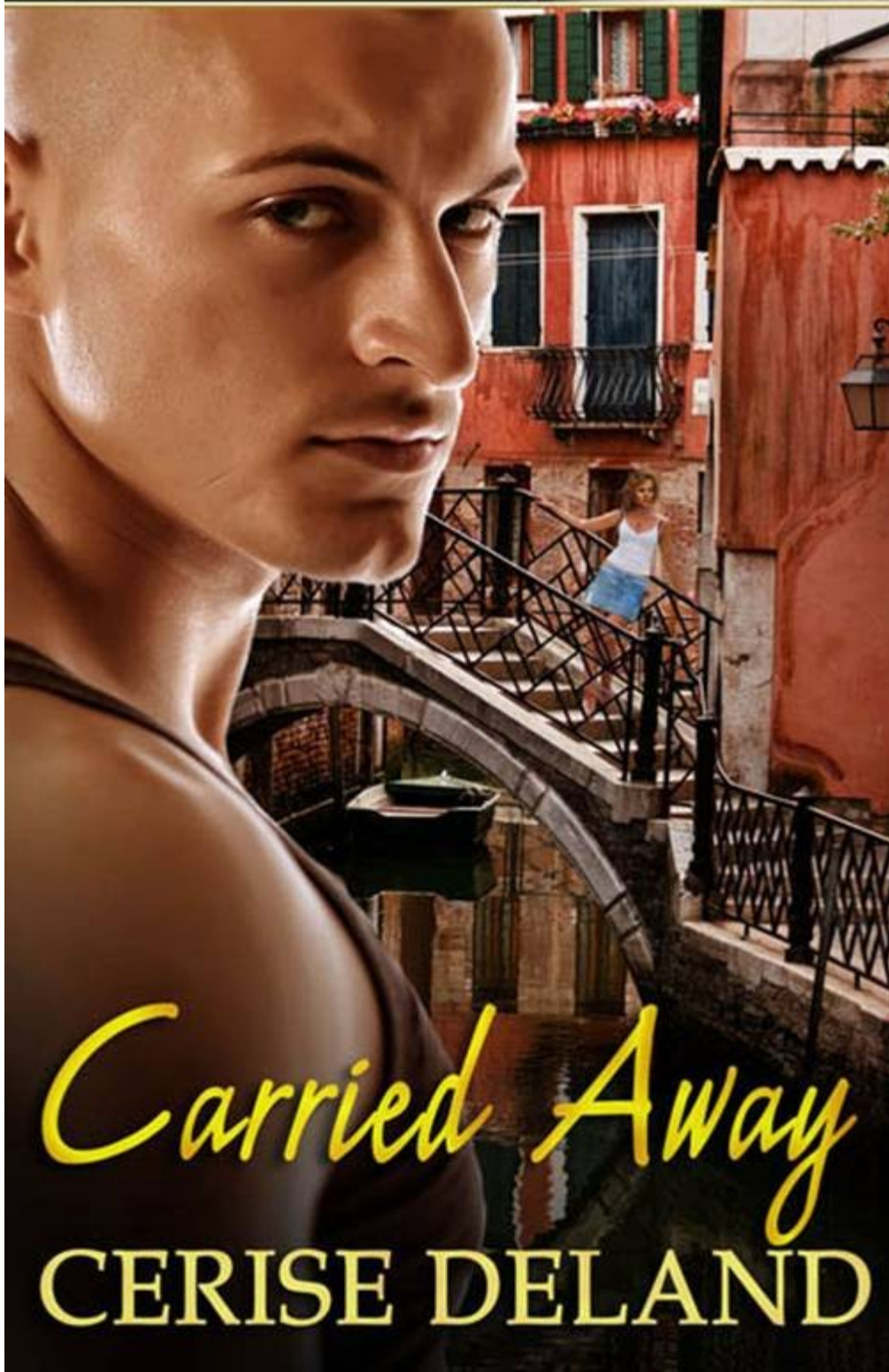


ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



Carried Away

Cerise Deland

Grant Warwick has never scoured luscious, funny Coco Dalton from his brain. She was heaven to hold, hot as hell in bed – and for four scintillating months, totally his. So why she left him one morning without the courtesy of a call is one damn big mystery he's never solved.

When she reappears one day in Venice, he's stunned she wants to apologize. Heartbroken she had to desert him years ago, Coco asks his help to find a terrorist who's tracking her. Resisting her isn't possible – Grant sweeps her up into his arms and savors her sweet body with kisses so torrid and lovemaking so mind-bending, she'll never again want to leave him.

But Grant must also find time to track down the terrorist, before Coco is taken from him forever.

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Carried Away

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CARRIED AWAY

Cerise DeLand

Dedication

For the staff at Romance Writers of America Headquarters in Houston, great thanks for years of dedication to improving the status and earnings of writers everywhere. We have all benefitted immensely!

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Chapter One

Grant Warwick took another sip of espresso and pushed his Ray-Bans up his nose. He leaned his elbows on the café table and narrowed his eyes. Yes. The woman in the tissue-thin white cotton dress was still yakking with the Venetian guy on the stalled *vaporetto*. Grant told himself it was the June sun's refractions off the murky water of the Grand Canal that hurt his eyes. But he knew it was the sight of Coco Dalton that assaulted him.

Damn her.

You'd think after three years of searching for another woman to replace her in his bed, he'd have replaced her in his mind. Forgotten her. The fire in his belly. The instant concrete in his cock. The idiotic dreams in his head.

One look at that gamine body, the cap of platinum curls, the upturned breasts that didn't need a bra, the legs that went on forever right down into her latest ugly pair of shoe leather—yeah, and he'd been hooked. Like a fish. And after the way she'd dumped him long ago, he knew his heartache smelled like an *old* fish.

Christ. *What a waste you are, Warwick.* A hulking Scots-Irish loner who never got hooked on any woman.

Except to graceful, reckless award-winning photojournalist, Coco Dalton.

What was she doing here? Though he could see she had her camera bag slung over her shoulder and one tiny piece of luggage, she never took a vacation. He scanned the hordes of tourists streaming past him toward St. Mark's Square, noting that no wise person traveled here after May unless they wanted to be trampled to death by the crowds.

Coco suddenly frowned at whatever her companion was saying. *Odd. You used to laugh. Often. With me. In bed. Out. On kitchen counters. Floors.* His eyes drifted shut as he

recalled how she felt like hot satin in his arms, sinuous and artless, the ballerina who gave up the quest for pro. The way her lush lips would spread over her teeth when she grinned. The way her plump nether lips would swell when she wanted Grant to lick her and fill her. The way she'd cream for him, coming just in anticipation of his cock sliding into her juicy little cunt.

He ran a hand over his cleanly shaven bald head. *Time to go, Warwick.* He downed his coffee, gave the high sign to his waiter and plunked twenty euro on the table for his lunch. Buttoning his suit coat, he stood and headed for the meeting for which he'd flown to Venice.

He worked his way from the Grand Canal back into the winding *calle* of the ancient city. Last night, after he arrived on his private jet at the small metro airport, he'd checked into his hotel and promptly gone out to find the building. Venice always confused the hell out of him but he got off on knowing all the details of any event and prepared. That research, that caution made him and his company one of the fastest growing and better known among international security firms. The reputation that gave him had guaranteed him this new contract with the government of Dubai for their new government historical museum.

Grant arrived within minutes at the pale buttery concrete building that housed the commercial offices of the Emirate. A *palazzo* built in the fourteenth century by one of the Electors of Venice, the structure reflected the intrigues of the city's politics with an ornate door of rose and green inlaid tiles. Inside, the tiny hall spoke of age-old schemes and secrets. He took the hairpin stairway up to the first floor, bending low to avoid the ceiling that was unfit for an American of six foot four.

"*Buon giorno,*" he greeted the receptionist, a lovely white-veiled Arab woman with a king's ransom of gold dripping from her fingers, her wrists and hanging around her neck. "Grant Warwick to see Sheik Khalid Nasar."

"Welcome, Mr. Warwick," the lady responded with a crisp British accent and a blazing set of perfect white teeth. She rose from her chair and inclined her head in

deference. "Please wait here a moment and I will announce you. May I offer you refreshment as you wait? Tea, perhaps, or coffee?"

Grant wanted neither but he knew from his years in the Middle East, it was an insult to refuse. "Tea, thank you." He took a seat in one of the huge, sumptuously upholstered chairs, which reminded him of those he'd seen in the Doge's private residence. He'd heard the emir of Dubai was a very forward-looking man and favored modern furniture. This medieval look amused Grant. *Ah, well. When in Venice, do as the Venetians.*

The receptionist appeared with a tray with one thimble-sized cup of steaming liquid. The aroma of anise and fennel met his nostrils and he decided the brew might soothe his irritation at seeing Coco again. He took a sip—heard the door open, looked up—and promptly realized no relief was possible.

Struggling in the front door, Coco dragged her little red suitcase behind her and smiled tentatively at the receptionist. "*Buon giorno, Signora.* I am Coco Dalton," she said as she parked her suitcase and let her camera bag slide to the floor. In the stilted movements of her body, Grant detected a change from the grace she normally possessed. "You are expecting me."

The woman nodded, her lashes fluttering and descending with wide-eyed dismay to the thin, almost transparent dress Coco wore. "Yes, of course, Ms. Dalton. May I offer you tea or coffee?"

"Thank you," Coco smiled, kneading her hands, whether out of numbness or nerves Grant couldn't tell. *Where are the remnants of the teenager who wanted to become a professional ballerina?* "Tea. Yes, tea." Her back was ramrod straight and she never turned to face him but chatted on.

Good thing, because his eyes drilled through the cotton to the curve of her hips and the straps of the white thong. His shaft twitched, taking note of the scrap of fabric that nestled between the two sweet cheeks of her ass.

Coco bent, fiddling with one of the zippers on her suitcase. "May I ask if you have a room free so that I might change my clothes?"

Grant's cock didn't want her to change a thing.

"My plane was late and I had no time to go to my hotel," she told the woman.

Grant forced his gaze lower and winced at the sight of Coco's latest outrage. Clunky neon pink running shoes.

"Forgive me," she said, "but I do not want to meet the Sheik in my traveling attire."

She's here to meet the same man I am?

"Yes, Ms. Dalton." The receptionist breathed a sigh of relief and smiled broadly at the scantily-dressed visitor. "Allow me to show you. Do you also have a scarf for your hair?" she asked Coco, as she turned and ushered Coco back through the hall.

What the hell did the Sheik need with a war-zone photographer? Certainly not to open a private historical museum in Dubai.

And if he does...

Grant scrubbed his jaw in anger. Why hadn't his VP of Research told him about this? Todd Cummings usually knew all. But if Coco Dalton was involved in this new job, Grant was pulling out now. He had no desire to meet her or talk with her. She'd made it plain to him three years ago when she'd failed to meet him at the airport for a romantic vacation that she was not and could never be devoted to him. And he had no intention of looking at her now and gnawing out his guts any more than he already had.

He stood.

The receptionist rounded the corner of the hall and paused, casting stunned eyes on him. "Sir? You are—"

"Leaving. Give my apologies to Sheik Nasar, will you please? I must—"

"Mr. Warwick," came a baritone from the far end of the corridor. The petite, olive-skinned man in a hand-tailored dark gray Italian silk suit. "Please, sir, you cannot leave."

