinks as he walked to their table, making Casey think he'd done a stint as a waiter in his youth. He passed the drinks out to each of them and handed the tray back to Lara. She patted him on the shoulder as she assured the table at large that the food would be out shortly. They walked shoulder to shoulder with matching steps back to the kitchen. Oh yeah, there was something going on there.

Casey concentrated on sipping her drink. She could still feel Boris's gaze stabbing into her head. She distrusted the man, though she could think of no logical reason for it. She was inclined to like Anastasia however. She had a pleasant, tinkling laugh and an ingenuous smile.

"So where are you from?" Anastasia asked Casey as she daintily laid the cloth napkin across her lap. Flawless manners, something Casey definitely didn't have.

"New York."

"Ah, I have never been. What is it like?"

Casey sipped her drink and picked at the edge of the tablecloth. "Busy, loud, exciting. There's always some place new to explore even though I've lived there my whole life."

"And you, Parker?" Ana asked.

"I live in Washington D.C."

"And do you like it?"

"Sometimes. Too much politics."

"You do not like politics?"

"I don't like politicians."

"Nor do I." She stroked her glass. The movement was oddly sensuous and very aggravating. Casey imagined snipping each white tip off her fingernails. "Do you like power?"

"Not really. Power changes people, usually for the worst." Parker scowled at his drink for a moment, while Casey eyed him suspiciously. But he wasn't talking about her sort of power, since he didn't know about it. And it was hard to be corrupted by something she'd been born with, since to her it was just part of the status quo. But it certainly had corrupted people around her in the past.

"But power can change the world if used properly." Ana spoke with the silkiest voice as she gazed into Parker's eyes, holding him locked, imploring him to agree. He nodded and she laughed lightly, before turning to Casey. Their eyes met. "What about you, my dear? Do you like power?"

Casey shivered. What was it about this woman's eyes, her voice? Familiar? But that wasn't it exactly. Maybe it was the question, asked innocently enough, but holding so much meaning for Casey. Did she like power?

"Not really. It's too unruly."

Boris finally joined in the conversation. "Really?"

"Yes. Who controls who has it and what they do with it? Power requires checks and balances."

Ana nodded encouragingly and opened her mouth to ask another question when Lara appeared at their table with plate-loads of steaming food. Sorting out who got what and sampling the delicious fare dampened their conversation. Casey did notice that Boris and Ana asked a lot of questions about Casey's life, but gave out very little information about their own.

Parker seemed to grow more and more subdued during lunch, too. Did he not like this couple? Her? Casey was hyper conscious of him, though, despite his quiet. She tingled whenever his hand brushed hers or his too-direct eyes peered into her own. She wound up feeling exceptionally hot and bothered, and therefore self-conscious. She'd die of mortification if anyone else noticed the tips of her nipples poking against her blouse. If Parker noticed, he gave nothing away, which was good, since that would have drawn attention to her.

And her panties were damp, which was even worse. She just couldn't tame the images that kept popping into her head randomly, like his hands cupping her naked breasts, his face level with her waist as he unsnapped her pants and pulled them down, his fingers gently pulling apart her labia so his tongue could lave along her clit.

Good God! She was extremely relieved when the long meal was over.

* * * *

Things were not going as planned, Parker realized as he watched Anastasia unwind her black sarong from her hips, revealing a high-cut thong and two perfect ass cheeks. Wow! Chin hadn't been kidding about bathing suits south of the border. He hadn't seen any topless babes yet, but this was pretty damn close. The woman twirled to spread her sarong wide, so she could lean over and lay it on a deck chair. Her boobs were pushed up and spread by the shape of her bikini top and her navel was flat, sexy, and pierced. She was H-O-T...and married.

So married. Which clammed Parker's libido right up where she was concerned. However, Casey was a different matter, and Casey was the problem. She'd managed to escape him after Ana had coaxed him to join her for a dip in the pool.

"Parker, darling, do you plan to just stand there staring or do you plan to swim?"

He'd rather go find Casey, since that was his assignment. Not to mention, if it was Casey standing before him, he'd be totally ready to do some pairs-skinny-dipping.

"You wanted me to swim, so I'm swimming." He tossed off his shirt and marched across the cement deck to the ladder. Ana wasted no time, making a shallow dive off the edge. She sliced through the clear water, kicked twice, and resurfaced at the other end of the pool. The fact that her blonde hair now shimmered wet on her shoulders and across the rims of her breasts only enhanced her obvious beauty.

Several of the men in the area noticed, joining in his open-mouthed admiration until their wives took aim at their family jewels.

Parker bypassed the ladder and jumped in, hoping to cool off. He wanted to get this swim over with, so he could get back to baby sitting Casey. Yes, Ana was attractive, and a year ago he might have been tempted, anything to mask the ache in his heart after Deanna's death. Around the year anniversary, he'd suddenly gone on a spree, screwing as many gorgeous women as he could, just hoping to keep the memories at bay. He'd been a lecherous ass, until Brandon had called him on it and told him he was jeopardizing his job. How could he be trusted with state secrets if he didn't even know who he was waking up with each morning?

Ana performed the sidestroke perfectly, bringing herself within a foot of Parker, where he

stood dripping at the four-foot mark. She slid a slick finger down his chest. "My my, you do have a nice physique."

"Thank you." He didn't know what else to say to that.

Her hand dropped lower, below the surface of the water, and she boldly cupped his crotch. "Want to play, Parker?"

"Thank you for the offer, but you're married." His dick twitched against her palm, denying his words, but he couldn't be held accountable for an automatic physical reaction. He could, however, be held responsible for following through on his lust.

"Tsk, ts. You're not so old-fashioned, are you?"

He backed up, but her hand remained in place. He was growing aroused at the physical touch, despite himself. And the view of her chest, ripe curves, and hard tits wasn't helping matters. Ignoring that, he said, "Actually I am."

"I can pretend to be single."

"And I can pretend to leave now."

She frowned and let go. He exhaled and willed himself back to calm.

"So that little girl is your thing."

"Do you mean Casey? She's hardly a little girl."

"She's not the woman I am."

"Certainly not, but is that necessarily a bad thing?" Ooh, that came out a bit more cutting than he'd meant it to.

Ana scowled. But that lasted just a moment before she pasted on a smile and laughed. "Well, let us swim then. I'll race you."

Parker had been missing his usual exercise so this suggestion, at least, he could live with. "Ten laps."

"You are on."

* * * *

The ocean breeze stroked Casey's legs as she walked across the damp sand and the water flowed rhythmically as the tide came in. In the distance, a motor boat pulled a water-skier through the breakers. Above, gulls dotted the sky.

Escaping Parker had taken some doing, oddly enough. Casey was flattered by his attention, but she needed time to herself to practice and to contemplate her future. Luckily, Anastasia had talked the pliant man into joining her for a dip in the pool after Boris had announced his intention to take an afternoon siesta. Parker had looked less than happy for some reason, which leavened Casey's spirits. She refused to be jealous of Ana's poise and classic beauty, especially since she was married and since Casey had no claim on Parker and therefore absolutely no reason to be jealous. But still, it felt good to know he wasn't ecstatic to be in Ana's company. She did wonder why, though. Maybe he just had qualms because she was married.

A few of the resort's guests wandered along this section of the beach, but Casey hoped she might find some privacy beyond the bluff a half-mile down the shore. Her feet sank into the hot sand, and she thought with a smile how much New York women paid spas for this sort of exfoliation.

She carefully picked her way across the rocks at the bottom of the bluff. During high tide these rocks would likely be under water, but for now they provided a walkway to her own private room on the beach. Limestone walls dotted with scraggly bushes rose toward the crystal-clear blue sky. Casey lowered herself to the sand at the base of a boulder and leaned back, arching her face toward the sun. Warmth seeped through her thin cotton coverall. She wore a bathing suit

underneath, but had no intention of swimming this afternoon. She'd probably save her swimming for the docile pool and Jacuzzi rather than the unpredictable ocean.

"Now what?" she asked herself. A seagull cried an undecipherable answer. She smiled. It was up to her to set a course of training. Her goal was control. What exercises would help her gain control? The beach offered a variety of tools, such as shells, driftwood, pebbles, and a live crab or two. Casey decided to start with creating a pile. Her power tended to flow automatically when she saw someone in need, but she rarely used it for simple tasks, so this took much more concentration. She pointed her fingers at the object she wanted to move and willed the power to grab the object and lift it into the air.

"Damn." The rock dropped without moving an inch forward. Why was it so hard to do these simple tasks and yet so easy when she didn't have time to think? Adrenaline perhaps? She glared at the rock, pointed her fingers, and growled. It lifted and dropped, quicker this time. Getting frustrated with the task did little to help matters.

She took a deep breath and tried once more. The stone floated a foot into the air. Steady, she told herself. Just a few inches. No problem. Until a noise from a boulder just a few feet away distracted her, causing Casey to lose control and send the stone careening toward the movement.

"Oye!"

Casey jumped at the sound of a disgruntled man's voice. Then a shaggy head appeared. "*Que pasa?*" A dirty hand rubbed an even dirtier forehead as the man, a very old man, examined the offending stone in his other hand. Then he looked, with bleary eyes, in Casey's direction. His eyes widened. He'd obviously not realized someone else was near. Neither had Casey. Had he seen anything?

The man sat up straighter and rattled off some Spanish. She shook her head and shrugged, since she had no clue what he'd said. He scratched his scalp.

Casey rose to her feet and moved toward him cautiously. "Are you okay?" What if he only knew Spanish? She didn't have Parker's dictionary with her. She gestured to his head. "Okay? *Bien?*"

He smiled and stood so suddenly that Casey stepped back a foot. "*Bien, sí sí, bien.* I am good." He clasped her hands, shook them, then set the stone on her palm. "Again? You are magic, no?" When Casey stared blankly, he lifted the stone and waved it through the air, before returning it to her palm. "Fly again, no?"

He'd seen her! Casey dropped the stone and backed away. "No. No magic."

"Sí. I saw the stone fly. Magic, no?"

Casey fought the urge to run as the old man approached her again. His smile was genuine and disarming. His eyes sparkled with the light of discovery. He didn't look freaked out or scared, only curious. He wore a thin brown overcoat that reminded Casey of a rumpled TV detective, and a half empty bottle of cheap rum resided half in and half out of one of its pockets, so that probably attributed a bit to the glimmer in his eyes.

"Do you live near here?" Casey asked with concern. "Are you hungry?"

He tilted his head as if he might not have understood all that she'd said. "Hungry?" He scooped his fingers toward his mouth and nodded.

So much for practice. "Come with me then. I'm sure we can find something for you at the cantina." She hoped Lara wouldn't mind her bringing this stray to the resort. Lara would probably know who to call to fetch the man, or she could send Nando to take him home at the very least.

* * * *

Later that evening as he dressed for dancing, Parker still found himself grinning at the image

Casey had presented as she'd dragged a straggly drunk into the cantina. Lara had known the man. She'd immediately launched into a tirade about him bothering her guests. Casey had insisted that he hadn't been bothering her, that he was just hungry, and perhaps too confused to find his way home. Meanwhile the man, whose name was Bernard Rojas, had rambled on about a flying rock hitting him in the head. He'd accused Casey and called her magic. Poor sot.

Luckily Nando had arrived to take charge of the situation before Parker had had to intervene. Nando later explained that Bernard lived with his mother-in-law over the *pastelería* in town. His wife had died five years ago and now Bernard drank to escape her memory and to avoid conversations with the *bruja*, witch, as he called his mother-in-law. He often slept on stoops or on the beach for the same reason. He was harmless, Nando insisted, and Parker was inclined to agree.

Parker eyed himself critically in the mirror. Not bad.

He'd been a bit concerned earlier when Ana had coerced him into a swim, which allowed Casey to escape his observation for an hour, but he'd bribed Manuel to watch her from the cliff's edge above and to inform him immediately if she'd been followed.

Manuel was a good kid. He'd appeared poolside with an old Polaroid camera dangling from his neck just before Casey had returned, and had whispered in Parker's ear that she'd met Bernard, the old man on the beach. He also mentioned that Boris had been out walking along the cliffs, which Parker thought was odd, since he'd told Ana he would be taking a nap. Maybe Malone could run a background check on Boris and Anastasia tomorrow.

Or maybe Parker was just feeling way too paranoid after the attack on Casey last night. Better to be safe than sorry, as the old saying went.

He checked his watch, locked his room, and went next door to collect Casey.

She opened the door a few seconds after his knock and looked surprised. "Parker, here you are again."

"As I said I would be."

"I'm beginning to think you like me or something." She wrapped a strand of hair around her finger.

"Is that so strange?" Especially since she wore a spaghetti-strap sundress that emphasized her cleavage and the curves of her hips. Her gray eyes mesmerized him. It didn't matter how voluptuous Ana had looked in her black bikini racing him in the pool, Casey had lingered in Parker's mind. He'd found himself wanting to taste her, to stroke her thighs, to curve his arms around her shoulders, and to weave his fingers through her lustrous hair. Just as he wished to do now as he stood just behind her and watched her lock her door. Ana had been more than a little annoyed that he'd rebuffed her obvious come-ons, and though he'd responded to her physically—what man wouldn't?—he'd not felt the violent clench in his stomach just at seeing her like he did now with Casey.

The woman causing this reaction turned and looked at him. "No, I suppose not, but then I'm not the only...ahem...somewhat attractive woman here at the resort. I thought you might divide your attention more."

Normally he would let his pride step in at this point and insist that, of course, he divided his attention. No one woman could capture him completely. But this would not further his agenda, which was to stay close to Casey so he could protect her without arousing her suspicions. It was stupid not to tell Casey who he was and why he was here. Then he could forget this needless playacting and be forthright. Then he could dally with Ana or a dozen women if he felt so inclined.

The problem was he didn't feel so inclined. As he gallantly offered his arm to Casey and led her down the stairs and across the courtyard, her touch jolted his system. Impulses sizzled all the

way to his dick. He wanted to slam her against the wall, push her skirt up, and fuck her hard and rough until they both screamed with release, claiming her as his own. He felt not only protective and watchful, but also territorial and jealous, especially when Boris appeared from beyond the fountain and greeted Casey with his charming smile. Parker found himself itching to punch the young blonde man in the face, rendering its perfection black and blue.

And from the scowl Boris gave Parker, he suspected that man might have some of the same violent feelings.

Casey noticed the by-play between the two men. How very interesting. Was it because Parker went swimming with Ana or because he was here with her? Of course, neither man knew the real Casey, the one with the bizarre talent for moving things with her mind.

As the trio followed the palm-lined path toward the pool area where an outdoor stage had been set up, Casey thought about her identity and how she couldn't seem to separate her 'self' from her power. She imagined her fave talk show host would have something to say about that, if she ever had time to crack open his book. He always seemed so sensible, like he could get to the heart of any issue with a single whip-crack idiom from Texas.

Boris wandered off to greet Anastasia, who was chatting with Lara near the outdoor bar.

"Casey?" Parker squeezed her arm.

"Yes?"

"Is something wrong?"

She focused on his green eyes and the fine laugh lines around them. "No, not really."

"Are you still upset about those men yesterday?"

"Actually, I'd put them out of my mind."

"Really?"

"Well, maybe not out of my mind completely, but I've shoved them to the bottom of the pile."

They paused near a wrought-iron table. "What's at the top of the pile?"

"Bernard for one."

"Why Bernard?"

"He seems like a nice man. I worry that he doesn't have a place to live and food to eat."

"Didn't you hear Nando? He lives in town."

"He does? Well, that's another thing. I still don't understand half of what's going on around me. Everyone speaks so fast that I wouldn't have time to look it up in the dictionary even if I remembered to carry it with me."

"Do you have it with you?"

Casey felt guilty heat spread across her cheeks. "No."

Parker squeezed her fingers gently. "Maybe you're feeling homesick."

"No."

"No? It's only natural. Unfamiliar language and customs, different time zone and cuisine."

"No. I don't miss home. I mean I miss New York. I love New York, but I don't have anything to go back to."

"What about your Chihuahua and Nadine?"

"They're fine without me. I always feel like an outsider." She hadn't meant to say something like that to Parker. Keep it light, she reminded herself.

"I know what you mean."

"You do?"

"Oh yeah. I'm the serious one at work, the stick-in-the-mud. My partner's always trying to

get me to lighten up.”

“Well, I guess if you’re constantly dealing with sick animals” She watched a shadow flit across his face. He wasn’t a vet. And for a moment she’d almost opened up to him. She had to stop making the same mistakes, picking the wrong guys. She was wasting her life on the wrong guys.

On the other side of the pool, Boris flirted with Lara, making her glow. Ana glared at the top of his blonde head. That couple had some problems, as well. No heroes here. Maybe no heroes anywhere. Was that her problem? Was she looking for something that didn’t exist?

The Calypso band moved from a warm-up to hot dance music that had the crowd cheering. Nando led Lara away from Boris and into the center of the tiled deck area in front of the stage. His hips moved as if they had a life of their own. Lara snapped her fingers and stomped her feet. Soon other couples joined in, including Manuel with a young female guest who blushed becomingly as he showed her the Latin dance moves.

“Dance with me?” Parker asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t trust you.”

Parker pulled her to face him. “Do you have to trust me to dance with me?”

Casey tried to see into his eyes, but they were silhouetted by the setting sun behind him. His dark hair curled onto his temples and around his ears. He pulled her close, bringing their bodies together so they could move in tandem. His arms wrapped around her and they started swaying to a beat much slower than the one the musicians played.

Casey’s hands flattened against the soft fabric of his shirt, her fingers splayed across his firm chest. She could feel his heart beat. Or was it her own? Or was it the steel drums and the jungle beat of the music?

Whatever.

It made her feel alive and happy.

A tingle that she normally associated with her telekinesis zinged through her fingertips as Parker lowered his lips close to hers. How odd! But she didn’t dwell on it, as sweet anticipation heated and melted her core. Closer. Closer and she could feel his heat. He kissed her forehead and her nose and her cheekbones. His breath warmed her skin each time he pulled away to find a new place to explore, and she tensed, awaiting his lips, praying that he wouldn’t stop. She couldn’t stop a small gasp from escaping her lips at the intense sensations shooting low in her stomach, and she couldn’t stop wanting more.

What was it about Casey that made him crave her like a salty potato chip or a perfectly grilled New York Strip steak? Her fingers felt uncommonly warm against his chest. His heartbeat seemed to have melded with hers. Each movement of his lips against her skin and his hips against her body sent electrical sparks through all of his nerve endings. When his lips finally settled gently, firmly, against hers he knew he’d crossed a desert to reach this oasis, a desert of years rather than distance.

Her lips were smooth, heated, soft. They danced against his until he could stand it no longer. He opened his mouth and let his tongue roam along her top lip, tasting it, teasing it, testing her. Then he tried the bottom one. Just as sweet, just as tempting. He prodded the tight opening between, asking for entrance. Her mouth opened on a sigh, welcoming him inside and he invaded full-force, plundering the virgin territory.

He’d never felt anything like this before, like a homecoming. His hands had slid down her shapely back and molded her hips to his. He gripped her firm ass, keeping her in place so he could

press his growing erection against her. The friction felt good, far too good. He thought about the games he used to play as a teenager, how he'd coax the girls, trying to go from third base to home plate even with their clothes on. It hadn't always worked, but it had always felt damn good. And this felt damn good. He pushed his hips forward. Damn good.

Time and place slipped away. They danced in a shadow hidden from most prying eyes, but Parker wanted more than dancing. He wanted her naked, beneath him. He wanted to be moving inside her vagina, have her wet heat surrounding him. He floated, losing himself in that long, luscious body kiss.

Until screeching feedback from the singer's microphone brought them crashing back to earth. Damn. They both jerked back, arms dropping. Casey's face displayed open-mouthed confusion. Then her cheeks reddened and she looked at the ground.

Parker shook his head. What the hell was he doing trying to make love to a woman in the middle of a party? And not just any woman—his assignment for God's sake! He took a step back, disgusted with himself. He wanted to touch her, tell her not to be embarrassed, but he was embarrassed at his actions. Maybe he was burned out after all if he couldn't keep his libido in check and keep his mind on his damn job.

"Parker?" Her soft voice was like a magnet to his body. "Is something wrong?"

He turned away and jerked his hair from his brow. "No, dammit."

And just like that, he cut her off. Her silver eyes looked lost for a moment, a little hurt, before they hardened to cynical steel.

"Casey, I..." What? He couldn't explain what his problem was. He'd been ordered not to tell the truth.

Casey backed up another step and straightened her dress. "Quite all right, Parker. No explanation necessary."

But it obviously was. If only he could give one.

"I'm sorry"

"Sure you are, but I think I'll go join the others now so I can enjoy the rest of my evening." She stalked off to chat with Boris, the smarmy ass, and proceeded to stab Parker with pointed silences for the rest of the night.

* * * *

Lara followed Nando's lead as if they'd been born to dance together. His strong hand on her hip barely nudged her before she was whirled into a dizzying turn. The crowd around them cheered and Lara laughed. Times like these she felt alive and young. The boys were up late and she should probably herd them off to bed, but that would break the spell of this handsome man whose eyes sparkled and whose hips flicked and swayed rhythmically. When the music slowed and he brought their bodies close together, his head nestled against her shoulder, she noticed the byplay between Parker and Casey. Again the urge to interfere nearly made her step away, but Nando's hand tightened on her back then dropped to her waist. So close to touching her intimately, yet he did not.

If only she were brave...

Manuel tugged his girl into Lara's line of site. "*Tia*, I'm going to walk Maria home, okay?"

Nando's arm fell away and she felt bereft and cold. It was like he was afraid to show her affection when around the boys.

"Where are Maria's parents?" she asked, stepping into the parental role dutifully. Her life was always about duty lately.

"Mi mama will walk with us, señora," Maria said. She was petite with black hair teased and sprayed, making her look far too old for her years. If only Lara had the guts to warn the girl how

dressings like that would make the boys want her but not love her, how youth passed too quickly and she should grab onto it, not rush it past. But the girl was too young to understand. To her the hairspray and make-up were simply dress-up, not enticements. She had a few years before that became her goal.

Lara sighed sadly, but only Nando noticed, giving her a sharp look. "Manuel, you may walk with her if you take Jose. I don't want you alone for your walk back. Then you and Jose are to wash up and get to bed. Understood?"

"Sí, Tía." He and Maria dashed off hand in hand in search of the smaller boy.

The band now pounded out a salsa beat and already Nando's hips were finding the rhythm. "You are a good mama," he said.

"But I am a woman, too."

His eyes widened. "Of course you are."

"Then why don't you treat me like a woman?"

"You wish me to do more than dance?" His hands cradled her hips, coaxing her into a matching pattern.

"Much more, Nando, much more."

"Soon, *dulcinea*. Love takes time."

"Love, *señor*?"

"Sí, love."

* * * *

The next day, another bumpy bus ride brought several of the resort's guests to an open-air market in the center of town, Parker and Casey among them. Though the enticing smell of roasted *chile* peppers welcomed the group as they stepped off the bus, the first thing Casey noticed was a stand of raw poultry. Whole chickens hung from the tin and wood roof, and blood ran fresh from the hunks of wing and breast on the counter. Flies perched on many of the pieces, making Casey want to gag. She thought about the food she would eat daily while in Mexico and decided to become a vegetarian for the interim.

Parker took her arm, as if the kiss from the night before had never happened, sending tingles all the way to her elbow.

"It's not all that bad," he whispered. "But avoid the guy with the little boxes."

"Why?"

"Cockroaches."

"What?"

Goosebumps sprouted on Casey's arms at the thought of creepy-crawlies. She still had nightmares from an apartment she'd rented in Brooklyn that had been infested with the disgusting creatures.

"They're pranks. He loves offering them to women to watch them scream."

Casey eyed him suspiciously. "How do you know this?"

"I have my sources." He winked, emphasizing the laugh lines around his eyes. This man was way too sexy for his own good and hers. Just his hand on her arm made her feel buzzed.

Boris and Anastasia emerged from the bus chatting gaily in Russian. Parker cocked his head as if listening.

"Don't tell me you know Russian, too. That is what they're speaking, isn't it?"

He smoothed his hand over his lips to hide a guilty start. "I believe it's Russian, which I don't know. I like to listen to languages to try to pick out recognizable words."

He directed Casey past the chicken stall.

“Is that a hobby?”

He glanced back at the handsome couple who were staring in disgust at the chickens. “More of a challenge. Most languages derive from Latin and so have many commonalties.”

Casey’s eyes widened. “You surprise me. First tranquilizers and now Latin.” She really was impressed with his desire to learn something new.

He cleared his throat. “All part of being a ... vet.”

“Uh huh.” Casey looked away, halting in front of a stand of blankets. Why did he keep lying to her? And why did she continue to feel deep in her gut that she could trust him? She focused on the weave of the brightly colored wool. “They’re beautiful.”

Boris and Anastasia caught up with them, and Anastasia agreed. “Yes, very beautiful. *Cuanto cuesta?*” she asked the vendor.

The short, leather-faced man replied, “Thirty dollars.”

Boris snorted. Casey thought it was a deal. A blanket like this would cost at least a hundred in New York.

“Ten dollars,” Parker said firmly. “Which one do you like, Casey?”

“Ten dollar’s not...”

“Twenty,” the vendor countered.

“Fifteen. What about this one?” Parker lifted a gray wool blanket with a Mayan God woven in the center as well as streams of colors worked throughout. “It matches your eyes.”

Casey chuckled. “That sounds like a line if I ever heard one.”

Parker grinned. “But it’s true.”

Casey turned to the vendor. “I’ll take it for fifteen then.”

“*Sí, señorita.*” He offered her an old plastic bag with the word *Gigante* stamped on it to carry the blanket in. Casey rummaged through her hip pouch for cash. She was quickly learning that Mexicans liked to deal in American dollars rather than pesos. Perhaps they knew where to get the best exchange rates, or perhaps it was because this was a high tourist area.

Anastasia also purchased a blanket, one with brightly colored stripes, then fell into stride beside Casey, leaving the men to their mutual grumbling, which seemed to have something to do with women and shopping.

“Shall we leave them to their man talk?” Anastasia asked once they were several strides in front of them. She aimed at a side aisle and gave a little wave to Boris. He took the hint and pointed Parker toward a stand on the opposite side that held fishing equipment.

Anastasia flitted from stand to stand with small exclamations over trinkets, hardly giving Casey time to look at what was on each table. Slow down, Casey thought, regretting her choice of shopping companion. She wanted to linger at each table and examine the sometimes-exotic products to be found there. Fruit and candy vendors were braided among toy and instrument sellers and stands full of woven tunics and ponchos. As Ana darted past yet another table, Casey finally took control and stopped firmly at a leather goods stand. Anastasia could just go on without her if she was in such a rush.

Ana noticed the loss of her companion and returned to peer over Casey’s shoulder.

“Oh, look at these bags!”

The vendor approached, attracted by the sound of an excited voice.

“*Un momento,*” Ana said to him then leaned closer to Casey. “So tell me about Parker. Did you just meet him at the resort?”

Casey breathed shallowly. She hated it when people invaded her personal space. She always worried about bad breath and what not. “No, at the airport. I thought maybe you’d seen us there

with Nando?”

“No. I’m afraid I was too preoccupied with the chaos. I swear we had three different porters fighting over our bags, and the cabby was quite simply insane.”

“Are the drivers better in Russia then?”

She laughed. “We’re not from Russia, dear. I can’t imagine what gave you that idea.”

Casey felt a blush heat her face. “I’m sorry. Your accent...”

“I’m from Bulgaria. An easy mistake for someone unfamiliar with the region I’m sure.”

“Uh, yes.” Casey concentrated on an engraved wallet in front of her. She knew absolutely nothing about Bulgaria, so she couldn’t think of anything to say.

“As to the drivers, they are crazy there, as well, but I own a Hummer so I can run anyone over as necessary.” From the look on her face Casey thought she might be serious about that.

After waving off the vendor yet again, Anastasia led Casey down a short aisle that held only a couple of stalls, one of which sported jewelry, Anastasia’s focus. At the end of this aisle, three burly black men unloaded crates from the open back of a red and white cola truck.

The jewelry was beautiful, handcrafted silver, and the prices were very reasonable. It was clear that Anastasia planned to take her time, so Casey relaxed and spent several moments assessing the pros and cons of each type of chain before moving on to pendants.

The shout distracted Casey from her perusal. When she looked for the source of the sound, she realized that the black men had come up behind her, but it was too late to react. One of the men thrust a body-sized burlap bag over her head and pulled it down to her feet. She struggled to drop down, away from the bag, to back up, anything. Then she was lifted off her feet and carried, despite her full body movements.

She was being kidnapped again. God dammit!

CHAPTER SEVEN

How did this stuff keep happening to her? And why?

Casey could hear Anastasia's muffled voice as she yelled 'stop' and 'help', but she couldn't tell if anyone responded because she was too busy struggling to get out of the bag, or at the very least, get the men to drop her.

The smell was overwhelming, dirt and possibly manure combined. Casey gagged and tears coursed down her cheeks, not from emotion but in response to the grainy material lodging in her eyes. She blinked rapidly and tried to bring up her hands, but the men had them securely pinned against her body. Instead she kicked and wriggled, but her feet never connected with anything and no amount of movement on her part got them to lose their grip.

They dropped her onto a hard surface.

"Ow! Let me go, you evil creepazoids! Gak!"

She sneezed, then spit more dust out of her mouth as an engine roared to life and a door slammed. She must be on the beverage truck, because she could feel the engine's vibrations through the floor. Someone was sitting on her stomach, holding her hands to her sides. He flattened her fingers against the floor.

Through her confusion, Casey had one coherent thought. *He knows about my power coming from my hands!*

Casey didn't recognize the language these men spoke, but if she had to guess she'd say African of some sort. Jesus, was the entire world after her?

"We are going to cut the bag open." A very thick accent. "Do not try anything. We have a gun pointed at your head."

Casey grunted in what she hoped sounded like agreement. The bag ripped and she coughed as more dust flew into her eyes, mouth, and nose. The man pulled her hands together behind her back and roped her wrists together. Would he think to bind her fingers?

Yes dammit! The men quickly wrapped duct tape around them, so she couldn't wiggle or flex her fingers at all. The first niggling of fear entered her consciousness. She felt like a pig going to market. Ugh, not a good analogy, since it evoked images of butchers with sharp knives.

One man heaved her onto her back. With her arms behind her, her chest and stomach stuck up higher than her head and legs. Her arms hurt and her neck hurt, and this shift of position brought her face to face with the gun. Dammit again!

* * * *

"Boris, darling, we have a problem."

Anastasia, the Queen of Understatement.

She'd found the men in a crowded aisle examining toy guns. Parker looked up from the display of popguns, hearing the slight quiver in her voice. He noticed that she spoke at a higher pitch, not the low sexy voice she'd used earlier. This was not going to be good news.

"Where's Casey?" he asked immediately.

She turned to him and narrowed her eyes. "That is the problem. She seems to have been kidnapped."

"What!" he and Boris chorused together, like some bad TV movie.

“Yes, we’ve no time to waste.” She grabbed Boris’s hand, for once without coyness. “I’ll explain along the way.”

Of course, explaining was difficult since she had to concentrate on parting the sea of Mexicans hauling wares and chattering in the center of the aisle. Parker watched from just behind Boris, and noticed Anastasia packed quite a punch when she put her mind to it. She shoved and whacked as necessary and breathlessly shouted back to Boris.

“A truck...three black men, spoke...African, I think. I wasn’t paying attention to their jabber until...too late.”

The aisles cleared and they ran full tilt to the scene of the crime. Unfortunately there wasn’t much to see at that point. Parker was flabbergasted. What the hell did Africans want Casey for? He’d thought he had an idea of the players in this game and now they’d shuffled again.

As Parker paced the area, eyes down searching for clues, he asked Anastasia, “What did the truck look like exactly?”

He glanced up and noticed some kind of by-play between Boris and Anastasia. What did they know that they weren’t saying? Maybe it was just a husband and wife thing?

“I must call the *policia*,” Boris said before Anastasia could answer. He took off at a jog. Parker reached into his pocket for his cell before he remembered that the damn thing had died for good. It was sitting on the coffee table in his room waiting for a proper funeral.

Ana watched her husband for a moment then returned her gaze to Parker. “It was a dirty white delivery vehicle.” She closed her eyes. “It read something on the side...some kind of soda.”

Parker peered up and down the aisle. “No drink machines. Can you tell me anything else about the men? The license plate? The direction they headed?”

“The men were tall, dark black, thin. They headed...” She pointed to the gravel area beyond the market stalls.

“South.”

“Yes. The plates were too muddied to read.”

A red Geo skidded to a halt on the gravel. Boris opened the door. “Get in. No time to waste.”

“Great.” Parker wondered how the annoying man had procured this car so quickly, but he didn’t care so long as it meant they were on the road after Casey. He slid into the passenger seat, Ana climbed into the back and pointed out the direction, and Boris gunned the gas, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

“There’s a road this way, goes along the coast.” Boris pushed the gas pedal to the floor while adjusting the knob on a gadget on the seat. It seemed to be some sort of handheld GPS, global positioning system.

Parker leaned in for a closer look, locating the road Boris referred to.

The gun was at his hip and a knife at his ankle as usual, but revealing these would reveal his identity and he began to think it imperative that he keep that secret. The amount of players in this game kept him off-balance. Would he find more? And what did it all mean?

Soon the tiny Geo caught up with the lumbering truck, with its red and white logo emblazoned on the back, on the curvy coast road.

“I think we should stay back until we reach an area where we can maneuver,” Parker said.

Boris nodded curtly. A click from the backseat, which sounded an awful lot like a gun cocking, pulled Parker’s attention, but when he looked back at Ana he saw no sign of a gun and she looked just as intent on the scene up ahead as ever. He sincerely hoped she didn’t have a gun, because he didn’t want to get his head blown off during this little escapade.

His heart sped up, every beat throbbing in his temples, and a wave of dizziness flowed through his mind. Was he going to be able to do this? He had no doubts about his skill level, but what if his heart conked out at the crucial moment? What if he had a stroke at the very second he leaped to Casey's rescue?

Maybe he really wasn't cut out to be an agent any more.

Focus, Parker. The moment. The car. The job at hand.

And finally, the dizziness, though it didn't exactly fade, took a back seat to his determination.

* * * *

"What do you want?" Casey looked each man in the eye in turn.

All three men were the color of dark chocolate and thin. Stubble covered their chins and their recently shaved heads. They wore overalls with company insignia on them. One man had a serious scar across his neck, almost as if someone had tried to cut his head off. Gulp. The second man had odd green eyes. The third man was slightly shorter and stockier than the others. He was the man who held the gun in her face. What was totally bizarre, though, was that they all wore matching medallions attached to chains about their necks. Where had she seen that before?

"You know you could shoot me just as easily from three feet away as three inches," Casey said. Conversation was always a good stalling tactic. She did want a closer look at one of those medallions, but not at the expense of staying in closer proximity to a bullet.

The man grunted and pulled back. How did they stay on their feet so easily when the truck bumped and swayed violently? Good balance. Maybe they'd spent most of their lives on a boat.

Casey tried to focus her power through her trapped fingers, but she couldn't do it. Perhaps she could if she trained herself to, but she sensed that time was of the essence here.

"Where are you taking me?"

The men remained stoically silent.

"Are you just going to stare at me the whole journey?" Maybe the power couldn't flow because she was lying on her arms. Maybe once she stood—would they stand her on her feet eventually?—she would be able to rocket herself out of their midst.

"So tell me, what's with the matching jewelry?"

The men glanced at each other, but refused to engage in conversation. *Come on, fellas, I need information here.*

A moan caused Casey to rock her head to the side. Another human lay in a clump a few feet away. This person was on his side and wore denims and a woven poncho, much more worn than the ones she'd seen for sale at the market. From what she could view of his face, he had dark rugged skin, but not as dark as their captors. His skin had more of a reddish tint, Mexican. The driver they'd stolen the truck from perhaps? He moaned again and Casey noticed that red ooze stained the front of his shirt and dripped to the floor.

"He's hurt. Help him!"

The men turned in unison to look at their other victim, shrugged, and returned their stares to her.

Gunman spoke. "He is expendable. He is lucky we have not shot him yet. Too noisy in the crowded market, but here it would not be noticed. Perhaps now is the time to kill him." He bent his head, giving an obvious order to Scarneck.

"No! If you kill him, I'll kill you, I swear, if it's the last thing I do." She threw as much menace into her voice as possible, though she felt less than confident at the moment. How would she kill them if she couldn't get her hands free?

Scarneck pulled a gun out of his waistband as he moved closer to his quarry. She could not lay there and watch a man get shot. She could not.

She felt the power tingle through her body as she watched the African raise his gun and take aim. The sound of the shot echoed through the truck, followed by a metallic ping as the deflected bullet bounced harmlessly off the far wall. Deflected by her power.

“But her hands” All eyes were on her, wide with shock.

How had she done that? She didn’t even know herself. It had seemed to zing through her eyes. She narrowed those eyes, ignoring the sharp pain in her shoulder, and glared at her captors. She had a bargaining chip now, though she wasn’t at all sure she could help herself in the same way she had the driver.

And if they managed to blindfold her, she’d be shit out of luck. She planned not to give them that opportunity.

“What do you want?” This time the menace in her voice was real. She struggled to sit up to relieve the pressure on her arms.

“A gun still kills you, no?” The leader cocked the gun and aimed it at her head.