"Your Highness," Grant inclined his head in respect to the emir's cousin, a noted businessman who had his own private collection of Middle Eastern artifacts. "I am most pleased to meet you. We should have done so years ago." For Grant to make a hasty exit now was impossible. Hell, it hadn't been possible before, but he was obviously brain dead! *You can't run from a planned meeting with a man who has agreed to sign a contract with you for two million dollars a year for ten years.*

When Grant got hold of Todd again, he was going to put his feet to the fire for his failure here this afternoon. Now all Grant had to do was just keep away from the cute blonde trick in bad shoe leather.

"Come," said Nasar. "We will discuss our matters at length. Naila?" He turned to his receptionist. "Please see we have privacy."

"I will." She averted her eyes, smiling at the floor in feminine courtesy to her superior.

Nasar led the way into a large office with a floor-to-ceiling view of the red and ochre rooftops of Venice. Inside, a blinding Carrara marble conference table stretched to a size capable of seating ten or more. Shown to the prince's left-hand side, Grant pulled out a rolling chair and waited for Nasar to sit first. He heard another door open in the hall outside, and then another. Odds were, from one of those came a woman he had never wanted to see again.

The first person to appear in the doorway was a man. Taller than the prince, darker than he and younger by a decade, this man strode forward, all grins. "Mr. Warwick! Jamal Hussein. How wonderful to welcome you here finally. We have written often! I am the curator of the new museum."

Grant nodded, took his hand in the western way and shook. Hussein, too, had a British accent and Grant knew from what information Todd Cummings had gleaned on

this job, that the curator's mother was British and his father from Dubai. With degrees from Oxford and Harvard in ancient texts and archeology, the man was renowned for his doctoral thesis on the works of early Islamic poets. A distant cousin of Sheik Nasar, Husseini's credentials and connections ensured that he had been appointed curator of Nasar's lavish new private museum.

Grant and Jamal took their cue from Nasar when he sat down, then navigated the formalities of getting to know each other. As they spoke, Grant listened not to the man but for signs of the woman whom he knew was somewhere in this office.

Finally, he heard it. Clip, clop. Clip, clop. Clattering down the hall was a woman wearing high heels. Grant had sworn Coco owned only one pair, so the odds that it might be she who appeared in the doorway were few. But so was what he saw her wearing as she came into view. Here, in all her svelte glory, stood Coco Dalton, all five foot six inches of her in a sleek white linen suit that cupped her lush breasts and flowed down her hips like a fresh coat of paint. And, yes—Grant knew his brows rose in shock—on her feet were ivory stilettos, six inches high. He let the other two men greet her first. Grant rose to his feet last.

She put a smile on her face and gave it to them all, not pausing at him any longer than the others, but sliding like the diplomat's daughter she was, back to her host. "Forgive me, for being late. My plane." She flourished a hand in explanation. "One can never count on schedules these days." She stepped forward to shake hands with Nasar and Jamal. Then she turned to him. "Hello, Grant," she said in an impartial but friendly tone that held no fear he might reject her. What's more, she was not at all surprised at his presence. *Why not?*

He shook her hand. Warm, elegant, her fingers withdrew from his with a jerk. *So. You are nervous about seeing me again.*

You should be.

She took the chair across from him. Without briefcase, computer or pen and paper, the four of them began the preliminaries of their first face-to-face meeting. The weather,

their health, the adequacies of their hotel accommodations were each reviewed and found pleasant.

Nasar folded his meaty hands before him. "Ms. Dalton, Mr. Warwick, I am grateful to you both for meeting me here earlier than we planned. Thank you for altering your plans to go straight to Dubai, but I needed to see you here as my own plans were recently changed."

Jamal leaned forward. "We have a problem we did not anticipate."

Grant frowned. If some hitch meant they were now going to withdraw the contract for his firm to supply security to their buildings, he wouldn't be happy, but he wouldn't starve, either. "I assure you both it was no problem for me to come here."

Coco agreed. "I am at your disposal. And knowing how well Mr. Warwick works, I know he maintains his supremacy in his business because he is always flexible."

I'm flexible? He stared at her. Her violet gaze slid over his in a nanosecond. *You've got some nerve, babe, to speak for me. And yeah, I'm flexible except when you ripped out my heart and left it in two goddamn pieces.*

Grant sat forward. "If this problem concerns our contract, I would be eager to discuss it with you." He opened a palm. "If not, could you give me some predictability on where our relationship will go in light of your challenge?"

Nasar nodded, his lower lip thinned in distress. "Of course. His Highness is very eager for me to sign both of your contracts." He looked at Coco and Grant in turn.

Ba da bing. Well, there's the other shoe dropping, Warwick. She's hired by them, too.

"And therefore, I will do so today. As planned. But only immediately after you hear our problem and after you both agree to help us in spite of it."

Coco fell back in her chair. In profile, she still looked like a young girl to him. Upturned nose, full mouth, high cheekbones, lovely chin. Except at this news, she was frowning at Nasar. "Please, describe what troubles you."

Grant shifted his attention to the emir's cousin.

The man who had appeared so congenial before, now let his features fall to raw despair. "The day before yesterday my house in Dubai, the old one which we are replacing with the new facility, was broken into. The security alarms were cut." He glanced at Grant. "We knew they were old and outmoded, but this...this theft we had not anticipated."

Grant shook his head. "Regrettable. Everyone thinks they are safe, until they learn how vulnerable they really are."

Nasar sighed. "So true. We knew – my cousin, Jamal and I – that this particular item would need the protection of modern security procedures and technology. That is why we endeavored to hire you and your company, Mr. Warwick. That is why we wanted you, Ms. Dalton, to aid us in photographing all the treasures in our collection. For documentation. For publicity. But also for secure possession."

Grant knew Coco's skills lay in capturing front-line scenes not ancient documents and artifacts. But Grant left that inquiry for later. Right now, he had to cut to the chase. "Sir, what did they take?"

"A twelfth-century poem," Jamal told him, his brown eyes dark with sorrow.

"The original from a famous Sunni poet," Nasar continued.

"It speaks of The Prophet's journey to the Far Mosque," Jamal explained.

Coco pursed her lips. "Muhammad's journey to the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem."

"The third most important holy place in Islam," Jamal added.

Grant wanted particulars. "Describe it, please."

"Egyptian parchment. Rare. I have the dimensions and a black and white photograph taken about ten years ago. I have also the complete text translated and its provenance. It was once, you see, in the Baghdad museum. We bought it from Saddam's government before the first American war in 1990. To protect it from harm."

Grant nodded. "You were wise to secure it from the Iraqis. If we'd continued, we would have gone into Baghdad."

"Thank you. I am glad you see my point," Jamal replied.

Nasar looked at Grant. "We are most eager to sign this contract and have your advance team secure the building. We have a suspect and according to our police, he flew into Venice yesterday. We are here to talk with Italian police. So you can see, I need your protection services quickly. I want no more thefts and I would like to sign these contracts now."

"I am ready," Grant said. "Tell me how you see Miss Dalton here fitting into our work with you."

Nasar smiled at Coco and this time the expression was one of great familiarity. "We have known each other many years, yes, my dear? Since her father served as the American ambassador to us when she was a young girl. I have great faith in her abilities and she suggested herself to do this work for us. Gracious of her." He squeezed her hand. "We are most grateful to her, too, for recommending you to us, Mr. Warwick."

That's why she's not shocked I'm here. She planned it! He'd tan her tight little ass once they were out of here. But now, he concentrated on Nasar's face, keeping his mouth firm and his words kind. "I will show her how happy I am myself." He flashed her a grin that made her turn her pert nose up and smile at Nasar.

Minutes later, the two of them had signed multiple copies of their individual contracts and they were bidding goodbye to their hosts.

Grant left first. She hung back, chitchatting with Nasar about their "old days" together in Dubai.

Grant took the stairs at a fast clip, fury nipping at his heels as he descended the staircase and out on the street, breathing fire at her audacity to recommend him for this job.

He sank back against the ornate façade of the adjacent building. It was six in the morning in Houston, but he whipped out his cell phone and got Todd to chew him out for the failure to learn that Coco had planned this gig. "And get our forensics guys on the next plane to Dubai. They're missing an artifact and we need to find it fast. See what

you can learn from the Italian Guardia about a suspect they are tracking here in Italy.” Satisfied he’d taken care of business, he crossed his arms to wait for Coco, The Fixer.

She came lumbering out of the palazzo trailing her infernal suitcase and lugging the bulky camera bag. She was on the phone, arguing with someone about failure to tell her about the missing artifact.

Grant swooped up behind her. “Give me this,” he demanded and took her bag. Then he wrapped one hand around her upper arm.

She startled, shut off her phone but didn’t object. “Nasar told me you’re staying at the Cavaletto.”

“Good of him,” Grant growled, but meant the opposite. “Where are you?”

“The same. Nasar booked it for me.”

“Terrific.” He led her along, her ability to keep up with him beleaguered by the damn high heels. “We can yell at each other over a cold bottle of prosecco.”

She halted on the sidewalk.

He turned to gaze at her. “What the matter? Don’t want to face the music?”

A blonde brow inched higher. “I knew you’d react like this. But you cannot argue with me.”

He glared. “Why the hell not?”

“Because I recommended you?”

“For openers, yes.”

“Don’t,” she pleaded on a whisper. “I need you on this.”

A first. When had she ever indicated she couldn’t live without him? “Pardon me if I don’t jump to agree.”

“Grant,” she said his name in a way that reminded him of hours buried inside her delectable body. She tipped her head and he thought he saw tears in her eyes as she continued, “I wanted you on this. There are more problems here than what you heard....” She glanced around to check if passersby were listening. “Upstairs.”

She'd braved the Afghan mountains with the Tenth Mountain Division for a year, been an embedded journalist on the American invasion of Baghdad in '03, street riots in Kandahar – and she had tears in her eyes because an ancient scroll of poems was stolen?

He scowled at her. Then took her suitcase from her fingers and nodded down the street. "That bottle of prosecco calls. And my patience just got thinner."

Chapter Two

The Cavaletto was a marigold-yellow stucco building in front of a gondoliers' station. A block off the Piazza San Marco and near exclusive designer shops, the *calle* was choked with pedestrians. Coco tripped along trying to keep pace with Grant's giant strides. She'd known he'd be angry.

Hurt. Yes, she'd understood that, too.

From the day I left him in Washington.

He led them past the receptionist and into the wood-paneled bar. Dark and intimate, the place invited quiet conversation. Coco had no inkling theirs would be.

"Grant, let's ask the bartender for a bottle of wine and two glasses. He can send it to my room. I'll check in."

"No, come up to my suite. It'll be faster. We'll get this over with." Ordering in clipped tones, he wheeled her suitcase toward the concierge and asked her to keep it and the camera bag for him. He took the chit from the woman, then grasped Coco's arm and led her toward the elevator.

Like most lifts in Europe, this one was tiny. Fit for two. And her arm tingled where it touched his. She barely breathed. He however was almost huffing. Using up all the oxygen in his vigor. *As usual.* She smiled in spite of herself.

"What's funny?" he bit off as the elevator jiggled to a stop.

"Nothing," she confirmed, knowing what came next was not going to offer either of them any happiness afterward.

He put his card key in the slot and thrust open the heavy door. Though he stepped aside to let her pass, she brushed her shoulder against his chest and she felt him tremble.

I do affect you. Still. She rejoiced at the thought as she made her way across the room. The walls, a deep grass-green, contrasted with the blood-red of the sofa and chairs. An old monastery converted to a five-star hotel, the place was one she loved. *But it works no magic for me today.*

When she faced him, he stood in the center of the room, fiddling with his card key, legs braced for whatever blow she was about to deliver. She didn't ask to sit and he didn't offer. *Fine.*

"I have known Nasar for many years. When he began to build his new museum, I knew he would want the best security systems and the best trained men to guard his treasures. To me, that meant only you." *You to help me figure out the mess I'm in. With my job. My vocation. And my life.*

"I'm honored. But not totally."