She gasped at the sound and was tempted to start begging for her life, before her wits kicked back in.

“Is that really why you’ve gone through all this trouble? To kill me? That doesn’t make any sense. You could have easily killed me at the market, and I wouldn’t have known what hit me.” She shook her shoulders, glad to be upright. “I’m thinking you need me alive. Am I right?”

The man shrugged. “I will kill you if necessary.”

“Good to know.” Casey tried to give him the evil eye, but her power wouldn’t cooperate. It preferred to let her save another rather than save herself. She sighed. She couldn’t use her power to hurt another human being, but flinging him against the wall wouldn’t really hurt him, would it? She vowed to spend a lot more time practicing and experimenting if she ever got out of this mess. If only Bernard hadn’t cut short her practice yesterday.

Shouting from the truck’s cab served as notice that something was up. The truck swerved and swayed. Casey nearly fell over from her sitting position. She readied herself. Another mad swerve and she rammed the gunman’s stomach. He hit the side of the truck just as another sashay seemed to take the truck up on two wheels. The gunman’s head came down in a thud. One down.

The moaning from the wounded driver had quieted. Had he died? Casey spared a glance for him. His eyes were wide open, but he was breathing. He seemed alert.

I’ll try it, Casey thought, firing her eyes at the man. Slowly, unbelievably, he lifted into the air, warm air currents floating him upwards.

Holy shit, I’m doing it!

As she turned her head toward the truck’s back door, the man moved toward the back door. He whimpered but reached out, still afloat, and pulled on the latch. The door lifted. Open.

And now Casey could see why the truck had gone mad. A small Geo was chasing it, swerving now and then to try to get alongside. When it did this, the truck jerked to block it.

Wide-eyed, the floating driver seemed to be praying in Spanish. Apparently he didn’t like being suspended over the edge of a rapidly moving truck bed with a clear view of the gravelly road below.

Casey had never tried moving such a large object so carefully before. Usually she sent a gush to propel or block. This time she had to be exact. And quick, since the goons were likely to recover their wits and retaliate at any moment.

* * * *

“What the hell?” Parker blinked, then blinked again. Was he hallucinating? Were there ropes he couldn’t see?

“Do you see that man?”

“The one floating in mid-air, you mean?” Boris nodded, eyes wide then narrowing.

“I cannot believe it,” Ana breathed, her lips surprisingly close to Parker’s ear. Boris gave her a sharp look.

They all watched in amazement as the body floated to the side of the road, keeping pace with the vehicles. Then it plopped to the ground, as if the strings had been cut, and rolled.

“Should we stop?” Ana asked.

Parker took a mere second to decide. “Casey’s still in the truck.” If the man was dead, it wouldn’t matter, but if he was alive “You called the police, right? Are they on their way?”

Boris flicked his eyes away, then nodded. “But perhaps Ana should use the cell to call for an ambulance? If it transmits from out here.”

Ana pulled a miniscule Motorola phone from her pocketbook and flipped it open. “No signal.”

“Damn!” Boris’s curse seemed less than heartfelt, and Parker began to wonder if Boris had called the police back at the market. He did seem truthfully intent on retrieving Casey, but what did it mean if he didn’t want police involvement?

Parker wished he were on an operation with back-up just around the bend, or at least computer access, so he could look up backgrounds on the happy Russian couple. He didn’t dare interrogate them now and risk their help in getting Casey back. He’d have to content himself with contacting Malone as soon as he returned to the resort.

Now that the man’s body was no longer floating—floating!—in front of the windshield, Boris focused on catching up to the truck again. There was no fucking way Parker had seen what he’d thought. No way.

The car jerked as it hit a pothole, but at least the road was widening finally. They needed the room to maneuver.

“Get my door as close to the opening as possible and I’ll jump,” Parker ordered. He opened the door latch but held it closed until the proper moment.

“That’s too risky!” Ana grabbed his shoulder. “Too dangerous.”

“No problem.” Parker almost added that he’d done it several times before, but he resisted. Besides each time was different. It wasn’t a case of practice makes perfect.

As the car drew alongside the back of the truck, Parker could see Casey braced against the far wall, on her feet but with her hands behind her back. Probably tied. Two black men held MP5s pointed at her, and a third sat on the floor holding his head. Could he take on all three? Maybe Casey would be more help this time than she’d been during the last fight.

“Now!” Boris shouted. “Another truck is coming. We have to move!”

Parker swung the door open and climbed onto the window ledge, launching himself at the truck bed. His stomach thudded against the edge. He quickly found a hook on the wall to grab and heaved himself onto the gritty floor.

“Get him!”

He looked up in time to see two goons coming at him, ready to send him back the way he’d come. A sudden gust of wind blew hair into Parker’s eyes, distracting him, and the next thing he knew the goons were skidding along the floor. They barely stopped themselves from sliding right out onto the roadway.

What the hell?

Parker found his feet and lurched through the truck. The third man stood and pointed a Vektor 9mm at him. Shit. Now what? Freezing seemed the most prudent course of action, until he thought of something better. Maybe a stomach slam...?

Suddenly the man's gun arm swung upward and back, banging against the truck wall. The pistol dropped free, but then it changed direction in mid-air and flew out the back of the truck, nearly smashing into the Geo. A quick swerve on Boris's part helped him avoid a collision with the gun.

"Are you going to save me or what?" Casey shrieked.

Parker scowled at the woman before following through with his stomach-slam idea.

The four-way fist fight that followed reddened Parker's knuckles and he knew tomorrow he'd have several black and blue marks on his torso. He managed to flip his knife to the flooring by Casey's feet, hoping she'd be able to use it on her bonds to release herself. *Come on, woman, be useful for a change.* She didn't move. What was her problem?

Casey stared at the knife, but couldn't fathom how she could get it anywhere near the ropes without the use of her fingers. Even if she could pick it up between her taped hands, then what? If she could get her hands in front of her, maybe she could use her feet to brace it.

The fight distracted her again, as one of the men approached Parker with a dagger. Casey gave it a look and sent it flying. She was getting the hang of this eye thing now, and her power never failed her when someone else was in trouble.

She again looked at the useless tool at her feet. Perhaps if she floated the knife, she could direct it to cut her bonds. She still needed to get her hands to the front.

A machete! One of the Africans swung it at Parker. Where the hell had he pulled that from? Oh, he had a scabbard strapped to his back. Casey hadn't noticed that before. The machete zinged and slashed through Parker's shirt before Casey could even react.

Blood! Okay, the machete had to go. No time to fool with her hands if she had to keep this close a watch on the action. Was Parker really hurt? He'd merely grunted a bit, so it probably was only a surface wound. The machete flew out of the truck, almost taking the wielder with it, since at first he refused to let go.

It was really kind of romantic for Parker to come after her like this. The last fight, he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but this time he had to have made a conscious choice to come after her.

The three men circled Parker like a pack of dogs, and he met them scowl for scowl, sparing just a quick glance at Casey. What the hell was she waiting for? Parker blinked sweat from his eyes and adjusted his fighting stance. His gun rested in the band of his pants. He was hoping to gain the element of surprise, because he was obviously outgunned while they were armed. That problem was solved at least.

He was going to kill Casey for not freeing herself with the knife. What an idiot! The classic damsel-in-distress waiting for the hero to save her. Well, she could damn well take some initiative here.

The Geo zoomed forward, out of sight, hopefully to get in front of the truck and force it to stop. Parker pulled his gun and unlocked the safety behind his back. He decided quick wounding rather than precise aiming lessened the risk of one of them getting the jump on him.

Three shots and each man fell against the wall nursing a body part and moaning. His hand held his firing wrist steady as he waited to see if anyone planned to continue the fight. He backed toward the wall and Casey.

"Why didn't you use the knife?" He knelt, feeling the floor for it, never taking his eyes off

his attackers.

“I couldn’t.”

“You could have tried,” he growled, jerking her around so he could reach her hands. That’s when he realized they’d taped her fingers together. What the hell for? At least it explained her damsel-in-distress routine. He carefully sliced the extra-sharp blade through the tape and ropes.

“Thank God,” Casey said, shaking her hands to revive the circulation. “What about the driver?”

“The driver? Hopefully Boris is going to force him to a halt.”

“No, the injured Mexican that...left the truck earlier. Is he okay?”

“I don’t know...and why did you call him the driver?”

“I think they took the truck from him.”

He took a deep breath. “And how do you explain how he got off the truck?” He still couldn’t explain what he’d seen and since the fight, the memory seemed even more surreal, likely part of his panicked imagination, in fact, since there was no other logical explanation for a man levitating off a truck.

Brakes squealed as Casey opened her mouth to answer. The truck tipped and Parker could only hope they were past the cliff’s edge as everything turned horizontal. He wrapped his arms around Casey and grabbed onto the railing along the wall, bracing his feet wide and bending his knees. Then they both held on for dear life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When the movement stopped, reaction set in. Parker's heart pounded, his mouth was dry, and his arms shook from the strain. His body pressed firmly against Casey's.

"They jumped," Casey breathed.

"Who?"

Parker's mind wasn't quite functioning, but his body was on hyper drive. The adrenaline coursing through his veins changed to desire in mere seconds. He wanted to take Casey, take her right there in the truck. Obviously a bad idea, but it blasted through him, despite his efforts to tamp it down. He shook his head and tried to steady his thoughts and slow his breathing.

"Who jumped?"

Casey leaned her head against Parker's arm. "The bad guys."

He could barely hear her since her mouth was pressed against his sleeve.

"Casey?"

"What?" She looked up, hot pink lips beckoning.

"I want you."

"What?" Alarm threaded her voice, but Parker didn't care. He kissed her open-mouthed, forcing her lips wide, invading with his tongue. Blood filled his dick, giving him a raging hard-on, which banged against her stomach. His thighs encased hers, holding her in place. He knew he was coming on too strong. He knew this wasn't the right place or time and that she'd slap him any moment.

But she didn't slap him. She kissed him back, roughly, angrily, like she could take out all her anger at the kidnappers on him. He soaked it up.

He pulled back and said, "That's it. Let it out."

Then he ravaged her mouth again and bucked his hips, pushing his cock into her soft flesh, shock and adrenaline fueling the crazy make-out session. If only the fabric didn't separate them. Wanting to feel every inch of her, he touched her hips, her shoulders, her breasts. Oh man, so soft, so heavy in his palms. Forget gentleness. She ground her hips up, seeking the friction that could make her come, at the same time making him nuts with the pleasure. He pinched one tit, hard, then gentle, and she moaned.

She moaned. Holy shit. She didn't say 'ow' or 'stop'. She moaned and fought to bring him closer, to pull his tongue deeper into her throat. It was like she was giving a blow job to his tongue, so he thrust into her mouth in response. She tasted hot, intense. Her hands raced down his body until they gripped his ass. More pressure. His dick was leaking pre-cum and he knew, if he could get inside her that moment, that he'd come.

He was so glad the captors had scampered, because at the moment any of them could have pointed a gun at his head and he wouldn't even have noticed.

* * * *

Boris stared in shock at the capsized truck. He'd watched it skid out of control, flip to its side, and skid several feet on flat earth. What if he'd killed her, his prize? Liang would fire him then and Russia would send him into exile or worse for his failure.

But it was his partner's fault. Anastasia should have watched Casey more closely. She

shouldn't have let this happen.

Columns of dust hung in the air and deep gouges in the earth showed where the truck had skidded.

Anastasia had taken off on foot after the Africans, but he had no doubt they'd outdistance her. She could take care of herself. But had he killed Casey when he'd forced the truck to stop?

In the dirt a glint of metal caught his eye. He lifted it up and pulled his monocle from his pocket so he could peer more closely. It was a medallion attached to a cheap chain. Several links of the chain were broken on the ground. It wasn't the chain that was interesting. The medallion, solid gold, sported a familiar symbol.

"Ah," Boris said, smiling. Now he understood. He tucked the pendant into his pocket. He planned to keep this piece of evidence to himself.

The black driver, obviously one of the kidnappers, was dead. A tree branch had pierced the windshield and his skull. Boris idly wondered if the cops were on their way. He'd never called them, of course, because he couldn't have them hauling Casey off as a material witness, and he couldn't have them nosing into his background. But this much chaos, and even in this remote area, someone had to have witnessed it.

That was the rub. If Casey was alive, then he couldn't leave the scene. This meant talking to the police, though he'd prefer not to bring himself to the local authorities' attention. He kept his hand on the gun in his jacket pocket as he approached the rear of the truck.

"Casey? Parker? Are you all right?"

He used his friendly voice, the one he hoped would induce her trust, despite his accent. The foolish Africans—Nigerian, Liberian, he never could keep up with politics from that part of the world—hadn't thought their plan through. Keeping Casey secure would require something far more sophisticated than duct tape.

His plan was more complex. He and Anastasia would win the girl's trust, get to know her and her power. How strong was she exactly? Did she need her hands free to use it? Could she do anything else, like read minds or see into the future? This seemed unlikely, since the kidnappers had just ambushed her.

Good. One test down.

He ultimately hoped to convince her to work with them willingly, perhaps with some silly story about a secret U.S. agency or some such thing, but given her history with the Institute, she might resist doing anything for love of country.

Once Boris had Casey firmly in hand, he'd have to lose Anastasia. Forever. He sighed at that thought. She could be a very inventive partner, but she was an expendable one. And one that was bound to cause problems if she discovered his dual employment situation. It was too risky to let her live.

"We're here." Parker's voice. Boris skirted a demolished tail light to reach the rear of the truck.

Parker was hefting Casey to her feet and steadying her. They were both flushed and breathing hard. Naturally, given the adrenaline rush from the accident.

"Are you hurt?"

Boris moved to Casey's side and checked her forehead for signs of blood or bruising.

Casey gave him a weak smile. "I'm fine. Thanks to Parker. He held me steady during the fall." Was she blushing? No, she was flushed from the twirling of the truck.

Boris felt the tiniest flash of annoyance at Parker for playing the hero. Casey seemed more attractive to him now than she had in New York, when he'd watched her win the raffle, the raffle

he'd rigged just for her. Maybe it was the thrill of the chase or the challenge of stealing her from another man that had him noticing her erect nipples and flushed cheeks. He could easily imagine her naked beneath him, writhing, arms cuffed over her head, legs spread wide and tied to bed posts, so he certainly couldn't fault another man for feeling the same desire. But he did resent him. Oh yes, and Parker would become an end to tie up when all this was over. But not in the way he longed to tie Casey up. No, Parker deserved a noose around his neck or a bullet between his eyes. He'd look forward to that, at least.

Sirens and crunching turf announced the arrival of the *policia*. Hopefully none of them would be astute enough to pierce his cover. It had only happened once in the past, making him extremely cautious ever since.

Ana returned, sweat cruising down her forehead, rings at the armpits of her silk blouse. Her disgusted look said it all. She'd failed. He took her arm and steered her to the periphery as the cops questioned Casey and Parker in the back of a squad car.

"You stink," Boris said, wrinkling his nose.

Ana snorted. "And you are a lazy ass. I could have used your help."

"Even I could not have caught them. They were excellent runners. Did you get a look at their faces?"

"Not really."

"Well, I'll run a check when we return to the resort and see if I can learn anything about the activity in this area."

Ana leaned against a tree, petting a prickly agave plant. "I believe you may discover that quite a few of us are visiting this quaint locale."

"Yes, and if so, we need to know who and where they are." An officer glanced their way and pointed. Another officer strode toward them. Ana whispered just before the policeman reached them. "Why don't we just grab her?"

"Do you want to fail like they did?" He gestured to the truck. She shook her head. Boris knew she was up for a promotion, greedy, unworthy cunt. Too bad she wouldn't live to get it.

* * * *

Casey grasped Parker's hand as she stepped from the police cruiser. The tang of the sea air caressed her nostrils and a gentle breeze lifted the hair on her neck and forehead. No mariachi played today, but the front of the Luna Resort looked as cheery as ever, festive like the blanket Ana had bought at the market.

"Do you think Ana and Boris are back already?"

Parker grunted. "Probably hours ago. They avoided the stint at the police station somehow."

"I'm sure the police figured they can reach them if they need to ask more questions." They walked up the path as the cruiser zipped back into the light traffic, narrowly missing a cyclist with a basket full of fruit. "I think they were hoping for a better description of the men from us."

"Well, that sketch artist was pretty good, but those men won't let themselves be found."

"Why do you say that?"

His hand touched her shoulder, and warmth spread from that spot throughout her body. She recalled that brief moment in the truck when she'd felt his heat, more than heat. They'd sizzled like tortillas on a cast iron griddle. She'd wanted to fuck him senseless right in the truck. And as insane as that was, he was the reason she didn't feel more traumatized. He made her feel stable somehow, even in the midst of this craziness.

And it was crazy. First, how did these men locate and recognize her? And were they connected to the guys who had shot her with tranquilizers? If not, just how many more bad guys

were going to pop out of the woodwork? God, what was she going to do to keep safe? She couldn't fight them all off forever. What kind of life would that be?

"These guys were professional," Parker said. "It may have not been a perfect plan, but it was a pretty good one. If Ana hadn't run and found us, and if Boris hadn't located a car so fast, you'd have been long gone. And did you notice their medallions?"

Casey had the strong urge to lean against his chest and let him wrap his arms around her. "Medallions?" She didn't want to think about this afternoon anymore. Would he mind if she did? Would she mind what this might lead to?

Actually she had noticed the jewelry and suddenly she remembered where she'd seen similar pendants—on the Swedes.

Guilt fluttered through her stomach. She hadn't told Parker about the Swedes, her telekinesis, or that these men were after her to use that particular talent for their own nefarious reasons. He'd put his life at risk for her, but she didn't trust him enough to tell him the truth.

No, trust wasn't the issue. Insecurity was. Casey wanted Parker to like her. It was boy meets girl in the middle of a James Bond movie. And he wasn't going to like her the minute he found out about her telekinesis. What should she say about the medallions?

"Yes, I think I saw a medal like that on one of the men who attacked you last night."

"Really?"

"Did you notice what was on it? Because frankly I wasn't paying that much attention."

Casey sighed. "Me neither."

"Damn, it might tell us who they're working for."

"You think they're connected?"

"I wouldn't have thought so, but those matching medallions can't be coincidence." He hugged her shoulder. "Are you hungry? We could go to the cantina." Parker's hand slid to her elbow as they walked. She noticed that his eyes wandered though, from side to side and up to the balcony. He was catching on that someone would likely cause more trouble.

"You know I am hungry, but I think I'm more tired."

"We can order room service."

The sounds of laughter and singing drifted on the fragrant air from the cantina. Palm leaves swayed gently.

Casey smiled. "Parker, you have been so terrific today, but you must be beat, too. Don't feel like you have to baby-sit me. I do know how to take care of myself. I'm a New Yorker, you know."

"Just humor me, okay? I want to see for myself that your room is still in one piece. After that I'll be right next door if you need me."

At least he wasn't grilling her about the men and why they might be after her. Maybe he was just too tired to deal with it at the moment? She certainly was.

"Parker, would you like to meet for dinner later?" The soccer boys had explained that the locals often went out after ten to buy tortillas and sodas from the street stands before dancing until dawn at the clubs. That sounded like fun...after a nap.

Parker grinned. "Would you go dancing with me?"

"Maybe." She remembered how dancing had turned out last night. Perhaps it would be best to proceed with caution. "Let's see how dinner goes."

"Deal."

The courtyard sparkled in the waning sunlight. A little girl splashed in the fountain while her mother sat on the edge and watched. A couple held hands and chatted on a stone bench. Two of the walls sported frescoes in the style of the Rivera.

Casey's legs weighed a ton as she climbed the steps with Parker close behind her. She had to concentrate to get the key into her lock, and she stood yawning as Parker assured himself that the room was safe. Would she stay awake long enough to meet Parker for dinner? She'd hate for her vacation to pass in a blur of attempted kidnappings rather than in romance.

She put her hand on Parker's arm as he turned toward the door. "Maybe knock on the glass door, in case I fall asleep?"

He brushed a lock of hair from her forehead. "Are you sure you don't want to sleep the night through?"

"Do you?"

"No, but I'd understand if"

She squeezed his arm. "I want to have some fun tonight, Parker. Normal fun."

"Okay, and we can talk."

No, forget talking. She knew what Parker would want to discuss, and she wasn't ready to tell him the truth. Well, she'd use her feminine wiles to distract him. That'd be fun. She'd never consciously used her feminine wiles before.

* * * *

A knock on the glass jarred Casey from a restless sleep. Beyond the glass, the setting sun silhouetted a man's shape. Casey's breath caught. She lifted her arms, ready to send the intruder backward over the balcony if necessary.

"Casey? Are you in there?"

Parker.

Casey exhaled slowly to calm her heart. She'd almost unleashed her power on him, and after she'd told him to knock on the glass if she was asleep. The room was dim, so Casey switched on the bedside lamp before standing and walking to the gauzy floor-length drapes. She swept them aside and unlocked the door. It was a flimsy lock and the doors could easily be taken off the track. No wonder the intruders had gotten in so easily. So far they hadn't been back to her room, as far as she knew.

"Finally. I was banging for ten minutes. I was about to give up and go on without you." Parker's tall form stepped into the room and filled it with his presence. He pulled the door shut with one tug and locked it, then turned to face Casey.

"Sorry. I was so out of it." Her voice trailed off. Parker was gazing at her legs intently, and that's when she realized she wore only a long T-shirt and no underwear at all. Her cheeks warmed in embarrassment, while her nipples responded in arousal. Traitors. Of course, they wouldn't be shy.

"No problem."

"Huh?" Casey cleared her throat, and realized that Parker was resuming the conversation, so she said, "I mean, why don't you go on without me? I didn't mean for you to have to starve."

Starved. Parker looked starved, but not for food. His eyes felt like a physical touch as they wandered over her body, every part of it, from her ankles to her bare thighs to her overly perky breasts. Casey thought of pulling her T-shirt further down her thighs, but that would just call attention to the situation. Better to brazen it out. If only the room hadn't started to feel so small and so warm, then maybe she could even out her breathing and heart rate.

Parker finally met her eyes. "I...had a couple granola bars in my room, so I'm good."

"Well, I have to"

"Take your time." He sat on the end of her bed, struggling to hide the grin on his face. "I'll wait."

Of course a gentleman would go to the living room and idly flip channels on the TV, but not Parker. He could out-brazen her any day. Meanwhile if she bent over to dig in her still-packed suitcase for her underwear, he'd really get an eyeful.

She tried not to notice his hot gaze on her. Perhaps she'd wear the red dress tonight without any undies. Problem solved. But she'd spend the night worrying that everyone could tell, and she certainly didn't want to seduce the wrong man.

Besides, given her track record since arriving here she'd likely be kidnapped tonight, and no underwear would just give the captors easy access. Not a good idea. But an eyeful could be just what the situation called for, serve Parker some of his own medicine, so instead of kneeling in front of the suitcase, she bent over. Cool air circled her bare butt cheeks as the shirt slipped away, hanging from her hips. She stepped her legs apart just wide enough for him to see the cleft between her thighs.

And she knew he could see it because of his quickly in-drawn gasp. Maybe she should give a little wiggle?

The bed springs creaked and she decided that wasn't a good idea. Just rummage through the jumble of clothes quickly. She found a thong and concealed it in her fist, before grabbing the red dress from its hanger and marching to the bathroom, without checking on Parker's whereabouts. She rarely wore thongs, but when she'd packed she'd had romance in the back of her mind despite her sexual issues.

She locked the bathroom door, half afraid Parker would follow her inside, then slipped the dress over her hips with a swish. She struggled with the zipper, but couldn't get the last two inches done up no matter how much she wiggled and bounced.

"Damn." Well, make-up and hair first. Then, she bravely left the bathroom to request assistance. Instead of forming words, she turned her back to Parker and waited. The bed squeaked. She heard his tread on the carpet. She could tell he was close when his breath tickled her neck. His big hands brushed her skin as he pulled the zipper to the top. Then his fingers traveled between her shoulder blades, traced her spine, and brushed the hair from her nape. The heat from his body warmed her thighs through the thin fabric of her dress.

He kissed her lightly on the most sensitive part of her neck, sending a tingle through all of her nerve endings. Shallow breaths seemed safest, as if breathing too deeply would bring more contact or break the spell.

Another kiss. Oh God, she melted. One hand drifted across her shoulder and down her arm, raising goose bumps. That hand smoothed over the satin of the dress around the curve of her ribs to the flat flesh of her stomach. Parker's thumb drifted higher until it brushed against her tight nipple. Her breath caught at the sensation. She closed her eyes and dampness filtered between her legs.

"Casey." Warm breath tickled her cheek. Strong fingers encased both breasts, so gentle, so right.

"Yes?"

"Turn around."

She did. He relaxed his lips against hers, barely touching, firmer, harder. She opened her mouth to let him slide in. Their tongues danced and her arms drifted around his neck and cradled him. Their bodies pressed together and the friction sparked a slow-burning passion inside of Casey. She didn't want to stop, but she knew they would. They had to for Parker's safety. If not for her unruly power, she'd help him undo what he'd just zipped up so he could push the dress to her hips and take her breasts into his mouth, one at a time. She wanted to unbutton his shirt, splay her hands across his chest, and circle his flat nipples with her tongue.

Parker moaned, as if he guessed at her fantasies. She could feel the lower part of his body pressing hard against her center. Maybe he was having fantasies of his own. His lips clung to hers and her arms held him close.

After long moments the kisses gentled and their bodies moved apart a fraction. Finally someone said, "We have to stop." Parker. He tilted her chin so he could look her in the eye. "Because I'm really hungry, and I could eat all night."

Casey nodded, knowing he didn't mean food. "We're adults you know. We could"

"No. There's plenty of time, and I want to see you dancing merengue in that red dress."

* * * *

Jealousy poured through Parker as he watched Casey flirt with Boris on the other side of the cantina table. He thought it was unconscious on her part, but Boris knew what he was doing. He and Ana must be an 'enlightened' couple, considering the looks Anastasia was giving Parker right in front of her husband. If Casey was his and ever looked at another man like that, she'd be locked in her bedroom and the man would be on his way to the hospital.

Condensation rolled over Parker's fingers as he lifted the margarita to his lips. He ought to examine that last thought. It was a dangerous one, but the only thought that lingered in his mind was whether he could pull Casey into a shadowy corner and lift her red dress to her waist and thrust himself inside her. He really, really hoped that no one tried to tranquilize or kidnap her tonight, because he definitely had different plans for the woman.

A hand squeezed his thigh and for a moment he thought it was Casey, but she sat too far away. It was Ana's long manicured fingers tracing their way higher along his leg.

"Stop!" he whispered, not wanting to draw attention to her activity.

"Oh come, come, Parker. Your girl is otherwise engaged at the moment. Boris has seen to that."

Parker lifted her hand from his leg before it reached its destination. "But that doesn't mean I'm interested."

"Don't tell me that vapid girl has you wrapped around her finger already?"

Parker was amused by how friendly Ana had been with Casey earlier and how viperish she was now. He still couldn't get a read on these two. They'd been a great help in Casey's rescue, but something wasn't quite right about them. He'd been unable to reach Malone on the phone this afternoon. He'd have to call tomorrow to get him to check on the background of this couple and see if he had a lead on the other players involved.

Maybe he should run Casey's name, too, just to see if Malone could unearth more intel than Brandon had. He pushed away the thought that this would be betraying Casey somehow. He had to protect her, and he couldn't do that without all the information.

Lara's laugh floated through the din as she approached the table to clear some of the dishes. The soccer boys were in the back washing dishes, she'd explained at one point, as punishment for a little prank they'd played on an older resort guest.

"Lara, where is the best dancing in town?" he asked her when she picked up the empty glasses.

She smiled and winked at the table at large, drawing Boris and Casey's attention to the conversation. "*Bailando Caliente* is just down Vasquez Street."

"Hot Dancing," he translated the name of the club for Casey's benefit. Her eyes sparkled mischievously, full of promise. Boris glared.

"And can we dance all night?"

"Sí. All night. It closes at 5 a.m. Many buy sweets from Ruben's stand on their way home."

Ruben was a stooped black man with a chrome cart full of pastries, Lara explained. Each day he woke before dawn and pushed the cart to the center of town to sell to the breakfast crowd on their way to work. He usually closed up just after lunch since the evening crowds tended to stop at the tortilla stands.

Parker couldn't shake Boris and Ana, though. He wanted to enjoy his evening with Casey, seduce her with slow dances and a small bit of tequila, not duel for her affections with the creepy married guy. The foursome strolled down the crowded street. Paper lanterns swayed cheerily in the breeze above the sidewalk. Several street vendors clustered in the area around the nightclub and couples spilled out of doors to stand smoking on the street. The young Mexican women did love their make-up and hairspray, Parker noted as they passed a chattering group. He liked the more natural look, like Casey. She had a flawless complexion with or without make-up.

Music filled the air, the multitude of beats clashing together like jungle drums. Halfway down the street Parker spied the neon sign that read '*Bailando Caliente*' in red letters with tiny flames bursting from the I's. He held Casey's hand as they started up the steps. Her cheeks flushed. The bouncer taking Parker's pesos looked bored as he nodded them inside, with Boris and Ana on their heels.

A dark hallway opened into a cavernous room where the lights pulsed in time with the music. Every body was in motion on top of a revolving dance floor, at every table, and along the bar. The closest wall displayed license plates from all 50 states, implying American ownership of the bar, or perhaps the owners just held '*gringos*' in affection. A variety of bottles lined the mirrored wall behind the bar, and game tables filled an alcove at the far end of the club. Keeping Casey's hand tucked against his side, Parker plowed through the crowd at the entrance to a clearing beyond. In a loud voice he asked, "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, I want to dance!" Again those eyes glittered and her lips parted. He nodded, his own body vibrating to the beat, and allowed her to lead the way to the dance floor.

"Up there?" He pointed to the rotating floor. It was raised a few inches above the hardwood floor. Lights within the platform shined upwards through a Plexiglas floor. The typical disco ball hung from the ceiling, reflecting the lights back down in droplets. The effect was disorienting, but Casey marched to the center with Parker in tow. They'd finally lost Boris and Ana somewhere in the crowd. Thank God.

"Do you merengue?" Casey asked.

"Is it manly to merengue?"

The men around them moved their hips rhythmically and quickstepped their feet, and looked fairly decent doing it. Seeing the women's skirts swooshing about their legs Parker recalled the time his fiancée Deanna had begged him to take dancing lessons. She'd wanted to be able to impress their wedding guests with their expertise, so Parker had gamely agreed to six weeks of lessons. He'd learned to salsa, rumba, and merengue. He hadn't worried about appearing manly because the only witness had been the ancient dance instructor, and she'd told him it was very sexy for a man to dance.

He tried to recall the dance moves, afraid he'd embarrass himself in front of all these people, but Casey's hips started to sway and she laughed at his efforts. She was having fun, and Parker found that for once he was, too. And for once he could set Deanna's memory aside without feeling guilty. He and Casey danced until sweat glued their hair and clothing to their skin.

"Let's get something to drink. I'm dying." He took Casey's hand, the only way to avoid losing her in the crush of people. Casey put her other hand on his shoulder and followed him single-file through the crowd.

"There's an empty table!"

"Grab it and I'll get us something at the bar, okay?" He didn't wait for her consent. He wove through a group of young adults chattering in rapid-fire Spanish, then tried to work his way to the bar. The lines there were three deep. Impatiently, he inched his way forward, when he really wanted to whip out his badge and yell for everyone to clear the way for the Feds. Of course, this was Mexico, so he was technically out of his jurisdiction, but no one in the club knew that.

Finally Parker reached the bartender and ordered two *cuba libres*. Five minutes later, he had the cold drinks in hand, which made the return trip through the gyrating teenagers more difficult. Once he'd relocated the table, Casey reached for the drinks to allow him to sit down. The table was thankfully away from any speakers or smoke machines. It seemed to be a bubble of quiet. A chance to talk to her at last.

Casey realized her mistake. By reserving this table, she'd opened herself up to conversation, which she wouldn't have minded if she didn't know Parker would eventually want to grill her about her enemies.

And he did. He waited until she'd swallowed half her drink in an effort to quench her thirst, the rum burning down her throat. Then he fired the first question.

"What the hell did you do to get all these guys after you?" He sipped his *cuba*, never taking his eyes off her face.

"Nothing."

"Honey, they want you for some reason." The way he said 'honey' reminded her of Indiana Jones. Yeah, she could see Parker in a fedora cracking a whip.

Meanwhile how long could she stall or what lie should she tell?

"Don't you want to get back to the dance floor?"

"No. Answer my question. The more you evade, the more suspicious I get." A master interrogator.

Should she continue to lie? She really liked Parker, was extremely attracted to him, and really didn't want to ruin this relationship so soon. On the other hand, she could think of no explanation to offer him for the bundle of goons chasing her. She could shrug innocently and deny any knowledge, but Parker had risked his life for her today. Didn't he deserve the truth? She swallowed the rest of her *cuba*. Give him the truth and he'd be gone. Nobody could love a freak like her.

"I really don't know who all those men are or exactly why they'd be after me. Maybe they snuck something in my suitcase to smuggle into the country and now they want it back?"

"That's usually the other way around. Most smugglers are trying to get things into the U.S., not out of it."

"But it's possible."

"Maybe, but you're not telling me everything."

"A girl has a right to privacy. It increases her mystery, don't you know." Her face and upper chest felt warm as a pleasant alcoholic buzz filled her head.

"Not when it involves putting my ass on the line."

Casey peered into the bottom of her empty glass.

"Here, take mine. I'm not ready for another charge up to the bar."

Casey, still believing stalling was best, gulped Parker's drink. Parker's lips had touched this glass.

My lips are where Parker's were. Now she knew she was buzzed. Only a great buzz would let such a stupid thought slip past her internal censors.

“Casey, you’re not off the hook. Tell me what you know about these guys.”

Casey chugged the last third of the *cuba*, then stood. Whoa, maybe she’d drunk more than she should have, judging by the spinning bar in front of her. Only the dance floor was supposed to be spinning, not everything else. Steady now, she eased around the table. Her intention was to pull Parker up and force him to dance again, but instead she stumbled and landed in his arms. She didn’t let him reach out and steady her. Instead she plopped onto his lap and leaned her head back against his chest.

“Dammit, Casey.” She felt his instant hardness against her backside, reminding her of their eventful bus ride, and knew he was enjoying their seating arrangements no matter what he said. “Casey, I need to know the truth so I can protect you.”

She rubbed her hair across his stubbly chin, like a cat, and giggled. “Parker, I don’t need protection. I’m very capable of”

“Like today?”

She sighed. “They were pretty good, taping my hands like that. They obviously knew”

“Knew what?”

She paused. Oops. Almost said too much. “Knew what they were doing.”

Shouts erupted from the group of kids near the bar. Though the words were in Spanish, the tone suggested hurling insults or challenges. One boy pushed the other and grabbed the pretty girl in the wraparound skirt. She struggled and complained. The other guy lunged.

“I think we need to get out of here,” Parker shouted as the volume in the bar increased tenfold. “This is about to turn into a brawl.”

A switchblade appeared in the boy’s hand as if by magic. He’d obviously practiced with it many times. The knife extended, sleek and sparkling in the swirling lights, as the boy pointed it at the girl’s slim neck. The girl’s pitiful whimpering was the only sound that permeated the bar.

Parker lifted Casey from his lap and stood.

He’s going to try to help, she realized, which was pretty heroic in her view. However, it also meant he could get himself or the girl killed. The boy’s eyes were glassy and his expression slack. Casey thought he might be past the stage of reason. If his impulses took over he could kill the girl in a second.

Without thought once again, Casey raised her hand, stretched her fingers, and with her invisible power, plucked the knife right from the boy’s hand. His face looked even more slack, his mouth opened in disbelief. The knife skidded across the floor to the foot of the bar, where the anxious baseball-bat-wielding bartender scooped it up.

The men’s yelling escalated, directed at the boy, and the girl was still held in a neck-lock, but at least no sharp implements were involved.

Unfortunately Parker had seen the whole thing. “What did you just do?”

CHAPTER NINE

Casey gave a little yelp of shock at hearing Parker's voice so close to her ear.

"What are you talking about?"

Parker reached for her arm, slid his fingers down its length to her hand, which he pulled toward him. Once he saw that she was looking directly at her own hand, Parker said, "What did you do with this?"

Casey flushed, completely angry with herself, repeating the mantra *Damn damn damn* in her head. "Nothing?"

His grip on her hand remained solid as he yanked her through the club's crowd. The boys had been split up by the other patrons and the girl now sat at a table with a girlfriend patting her on the back. Their voices reminded her of chickens clucking. Casey was sure they were discoursing on the uselessness of the male species.

Parker jerked Casey's hand, followed by her body, away from the table and through the crowd. "Where are you taking me?" The rum seemed to be sloshing around in her stomach and the dizziness was increasing with this rapid jarring movement. "Parker, I might puke."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Don't you dare. We're going outside where it's quiet, so I can think straight and where you can talk and I won't miss a word."

The gathering of smokers and chatters on the street had thinned somewhat and the food vendors had all packed up and gone home. It had to be in the wee hours of the morning. The air remained crisp and tangy from the nearby sea. Parker walked at a brisk pace until they reached a pool of light from a buzzing street lamp, far enough from the loiters outside the club that they wouldn't be overheard.

He turned Casey to face him and gripped her shoulders so she couldn't dart off. "Now tell me the truth, dammit."

"You won't believe it."

"Doesn't matter if I believe it. Just tell me it, and let me decide."

Heaving a deep sigh, Casey's head dropped a bit and her eyes cast downward, but Parker's fingers lifted her chin back up until she faced him.

"But you won't like me anymore," she whispered.

His face softened as his thumb stroked her chin and along her lips. He leaned in for a quick kiss. "I'll like you."

He couldn't know that for sure, but it was kind of him to say. *Just blurt it out. Damn the torpedoes.* "I have telekinetic powers."

"What?" He shook his head and knocked his ear. "What?"

"I have telekinetic powers. I don't know how they found out, but I think that's why everyone's after me."

"What?"

Casey thought about slapping him to snap him out of his befuddlement.

"What do you mean telekinetic powers?"

"Parker, I'm still feeling a bit woozy."

"Here." He gestured her to a gray wooden bench that sat alongside an adobe wall.

She lowered herself to the bench with a sigh. "Boris and Ana will be looking for us, don't you think?"

"Damn Boris and Ana, okay! Explain this to me."

"Are you thickheaded? I said I have telekinetic powers—I move objects around without touching them. What else is there to know?"

"I can't believe it." He leaned back and combed his fingers through his hair. Soon his expression changed from disbelief to revelation. "That old man with the grain? When we were on the bus?"

She nodded.

He gasped. "The injured man from the truck? You did that?"

She nodded again. Here we go. He'll drop me like a habanero pepper. Too hot to handle, or just too far out to deal with. A freak. Casey wanted to steel her heart against another rejection, but the sense of disappointment left a sour taste in her throat. Why did everything have to come back to this? Why couldn't anyone see her as a superhero and revere her power instead of running screaming in the other direction?

Parker's expression changed again, this time to carefully blank. What was he thinking?

He turned his head toward her and met her eyes. "You know why I came on this...vacation?" He stumbled a bit on the word. Casey shook her head and waited. "To lower my blood pressure, so I could get back to my *real* job."

"What is your *real* job?"

He hesitated. Would he say veterinarian again, validating Casey's distrust of him?

"I'm a government agent."

Casey gasped. "Really?" Then new suspicions set in. "And you're on vacation? You're not on some covert operation?"

He paused. "It seems like I am, even though I'm not supposed to be, what with all these operatives chasing you. My blood pressure has to be sky-rocketing because of you."

Well, that hurt, but at least he hadn't called her a freak.

"I have to be able to do my job." He closed his eyes and his voice lowered. "There's a little girl missing, Missy. Her file's sitting on my desk and I can't get back to it because I'm on this damned 'vacation.'"

"Why didn't you wait until you'd finished the case then?"

"Doc said no, so the boss came up with this. They're golf buddies."

Casey wanted to brush back his hair and pet the stubble on his chin. "Have you tried medication?"

He expelled a breath and opened his sparking eyes. "I'm not taking pills!"

"Good Lord. Listen to that pride talking. There's nothing unmanly about taking medicine for a medical condition."

Parker shook his head. "No damn pills. Period. I'm going to lower my blood pressure, whatever it takes." The volume of his voice had risen. "Now I'm not talking about this anymore. I want to talk about you, and how the hell you knocked that knife out of that guy's hand."

"Parker, I told you the truth. Now if you choose not to believe me, fine, but there's really nothing else to say." She stood and hugged herself.

"How do you do it? You use your hands, right? That's why they taped them, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"So they know an awful lot about you."

"Seems that way." She recalled the truck driver she had saved. The rescue workers had

arrived and given him a blood transfusion. Excitement brewed inside her at the memory. "Today I used my eyes."

"Your eyes?"

"Yes, while my hands were taped. That driver really needed me, so I was able to use my eyes."

"But you couldn't free yourself?"

"No. I can help other people just fine, but the power's usually faulty where I'm concerned. And I still haven't mastered...manipulating it, like fine movements. I can do broad blasts just fine."

"I see."

At that moment Boris and Ana emerged from the club. "There you are!" Ana exclaimed. "We thought you had left us for good."

Scowling at the couple as he rose to his feet, Parker said, "Casey was feeling a bit dizzy, so we came out for some fresh air."

"Dizzy?" Boris touched her shoulder. Parker growled, but Boris ignored him. "Are you feeling better now, my dear?"

"Yes. Just drank my *cuba* a bit too fast."

Boris continued to pat her arm. The friction made her want to vomit, especially when she saw the venom in Ana's expression. Casey knew better than to come between a married couple, so she moved closer to Parker and took his arm.

"Are we ready to walk back to La Luna?" Ana asked, smiling a little too brightly. "It's been a very trying day, especially for you Casey."

"Yes." Casey yawned to punctuate the truth. Parker's face still held a scowl. Now it was focused more into the distance instead of at Boris, but he kept Casey's arm tucked against his own. She knew he was thinking about her, but what exactly? Good or bad?

The group moseyed back to the resort. Casey took the time to enjoy the balmy ocean breezes and the comfortable temperature of seventy degrees, even though a variety of tense emotions swirled about her. The group remained quiet. Casey ruminated on Parker's response to her revelation. Did he believe her? Was he ready to commandeer the next bus to go back to the city, far away from her? She resisted admitting to herself how much she liked having him around. Better to keep a thick skin. And she still had that nagging suspicion that he could be one of them. If he was an agent, he could easily be here on assignment.

But what was his assignment if not to kidnap her like the rest? At least he wasn't wearing a medallion. Maybe he was supposed to seduce her to gain her cooperation? If so, he was doing a lousy job at it. He was a federal agent. Didn't they train for that sort of thing? Why hadn't he made a serious pass by now?

A tingle fluttered through her belly. She'd loved to be seduced, even if she ultimately turned him down. At least then she'd know he found her attractive. Maybe he just wasn't that into her?

Back home, she'd made out with Andrew, but she'd never felt that turned on and she didn't think he had either. She'd known, subconsciously at least, that he wasn't right for her. But Parker was a different matter. She really liked him and her attraction to him sent continual zings through her system. Maybe this time she should take the risk, forget the consequences. Besides how could she learn to control her sexual response if she never had sex? But what about Parker's blood pressure? Having sex with her might turn out too eventful for his health. Damn, damn, damn.

* * * *

Parker dug his hands into his pockets and stared at the cracked asphalt below his feet. Boris and Ana were thankfully quiet as they walked back to La Luna. Parker needed to think. What was

he supposed to believe? Why didn't he discount her fantastic story immediately?

Because he had witnessed several odd things since meeting Casey, not to mention the black marks crossing out half of the Fed's file on her as 'Top Secret'. The more he thought about it, the more he recalled, all the way back to that first meeting on the steps at the airport.

He'd seen Casey trip, had reached out to prevent it, when a warm gust of air had pushed her back to her feet and into his chest. He realized now that that must've been her 'power' at work. And she'd stopped the tray from crashing at the cantina. Then there was that driver. He'd been floating in the air as if part of a magician's act. He'd forced himself not to think about it at the time, because too much was at stake at that moment, but now he recalled how truly bizarre that sight had been.

This so-called telekinesis also explained why groups of international spies were after her. She could handle herself to a certain extent because she was essentially a superhero, but she didn't have combat and covert ops training. She also didn't have connections, information, or weapons at her disposal. For that she needed him.

He kicked a stone and noticed that Boris was walking awfully close to Casey again and not paying any attention to his wife. He was really getting on Parker's nerves, and why the hell wasn't a seemingly strong, confident woman like Ana demanding his fealty? Though it wasn't Parker's place to get involved in domestic disputes, he thought a gentle reminder to Casey about Boris' marriage status might be in order. He'd mention it when they got back to the resort.

What to do then? Casey would be once again vulnerable in her room alone. Picking the lock on the glass door was way too simple. He'd need to convince her to stay with him for her own safety.

Wait a minute, Parker. Is this the best move? None of this helped lower his blood pressure or get him back to his real cases, but if he failed they might demote him or outright fire him. And now that he knew the truth about Casey, he realized her case was as important as those stacked on the desk in his office. What would it cost the United States if he let her talent fall into the wrong hands?

Sometimes the idea of getting back to the Agency filled him with despair. He knew in his gut that Missy was already lost and they had little hope of even finding the responsible party. Even if The Company managed to rescue her, she could already be 'turned', brainwashed to be a traitor to her country. It was so much easier when they were young.

These black moments of crushing doubt arrived with increasing frequency lately and seemed to last longer each time. They'd started when Deanna had died. The madman who'd killed her had eluded him before her death and taunted him after. He'd felt so helpless then that he'd even considered resigning from investigative work altogether. Only a thirst for retribution had kept him going. The killer had to pay. And that was what fueled him to this day, though now he worked for The Agency rather than the FBI. His focus had changed and thankfully he encountered fewer dead bodies, but he'd still doggedly follow the smallest lead until he'd solved the case.

The problem was some crimes simply remained unsolved despite The Agency's best efforts. Sometimes the other side was just better than they were. But Parker couldn't let it go, and that's when he clashed with his boss and his partner and sometimes the higher-ups got on his case about letting it go, that they didn't have enough manpower for him to be out there beating a dead horse.

That analogy sickened him. They weren't talking about dead horses. They were talking about men, women, and children caught up in this convoluted war game they played, sometimes just because they'd discovered a new virus or a cure or a technology. They'd pursued their passion and now they'd be on the run for the rest of their lives.

In Deanna's case, the killer had paid finally, but shooting him had not brought Parker

closure, had not ended his grief. Time, thankfully, had dulled it.

Parker shook his head, seeing the resort lights just up the road. Dwelling on this helped nothing, least of all his blood pressure.

He couldn't believe he had such a physical weakness. It made him feel wimpy. The doc had assured him that part of this was hereditary. His dad had died of a heart attack at fifty-five. Parker knew he didn't lack for courage, knew he could fight and shoot as well as he ever had. But he also knew the Agency could sideline him if they didn't think him fit to be out in the field. He couldn't let that happen.

* * * *

Anastasia closed the door to their hotel room with a little slam, then faced Boris, hands on her hips. "What was that all about?"

"What?"

"You're supposed to be my husband!"

"Ana dear, many husbands have the wandering eye."

He slipped off his loafers and stretched his arms across the back of the sofa. The sofa had seen better days, as evidenced by the general sinking toward the center of all the cushions. The upholstery appeared gray and worn, but any holes had been sewn up tightly and a lively woven blanket disguised most of the flaws. "It's part of the game. I am to gain her confidence."

"I thought the plan was to take it slow. She's going to think you're" She paused to search for the word. "...A scumbag."

"Really? I thought I was extremely suave."

"A woman distrusts a man with a roving eye."

"Is that so?" Boris tipped up his lips into a sort of mocking sneer. "Do you distrust me, dear Ana?"

"Of course, I do, Boris. That's one of the rules of this game, but Casey doesn't know the rules. She's taken with Parker. I think you and I both would do better to gain her confidence as *friends*." She emphasized the word. "Then she'll come to us when Parker lets her down."

Boris admired her slim fingers as she poured a cognac into a crystal glass. "And what makes you so sure Parker will let her down?"

"Oh Boris, you are so obtuse. He's falling in love with her and he hates it. Of course he'll let her down." She shoved his thigh out of the way so she could settle onto the sofa next to him.

Boris considered her point of view. He'd observed the attraction between Parker and Casey, likely every guest at the resort had, but love? In this short a time? No, he couldn't believe it.

"You're letting wishful thinking cloud your judgment, I'm afraid."

A snort and a gulp of cognac preceded her reply. "Do you wish to wager?"

"A wager? Ana, how unlike you!"

"Twenty American dollars."

"Where's the risk in that?"

Ana turned and played with the buttons on his shirt, then she let her finger skim across his stomach, belt and pants. "It's not about the money. It's about your pride."

As she coaxed his zipper down and pressed her palm against his cock, Boris closed his eyes. She pushed the fabric out of the way until her cool fingers skimmed along the bottom of his shaft to his balls. She shifted them from finger to finger, teasing, squeezing tight, almost to the point of pain, then releasing. Boris liked a little pain, but more than that, he liked inflicting it.

"Ah." He understood. He would hate to lose to her and she knew it, but in this case it didn't matter. Ana's lips formed an O. Her chin lowered, gradually her head followed her hand, causing

Boris to sink deeper into the cushions with a long sigh. She undid the snap and zipper on his slacks, spreading the fabric. Once his cock was free, she blew on the head. Her warm lips settled against his taut skin. Ah, how he loved working with Ana in the field. She always gave good head.

Unfortunately, that wouldn't save her in the end and he'd never have to pay up on any bet.

A smug smile played on his lips. He wove his fingers through her hair as she sucked. He liked her between his legs in such a subservient position. Unfortunately the pleasure would be short-lived since he'd drugged her drink. But he could savor her humiliation for a little while. The wet cave of her mouth milked his cock, the pleasure loosening his muscles, relieving the evening's stress.

"Put your hands behind your back, darling." She ignored him at first, so he tightened his fingers against her scalp. She obeyed, clasping her hands just above her butt. He pushed against her head, forcing her to swallow more of his cock. She gagged a little, but continued to greedily suck, swishing her tongue along the ridge to increase the sensation, trying to force him to come in her mouth, to give over control.

Ana was such a sexual creature, and so conflicted because of it. He knew she got off on submitting to him sexually, but he also knew she did these things in an effort to take the upper hand in their relationship. She thought that by pleasing him in bed he'd be more pliable, less alert. That simply was not so.

And he wouldn't come for her now, though her tongue and throat demanded it. He would wait, restrain himself, make her desperately eat him ... until she passed out.

Ten minutes later, Ana snoozed on the floor, giving Boris the time he needed to contact Liang. He dialed the cell phone, which normally resided in his breast pocket, and waited, sipping a cool beer and playing with the medallion he'd snatched from the scene of the truck crash.

"Yes?"

"Liang."

"Yes, Petrovitz. Well?"

"Miss Summers was amazing today."

"Really?"

"Yes, she teleported a man from a moving truck safely to the ground. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself."

"Teleported a man? Through the air?" The tone of the short Chinese man's voice said he was impressed. "Anything else?"

"That was all that I witnessed, but I believe something happened with a knife in the bar. The patrons were talking about it."

"And does she trust you?"

"I believe I am gaining ground. But there are a couple of problems."

"Such as?"

"Such as this man, Parker Nelson. Ana thinks he's falling in love with Casey."

"And you disagree?"

"They just met so I doubt it, but the issue is that he has taken it upon himself to protect her and he seems to be very good at it. I need to know more about him. Can you get me that information?"

"Certainly. And what is the other problem?"

"Casey was snatched today right under Ana's nose."

"But you got her back?"

He wasn't one for modesty. "Yes. The men were black with African accents, according to

Ana, but she couldn't place which country. They escaped, of course. But I found something on the ground near the scene, a medallion."

Silence hummed in Boris' ear. He wondered if Liang knew the significance of the medallion as he did. Idly he stroked the raised image on the medal. It was Janus, the Roman god of change or beginnings. But what differentiated this pendant from an old Roman coin was the triple waves inscribed over the two faced god.

Liang cleared his throat. "Stay close to Casey from now on. Don't trust Ana to do your job for you. I'll find out who else is operating in the area." A click signaled the end of the conversation.

Boris leaned back against the cushions. He rolled Ana to her back with his foot, then used his toe to inch her skirt along her thigh. She had long, long milky legs. He nudged them apart, thinking about Casey. He slipped his hand along the row of buttons on Ana's shirt and popped them off one by one. Casey was an even juicier morsel. He'd like to bind her with leather straps and fuck her, but first he needed to test her. Could she move something heavier than a man? How did her power work and what would act as kryptonite to that power? In order to control her, he had to know how to control her power.

Boris slid to his knees between Ana's legs and unclasped her bra. As the lace fell to the side, he leaned down and bit each breast hard. He wanted her to have the marks, to know what he'd done.

Her mouth had dropped open slightly and saliva slid from the corner of her mouth across her cheek. Her eyes remained closed. He'd given her a strong dose, since she'd learned to resist most drugs during her training.

How could he test Casey? Stopping the limo in New York had shown strength but little control. Could she lift a car in the air the way she had lifted the injured man? He unbuckled his belt and pulled it free of the belt loops. Then he tucked the rigid leather under Ana's firm breasts. Just the hint of bondage would make the sex more enjoyable for now.

He unbuttoned and unzipped his slacks again and pushed them down, along with his underwear. Ana, of course, wore no underwear. He'd pushed her skirt to her waist and now ran his fingers through her cleft, opening her for easy entry. Well, not too easy, since she wasn't wet from arousal or able to angle her hips to accommodate him. He'd probably leave bruises on her cunt as a result.

He smiled. He liked her dry, tight, and unwilling instead of argumentative and arrogant. He imagined Casey, that picture of innocence, under him like this. He imagined the humiliation she would feel when she awoke to find herself part naked, spread-eagled on the floor, violated. And of course, she would know he'd done it, and that the sticky goo on her thighs came from him, not Parker. And he imagined telling Parker what he'd done to her, and the look of horror on that man's face just before he shot him in the head.

As he pumped in and out of his unconscious partner on the floor, building his orgasm, he thought of a plan. He would design a situation which would endanger Parker. That would place Casey's power and her attraction to Parker to the test. His balls tightened, his arms strained, and he let his mind wander to images of the ropes and handcuffs he kept in his dungeon back home. That was all he needed to shoot him to completion. He jerked violently as the cum left his body and filled Ana's.

* * * *

Casey, room key in hand, reached for her door handle. Silence reigned in the empty hallway. Everyone else was asleep and that's how Casey wanted to be as well. She yawned.

"No." Parker's hand, slightly rough from calluses, covered hers. Once again, she felt the prickling awareness in her stomach and breasts.

Which she ignored. “What do you mean no? I’m tired. I want to go to bed.”

“Then sleep in my room.”

Tempting, but not wise. “Parker, I’m too tired to be propositioned. Maybe tomorrow.”

He pried the key from her fingers and tucked it into the pocket of his jeans. “I’m not propositioning you. It’s not safe for you to stay alone in your room.”

She rotated slowly until her back was flat against the wood door. Parker stood close to her, invading her personal space, tall, overbearing, like he could capture her in his arms and take her away to his castle. His textured jaw looked kissable. His smooth lips had to taste like candy.

She yawned again.

None of that mattered until she had some sleep. “I told you I can take care of myself.”

Besides you’re still lying to me. She hated believing that, but she’d learned to trust her instincts over the years. Well, not ‘trust’ exactly. She’d certainly ignored her instincts often enough, but she knew if something didn’t seem right, it probably wasn’t. “For all I know, you’re one of them.”

“I’m not one of them!”

“Keep your voice down. You’re going to wake all the senior citizens.” The guests on their floor all seemed to be nearing the centennial mark. Boris and Ana had a room on the fourth floor facing the courtyard.

“If you thought I was one of them, why’d you tell me your secret?”

“Cause you were such a pain in the ass.”

“And if I was one of them, don’t you think I would have already known your secret?”

Sadly that made sense. She realized there was one other thing she hadn’t told Parker. “The Swedes are after me, too, and they wore those pendants too.”

“What!” Again his voice was too loud.

Casey gave him a shove. “Inside. We’ll talk inside. Now open your door.” She was too tired to debate the room issue anymore. She’d slept just fine last night in his T-shirt on his couch, so she could do it again now.

CHAPTER TEN

Parker's hands trembled as he struggled with the key in the doorknob.

"What's the matter with your hands?"

He squared his jaw and shook his head, but Casey noticed he seemed to be breathing too shallowly and he was sweating. She brushed his fingers away, turned the key, and unlocked the door.

"Go sit down," she commanded. "I'll bring you some water."

Parker complied without argument, which seemed so out of character that Casey worried she had a dying man on her hands. She hurried to get the water and dug a baby aspirin out of her purse. He'd mentioned high blood pressure. Maybe this would help.

"Here chew this."

Parker opened his eyes but remained slouched against the couch. Casey placed the aspirin on his tongue and he chewed, then cringed. "Yuck."

"You don't like baby aspirin? I love the stuff." She ran to the kitchen, found a glass, and filled it with water. Handing it to Parker, she asked, "Do you need a doctor or a hospital? You look a bit green. Are you in pain?"

He shook his head then took the water glass to sip, his eyes closing once again.

"I'm fine," he said finally. "I just get dizzy sometimes and my heart races."

Guilt pounded her. "And it's my fault, right?" He'd spoken part of the truth earlier at least. She was causing him nothing but trouble.

"No, just my blood pressure. Genetics." His voice sounded scratchy but his breathing had slowed.

But Casey knew the man did not need her problems on top of his own. Whatever his real deal was, he needed to rest and recover...alone.

"Let's get you to bed," she said softly. "It's been an extremely long day and night."

"It has."

She helped him lurch to his feet and across the room. Once in the bedroom she pulled off his shoes and socks and laid him against the pillows.

"Kiss me."

"Parker, you're sick. You need your rest."

"Kiss me. It's therapeutic."

So she kissed him, chastely, but he took advantage, tugging her onto the bed next to him.

"That's not a kiss."

He showed her what he meant, by spreading his fingers across the back of her scalp, pulling her face close until their lips met, widened, devoured. Casey closed her eyes and concentrated on the sensation of Parker's tongue invading her mouth, trailing across her tongue, touching each of her teeth. She closed her lips around it and sucked, enjoying the texture and control. She spread her hands across his broad chest, noting the texture of the cotton shirt over his pecs and tight nipples. Then she grabbed onto his firm shoulders, and instead of sucking his tongue, she thrust her own at the back of his throat, dueling with him.

Oh my, he tasted wicked, like tequila and smoke. His chin was rough since it'd been almost

a full day since he'd shaved. The skin on his arms had this great texture from a thin layer of hair. And his arms were so solid, muscular, capable.

She became conscious of the drift of his hands, lower, petting her bare shoulder blades and her waist. Then moving the dress fabric enough to find her bra strap. The clasp unlatched somehow—oh, his fingers did it. Talented. Now they brushed under her arms, tickling her sensitive flesh, curving up under the lacy fabric, pushing it out of the way.

Casey sucked in air harshly as she felt Parker's thumbs brush both of her nipples simultaneously, springing them to action. They grew rigid under his continued touch. And the touch changed from gentle to teasing to hard as he pinched the nubs between forefingers and thumbs.

Casey gasped. Holy shit, she liked what he was doing. Liked it a whole lot. But she was afraid something would happen. Things would start flying. She should stop him. His mouth finally pulled away from hers, but only so it could drift across her eyelids and cheeks. His teeth nabbed one of her ear lobes and tugged. Damn. That signaled her pussy to leak a bit, readying itself for what it hoped would happen soon.

"Touch me." Parker's gruff voice vibrated in her ear as one of his hands guided her to touch the front of his pants. She squeezed the stiff rod she found there. Then she rolled her fingers along the cloth-covered length until she found the bulge of his balls. She cupped these and squeezed again. Parker moaned. Casey started nibbling his Adam's apple, so she could feel his vocal vibrations.

"Moan some more." She squeezed.

"God yes."

Her vagina felt open as her thighs clenched. She wanted his mouth on her breasts. She wanted his fingers on her clit. She wanted to feel his dick, thick and hard, sliding in and out of her wetness.

And just a moment ago he was sick and dizzy because of her.

"Parker, we can't do this."

"Oh yes we can." He pushed his hand under her skirt between her thighs. "You're so wet." His thumb slid across the silk of her panties, tantalizing her swollen clit.

"You're ill, Parker."

Refusing to listen, he pressed and circled her nub. Casey's hips moved in response. "Let me make you come."

The more his fingers and thumb moved, the more her heart raced, which unfortunately reminded her all the more how bad this was for Parker's blood pressure.

"Parker, we have to stop."

He removed his hand and glared at her, and she knew this time she'd managed to kill the mood. "I'm not some sick old man."

"I didn't say anything about old, but you are sick and you need to rest." And she didn't want to tell him some of the other things that might happen if they had sex.

He fell back against the pillow and crossed his arms over his chest with a huff. His cock tented his pants, showing her he was still extremely turned on, but now he was also extremely pissed off. He closed his eyes and turned his head away.

"Parker, I just care about you."

"Screw you. I don't need a fucking nurse maid."

Well, that hurt. She launched off the bed. "I'll be in the living room if you need me."

Half an hour later, she checked in on him. His breathing had slowed, his arms were relaxed at his sides.

Casey waited a moment. Yes, he was asleep. He even snored a bit. The stern lines about his eyes and mouth relaxed as he slept, so that he looked little boyish. Casey brushed the stubble on his chin with her thumb. So masculine. And his nose was almost aristocratic, though a slight bump and a small scar betrayed a past injury. She kissed the tip very lightly.

Then she inched her fingers into his front pocket, reclaiming her room key. Her chest still hurt from his harsh words, so it was partially anger that had her determined to return to her own room.

She wasn't exactly sure what she planned to do about her problems, but she'd given up hope that this would be a relaxing vacation by the beach. Spies from every nation seemed to know she was here in Mexico. They'd known when she would arrive at the airport. They'd known the resort's bus schedule, and they'd known the path to Casey's room.

Parker had known those things, too, all of them, but he'd said he was on vacation, and she believed him about the high blood pressure. She doubted the government would send a sick agent to capture her. Could he have been sent to protect her? He certainly seemed to have made it his mission. But her mother had long ago threatened to sue the government if they didn't call off their watchdogs and get out of Casey's life, and she hadn't seen or heard from them since. Well, since she'd broken that agent's leg. She still regretted that, but her powers had surpassed her control and she'd been so angry to find him following her.

But that had been years ago. How had anyone found out about her powers now? And obviously quite a few people had if this many people were chasing her. Did this have to do with the Institute or had someone witnessed one of her more recent interventions? And were they all on the same team?

Casey sneaked into her room. At least it hadn't been trashed again. She took the time to check every nook and cranny to make sure no one waited to pop a gun in her face. Then she locked her bathroom door and took a quick shower. She was so tired she could fall asleep standing up. She towel-dried her hair, brushed her teeth, and slipped on a long T-shirt. Standing in the bathroom doorway, she observed her room, still feeling paranoid about intruders. Could they hide behind the curtains or in her closet or under her bed?

She decided to check the whole suite again. Better to be safe than sorry, so she padded into the living room. That's when she noticed that a note had been slipped under her door. She picked it up. Had Parker woken up and come searching for her? She unfolded the slip of paper and noted that it smelled faintly of fragrance. She sniffed again. It seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it. The bold print read, "I have information about the Institute. At dawn take a boat across the inlet to Café Americana. Come alone." A black and white symbol was scribbled below the words. It seemed to be a head with two faces with three wavy lines over top.

Casey giggled. She was embroiled in a spy thriller and obviously she was the naïve dupe. Did they honestly expect her to fall for the oldest trick in the book? The whole 'come alone' thing screamed trap. But that symbol. She closed her eyes. Yes, that was the symbol on the pendants that the Africans wore. She was sure of it.

Casey sat down on the couch and stared at the note. She sniffed. Why couldn't she place the scent? It was spicy, exotic. Was it feminine or masculine? Hard to tell.

She should inform Parker about the note, get his advice. He was an agent. But he'd already said she was making his condition worse and she was still miffed at his cruel words. She'd just been trying to help him by not taking things too far on the bed. And in that same vein, could she really justify risking his life by involving him in her problem? She sighed. Boris then. He'd helped rescue her from the one set of bad guys. But then there was Ana. They seemed to be having marital

problems. Would she make them worse by dragging Boris off on a secret mission?

She frowned. Why couldn't she handle this on her own anyway? She had her power to protect her, even if it did backfire half the time. Why did she need a man? Take Andrew, for example. He hadn't helped at all with the limo incident. She'd handled that just fine.

Of course the last option was most likely the most sensible. Just ignore the note. Stay snug in her bed and sleep through the dawn. The Institute was a chapter from her past best left closed. She didn't need any information this mysterious messenger might have.

She stood and took the note with her to the bedroom. She set it on the nightstand and crawled under the covers. It was 4 a.m. Not much time till dawn. She reached up and clicked off the light then stared at the dim square of paper. She took a deep breath and scrunched her eyes closed, willing sleep to come. It would not. Who knew about the Institute? What did they want to tell her?

It's a trap, remember? Use your damn brain.

If only her overtired brain would let her sleep in peace. Instead it replayed the day's events and the past week's events. Then she fell into a doze and began to dream about the lab at the Institute. That damn gray room with no windows, only two-way mirrors. Tables, cards with kindergarten shapes, computers, tests of every sort. Tape recorders, video cameras situated discreetly in the corners. Men and women in lab coats who manned the computers and the cameras and hid behind the mirrors observing. A row of scraggly kids ranging in age from seven to seventeen. Some of them lounging on folding chairs along the soundproofed wall. Others sitting on the step that divided the room.

This dream memory was vivid in Casey's mind since she was one of the scraggly kids. She was into her heavy metal phase, though she was only twelve. She wore jeans with strategic slits from the ankles to the thighs. Her leopard striped tunic slid down one shoulder with a chain belt cinching it at her waist. Her hair was big, permed, teased, and gelled, with glitter and pink tips. A couple of the other kids also sported the current punk-rock style while the two teenage boys stuck to classic jeans and tees and a couple of the girls wore Catholic school uniforms.

Casey painted her nails, feeling bored, wishing they'd get the testing over, so they could return to the dorm and play video games. They'd already completed their school lessons for the day—each kid had his or her own tutor so they could keep up with the public school curriculum. Like they'd ever escape back to the real world again. Casey didn't hear the lab door open since she had rock music blaring through her headphones. When she looked up she saw this willowy blonde girl in a navy dress with huge shoulder pads talking to one of the testers, Dr. Randizan. Casey took off her headphones.

Dr. Randizan brought the girl closer and cleared his throat. "Everyone, this is Anna Blitzen."

Anna glared at the assemblage with her striking blue eyes.

"What's up her ass?" murmured Joe, the video star wannabe, from just behind Casey.

"Anna is a new member of our team. I hope you all will make her welcome."

Casey, not normally outgoing, stood and stretched out her hand to the newcomer. "Nice to meet you." She knew what it was like to be the new kid in this surreal bunch. Casey'd only been handed off to the Institute the year before after she'd gotten kicked out of St. Mary's School for Girls for saving a cheerleader as she fell from the top of her pyramid.

"The feeling is not at all mutual." Anna's scowl deepened.

The other kids gasped and Casey's mouth fell open. What a bitch! And what an accent! Accent...

Casey woke with a start, blinking and breathing hard. There'd been something important about the dream, something she should remember, but the more she concentrated, the more it faded

until it was gone completely.

Wait, she remembered the testing—the psychic testing. They’d tested each kid for everything, even if they only had one ability, and that’s where the three wavy lines came from! The mind reading test. She remembered the black and white card clearly. Whatever the deal behind the medallions, they had something to do with ESP.

She sat up in bed and squinted at the clock. Damn. She’d hardly slept at all. Light filtered in through the slats of the blinds, highlighting the note perched on the nightstand.

You know it’s a trap, she reminded herself. But it wasn’t like they wanted to kill her. Damn it all, she had to risk it.

* * * *

Casey slid a sun visor onto her head and sunglasses onto her nose. Then, practically tiptoeing, she entered the hallway and locked her door. She knew curiosity killed the cat, but the feeling that she was missing something would not leave her, and the note writer claimed to have information about the Institute. She couldn’t pass up the opportunity to learn something that might apply to her current situation just out of fear, right? And she could protect herself using her power, right?

Luckily she didn’t have to pass Parker’s door to get to the stairway that led to the courtyard. There was a small gate leading to the street behind the bottom of the stairs. Once there Casey had no problem crossing the still-empty street and walking onto the dock. The planks creaked with each step she took, echoing across the water.

“Hola, muy bonita señorita.”

Casey shrieked and turned, her heart pounding in her chest. For a moment she thought the old man in front of her was Bernard, the man she’d startled on the beach, but upon closer observation Casey realized this man was older with coal black skin.

“Estas bien?” the old man asked.

“Uh, hablas ingles?”

“Oh sí.” But he continued to rattle on in Spanish.

Casey smiled politely until she remembered that she’d stashed Parker’s dictionary in her purse. She quickly looked up the word for boat. She patted the man on the shoulder to get his attention then pointed to the end of the pier. “May I use your boat?” She tugged on his elbow enough to get him moving. *“Tu bote?”*

“Sí, es mi barca.”

The gray-green water gently rocked the boat up and down. Casey flipped to the word ‘use’ in her dictionary. She pointed to herself. *“Mi usar your bote? Utilizar your barca?”* She dug in her purse again. “I have money.” She handed the man some pesos.

A smile spread across the creased face as he nodded up and down happily. The pesos disappeared into the recesses of his voluminous jacket. Casey got the impression she’d offered him too much money, but she couldn’t take it back now. He bowed and gestured for her to take the boat.

“Thank you.”

Getting into the boat proved more complicated than Casey expected as it rocked with each wave. The old man held Casey’s arm to steady her until she was able to sit on the weather-beaten wooden bench.

“What’s your name?” Casey asked as she fished the oars out from under the bench. She noticed that an inch of inky black water spread across the bottom of the boat. She hoped that was from waves lapping over the sides and not from a slow leak in the bottom.

“Ruben.” Ah, the vendor Lara had mentioned.

“Gracias.” Casey knew her accent was atrocious, but Ruben smiled and waved as she set the oars to water. He didn’t ask when she would return the boat. Perhaps he considered the boat purchased. How many pesos had she given him? At home she knew precisely how much to tip a porter or give to a street performer. She couldn’t believe she had come to a foreign country so unprepared as to not even understand the currency. Her excuse was that her life had just fallen apart again and she’d been in a hurry to avoid facing the pain. And tomorrow was her birthday. She’d almost forgotten. Perhaps she’d ask Lara for a special dessert to celebrate.

Moving the oars through water was like moving knives through lead. They seemed to grow heavier with each stroke. She hoped the café would be easy to find once she reached the far shore, and she certainly hoped whatever information the mysterious note writer gave her was worth all this hard work.

About fifteen minutes later her muscles began screaming, so she pulled the oars into the bow and let the dinghy drift with the current. The beach dead-ended at a cliff that jutted out into the water. The wind whipped her hair against her cheeks and sea spray pelted her, leaving the taste of salt in her mouth and a sting in her eyes. The sun had risen above the mountains beyond the town, giving the flat-roofed houses a golden glow. Casey inhaled deeply. It was actually quite peaceful out here on the water, just drifting along.

Until she heard the gunshot.

The projectile splashed just beyond the bow. Casey squinted at the cliff and saw a person’s silhouette. Damn. They were shooting at her! This was a switch. She’d expected a trap of some sort, since everyone seemed to want her alive, but a second shot confirmed that these were indeed bullets, not darts, flying at her, since there was now a nice round hole in the side of the boat.

Shit! With the sound of the third shot she sprang forward, letting her knees splashed into the icy water at the bottom of the boat. She yanked the oars out and began to row as fast as possible while still keeping her body down. She flicked her fingers, sending out small bursts of power to propel the vessel along. Casey didn’t see the next bullet strike the boat, but she heard the sound of wood splintering and water gurgling. Then the boat began to sink.

Shit, shit, shit. She sent out a steady stream of power to keep the boat afloat and moving. She passed just below the cliff, close enough that jags of rock obscured her view of the shooter, and hopefully the shooter’s view of her.

* * * *

“Señor Nelson!” Lara’s cheery voice woke Parker from a deep sleep. He’d been having some bizarre dream, but the moment Lara’s voice had penetrated his consciousness the dream was lost. Testing his limbs with little stretches, he realized he’d needed the sleep. Yesterday every part of him had been tight and tense, but this morning he felt loose and relaxed.

“Señor Nelson, breakfast!”

Why didn’t Casey answer the door? Embarrassment still? It wasn’t like they’d done anything for her to be embarrassed about, unfortunately. Parker padded into the living room and saw the blanket neatly folded on the couch. No sign of Casey. She must have sneaked back to her room via the balcony again. He’d have to explain that that really wasn’t a safe thing to do at this point.

Parker unlocked the door and let Lara, laden with her breakfast tray, enter.

“You really don’t need to bring me breakfast each morning, though I do appreciate it.”

“It is my pleasure.” She opened her mouth to say more when they heard the first gun shot, quickly followed by two more. Lara shrieked. They sounded distant, not from within the resort’s walls, but Parker didn’t waste any time. He used the balcony to cross to Casey’s room, busting open

the useless lock on the glass doors and entering her bedroom. She wasn't there. He checked the living room. Not there either.

"Señor Nelson, is Miss Casey okay?" Lara peeked into the bedroom from the balcony.

"She's not here." As he looked more closely he saw a piece of paper tossed among the sheets of her disheveled bed. He grabbed it up, scanned the words, and swore. She couldn't have been so stupid, could she? Didn't anyone who'd grown up with American movies know better than to 'come alone' when requested?

Pushing past Lara, he peered over the balcony railing. Where had the gunshots come from?

"Lara, can you check the cantina and also ask around to see if anyone knows where Casey is? Maybe she went for an early morning stroll or a swim."

"You are worried for her, no? Do you think she is in trouble?"

"I hope not, but knowing her, she is."

As Lara left through the hallway door, Parker threw on some clothes in his bedroom along with his shoulder holster and knives. He scooped up the bedside phone and dialed the satellite office.

"Malone here."

"About time! It's Parker."

"You don't sound relaxed, man."

"Hell no. There has been nothing relaxing about this damn trip, but I don't have time to explain. I need you to find some background for me."

"All right."