"I know," she said apologetically. "You would have preferred to get this gig without my recommendation."

"You got that right."

"But now you've signed the contracts. You could have refused."

"Not my style to start something I don't finish."

She braced herself for what was coming.

"Unlike some people." He threw the words at her like bricks.

She avoided his brilliant silver gaze. With eyes like a warlock and a body like Thor, he could unravel her steeliest resolve in one sweet glance. But this from him was no reverence from a lover. She'd destroyed that in him three years ago. And the best she could hope for now was a truce. "May I sit, please?"

He waved a hand.

She perched in the overstuffed chair by the window. Outside, a gondolier was singing and she recognized it as a popular American love song with lyrics that once defined her affair with the scrumptious man standing before her.

She rolled her shoulders. "Two months ago, I was working in San'a, taking pictures for a *National Geographic* spread on Yemen."

He strolled toward her, his face a study in concern. "You never cease to amaze me for the dangerous assignments you take on."

"I am a mad woman, aren't I?" she asked with a speck of wonder.

"I'm shocked you've survived this long."

"It's because I have a die-hard attitude toward work." *One I'd love to unlearn.*

A knock came at the door.

Grant went to answer, let the hotel waiter in with the wine cart and signed his receipt. "*Grazie, bene*, I will open the *vino*." With that, he escorted the man to the door. As he began to work the wire on the cork, he said, "Continue about Yemen."

"I was there for more than two weeks. My assistant, Maria... You remember Maria?"

Grant nodded.

"She went early. Did the preliminary work, setting up interviews, getting permits to travel to the interior."

"Christ, Coco. What the hell were you doing outside San'a? There is nothing of any interest beyond the city, and I use that term loosely."

She bit her lower lip. "In any case, she was there and when I arrived, she had the advance work done for me. She is very good, you know."

"I thought so when I met her, yes." He popped the cork and poured the bubbling white wine into the two flutes.

"The last night before she was to go back to Washington, she left our hotel to meet one of the aid workers attached to the United Nations delegation there."

He handed her a flute and they both drank.

Coco swallowed hard. "Both of them were to go to a restaurant that the Americans, the British and the UN people frequent. They never got there."

Grant's features fell. He sat down on the edge of the sofa opposite her.

"They were attacked by a group of kids as they got out of the taxi in front of the restaurant. Both women were beaten. Badly." Her eyes filled with tears at the memory of her beautiful young assistant, so deformed by those thugs. "Maria had terrible injuries, among them two broken ribs, a broken nose, and her left wrist crushed. She fought them off and her friend did, too. Only the fact that the proprietor came out a few minutes later saved their lives."

"Where is she now?"

"Washington. Georgetown Hospital. Plastic surgery."

He winced. "She was a beauty."

"I hope she will be again." She gulped, once, twice. "But she may never —"

He reached over, took her hand and squeezed hard. "Never what?"

"See herself afterward."

"Christ, they mauled her?" He put his glass down and pulled her over to the couch next to him.

"Her optic nerve is damaged." Coco couldn't resist his lure, didn't want to. Ever since she'd spied him from the *vaporetto* sitting in that café by the Canal, her entire body had yearned for his touch and his care. "They beat them both. Her friend? Died."

"Why don't I remember hearing about this?" He shook his head. Nothing came to mind. "I usually monitor such things."

"The number of attacks on Americans abroad has increased in the past two decades. How can you keep track when the fanatics are out there everywhere?" she said, knowing she was concealing other facts she could not tell him.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hauled her close. "Honey."

She thrilled to his endearment. *God, why had she left him?* Why hadn't she known then that wherever she went afterward, she'd never spend a day not thinking of him, needing his concern and his gruff humor just to make her day complete?

"Tell me the rest," he whispered and tipped up her chin.

"The head of security at the embassy investigated. He issued his report last week. He believes the kids who did this were trained by a terrorist group to be rabble, troublemakers."

"Did any one send a note or make a video and take responsibility for the attack on Maria and her friend? That's their M.O."

"No. No." She felt foolish sitting here telling him her suspicions. Especially since she had no evidence, just a feeling of dread. Still she hated to say the next thing. "You remember how Maria looks like me?"

His mouth hitched up at one corner in smile that soon vanished. "Not as lovely, but yes." His dark brows knit. "Why?"

"I think they mistook her for me. Thought they were beating me."

He stared at her. His arm clamped her closer. "Why?"

"It's a long story."

"I'm not going anywhere this afternoon." He put a hand to her cheek and his thumb caressed her there. "Neither are you."

She met his gaze, his penetrating silver eyes and knew this was the first of so many revelations she'd have to share with him. "I was in Yemen to do the *National Geographic* spread, yes. But my pictures included the homes of some of the political leaders, many of whom sponsor terrorist groups." She didn't tell him why she had those kinds of pictures. If he agreed to help her, she would tell him. Have to. *And god, won't that be a relief!*

"No big deal, we've known about those for decades," he said with the shrug of a shoulder.

"Evidently. But you know any photographer takes hundreds more shots than they need, just to ensure getting the best of the lot. Anyway, I reviewed my thumbnails after

I got back to Washington. I wonder if they saw me take shots, tracked me and attacked Maria instead."

He pondered that for a moment. "Why would they expect that she—or you—would carry pictures to dinner? To assume they're stupid is too much to hope for!"

"I agree," she offered in a small voice.

"So then," he began, examining her face with the precision of an expert analyst of human nature, "why am I here?"

She licked her lips. "I recommended you back in January to Nasar when they offered me the contract for the museum work." *I knew even then I needed to see you again, hope you might talk to me, forgive me for how I'd left you.* "I hoped you would accept because I knew you, your staff and your technology were the best in the business. But now that I suspect what really happened to Maria, I am even happier that you're here."

"And you're afraid?" He asked in such a way that she knew he was stunned that she could feel fear.

"I am. Very. I seem to see thugs everywhere I look. I tell myself I'm crazy, that this can't be, that it's ridiculous to think that anyone could do such a horrible thing like attacking Maria." She shook her head. "But I'm becoming paranoid." *I suspect everyone. Now, even Nasar and Jamal.* "I hate it. I was never like this!"

Grant ran his hand up into the curls above her ears, cradled the back of her head and pulled her into his embrace. Her face to his strong throat, she wrapped her arms around his body and hugged him for all her might. He stroked her spine, planted his lips on top of her head and said, "So does this mean you're happy you decided to switch from taking pictures of battles to museum pieces?"

One reason. "Yes, I'm becoming a wuss."

"A wise wuss."

She let her head fall back so that she could view his face. God, he killed her with the sculpted symmetry of his features. The golden tan. The wide, black, winged brows. The

contrast of the dazzling eyes. The sharp cheekbones. The wide, stern mouth. *How long it's been since you've held me and looked at me like you do now. Like you want to eat me up.*

She got to her feet. Drifted away from him. She'd told herself when she decided to recommend him for this job that she wouldn't fall into bed with him. Even though she craved him like the earth needed the sun. It was not fair to him, given what she had to do. Now that she'd seen him, embraced him, she warned herself once more not to even think about starting a physical relationship with him again. Not because she didn't want him. But because she still hadn't told him everything about herself. What she did. Why she did it. *Hell.*

She smoothed her hands down her linen skirt and headed toward the door. "I should go."

He stopped her with the velvet bass voice she'd heard in her dreams for three lonely years. "After what you've just told me, I don't approve of you in a separate room."

She curled her shoulders. Closed her eyes. How she wanted to move in, sleep with him, make love to him. "I didn't think you would." *I can't just walk back into our life and fall into bed with you like some broad with no brains and no remorse. "But—"*

"I signed that contract, so it's my job to keep you safe. Because I can't put a bodyguard into place for you on such short notice, *I am your security. Hence, you sleep here.*"

She pinched the bridge of her nose. She was exhausted from worry and the trans-Atlantic flight. Seeing Grant again had sapped her energy more than she anticipated. She was getting too old to be running around the world doing one job she loved – and a second that she'd come to hate. "Don't push on this, Grant."

He strode to his door. "You are not checking in. No one needs to know you are here. I'll get the adjoining room and your luggage. We leave for Dubai tomorrow morning. I have my jet. You will fly with me."

"I have a ticket."

"On a commercial airliner?" he asked like she must have rocks in her head.

"I'm in first class."

He huffed. "First class is no defense against C4 and crazy men."

"You're right." She'd known it, but a cover was a cover. She nodded, grateful, but felt herself sliding down a steep slope that led straight into his arms and his bed. She rubbed her arms and turned to look out his window into an uncertain future.

"Have a nap," he ordered, his guttural voice a sweet rasp against her skin. "We'll have dinner together. I'll make the arrangements."

She didn't turn, didn't want him to see her face, her joy, her frustration at her inability to control her desire for him. "Eight?"

"Eight."

"Ciao."

"Ciao, bella."

Chapter Three

At eight twenty, he took her hand and led her onto the private launch he'd ordered to take them across the lagoon to the restaurant. Glancing around the piazza, he saw no one near them. No one tracking them. *Good*. He'd chosen a five-star restaurant that had good food, its own marine stop and a clear view of the walks and the blue sea around Venice. His feeling of security meant he could concentrate on the elegance of her fingers as she slung her purse strap over her shoulder and clasped his hand. He'd always liked her fingertips on him.

By eight forty, they claimed the reservation he'd made just before they lost it. He'd always scolded her about being late. She was late for every event in her life. But as Coco preceded him to their table on the veranda overlooking the lagoon, he watched the way she walked in the black high heels, which obviously meant she had increased her wardrobe selections. *To impress me?* He barely had time to consider that when he admired how her black cocktail dress moved with the sway of her hips. He'd always appreciated the way they filled his hands.

Over vodka tonics, he kept the conversation polite, irrelevant to the challenges before them. Plenty of time for those discussions. Right now, he preferred to admire the way the silk slipped over her breasts. And the way her nipples tipped up at him, pebbling beneath the fabric as his gaze fell to them, time after time.

She knew they reached out to him. He could tell by the way she squeezed them together with her upper arms and glanced away more frequently as the pinot grigio arrived to accompany the appetizers. He had planned this examination of her charms back at the hotel. Not just to fill himself up with the sight of her again, but to unnerve her.

He grinned, proud as hell he was succeeding.

"Tell me how your mother is?" he asked over the Prosciutto crudo. He'd met the lovely widow, of whom Coco was the younger spitting image, three years ago in Washington when he and Coco were inseparable for four wild months.

"She's very well," Coco responded, beaming about the parent who was a noted scholar of medieval Byzantine history. "Recovering well from the loss of my dad." Coco's father had died four months before Coco and he had met. Coco had still been in mourning because her father had died with his reputation in tatters—and her love for her dad had colored their affair with red-hot need. "She refuses to resign from the faculty."

"Still at Georgetown then?" He lifted the white wine to his lips, licking the bottom one as he took in the beauty of her face.

With rapt attention, she opened her mouth to watch his as he drank. Then she shook herself and fastened her attention on her sliced delicacy from Parma. "My mother is working on a new book when she is not haunting her office on campus."