"Anastasia Petrov, blonde, five foot ten, early thirties or possibly late twenties, Russian. Boris Petrov, six foot, early thirties, crew cut, blonde hair, black eyes, pale skin, Russian. Acacia Summers, five six, late twenties, brown hair, gray eyes. She's been under FBI surveillance for several years and her background is classified, but see if you can find anything on her at all. She's the crux of all this."

"Will do."

"Thanks. Gotta go." He slammed down the phone and broke into a full out run the second he hit the hallway. He vaulted down the steps, through the gate, and onto the street. He hadn't heard another gun shot, which forced his heart into his throat. Had they hit their target? Was Casey dead or bleeding somewhere?

The old pastry vendor pushed his cart slowly along the street.

"Aren't you a bit late this morning?" Parker asked as conversationally as he could manage.

"Sí." The man explained that a woman had given him a hundred pesos to buy his boat so he'd treated himself to an extra beer before retrieving his cart.

"Where did she go?"

He pointed toward the peninsula to the south.

"Thanks."

The man tottered on his way. Parker ran to the end of the pier. He spied two fishing trawlers to the north, near town, but no other small craft. Had the boat sunk? He refused to believe that, so he'd assume she'd made it around the peninsula. Parker trotted back to land and debated the quickest way to get there. It was still early, with only a few peddlers on foot. If he went back to the resort in search of a car, he'd lose valuable time. So he picked up his pace, transforming his trot into a run.

Running always relaxed him. The steady rhythm calmed his mind. He took deep, concentrated breaths, lengthening his strides, knowing speed surpassed endurance in importance

this morning. The ocean breeze kept him cool. Too bad the pavement wasn't more even. It looked like it had seen better days a decade or so ago. He estimated the distance by land around the outcropping was about a mile, which he could run in seven minutes under normal circumstances.

Maybe the shot had had nothing to do with Casey, but it was too much coincidence that she was in a boat at the same time shots were fired. Why hadn't she stayed in his room, and why the hell had he let himself fall asleep? He was really blowing his assignment.

Beyond the outcropping Parker spied water sloshing against sandy beach, and there was the boat, half grounded, half submerged. He scanned the beach. No Casey. He peered down the street. Shop owners hosed off sidewalks and rolled up chain barricades. Bins of fresh produce sparkled in the morning sunlight. Parker shaded his eyes as he walked down the street. He spotted a small café with indoor and outdoor tables. The open-air tables were empty, but a lone figure hunched over one of the inside tables. Parker's heart stopped. Was it Casey? Was she hurt? He rushed inside.

The jangling of the cowbell over the door caused the figure to jerk up. Casey looked startled when she recognized Parker, but she seemed uninjured, at least.

"Are you okay?" He knew his voice was louder than it needed to be. He wanted to grab her and shake her and hold her against him. Instead he shoved his shaking hands into his pockets.

Her mouth opened and closed twice as if she were deciding on the right answer to give. Parker moved closer to the table and stared down at her. In a hushed voice, he said, "Are you hurt? I heard shots fired." He lowered himself into a chair.

A tentative smile appeared on her face. "I'm fine. The boat's a bit the worse for wear, though, but I think I bought it rather than borrowed it, though I'm not sure, and Ruben would probably like a new boat anyway. How much do you think those cost around here?"

Parker yanked his hands out of his pockets and grabbed hers on the table. "Damn the boat!" "Well that's not very nice."

"You're rambling about the boat and you know I don't give a shit about the boat. Why did you leave this morning?" He still had his heart in his mouth from discovering her gone.

She sighed and sipped her café de leche, which just made Parker want to jump across the table and shake her until she answered. Finally she set the cup down and said, "I got a note telling me to meet someone here, alone, but no one has shown up. I think I was on time despite the gun shots, but now I think the note was just a lure to get me into the open."

"You think?"

Casey scowled. "Parker, sarcasm does not become you."

"I don't give a shit. Why the hell didn't you wake me, ask my advice at least, or ask me to come with you?" Of course he wouldn't have let her go at all.

"It said 'alone'."

"They wouldn't have known, you idiot, and I could've made sure you were armed." He stared into her eyes, willing her to adequately explain her stupidity.

"I am armed."

"You have a gun?"

"No." She lowered her voice. "I have my power."

"Which certainly didn't help you escape the Africans. And anyone with half a brain would know that a note like that could only mean a trap." He pulled the offending note out of his pocket. What was the weird drawing and what was the Institute?

Casey scooped more raw sugar from a chipped porcelain bowl into her coffee and stirred. "I know that, but what if someone really did have information for me? Maybe it could help me know why everyone is after me. I really did think I could handle myself. And I don't want to keep

involving you. Like you said, being around me isn't helping your blood pressure at all. You need to rest and I'm only bringing chaos into your life."

Chaos...was that what the stupid picture was? The Roman god Janus? Parker smoothed the paper out as calmly as possible, but he really wanted to scream. He'd trusted Casey with that information, information about his one vulnerability, and she was using it against him. "But do you think it helped my blood pressure when I heard shots and discovered you missing? Then I had to run a mile to get to you to find out if you were all right."

She lowered her head, letting her bangs shade her face. When she brushed the fall of hair behind her ears and glanced up, she had a glint in her gray eyes, and Parker sensed trouble. "I can take care of myself. I have taken care of myself. Yes, you've helped me out, but I don't know what's in it for you. You could be one of them. You lied to me from the beginning. You're no damn vet. You probably hate animals."

"I do not. I had a dog once. And I told you I'm an agent."

"But you're still lying to me."

"I am not." He'd been trained to lie, but it felt wrong to lie to Casey. Besides, without her implicit trust he couldn't keep her safe. She was too impetuous. But he'd been sworn to secrecy by the U.S. government, not to mention Brandon. It felt treasonous to break the rules. He never broke the rules. Well, yes he did, when a case took over his psyche and he dreamed about it at night and just couldn't let it go. Like Missy's case. And now Casey's.

"I'm going to order a coffee. I need some caffeine."

"Isn't that against doctor's orders?"

"I don't give a damn." He jumped to his feet and stalked to the counter. "*Café, por favor.*"

"Bueno." The craggy-faced woman hustled to give Parker a cup. Parker also picked out a couple of pastries before paying the woman and returning to Casey.

"Here." Parker placed a pastry on a napkin and slid it across the linoleum table.

"Thanks. Now are you going to tell me the truth?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I was ordered not to tell you, Casey, or I would have been up front to begin with. I want you to know that."

Casey felt sick to her stomach. Was he going to tell her he'd been ordered to kidnap her as well? Would he take her back to the Institute or someplace like it? The bell over the door rang, momentarily distracting them both. A gangly teenage boy entered and went straight for the counter demanding a soda.

Casey took a bite of her pastry and chewed while they waited for the boy to complete his transaction and leave. "What were you ordered not to tell me?"

"I work for HSP, Homeland Security Project."

"I've never heard of it."

"It's new, more importantly it's highly classified so if you had heard of it then we'd be in trouble, because that would mean we had a mole on the inside."

"How do I know you're not just making up some story then?" Since he'd already told her he worked for the government, she doubted this was the big secret, but it also occurred to her that she only had his word that he worked for the United States and not some other foreign government. Accents could be faked.

Parker reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a black leather wallet. Casey expected to see a badge when he flipped it open, but all she saw was his Virginia driver's license. Then he dug out a laminated card from behind that. It was another ID. This he handed to her and she was immediately struck by the somber expression on his photo. The letters HSP were lasered in bold as a backdrop to the other information found there, such as name, address, height, weight, and birth date. Casey noted that his thirty-seventh birthday would arrive in two months. They'd be back in the States by then, separated by a few hundred miles and totally different lives. Unless she got killed or kidnapped first.

"It says 'Special Agent'. Is there a non-Special Agent?"

He grinned. "No, all of the agents are special. We do have some office personnel, though, who have a lower security clearance and, of course, different titles."

"Do you have your own office?"

"Yes, in D.C. Not too far from the Hoover Building."

"Okay, so spill it. What were you ordered not to tell me?"

"I've been assigned to protect you while you're out of the country."

"Why would they do that? They promised to leave me alone."

"Who did?"

"The government. Years ago. My mom threatened them with legal action or something after my dad died, and they promised to stay the hell away from me. Why would they start worrying about me again now?"

"Did you know the FBI's been tailing you for years?"

"What?" Casey nearly choked on her pastry. "No way."

"It's in your file."

"You saw my file? But then why didn't you already know about my power?" Was he that

good an actor?

"It's all classified by the higher-ups for some reason. Half the pages are blacked out and who knows what records are just plain missing. I was operating blind. I didn't know why the government wanted you protected or who I was protecting you from. I'm still not sure about the who part."

Casey stared at Parker's face as she recalled the times he'd lied to her. He was good at it, too, but hadn't she always been able to tell? He seemed to be giving her the truth this time. His eyes never left her face, but had the blood pressure thing been a ruse, too? He'd seemed genuinely ill last night. She wished she were a mind reader instead of a telekinetic. What good did mentally moving objects around do if she couldn't tell whom to believe?

"Casey, I need you to trust me. We need to work together on this. My orders are to protect you, not to bring you in."

"So you're not here on vacation to lower your blood pressure?"

"Actually, I think my boss assigned me to your case because it was supposed to be simple. I'd refused to take a vacation, so instead of forcing me to take a leave of absence, he gave me this babysitting assignment."

"Babysitting assignment?" Casey scowled.

"I was supposed to be able to sip margaritas while watching you work on your tan. Somebody seriously underestimated the amount of trouble you were in. I doubt Brandon would have assigned me to you if he'd known."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"I beg to differ."

"And I am not the property of the U.S. Government."

"But you are an American citizen, and as such, don't you deserve our protection?"

"Are you a good agent?"

"The best." He scratched his chin, as if he had a moment of doubt. "I'm a good agent. I have failed before, but all agents fail some of the time." His gaze zoomed in on her, intent. "I won't fail you."

Casey leaned back in her chair and looked out the window. The sun shone bright on the street now, but the café was shaded by a tattered awning. A hole-in-the-wall tortilla factory operated across the street, where a leather-faced woman ground corn with a large mortar and pestle, as gray tortillas crawled by on a conveyor belt.

"So what now?" she asked, refocusing on Parker's strong jaw and five o'clock shadow.

"Well, I've got my local counterpart running a check on a few people. Hopefully we can figure out who the players are. It's hard to make a plan without all the information."

"What if I don't want to go along with whatever plan you create?"

Parker put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. His fingers latched onto Casey's chin and forced her to meet his eyes and hold them. "I am on your side."

"What side is that? The American side?"

"Of course."

"Well, you see, I have a problem with that. I've already played a guinea pig for the government, and I refuse to do it again, for anyone."

"What's so wrong with working for the government?" His voice took on a whiny sound, so Casey knew she'd struck a nerve by giving a less-than-glowing review of the Feds. "I work for the government."

"But you're essentially free, as free as anyone in the United States is. They don't confine

you to a dormitory at night or force you to spend eight hours in a lab where they poke you with needles, scan you with MRIs, and make you perform like a circus monkey.”

“Is that what they did to you?”

“Yes. They lied about their objectives and they manipulated us, pitted one against the other, and we were just kids.”

“How old were you? Was that the Institute referred to in the note?”

She nodded. “I started when I was eleven and I was there for three years.”

“Did you see your family or have breaks at home?”

“Yes. They said it was a special school for the gifted, so they essentially mimicked a school schedule, and at first my family and I felt privileged, excited by the opportunity.”

“What changed?”

Casey shook her head. She suddenly felt drained. Why not let Parker make all her decisions for her? If only she could. For the moment, though, cooperation seemed like a good way to get useful information before she had to make any decisions. “I don’t want to go into it all now. I want us to decide what the next step is. It sounds like we should go back to the resort so you can contact your cohort. Do you agree?”

Parker gave Casey’s hand a quick squeeze. “Yes. Just remember I’ve got your back. I’ll protect you.” The memories blasted into his head. Images of blood. He’d failed too many people too many times. The hell with it. He didn’t have time for self-doubts and recriminations now. They seeped into his dreams often enough. During the day he needed to focus on the here and now.

* * * *

“Señor Nelson, I have a message for you.” Lara bustled over with a pink slip of paper to where Parker sat in the cantina.

“Gracias.” He read the message. Malone. He had the information. Parker swallowed his tall shot of tequila and stood. There was a payphone in the courtyard, and a payphone seemed a safer bet than his room phone at this point.

Casey was in her room showering. She’d promised not to make any hasty exits without consulting him, and he was sure she’d learned her lesson this morning. But...since she kept surprising him, he had taken the precaution of giving the soccer boys a few pesos to watch both the front and the back of the building. Divide and conquer.

Parker dialed.

“Malone here.”

“It’s me.”

“Hey, man. You got my message then?”

“Yeah, no problem. Give it to me.”

“Boris is the smarmy one. His real name is Boris Petrovitz. He technically works for Russia, but he has ties to Du Liang of China.”

“He’s a spy then.”

“Oh yeah. So’s Anastasia, but at least you can count on her loyalty. She’s Russia all the way. Her real name is Anna Blitzen and she’s very skilled. Boris was in New York just last week, but Anna flew in from Moscow to meet him in Miami before coming here. I’m thinking that whatever Boris plans to do, it will be for China, and that in the end he’ll have to get Anna out of the way somehow.”

“That’s interesting. So maybe I should focus my attention on Anna and try to feed any suspicions she may already have?”

“Could work. Now Casey is interesting. Her basic info you saw in her file: born and bred

New Yorker, series of jobs, series of college classes, and series of relationships. Nothing lasts long in her life. But I was able to dig up a bit more. Her father was indicted by the IRS for tax evasion, but during the investigation he died of a heart attack. And all of this happened within a year of Casey being expelled from the Philby Institute.”

“The Philby Institute?” Parker heard computer keys clicking from Malone’s end of the phone line.

“It looks like it was some sort of think tank, but I can’t find any info on what they were working on. The files have been erased. However, there is a short report on an accident that occurred there in 1988, which is the same year Casey left.”

“How long was she involved with the Institute?”

“Three years. And the Institute was supposedly an entity of the U.S. government, but it also had substantial private backing, which pulled out that same year. I think these events are all related somehow.”

“What sort of accident was it and who did it involve?”

“It doesn’t say exactly what happened, but it says a student was checked into a Long Island hospital with serious injuries.” More clicking. “Here we go. Hospital records list...oh interesting...Anna Blitzen, age 13, was checked in with severe burns on her feet, of all places. I wonder what really happened.”

“And I wonder if Casey had something to do with Anna’s accident and if Anna has a grudge?” Parker rubbed his thumb under his chin in thought. “How to play this? Haul them in now so they know their cover’s blown? Or try to get more information out of them?”

“Well, what do you think their plans are for Casey?”

Parker switched the phone to his other ear. “Until today everyone has been trying to kidnap her, I presume to study her.”

“Why do they want to do that?”

So Malone hadn’t been able to dig up any information on Casey’s power. How did everyone else learn about it then? He debated the wisdom of revealing it to Malone, so he evaded. “I don’t know exactly. This morning, though, someone shot at her. Anna is the only one I know who may have a specific grudge against her, but there could be other reasons to silence her that I’m unaware of.” Like keeping her from using her powers at all.

“Do you want me to come over there to help you out?”

“No. I need you there to call the cavalry in if necessary. And one more thing I need you to research for me.”

“Shoot.”

“Everyone seems to be wearing these medallions. I didn’t get a close look at what was on them, but then the note Casey got had this symbol drawn on it, and I think that might be what’s on the medallions. It’s two faces in one head, like the Roman god Janus, and over that are three wavy lines. Can you get me anything you can find on this?”

“Sure thing.”

“And do it fast.”

Once Parker hung up the phone, he wandered the path until he found Manuel, who offered up his all-clear report. Good. At least Casey was still where he’d left her.

* * * *

Except she wasn’t. She was in a bathroom in one of the resort suites, not her own unfortunately, but this time it wasn’t her fault. Well, maybe a little bit, but she hadn’t realized that she couldn’t trust anyone, not even the maid. Call her a slow learner. Really, someone ought to give

her a Spying 101 manual to read so she could avoid these pitfalls.

At the knock, Casey had peeked through the eyehole at a petite Mexican girl with a cart full of sheets and towels, so Casey had opened the door. Unfortunately, after she did so, she spied the maid running down the hall with a handful of pesos. A tall thin woman with a gun replaced her at Casey's door. Wasting no time, the woman, who had caramel skin, slanted eyes...and what else...a medallion, pushed Casey back into her room.

Only then did it occur to Casey to scream in case Parker was somewhere in the vicinity. She took a breath, but Tall Thin Woman pulled a stun gun from her jacket and zapped Casey's arm. Tingles traveled through Casey's body, and not the erotic kind, just before she collapsed. The woman then stoppered her mouth with a rag before she could emit a sound, tying the ends tightly behind her head.

And now she was in someone else's bathroom. Still at the resort, at least, Casey thought as she recognized the bamboo print wallpaper and olive green cabinets. Handcuffs restrained her wrists and ankles, the rag still filled her mouth, and she sat, like a lump of mashed potatoes, in the center of the bathtub.

She thought back to the moment before she lost consciousness. Who the hell was that woman? What new country was after her blood? Was this the person who had taken pot shots at her earlier? The woman's eyes implied Asian, but her height and red hair implied something else.

Honestly, did she have the whole world after her?

The silence gave way to distant sounds, young voices speaking Spanish, water dripping in the bathroom sink, doors slamming, heavy footsteps on the stairs, but none of these sounds seemed to come from the room beyond the closed bathroom door. Had the woman left her alone here?

Casey knew she'd better kick her butt in gear and escape, but for just a moment she lost herself in the vision of her bleak future, a future spent evading faceless enemies. Did she have any choice? Was there some solution to this dilemma? If there was, she'd yet to think of it.

Well, time enough to brood later. She needed to get out of here while she had the chance. For a few seconds she struggled to get to her knees, and from there to her feet. She sat on the side of the tub and leaned back until her hands wrapped around the edge for balance, then she swung her legs over the edge, almost tipping over in the process. She slammed her heels on the tile to stabilize, then used the momentum to propel herself to her feet.

Waddling to the door took longer than expected. She leaned her ear against the painted wood. Silence. Turning her back to the door, she felt for the handle and turned it.

She waddled around to a forward position and observed the empty bedroom. A metal briefcase with a sturdy-looking lock was perched on the end of the bed. The open wardrobe across the room revealed an empty suitcase on its side and a variety of clothes with designer labels, everything from evening gowns to denim jeans. So far so good. Stealth was impossible with the handcuffs, but she heard no television or any other telltale signs of human habitation. The suite was deserted.

Slowly Casey made her way across the living area, pausing to listen every few feet. What if she ran into Tall Woman in the hallway? Would the balcony be better? It would only connect her with the next suite, and she had no idea who occupied it.

Well, maybe it's some unsuspecting tourist that I can scare to death.

She couldn't waste too much time debating. The balcony then. She somehow managed to flip the latch blindly and open the door. She peered over the rail and spotted one of the soccer boys, Jose, but she still had the damn rag in her mouth, making her tongue dry and cottony. To try to get his attention she decided to bang the railing with the handcuffs. The resulting clinking sound was

singularly disappointing, not loud enough to attract Jose's attention.

Well, back to Plan A, knock on a stranger's glass door. The curtains in this room were closed, hiding its occupants, if it had any, and she hoped it did, otherwise she'd be sitting out here until Tall Woman came back.

Not good.

The handcuffs did make a nice loud noise on the glass. She could hear distant voices. Perhaps they were in the bedroom? Casey waited, but nothing happened, so she banged again, a bit harder this time. Finally the voices drew closer, then the curtain flipped back revealing a face. Ah, she recognized this face. Boris. She just hoped he would recognize her with the rag puffing out her cheeks like a roast pig.

"Casey?" Boris fumbled with the lock, while Anastasia lifted the curtain to see for herself. Did her face look a bit tearstained?

"Casey, what in the world are you doing out here?" Ana tactfully restrained from mentioning the handcuffs and gag. Of course, she also forgot that Casey could hardly answer her question in this state.

Boris opened the door and helped her over the track, then to the couch. Once she was seated, Ana snipped the rag off with kitchen shears, while Boris examined the cuffs at Casey's ankles.

"I think I can get these opened."

"Oh, that would be super."

He dashed to the bedroom as Ana brought over a glass of water.

"Who did this to you, dear?"

Casey shook her head then guzzled the whole glassful. Then she remembered Jose standing outside, uncharacteristically stationary. She'd bet anything that Parker had placed him out there as sentry. Well, fat lot of good that did!

"Ana, could you do me a favor and yell at Jose out there? He's below the balcony. Tell him I'm here and could he let Parker know."

Ana looked shocked, then nodded and walked over to the glass door. For the first time, Casey noticed a slight, almost imperceptible limp in Ana's gait. Had she pulled a muscle during one of their recent adventures? Something familiar...Casey's mind zinged back several years to the Institute. She'd known an Anna, blonde. Was that what the dream had been trying to tell her? They'd been good friends, or so it had seemed for a while, then she'd discovered Anna's secret.

She forced her mind back to the present. She didn't want to recall what happened next. The Accident. Besides this was Anastasia from Bulgaria, who'd never shown her a moment's recognition. It couldn't be her friend from all those years ago.

Boris returned to give his attentions to Casey's feet.

"Is that a lock-pick kit?"

"Yes." He snipped off the word, implying he wanted no further discussion of it, so Casey just said "Oh," and thanked God that he had such a kit. It didn't matter to her what nefarious reason would cause him to possess it. At least, it didn't matter to her until *after* he removed the handcuffs. He set to work and in mere seconds had her feet unlocked, so Casey angled her body so he could reach her wrists. A small click and she was free.

"Thank you, thank you so much, Boris. I could kiss you."

"Then please do so."

Ana had reentered the room. "Boris darling, do restrain yourself."

Moments later strenuous banging on the door startled them. Must be the Gestapo, i.e. Parker, who was probably about to read her the riot act. But it wasn't her fault, really it wasn't. Ana opened

the door and Parker rushed into the room. Boris sat next to Casey on the couch examining the handcuffs. Not likely to find any clues there, but she felt certain that once she described the woman to Parker, he could unearth her identity.

“Casey, Jesus, are you all right?” Parker stalked across the room, face almost purple, and kneeled in front of her, where he gripped her hands, hard.

“Chill, Parker, you’re going to break my fingers.”

He didn’t apologize or let her go, but he did gentle his grip somewhat. “Why the hell did you leave your room? You swore to me you’d stay put.”

“Way to show the love,” Ana commented acidly.

“Parker, I doubt this was her fault.”

Parker turned his glare on Boris. “You doubt it, do you? Shows what you know.”

Casey gasped. “It wasn’t my fault! That’s not fair at all.”

“This isn’t about fair. It’s about keeping you alive.”

“I was in my room. Someone knocked. It was the maid”

“And you opened the door, didn’t you? Even though common sense”

“Don’t give me ‘common sense’. It’s not common sense to fear a hotel maid.”

“If you’d just waited until I got back, told her to come back later, anything but open the door.”

Casey jerked her hands free and was tempted to kick him to his butt. Ana came forward, murmuring ‘Children, children’ and put her hand on Parker’s shoulder. Casey’s lip curled and she had the animal urge to snarl. Parker surged to his feet and paced across the room as Boris smirked. He came back and snatched the cuffs from the man’s hands. He opened his mouth as if to say something, closed it, and examined the cuffs instead.

“Casey, may I speak to you a moment?” He didn’t wait for her answer, just hauled her to her feet, and propelled her toward the door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Parker, how rude! And that arm’s already sore.” But he ignored her, so she waved over her shoulder. “Thanks so much for the locksmithing. Talk to you later.”

“Tootaloo, darling,” Ana said, smiling, like a psycho mother from a sixties sitcom.

Then Casey was in the hallway, trailing behind Parker’s broad shoulders. He now held her hand instead of her arm, but his grip hadn’t loosened. He slowed on the stairs so she could keep up.

When Parker finally stopped in front of his room door and thrust his key in the lock, Casey was huffing and puffing like the mean old wolf. “Why are you so Cro-Magnon? Boris and Ana saved me. If it had been someone else, they might not have let me in.”

He pulled her through the door. “Don’t you find it awfully coincidental that their room just happened to be next to the one you were locked up in?”

“Did Jose fill you in?”

“Yes, he said he saw you on the balcony.”

He only let go of her once he had her settled on the couch. He closed the curtains. The loss of light affected Casey’s mood, giving her a sense of impending doom. Really it would have been helpful if she had the ‘gift’ of precognition. Then she’d be able to avoid all these kidnappings. Of course she knew precogs didn’t have much control over their talents either. The images usually came as dreams and had to be interpreted, and they usually involved strangers. Rarely did they help the precogs themselves.

“Well?” Parker’s eyebrows had risen to his hairline as he waited for an answer.

“Well what?” Casey had lost the train of the conversation. Understandable since her stomach was growling and a monster headache had set in from being bound and gagged so long.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit of a coincidence?”

“Oh, the room thing. Well, the resort isn’t that big. You and I have rooms next to each other.” She rubbed her temple. “But you arranged that, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Seemingly without thought, Parker turned Casey around and started kneading her shoulders. Heavenly. After a few moments he sighed. “Let’s sit down. We need to talk.”

“But this feels so good.” She peered over her shoulder through a fall of hair. “Can’t we talk later? It’s been a really rough day.” Her body had started to tingle at the nearness of Parker’s heat and her mind now veered to pleasing images of Parker naked giving her a full-body massage.

He drew closer and his breath warmed her ear and tickled her neck. “Are you okay?” he whispered.

“Yes. Just a bit sore in spots.”

“Do you want me to massage those spots?” He’d read her mind.

“That sounds nice.”

He guided her to the bedroom with gentle pressure from his fingers on her shoulders. He knew just which points to press to loosen the knots, but then he left her to pull the comforter off the bed. After that, he disappeared into the bathroom, returning with a small jar.

“What’s that?” Casey hadn’t moved, unsure of what Parker expected of her.

“A salve. Secret recipe. Very good for sore muscles.”

“Ah.”

He placed the jar on the nightstand then returned to her side where he first lifted her arms then the hem of her T-shirt. She followed his silent instructions without protest. The soft fabric climbed up her stomach and ribs until it revealed her white cotton bra. One more tug, and it was free of her shoulders and head, so Parker sent it flying across the room. She giggled self-consciously as it settled on a suitcase, tempted to cross her arms over her chest as her nipples hardened.

“Lay on your stomach.” The command in his deep voice sent shivers up Casey’s spine.

She kicked off her shoes and crawled onto the center of the bed, wiggling her ass suggestively. Then she lowered her stomach to the mattress, settling her arms at her sides. She turned her face to the side, closed her eyes, and listened to the bed’s springs creak as Parker reclined next to her. She heard the snick of the jar opening and smelled menthol mixed with cloves. Parker’s warm hands skimmed her skin as he unlatched her bra. The fabric loosened and he pushed it across her shoulders and down her arms. Her nipples tingled in awareness even though they were hidden from view.

“Parker?”

“Hmm?” His fingers moved along her shoulder blades.

“Have you locked all the doors?”

His hands stilled. “No.”

He leapt to his feet, leaving her chilly on the bed. She trusted that he would make sure no would-be kidnappers lurked behind the curtains or under the tables. Lesson learned. She didn’t want any interruptions this time. All of her nerve endings were singing snap, crackle, and pop. She was so ready to feel Parker on her and in her, deep in her. He wouldn’t walk away this time. No way.

“All clear,” he said when he returned to the room after five minutes. “And I’m not answering the door or the phone, got it?”

“Got it.” She chuckled. He sat next to her, and the warmth from his hip seeped through her pants to her skin.

“Are you ready?”

“For the massage, yes, but I have to tell you something.”

The smell of menthol grew stronger and the first touch was cool, but it warmed as he massaged it into her sore shoulders. The salve generated a soothing heat that penetrated her muscles and swept away her cares. It also sent exciting messages to other parts of her body. She had to concentrate on her breathing to keep from clenching her thighs together and arching her pelvis against the mattress. As Parker’s thumbs located pressure points between her shoulder blades she nearly purred.

“Like that, do you?”

“Yes.” His palms roved lower, massaging her aching back. Using his thumbs to apply the deepest pressure, he smoothed his fingers across her skin in a gentle, relaxing motion. “Sometimes, actually every time so far, when I have sex ... something happens with my power.”

“Lift your hips.”

Casey obeyed, allowing Parker access to the zipper and snap of her pants. Wetness leaked into her panties. Oh yeah, she was turned on, but she wasn’t feeling abnormally warm and nothing had floated across the room so far. A good sign, but she forced herself to tell him more. “Sometimes things go flying, because of my power. I guess when I get so excited, I can’t control it.”

He pulled the pants over her hips and past her thighs and calves, his fingers trailing behind the fabric lightly touching her skin, until the pants were removed. Now his gentle ministrations focused on her ankles that still bore red marks from the handcuffs.

“I just wanted you to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Parker had lost himself in the feel of Casey's skin, the heat of the salve, and the anticipation of what was to come. Casey's voice had a husky tone to it, and though he heard her words, they weren't quite sinking in. In fact, he was rock hard and his pants were feeling downright uncomfortable.

Until he saw the cuff marks.

His fingers continued to knead supple calves and generous thighs, but his mind shot away to the duplicity of Boris and Ana and the complication of yet another kidnapper in their midst.

Casey wasn't safe here and he wasn't protecting her by allowing her to remain in the wide open like this. He wanted to trip up the other spies, but not at the expense of losing her. Not only was she his responsibility because of his assignment, but he cared about her way too much, more than he felt comfortable with. He wanted her so much he couldn't breathe. She messed with his thought processes and with his carefully wrought plans for his career. Right now he wanted to say to hell with all the others and hide her somewhere deep in the jungle, keep her there forever, safe from rival governments and serial killers, mob bosses and terrorists, and he wanted to fuck her senseless while he was at it. And he didn't care how many objects went flying through the air.

Casey moaned as he pressed her lower back once again. Her tiny red panties hid some of her petite derriere, tantalizing him, so he traced the edges with his thumbs. She pushed her ass higher, seeking his touch, so he pressed his thumb into the cleft between her butt cheeks and slid it up and down. She moaned and wiggled. God, what a cute ass. He wondered if she'd ever been taken from behind. Impatient, he caught the lip of the slim fabric and slid it down her legs.

Parker's breath caught and his body responded to the sight of her naked curves. He gave her a love tap and she squeaked, then giggled. He loved her giggle. It reminded him of how different she was from women he'd dated in the past. She wasn't innocent exactly, but she was naïve. And so fucking sexy.

Yeah, he wanted to keep her safe forever, keep her with him forever, but even in the short time they'd known each other, Parker could tell it wasn't in Casey's nature to cower. Hiding would kill her spirit, but remaining under fire would break her down, too. His hands stopped. They needed some more permanent solution, but they also needed an immediate plan, even if that meant going into hiding temporarily.

"Parker?" She'd risen to her elbows and turned, seeking his eyes.

"Sorry. Just thinking." Of course, now he could see her breasts, nipples brushing against the sheet, and his mind blanked.

"Do you want to stop? Are you afraid of what my power might do?"

He nearly choked. "No. Definitely not." He used her wrist to direct her to flip onto her back. "Move over."

He was conscious of the fact that he was still fully clothed as he lay down next to her glorious naked body. He didn't mind. He wanted to take his time, and if he was naked he wouldn't have enough control to take it slow.

"What were you thinking about?" Her brow wrinkled with concern.

Parker shook his head and put his finger over her lips. "Nothing."

Then he rolled atop of her, keeping some of his weight on his elbows so he wouldn't crush her and careful not to scrape her with the snap and zipper of his jeans. He lowered his lips to hers. Just a brush, a taste, but the kiss quickly escalated from chaste to consuming. Her fingers wove through his hair, grasped, and pulled him deeper, and her mouth opened and their tongues meshed.

And the pillow next to them floated into the air.

"Holy shit." He saw it out of the corner of his eye, but then Casey's fingers caressed his jaw

and refocused his attention on her. The pillow dropped with a barely perceptible thump back to the bed.

Casey smelled sexy, citrusy from her shampoo, exotic from the cream he'd smeared over her body. She'd spread her thighs wide on either side of his jean-clad legs, making it hard to resist grinding his hard-on into her. Her plump bare breasts pressed against his chest. He imagined the sensation of fabric rubbing against her sensitive tits. Suddenly, desperately, he wanted his clothes gone, but her arms and legs held him in a vise grip, and he drowned in her kisses.

Freeing himself slightly, his lips searched her neck, tasted, nipped, sipped. From her neck he licked to the upper curves of her breasts. He cupped her flesh with his hands, giving his mouth easier access to her taut nipples. He flicked his tongue along one areola and her moan reverberated through her chest.

"God," he murmured, before opening his mouth so his lips could circle the distended flesh. He suckled deeply, and her body bucked in ecstasy. Her fingers massaged his scalp as she held him in place.

And a lamp launched from the table straight into the air and did a somersault.

"Don't stop," she moaned, lifting her hand from his hair long enough to do something to the lamp, so it could land back on the nightstand.

He chuckled. "Never." An occasional flying object just added to the moment. He sucked one nipple then the other, enjoying the texture and salty, sweet taste. Her wetness dampened his jeans, proving her complete arousal. Her breasts were so sensitive that just sucking them seemed to have her near orgasm.

Could he make her come with just that alone? But he wanted to taste the rest of her. He released her tits and drifted lower, across her sexy stomach, over her hipbones, through the nest of curls that tickled his nose as she squirmed, whether from ticklishness or anticipation he couldn't say. When he reached his goal, he used his thumbs to spread apart the folds of fur-covered flesh. Her womanly scent filled his nose and turned him on even more, making his dick ache. Taking his time, he explored with his tongue, sipping her juices, seeking out her pleasure spots. He licked around her clit slowly, tapped it with his fingers, and watched her reaction. She was practically writhing against the twisted blankets.

This time he felt his body levitating slightly. Okay, this concerned him. "Are you sure you don't want me to stop?"

She smacked his forehead as an answer and he laughed. Gravity returned. He sucked her engorged clit into his mouth, holding it there, flicking it with his tongue, then sucking it again, deeper. For variety, he delved into her hot, wet hole, moving his tongue all around. Then he returned to her clit and stroked and sucked.

"Parker, God, yes! Don't stop." She sounded breathless and her fingers had wound tightly in his hair, holding him in place. She bucked violently.

Her orgasm nearly shattered him, just knowing he had that much power over her, knowing he'd brought her so much pleasure that her body still spasmed. And thank the Lord, he was still on the bed with her. He wouldn't have put it past her to blast him across the room in an unconscious response. Breaths and moans heaved from her chest, and Parker didn't stop licking until she lay completely still, languid. He savored her taste and smell as well as the feeling of his too-full cock raging against the confines of his pants.

Finally, he lifted himself from the bed and stripped. He always packed condoms in his overnight bag luckily, though he'd rarely had call for them in the past couple of years. Thank God they were there now. He slid one on, the touch of his fingers on his cock teasing him with what was

to come.

“Casey?”

“Hmm?” She turned her face to him, a satiated smile and half-lowered lids greeting him.

“Um...”

“Come here.” She pulled him atop her relaxed body. “Have your way with me, Parker. Please. And don’t mind me if I snooze.” Her lips quirked.

She didn’t snooze. He entered her warm, wet sheath, and knew he’d died and gone to heaven. Yes, a cliché, but a true one. She was so tight, and before long she’d gone from languid to excited. She followed his lead, his rhythm. Lifting her hips to meet him, angling herself to give him maximum pleasure, she wrapped her legs around his thighs. Her heels dug into his ass cheeks, urging him deeper and faster. He slammed into her soaking pussy, then withdrew slowly while the muscles in her vagina squeezed him. Her heat surrounded him, and her cries of pleasure filled his ears.

Completely in sync, he pushed her, harder and faster. And when he exploded, she did, too. He bucked in reaction as his cum shot into the condom, warming the walls of her vagina.

“God, Casey.” His chest heaved and he lay on top of her, boneless, letting her feel his full weight for the first time. She didn’t complain. Her legs still held him in place. Each time her cunt squeezed him, she shuddered and sighed. Then she bit his chin.

“Parker, kiss me.”

And the kissing was almost as violent as the love-making, like they were each trying to show what they felt, how much they’d enjoyed themselves. Only after several long minutes, did they relax and Parker rolled to the side, pulling Casey onto him so he could cradle her.

“I thought for a minute we were going to have a problem.”

“With what, pray tell?”

“With flying things.”

“Flying things? I didn’t notice.” She smiled. “I was too busy.”

* * * *

Ana settled next to Boris on the sofa, a glass of wine in her hand. “What do you make of that, love?” She infused a bit of sarcasm into the word. She wanted to pull out her gun and shoot him, had wanted to since she’d realized he’d drugged and fucked her on the floor.

Boris snapped his cell phone shut and reached for Ana’s glass. He sipped the red Bordeaux and returned the glass to her. “We have more company.”

“Who this time?”

“According to the front desk, the room belongs to Li MacGregor.”

“British do you think?”

“No. They’re staying across the compound. Edward Smith and Geoff Gunter.”

“Oh, Edward! I shall have to say ‘hello’.”

“Do that, dear. I’m sure he has lovely memories of you kicking him in the balls at the embassy party.”

A smile played about Ana’s lips. She’d outwitted all of the players that time, retrieving the chip from the safe then escaping through a laundry chute to the basement. After she’d made the drop, she’d returned to the party and toasted the still-limping Edward with a glass of champagne. He had not been amused. “The man is devilishly handsome, though.”

“Perhaps, but you’re focused on Parker for the moment. We’ll need Mr. Nelson out of the game when the time comes. Casey will be hard enough to handle.”

Ana’s smile shifted to a grimace and her eyes narrowed. She’d waited a long time to get

revenge and now she could taste it metallic on her tongue. She was sure Casey didn't recognize her, likely hadn't cared enough to make the connections in her mind. Plus Ana had changed drastically since her time at the Institute. She'd left her gawky clumsiness aside and had gained confidence and grace. She'd honed her skills as an agent, learning martial arts in Japan, practicing with explosives and weapons in Siberia, learning the fine art of seduction in Buenos Aires.

She crossed her leg over her knee, which sent a sharp pain from heel to thigh, reminding her of the most important changes. She'd had surgery after surgery to repair the nerve damage and scar tissue left from the burns on her feet. She still betrayed herself with the smallest limp when stressed or tired, but considering that she hadn't been able to walk during her teen years, the limp was a small cross to bear.

"Li is a woman it seems," Boris said, recalling Ana to the conversation.

"Asian?"

"Not Chinese."

"How do you know?"

Boris gasped, causing Ana to focus her gaze on his eyes and face, searching for his tell. There it was. His right eye always twitched when he lied to her, as he was doing now. "The lady at the desk said Taiwanese or Japanese."

Ana nodded slowly. He'd given himself away somehow, divulged info that he shouldn't really know. Ana just had to find out how he came to know it. He'd sounded very certain.

Ana thought back to their earlier conversation, the one thankfully interrupted by Casey banging on the glass door. Boris' eye had been practically sewn shut with the force of his lie then. Ana had lost control of her emotions, accusing him of raping her, but she had them under tight rein now. She would get her revenge on Boris. For everything. He wouldn't cast her as the scapegoat for another assignment gone wrong as he had many times in the past. He wouldn't taunt her about her physical deformities or use her for his pleasure ever again. This time Ana would bring Casey in, dead or alive, and Boris would sadly lose his life in the line of duty.

"Ana darling, you seem distracted."

"Not at all. Merely wondering what we shall do with the new player in the game and why there are so many players at once."

"Kill her of course. And as to the number of players, there must have been a serious intelligence leak somewhere." He tsked his disapproval.

"Do you think she's returned to find her little present missing?" Ana asked, referring to Li.

"No. I think we would have heard some cursing and banging if she had."

"How foolish of her to leave her charge alone like that."

"Yes, indeed. We will not be so foolish."

No. Once Ana had Casey safely in her custody, she would not leave the girl's side until her government had instituted every known form of torture on her. Or she would fulfill her dream and kill Casey herself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Casey emerged from the bathroom with her one-piece suit on underneath a terry-cloth cover-up. She paused a few feet from the bed and observed Parker speaking on the phone to his contact. He'd put on denim shorts, but had left the top button undone. His tanned and toned stomach flexed as he leaned over a small notebook to write down some information. Casey wanted to run her hands all over his lean, muscular back. His skin had a healthy hue to it and looked good enough to eat.

But the thing about watching Parker now was that he was still here, in this room with her. He hadn't run away. He'd witnessed objects levitating, including himself, during sex, and he hadn't skedaddled as fast as his legs would carry him. And for that reason, he now carried a little bit of Casey's heart with him, though he didn't know it and she didn't plan to tell him any time soon.

He looked up and noticed her attire. Raising his eyebrows, he hung up the phone. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the beach."

"No, you're not."

"Says who?"

"Says me, of course. You can't go outside with all these people after you. You'll be a sitting duck."

Casey bit her cuticle but stood her ground. "I'm on vacation."

"So? You're still a target."

"I need to practice."

Parker sat up and swung his bare feet to the floor. "Practice what?"

"Control." She blushed. "I've been able to do more with my power on this trip than I ever have, but I still don't have control over it."

"You got that injured man off the truck. Seems like control to me."

"I've always been able to help other people, but my power is much less cooperative when it comes to helping myself, and I want to be able to choose when I use it and when I don't. I'm tired of being at its mercy."

Parker reached out, took her hands, and pulled her to his side on the bed. "Explain. How are you at its mercy?"

Casey leaned against him. His skin was cool, but quickly warmed at her touch. Parts of her body trilled in response. "I'm at its mercy because it's like a reflex. Without even thinking, the power emerges to help someone, except me, of course. The thing is, sometimes I don't want to help. Sometimes I'd like to not get involved."

"You'd want someone to get hurt instead of helping?"

"No, of course not. But this power has ruined my life. I'm in such a rut. No job, no career. My last boyfriend just broke up with me—" Parker frowned— "And it's always because of this thing I do."

She sighed heavily, fingering the string on her cover-up. "I feel like the power is a parasite controlling me, instead of a gift that I control. I mean sometimes the people I helped didn't really need my intervention, and instead of thanking me, they end up calling me a freak and pointing crosses at me."

“Like these two women having a cat fight in front of Saks. They wouldn’t have killed each other. There was a cop and a security guard approaching. They could have handled the matter. Instead, there I was raising my arms and using my power to pull them apart. Next thing I know they’re attacking me, asking me who the hell do I think I am, threatening me with assault charges. Luckily the cop couldn’t believe what he’d seen, so he didn’t take any action. Does this all sound petty?”

“No.” He hugged her tightly. “It sounds like your talent is controlling you as much as these governments want to control you. It should be your choice, but more importantly you need to know it’s going to work when you need it to, and you need to know what you can do with it. It’s just like when I trained at Quantico. All agents have strengths and weaknesses. They need to know their limitations. They need to know how heavy that gun can get in a stand-off, and they need to know how to compensate so they don’t lose their edge.”

“So then you’ll let me go practice?”

“We’ll go practice. Together. You are not leaving my sight until we are safely back in the States.”

Casey pulled back. “I’ve got another week here, you know.”

“Casey, you can’t seriously want to stay here with all these people after you.”

Casey jumped up and paced across the room, twisting her hands. “Yes, I can. If they know so much about me, what’s to keep them from following me to NY? This is my life now, isn’t it? They’re never going to stop chasing me. I might as well drink piña coladas and swim in the ocean as pound the pavement in New York looking for a job. I’ll fend off the attacks as they come.”

Parker stood, too, snapping his cut-offs and looking around for his shirt. “Look, we’ll talk more about a plan of action later. I’ve got something else I need to ask you about, but we can do it on the way to the beach, okay?”

It was against his better judgment and probably against regulations, letting her leave the room, but she was right. She needed to control her power as a matter of survival, and she needed to live her life despite the obstacles. The thing that concerned him most was the sniper, but maybe bringing Casey out into the open would draw the players out. That meant he’d have to be as ‘on’ as he had ever been, because he’d promised himself that he would protect Casey at all costs.

He slipped on a loose Hawaiian shirt, then tucked his gun into the back of his shorts. Maybe he should teach Casey how to shoot while he was at it. Well, let her master one skill at a time. There was plenty of time to teach her more.

As Casey slipped flip-flops onto her feet, offering Parker glimpses of her sexy legs, he wondered if they really did have plenty of time. They’d made love, but in today’s world that didn’t necessarily mean a permanent relationship. If only he could gage the intensity of his feelings, but they were all muddled together. The adrenaline that came from close calls with bullets, the exotic allure of a foreign country, old fashion lust for Casey, disgust with himself for his physical weakness, and a longing he couldn’t quite identify. How did he feel about Casey? Would it be the same back in the States when her home was in New York and his in D.C.? Would she move to D.C. to be with him? And if she did, what then? Would they be happy together when day-to-day living took over?

Parker followed Casey out of the bedroom and watched as she quickly packed a little beach bag with rolled-up towels and bottled water. The fact that he was even thinking about a relationship with this unpredictable woman after his assignment ended was shocking and scary by itself, because it meant he was finally over Deanna. He would never forget her and he would always love her, but the love was different now, not raw and passionate, but peaceful. And what about his need to

revenge all wrongs? Well, he was pretty sure that would stick with him. He was just that kind of person, but it didn't have to overtake his life. He could temper it if he chose.

"Parker?"

"I'm ready." They entered the hallway and locked the room door. No one was about, but Parker kept his right hand behind his back, ready to pull the gun if necessary.

"So did you find out any information?" Casey asked.

"What?"

"On the phone."

"Oh, Malone. Yeah. The red-head is registered as Li MacGregor, but he thinks she might be a fairly new agent for North Korea called Lian McCulloh."

"The last name is Scottish, right?"

"Seems so, but she's an unknown quantity right now. We don't think she was born in Korea so we're not sure how she came to be an agent for them. Really the number of agents, nationalities, none of this makes sense. Unless"

"Unless?"

"Unless they're all working together."

"The medallions, you mean."

"Yes. Malone's still searching for something on them."

They arrived at the quad in the center of their building. The water in the fountain gurgled cheerily. Parker stopped Casey by touching her arm before she could step out into the sunlight.

"Let's walk on the sidewalk."

The sidewalk wrapped around the quad and was covered by the second floor balcony. Parker walked silently next to Casey as his eyes scanned the balcony and the courtyard. When they reached the double doors that led to the maze of paths at the center of the resort, he opened them cautiously, keeping Casey behind him. He scanned everything, then finally let her through. Only when they entered the opaque cave of palm trees and vines did Parker relax.

"Did you recognize Anastasia when you first met her?" he asked, catching Casey off-guard.

"No. Should I have?" But then she bit her lip. Something had seemed familiar about her today, but that couldn't be.

"Are you sure?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not sure. I never noticed it before, but there was something about her today."

"Her real name is Anna Blitzen." He paused and watched her face closely. Casey couldn't hide her gasp.

"Anna? Really?"

"You know her?"

"She's from the Institute. But are you sure? She's so beautiful and she's...okay!"

Parker stopped her before they stepped into the open again. "She had an accident, right?"

Tears pricked her eyes at the sudden memory. No, she didn't want to recall that. She couldn't deal with that guilt. But she wasn't dead! For a while, she'd thought she was, then she wasn't so sure, but finally here was proof that she was alive.

"It was my fault," Casey said finally, sucking in a lungful of air. Stay calm. Once the memory struck, it was like yesterday.

"What was your fault?"

She could see the flames sparking from the consoles and trailing up the walls and across the ceiling. She never knew why the sprinklers had failed to come on, or the fire alarm, for that matter.

“Casey?”

“There was a fire.”

“Anna was caught in the fire?”

Casey tugged at a strand of hair. “I’d found out the truth about Anna. You see the Institute was specifically for kids with psychic abilities. Our abilities were tested and studied, and when they tired with that, we were given normal school work so that we could return to real school someday. I’d been there so long I didn’t believe they would ever let us go.

“When Anna arrived, we all tried to get to know her. A new person was rare, and since we were denied TV and other normal pursuits, we spent a lot of time talking, learning from each other. The one thing we all had in common was the feeling that we were doing something good for our country.”

Parker took her hand and pulled her into the sunlight. They followed the path at a slow pace.

“How come you never learned to control your power at the Institute?” Parker asked.

“I’m not sure. The tests they set up weren’t really practice sessions. They messed with our heads. They pitted us against each other and forced us to act on instinct. I think it was all set up to see what exactly we could do. Perhaps they didn’t want to train us until they’d devised a use for us. I don’t know.”

“What sort of ability did Anna have?”

“Well, that’s the thing, she didn’t have any ability. We were told that she could read minds, which of course made most of us nervous around her. Jeffy was the only mind reader of the group, and he would sometimes spout out the most embarrassing information about us. We spent a lot of free time working on his social skills. We kept telling him, look, you’ve got this power, but you don’t need to tell everyone’s secrets.”

Casey could smell the salt air now and hear the breakers. Several other couples strolled about the paths. Parker’s sharp eyes focused on each pedestrian for a few moments, until he seemed to come to some conclusion about them, then he would refocus on Casey. Casey warmed, just knowing he was watching out for her. Yes, it was his job, but she felt like it was more than that.

“Anyway, the lab coats used specially marked cards to test mind-readers. Jeffy scored eight-five to ninety-five percent correct in his tests. It seemed to depend on which lab coat worked with him. He said that some minds were so scattered, he had a hard time sifting through to find the card.

“But Anna always tested with one particular researcher, Dr. Randizan, and she always scored a hundred percent. She also avoided Jeffy like the plague. One day Jeffy came to me and said that he’d caught a stray thought from her. ‘Hope they don’t find out.’ That’s what the thought was.”

“Find out what?”

“Find out that she wasn’t psychic at all. But Jeffy didn’t find that out. I did. I overheard her talking to Dr. Randizan in the lab one evening. He was coaching her on the cards that would be used in the test the next day. He set them up in a precise order, and she memorized the order.

“What I couldn’t understand was why someone with no ability would want to be locked up with us nerds in this aseptic prison.”

Parker reached over and pulled her finger from where it continued to twist her hair. “I’m sure you weren’t ever a nerd.”

“Sure I was. We all were. Hopeless geeks.”

“Did you find out why Anna was there?”

“Actually, no. The accident came first, before I could confront her.”

The beach beckoned, and Casey didn’t want to think about the Institute any more, though

she knew she'd have to face it soon enough. Would talking to Anna and giving her a simple apology do the trick? The Ana she knew now seemed sophisticated and care-free, but if she was an agent, that had to be an act. Was she the one that had shot at her? Did her anger run that deep so many years later?

Casey pushed the depressing thoughts aside and sprinted the last hundred feet of the gravel path, jumping with both feet onto the sand. Hot! The flip-flops did little against the heat of the sand, so Casey skipped further away from Parker, laughing, heading toward the water's edge.

Parker couldn't help himself. Casey's enthusiasm was contagious. The agent in him scanned the beach for anything suspicious, but then he pulled off his sneakers and jogged toward the gorgeous, vivacious woman. She'd splashed into the ocean, looked sleek and yummy and wet. She'd untied the belt on her cover-up, so now he had a full view of her beautiful body, which called to mind images from earlier. His stomach clenched and he realized he was growing hard again. He wanted her so fucking much. He needed her, too, like air, like food. The water hit his ankles, but he didn't care. As soon as he was at Casey's side, he swept her into his arms, pressed her against his body, and devoured her with his mouth and eyes. She tasted heavenly, salty and sweet.

"Parker." The sound of his name exhaled from her lips sent shivers through his body. His hands slid down her slippery back to her sweet ass. He fused her to him, wanting her to feel what he felt, intense, out of control.

He knew Casey had more story to tell about Anna Blitzen, and he knew it was important, but at the moment he didn't damn care. Another wave splashed them both. Parker spread his legs to brace himself on the sinking sand. Casey clung to his neck. Her fingers stroked his hair, and her legs wrapped around his hips.

"I want you." His voice sounded strange, not his own, husky, aroused.

"I want you, too." Casey couldn't believe the intensity of her lust at that moment. She wanted him stripped down, his body against her with no barrier between, right here in the warm water in full view of the resort. Was she crazy? Yes.

"Maybe we should have stayed in the room," she murmured against Parker's ear.

"Yeah, maybe. Too late now." And with his strong arms securing her against him, he started to trot along the water's edge and around an outcropping of rock that would hide them from view.

"I'm too heavy for you, Parker. Put me down."

"No, you're not. Almost there."

"Thank God." She laughed, loving the feel of his arms cleaving her to his chest. High rock walls surrounded them on three sides now, their own private sun room.

"Yes, thank God." Parker fell to his knees with Casey beneath him. Her cover-up protected her from the sand. Parker pulled her arms free and laid the fabric flat. Then he stripped off his shirt and used it to wrap around his gun, so he could put that on the ground without clogging it with sand. Casey's breasts, covered in thin, wet Spandex, pressed against his chest. She kissed whatever skin she could reach. Her hands roved his back and his butt and around front to his hard shaft. Parker groaned.

"Like that?"

"God yes."

Casey unsnapped his pants and lowered the zipper, sliding her hand inside until her fingers circled his velvet tip. Parker groaned again.

"Like that, too?"

"Better. But not quite it..." He leaned back and pulled the shorts and briefs to his thighs. His long hard cock presented itself for Casey's inspection. The way they were positioned on the sand,

Casey couldn't resist licking the solid organ, slow and sexy. Parker's breathing was now double-time. Casey took the head into her mouth, while her fingers explored the back of his thighs, then higher to his ass cheeks, which had hollow dimples on each side from the way he held himself locked in place. She opened her mouth wider and relaxed her throat, so she could suck him deeper. Deep throat. She thought of that dirty movie she'd seen once at a friend's house. She didn't feel dirty at all. She felt powerful and brave, so much so that she ran her fingers down the center of his ass. He gasped, enticing her to press deeper. Then she spread the cheeks apart just a bit. He began thrusting his hips, fucking her mouth.

"Casey, Casey."

She loved hearing him say her name like that. She exalted in the fact that she could make him lose control this way, and she loved that she could bring him so much pleasure.

His fingers pinched the straps of her swimsuit and slid them down her arms until they were free. He bent down and smoothed the suit against her skin. His thumbs tucked beneath the fabric to skim her nipples, which were excited and waiting. The suit lowered until her breasts were completely revealed. His fingers danced over them. The sea air brushed them. Casey felt so turned on, like she'd never been in her life, so electric, so aware.

She continued to suck his cock until he gripped her hair and gently pulled her mouth away.

"No more or I'll come in your mouth, and I want to fuck you."

He pushed her down onto her cover-up and shimmied her suit down her legs and off. His eyes gleamed, examining her, so she bent her knees and spread her legs to give him a different sort of view.

"I'm waiting," she said, lowering one finger to her pussy to finger herself slowly. The act of masturbating in front of him turned her on, but more importantly, it made him even more crazy. The man needed some craziness in his life.

The sand warmed her legs and back. She watched as Parker took off the rest of his clothes, wasting no time now. A drop of pre-cum glistened at the tip of his very engorged cock. Funny how it looked much bigger from this angle than it had when she'd sucked it into her mouth. He lowered his body, kneeling between her legs, and gently prodded her entrance. Casey was so wet, so sensitized, that she gasped with each new inch sliding into her hole.

With every thrust, her body clenched him. In and out, faster, harder. Casey's nails dug into the hard muscles of Parker's back, but he didn't seem to notice. His eyes intense on her face, he seemed focused on the sensation.

Casey wrapped her legs around Parker's thighs. She moved with his rhythm, pulling him to her so that their chests touched. She stroked his lips with her tongue until he responded by kissing her open-mouthed, the thrusts of his tongue as deep and powerful as the thrusts of his body into hers. She dropped her knees wider and lifted her heels to his ass, which allowed his dick to pound against her cervix. She cried out at the sustained pleasure, panted, then yelled some more.

Parker nearly lost it when she cried out. The sensation on the head of his cock was mind-blowing. His balls tightened, and he was going to come. She was taking him so deep. God, how could this woman change him so completely? He was having sex in the open on the beach, and it was the most erotic thing he had ever done. He knew he couldn't hold out much longer as her body squeezed his. He kissed her as if his soul could wrap around hers.

She moaned steadily, almost whimpering, and he knew she was going to come. He didn't let up. If he was going to lose control, so was she. He pumped harder until she screamed. He could feel her body's orgasmic response, and that sent him over the edge. His cum squirted out, heating his cock even more, and his body jerked against her, out of his control, seeking every last bit of

pleasure.

And he'd never felt so damn complete in his life.

* * * *

"So are you actually going to practice now, or what?"

Casey smacked Parker's shoulder as he snapped his briefs back in place, leaving his cut-offs on the sand next to his wrapped-up gun. As if he hadn't been the one to distract her from her purpose in the first place. Casey struggled to brush all the sand from her backside.

Parker wore a kid-in-the-candy-store grin. "Here, let me help you with that." He started sliding his hands up and down her thighs.

"None of that, now." Casey swatted his not-very-helpful hands away and slipped her bathing suit back into place. "I think I just need a quick dip in the ocean." In three long strides she reached the water's edge. The Pacific was warm like bath water, which Casey found odd, since the Atlantic seemed to stay cool until late July, even as far south as Hatteras. The waves also broke much farther out here. No parasailors or surfers out at the moment. Casey enjoyed the feel of silky wet sand under her feet as she waded out deeper. She wanted to get her entire back under water to remove the sand, which was starting to dry and itch, and there were parts between her thighs that could use a good soak.

Parker followed Casey, but he'd refocused on his job as protector, letting his gaze rove up and down the visible beach and above along the rim of the cliff. He couldn't believe he'd just made love to Casey outside on the ground. He'd never let his guard down so completely before, especially not while on an assignment. This was not good. He was compromising Casey's safety just to satisfy his lust.

Lust.

Was that all it was? The murky ocean swirled about his shins. Was it more than lust? Was his concern for her safety more than this assignment? Well, he was a member of the human race after all. He naturally didn't want to see another human, especially a female, hurt or used. He watched as Casey dove under the water then emerged, dripping and laughing.

No, with Casey it felt like more than natural macho instincts. Brandon had accused him of obsessing over his cases—was Casey just another case that he was hyper-involved in? Was Brandon right?

"Yoo hoo, Earth to Parker." Casey closed the gap between them and wrapped her wet arms around his waist and pressed her nipples, perky through the Spandex, against his chest. He shivered from the mingled sensation of cold, wet, and lust.

"God, Casey, I want to take you again." He almost growled it.

Casey rubbed against him like a cat. "So take me again. Who's to stop you? Certainly not me."

"You're not sore?"

"Not that I've noticed." She laughed. "But I'm standing in warm, swirling water. I'm sure that's helping me feel languid."

Still snuggling against Parker's waist, Casey baby-stepped backwards until they were in chest-high water. Then she gripped Parker's muscular biceps and used the buoyancy of the water to wrap her legs around his waist. Ah. Now her center meshed against his body in just the way she wanted it to. She felt him responding, so she wiggled closer. The water between and around them added to the sensation.

Parker groaned. "Casey, you're not getting any practice done this way."

"I'm practicing."

Parker looked down into her earnest eyes. "What are you practicing?"

"The art of love." She laughed. Joy burst through her cells. He was so stodgy sometimes, but he came alive during lovemaking, and he made her feel so safe. "Plus I'm practicing first aid."

"First aid?"

"Oh yeah. I'm lowering my patient's blood pressure."

Parker gripped her butt and ground her softness against his hardness. "Lowering it? No, I think you're raising it."

"But I read in a magazine that sex is good for the heart, and isn't it like tensing all your muscles then letting go so you can totally relax? I took a meditation class once where we did that."

"Where you had sex?" He adjusted her legs. She gripped his hips tighter.

"No, where we tensed all our muscles one by one, then relaxed them completely. I felt like jelly after."

He took her hand and led it to the place between their thighs. "Does this feel like jelly to you?"

Casey felt her face change to beet red. "It was jelly-like a few minutes ago."

Now Parker blushed, but he also led them deeper into the water. "I've never had sex in the ocean before."

"No?"

"No."

"And it's an important life experience to have sex in the ocean, you know."

"No, I didn't know, but I believe you." His fingers stroked across her bathing suit under the water. Soon he pulled the fabric out of the way. He eased three fingers inside of her while tapping his thumb against her clit, and she let her breath out in a whoosh as she clutched his wet skin tightly. He widened his fingers inside her. With his index finger, he rubbed and pressed her G-spot. His thumb circled her clit until the intensity was almost too much. Then he moved his hand, to her dismay, but replaced it with his hard-as-granite shaft, but only against the outside, rubbing her pleasure center, only teasing her since his briefs were still in the way.

With one hand circling Parker's neck, Casey slid her free hand down his chest and stomach and under the water. She fooled around with the wet fabric of his briefs, tugging until they were out of the way. Then she stroked him. She loved watching his eyes practically roll up in his head at the pleasure of her wet fingers pulling up and down, and the warm water coursing past his balls and ass.

They'd totally lost track of their surroundings. There was no ocean, only the two of them in a tiny tub of pulsating water. Parker nipped at Casey's chin and neck. His tongue traced translucent skin. She leaned back to give him more access, without ever slowing her steady massage on his dick.

Since his hands were full, Parker used his teeth to ease Casey's swimsuit down her shoulders. He couldn't get it completely down, the way he wanted it, without help from his hands, so he moved his tongue over the swell of her breasts, lower, tucking under the edge of the fabric to reach her nipples. The more he licked and suckled, the more the fabric fell away. When he could finally pull her breast completely into his mouth without hindrance, Casey moaned and writhed and exploded, contracting on his fingers.

Without another moment's hesitation, he lifted her and slid her down his hard length. Her breasts crested the water, but the rest of the action was underneath, away from view. Of course, why should he care? He'd already taken her in full view of God on the beach.

"Fill me, Parker."

Her guttural voice heated his blood even more. He thrust hard, gripping her butt and thighs

to hold her in place. Powerful, hard thrusts, Parker didn't hold back. He couldn't hold back. He made love to her in the water until he lost all control and came. He completely lost it. He lost all sense of himself. Everything melded into one everlasting wave of pleasure as he ejaculated. The ocean throbbed around their twined bodies, his liquid heat flowed into Casey, her body contracted around his. Everything brought together.

"I feel like a God," he murmured against Casey's ear.

"And I'm your goddess."

"Yes, the goddess of pleasure."

Though he didn't want the moment to end, Parker finally removed himself from Casey's luscious body slowly, and readjusted their clothing so they could wade back to shore.

As they splashed through the shallow water, a glint caught his eye, a flash from the top of the bluff wall. He looked up and squinted and saw it again. Sun reflecting off of glass or maybe metal. He wrapped his arms around Casey's waist and threw her to the ground, using his body as a shield. Had the shooter returned or had someone been spying on them? Suddenly Parker realized the foolishness of what they'd just done.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Parker prepared to lunge for his gun if necessary. He squinted up at the cliff's edge, but the reflecting object disappeared.

"Parker, what's going on?" Casey's voice was muffled but shrill.

Had it been a gun or something glass, like a camera lens or binoculars? How could he have let down his guard so completely?

"I think it's nothing."

He felt sick in the pit of his stomach at the idea that pictures could get back to Brandon or onto the Internet. He'd never been so reckless in his life.

"If it's nothing, then get the hell off me! That hurt!" She smacked his shoulder.

He rolled over. "I thought I saw something, but it's gone. Excuse me for being a tad paranoid where you're concerned."

Casey acted like a drug, taking away his inhibitions. Was he willing to risk his career to give into these whims? And he'd put Casey at risk, too. He should have had more self-control.

But once they were dry on the beach, close enough to the rock wall that the angle wouldn't allow for spying, and with Casey magically lifting rocks and twigs into the air, he relived those moments in the ocean. God, he wouldn't trade them for anything, not even his career.

* * * *

When Parker spotted Manuel with his camera propped in front of him on a cantina table, he realized what the glint of glass might have been. Had Manuel been following Casey, as Parker himself had asked the boy to do before? If so, what had he seen? The idea that Parker might have been center stage in a little boy's peep show really bothered him. More than that, the idea that he had so completely let down his guard drove him nuts. They had been perfect targets. He'd have to catch the boy alone and find some way to ask if it had been him on the cliff.

"Parker?"

He grunted in response to Casey's voice.

"Parker, you're hurting that poor innocent napkin."

"What?" He blinked. He'd been staring at Jose, who whispered excitedly to Nando before jumping up to run outside. When Casey waved a hand in front of his face, he refocused on her. Lust hit him square in the gut as he remembered what they'd done, but so did disgust at his failure as a bodyguard.

"Parker, is something wrong?"

He knew if he explained that he regretted what they'd done on the beach he'd hurt her feelings. It had been beautiful, wonderful, but so irresponsible, impulsive, downright crazy, and totally unlike him.

"No, nothing's wrong." He also couldn't tell her that he suspected Manuel might have been on the cliff above watching them. What would that accomplish?

Guests wandered in and out of the cantina during the Mexican version of Happy Hour, or they sat at tables, laughing, talking, altogether loud. Lara waited on everyone, but she often stopped by Manuel and touched his shoulder, and Nando's face lit up every time she came near. Parker could now see the truth in Casey's belief that romance was blossoming between the couple.

But what about romance between himself and Casey? He was sure many of the resort patrons assumed they were a couple. Were they? In real life, Casey lived in New York and Parker lived in D.C. And in real life Casey had a 24/7 FBI escort that she didn't even know about, while Parker had a missing girl and a kidnapper to find. Romance did not make sense in his life.

Casey spooned flan into her mouth as she watched expressions flit across Parker's face. What was he thinking exactly? It couldn't be good, whatever it was. Casey had given up trying to speak to him. He was obviously off on his own planet somewhere. If she admitted it, she felt pretty hurt that after their intense lovemaking he should be so distant with her now. It didn't make sense and it wasn't fair.

"Are you finished?" Parker's gruff voice shocked her after his interminable silence.

"What?"

"Are you finished eating? I'll walk you back to your room."

"What if I don't want to go back to my room?"

"I need to check in with my boss."

"Go for it. I'm staying here. I might chat with Lara a bit."

"Casey, we've been through this. I can't protect you if we're separated."

"Well, I've had enough of togetherness if this is how you act. I'm staying here."

"What do you mean, how I act? You're the one acting like a child!"

Several sets of eyes glanced their way in response to Parker's overly loud comment. Casey seethed. She didn't deserve this treatment. She didn't know what Parker's problem was. Had she sucked at lovemaking? No way. He'd been totally into it. Her power hadn't accidentally flung him against the cliff wall during her climax. Nothing had gone wrong, so what the hell had put Parker in such a foul mood?

He stood. "Come with me."

"I will not." She hated making a scene, but she hated being pushed around without explanation even more.

Parker sat back down, obviously grasping at calm. "Casey." His tone was eminently reasonable and oh so condescending. "I need to contact Brandon and I need to protect you. The only way I can do both is if you come with me to the phone."

Casey adopted the same tone. "I never asked for the government's protection. I'm capable of taking care of myself, and I'm sitting in a cantina surrounded by witnesses. I'm fine right here. I'll even promise not to leave until you get back."

"That's what you promised when I left you in your hotel room alone."

Casey winced, but she refused to give in. She would not be cowed. She was gaining more control over her power each day. She could protect herself if necessary. She shook her head and crossed her arms.

Parker growled, stood, and stomped out of the cantina.

* * * *

Manuel had seen something he shouldn't have, but it wasn't the first time. He cradled his head on his arms on the cantina table, feeling glum. He'd been spying on Mr. Nelson, curious about his relationship with Miss Casey. The two adults confused him. They often argued, yet they seemed to stick together constantly and Mr. Nelson always wanted him and Jose to watch after Miss Casey. If they didn't like each other, why didn't they just stop hanging out together? If they did like each other, why did they fight so much?

Lara and Nando were different. He watched Lara wipe salt and pepper shakers at one of the tables near the kitchen while Nando told her a story. They obviously liked each other. Tia Lara

laughed whenever Nando was near, and they often touched arms and hands, but they spent too much time apart since Nando drove the tour bus. They'd danced together beautifully last night, even Maria had said so. Manuel had hopes that they would marry, then maybe they'd adopt him and Jose so that he wouldn't have to wake at night in a cold sweat worrying that his father would return and take them away from Lara forever. She was the closest thing to a mother he had. He couldn't bear to lose her, especially for a father he couldn't count on. And he wanted to stay near Maria and the resort.

But he couldn't quite understand what he'd seen Parker and Casey doing in the water. They weren't swimming. They were definitely kissing, for a long time. So they obviously liked each other. And yet here they were again arguing, and Parker had stomped away.

Lara went over to speak to Casey, so Nando came to Manuel's table and put a hand on his arm. "Is anything wrong, *hijo*?"

"I don't understand men and women."

Nando smiled. "That is one of life's mysteries."

"Like Mr. Nelson and Miss Summers—do they like each other or don't they?"

"Oh, they do. I'd venture to say they love each other."

"But they fight a lot."

"One of the signs."

Manuel's heart plummeted. If that was a sign of love, did that mean Maria didn't love him? Did that mean Lara and Nando didn't love each other?

"You have to fight to be in love?"

"Oh, no, not necessarily. It depends on the people and their passion. Some people fall in love gradually, so slow they don't even know it's happening, and for some people it's sudden. They go from hating someone to loving that same person right under their noses."

Manuel thought about this. "Then they can go back to hate just as fast?" His dad had told Lara he loved her at the same time he was telling some other woman he loved her, and he'd seen his dad kissing and doing other things with both women. Then he'd left them all just like that. Would Parker do the same to Casey? Would Nando do this to Tia Lara?

"Are you thinking about your dad?"

Manuel nodded.

"What your dad feels for women is not love. I don't want you to mistake that. He lusted after the women he was with, but that's not love."

"Lust is like kissing?"

Nando sighed. "It can go along with kissing. The thing about lust is that it doesn't go along with any deeper emotion. When you love someone, you stick by them through thick and thin. You miss them when they're not around. You do things for them without thought of your own reward."

"Like you do for Lara."

Nando smiled. "Yes, just like that. And it's much harder to fall out of love than to fall in it."

"Are you going to marry her?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

Manuel grinned. Oh yeah, he was full of secrets. He nodded eagerly.

"I do plan to marry her, but she doesn't know it yet, so don't tell her. Promise?"

The day was looking up. "I promise."

Nando patted his shoulder again. "Now go find your brother and have some fun."

* * * *

Five minutes after Parker stalked out of the cantina, Lara rushed over to Casey's table and

sat down.

“Is everything okay, Señorita Casey?”

“Sí. Parker’s just in a snit over something.”

Lara leaned close and patted Casey’s arm. “Men, they have fragile egos. Sometimes women must pretend to give men their way. You see?”

Casey smiled. “I don’t think that would have helped here, but thank you for your advice.”

Casey leaned in closer. “By the way, what’s up with you and Nando?”

Lara blushed. She fingered her braid and giggled nervously. “Me and Nando? There is nothing between us. What made you say such a thing?”

“Just women’s intuition, I guess. He’s a very handsome man.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, *sí*. Very good looking. And he’s very good with the boys.” She glanced to where Nando and Manuel had their heads together, deep in conversation.

Lara’s face gentled. “Yes, he is very good with the boys. Manuel and Jose love him, I think. I only fear one day he will leave and they will be hurt again.”

“Lara, I only know what the boys told me, but I don’t think Nando is the same type of man as their father was. I think Nando is a good man who will take care of all of you.”

“I’m surprised the boys told you so much. They must like you.” She paused. “But how do you know Nando is not the same?”

“Just a feeling. Grant you, I’m not the best judge of character when it comes to my own men, but I think you need to trust yourself as far as Nando’s concerned. I think you feel he’s a good man, too.”

“Yes, I do. *Muy bueno*.” She drew her eyes away from the man in question and peered at Casey with motherly eyes. “You have a good man, too. Señor Nelson is a very good man.”

“He may be a good man, but he’s a complicated one that I have yet to figure out.”

“When you love someone, it should take a lifetime to learn all of their ways. That’s what keeps love interesting.”

Casey sighed at this. The thought of a lifetime of love brought a melancholy to her heart. Would she ever have someone’s love for a lifetime? She knew she couldn’t expect that kind of devotion from Parker. He lived in a different city. His life ran a far different course than hers. Once they left Mexico and he was able to go back to his unsolved cases, he’d forget about her, she had no doubt.

But maybe she should go find him, and try to pry out of him what had gotten him so upset? And she supposed she should be more cooperative so that he could do his job properly, even if it was a job she’d never given her consent to. That was the U.S. Government for you, always butting in where not wanted.

“Lara, I think I will go find Parker.”

“Good girl.” Lara patted her arm, then stood and picked up her empty serving tray. She glanced at Nando and Manuel once more before bustling off to the kitchen.

For the first time, Casey felt genuinely anxious stepping outside of the cantina alone. She hadn’t recognized any faces inside the cantina as players in the kidnapping-Casey scenario, but that didn’t mean they weren’t. She eyed the walkways and the deck area and the balconies as she walked, but few people were about and they all wore swimsuits and seemed wrapped up in their vacation agendas. She’d told Parker she’d stay in the cantina, so was this a wise idea? But he’d only left a couple of minutes ago. No problem. She was a streetwise New Yorker. She knew how to handle herself.

So she threw on that familiar persona as she headed toward the building with their rooms. She pulled her shoulders back, increased her stride and her pace, swung her arms. She met the eyes of the one or two guests that crossed her path. Show no fear. Let them know you're aware and that you have someplace to go. She practically ran through the tunnel of palms. She yanked open one of the double doors to her building. The courtyard was empty, but she still skirted it as Parker had shown her.

Finally the stairwell. Home free. No problem, and was she being a bit overly paranoid or what?

She trotted up the steps to the first landing. And screamed.

* * * *

There was a vending machine area of the courtyard not far from Parker and Casey's rooms. Parker leaned against the soda machine as he listened to Brandon's mini-tirade on the old payphone receiver. Would the man never wind down? Apparently he blamed Parker for turning the simple babysitting/vacation job into an international incident.

"Brandon, you're the one who sent me here without all the information."

"They said she just needed to be watched, just like she's been all these years. Nothing has ever happened to her. They said her life was boring."

"They lied."

Brandon's sigh was long and loud. "Dammit, Parker, I wanted you to rest. You're my best damn agent and I don't want to lose you to a stroke or a heart attack."

"I'm not going to have a stroke *or* a heart attack."

"Even that marathon runner nut had a heart attack. What makes you think you're immune?"

His eye twitched as he said, "I'm not saying I'm immune. Just that it's not going to happen. I won't let it."