"The subject this time is what?" He was being pleasant, of course. What else could he do? Coco wasn't going to jump into his arms. After all, she *had* left him. So if his payback was hell for her, he figured she deserved a little of it. He'd certainly suffered for three long years like an addict failing the AA program. He had to know if she had suffered. And why she had.

"The fall of Constantinople, 1204 and the first Crusades." She sat back as the waiter removed her plate. "*Grazie,*" she murmured to the man and to Grant, explained, "The fight for the conquest of Jerusalem."

"King Richard of England and the rise of the Islamic empire." He glanced out over the lagoon and grinned. Not at the view of the moon reflecting in the water, but at the fact that she was now shifting in her chair regularly. Needing him. Getting wet for him. He would bet last year's income on it. "Your mother is a delight. I can hear her laughter." *Like yours.* "Untamed."

The primi piatti came. He had the spinach linguine.

She stared at her plate of risotto, then smiled at him. "This is the first time in months I've felt like eating."

His cock tingled with the leap of faith that she wanted to eat because she was with him again. Enjoying herself. "Looks like you need it." He gestured with his glass, enjoying himself more than he had—yes, he'd admit it—since he'd been with her in D.C. "You've lost weight." *Why, babe, have you worked yourself to the point where you have dark shadows beneath those gorgeous purple eyes? And are your breasts smaller, too?*

"At my age, most women want to lose a few pounds."

"Thirty-three?" he inquired, knowing he even recalled her birthday, for god's sake. "Such an old lady," he teased her and swirled his pasta. Damn, he was enjoying the way she surveyed him like a woman who hadn't dined on a man in years.

"I'm decrepit," she joked, but took in the breadth of his shoulders, his shirt and tie, the Italian suit he'd ordered handmade the last time he'd been to Milan on business. "You on the other hand, look fabulous. Still working out like a bodybuilder, I see."

"Good for business to look fit."

"People trust men with big beefy muscles, huh?" she ribbed him, putting her lips around the fork and pulling off a bit of risotto.

He could imagine her mouth around his cock. Tight. Wet. Warm. He put a finger to his shirt collar. He was getting hot. And hard. "They do," he affirmed, thinking he sounded like the village idiot. "Builds confidence."

She grinned and tucked in for another forkful of her dish. "Does the shaved head do that, too?"

"I would assume so." He was happy to concentrate on twirling his pasta and not look at her. Now that she was relaxing, she had him on the spot, enchanted with her, damn his eyes. "I've seen an increase in the number of clientele. So I must be presentable."

"Why did you shave your hair?" she asked in a dulcet tone that punched him in the solar plexus.

She cared about his hair? Christ, he was going to jump her. "Vanity," he admitted.

She fell back in her chair, chuckling. Her breasts jiggled. Up and down. Up and down. "That's a characteristic I never thought you had!"

The wistful nature of the topic drifted to a more serious note. *If you'd stuck around long enough...* No, he was not going to show her his anger here. He'd already done that this afternoon. Tonight was about finding out where they were going, not where they'd been. "Yeah, well, I can be just like any other guy."

She leaned forward. Put her fork down. Let her gaze roam over his forehead and ears, his cheekbones and nose, his lips, his chin, to come back and admire his eyes. "I don't think so," she whispered.

It took him a second or more to get past the lump in his throat. "I was getting gray."

From the way she adored his features, one by one, all over again, she didn't care. "Where?"

He hooted. "At my temples."

"Ah." Satisfied, she leaned back again.

Thank god. If she'd continued to ask him precisely where else he was gray, he would have had to rip off that lovely black silk in front of all these very ritzy people and take her right here on the linen tablecloth. Then he'd show her where else he was gray.

She traced a line through her risotto with her fork. "I'm different, too." She lifted her face and met his gaze. "I want to change what I do for a living."

"Why?" he asked and knew the question was delivered in a dark inquisitive tone that went beyond the banter they'd indulged in.

"I can't take the pressure. Not anymore. Too many people I piss off. Too much flying. Too many issues." She looked around the room, tears beading on her lashes. "Especially since Maria."

He reached across the table and took her hand. The zing of electricity he felt between them humbled him, destroyed his desire to keep up the small talk. "I'm glad you got me involved."

She sniffed. Blinked and put a thin smile on her face. "I know you're angry. You have every right to be. But I—"

He stopped her putting up his other hand. "I'm here. I'm good with this." *Until I see what you have in mind for how deep we go this time.*

"Can you do this? Be with me? And not..."

Make love to you? Probably not. "Not what?" He was going to make her admit the attraction that was like positive to negative. Like lightning to heat.

"Not hate me?"

"Jesus!" he seethed. Other diners turned to stare at them. "I never hated you."

Something cracked inside her body then. He felt her go lax. Saw the sun shine through the storm clouds she seemed to be carrying around with her today. "I'm glad. Grateful."

"Eat your dinner, babe." He lifted his chin, indicating she put her attention on her dinner. "I'll be grateful if you keep yourself healthy." *And I'll be happy to keep you safe.*

They got through the rest of their dinner with increasing ease. She shared stories about her last few projects in Egypt and Jordan. She'd done photo spreads for two travel magazines on Israel and Palestine many times before and loved being able to work in an area she knew so well. He told her what little he could about his contracts in Afghanistan, Japan and Mexico. He brought her up to date on friends of his whom she had met when they were single men. "Both Cord and Tate Ryder are married, now. I recently helped Tate and his wife clear her of some problems she had with Witness Protection and the FBI."

"You can't talk about it?" Coco asked.

"I shouldn't."

"I understand," she said. "Some things we must not know about each other," she offered and from the look on her face, she regretted the statement. She jerked away and cast her gaze to the moonlit sky. "Ever been to Dubai?"

"Often. Once in 1990 when I was a green Marine. It was the time of Desert Storm and I was Military Police, attached to our Embassy. Not much to do in an Arab country for American boys. I sat on my duff reading the one hundred great books."

"Let's see. While you were on your duff, I was in junior high."

"Driving little boys wild."

"No way! I had braces and long gangly legs."

"I like your teeth. Dentist did a good job." *Love the legs, too*, he was certain his expression added. *I want to put them around my neck and discover again all the juiciness between them.*

"*Signore?*" The waiter cleared his throat. "Will that be all for you this evening?"

Pulled from his desire for her, Grant looked up at the man. "*Si, grazie.*"

They were out on the walkway in minutes. A breeze came off the Mediterranean and Coco rubbed her arms. As they strode to the launch station, he checked their surroundings. *Clear*. Then he removed his jacket, swung her around toward him and placed it over her shoulders. She clutched the lapels securely to her in the wind, but did not look at him as she murmured her thanks.

Within a few minutes, the launch came. Both of them remained silent. Their camaraderie had died and Grant suddenly felt like a teenager, unable to reestablish it with any finesse.

They strode along the *calle* quickly toward their hotel, her high heels clattering on the stones, the wind whipping higher and cooler. Restaurants were closing for the evening, proprietors closing the shutters, pulling down the grates over the doors. The walks were virtually empty. No one was following them.

In the elevator, at her door, he knew what he wanted to do, but told himself to wait for her lead. They were going to be together for a long time, days, weeks. He'd have time to enthrall her, make her want him in her bed. Yes, fool that he was, he was so far gone in lust, he knew he'd take her bed again, even if—even though she never wanted him permanently any other way.

She dug out her key from her purse. He had given it to her after he'd spoken to the desk clerk and arranged for the addition of this room to his own bill. The man had been curious about Grant's need for the room, but he cut him off, saying the previous occupants had been noisy and he was willing to pay for peace.

"Let me open it," he told her as he took it from her fingers.

With her eyes, she asked a thousand questions about his intentions.

"I want to come in to check that no one has been in to search your things." *Or plant anything.*

Fear made her frown. "You wouldn't think someone would do that here?"

"You never know." He slid the plastic in its slot. The lock clicked and he turned the handle. "Look around. Try to remember how you left things. And *no*." He caught her arm when she began to slip off her heels in her old habit of getting out the contraptions as soon as she could. "Just examine."

She was paused in the doorway, her breasts tight against his chest, her gaze dreamy and yearning but frightened. "You're making me scared."

I want to make you come. Loud and crazy and more than once. "I don't mean to. Now do this. Tell me. What do you see?"

With regret, he closed her door and took his jacket from her. Lucky he could walk with the boner he sported, he deliberately marched around the sitting room with his coat in front of him. The place, a mirror image of his, seemed empty. Bare of humanity. Well, Coco never traveled with a lot of luggage. "Where's your suitcase?"

"The bedroom," she told him, spreading her fingertips above her closed laptop on the desk. "Nothing looks moved here."

He examined the tracks in the carpet. All seemed to be hers. Slim, size seven. Strolling into her bedroom, he noted the chocolate truffles on her pillows. The maid had been in for the evening rounds to turn down the bedding and plop treats on top. Had anyone come with her? Might she work alone? He'd ask the desk in the morning, just for the info. Just in case.

Hmm. He strolled around the foot of the king-size bed. Coco's camera bag lay open on the floor. Inside laid one palm-sized camera, one larger, and a Nikon, two telescopic lenses, her battery, and containers for all the odds and ends photographers used. Her little red suitcase lay open right next to it. She'd emptied it of the white cotton dress. He could see it hanging in the open doors of the armoire in front of him. He also saw the white linen suit hanging next to it. His gaze drifted back to the camera bag. Something about it niggled at him. What? Well, *hello?* He bent over to peer more closely at one item that knocked the air from him.

He fingered the tissue-thin fabric a major chemical company had perfected only a few years ago. A suit of this fit its host like white on rice. What's more, the wearer could be fried, frozen, shot and stabbed—and survive. *Coco, babe, what the hell are you doing with a suit of para-aramid? And how did you get something only deep cover agents ever acquire? Your job requires you to break and enter?*

"I don't see anything here, Grant."

From the sound of her voice, he could tell she was headed his way. He stepped away from her bag and over to the window. He fisted his hands to stop the quake that ran through him.

He spun to look at her through the new perspective the suit gave him. *What are you not telling me?* "I don't think anything has been moved in here. But what do you see?"

She strolled around the room as if she were window-shopping at Macy's. She stopped when she spied her camera bag open, and with only a moment's freeze to note the sight of the black cat suit, she announced, "No. Nothing amiss in here."

"Check the bathroom."

She walked away.

He fisted his hands. How many secrets did she have?

She came back in and approached him. "All clear."

He caught her upper arms. "I'm going to say this. And I don't want any arguments."

"Okay." She sounded tentative.

"That connecting door stays open tonight. No locks, no privacy."

Being harsh was definitely not the way he meant to end the night. A man could always hope to get lucky, right? But the suit got to him. "Sleep tight," he said, trying for some of the congeniality they'd built over dinner.

He turned on his heel and left her standing alone by the window.

He didn't look back. If he did, he'd sweep her up and carry her to his bed. There, within arms' reach, he could ensure safety for her. But he couldn't save her from herself, could he?

He undressed and out of frustration, threw himself into a freezing cold shower. It didn't calm his mood or his erection. So, naked, he went into his sitting room, paced, stood at the window for god-knew-how-long and watched the moon travel the sky. Running his hands over his head, he decided to move the chaise longue to angle toward the window, the view of the black velvet night and what he could see of her suite. Then he parked himself in the thing, hoping he'd wear himself out.

But he began to hear sounds from her room. She shuffled things. Left her light on for a while. Reading, maybe. She got a drink out of the mini-bar and he could hear her fiddle with the bottle and the glass. Then she went into her bedroom. After a half-hour or so, he heard her click on a lamp and he could see rays dapple the carpet. Once more, she got up, this time to get a drink of water in the bathroom. She padded back to bed.