"Just like you said you'd get your b.p. down by sheer will alone, right? How's that working for you?"

Parker almost said that Casey was helping with that. She was giving him exercise and stress relief—his own personal trainer. If she only wasn't giving him grief in so many other ways

And that's when he heard the scream.

"Brandon, I've got to go."

"What? Was that a scream I heard?"

"Yes, and with her luck, it's most likely Casey." He hung up before Brandon could say more. Then he dashed down the walkway to the stairwell, eyes roving, looking for signs of struggle in the courtyard or on the balcony. Unholstering his gun, he opened the door to the stairwell and immediately heard Casey's whimpers. She stood on the first landing, gripping the railing and dry heaving.

"Casey, is someone up there with you?"

She looked down at him, her eyes wide and glassy. "Yes."

He barely heard her, but didn't hesitate to get up the steps, fully prepared to shoot whoever threatened her.

Then he saw the body. It was an Asian redhead. The woman was somehow suspended upside down over the railing leading to the second floor. Blood pooled on the landing. It had crusted in her hair and on her forehead, appearing to originate from the small round hole between her eyes.

Parker wrapped his arms around Casey to calm her. "Was this the woman who took you from your room?"

"Yes."

“I think someone may be trying to eliminate the competition.”

Casey switched from dry heaves to loud sobs. “Over me? They’re killing each other over me?”

“Calm down, honey.” He stroked her hair. “Not over you. This game goes way beyond you. You may be the prize of the moment, but we’re all just pawns in the master chess game. You know what I mean? They want you because they want an advantage, any advantage, for their government. Weapons of mass destruction, oil, defense shields, sanctions. It’s all about bargaining. For us it’s about protecting what we have. For others it’s about getting even a small sliver of what we have.”

He resisted the urge to strangle Casey for yet again breaking her promise to stay put. She seemed biologically wired to disobey orders and go rushing into trouble. Instead, he hugged her tightly. It wasn’t her hanging in that stairwell, and that was what mattered.

“Come on. Let’s go back down to the cantina—together—so I can get Lara to call the authorities. And remember, whatever you do, don’t let the local police know you recognized the woman, okay? They can’t help us and I don’t want you to become their lead suspect in a murder case, okay?”

She nodded and dried her eyes, letting him lead her down the stairs.

* * * *

Minutes took hours to pass as the *policia* flitted about the resort, interviewing guests, fingerprinting, running background checks. Parker had explained that all the players would have covered their tracks well. The police would find nothing out of the ordinary about the guests.

They sat on the edge of the pool. The area was well lit by tiki torches, candles, and bug zappers. Casey’s feet swirled the water. Parker cocooned her with his legs and arms surrounding her and his chin perched on her shoulder, his warm breath dusting her neck.

“I do wonder why they left the body in plain view,” Parker murmured, thinking aloud. “Usually a spook’s passion is to remain unseen and unnoticed.”

“A warning?”

“Perhaps, but I feel like this will more likely up everyone’s timetables.”

“What do you mean, everyone’s timetables? You mean they’re going to come after me faster?” Casey looked about her frantically at the number of unknown people milling around. Any one of them could be an agent. Even though she felt totally safe in Parker’s arms, he was only human flesh, as she was, and no amount of skill and no amount of telekinetic power would stop a bullet in the back.

“Casey, I know you wanted your vacation, and I totally understand your point, but I think we need a plan here.”

“You mean you think I need to return to the States so I’ll no longer be your assignment.” Casey tasted the metallic tang of blood as she bit her lip yet again. She’d been feeling a bit nauseous since finding the body anyway. How could Parker deal with this sort of thing daily?

“You’re putting words in my mouth. I do think we need to get you back to the States, so I can get some serious back-up, not so I can hand you off. How can you think I would do that after ... everything?”

“How the hell do I know what you’re thinking, Parker? I don’t know if I’m just a quick lay for you. I do know I’m a thorn in your side and a health risk.”

Parker grabbed Casey’s chin with his finger and thumb and turned her to look at him. “How can you say that?” His eyes flashed. He was almost shaking with fury. “I care about you.”

“I’m a case to you.”

“I do not go around screwing all of my assignments!” He hopped to his feet. “Do you think

so little of me?"

Casey pulled her icy feet from the water, covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears. She knew her own feelings for Parker were strong, too strong, but she'd been too caught up in this whirlwind of espionage to take the time to assess Parker's feelings. She really didn't know. She didn't know if her own insecurities were clouding her judgment, and she certainly didn't know if the challenge of surviving all of these attacks had intensified her feelings, or Parker's.

Parker saw the woman in front of him crying, but he was too damn angry to comfort her. She broke his heart, thinking so little of him like that, but God he wanted to hold her again and shush her tears away.

Instead, he paced the length of the pool, so full of a mass of conflicting emotions that he didn't see Boris approach Casey until it was too late.

Boris slung his suave arm around Casey's shoulders and pulled her close. His face looked solicitous, but Parker gripped his fists, fighting the urge to go up to him and rip not only his arm away from Casey, but to rip his face off. Two-faced slime! Hadn't he told Casey...?

Actually, they'd never gotten to that conversation, so she didn't know the truth about Boris, and all he'd said about Ana was that she'd been at the Institute. Did Casey realize Ana might be the one who'd shot at her in the boat?

Several long strides brought him to Boris and Casey's side. He fought the urge to yank her away. Boris represented little risk in front of all these witnesses. But if he could get Casey alone, Parker had no doubt he would take full advantage of that. The man had to know that time was running out for him to press his advantage.

"Oh, Parker, I heard you saw the body, as well?" Boris spoke without removing his arm from Casey's shoulder. Why didn't she make him? She cringed from his mention of the body and her face looked strained, but she stayed plastered to his side. Was she trying to make Parker jealous? If so, it was working, dammit.

"Where's your 'wife'?"

Casey again flinched as Boris gestured up the path to where Ana was chatting with one of the Mexican officers.

He tried a different tact. "Casey, are you ready to go to your room? It's been a long day for you."

She nodded, then her eyes widened, and that's when Parker realized that Boris had a gun pinned to her side. It was hidden by the folds in his white sports jacket. Shit. He hadn't expected him to make his move so quickly or so publicly. And the fact that he held it so tight to Casey made it too risky for her to use her power on him.

Boris spoke as calmly as if he discussed the weather. "You stay here, Parker. Drink some beer. If Casey wishes to rest in her room, I can walk with her. I was thinking of an early bedtime myself."

"I don't think so." He couldn't let the man get Casey in private. He also thought it best not to let on that he knew about the gun. That might cause the double agent to panic, which was the last thing Parker wanted until he got that gun away from him. "I'm sure Casey would prefer if I walked her. You wouldn't want to desert your wife."

"Oh, Ana is having a blast chatting with the kind policeman." He scowled in her direction.

"Do you think they know who was behind the murder?" Parker asked. He suspected Boris, of course, but could Ana have done this behind her partner's back or vice versa?

A drop of sweat pearled on Casey's forehead. She reached her free hand up to wipe it away, which caused Boris to jerk her closer. Her hand froze, then lowered, so Parker leaned in and gently

brushed it away for her. He stood as close to her as he could without making Boris nervous.

Ana had set off down the walkway to them. She wore white silk pants that flowed about her long legs. She looked crisp and feminine, the type of woman Parker would have dated in the past, but now he only had eyes for Casey. All of his lust and his care focused on her, with her strength and sense of humor, strange power, and giving body. And in one moment she could be lost to him as Deanna had been, at the hands of a bad guy.

“Boris, darling, let go of that poor girl. You’re suffocating her.”

And in one fell swoop, Ana had dissolved Boris’s hold on Casey. Thank God. Parker had not been prepared and he was nearly hyperventilating. He would not let it happen again. The man surreptitiously slid the gun away from Casey’s side and tucked it into his waistband. Casey practically jumped to Parker’s arms. He tried to maintain his oh-so-casual expression as he placed his arm around Casey’s shoulders and maneuvered her slightly behind him. He was surprised that she’d maintained her calm. Most women would have been running for the police, screaming about the gun. She probably knew she wasn’t far enough from Boris’s gun to be safe if she put on such a show.

“Hello, Ana,” Parker said. “I was just telling your husband here that Casey has had an extremely tiring day already, so I was about to walk her back to her room for the night.”

Ana focused on Casey. “Oh, you poor dear. That must have been very traumatic, finding the body like that. Did you know her?”

Casey hesitated. “Yes, I think that was the woman who tied me up in her bathroom.”

“Oh my, and why on earth did she do that?”

Casey met her gaze directly. “No idea.”

“Well, at least you won’t have to worry about her any longer.”

“No. Now I’ll just have to worry about a murderer in our midst.”

Ana rocked back onto the heels of her white mules. She said nothing, but sidled a glance toward her ‘husband’. Did she know Boris had been the shooter?

“Parker, I’m really tired,” Casey said, and she looked it as she sagged against him.

“Okay. We’ll talk to you all later.” It nearly killed him to sound so casual when all he wanted to do was throttle both spies with his bare hands. Instead, he guided Casey across the gravel, keeping their pace deliberately slow.

“Is he going to shoot me in the back?” Casey whispered.

“He wants you alive, remember?” Of course, that wouldn’t stop Boris from shooting Parker in the back if necessary. “And if he’d wanted a public scene he wouldn’t have let you go.”

“Shouldn’t we tell the police?”

“No. They can’t handle this.”

They reached the colonial-style doors and entered the courtyard, again veering to the right to stay under cover. Two sunburned children splashed in the fountain while an irritated father tried to wrap a towel around a toddler.

“We’ll take the other stairs, okay?”

Casey nodded. “But what now?”

“Now we get the hell out of Dodge.” He looked down into her shadowy eyes to see if she would protest this time.

She sighed. “Okay. I guess we really don’t have a choice. Won’t Boris just follow us? And who is he anyway? Is he really Ana’s husband?”

They walked down the faded green carpet in the hall toward their rooms. “Boris is a double agent, which I doubt Ana even knows. He’s working for Russia and China. According to

intelligence reports, Ana is not married to him, and she is strictly Russian.”

“She told me at the market that they were Czech or Bulgarian or something.”

“Nope. Russia. And Li, the dead woman, was North Korean.” He noted Casey’s cringe and wished he could just cradle her in his arms for a while, wished he could do something normal, like microwave some popcorn, pop in a DVD, and share a bottle of wine.

“What about the men from the truck?”

“We think Liberian, but we don’t have a solid line on them yet.”

Her eyes widened. “Is anyone else after me?”

“The Swedes, the British, but none of that makes sense. They’re either neutral or allies to the United States. The medallions are the key, and neither Boris nor Ana wears one, so Boris and Ana are working for their governments. Everyone else is working for one organization.”

“An organization that has to do with psychics, right?”

“Why do you say that?”

“The three wavy lines. They were on the note and on the pendants. They’re from the test cards at the Institute, and I think they were commonly used for psychic testing probably as far back as the sixties.”

Parker’s mind raced from the information as he eyed the doors in the hallway. Casey turned the key in her lock. She pushed open her door.

“Wait. Let me make sure it’s clear.” Parker retrieved his Firestar from his pants holster and held it in front of him stiff-armed as he stalked into the room. As soon as he saw the living room was clear, he whispered, “Close the door and lock it. Stay there.”

Casey obeyed. She was in too much shock to resist. Boris was a spy. Ana was the poser from the Institute. Casey closed her eyes and slid to the floor, keeping her back against the door. Poor Ana. Casey had tried to help her during the Institute fire, but she’d hesitated and by then it had been too late. Ana’s feet and ankles had sustained third degree burns. When she’d been taken to the hospital, Casey hadn’t even known whether she would live, and she’d never heard from her again.

“Casey, it’s all clear.” Parker strode up to her and reached out his hand. “Why don’t you come lay down on the bed and I’ll start packing your bags, okay?”

Why was he packing her bags? Oh yeah. She had to leave. Again. It was just another failure in a long line of failures.

She accepted Parker’s hand and pushed all self-pitying thoughts from her head. She belonged back in New York anyway. More importantly, it was high time she got far, far away from the man in front of her, before her heart bled out. She just couldn’t lead a life with love in it. She had to be hard. Survival was required here.

“I think we’ll take a cab to Mexico City,” Parker said as he opened the closet and various dresser drawers. “I’ll get Malone to call ahead and set up plane tickets for us under aliases, since we’d really prefer not to be followed back home. Not that I think that will hold anyone off for long.”

Casey dropped onto the bed and closed her eyes. The adrenaline had drained out of her the minute they’d reached her room. Now she felt like a rag doll, boneless and brainless.

“I think we should fly to D.C. and meet with my boss. We’ll be safest inside the agency and that will give us time to sort this mess out.”

Casey wasn’t as familiar with D.C., but she figured she could manage to lose herself there. No matter what Parker thought, she wasn’t coming in from the cold. She’d rather a life on the lam than a life in a lab.

He loaded her clothes into her suitcase until her room phone rang.

Casey gathered from the one-sided conversation that Lara had put Malone through to Casey's room when he'd been unable to reach them in Parker's room. Parker explained the new situation, both the murder and the rash actions of Boris and their new need to get away from the resort quickly. Malone would make the plans and Parker would call him once they reached the airport to confirm what names the tickets would be under.

"Hang tight," Parker said after hanging up the rotary phone. "I'm going to grab my stuff. I'll lock the door and be back in five minutes, okay?"

"Gotcha. I'm surprised you trust me alone."

"Five minutes only."

He disappeared and soon Casey heard banging and cussing through the wall from the adjacent room. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to fight the zombie feeling. Next door she heard a knock and a man's voice. The police. It sounded like they had a few more questions for Parker, like maybe they didn't believe it wasn't his fault.

Not his fault. Mine.

God, she was maudlin. Andrew would have told her to take a chill pill when she was like this, and Jacques would have suggested hormones. Maybe a little of both would do the trick, or maybe a keg of tequila.

A click woke her from her light doze and was the only warning she had that someone had entered the room. She could still hear Parker assuring the cop that he'd only come upon the body after Casey screamed, so it couldn't be him. Casey cracked open her eyes.

A gun. Again. This had gone way beyond lame.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty." It was Ana this time. "Boris and I need you to go on a little trip with us."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ana recalled her conversation with Boris as she stood over Casey with a gun. She'd berated him for his careless behavior. What the hell had he been thinking to stick a gun to Casey's hip in public? He'd claimed that he'd assumed Parker would have given away Boris and Ana's true affiliations. He felt he needed to act swiftly. Fool. Yes, they needed to act swiftly, but they needed to use a few brain cells, as well.

Ana had sprinted to the stairs that led from the street outside the resort into the building with all of their rooms. Once on the right floor, she'd picked a lock and posted herself in the room diagonal from Casey's. She knew Parker and Casey were already in there, and she'd never expected Parker to provide an opportunity so soon. Thank God for stupid men.

As Casey blinked to alertness, Ana fought with herself. She so truly wanted to plant a bullet in the skull of the woman that had ruined her life all those years before. But it would be sloppy. Boris would know she was responsible and he'd likely report her to her superiors. Such blatant disregard for orders meant execution, or at the very least, exile. All along she'd planned to make Casey's death look like the act of another agent or an accident. But here was this perfect opportunity. Casey's head beneath her gun, and Casey too disoriented from her doze to react fast enough.

"Shit."

Casey's mouth opened wide. "Why are you saying 'shit'? Isn't that my line?"

"If only you knew."

"I think I do know, and I'd really like to talk to you about this."

"Shut up." Enough time wasting. Boris knew she was here. He'd laid out a plan for her, so she couldn't risk killing Casey at this moment. "Now get up. And not another peep." She listened to the voices in the other room. Hopefully the loquacious officer would keep Parker occupied for quite some time.

Casey stumbled to her feet. "You know Parker's coming back here any second." Then she squinted her eyes in an odd way that Ana recognized as a precursor to using her telekinesis.

"Don't you try it. I'll shoot to kill and I'm close enough to hit you, whatever you plan to do. The only chance you had was when you first opened your eyes. And in case you don't understand this yet, I mean to kill you, so it's no skin off me if you die now or later."

"Does Boris know you plan to kill me?"

"Planning to plant a little bird in his ear?"

"Maybe."

"The minute Boris finds out is the minute he dies, if not sooner."

"So he's not really your husband."

"Hardly. I would never marry, and even if I did, I would never marry such scum."

Casey's fingers twitched. Could Ana really shoot her before she got the gun away from her? And why hadn't she reacted in her usual waking manner? She hadn't really been asleep. She'd been in a doze, which only served to leave her reflexes more sluggish than they already were from seeing the body. Parker would be back over here any minute. His inserting the key in the door would serve as enough distraction. She could unarm Ana then.

Ana gestured for Casey to follow and they both moved into the living room. Ana managed to slide the chain lock home without a waver from the gun.

"To the balcony," she ordered.

Once outside, Ana also locked the sliding doors. She obviously hoped to slow Parker down, since she knew those locks wouldn't hold.

The hood of Boris's car glinted in the streetlights below, motor running, but Boris stood a few feet away pulling on a rope. He was sending a package up to Ana.

"Grab it and open it," Ana ordered.

It was a large canvas duffel bag, and inside Casey found a folded up fire stairs.

"Take it out. You know what to do. Hook it over the railing so we can climb down."

Boris had a gun trained on her, and she could hear knocking on the interior door. The knocking quickly turned to banging as Casey unrolled the ladder and hooked it on the rail. Parker kicked the door open as Casey disappeared over the ledge. Ana didn't even wait to take a shot at him. She followed Casey down the ladder, which swayed and rattled as each new rung was reached. Casey looked over her shoulder and saw that Boris hadn't eased up with his firing arm. It was stiff, gun clasped, at the ready. She knew Ana wanted her dead, but would Boris dare shoot her? His bosses had to want her alive. Maybe now was her opportunity, because once they got her in the car, it would be a confined space and much harder to escape.

She'd escaped the Swedes, she reminded herself, but her odds were very different in a car with someone who wanted her dead.

Do it, she told herself. She sent a burst of power toward the wall, which made the ladder swing wildly. Above her, she could see Ana's white-knuckled grip, as she managed to keep her hold on the ladder. Below her, Boris shifted his stance and followed Casey with his eyes, keeping her in his sight.

Casey's mind raced as she gripped the swinging ladder. She felt the aim of Boris's gun as if the muzzle physically pressed against her back. She could either make the ladder swing or she could turn and use her power to fling the gun away, but she couldn't do both at the same time. Did she dare jump?

Sloppy, Parker thought, as he peered over the balcony and took aim at Boris. There were only a couple of pedestrians on the dock and the street at this time of night, but they had slowed or stopped to observe. Boris and Ana had nothing to lose now. They'd given themselves away completely. Why would they take such a blatant risk when they'd taken such care to get to know Casey in the first place? It seemed that their attitudes had changed from professionals with an assignment to people with personal stakes in the outcome.

No time to ponder that change now. Parker had to disable Boris's firing arm without giving the man time to shoot Casey. The fact that she'd made the ladder swing wildly would help. Parker fired, but Boris jerked at the sound, so the projectile only grazed his cuff. The Russian's sharp blue eyes focused on the balcony as he squeezed off a shot. Parker skipped left and fired again. At least Boris was firing at him instead of Casey. Ana was a different story. She had one leg and one arm through the ladder rungs for stability, but her right hand held a .22 that was now aimed directly at the top of Casey's head. The only thing that kept her from firing was the precariousness of the moving ladder.

"Jump!" Parker yelled. It was Casey's only chance.

She jumped. Immediately. Good girl. Parker was shocked she'd listened to him for once, but his relief was short-lived because Casey landed on top of Boris. Both of them rolled on the ground fighting for the upper hand. Parker took a shot at Ana as she too jumped, but he missed, so he

scrabbled over the railing and down the ladder, jumping the last five feet to land on Ana and pin her to the ground.

Boris grabbed Casey's wrist as she raked her nails across his cheek with her free hand. His gun lay just a few inches out of his reach.

"You cannot win," he said, his mouth close to her ear.

"Of course I can," Casey shot back.

Cocky girl. She dug her nails into his chin and clambered on top of him. His cock responded to both the pain and the proximity of her pussy. He loved fights.

"Don't make me hurt you," he warned, though he would enjoy it. Hurting her would be the ultimate pleasure. He had a cat-o'-nine tails at home that would welcome dancing across her backside.

"Screw you." Casey speared her elbow into his ribs. In retaliation he drove a fist into her stomach. "Ugh."

"I told you not to make me hurt you." Boris deftly regained his feet and dragged the gagging Casey to hers. He twisted her arm behind her back with one hand and poked the Glock into her temple with the other.

"Cease now, Parker, or she's dead!" Boris's staccato voice worked its charm on Parker and Ana. They froze. Unfortunately, they froze with Ana in front of Parker, though neither of them appeared to have a weapon in hand. Boris would have gladly shot him. In fact, he would have gladly shot Ana, as well, but there were too many witnesses. He couldn't jeopardize his standing with the Russian government by shooting one of their agents in cold blood. Instead, Boris sidled to the car and told Casey to open the door. "Get in."

Parker clasped his hand under Ana's throat evoking a whimper from the woman. "Let her go," Parker said evenly.

"Sorry, chap. She's mine, and if you kill Ana now, it's no skin off my nose." In fact, if Parker would oblige him, he could cross two things off of his to-do list. Of course, he didn't really believe Parker had it in him to kill an unarmed woman in cold blood. Not to mention that Ana seemed to be inching her hand behind her, probably in the hopes of giving Parker's groin a good twist.

Boris followed Casey into the car. It was the red Geo, which he'd used to chase the Africans in before. Casey was busy yanking on the handle of the opposite door, but Boris had had the foresight to solder the seam shut.

"Why does no one help?" she asked, referring to the few spectators on the dock.

"Fear and apathy, my dear." Boris scrambled onto Casey's legs, pinning her in place, feeling oh so aroused as he slid ropes around her wrists. He pinned her hands under his groin while he lashed a blindfold across her eyes. Casey screamed, but he didn't stop, knotting the cloth tightly behind her head. He grabbed the duct tape from the floor and taped her hands. Then he forced her facedown to the floor. Oh, if only he had time to fuck her while she was tied up like this. That would be a slice of nirvana.

Forcing himself to look away from her tempting arched ass, he glanced out the window and noticed Parker on the ground grasping his privates. Ana launched herself into the front seat and shifted the car to first. They roared down the cobbled street, leaving squawking Mexicans in their dust.

"Boris, that was not safe."

"I know, my dear, but we've run out of time to play it safe."

* * * *

Each raindrop pinged against the tin roof of the shack where the Russians had deposited Casey. It was daylight and, if Casey hadn't lost too much track of time, it was her thirtieth birthday. "Happy birthday to me."

She was strapped to a hard, splintering straight-back chair in the center of the dirt floor. Through the cracks in the trussed walls she could see the steamy forest setting beyond with no sign of habitation other than the squawking birds and a lizard or two. She just prayed there were no snakes or spiders about. At least Boris had removed her blindfold as he'd explained how the Russian government would like her cooperation, or she would be loony-tunes by now, but her fingers were still encased in duct tape and her arms were now bound behind her back.

Was Parker okay? The thought that he could be injured brought a sick feeling to her stomach. He was fine. He had to be. It was her own continued good health she needed to be thinking about.

At first she couldn't believe that Boris had dared leave her unattended, but then she'd heard the screaming argument he and Ana started the moment they left the shack together. It had been in Russian, so Casey hadn't understood a word, but it was obvious they seriously disagreed on how to handle things from this point forward. Casey wondered if they would both kill each other and leave her stranded in the middle of nowhere until she starved to death.

With nothing but time, Casey vowed to focus her power on the door and get it to swing open using just her eyes. So far no luck, not even a rattle. She suspected it was padlocked based on the click she'd heard after her two 'friends' had departed. She had lifted a man from a moving truck, so she should be able to open a damn door.

Or not.

Shit.

It was once again a case of no one needing rescuing except herself. She knew she had the power, but apparently she didn't have the proper motivation, so she imagined Parker possibly injured and in need of her help, but the image did nothing to move the door.

She scanned the floor looking for any sort of object that might help, like a handy machete or keys for the handcuffs. Of course there was nothing. A lizard did peek its head through the slit between the ground and the wall, but upon seeing her it thought better of entering and scurried away.

Again Casey wished for a far more useful psychic power, like a mental GPS system so she could guide Parker to her location to rescue her. For once she wanted to be the damsel in distress rescued by her white knight, if only her white knight knew where to find her. They'd driven for what had seemed like hours with Casey blindfolded the whole time. She'd smelled fish and ocean air and fried food for a while. Then those scents had given way to smells of damp earth and flowers. The sounds had changed from the shouts of fishmongers and tourists to the squawks and chirps of birds and insects. The air had also grown thicker as the humidity had risen, giving way to rain just as they'd reached their destination. Casey guessed they'd traveled away from the coast, but since she knew so little about Mexican geography, she couldn't say more than that.

She slitted her eyes, zeroing in on a spot in the wall in front of her. It consisted of a wood frame with bamboo lashed to it by some kind of twine. She pictured a section of the wall blasting outward leaving a large hole. Move!

Nothing.

She pictured a red laser beam searing through the bamboo burning away her prison. Move! Dammit! Still nothing. No response at all.

She squinted her eyes so hard that she could barely see through them and pictured the twine

unraveling from each post. Move!

Something did move, but not because she willed it to. Rather, because a large, hairy spider found an opening in the fortress.

This set Casey's heart to palpitating. She didn't have any particular bug phobia, but unfamiliar bugs in a foreign country did spike fear through her. The thing could be poisonous. At the very least, it was ugly and its beady eyes stared right at her, sending chills up her spine. This time without any forethought at all she yelled, "Move!" and the spider and part of the wall with it flew out into the jungle.

"I did it!" She had a window, and she'd learned that an immediate threat, like the spider, put her power into high gear. But she was still trapped here waiting for Boris and Ana to duke it out and decide whether to kill her or send her to Siberia. Neither prospect thrilled her.

Time to try again. She had to get herself loose. She wiggled her wrists, which were sore from the chafing cuffs. Her right arm had gone numb, which meant pins and needles when she was finally able to move it again. Her other arm had a hellacious cramp from elbow to shoulder. Her lower back hurt, and her butt ached. She flexed and unflexed her leg muscles to keep the blood flowing in them. She looked down between her thighs at the ropes binding her ankles to the chair.

Picture the knots loosening, she told herself. She stared. She stared harder. Loosen, damn you!

And they did. Wow. Casey sat back in shock, then she kicked her ankles until the ropes slid slack to the ground.

Okay. She still had the ropes encircling her thighs and the seat of the chair to deal with. She went through the same process. The pressure on her legs gave way and a thunk signaled the drop of the rope underneath her chair. She wiggled and kicked her legs until the lap rope slid off of her. Progress.

Now, could she get loose from the chair itself? She tried to stand, which lifted the chair with her. More jiggling seemed to cause the chair to slide on her back, but not enough, so she sat back down and focused on the ropes about her arms. Casey's efforts grew more frantic as she heard Boris and Ana's voices approaching the hut. They were arguing. Again.

A gunshot pierced the forest. Casey stopped struggling and listened. Boris and Ana had gone silent. Had one of them shot the other? She listened for moans. After a few moments the birds resumed their chirping. Shit. Which of them was left? And which would actually be the worse option? Or had Parker ridden in like a white knight to save her?

Ana broke the drawn-out silence with a stream of creative expletives, some in Russian, most in English, and even a couple in a language that sounded like Chinese.

"Silence!" said a third, unfamiliar voice. Now who? Casey stood again and resumed her shimmying. She needed to get out of here. Immediately.

"Where is the girl?" The stranger's voice again. He spoke perfect, unaccented English, but the complete lack of accent denoted someone who had studied hard to eliminate his accent. His voice was deep and commanding and scary.

"She's in the hut there." Boris's voice sounded strained. Was he the injured one?

Footsteps. Casey abruptly resumed her seat. Of course, she couldn't exactly hide the ropes puddled at her feet, a dead giveaway that she'd been trying to escape.

When the door opened, Casey put on her pout face and tried to look as docile as possible.

"What have we here?"

You know damn well what you have here, Casey thought, as she studied the man. He was short, about five feet, which she hadn't expected, considering his commanding voice. He was

clearly Asian, most likely the Liang Parker had mentioned, Boris's boss. He also had a serious scar twisting from the back of his neck to the front and into the V of his button-down shirt.

He confirmed her assumption. "I am Liang, Miss Summers. I am glad to finally meet you."

Should she be falsely genial? Would it give her any kind of upper hand?

Nah. "I can't say the same. Your minions have treated me with abominable rudeness. My arms are killing me and I have to pee like a racehorse. Are you expecting me to pee in my pants? Do you want to clean that up? And what about water? Aren't most POWs given the bare necessities at least?" She paused for breath.

Liang's hand snaked forward and his fingers gripped her chin in a ruthless grip. "Let me correct your assumptions. You are not a guest. You are not a prisoner. In fact, you are officially a non-entity, so you'd do well to curb your tongue."

Self-preservation took over, and for once Casey's power cooperated on her behalf. The warm blast radiated from her eyes into Liang's chest, sending him staggering back through the doorway, where he landed on his butt, with a bleeding Ana refusing to catch him. Boris smirked.

Casey hoped to use the momentum to free herself. This time the chair toppled over when she stood, so the ropes about her arms slid down her body to the ground. She stepped away from them and debated the wisdom of ramming headfirst through the doorway. She wasn't a bull, so that probably wouldn't be a successful method of escape. Gee, where was Parker when she needed him?

Liang, butt still in the dust, clapped his hands, an audience of one. "Bravo. Encore, please."

Casey realized he'd wanted a demonstration of her power, and she'd just given it to him. She'd be happy to give him another one if it would get her out of this place. For a moment she recalled the time in the past when she'd refused to use her power out of stubbornness and pride. Ana had paid for her selfishness, but now Ana stood here, quite ready to kill her, so maybe it was time for Casey to stop feeling guilty and start taking control.

Sounded good in theory, at least.

Liang regained his feet. He gestured at her legs. "Obviously your earlier restraints were not sufficient. Please rectify this matter." He looked pointedly at Ana.

"I am a citizen of Russia and my loyalty is to Russia. I would rather die than obey you." Her shirt, from her shoulder out, was gummy with blood. She pointed to Boris. "That man is a traitor and should be executed."

Liang smiled, showing a row of crooked and broken teeth. "But he is my traitor, so I'll keep him around a bit longer. You, on the other hand, are expendable."

"I'll do it," Boris said, pointedly stepping between Ana and Liang's gun. Interesting, since Casey was pretty sure Boris planned to kill Ana himself. Oh, the intricacies of international espionage. "I want to be sure she's secure myself."

He loped out of Casey's view, leaving Ana once again facing Liang's gun. A war of wills raged, until Liang shrugged. "Walk away and I will shoot you in the back, or stay as you please."

Ana's facial expression seemed cemented in place. She didn't look away, but she didn't walk away either. She finally conceded with a small nod.

Boris returned with a chain of some sort and two pairs of handcuffs. Casey struggled and fussed until Liang threatened to shoot her in the knee, but she'd created enough distraction to knock the keys from Boris's pocket. He didn't notice as he threaded the chain around her waist twice, and secured it with a padlock. One set of handcuffs clicked to her ankles, the other set went around one wrist and the chair. Great. Now she'd have to be Houdini to escape.

Satisfied, Liang said, "Come. We have much to discuss." Once again the door slammed in her face. Boris even nailed the wall segment back in place, taking away her one view of the

outdoors.

* * * *

Ana wanted to scream out in frustration and pain as her two enemies stood over her laughing.

Liang held a pistol to her temple, which allowed Boris to strap her wrists to the rickety headboard of the old bed. This took place in the back room of the cabin they'd chosen as their headquarters once they'd snagged Casey.

Only, it wasn't Casey being tied up, it was Ana, who still had a bullet in her arm. Liang had allowed Boris to slap a rough bandage on her, but that was all. Then they'd discussed whether to kill her or use her. Liang decided some torture to relieve her of any secrets would be useful for the Chinese government, but they needed to take care of Casey first. So now Boris was strapping Ana to a bed and getting off on it besides. Pervert.

She flexed her hands as she'd been taught, hoping Boris wouldn't notice. The goal was to wind up with enough wiggle room for her double-jointed thumb to slip through.

Ana didn't have any psychic powers like Casey, but she had a ruthless streak and a penchant for pre-planning, and in this case it was her pre-planning skills that she was counting on. She'd acquired some GHB from a contact in town, then she'd stocked the cabin with bottled water tainted with the drug. She'd drugged a bottle of vodka and tequila, as well, so if the men chose to imbibe in any way, they'd be knocked cold.

So she just had to wait, praying she didn't bleed to death first.

Liang left the room once Ana was secured, but Boris remained.

"You are a traitor, bastard, scum!" Ana wanted to spit on him but he kept his face too far away.

Boris tsked then stuffed a rag in her mouth. "Ana, my dear, will you never learn?"

He glanced at the door, then lifted the hem of her shirt to her neck. "You are beautiful tied up like this," he breathed. "Stunning."

Ana shivered, and not from the draft on her stomach. Boris spread his fingers wide and gripped both of her breasts. "Just exquisite."

Ana shook her head and wriggled her tongue, trying to knock the gag from her mouth so she could tell him to stop and to go to hell while he was at it.

"That's it, struggle for me, my whore." He pushed his hand down her pants roughly and squeezed her pussy.

Ana ceased struggling as she watched Liang reenter the room. His face held a look of disgust as he approached Boris silently from behind. Boris was too enthralled with feeling her up to notice, until Liang cocked a gun just behind his head. Boris froze with his hand stuck down her pants.

"Remove your hands from the woman, and stop disrespecting me by making me wait." Liang's voice was stone cold.

Thank God. Ana shivered again. The two men left the room. She immediately began working on her bonds. It only took her ten minutes to get completely free. Then she had to waste valuable time digging the bullet out of her arm and binding it up with a strip from her shirt. She peeked into the main room of the cabin. The men were out cold, but for how long? Two empty shot glasses sat on the table. They could wake up any minute, so Ana grabbed a gun with a silencer attached to its barrel and shot them in the head. Shivers and nausea racked her. She'd killed many times before, but never someone from the mother land and never someone so completely defenseless. It felt as if she'd shot him in the back. She lifted her chin and steadied her hands. The

rat had raped her and betrayed his country. If anyone deserved to die, it was he. Ana pushed the twinges of conscience from her mind and focused on finding Casey before anyone else got in her way.

* * * *

By the time night fell, Casey's throat felt as dry as a day old donut. So much for her birthday. Her stomach rumbled non-stop, and her arms and feet had gone numb. She couldn't even see her legs, the night inside the hut was so black. She'd tried for hours to float the damn keys. She'd got them as far as her lap, but fatigue had destroyed her concentration, and she couldn't figure out how to get them to her hands.

Through cracks under the ripply tin roofing, the sky appeared brilliant red as the sun set. The bird sounds had died down, but new, unfamiliar sounds took their place. Insects, tree frogs. She wasn't sure, since she was unfamiliar with Mexican wildlife, but she imagined all the creepy crawlies were coming out to play, and her legs were bare, crying to mosquitoes far and wide to come feast.

She hadn't heard any voices for what seemed like hours. After she'd moved the keys to her lap, she'd used her time to practice controlling her power, creating a small nest of twigs with just the power of her mind and the focus of her eyes.

Stealthy footsteps approaching the hut caused Casey to rejuvenate her efforts with the keys. The problem was control. She couldn't just fling them somewhere. She needed them to go right to her fingers. She heard crinkling grass and the snick of the padlock. The keys levitated and moved. She lost sight of the keys in the darkness of the hut, but continued to picture them landing in her hands behind the chair. She felt cool metal. Wow, she'd done it! Now to get her taped fingers to unlock the cuffs without dropping the keys.

The door whined and opened. A figure stood silhouetted, framed by the garnet sky.

"Parker?"

The figure laughed, a feminine laugh, one that Casey recognized. Ana.

"Have you come to kill me then?"

Ana moved quickly to her side. Smack! That answered her question. Casey pushed the key into the lock on the first cuff. Click. With the first hand freed, she was able to unlock the second hand more quickly.

"My country wants to study you, use you," Ana said. She gut-punched her. Casey bent over and moaned. At least the lunatic hadn't just shot her. This gave her cover while she unhooked her ankles. Except then Ana cuffed her ears.

"Ow, you bitch!"

"They want me to take you to them alive, but I don't want you alive."

"No shit."

"I will lose my career if they find out I killed you, but this is a risk I'm willing to take."

"I really think we should talk about this. I'm really sorry"

The cool metal of a gun muzzle pressed against Casey's temple. Her breath caught, her heart thumped. No time to think, only react. She leaned away from the gun and fell off the chair. Once on the ground she scrabbled backwards. The sensation of pins and needles from the soles of her feet to the top of her thighs hampered her movement as circulation returned to her legs. She flicked her fingers and banged the dark blob that was Ana into the wall of the hut. Since she was probably re-aiming the gun, Casey moved sideways. The pop of the silenced gun was all the warning she had to deflect the bullet. It blasted a hole through the roof, letting in a shaft of moonlight.

Ana fired several shots in quick succession and Casey used her power to deflect them all

until the gun clicked empty. If Ana had another clip, Casey had no doubt she would reload in seconds, so that's all the time she had to slide toward the open door as if she was sliding into home plate.