Yeah, babe. Hard to sleep, isn't it, when there is so much more to say?

He sat, reclined in the chair, one hand over his mouth, eyes glued to her room near the window. He waited. That's one thing he was so good at.

She came into sight as she drifted toward the window. Dressed in a floor-length gown of some clingy stuff, she leaned on the credenza in front of the window. Her nipples were poking the fabric, her tortured face lit by moonlight, her eyes closed. *Forgetting what we had? Remembering?*

Steady, Warwick. It may be only her secrets that she thinks of. Not you. Why you?

She moaned and faced their door.

He dared not breathe.

Then she walked forward. On cat's feet, she came to the doorway, paused and there in the silvery light, her gaze found his.

He let her look her fill. God knew, he was riveted to the chair.

Whatever she saw, she glided forward. His belly convulsed. His cock lay on his thigh, stiffening with interest.

She came to stand next to him and sank to her knees. With a gaze his heart described as loving, she put two fingers to his lips, chasing his own hand away.

Don't talk?

Babe, I can't utter a word.

Then she moved closer. His brain melted down in the fragrance of her perfume as she reached one arm around his neck and pressed her face to his bare chest.

The warmth of her flowed over him. He shut his eyes. Opened them. This silken body in his arms was really hers, and not some fantasy. She kissed his shoulder, pressed her lips to his sternum. He heard her sniff and knew she fought tears.

That's when his arms clamped around her and hauled her up to splay her upper body over him. He planted his lips in her hair. Her soft curls. He caressed her back. Sleek flesh and bones. He put one palm over a cheek of her ass and squeezed.

"Come up here, babe. I need all of you."

She let her head fall back. Her eyes glistened with torment. She gazed at him, wanting, pleading for so many things. Comfort? Affection?

He had that and more for her. He'd never stopped wanting her. Couldn't, wouldn't now that she was here within reach. He might be all kinds of a chump, but at the moment, he didn't care a thing about his reputation. Only about claiming her once more. He put his hands on either side of her head and smiled sweetly at her.

But she struggled up. Stood.

He panicked. She was leaving? The lump in his throat dissolved when she shimmied out of the gown, letting it puddle on the floor, and climbed onto the chaise with him. Lying along his side, she rested on his chest.

The feel of her skin on his was like a stroke of satin. He'd dreamed of this, her, but hadn't recalled how exquisite she felt. He decided he needed to touch all of her, from head to toe. He planted his big hand in her hair and rumped her curls. She smiled against his chest. He traced the shell of her ear and pulled her earlobe. She wiped away tears on one of her cheeks. He grinned and began the descent from her delicate jaw down her elegant throat, defining its length with one knuckle. Until he reached her cleavage and halted. To go on was the question.

Check it, Warwick. If he caressed her, if he showed her how badly he had missed her, how he still yearned for her, did he risk anything? Other than his sanity, all over again? Or could he take whatever she was offering here and enjoy it for now? For the moment?

Why she had left him, he might never learn. What she was doing with the cat suit, he would demand to know. But why she came to him here, he understood. He could tell from her insomnia and her tears. She wanted him, missed him.

And by god, that meant he'd welcome her.

He inhaled and slid his hand to cover her breast. She undulated, mewled in the back of her throat, and he crushed her close. His thumb circled her nipple and it blossomed for him. He moaned and sent his open palm down her rib cage. Curved but taut, her belly was such a turn-on. But not as much as what lay below. He splayed his

fingers and dropped into the wealth of hair over her mound. She stopped breathing. Christ, he might never need air again either, she felt so moist, so soft. He let his hand dive lower and his fingers found her seam. He sank inside. She was wet and warm, swollen for him.

He rose up and whirled her beneath him. With brute strength and wild need to keep her, he pinned her to the chair. Her gaze on his was beseeching him for understanding or mercy, he could not tell. Her lips parted.

"Darling," she murmured, "I'm so sorry I left."

He lowered his face to her shoulder then. Pride wouldn't let him show her the raw emotion that wrecked him.

"Grant," she whispered. "Look at me, please. You've got my hands trapped, honey, and I want to kiss you."

Chapter Four

As he drew away, Coco could see written on Grant's face what she had known for three years. He had cared for her far and above the mind-blowing sex they'd shared. She had felt the same madness for him, and yet, the timing then had been so bad. Her job not done. Her devotion divided. No heart to enjoy a love affair. No time to be honest or stay and nurture a relationship. She meant to change whatever had been wrong then.

Now he took one of her hands from between their bodies and buried his lips in her palm.

She freed her other hand to frame his face and lean up to press her mouth to his.

This first taste of him made her ravenous. She'd hungered for him for three long years. Today, she'd tamped it down. His looks, his offhand charm were manna for her soul. Always had been. Had he known that? Could she show him?

Warm and responsive, he let her kiss him as she pleased. Oh, she pleased.

Sweetly. Lightly. Brushing her lips over his, she sampled him time and again. Remembering and discovering anew his flavors, his textures, she learned once more his willingness to let her enchant him. The same way he enthralled her.

She wrapped her arms around his massive shoulders and rubbed her nipples into his heavily muscled chest. Oh, she had missed him. She placed her hand on the back of his head to hold it steady, and with an eager mouth, sucked on his lips, licked the outline, kissed him with the desire to erase the empty years without him.

Patient, he breathed deeply as she took him higher and drank of his lips longer, harder. Rough, tender, she set her mouth on his again and again, shaping, savoring, devouring. He began to groan and she knew she'd made her point. Time to make another, and so she took his lips once more and sent her tongue inside his warm cavern.

He gripped her nape and let his tongue tangle with hers.

She broke away, breathless. "I thought I remembered you, your body, this." She took another sample of his mouth. "I hadn't. No dream compares to flesh and blood."

Pulling her down to sprawl flat over the chaise, he captured both her wrists and shoved them above her head. He thrust one leg between hers and spread hers wide. Against her mound, she felt the long steel of his cock. She shifted, trying to position him near her seam and take him inside.

He jerked up. "Not yet," he growled and bit her earlobe.

She arched against him, blissful. She could give him time. Give him anything he wanted. It's what she'd come for. What she'd planned for. If he'd let her. If he still wanted her. And from what she was feeling and hearing, he did.

She cried out in joy and wiggled beneath him, abrading her nipples against the rich fur of his chest. She hooked a leg over one of his hips and rocked her pussy on his thigh.

He slid down her body, eluding her, making her moan in frustration, his hands still gripping her wrists like manacles. Nonsense on his lips, he murmured something torrid to the spot behind her ear. Trailing his tongue down her throat, he stopped and pressed his mouth to her pulse. Something that sound like *alive and here* escaped him. She was, yes, finally she was. His fingers slid down the backs of her arms and he placed his mouth to her sternum. He cupped her breasts.

She mewled. Her nipples yearned for his teeth, his tongue, his kisses. Her breasts were so full, so hard, so needy, she could feel them reach for him, demanding his loving.

He gave it. *Oh, sweet god!* Her hips rose up off the chair as he took both breasts in his hands and with a rasping tongue, he laved her. Round and round, he bathed each completely, kissing the undersides and licking her cleavage. She gasped for air, her hipbones grinding up against his, searching for relief.

He didn't give any. Instead, his fingers played with her nipples. Tweaking them, twisting, then rewarding them with a hard suck deep into his mouth.

One hand to her chest, he angled down and traced a long wet line with his tongue along her torso to her bellybutton. "I wanted to put a ring in here three years ago. I damn well will tomorrow," he promised her and pressed his tongue inside the hollow. "What do you think, babe? Amethysts? For your eyes?"

"Diamonds. For yours."

He snorted. "We'll put my eyes on you?" He paused to gaze at her, his look melting her down. "Since the moment I met you, my eyes have seen only you."

Blown by his admission, she told him, "And mine for only you, too."

He pushed up on his heavily corded arms, flashed her a grin, but his mouth was thin, pained. "We're overdue for me to put my hands on you. My cock inside your sweet little pussy." He smoothed her hair back. "But we can't do this tonight."

She gasped. Struck. He didn't want her? Her worst fear, come true. "No," she sobbed. "Let me make it all up to you. I never meant to hurt—"

"Babe," he whispered, "it's too late—"

"No!" She felt like he'd cut her heart out.

"Listen to me! You've got me wrong. Shops are closed."

"Huh?" Was her brain working right?

He put his lips to her collarbone. "It's not that I don't want you."

"Then what?" She placed a hand to his cheek to lift his face.

He looked forlorn as a teenager. "I don't have any latex."

She sputtered. "No...no..." She was staggered with surprise. "But..."

"I haven't bought any in...hell! A long time! I certainly didn't expect to meet you in Venice and I—"

"Let me go, Grant." She put her palm to his chest.

"Babe, I'm sorry!"

"I understand, sweetie. Let me up!" She pushed against him. Her pussy flooding with more cream, her breasts tingling to be possessed by him, she struggled up.

"Coco, we can do lots of other things!"

"Don't want to," she told him. He looked like she'd just torn *his* heart out. *Good*. She hurried into her room. Flung wide the door to her bathroom, fumbled through her cosmetics case and extracted a long string of condoms. She pivoted back toward his room and halted.

He stood in the doorway, his arms folded, his silver eyes streaked with sadness and growing jealousy. "You carry —"

"I don't usually. But I did here to Venice. *I* knew, even if you didn't, that I was going to see you. *I* knew I wanted to make love to you and I wanted to be prepar —"

He grabbed her so fast, she couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Didn't want to.

He dragged her up against him, clamped his arms around her waist and consumed her mouth. As he walked her backward to the bed, he demanded, "How many do you have?"

"Dunno. Have to read the box."

He snorted. "We'll use what you've got." He kept sipping at her lips, laughing in between words. "Buy more in the morning."

"What stamina," she praised him, taking one packet but shoving the rest into his hand as she kissed his nose, his cheek, his jaw.

"You ain't seen nuthin' yet, sugar babe," he whispered, as her calves hit against the mattress and she sat down. The moonlight streamed over his shoulder, putting his face in shadow. She tore open the package, hoping she could put this on him easily. She'd had no practice since she'd left him.

His was a silhouette of power, tossing the remaining condoms to the nightstand, panting like a wild animal as he took his sweet time, damn him, looking her over. "Want me to do that?"

"No!" She shrank away from his reach. "I planned this."

Hands on his hips now, he pointed his luscious cock at her, proudly. "Cover me quick, bossy lady."

She ran her tongue over her lower lip as she saw how his blunt shaft pointed at her. On a whim, she reached over and kissed the tip.

He growled. "*Now* is a good time!"

Undeterred, she licked the drops of pre-cum from her upper lip and smiled up at him as she wrapped her hand around his base and rolled the latex down, down, down to his root.

Then she lay back and stretched up to display her body as leisurely as a stripper on an imaginary pole. "What do you think?" she whispered, eager to hear what he liked about her.

"My memory's bad," he rasped and lifted his chin at her. "Refresh it."

She swallowed hard on the intimate suggestion. Her memory of them together in bed and out was oh, so alive and well. It told her Grant Warwick was a man who liked to watch—and afterward he would show her how very much he appreciated her ingenuity. She wouldn't fail him.

She smiled at him, a slow hot caress over the outline of his massive body from his head to his lean hips to his sculpted thighs. Lifting her arms like a dancer who had all the time in the world, she curled her fingers in her hair, over her scalp and down over her eyes to drag apart her lips. She caressed her throat and pushed her breasts together to beckon him with stiff hot areolas.

She could hear him catch his breath.

Gratified, she went on. One hand drifted down the opposite arm, fingers touched, separated. *Ballet lessons helped get your man hard. Who knew?* She grinned at him, flexed her thighs. Her pussy pulsed, swelling, cream gushing down her channel.

He stepped closer. In this light, she could glimpse the way his hands fisted at his sides and the way his giant cock rose higher toward his navel.

Her cunt flooded with fresh juice and she could feel the wealth of it rush over her labia and drip to her thighs. She was going to be so wet for him when he finally put that thick rod inside her, he would be a happy man.

"More," he demanded.

Had she stopped? "I want you," she told him as she threaded her fingers into her moist pussy hair, "here." She parted her lips for him and the room filled with the small, distinct sound of her liquid need of him. She held her body open for him.

He narrowed his gaze and audibly inhaled. Could he smell the aroma of her desire for him?

She certainly could and she rejoiced she could offer him such proof of how she wanted to take him inside her. To give him more, she sank one fingertip down her seam. The merest touch to her clit and she hummed. "Grant, sweetie."

"Roll over," he ordered her.

She rose up on one elbow and did as she was told. Writhing on the sheets, getting whatever satisfaction she could from the rub of cool linen, she groaned. Then she pushed up to her knees, her buttocks in the air. She sent one hand between her legs, one fingertip tapped her rosy hole. "Grant," she beseeched him. "All of this is for you."

He climbed on the bed, rocking the mattress with his weight. Hands to her hips, he pressed his thighs to hers. Slid his shaft along her seam. Made her bite her tongue in delight as he moved slowly back and forth along her dripping, greedy little slit. He prodded her, teasing her with the promise of his thick rod deep inside her cunt. She whimpered and put her forehead to the mattress. She knew he wasn't going to give it to her yet. He never did fuck her until he'd tormented both of them with a feel of every part of her pussy and his cock.

She reached back between their legs, able to capture one of his huge balls and caressed him. He growled at her. Fair play, she countered, then rolled his sac in her hand. He sent one hand up her backbone, buried his fingertips in her hair and kissed her nape. "You're a witch."

She grinned as he circled one arm around her hip, one hand to her pussy, pressing her back to his hot, hard body.

She pushed against him, losing her hold on his scrotum, but gaining one of his hands tracing her very happy slit.

"How big is your clit, babe?" he asked as his fingers burrowed inside her and rested atop her sensitive ball of nerves. "Do I need to make it larger?"

"You do." She shuddered. "With your mouth."

He gave a laugh. "What I figured, babe." He rolled to one side and let her fall to the other. "Let me take a closer look and then I'll make you very happy, honey."

"You'd better, big boy," she complained and pouted like a kid, "or I'm coming without you!"

"No way," he crooned as he pressed her thighs as wide as they could go. "Tonight your tight little cunt pounds only around my cock."

He always kept his promises and to ensure this one, he spread himself out on the bed between her legs. "I love your pretty pussy." He rolled open her lips and as he spoke she could feel his breath moist and warm on her needy tissues. "Swollen and pleading for me. Coated with cream ready for me to eat you up." He licked her clit delicately. "And I love to work your nub here and get you fired up to have me."

She pushed her fists into the bed. "I'm blazing already! Taste me. Now."

"I aim to please," he murmured and put his lips to her clit, then pulled her hard and fast into his mouth.

She bucked up.

One hand to her stomach, he pushed her down. "Gotta be a good girl. No moving away from me."

"I'm not going away, sweetie," she agreed on a plaintive note. "But you have to eat me!"

"Hey, babe." He was laughing. *Laughing?* "I'm gonna taste you all night long. Like this," he whispered as he sucked her labia into his open mouth and his tongue stroked the nub to a wild new level of delight. "And this here?" He spread her wider and drove his tongue deep into her channel to lick her G-spot. "This is where I make you nuts. Like this." He put one finger beneath her swollen button and stroked her there as well.

She was pulsing with electric excitement when he got up on his knees and stuffed a pillow under her ass. "There," he crooned. "The better to pet you and tame this cat."

He went down on his elbows again and concentrated on laving each labia, up one side and down the other, pushing them together with deft fingers to expose her clit fully, scrape his teeth over it and make her keen in delight.

She drove her knuckles into his shoulder. Her reward came as he hooked his hands under her knees, hauled her up his thighs and drove his blunt cock right up inside her begging pussy.

"Ah, oh, um." She couldn't seem to find words to describe how full, how complete she felt with his shaft rammed up inside her. How had she lived without him? Without this ecstasy?

He froze, too. With his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth open in a grimace, he looked like a man in exquisite pain.

But as he moved—*oh, yes!*—she caught a breath and rocked with him. Grinding down on his cock, she panted, nuts to have him fill up every cell in her body, every thought in her brain. She wailed as he stroked her with a fast rhythm that gave her clit fresh delight and sent her careening over the edge of an orgasm she never could have imagined.

She yelled over and over, knew she emitted crazy sounds. But she couldn't stop as he pummeled her pussy with his need and a wild, hard speed. She took him, absorbed all of him, his hunger, his pace and his brand on her. She came in one wave, followed by another and another. Still he rocked her and she hung on, fingernails in his thighs, ankles crossed behind his back. He pumped into her with the relentless force of a

machine, fast and furious. Then like a penitent, he became slow and careful, murmuring some kind of fervent prayer to fuck her well and now and keep her with him. And then he exploded with a cry that shook her soul, pierced the quiet of the room and took her up to nirvana and down into the splendor of the bed. He wrapped himself around her. She burrowed back, reveling in the feel of his care.

She had no idea how much later he pulled the sheet up over them. Minutes afterward, she felt him kiss her forehead, rise and go into his bathroom to get rid of the condom. The water ran for a while and he came back to lie down beside her. He peeled back the sheet and rolled her to her back. Then she felt him stroking her breasts and her belly with a warm washcloth followed by the brush of his lips. Suddenly he pressed the cloth between her nether lips. With loving swipes of his hand, he opened her labia and stroked her clit with the nubby fabric. She moaned and his mouth was pressing deft kisses to her pussy.

"I got carried away," he apologized as he continued his ministrations.

"You were gentle, sweetie."

"I don't ever want to hurt you," he said, kissing the inside of her thigh.

"You could never hurt me, Grant," she whispered. "You may be this big brawny guy, but with me you're a lamb."

"Sheesh." He sucked her clit for a long minute, making her mewl. "Don't spread that around, will you, babe?" He rubbed his lips over her nub, inspiring her to put a hand to her pussy.

"Never. Darling, you have got to stop or I'm going to demand you make love to me again."

He nudged her fingers away, thumbing her more widely open and lavished his tongue on her cunt. "I need this, Coco. Need *you*. I have to make sure you realize who's in bed with you."

She put a hand to his cheek. "I know who's making love to me! I knew a few minutes ago. A few years ago."

"Really?" He slid up beside her.

She stared up at him and after the glorious lovemaking they'd just shared, she saw an inquiry, an objectivity in his features that astonished her. This was more than the jealousy she'd seen when she'd retrieved the condoms. This was deeper. She had to reassure him. "I haven't been with anyone since you."

"Why not?"

Her mouth parted at the wild hurt on his face. *Oh, sweetie.* "I didn't want anyone but you."

"Hard to believe, don't you think? Since you're the one who left me."

Truths, Coco. He needs big bad truths. In his narrow silver gaze and in his tense body, she saw how raw his wound was. The gaping pain of how she'd hurt him.

She glanced around the room. Swung a leg out of bed. Stood and kneaded her hands. Walked to the window, naked in the moonlight. "I had to leave you that morning in Washington. I couldn't get on that plane to Fiji with you."

"So you just let me wait at the gate at Dulles?"

"I had to."

"Why not tell me before I went there? Call me and let me know? I hung around for ten hours, looking at every leggy blonde who came along, hoping it might be you. Why not tell me face to face?"

In her career, she had braved a lot of things. Riots, bombs, crazed extremists. Still, she was too chicken to witness the look on his countenance when she told him the truth. She stared at the moon instead. "I had a job to do. And I was called the night before you and I were to leave on vacation to complete it. The assignment was one I'd taken on well before you and I ever met."

"So it was work," he concluded in a sudden and remarkably even tone. "You couldn't just tell me you had work to do?"

She shook her head. "No."

“Why not?”

She whirled to face him then. “Because no one knows about the work I do! No one ever does.”

He digested that for a silent moment. In the silken light, she could see the feral heat of his gaze. “How can that be? You are a freelance photographer. You work on assignments for media.”

“That’s what I used to do full-time. Now it’s my cover.”

He got to his feet and in three strides, had her around the waist, her breasts and belly and pussy warmed by the encompassing comfort of his big, hard body. With two thumbs lifting her jaw, he stared down into her eyes and with heartache in his voice, he asked, “What’s your real job, baby?”

Chapter Five

"I work for the CIA."

Her words gutted him. Ever since he saw the suit, he'd worried. He'd worked the odds. He'd known the answer. Oh, maybe she wasn't connected to the Agency. Perhaps Secret Service, protecting the president or the currency. Could have been the United Nations, anti-terrorist op. Or NSA. Deepest of deep black organizations.

"Since when?" he asked her, wrapping her as close as he could get her without breaking eye contact.

"More than three years ago. After I started to win awards for my pictures."

He pressed her head to his chest and she came so willingly, so gratefully, he thought she might crawl inside his skin and stay there. Okay by him. "You knew who I was, what I did for a living. Hell, I was with the FBI back then!"

She sniffed, a haughty sound of joy amid the seriousness of her revelation. "An Agency op was going to reveal to a Bureau man who she was? And spoil the competition?"

He hugged her. "Babe, you know what I mean. You could have told me. Saved us both a lot of heartache."

She looked up at him again, shaking her head. "We'd known each other four months. I knew you were...safe for me to date."

"You ran a check on me?" *Hell, why ask.* He knew this answer, too.

"Standard Operating Procedure. You know it is."

"Especially when you're sleeping with the guy," he teased her.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and adored his features with her loving eyes. "In those four months with you, I got no sleep."

"Who wanted to?" He kissed her then, an acceptance of what she was implicit in the melding of their lips. He drew back to see that she was still troubled by what she'd revealed. He knew, too, that she wasn't going to feel totally free until she'd told him everything. Well, he wasn't going to feel totally free of his anger that she'd left him, either, until he knew all her secrets.

He bent, scooped her up under her legs and carried her back to their bed. He set her down, caught pillows and plumped them against the headboard, then sat and brought her up to rest against his chest. He kissed her forehead. Pulled the covers up to their waists and bent to take one of her nipples in his mouth and suck her hard and long. She sighed and he kissed his way up to her lips.

"I want to know everything, Coco," he said looking into her eyes as he ran a hand down her stomach to her tight pussy and sank his longest finger inside her wet little cunt. "I can't protect you, I can't help you unless you tell me what you're doing, who you're chasing and why you wanted me here with you."

She smiled ruefully. "You think I'll have half a mind for that with the way you are...oh, um...stroking me?"

"You'll get used to my demands," he told her with determination. "I intend to be inside your body in every way I can for a damn long time to come." He grinned wickedly as he rubbed his finger across her clit. "Tell me everything, babe. I'm listening."

She inhaled deeply. "You like to torment me." She arched as he scraped his nail over her nub.

"I'm going to make it a habit, too." He twisted his hand inside her slick channel a bit farther. Two of his fingers were now coated with thick hot cream and his cock was throbbing to be buried deep and swimming in her juices. "I'm going to be very good to you while you reveal all your secrets."