Something hard came down on her leg. Apparently Ana did not have another clip, so she'd resorted to pistol-whipping her, but Casey was too close to freedom to give it up that easily. She flung her arm back and shot a burst of power at the woman, throwing her backwards and momentarily stunning her. Casey clamored to her feet.

Lights from a nearby town lit the sky faintly. It was certainly lighter than inside the hut. The mosquitoes had started their bombing raids, but Casey had no time to even swat at them, since she had to focus on the ground to avoid tripping. She jogged out of the clearing with Ana at her heels, tripping on vines, logs, and small, scurrying animals. Not yelping each time she stubbed her toe took effort, but she was trying to lose Ana. The problem was the woman was a more experienced runner, so any second she'd be close enough to tackle her.

Once away from the hut, the foliage was so dense overhead that she couldn't even tell if they were heading back to town. Had Ana killed Boris and Liang? At least then there'd be two less people after her. Not that Casey believed in killing people, but she did believe in getting them to stop chasing her. She wanted to get back to the States and jump Parker's bones, not deal with spies and think tanks and all that crap.

Ana lunged for Casey and wrapped her fingers around her neck and squeezed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Casey fought to breathe. She noticed the jungle had gone quiet around them and she could see sky through the tree canopy. Not good. She should not be in a position where she could see the sky. Reaching her hands up to Ana's wrists, she dug her short nails into flesh, but Ana wouldn't let go. Casey pulled back one hand and slapped the aggravating agent across the cheek. Casey was starting to see stars. Also not good. She wiggled her fingers, letting loose her power. The problem was that Ana was so determined not to let go that she took Casey with her when she fell back to the earth.

"God dammit! Don't do that again!" Ana screeched.

Why the hell not? Casey couldn't speak, so she had to content herself with mental retorts. *You're trying to kill me.*

Ana's grip loosened some upon impact with the ground, and now Casey was on top, so she jerked and twisted, fighting the black spots in front of her eyes. If she lost consciousness, it was all over for her.

With the adrenaline rush came another blast of power. This time it was pure instinct. The power pushed against Ana, holding her to the ground, while Casey struggled backwards. She broke free from the talons of death. After retreating several feet, she flung out her hands and lifted Ana from the ground and up about twenty feet into the air. Then she flipped the Off switch. Ana yelped at the sudden return of gravity as she plummeted to the ground. Casey heard a distinct crunching sound just before the scream.

"You bitch. I will get you for this!"

Casey frowned. Ana had said the same thing in the lab all those years ago, as if she'd thought the fire had been Casey's fault. It hadn't been, and Casey had helped her as much as she could, but not until it was too late. She'd been so sure it was another set-up, that more bigwigs were behind the mirror observing her and her power. She'd always figured Ana was in on it, since she knew she was a fake, a plant. Only the fire had been real and out of control, and real flames had lashed at Ana's feet. The sprinklers had failed and the automatic lockdown had prevented help from getting to them.

Casey loped away, feeling guilty that she was once again responsible for an injury to this woman. She knew in the logical part of her brain that it was self-defense, but she had always used her power to help people, not hurt them.

She was so tired and sore. The memories from the lab fire filled her mind. She wondered to this day if someone had set the fire and disabled the sprinklers, perhaps to get rid of the evidence that the lab had even existed. Or perhaps one of the lab rats had wanted revenge. Or maybe they hadn't expected anyone to be in the lab that night, so they had set the fire hoping to get the program shut down. They had succeeded in that. The kids were spirited home the next day. Then they had to sit through a debriefing with their parents—where they were reminded of the confidentiality agreements they'd signed and were given the 'official' explanation of the fire—so that no one would truly know what had gone on there.

Then the 'shadows' had shown up. The FBI agents hadn't even attempted stealth. They wanted her to know she was being watched. They had cameras and camcorders. They never missed

a move she made. They had also audited her father, and that's when he'd had his heart attack. Finally she'd had enough. Casey and her mom threatened to go to the NY Times about what had happened in the Institute if the Feds didn't leave her the hell alone.

So they did. Or so she thought.

Apparently they'd been following her all along since then. They'd just added stealth to the mix. Casey had gone into serious denial at that point anyway. She didn't want to find them watching her, so she didn't look.

Casey shook off the memories and concentrated on sucking in enough air to keep her feet moving. The blister on her left toe throbbed, making it very hard to concentrate on any thought at all other than stopping and taking off her damn shoe, but that wasn't an option. She needed a plan to get out of this country. She wanted to get home, but could New York really be home anymore if the world was still after her? Maybe D.C. would be fun? Parker would be there, which was a plus. Flashing back on their great sex gave her a mental shiver. Parker was so yummy among his other plusses. A keeper, if only she led a life that allowed her to keep anything.

Tripping on a vine slowed her pace and she had to wonder if she would ever find the road back to civilization. She wondered if the smell of motor exhaust was a hallucination. Probably not, since it was accompanied by the groan of shifting gears and the rumble of an ill-tuned engine. Casey straightened from the trunk she'd leaned against to remain upright and flung herself in the direction of the noise. She didn't care if it was an enemy at this point, although it not being the enemy would be very helpful. She just wanted a ride to town.

She jumped onto the road in front of the barreling vehicle—probably a bad move. Oh well. Too late now. She waved her arms and prayed the truck had good brakes. It skidded to a stop about a foot in front of her face. The small driver jumped from the truck berating her in Spanish until the glow of recognition fell over his face.

“Señorita Casey! We have been looking all over for you. Señor Nelson is most upset. Where have you been?”

Casey didn't know if Nando knew any of the details of her current predicament, so she shrugged, keeping it vague. It crossed her now hyper-suspicious mind that maybe he wasn't one of the good guys. Was this a ruse to get her into another compromising situation? Whatever. She didn't care at this point. Hopefully Parker had really sent out the troops looking for her. She hugged Nando and allowed him to open the door for her. She clambered inside and sagged against the pokey vinyl seat.

Once on the road back to the resort, Nando chattered incessantly, mostly about the Keystone cops at the Resort investigating the murder and about Lara's argument with a restaurant patron. Casey figured by now a whole posse of agents had probably spotted the truck, since it backfired every few feet and moved at only thirty miles per hour. She pressed the lock button only to find it jammed in one position.

“The lock is broken, señorita. Do not worry. We are quite safe.”

Casey doubted the veracity of that statement, but her eyes refused to remain peeled and she was too tired to fend off a would-be attacker if he or she did yank her door open. She yawned and dropped off.

The shrieking of hinges and the sudden presence of gravity resulting from someone yanking the truck door open woke Casey. The sensation of plummeting sideways to the earth was stalled by beefy arms catching her and pulling her against a strong chest. Ah, a strong chest, not unlike the one she'd met at the airport a century ago. Casey kept her eyes closed and breathed deep. Parker's familiar masculine scent filled her with a sense of calm and security. Until he started shaking her,

that is.

“Casey, dammit! Five minutes! I cannot leave you alone for five minutes! I thought they’d gotten you for good this time. I was so worried.” He shook her again, but Casey didn’t think he was aware of what he was doing.

She opened her eyes and glared. “And where were you, Mr. Hero? I could’ve used some help back there.”

“Back where? I lost them. I’ve been calling every contact I have in the area and using up all my favors, but no one had any intel.” His eyes softened. “Dammit,” he said again as he bear-hugged her close enough to suffocate her. Then his mouth descended in a daze-inducing kiss. She was a goner. The world was a goner. Gone for a good five minutes at least. The tongue in her mouth searched and taunted. She responded. Her body came awake. Her desire sensors drowned out her pain sensors, telling her throbbing blisters and aching muscles to go to hell.

The kiss could have gone on forever if not for the intrusive catcalls of the soccer boys. They began to grate on Casey’s consciousness, bringing a blush to her face.

Casey opened her eyes and pulled back so she could assess her surroundings properly. A small group stood near the resort garage, which housed the bus, a golf cart, and a few utility vehicles. Nando, Lara, and Jose and Manuel gathered near the truck with big grins on their faces. Casey was happy to note Nando’s arm casually looped about Lara’s waist. She really thought there was hope for them as a family, and she wished she’d had less intrigue and more time to get to know them during her stay. She and Parker were the only other people present, thank God. She wondered what the ‘normal’ resort guests thought of bodies being found in the stairwells and shots being fired and kidnappings. Did they think this was just the usual Mexican entertainment?

“So what’s the plan?” Casey asked after a moment’s regrouping. She knew as the heroine of the piece she ought to be applying her own brain cells to the problem, but the only lame idea she’d come up with was to hold a press conference. She wasn’t sure what good that would do or where to hold it, but the idea kept repeating in her brain. At least then the spies wouldn’t have secrecy on their side—that was the only logic she could place on the notion.

But as to how to get out of Mexico, she hadn’t a clue.

Parker spoke. “I’ve got a friend of a friend in the ‘import’ business. He can help us get across the border undetected, but first we’ve got to get to the border. Lara knows a pilot at this little air tour place outside town, so she’s going to drive us there.”

“But won’t the posse just follow us?”

“We’re going to hide under the tarp in the back.”

Casey cringed.

“You got a better idea?”

“Actually, at the moment, my brain is dog meat on drugs, so lead on, Mr. Fed.” Oops. She probably shouldn’t refer to his job, even in front of allies, but she was punchy.

Parker turned to Lara and kissed both of her cheeks. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Of course, Señor. I’ve not had so much fun in years. And do not worry about your belongings. I will ship them to you *en una semana*.”

“*Gracias, señora.*”

Casey took Lara’s hands. “Thank you, Lara, for your hospitality, and I’m sorry I’ve brought so much trouble to your life.” Lara said nonsense and kissed both of Casey’s cheeks. Casey also hugged and thanked Nando, then she turned to the boys.

“I will write to you, if you’d like, Miss Casey,” Manuel said, hugging her waist.

“I would love that, Manuel. I think I may have to write to you first, since I’m not sure if I

will be at the same address after all of this. I promise to send my address once I'm back in the States." She squatted down and leaned in to speak in a low voice. "And you can count on me as a friend. I won't forget you. And I think Nando and Lara love you very much."

She saw the tears in Jose's eye, though he tried to maintain his stoic expression, so she gave the boy a hug. "I will miss you."

"Yo tambien, señorita."

"He says 'I also'," Manuel translated.

Casey gave Jose one more hug and a quick peck on the cheek. His sun-warmed arms responded, clinging tightly to her neck, until Lara gently pulled him away. She picked him up, gangly legs and all, and held him to her.

Casey wished she had more time to examine her feelings. Yes, she'd miss these people she'd known for such a short time, but it was more than that. It was that brief feeling of family they'd given her. She felt like she was losing her family, like she would never see them again. It made her long for her own family in New York, no matter how many problems they had.

Parker brushed his hand behind her neck and down her back, and with gentle pressure guided her toward the truck. They climbed into the back and Nando slammed the cab shut. They waited on top of the tarp while Nando released Lara from a hug and she climbed into the driver's seat. When the engine roared to life, Casey blew kisses to the boys then crawled under the musty tarp, having flashbacks to her experience with the Africans. Parker followed, taking care to secure the tarp end with the weight of a crowbar and a ball of twine. Then he lay down next to Casey. Casey's eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness. Sunlight seeped through the weave of the tarp so that she could see Parker's eyes focusing intently on her face. He reached out his hand and stroked her cheek.

"You're beautiful."

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

"I'm serious."

Casey frowned. She knew he was serious. She guessed she was just too raw from saying good-bye to the boys. How would she feel when she had to say good-bye to Parker, too?

He took the hint and changed the subject. "So how did you get away from the dynamic duo?"

"Boris unwittingly provided me keys, and Ana came for me, but planned to kill me, so I had to drop her."

"What do you mean, drop her?"

Casey wiggled her fingers, which stirred up dust on the truck bed, making his eyes water. "I used my power and lifted her in the air, then dropped her. I think I broke her leg. I'm not sure what happened to Boris and Liang, though. They weren't with her."

Parker coughed. "You should have killed her, so that at least one less person would be gunning for you."

"Don't you know me by now? I'm one of the good guys."

"The good guys kill people sometimes."

"Not if it can be helped."

"She'll come after you again."

"So what's new?"

Casey shivered as Parker ran his rough hand over her arm. "You're sounding a bit cynical this morning."

"Sorry. Rough night." Finally, she smiled. "I have this weird idea."

“Uh oh.”

She punched his chest. “Yeah, that kind of idea.”

“Well, out with it.”

“What if I held a press conference and told the world about my powers?”

“No one will believe you without a demonstration. Even then, the TV viewing audience is a bit jaded by special effects.”

The truck bed was beginning to heat up from both the running engine and the pounding sun. Casey wanted to lay back, since the arm she rested her head on was going numb, but then the tarp would suffocate her.

“Here.” Parker pulled her to him, so she could use his chest as a pillow. She was still sweating, but her arm was happier.

She continued her explanation. “I’ve been thinking about my future, you know. I mean, I can’t live on the run forever. I don’t want to be a lab rat or some locked up government secret weapon, so the crazy idea is, what if I started my own agency?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“What kind of agency?” Ad agency? Acting agency? Parker’s mind conceived all kinds of weird images as he stroked Casey’s hair. He loved having her soft body cradled against his own. He loved just having her back, knowing she was safe with him, for the moment at least, even if they were under a tarp in the back of a pick-up truck.

“Well, a psychic agency.”

“What?” He felt like he said that word a lot around Casey. It was getting old.

She snuggled closer, brushing against suddenly alert parts of his anatomy. “Kind of like a detective agency. Psychic freelancers basically.”

“Mercenaries.”

“No. We’d be free to choose what assignments we took on. For example, we could help the U.S. Government on occasion, but on our terms, and we could help people in need.”

His arm slid down hers then crossed her stomach so he could nudge her soft bottom against him. The crappiness of their surroundings and situation was replaced by an overpowering lust. He pressed himself against Casey, and with his bottom hand, which had limited mobility at the moment, he petted her breast and compressed her nipple until it peeked. He knew she was aware of his machinations, because her breathing grew rapid and her butt pressed and wiggled against him of its own accord.

He forced his mind to remain on task with the discussion. “How do you know there are any others out there like you?”

“Well, there’s at least the others from the Institute.”

“Were they legit or just scam artists like Ana?”

“Oh, they were legit. They were amazing. Every last one of them. Sometimes I miss them, but I certainly don’t miss feeling like an animal at the zoo.” Her hand snaked back and stroked up and down Parker’s thigh. He was wishing she’d move it to a slightly different location. “Maybe I’ll look them up after I’m out of this mess?”

At least she was sounding more positive about getting out of this mess.

“But what do you think about the press conference? Do you think it could keep me safe?”

“Hide in plain sight. I like the idea. I don’t know if it will work as well in fact, though. Why don’t I contact my boss and maybe a couple other people in Washington and see if we can work something out?”

Casey’s breath hissed through her teeth as Parker’s fingers wended across her thigh to her mound. Her voice sounded breathy when she spoke. “Parker, I know you’re a Fed and I love you and all, but are you sure they won’t just use me the way they did before?”

His magic fingers stroked and slid and manipulated between her thighs. Casey could not believe she was under a tarp on a work truck making out with this super sexy federal agent. Her life was just off-the-charts bizarre sometimes. Or was that all the time? And was her stomach clenching from her building lust or was it from the thought of putting her life in the hands of the U.S. Government again? She just didn’t think she could trust them, even if she did trust Parker.

“Casey, did you just say you love me?”

“Huh?”

“You said you love me.”

“Did not.”

“Yes, you did. You said, ‘I know you’re a Fed and I love you and all...’”

“Just an expression, Parker.” She tried to pull away, away from his questing fingers, and away from the possibility of loving someone she would just lose in the end. All of her other boyfriends had just been dates with time limits. It had hurt a bit to be dumped by each one, but that was more pride than heart.

Parker was different. She knew this by the sick feeling in her stomach whenever she thought of saying good-bye to him in the States. Would it happen just across the border, or would it last as far as D.C.? Most definitely it wouldn’t last till New York, if she could even go back to New York.

The cliché dog-with-a-bone applied to Parker, though. “It’s not just an expression, sweetheart. You love me and you know it.”

Parker’s hands crept inside her clothes, teasing her, seducing her. Well, she’d turn the tables. “Do you love me?” As she spoke, she rotated her body, allowing his hands to come along for the ride. At least now she was facing him and could see his eyes.

“I do love you.” He said it so softly, so sincerely, she almost believed it. Just a crumb of doubt remained, the crumb that said the frustration of living with her unpredictable powers would soon sour whatever adrenaline-produced emotion he felt now. She told herself the water in her eyes and the sensation of choking in her throat were caused by the dust and dirt flying around under the tarp and not by some flighty emotion.

“You don’t believe me, do you? Still. It’s like being stuck in a record groove.”

“More like a time warp. We’re in a place out of time here. It’s not real life. You won’t even like me once we get back to real life.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Is that rhetorical?”

“I love you, Casey Summers.”

Casey refused to say it again, and though she would have liked to express a few things with her body, just then the truck stopped, Lara’s door slammed, and her voice hallooed through the tarp.

Casey crab-walked away from Parker until she’d freed herself from the tarp. Parker just sat up and pulled the thing off of him, flinging it across the truck bed as if angry. Was he angry? And was it at her, because she hadn’t said ‘I love you’ again, or was it at the necessity of Lara’s interruption? Obviously it wasn’t Lara’s fault for interrupting, since that’s what he’d told her to do.

The airfield consisted of cracked, weed-filled tarmac surrounded by yellow dirt, scrub brush, and cacti. Some Casey recognized as the maguey plants that mescal was distilled from. One dilapidated hanger loomed like a mother, its shadow producing the only shade in the area. Casey could see one plane through the open hanger door. A second plane taxied slowly along the tarmac. It rolled toward Lara’s truck, and stopped about fifty feet away. A pipsqueak with an old motorcycle helmet jumped out and skipped toward them.

“Eek.” The squeak from Casey’s lips had been involuntary at the thought of a child piloting them across the country. She was *not* getting into a plane with a child for a pilot.

Lara patted her hand reassuringly, then moved with outstretched arms toward the pilot. The pilot stopped mid-skip, lifted off her helmet, and barreled into Lara’s arms. Long honey hair flowed out behind her, almost as long as Lara’s braid. A woman. A very dainty, very pretty woman, probably mid-twenties. Casey glanced at Parker and felt a flare of jealousy as she noticed him admiring the woman’s butt as she and Lara twirled together.

It was a normal male reaction to a pretty woman, Casey knew, but it did cross her mind to

wonder how well she knew Parker. They'd been having this little adventure, but she didn't know the basic things about Parker that made a relationship, such as, did he leave the seat up? Would he cheat on her? Did he expect her to be able to cook or to keep a spotless house? She lived in Manhattan, so cooking had never been a necessity. Take-out restaurants on every corner, all-night delivery, and dirty-water hot dog stands kept her fed. She wasn't even sure if the stove in her apartment worked. The microwave worked fine for popping corn or for heating a mug of water. What did she need a stove for? Was Parker the same, or was he a meat and potatoes man?

But there was no time now to ask him as Lara guided the pilot to them and made introductions.

"Señor Nelson and Casey, this is Ellinca Anderson."

"Call me Ella."

Did Parker hold her hand just a tad too long for a friendly handshake? Casey nearly growled as Ella's smiley eyes gazed into Parker's. *Mine*. The thought wasn't even conscious on Casey's part, but it was insistent. *Mine*. Casey had to work to keep from squeezing Ella's hand too hard, as if this were a classic male pissing contest. Grow up, she told herself. They'd be with this woman an hour or two and never see her again. Parker didn't have time to get it on with her. And what was with this ridiculous jealousy anyway?

"Come. You can freshen up in the hanger while I fill out some paperwork. Then we will be off."

Parker opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He stayed next to Casey as Lara and Ella walked briskly ahead, giggling together like school girls.

"What were you going to say?" Casey whispered to Parker, gratified that he'd stayed by her side.

"I just want to be safely off the ground. The longer we linger in any one place, the more dangerous it is for you."

Casey smiled, more than smiled, a big grin filled her face and reflected in her eyes.

"What? You're happy about danger?"

"I'm happy that you were thinking about my safety."

"Of course. What did you think I was thinking about?"

Casey gestured toward the waggley butt up ahead. "That."

He stopped, momentarily shocked. Then he laughed, bending over at the waist and guffawing.

"Parker, have you lost your mind?"

The other two women turned to look.

When he finally straightened and wiped his eyes, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and squeezed her to him. "I'm a little punchy," he explained. "But that just proves that you love me, you see."

"Does not." She did love him, but she certainly wouldn't admit it.

"I love you. Now, don't you think you should tell me the same in case we die in that puddle jumper?"

Casey punched him in the gut, a little harder than she intended. "Don't say that! I have enough problems with flying as it is. I don't need you to remind me that it's more dangerous in that...thing than in a commercial jet."

"Sorry." But the smirk remained on his face and his arm remained possessively about her shoulders, warming Casey to the soul.

Their time on the ground was brief. The hanger sported a bathroom with flowered wallpaper

and a lavender scent. Ella spoke on an old-fashion short wave radio and filled out a flight manifest. Then they were all saying good-bye to Lara and dashing across the dust bowl to the plane.

Ella provided them both with old Harley helmets and parachute packs, making Casey even more nervous. She hadn't realized the plane was that small.

"Don't worry. Really, after all this prep, the flight itself is pretty boring," Ella assured them. "But better safe, right?"

Casey shrugged the pack straps over her shoulders. "Where are you from?" she asked Ella, then wondered if she should have asked such a personal question. Ella's voice had a slight twang, but she couldn't place it.

"Florida, actually. Tampa."

Parker buckled up. "So how long have you been here?"

"About five years."

"Why?" Casey blurted, unable to imagine choosing uncivilized Mexico over Tampa, which guaranteed access to refrigerated food and late-night drive-through lanes.

Ella frowned, turning around to check controls and start the propellers. She had to shout to be heard now. "My stupid heart told me to follow some fool man. Lost my life's savings. Took me three years to save up enough to buy this place and another year to buy a plane." She sounded bitter.

Casey refrained from asking any more questions. She'd obviously struck a nerve. Instead, she lapsed into silent reverie—conversation was impossible once they taxied down the runway and lifted into the air—considering the folly of trusting a man so much that you changed your life for him. Could love be mutually beneficial without sacrifice? Strings meant sacrifice. Did she want to sacrifice more than she already had? It seemed like she was always sacrificing to the servitude of her power. She just wanted to be free, free to live a normal unencumbered life.

The land below was spotted with water, greenery, traffic. Turbulence buffeted the small craft far worse than it had on the Aero Mexico 747 she'd rode into the country.

Casey couldn't answer her own questions at the moment. She felt like she hadn't come anywhere near accomplishing her goals for this trip. Did she have any more mastery over her power than she had had at the beginning? Well, she could use her eyes as well as her fingers. She'd escaped from Ana. That was still an adrenaline, self-preservation thing, but she hadn't been able to take that same action with the Africans so maybe that was an improvement. She needed to know what her power could and couldn't do so she could count on it and hone it so that she wasn't like a walking bomb with a rusty timer. She knew this power was with her to stay. It was time to stop wishing it away and to take control. She couldn't change her life for the better if she couldn't accept that most basic tenet about herself.

She bit her lower lip and Parker's hand covered hers and squeezed. She couldn't control Parker or this relationship. She couldn't control most things in her life, but she could control her insides at least. Not love, of course—that was an out-of-control roller coaster ride—but she could accept herself, her power, and take responsibility for all the ways she'd messed up her life in the past. She had been choosing the wrong jobs because she'd expected so little of herself. She needed to have confidence in herself as a person, believe she was someone worthy of a good job and a long-term relationship.

"NYU," she said aloud, thinking maybe she should look into a more alternative major. Did they have private eye courses? Or film making? The eccentricities her power caused would probably be good publicity in something like that.

The tilt of the plane changed as they abruptly dropped altitude. It probably wasn't really abrupt. It just seemed that way to Casey, the paranoid flyer. Parker squeezed her hand again.

“Almost there I think,” he said, or mouthed rather, since Casey couldn’t actually hear his voice.

The landing was smooth. They were in the center of a field surrounded by trees. The runway was thin and obviously meant only for small planes. It crossed Casey’s mind that it was probably known only to smugglers, whether they smuggled humans or drugs. She certainly didn’t want to know more than that. Once the props had been flipped off, they removed their helmets.

“Who are we meeting?” she asked Parker.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he helped her from the plane and turned to thank Ella.

“No problemo.” This she said with her sweet Southern twang. She shook their hands, then gestured across the field. “I believe someone is looking for you.”

Casey’s breath caught, thinking Liang or Ana had caught up with them somehow.

Parker clamped his hand on her shoulder. “Yes, that is who we were expecting. Thanks.”

The walk across the field was more traumatic than Casey had expected. She saw that Parker’s ‘friend’ had a semi-automatic pointed in their direction, although it didn’t seem to be pointed at them. When they were close enough to see his eyes, Casey saw that he was scanning the surrounding trees. Covering them. Shit. She scanned the trees and she felt like a sitting duck. Why didn’t she think of things like this before she walked into them?

Parker obviously did. He didn’t crouch or increase his pace, but his eyes were in constant motion and he had placed Casey to his left, keeping his gun arm free. His fingers flexed as if he was ready to pull it at a moment’s notice.

Instead of stopping and greeting the wielder of the MP-5, they walked past him, without a word, into the shelter of the trees. The man followed, carefully walking backwards.

They were safe now.

Right.

* * * *

Parker let out a long sigh of relief once they’d reached cover. He let go of Casey’s hand and turned to greet Marcos, as that slim man slung the MP-5 over his shoulder. The greeting consisted of a quick, firm handshake and a nod. They weren’t in the clear yet, so Marcos wouldn’t want chatter, just action, which was why Parker had chosen him.

When Casey smiled and opened her mouth, obviously to offer the man a friendly greeting, Parker shook his head. Thankfully, she took the hint, and they proceeded through the brush silently. Well, silent wasn’t exactly true, since Casey had not been trained in stealth. She clunked through the brush and crunched branches and swore under her breath. Parker found his lip turning up in a smile as he listened to her. Why was he smirking about something that would have annoyed him just a week ago? She was way too far under his skin. What if she left him after all this, when she didn’t need him anymore?

She doesn’t need you now, Parker. Get a grip. She’s got powers you can barely believe even though you’ve seen them. She can take care of herself. As she had told him on more than one occasion, although she was truly a walking hazard.

The gunfire wasn’t quite unexpected, but it did shake him out of his going-nowhere thought process. He yanked his gun free and pushed Casey to the ground. He could hear her swearing at him, but he didn’t care. His focus was on the sniper, specifically the sniper’s location. Or was it more than one?

To the right, bark flew off a tree as a bullet pierced the wood and sent splinters flying. Parker ducked slightly and scanned left. Where was the person hiding? Marcos held the same stance as Parker. They’d automatically moved back to back to cover each other. The thing about snipers

was, if they were good at it, they could pick a balloon off a bottle and never reveal their position. They practiced the art of camouflage. Most of Casey's attackers had not seemed very well trained, or was it just that Casey created such chaos around her that no one's training really mattered?

That was probably it, Parker thought as he felt a hand wrap around his calf while a fist punched the back of his knee. He almost fell, which was likely the mad woman's intention. She didn't understand what he and Marcos were doing and she wanted him to get down. He understood this intellectually, but hissed, "What are you doing?" anyway and swatted at her like a fly.

"Get down!"

"I'm protecting you."

"Get down, you macho asshole, right now!" She pushed his knee again, which really pissed him off since it was distracting him from the task at hand.

"Stop it!" He felt like a petulant five-year-old. Marcos glanced over his shoulder at him and smirked. The shots stopped, but Parker had no doubt they'd start up again as soon as the sniper reloaded or moved to a more optimum position. Now Parker and Marcos crouched, heads together, practically on top of Casey. She was abusing both of them in a monologue about stupidity and masculine pride, but they ignored her.

"Did you spot him?" Marcos asked, sweat sliding down his forehead.

"No. You?"

"No."

"He's moving."

"Yes, which means we've got to move without giving away our location." They both glanced at Casey.

She looked shocked at the sudden attention. "I say we get the hell out of Dodge. Now."

Parker observed Marcos's eye roll and felt like doing the same thing. "Hands and knees, Casey, quietly. We'll zigzag."

"Should we split up?" Marcos asked. "I can draw his fire."

Parker noted Casey's protest even before she voiced it. Sad to be so in tune with a woman in this situation. He forestalled her with a hand over her mouth and said, "No, too dangerous, and we need you to get us over the border."

"It's all set up with Demeter in Texas."

Parker nodded, but sweat pooled under his arms. It had been too quiet for too long now. Why would the sniper give up like that? Or had he crept right up to them during their little chat? "Time to move," he said.

Casey crawled on hands and knees between the two men who did a sort of crouch walk on either side of her, staying out of view yet vigilant. Casey admired them for this, but at the same time was totally pissed to have to remain on her hands and knees. The stiff brush felt like steel wool on her knees, jagged rocks pierced her skin. Her palms itched from sweat and dirt. This sucked, her life sucked.

Look at the bright side, you have two men at your side willing to die for you. Even if it was their job, that was a plus. How many women had that?

How many women needed that?

They zigged right and zagged left then went straight for a while, then zigged and zagged once again.

Parker held his hand in her face at nose level, apparently a sign to stop. "See that?"

"Yeah." Marcos lifted his rifle and lowered his head until his cheek rested on the stock. He sighted along the barrel and fired.

A long silence followed.

"I think you got him," Parker whispered.

"Maybe. I'm going to check. Keep heading north and I'll catch up. If I don't, just tell them at the border that you're meeting Demeter."

"Marcos, I"

"No worries. I'll be back in ten."

* * * *

Of course, Marcos wasn't back in ten. No, that would be too easy. Parker was starting to get worried, not only because Marcos was a damn good agent and the one who could get them out of here. He was also a good friend, and Parker didn't have many of them.

"Should we be worried?" Casey voiced his concerns aloud, but he just grunted in response and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Shoulder high river cane surrounded them, providing good cover, but it would also make it harder for Marcus to catch up to them.

Parker knew he and Casey were close, very close, to the Rio Grande, but he didn't know if they were looking for a boat or plane or what. And the name Demeter was painfully little to go on.

"He'll be back." Casey spoke again, reassuring herself as much as him. Parker nodded.

"Do you think it was Boris or Liang?"

He knew he should be more curious about the identity of the sniper, but as long as they'd stopped shooting, he didn't care. "They want you alive, remember?"

"What if they changed their minds and decided I was too much trouble?"

"They won't give up that easily."

"Will they ever give up?"

Parker shrugged. Sweat pooled under his arms and slid down his back. "We'll try your press conference idea."

"But you don't really think it will work."

"I don't know. Maybe." He wanted it to work. "Maybe if we publicly debunked your power. Maybe they'd all leave you alone then." He wanted Casey free from this mess.

Then she won't need you.

"Parker, are you mad at me?"

He stopped, letting her bump into his back, but he didn't turn to face her. "I'm just concentrating on getting us out of here."

"I know, but it seems like there's more to it than that."

"Nothing that can't wait 'til we're back in the States."

Casey sighed, knowing they were both too tired and strung out to explain themselves. "If you say so."

She had the feeling Parker was still upset at her refusing to say the love word again. But then, maybe he was just really upset about Marcos' continued absence. Not a good sign. Did it mean the agent couldn't find them? Or that the sniper was still alive and had killed Marcos? Maybe the bad guy was tracking their moves right now, but no bullets pinged off the dusty ground.

Casey realized her thoughts were going in circles. She'd developed a blister on the inside arch of her left foot. If only her powers could help them get out of this field. Since neither of them had a machete, they were winding their way through the stalks or pushing them to the side or stepping over them. Very slow going.

"Parker."

"Hmm?"

"Let me walk in front."

“Casey, we’ve got to keep moving.”

“No kidding. Let me walk in front.”

“What for?”

“God, just do it.”

He stopped and gestured for her to move forward. She did. Then she focused her eyes on the maze of bamboo in front of her. A gentle breeze twitched the stalks, but they still blocked her way. She squinted her eyes, but resisted wiggling her fingers. She wanted to practice her control.

Concentrate.

Finally a cooperative gust of power flattened the stalks to the ground. She was going for a parting of the Red Sea effect, but this would do.

Parker clapped. “Why didn’t you do that an hour ago?”

“It didn’t occur to me that I could.”

She was about to take a step forward when Parker clasped his hand over her mouth. Right in her ear, he whispered, “Shhh.” They stood stock-still and listened. “A machete.”

Casey nodded silently. She didn’t even dare breathe, and it seemed like Parker didn’t either.

“Park, it’s Marcos.”

“Oh thank God.” Parker dropped his hand. Casey’s lips were relieved, because they were beginning to sweat.

Marcos appeared to their right, machete in his right hand, SIG-Sauer in his left.

“Did you find the sniper?”

“No.”

“Damn.”

“That leaves an unknown quantity.”

The two men held the same stance. “Should we delay our crossing?”

“Play it by ear.”

Parker nodded.

Marcos went on. “Can she swim?”

“What?” Casey’s eyes widened. Wasn’t the Rio Grande a big river?

“The river’s low this year. Some sections are nothing more than a muddy bed. This section is not too wide.”

“Why don’t we just go through one of the regular entry points?” Casey asked. “I still have my IDs.”

Parker answered. “We think you’d be a sitting duck at a legal border crossing. This way we can get you back into the U.S. undetected.”

“Won’t they shoot at us?”

“They don’t have enough Border Patrols to cover every section of the river. We’ll be okay.”

Marcos sounded confident. He stepped over Casey’s flattened bamboo and started swinging his machete to carve a new pathway. Parker gestured for Casey to follow and he took up the rear. She couldn’t tell from his expression whether he thought Marcos’ plan was a good one or not. And if she was a sitting duck at a border crossing, wouldn’t she be a sitting duck at a press conference?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They left the shelter of the cane field and approached the river at dusk. To the west a huge candlewood tree created an odd silhouette against the darkening sky. The river appeared shallow and calm, a glassy surface unbroken by rapids or rocks. Both agents agreed that they needed to wait for full dark to cross, so they seated Casey on a small tarp from Marcos' pack near a mesquite tree while they stood sentry nearby. They were casual yet aware. Occasionally they'd stick their heads together and talk in low voices. Casey caught snippets of the conversation, which seemed to be about who the sniper might be and whether he was currently tracking them.

The air was fragrant and thick, and Casey found herself drifting off. The long hike had worn her out, not to mention everything that had gone on before. When she started to tilt sideways, she caught herself, blinked her eyes, and shook her head, trying to stay awake. A full moon lit the landscape, also lighting up a pair of glowing, beady eyes looking right at her. Casey yelped and backed away until her butt encountered a pincushion, which was probably one of those miniature cacti she'd seen all day. She yelped again, this time from pain.

"Casey?" Parker's voice. She couldn't really see him, but hearing his voice made her warm inside.

The glowing eyes disappeared in the darkness, but Casey decided it was time to get close to Parker again, perhaps stand between him and Marcos, they being the men and all, and they having the guns. She jumped to her feet.

"What's up?" Parker said into her ear.

"Eyes, to the right, low to the ground."

"I don't see anything."

"They went away."

Parker chuckled. How annoying. "Probably a fox or coyote. Your screech probably scared it."

"Do they eat people?"

"Not generally." She could hear the humor in his voice.

"I'm glad I amuse you."

Marcos interjected, "Well, someone has to. Takes a lot to get this man to laugh."

"I seem to do it in spades."

Marcos turned to look at them, the moonlight glinting off his dark hair. "Very interesting."

Parker snorted. "There are things out here to worry about, though. Diamondbacks, coral snakes, scorpions."

"Now you tell me."

"That's why Marcus gave you the tarp."

"A tarp is not going to help against a snake."

"No, but my gun will." Marcos tapped the object he was referring to, then gestured toward the sky. "I think this is as dark as we're going to get tonight. Time to cross."

Marcos had hidden wetsuits in a trunk under a Mexican buckeye bush before meeting Parker at the rendezvous. He said the water temperature was warm, but the wet suits could go over their clothes and the black would keep them from being visible in case any Border Patrol happened by.

Marcos also thought this area of the river was shallow enough to walk across, but he said to be prepared to swim, because looks could be deceiving. Casey just nodded at all of his instructions as she struggled to pull the man-size wetsuit over her jeans. She hated the feeling of crossing into her country illegally when she was a U.S. citizen, but she respected Parker's judgment. He was the espionage expert, after all.

Cicadas, frogs, owls, and coyotes all created a chorus of night noises that accompanied their splashes through the water. A couple of points were too deep for Casey to keep her footing, so she clung to Parker's arm and floated until her feet found solid ground once again. It took forever with the adrenaline pounding through her body as she scanned the horizon for signs of the Border Patrol. Even if they did appear, they'd have to point a flashlight at their exact spot in the river since the dark wet suits provided perfect camouflage against the inky water.

They reached the far side without incident, allowing Casey to exhale a stream of stress as she climbed onto the bank and struggled out of her wet suit. She wrung water from her hair. They weren't in the clear yet, Marcos explained, since Border Patrol had checkpoints along some of the nearby roads and did random searches of the known safe houses. Once out of the wet suits, Marcos tucked the suits into a hollow carved into the solid packed dirt. He covered it with debris and stones from the riverside. Then they hiked downstream for half an hour, before Marcos paused again, searching the ground. Apparently he was looking for a specific stone, because when he saw it, he tilted it and pulled something from underneath it. Casey's eyes widened. How had he ever found that exact stone in the dark?