She bit her lower lip and closed her eyes as he stroked her pussy slowly, sweetly. "By the time I got out of college, I had put aside the idea of becoming a professional

dancer. I was good at pegging people in photography and thought I'd use what I'd learned in the Middle East to build a career. Having Dad's connections helped."

"Makes sense," Grant added, his rhythm in her core now a soft beat.

"I loved the experience when I was a kid and he was the ambassador to Dubai and later to Egypt and to Israel." She was drifting backward to memories of her childhood, rocking to Grant's fingering of her channel. "You're outrageous, you know, to put your fingers inside me when I am trying to be serious."

He gave her the lopsided look of a bad boy. "But I'm loving it. So are you. Talk, babe. You get a reward once you're done."

"You are bribing me with sex?" She was sputtering with glee.

Good. Whatever she was about to tell him was not pretty. He had to keep her talking, mindless and his. He lifted his brows at her and halted his caresses. "Should I stop?"

"No!" She caught his wrist. "I've just never been interrogated while being finger-fucked."

He rolled his eyes. "New methods of torture. Men are coming up with them all the time."

"Yeah? *Ummm.* Wow, *yeahh,*" she breathed. "They didn't teach us in training classes how to respond to this."

He took his fingers infinitely deeper inside her core. "None of those teachers knew what a succulent pupil they had."

"None of them could make me wet, that's for sure."

He chuckled, then circled her clit. "None like me, huh?"

"*Oh!* No, no. Definitely not." She arched backward. Her breast a ripe temptation he could not resist treating to a small bite.

He grinned against her skin. "You were saying?"

"Yes. Well. I wanted to be in the diplomatic corps. But I had taken quite an interest in... Oh, my, could you please pinch my clit again, sweetie, I'm very interested in that." She trembled in his arms as he complied with her request.

"You were interested in what, babe?" he prodded her, shifting to accommodate the rising demands of his very ready cock. Damn, he'd better slow his seduction of her or they'd do nothing tonight except get laid.

"Classes in photographic realism. And I won a few awards. So out of college, I got a job at a small non-profit that worked in the Middle East."

"Is that when you took those pictures of the children in Cairo without shoes?"

She smiled, clearly proud he knew about them. "How did you learn about those?"

"Not hard. Those pictures wound up in every newspaper from here to Tel Aviv."

"I liked the work, but I needed something more. Almost four years ago, I got a lead on a political faction in Cairo that wanted publicity in the West. They were opposed to their own government and they sent me an invitation to come take pictures of their communes."

"They were communists?"

She shook her head. "More in practice than in doctrine. They thought they had gotten a bad rap from the international press and they offered me safe passage if I would come and take shots. I did."

"And those won you a few journalism awards. I remember," he said, smiling at her. "What then?"

"After I finished the project for them, their leaders took me with them on a trip into the desert where they were to meet with other leaders of their network in other countries. I put on a black *abaya*, dressed like an Arab woman, a devout one with a *boushiya* to conceal my face. I wore the long black gloves, too, to cover my hands. But that exposure to those at the meeting was the most valuable thing to come out of that visit." She took hold of his wrist now. He'd stopped caressing her seconds ago, but she

made the point to hold him still for what she wanted to reveal. "I saw more than a dozen leaders of different groups from Middle Eastern countries. All of them associated with each other. Most of them responsible democratic parties."

"Like the array of parties in European governments."

"Exactly. The best thing about the event was that they spoke freely about their goals, their leaders, their numbers and their platforms." She dropped her gaze to her hands. "But there were five in attendance who were different. Although the man who had invited me—Ahmed Suleiman was his name—thought everyone was devoted to democratic principles, these five had recently changed their ideas. Still they had come to the meeting. They were dressed in total black. Two wore balaclavas. All looking forbidding. Surly, gruff. Especially to the women who were there. And as a group, they were friendly to each other, but not to the others. They tried to incite others to join them, proclaiming only they could change the region's status quo. Only they had the right ideas and the right tactics."

Grant held his breath. "Which were?"

"Violence. Riots and bombings."

He tightened his hold on her.

"Of course, they didn't know that one of the woman in their midst had a photographic memory."

He cursed. "Did they have any idea that you were—?"

"American? I didn't think so. I never showed my face or my hair. I only helped to serve tea. Like the other women there. Obedient. Silent."

"And like them, fluent in Arabic." He wanted to shout in frustration. "So you came home and then what?"

"Went straight to my father. I was so full of what I knew, who I'd met, that I could scarcely think straight. I told him what happened only in outline, never specifics. I've never told anyone those, except my control."

“Good. Good.” Who was her control? And where was he now?

“But Dad thought it best if I went to the Agency and told them. I did.” She rolled her shoulders then, looked away from him, swallowed hard and said, “I need some water. Something.”

Grant got up to get her a drink from the tap. When he came back, she had put her nightgown on again and was pacing the floor. Murmuring her thanks, she did not look at him but took the glass and downed the water. Then she turned toward the window. Closing something off from him, he knew. But he barely had time to contemplate that before she spoke again. “I started to work for them and over the years, I’ve helped them identify two of the radicals in the desert that day. I’ve kept my cover as a freelance journalist and kept to myself. Except for you.”

She faced him then and the way her gaze flowed over his features salved the wound she’d made when she left him. “I never wrote a hot affair into my life story until you. I didn’t have delicious men in my life until you. No weekends in bed. No breakfasts on the floor as a man made love to me.”

He was gratified by her memory of how he’d taken her to a hunting lodge in western Maryland. How they’d spent the entire weekend naked, tangled up in each other. How he’d cooked enchiladas and fed her one bite at a time as he feasted on her delectable body.

She stepped closer. “I haven’t had anyone since you, either.”

Grant sank his hands in her hair. He nuzzled behind her ear, his favorite spot second only to her pussy. “I didn’t want any woman ever like I wanted you. Like I still do.” He wrapped his arms around her lithe warmth. “What happened that you couldn’t come away with me?”

She rested her head on his shoulder, her fingers tracing patterns in the hair on his chest. “When I left you at the hotel the morning we were to leave, I had a message on my closed circuit cell phone. I went through my procedure to make contact and got instructions to leave immediately. One of the men I’d been looking for, one of those

who'd been at the meeting in the desert had been caught in Madrid. Our guys from the Embassy and Interpol were interrogating him, but they were getting nowhere. I had to go see if I could ID him positively."

"And were you able?"

"I did. I decided he was one of the five radicals I'd seen in the Egyptian desert and the Spanish police and our men took him away. To a black site."

"And is he still held by our agents?"

She nodded. "He is. Oh, he most definitely is. But as of last year, there is another man out there who claims he was at this meeting and he is the blood brother of the man held at the black site in Poland. For revenge, he directed the bombing of our embassy in Sofia last year and the one in Ethiopia last month. We know because he left notes, claiming responsibility afterward. He demands all those at the meeting be made known to him. He calls himself Hakim, the Judge."

"And aside from Hakim, you have to identify two more radicals?"

"Yes. But I worry as time passes that my memory will fade. Still personal recollections are better than computer ID. Meanwhile, Hakim is looking for those who attended the meeting, for all who saw his face."

"How do you know this?"

"The man who took me to the desert – Ahmed Suleiman – knew who I was. He sent me an email two weeks ago to tell me he had heard this through his own channels."

"Suleiman had your email address?"

"My public one, yes."

"Well, where is Mr. Suleiman?" Grant demanded, his brain firing like lightning. "Can we find him? Has the Agency tried?"

She winced. "Yes, they found Ahmed five days ago. In Paris. In an apartment in the Marais."

"The Marais? What's an Egyptian doing in the old Jewish sector of Paris?"

"Living there. Hiding there."

"What does he say? Have they gotten anything useful from him yet?"

"He's cooperating because he's not a radical. But he's afraid of Hakim and his friends. I know Ahmed, Grant. He's thoughtful and kind."

"He should have thought twice about taking you to a meeting like that."

"Evidently so should I."

Grant assessed her compassionate face and knew what he should do. *Tomorrow*. He'd put Todd on this in the morning. *A call to Langley. A call to our Paris embassy.*

For now, she was here and damn if she didn't need him. And what he could give her. For sure, what he could give her was mindlessness. Ecstasy to chase away the shadows. And cast his feelings for her once more into stone. To hell with his pride. She needed him. He wanted her. What else could matter?

"Sweetheart," he murmured as he hooked his hands in the thin straps of her gown, sweeping the gauzy thing down over her breasts and hips to swish to the carpet. He bent and caught her up in his arms. If he could absorb her into his body, he would. To keep her safe. Keep her alive and his.

He laid her down across the mattress and hovered over her on all fours like a beast, crazed to have her, wild to take her body and fill her mind with him. Away from the horrors of what she did.

He captured her mouth, kissed her then tugged on her lower lip. "There is nothing and no one but us. Here, now." He seized her nape, held her in place. "Do you hear me?"

She nodded, grateful and eager. "I do. Oh, I do!"

"Come with me," he whispered and fisted his hands in her hair. "Let me tell you what I feel for you."

Her lips parted and her eyes seemed to become purple pools of pleasure.

"I love your curls." He pulled at her scalp and she smiled, wriggling against the linens. "I love your temples. They throb, did you know, when you're tense?"

She gulped. "No."

He put his lips there and felt her pulse change tempo. From tension to desire. *Good, babe.* "And your cheeks blush when you're in heat."

She traced his jaw with a fingertip. "Ah. With you, I am hot round the clock."

"Mmm, so good to know." He nipped her chin. "You are so fine, I want to eat every bit of you."

"Oh," she crooned, her arms trying to pull him down, "and you are just the man to do it, too."

"You know I will," he promised and trailed his lips down her throat to her cleavage. He cupped her breasts, inhaling the fragrance of her pussy lingering on his fingers. He growled and rubbed her nipples. "These are such sweet treats."

She inhaled and writhed in sensuous splendor. "Yours to gobble up."

"Like this?" He pulled one with a hard suck of his mouth. "See. It stays hard and pointed."

"That's 'cause they want you to do it again."

He complied.

"And again," she whispered.

He pushed them together and treated both to his ardor.

She arched up and cursed in delight.

"I like under here," he said as he kissed her beneath the curve of one breast, and then the other. "And this," he added as he dipped his tongue inside her navel. "But most of all..." He paused and left her hanging.

"Yes?"

She expected he was going to lick her pussy. He grinned. "I love your knees." He hooked his hands under both joints and lifted them to bite each one in turn.

She chuckled. "You do not! You are a terrible man!" She batted his shoulders as he continued to kiss the inside of her kneecaps and the swell of her calves, down to her ankle bones.

There, he captured her feet and nipped each toe. "Wow, love the taste of these!"

"Toe jam? You are nuts, Warwick!"

"You bet your sweet ass, I am. For you, babe. And you know it." He was laughing with her into her glowing eyes. "So roll over and let me tell you what else I love."

Her violet eyes flashed with expectation. "Yeah?"

He snorted. If she thought he was going to give it to her from behind, she had no idea of his stamina. Or his imagination. "Let me see the flip side, honey, or you'll never know, will you?"

She growled and grumbled. "Yes, yes!" Beneath him she did a roll, the brush of her skin on his a freaking temptation to just fuck her now and make them both so damn happy. But he had to drive her crazy, far, far from her troubles.

When she was settled, he let himself down along her body for a full feel. Christ. It had been so long since he'd savored her.