He handed the wad to Parker. Money. "This will be enough for a night or two at a motel. I assume you'll be calling Brandon ASAP."

Parker nodded. "As soon as I get to a phone."

"It's good that you're not using a cell. Hate for someone to track you with a the GPS in a cell."

Casey's eyes widened. She hadn't even thought of that one. She had so much to learn about spy games.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't by choice. Damn thing's been through a war zone. Probably beyond repair."

"What do you mean, a war zone?" Casey slapped her hands on her hips and glared. It wasn't her fault his damn phone was broken.

He rolled his eyes at her, before turning to Marcos and clasping hands. Marcos gave Casey a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Good luck." Within moments he disappeared into the heavy brush lining the river's shore. Casey felt bereft. Funny how much trust she'd placed in a total stranger. Maybe it was because Parker trusted him so implicitly.

Parker knelt near the water and soaked a handkerchief. Then he wiped Casey's face. Casey's breath caught at his touch, but then she relaxed. "Want you to look presentable," Parker explained. Casey returned the favor. Yes, if they met Border Patrol it would be best not to look like they'd just swum across a river.

* * * *

Casey and Parker had nearly walked right into a Border Patrol checkpoint when they reached the highway, so they'd veered off the beaten path into a swamp, or something that looked and smelled just like a swamp, complete with alligators. Parker had kept his gun at the ready as they'd slogged through the slimy water. Finally they'd returned to a paved road, which led to a motel. Casey still wasn't sure where in Texas they were exactly, and, at this point, with her head pounding and her blisters throbbing, she didn't really care. She just wanted a shower, followed by a

long soak in a tub filled with steamy water, followed by a long, long snooze.

Back up.

Add a steak, baked potato, and vanilla shake to the scene in the bathtub and she'd be in heaven.

She explained this to Parker, who laughed and said he'd see what he could do. He could be a good guy when he wanted to be. He could also be a bad ass when the situation called for it, and Casey loved that.

Parker slid the magnetized key card through the slot and opened the door to a room done in orange and green polyester.

Casey shielded her eyes. "Oh my God."

"Oh my sixties," Parker said, nodding in agreement.

A little chuckle erupted from Casey's chapped lips, followed by an inelegant snort from her nose. Soon a huge guffaw emerged from her throat. In moments she was clutching her stomach as she rolled on the bed laughing. This lasted for a solid ten minutes while Parker roamed the room with his gun out, checking in closets and behind shower curtains for any intruders. When he returned to the lunatic woman, who was trying to wipe the streaming tears from her cheeks, he just shook his head. "It wasn't that damn funny."

"No shit." But she couldn't stop laughing. It was like every emotion she'd experienced in Mexico all welled up and poured out in relief. She was back in the States. She was back in the United States of America.

"I'm back in the States," she said, once she caught her breath.

"Yes you are."

"I'm a U.S. citizen and I'm back in the States."

"But unfortunately you've left your brain cells in Mexico."

"I don't care. I'm back in the States and I'm never leaving again."

"Ever?"

"Never ever."

"Not even to see the Peace Bridge and Niagara Falls?"

"I can see the falls from stateside."

"Not even St. Lucia or the Bahamas?"

She shook her head vehemently, which caused her hair to slap her cheeks. God, she needed a shower. "Not for one teensy weensy moment am I leaving this country ever again."

"So...that means that you will stay in this room without fail the whole time I'm gone...right?"

"I'm still in the country outside of this room."

He knelt in front of her. "But I need to call Brandon from a payphone and I need to know you're safe. If you're kidnapped, they'll ship you right back out of this country, you know."

Casey was so tired she had to blink rapidly to keep focused on Parker's eyes. He was so serious, and he was acting as if it was her foolishness that had gotten her kidnapped each time, which would have pissed her off if she weren't so tired. Forces beyond her control were at work here. She wasn't to blame. However, she had no intention of doing anything but implementing her plan, i.e. shower, bath, food, and sleep. "I will stay in this room if you bring me back a steak, or at the very least a hamburger: with cheese, bacon, Angus beef..."

Parker's stomach growled, causing a blush to creep up from the V at his neck. "I get the picture. Return with food. Got it."

Parker returned twenty minutes later to find Casey half-asleep in the tub. "That's a good

way to drown you know.”

“*Sí, señor.*” She closed her eyes again and commenced snoring.

“Casey.”

“Hunh?”

“Wake up and get out of the tub. I’ve got some food.”

In Casey’s semi-conscious state, Parker managed to raise her from the water (admiring her curves as he did so), wrap her in a thin motel towel (crushing her curves against his chest), and guide her to the laminate table covered with bags of glorious fast food. She immediately perked up.

“Mickey D’s. Oh I love Mickey D’s. My absolute favorite. Yumolicious. American food. Fast food. Happiness.”

“Casey, you’re starting to scare me.”

“Why?”

“I’ve never seen you quite so giddy before.” Parker pulled fries and burgers from the colorful bags. He hated to burst her little bubble of happiness, but he worried she might let her guard down too much. “You know we’re not out of the woods yet, don’t you?”

“Oh fuddy duddy.” She giggled like a thirteen-year-old.

“Someone didn’t drug you, did they?”

Casey shook her head since her mouth was stuffed with fries, a mouthful of bun, and a straw. Parker had visions of future barfing episodes if she didn’t slow down. He was glad to see her happy, but he knew it was just the aftermath of too much stress and adrenaline.

Sure enough the second Casey’s head hit the pillow, she was out, mouth hanging open, arms flopped wide. He had to maneuver her under the covers and pull the damp towel out from under her. Her hair fanned across the pillow. Her cheeks were rosy and her lips kissable. She looked cherubic, except for her full breasts barely hidden under the hem of the blanket. Parker examined the swells of creamy skin and got hard just thinking about lying next to her.

Damn. He had to secure the room and shower first before he could even think about joining her. He’d also wanted to discuss the plans he and his boss had formulated. Well, the morning would be soon enough. Let Sleeping Beauty enjoy her sweet dreams for now.

* * * *

Pleasant dreams about New York bagels and steak-on-a-stick gave way to muzzy wakefulness as Casey realized she was being stroked in a most pleasant manner. Parker. His warm, naked body snuggled close to hers. His hands explored her stomach and down her thighs, gentle and slow. He wasn’t in a rush to satisfaction. He was just enjoying waking her up. Casey’s lips curved, though she kept her eyes closed. She felt the man’s breath on her cheeks as his fingers roamed across each round breast. His lips followed, settling into a soft sucking on first one nipple then the other.

“Ohh.” She threaded her fingers through Parker’s satiny hair and opened her eyes. “Yes.”

He took the invitation and levered his weight on top of her. She spread her legs and welcomed him to her. It felt so right to be here with Parker, to have him heavy on her body, to be encased in his warmth. As he entered her and moved his mouth to her own, she realized her heart had opened wide, probably for the first time in her life. This feeling was different from the love she felt for her mom and her siblings, and way different than the feelings she’d had for Andrew or any other of the long line of beaus. This feeling was at once freeing and confining, joyous and scary, giving and grasping. It was love, of course, love that for once she knew she had to declare aloud, that she couldn’t take back. It didn’t matter whether Parker reciprocated her feelings or not, whether he stuck around or not. She loved him, and she would forever, no matter what happened.

She couldn't even hope to explain this feeling in inadequate words, so she just said the ones she knew he was waiting to hear. "I love you, Parker."

He lifted his head and opened his eyes and looked at her. "I love you, too, Casey Summers."

This time when they made love, it transcended their bodies, and afterwards, Parker didn't want to examine his feelings. They were too raw. He knew losing Casey would kill him. He would stay by her side and protect her. The memory of Deanna prickled his consciousness, but he brushed it aside. Someday he'd tell Casey about the case he'd been on and how the serial killer had decided to target his fiancée, but for now he'd finished his grieving. He was ready to live again. He was ready to risk again. Yes, he still had doubts about his ability to protect Casey, since he'd been unable to stop Deanna's killer from shooting her in front of him, but he would keep Casey safe with the last breath in his body if necessary.

They dressed in silence and ate a breakfast culled from the snack machine on the second floor. Parker brushed Casey's hair, which nearly gave her another orgasm. She'd never had a man do that for her before. It was both erotic and comforting.

"Casey?"

"Hmm?"

"I called Brandon, my boss."

"Yes?"

"They're coming to pick you up."

Casey's eyes flew open, her heart raced, and her palms grew clammy. "Are you going with me?"

"No. There's been a break in the case I was working on before I met you. In Dallas." Parker's voice caught. "They think they've found Missy's trail."

Casey nodded, understanding his need to be there, to see this thing finished. He met her eyes.

"I trust Brandon, Casey, or I wouldn't leave your side. You know that, right?"

"Yes." She paused. "But what does he plan to do with me?"

"For now, just take you to a safe house here in Texas. I'll wrap up this other case, then meet up with you."

"Then what?"

The long look they exchanged said they both knew there was a lot to discuss about their future. "We'll figure it out. Have faith."

Casey nodded. They cleared up the remnants from their breakfast and awaited the Morse code knock on the door. Brandon had chosen the distinctive S.O.S. knock to let Parker know there was a friend at the door.

"Do you think Ana and Boris are still in Mexico?"

"No idea, but I doubt it. In fact, I would expect them to already know we're over the border. They might even know our general location."

"How would they know that?"

"Intelligence, moles. Every side has them."

"If everyone knows what everyone else is doing, how does anything ever get accomplished?"

"That's the game, to get the edge, that one piece of information that puts us one step ahead of the enemy. It's actually a good thing, this equality of information, because it keeps any one world power from having an advantage. Even the U.S. shouldn't hold all the cards."

"I bet your higher-ups wouldn't want to hear you say that."

Parker grinned. "No, probably not."

The three short knocks, followed by three longs and three more shorts, echoed like cannon fire in the small room. Parker's gun was in his hand after the first knock. He gestured for Casey to back into the bathroom out of sight. Then he leaned against the wall and opened the door with the chain still on.

Parker had never been so glad to see his partner's face. "Chin, man. I'm so glad to see you."

"Howdy, partner. Hear you've been having an adventure without me."

Parker undid the chain. "Come on in." His partner looked a bit wary as he eyed Casey who'd ventured out of the bathroom with a tentative smile on her face. "Chin, this is Casey Summers. Casey, my partner, Chin."

"Nice to meet you." Casey extended her hand.

A grin looped across Chin's face. He shook Casey's hand. "Pleased, ma'am." He affected a Texas drawl. Chin had an affinity for accents and dialects. He'd grown up in Chicago, but at the moment he sounded as if he'd been born and bred in the Deep South.

"So what's the plan?" Parker asked. He noted the limousine with tinted glass in the parking lot. Next to it, a non-descript Ford Taurus idled.

Chin handed Parker a set of keys. "The Taurus is for you for Dallas. And I'll be escorting Miss Summers to the safe house."

"In a limo?" Casey sounded dubious. Parker didn't blame her.

"It's in a swanky high-rise, so the limo will blend."

"The last limo I saw nearly crashed into my place of work."

"It did?" Parker hadn't heard that story. Would the woman never stop surprising him?

"I stopped it."

Now it was Chin's turn to be surprised. "How'd you do that?" He obviously hadn't been filled in on Casey's powers.

Parker cut off Casey's explanation. "We'll talk about it later over a beer. Let's get this show on the road. I want to catch Missy's killer, and I'm sure the sooner Casey's in a safe house the better."

Casey was still having doubts about this plan as she followed Chin to the limo. Parker kept his left arm around her, leaving his gun arm free. His eyes scanned the parking lot. He obviously expected someone to jump out of the bushes that divided the lot from the split highway beyond. Morning traffic was sparse. Just the occasional car whizzed by, but Casey's heart raced every time. Bushes that walked and carried guns did not seem beyond the realm of possibility at this point.

The inside of the limo was oddly dark, since the interior lights didn't come on when the door opened. The dividing glass was up and the tinted windows blocked most of the sunlight. The anxiety in Casey's stomach increased. Parker smiled reassuringly, but she had the impression that his thoughts were on the case in Dallas. He trusted his partner, though, and she trusted him, so no worries.

No worries.

Casey climbed in, Parker leaned in to kiss her good-bye, and the door closed. Chin was the driver. Once the sleek vehicle merged into traffic, Chin lowered the divider a small amount to tell her where the light switch was. Then his phone rang. "Chin here," he answered as he rolled the divider back into privacy position. The cavernous interior was bathed in shadow. Casey's fingers explored the ceiling, searching for the light switch.

Two ceiling lights and several running lights glowed to life, and Casey found herself staring at a familiar face.

“Hello, Miss Summers.”

“Dr. Randizan.” She tried to keep the shock and fear from her voice, but was less than successful.

“You remember me.”

“Of course.” How could she forget the man from the lab who had helped Ana fake her ESP? He nodded. “Good.”

“And Mr. Chin knows you’re in here?”

“Yes.”

Casey tilted her head and smoothed her sweaty palms down her thighs. “I’m a bit confused. Are you working for the U.S.?”

“No.”

“Russia?”

“No.”

“Okay, give. Who do you work for?”

“A private interest.”

“But you and Ana knew each other. Is Ana working with you now?”

Dr. Randizan had gray hair and full eyebrows tamed with pomade. His beady black eyes made Casey think of a falcon eyeing its prey. He had thin, too-pink lips and a constantly flexing jaw. His voice was raspy and he wore a medallion at his neck, partially tucked under his necktie. “Poor Ana has been a pawn in a game much bigger than she knows. So have you.” He laughed or coughed. Casey wasn’t sure which, and didn’t want to know.

“What about Boris and Mr. Liang?”

“Liang was the one patriot in this mess. He truly believed in China.”

“Was?”

“Oh yes, he’s dead. Anna shot him and Boris before she came after you, from what I’m told.”

“So where does everyone fit, then?” She thought about the Africans, Swedes, and the murdered Korean.

“Not counting Boris, Ana, and Liang, the rest work for me. Or I should say ‘worked’. Those who fail me do not continue in my employ.”

“And who do you work for? Who is this private interest?”

“Now that I cannot tell you.”

“What about Parker?”

Randizan laughed and settled back against the black leather cushions. “Was that the young man kissing you? Chin’s partner, correct? He works for Homeland Security, a joke in itself.”

Casey bristled at both Parker and her country’s agency being referred to as a joke. “Parker didn’t set this whole ride up?”

“Why, yes, he did.”

“But with his boss. He didn’t know about you, right?”

Randizan’s greasy eyebrow raised. He didn’t answer, arousing Casey’s suspicions. But then perhaps that’s what he wanted to do: get Casey to doubt Parker. She refused. “What about his case in Dallas?”

“I know nothing about it. I can only assume that Parker’s boss told him the truth.”

Casey sighed. Was the whole story about a lead on Missy a ruse to get Parker away from her? He’d be so disappointed. It sounded as if Chin was a double agent using Brandon’s orders for his own purposes.

"I'm surprised Ana isn't here with you, then." Casey glanced out the window and noticed the vehicle now rolled across tarmac toward a small private jet. It looked like a private airport, too, like the one in Mexico.

"Ana, unfortunately, though a highly skilled agent, is completely obsessed with killing you. She's been disobeying orders right and left to do so."

"While failing miserably."

"Yes."

Casey wondered whose orders exactly, but decided the whole thing was too convoluted to inquire about. And time was running out. If they got her on that jet, her chances of escape reduced exponentially. The car stopped and Casey tried the door handle. Locked, of course. She'd escape once the door opened.

But the door didn't open. Instead, Randizan lunged, plunging a long needle into her thigh. Her power plastered him back against the privacy divider, but it was too late. The drug was in her system, and it was powerful. In seconds, her lids lowered and a sort of paralysis set in. Damn. She slumped to one side just as the door opened. Then blackness erased everything.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Parker knocked on the door of the Houston safe house, but when he received no answer, he used his key. Once inside the alarm beeped menacingly until he keyed in the deactivation code. The cavernous suburban house was decorated in Old World Spanish with a small courtyard under skylights and lots of wrought iron elements.

“Chin? Casey?” The silence was deafening. He knew long before he’d walked through the entire house once and checked every door that the place was empty. Had Chin taken her to Dallas instead or Corpus Christi? Parker’s gut told him that wasn’t the case, though. Damn. He whipped out his newly-repaired cell phone.

“Brandon, where the hell are they?”

“Parker? What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Chin and Casey? He was supposed to bring her to the Houston safe house, right?”

“Right.” Brandon said the word very slowly as if the wheels were turning in his brain as he said it. “Where did you last see them?”

“At the motel. Chin put Casey in a limo, which he drove.”

“A limo? Why the hell would he rent a limo?”

Parker tried to relax his grip on the tiny phone before he broke it. “You know, I thought it odd at the time, but my mind was on Missy.” Just thinking of the small girl’s face when he’d handed her back to her mother tightened his chest. They’d arrested the spies that had attempted to get her out of the country via boat, but there’d be others. As long as she had her special skill, there’d be other countries that would try to steal her for themselves.

Brandon’s voice was understanding, but sharp enough to focus Parker on the problem at hand. “Chin last checked in about three hours ago, and he said they were at the safe house.”

“On Villa Street?”

“Villa Street.”

“Damn, damn, damn!” It had been six hours since he’d last seen Casey. She could be halfway across the country by now.

He could hear Brandon tapping computer keys. “Chin’s GPS is off. I’ve got Margaret running down the limo. The rental place may be able to give us some information. The air over South Texas has been swarming with small private planes, any of which they could have been on.”

“You don’t think she’s still in the Texas?”

“Doubtful. Did she have a cell phone?”

“No, I never saw her with one. You said Chin’s GPS is off, but what about his phone?” Such a long shot.

Brandon was typing and Margaret’s clipped voice provided background noise. “We’re checking.”

“Who is he working with?”

“I’ll have Margaret pull his cases and see if we can figure it out.” More typing. “Okay, I’ve got his provider. Why don’t you sit tight and I’ll call you back?”

Parker’s stomach threatened to turn inside out. “Sit tight? I need to do something. Now!”

“You never used to be so impatient. Look, we’ve got an APB out on Chin and I’ve got a

bunch of info to run down. We'll find her, and meanwhile there's really nothing you can do."

"I can hop a plane."

"But what if she's still in Texas? And if not, which plane? Just sit tight."

Parker's knotted stomach barely expanded as he tried to suck in some air. His pulse pounded and he saw spots. "You know what, maybe I do need to sit. Literally. Before I fall down. Might want to call 9-1-1." He clicked off the phone before his boss could interrogate him. Damn. It must be his blood pressure. He felt like he was going to die.

* * * *

Casey had never had a psychic experience other than her telekinesis, so she didn't really recognize the dream for what it was, but it was so real that she woke with a start, breathing fast and clutching her chest.

Parker. Parker lying on the floor of a strange house, in pain, struggling to punch the buttons on his cell phone.

It had felt so real, like she was there inside his body. She didn't know if her vision was accurate, but she knew with a certainty that Parker was in trouble.

Oh damn, so was she. She'd almost forgotten, but the hum of the plane's engines reverberated through the cushion her ear was pressed against. She opened her eyes and realized she wore a blindfold. However, the cloth had come loose, so when she moved her head a bit she could see below it. Her head throbbed, but she ignored this as she took in the view from her prone angle.

It was a plush private jet. The carpet was like red velour, and the chairs were brown leather. Randizan and Chin leaned together across a stainless steel table, speaking rapidly. If Casey blocked out the hum of the engines, she could make out their words. They kept talking about the January group and a WMD, which didn't make any sense at first, but then it clicked. Weapon of mass destruction. Aimed at the U.S. Casey closed her eyes and listened more intently.

"I don't get it," Chin said.

"Casey here is the battery essentially," Randizan explained, slowly, as if talking to a child.

"But she's just a person."

"With an amazing gift. This WMD basically magnifies her gift a hundred fold."

"And her gift is to move things?" He sounded dubious.

"Yes. She's brilliant at it. Always was. Poor Anna dear was so jealous."

"Who's Anna?"

Randizan sighed. "I can't believe Parker kept you so out of the loop."

Casey opened her eyes and focused just in time to see Chin's lip curl into a snarl.

"There, there. We all have our little secrets to keep, don't we?"

With a curt nod, Chin settled back in the swivel chair and steepled his fingers. How could Parker have been so wrong about his partner? Randizan was right about at least one thing. Everyone did seem to have secrets to keep. What Casey wouldn't give to hang out with a bunch of blunt five-year-olds for a month, anything to escape from all this cloak-and-dagger business.

Chin's icy eyes met hers before she could close them again. Randizan followed his gaze and said, "Ah, I see our subject is awake." He rose, and before Casey had a clue what he was up to, he jabbed her with a needle again.

"Damn you!"

As the gray void took over, she heard Randizan say, "I will not make the same mistakes others have. She's too dangerous awake."

* * * *

This time when Casey regained consciousness, the plane was on the ground. She could tell

by the lack of vibration and white noise that usually surrounded her on a moving plane. How long had she been out? They could be in Australia by now for all she knew. She listened for voices, but heard nothing nearby. She thought she heard some shouts from outside the plane, but she wasn't sure. This time she wouldn't betray herself until she'd formulated a plan. She had to be ready to act from the moment she opened her eyes.

What was her plan?

Come out with guns blazing basically, or, in her case, with power flaring. They'd kept her drugged this whole time so they hadn't bound her feet, though her wrists were tied in front of her. They hadn't taped her fingers, so she had both those and her eyes to work with. And they were on the ground. She wouldn't have to jump from 20,000 feet. It was time to get out of here. Her bad feeling about Parker hadn't left. In fact, it had intensified. She had to get to him. Not to mention, she had to preserve the safety of the United States by not providing the battery power for this WMD, whatever it was.

The cabin remained quiet around her. They couldn't have left her alone, could they? Randizan didn't strike her as the careless sort, so if no one was in the cabin with her, she could assume that someone stood sentry just beyond. She cracked open a lid and scanned. Yup, alone in the cabin. They expected her to go through one of the doors at either end if she tried to escape. Casey sat up slowly, feeling a bit woozy with the aftereffects of the drug. She examined the windows. The one just over the wing in the center of the cabin was the emergency exit.

Casey read the directions posted on a little sticker on the window. She lifted the red handle slowly, half expecting an alarm to sound. When the cabin remained silent, she pushed the door open and climbed out. The first thing she saw was a fuel truck with a hose going to the fuel tank under the wing. Casey laid down on her stomach to stay out of view. She scooted to the edge of the wing and peered over. It was a bit of a drop, but, hopefully, she wouldn't twist her ankle on the way down.

Use your power. She'd blocked a fall before, so she could do it now. Feet first, she slid off the wing. As she let go, she sent out a burst of power with her eyes, which acted like turbo boosters, stabilizing her landing. She barely made a thud as her feet touched the ground.

Where was she? She glanced around her just long enough to spy the huge postmodern terminal. She ran away from the plane and in the opposite direction of the hatches where the guards were posted, staying low and heading toward a higher traffic area. Three 747s were being unloaded and fueled. Casey crept alongside a baggage tram until she found a space to slide into. She knew with post-911 security, she was likely to get caught at some point, but if she got inside the terminal, she'd be away from Randizan and Chin, and being arrested by the police seemed like the lesser of two evils.

Unless she was already outside of the United States, but she didn't think so, though she heard plenty of foreign languages as the tram entered the terminal. Finally it stopped and several men began to unload the luggage and toss it onto a conveyor belt. Time to get off.

"Hey you, this is a restricted area!" One of the men threw down a tweed bag and lunged at her. She flicked her fingers, sending the man into a butt-skid on the cement floor. She ran.

She was quickly lost in the warren of hallways, but when the volume of voices increased and she could hear loud speaker announcements, she figured she had to be close to the public areas. Ahead of her, a pilot keyed a code into a door and opened it. Casey used her power to hold the door open long enough for her to reach it and slip through. If she'd had the time, she would've given herself three cheers for managing her power so well.

The first thing she noticed were high ceilings sculpted in a way that reminded her of the

Wright Brothers for some reason. Light flooded the busy terminal. So many foreign faces and voices confronted Casey that for a moment she thought she was mistaken about still being in the U.S. Artwork and trees lined the walkways.

Eventually the signs clued her in. San Francisco International Airport. They'd drugged her enough to get her to San Francisco! But that meant she was nowhere near Parker, and her gut kept telling her something was wrong with him. She needed to get to him.

She spied a police station near one of the baggage claim carousels. Should she go to the police? Or should she try an information kiosk? Maybe she could ask where the local FBI office was?

But Parker wasn't FBI.

She had no money, no way to get to him without help, but what if Chin used his credentials to enlist airport security and the cops in locating her? This seemed an overwhelming possibility, so Casey kept moving until she spotted a pay phone. She knew her calling card information by heart, so she used it to call Parker's cell phone. It was the only thing she could think to do.

"Nelson." But it wasn't Parker's voice.

"Parker?"

"This is Parker Nelson."

"No it isn't. Who are you?" Casey tried to keep the panic from creeping into her tone, but she wasn't successful.

"Casey Summers?"

"How do you know who I am?" She was tempted to hang up the phone, but she needed to know what was going on.

"Where are you?"

"Hey, you answer my questions first. Who are you and why do you have Parker's phone?"

"Miss Summers, my name is Brandon. I'm Parker's boss. I have his cell phone because he was admitted to a Houston hospital earlier today."

"Oh my God, is he all right?"

"The doctors believe he had a small heart attack."

"Oh Parker." Casey was near tears, almost too preoccupied to notice the heightened amount of airport security in the hallway. But she did notice. "Brandon, they might get me any minute. I need help."

"Why weren't you at the safe house?"

"Parker's partner Chin is one of them."

"What? One of who?"

"I don't know exactly. I think they're called The January Group, but Chin and Randizan kidnapped me and brought me to San Francisco on a private jet. I'm sure he's used his credentials to get airport security looking for me. What am I going to do?"

Brandon remained silent for a few beats, then he said, "There's a police station in Terminal One. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes."

"Go there. Stay there. I'm calling them right now. Don't worry. We'll work this all out."

"Brandon?"

"Yes?"

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"Well dammit, you don't, but I guess I'm your only hope, eh?"

Casey hung up. Yes, Brandon was her only hope at the moment. She just prayed he got

through to the cops in time, and that she could actually get there without being waylaid by one of Randizan's cronies.

She moved back the way she came, staying near clusters of passengers. She wished she had a carry-on bag or something, so she wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb. She didn't even have a purse. Nothing to prove who she was or that she was an American citizen. They'd probably searched her thoroughly when they had her knocked out.

Twenty feet from the SFPD she saw Chin, and unfortunately he saw her. He spoke into a walkie-talkie and three airport security guys broke from the crowd to dive for her. She flicked her fingers and they went flying. She had to get to Parker, and no one was going to stop her. Her heart raced and she felt like she was running through quicksand, but finally she reached the police station. She latched onto the nearest man with stripes and a uniform and blurted out her story.

"What is that woman doing to you, Schafer?" A tall, lanky man in street clothes came around one of the desks.

"Something about people chasing her, sir." He pushed Casey to arm's length, though he didn't let go of her shoulders.

Just then Chin burst into the station flashing his badge and pointing at her.

"You've got to believe me. That man is after me. He's a traitor to this country. He kidnapped me in Texas." Casey took a breath.

The plain-clothes man raised a hand to stop her. "You wouldn't happen to be Casey Summers, would you?"

"Yes." Relief flooded her every vein and pore.

"Gotcha. Just spoke to Brandon at Homeland Security. He says I'm supposed to detain you."

"What do you mean, 'detain' me?"

He laughed. "I've got it, Sergeant." He waved the man with the stripes away and led her deeper into the office, farther from Chin. "Detain you, arrest you, tie you up in thick red tape, until either Brandon or the press get here to save your ass."

Casey's mouth went dry. "You're going to arrest me?"

"Yes. Something to do with airport B&E, that sort of thing."

"I'll have a record? My mom will kill me."

"I'm Detective Rex Yeger, by the way." He offered his hand so Casey shook it and, as she did so, she checked his neck for jewelry. No medallion—thank God! "I'm sure charges will be dropped once everything is straightened out. The key is to make sure the agent over there causing the big ruckus can't take you out of here, right?"

"Right."

So Casey was charged and fingerprinted and put in interrogation for a while, where she was allowed to use the phone to call Brandon again. Parker was stable, but asleep. They planned to send him on a private plane to Bethesda to recover so that he would be closer to his home. God, Casey just wanted to hear his voice. He was the one person she truly trusted. Everyone else could be telling her great big whopping lies, but Parker would tell her the truth. And she loved him. She needed to tell him that again and again.

After about an hour, they locked her up in a holding cell. She could hear Chin arguing with Detective Yeger and the Sergeant, demanding that Casey be turned over to federal custody. They just kept insisting that their hands were tied. Then the press showed up.

The reporters invaded, cameras, microphones, and tape recorders their weapons of choice. Detective Yeger let them march right up to her cell and begin their interrogation.

"Miss Summers, is it true you have telekinetic powers?"

“Is it true the Russians kidnapped you and planned to use you as a weapon?”

“Is it true you foiled a terrorist plot?”

Detective Yeger stuck both his pinkies in his mouth and whistled loud enough to pierce the reporters’ ear drums. “Let her talk, will you?”

Casey blinked and cleared her throat. She’d gone over a possible speech on the truck with Parker, but she wasn’t sure she could remember it now. “Um.” She cleared her throat again. “My name is Casey Summers. I have telekinesis, which is the ability to move objects with my mind. Several parties have recently attempted to kidnap me. One is called The January Group. I cannot say whether their plans were for me to be some sort of weapon or if they simply wished to study me. I’ve already been studied. I am an American citizen with rights. I am not a lab experiment.”

She paused as flashbulbs illuminated the precinct. “I want to announce plans to create my own agency called—” ESP, ESP, what the hell was she calling it? “E. S. Spies. I don’t know if there are other psychics like me out there, but I want this agency to be a haven for anyone like me.”

“What will your agency do?”

How the hell did she know? Yes, she’d been thinking about it, but she’d been a bit too preoccupied to formulate real plans. “Think of it as a detective agency.”

The questions flew at her at that point. She demonstrated her abilities by removing microphones and cameras from various reporters’ hands. Finally Detective Yegar shut them up and shooed them away. Her family was going to flip ... and wouldn’t it be great if Andrew and Jacques saw her on TV?

“Thank God,” Casey murmured. “Hey, what happened to Chin?”

Yeger shook his head. “He disappeared in the confusion. My guess, if he really is a traitor, is he high-tailed it back to his little plane and took off. Unless Brandon called the right people to get the plane grounded.”

Casey combed her fingers through her hair, trying to release some tension. “I need to get back to the East Coast.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you there as soon as we can, on a proper flight this time.”

* * * *

They all witnessed the press conference. The Swedes had taken a flight home to regroup. The Africans were in Cuba awaiting new directives. Gunter and Edward were sipping margaritas at a bar.

They saw the press conference and they each figured if they’d managed to get Casey on a plane, they wouldn’t have been stupid enough to let her get loose in the airport. Of course, they’d not even managed to get her properly kidnapped, but they’d lined up their excuses on their reports, and they knew this game was up. Question was, would the Big Boss simply reprogram them before their next assignment or eliminate them altogether for their miserable failures?

However, Anastasia knew the game wasn’t up for her. She still had a score to settle with Miss Summers, but oddly she found herself wanting to talk to her even more. What was The January Group? Who was in charge? What was their mission? Would they pose as much of a threat to mother Russia as they did to the U.S.?

The arm and leg injuries had hindered Ana’s efforts some, but she had connections throughout Mexico and Texas, so once she’d replaced her cell phone, she was in business. It didn’t take her long to get properly sewn up and splinted. Then she’d tracked down a chopper to take her to Texas.

But Casey had gotten herself kidnapped again and Parker had been sent to the hospital, so it was time to regroup and plan. She had no doubt Casey would escape, which she did as evidenced by

the press conference, plus the girl had a soft spot for Parker, so no doubt she'd zero in on him as soon as possible. Ana decided her best course of action was to locate Parker and wait.

* * * *

Casey bit her nails non-stop on the flight from San Francisco to Ronald Reagan National Airport in D.C. From there, federal agents and the press escorted her across town to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. Finally she was riding up the elevator, getting ready to see Parker.

What would she say to him? It seemed so strange, as if a year had passed since they'd last seen each other, even though it had only been a couple of days. Casey's emotions were still there, tight in her throat and stomach, but what if this heart attack had changed Parker completely? Or what if just being home in D.C. had brought him back to his senses and now he wouldn't want her? And what did 'wanting' her entail anyway? What exactly did she expect?

She didn't know.

It didn't matter. She just needed to see for herself that Parker was alive and recovering.

Agent Todd spoke to someone at the nurses' station, then led her down the carpeted hall to Parker's room. He knocked, another man answered. Casey was surrounded by strangers, and she just wanted to see Parker.

"Casey?"

She looked up. "Yes."

A man with gray and black hair offered his hand. "I'm Special Agent Brandon, Parker's boss."

Casey shook Brandon's hand nervously. "Is he okay? I haven't spoken to you since California."

"He's fine. Don't worry. Come on in." He moved aside so Casey could enter, then took Agent Todd's arm and led him a ways down the hall.

Casey peeked around the privacy curtain.

"Casey!" Parker's voice was husky, and he had an IV tube attached to his arm and monitor patches stuck to his pulse points. He lifted his arms. "Come here."

Casey nearly cried with relief when she saw the warm expression on his face. She leaned in to hug him, trying not to upset his wires and tubes. He wrapped his strong arms around her and pulled her onto his lap. "Casey." He peppered her cheeks with kisses. "Casey, thank God. I'm so glad you're all right. I'm so glad you're here."

She held back. "Are you? I wasn't sure. I thought you might have family with you."

"My parents were here earlier and they'll be back this evening. You can meet them. They're a little stiff-necked, but I'm sure they'll love you. And it doesn't matter anyway, since I do."

"I love you, Parker." She relaxed against his chest. Tears finally flowed and sobs wracked her chest. It took five minutes for her to get hold of herself. She'd just needed to let it all out, all the stress and adrenaline and worry. Parker stroked her hair and murmured that he understood. He also said something about buying her a cheeseburger.

Later, Casey sat next to Parker in the hospital bed and shared his lunch tray. They'd opened the curtain, so that Parker could exchange quips with the agents stationed outside his door. But now Casey turned serious. "I'm sorry about your partner."

"I am too. Sorry I trusted the S.O.B. To think what could have happened to you because of him, what did happen."

"But I'm fine."

"I just wish they'd been able to catch him and Randizan. It feels like the bad guys have won,

‘cause they’re all still out there.”

“But you’ll track them down. That’s what you do.”

A female nurse entered the room, nodding at the two guards. She wheeled a tray into the room butt first, then pulled the curtain. “Time to check your blood pressure,” she whispered.

The voice sounded oddly familiar, but this was a government-run hospital where they checked your ID and searched your car.

Before Casey could think more than that, the nurse whipped around and pointed a Glock at her. Well, damn and fuck. This was getting old! She was barely three feet away when she squeezed the trigger. Casey probably would have seen her life flash before her eyes if she’d had time to think, but she didn’t. She just reacted. Her eyes widened and her power lashed out. The bullet stopped mid-flight and plummeted to the laminate floor. Ana fired again. The agents in the hall raced inside and pushed the cart away, so they could grab the woman’s arms. Casey deflected two more bullets before they’d wrestled the deranged woman to the floor.

“I’ll get you, Casey. You deserve to die. Don’t think this will stop me!” She shouted this, though Agent Todd pressed his knee in the small of her back and yanked her wrists behind her to secure them in handcuffs.

“What did she do to you?” Parker asked Ana incredulously. “What could have possibly been so bad?”

“She caused me a lifetime of suffering.” The other agent had a Taser aimed at her just in case.

Casey bowed her head. When she thought about it, though, she realized she’d never really been to blame, but she couldn’t blame Ana either. “I didn’t cause that fire, but I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help you sooner.”

“You refused to help me sooner.”

“We were kids, Ana, and we were pawns in their game. You can keep blaming me. I mean, I can’t imagine what you had to go through, but this is just wasting your life. You’re a beautiful woman and I think there’s got to be more to you than this lust for revenge. You’re giving me too much power.”

Not that it mattered now, Casey supposed. Ana was an enemy agent and would probably be held under the Patriot Act. Casey felt sorry for her as they led her away. But suddenly she turned back. “I want to know about The January Group. I can help you!”

Brandon stepped in at that point and spoke to Ana in a low voice as they continued down the hall.

“Well, one down and only a dozen more to go.” Parker grinned.

Rolling her eyes, Casey couldn’t help but smile. “Such is my life.”

“Will you let me share that with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been talking to Brandon, and I’ve decided to resign.”

“Brandon’s making you resign, after all you’ve been through? That bastard!”

“No, I’m deciding to resign. I want to help you with your agency. If you’ll let me.”

She stroked her fingers through his thick hair. “But, Parker, that’s ages from becoming reality. I don’t even know where I’m going to locate it or what it’s for or how to run it.”

“I have faith in you. More importantly, Brandon’s already fielded several calls from supposed psychics wanting to join you.”

“Oh wow. Were any of them real?”

“Who knows. Guess we’ll find out.”

“Guess we will.” Casey reached up and brushed the stubble on Parker’s jaw. “I love you, Parker Nelson.”

“I love you, Casey Summers.” He kissed her thoroughly, until three of the nurses stopped in the doorway to cheer.

THE END