He rose. This time, he started with the backs of her knees. He dropped kisses to each one and grunted. He nibbled his way up her thighs and when he got to her sweet cheeks, he blew air on her skin.

"For all this, Warwick," she threatened in a sultry whine, "I am going to get you good."

He levered up and bit her shoulder. "Bet on it."

She pressed her hips into the mattress, a rhythm now going for him to imitate once he got inside that sweet pussy again.

He sat back on his haunches and splayed his fingers on her back, massaging any remaining tension from her scapulae. He felt the delicacy of her small waist. The plush

wealth of her ass cheeks. Then he sent his fingers between her legs, along the drenched line of her seam.

His forehead dropped to her back. How had he ever been so blessed to find her? How damn long he had missed her!

He sank his fingers up inside her cunt. She was so soft. So his.

He reared up and rolled her over.

In one move, he grabbed her knees and pushed them up and back beside her torso. This way, he had a full view of the swollen glistening pussy. The froth of hair. The puffy lips. The delicate folds that spilled this way and that from her pretty cunt. The delicate channel waiting to be filled by his cock. The way she squeezed her muscles and sent up a fresh waft of her musk to his nostrils. He nudged her creamy core with the weeping tip of his aching cock. How he remembered to grab a condom, he couldn't say. But he shoved the damn thing on and sank deep, deep inside her.

She dug her fingers in his hips.

He sank farther. In a long furious set of thrusts, he took her up and pounded into her with a fury she matched. She squeezed her eyes shut and shouted how she loved this. He changed his tempo to a slow grind and she groaned through her teeth. He took his sweet damn time sliding into her succulent pussy, loving the sound of her juicy need and feeling every hot inch of her cunt hold him and keep him tight. Loving the sight of her red lips taking his cock inside her, he knew he could fuck her 'til he died and never tire. And when his cum rushed up and he rocked until he felt like he had emptied every drop inside her, he felt he'd ground every beat of his heart into her as well. He felt her pulse with him, over and over, her spasms frantic things that left her spent and panting. Both of them covered in sweat.

Minutes later, he rose up on shaking arms. He tugged at her hand. Limp as silk, she rose but draped against him, exhausted, her head lolling. He swept her up and took her into the bathroom. Standing her against her wall, he kissed her as he rolled off the

condom, tied it and dropped it in the trash, then reached inside the shower and warmed up the water.

“Come here, babe,” he led her in, his arms wrapping around her to hold her up. “Let me wash you. We’ll both sleep better and late.” *If I can keep my hands off you. Then tomorrow, I’ll worry about what we’re doing to set you free.*

Chapter Six

She awakened to the luscious suck of hard lips over one of her nipples and the stroke of tender fingers circling her clit. She stretched, a smile spreading heat through her body. "I'm boneless," she announced in a husky tone filled with last night's joys.

"Yeah?" Grant chuckled, his deep voice sending vibrations from her breast down to her pussy. "Well, I'm not!"

"Yum," she purred and rubbed her thigh against the length of his cock. "One hard bone."

He ate his way down her torso. "I'm gonna show you how big it is, too!"

"Not right now, you're not." She slipped to one side. "I've got to brush my teeth. Among other things."

He shifted to allow her up, his black brows wiggling at the sight of her naked. "Thought you'd be appreciative. I certainly am of what I see."

"I promise to come back." She pointed at his impressive length. "How could I ignore an invitation like that?" She felt her insides go to mush. "Hell," she moaned and put a hand over her eyes. "I've got to stop ogling you." She made a beeline for the john.

In the bathroom, she took one look at the swirl of towels on the floor. The ones he'd used to dry them both off last night after their shower. She shivered at the memory of his hands all over her, rubbing her with the nubby terrycloth, making her want and beg for more. He'd been so sweet, telling her she'd have more of him this morning.

"Making good on all your promises," she told him beneath her breath as she surveyed herself in the mirror. *My god*. She looked like a different woman. Wild. Hair sticking up. Lips lush from kisses. Breasts full and aching for more of his attention.

Ah! She whirled for the toilet and then came back to stare again. She was pink, rosy. Flushed with fulfillment like she had not known since she'd left him. Branded by his little bite marks on her breasts, her shoulders and her knees. She picked up her toothbrush out of her cosmetics case and plastered toothpaste on it, then scrubbed her teeth. Her eyes were bright, too. The shadows he had recognized were a lighter shade this morning. Because of him.

She rinsed her teeth and stuck her brush back in its traveling case. Grabbing a small towel, she put it under the faucet. Why didn't they have washcloths in European countries? "It's not like they're broke."

"Who?" Grant walked into the room.

She held up the wet toweling, explained and added, "Americans are the ones without a shirt on their backs!"

He grinned as he came forward and plastered his big body against her. Between her ass cheeks, she felt him insert his hard shaft. "I don't want you to wear any shirt, that's for sure."

"You either, buddy." She turned and wound her arms around his neck.

Chimes rung in the next room.

"What's that?" she asked. "Not church bells."

He gave her a peck on the cheek. "My phone. Todd, or it better be."

"Ah. Do they have room service here? I'll call while you do your thing."

"No! You are not here. Remember?" He warned her with a stern look. "I promise I'll order your coffee once I've finished my business with Todd," he told her as he made his way back to the bedroom.

While he talked, she took another shower. Washed her hair. Padded into her own bedroom and found a bra, tee shirt and jeans. She grinned. No panties. *Oh, yeah.* She liked that concept and went with it. Letting her hair dry naturally, she ran her fingers through her curls and walked back in to the bedroom to join him.

Grant sat at the desk, still naked and frowning in the midst of his conversation with Todd, a man Coco knew to be Grant's guru of all things organizational. "I don't care what strings you have to pull," he told the man in Houston, "I want as much as you can get and I need it by two o'clock. Also, I need the number for Nick Chekov at the American Embassy. I've got to talk to him. Yes, I'll wait." He glanced at the clock on the table and threw her a perfunctory smile.

She sat down on the edge of the bed to listen.

"You've got it? Okay. I'm ready." He jotted down a number on the hotel stationery. "Call him after we hang up. Tell him I'm coming. But fax me that report now. Right, to my phone. Encrypted." He listened for a long while. "Okay. And, ah, that first matter? Yes, I want that by five. I know it's a rush, but give the man a bonus and fly it over. Good enough. Bye."

Grant sat for a minute, staring out the window.

Coco went to put her arms around his neck and kiss his bald head. "You okay?"

"I've been better." He sent his hands up her arms, put his lips to the crook in her elbow.

She sighed. "I know. I've brought you trouble. Lots of it."

He pulled her down and around to sit on his lap. "I deal in stopping trouble."

She gave him a sweet kiss. "No better man."

His phone rang.

She glanced down at it as the screen illuminated. A fax had arrived in his inbox. "What's going on? What are you getting from Todd?"

"A report on Maria's attack from the San'a embassy."

"How did you get that?" she asked in awe.

"I'm a magician." He winked at her and picked up his phone. "Let me read this."

As he did, his expression went from concerned to alarmed. When he looked up at her again, his voice was flat. "The Yemeni police have questioned the boys who

attacked Maria and her friend and the kids do sound as if they were looking for a trim, blonde American woman."

She hunched her shoulders and shivered. "I'm going to try to help her all I can."

Grant hugged her. "She's smart. And determined. We have to hope doctors can save her sight."

Coco agreed, but she had to know more. "And what else is Todd doing for you this morning?"

"Getting me a report on Ahmed Suleiman."

"The Agency won't give that to a private citizen."

"I'm not going to Langley to get this."

"No?"

"I have a friend."

She snorted. "Sweetie, to get that report you would have to have a friend more powerful than God!"

"So that means after I get it, you'll tell me how well I'm connected?"

She cuffed him.

"Meanwhile, I'm calling room service for breakfast. Anything special?"

"Chocolate croissants and lots of coffee. With cream."

"Wow. I never met a woman so unafraid of calories." He picked up the house phone, made the order and went for the bathroom. "Do not open that door. I'll be out of the shower in a flash. But if Todd calls back, get me right away!"

As he showered, she brooded. Trapped in a hotel room with a delicious man she'd needed for years was one thing. But she knew she was also trapped in a nightmare she couldn't shake. Try though she might, she only got in deeper. All because a nice man had offered to take her to a political meeting one day in the desert. Because she had a damn brilliant memory and a thirst for excitement.

That was then. Now all she wanted was a rest from the worry. The loneliness. The feeling that the one great relationship she'd had in her life she had thrown over for the Agency. The Company. But she knew the bigger reason was because she had made a promise to her father to get these guys.

Grant's phone rang again. She picked it up and read the signature line. Todd.

"Grant!" she shouted as she took it in to him.

He stepped out, grabbing a towel and the phone. "Here I am. Yeah? Tell me."

Coco left him to his conversation, but from the grunts he made as she walked away, she knew whatever he was hearing was not good news.

Sitting on the chaise, she waited for him. But when he came back in, one look at his glazed eyes and she knew whatever he'd learned was disastrous.

"What's wrong?" She stood.

Grant stepped closer, grasping her upper arms. "I won't sugarcoat this, babe. The Paris police found Ahmed Suleiman the day before yesterday. In his apartment." Grant brushed hair back from her cheeks. "He's dead, Coco. Murdered."

"Oh, Grant, no! He hated violence."

"He didn't deserve this then. He was tortured."

Tears burned her eyes. "How?" she rasped.

"His tongue was cut out and left on the table by his body. Beneath his tongue was a note."

"Claiming responsibility?"

"And giving a warning."

To whom? "What did it say?"

"'Beware to all women at the meeting of the Stars of the Desert'."

"It's true then! Hakim *is* hunting me!" She swallowed hard.

Grant tipped up her chin. His jaw set. His look fierce. "We'll get some caffeine so we'll both be firing on all cylinders." He gave her lips a light kiss and hugged her close.

"We'll sit and talk. Make a list of everything you know about Hakim and his buddies. What he said, what they did, how they all looked. We'll figure this out. Find a way to end this. Keep you safe. For all time. Do you hear me?"

"I do."

He examined her. "What are you thinking?"

She stepped backward and ran her hands through her hair. "I have to find Hakim before he finds me."

"We do," Grant corrected her.

She gave him a small smile. "Yes. We do. But *how*?" She folded her arms as Grant sat in the chair to watch her.

Which of the two radicals remaining was Hakim? Langley had pictures of suspects and she'd been over and over them. None had struck her as the two still at large. Had she made any mistakes in recollecting the attendees at that meeting? She'd been so certain about identifying the first two and then the third man in Madrid. Since Maria's attack, she'd been over and over the memory a thousand times. Discussed it as many times with her control, others at headquarters. She'd seen mug shots, action pix. So many, so often. Was her famous photographic memory failing her?

Another thought occurred to her. And she reached for her cell. Powered it up. Called the relay number to her control. She walked the floor, sat at the desk, paced again. Her phone rang.

"Hi," Coco said, then gave her code. She heard a click and a voice on the other end greeted her in a thick New Jersey accent.

"There is a problem in Paris," Coco told her control. "Have you heard about it?"

"Only this morning."

"Anything I need to know?" *And why the hell didn't you tell me?*

"We have a report but it is very brief. Perhaps you might visit?"

You read Grant's mind. Coco had to hold herself back from yelling her next thought. "Who would you suggest?" *Hook me up for once in your life! Earn your salary!*

"You have friends, colleagues in Paris."

My friends. My colleagues. Coco winced. "And what about our friends in Jerusalem?" Israeli international intelligence, the Mossad. *Those guys seem to know everyone, good, bad or worse.* "They must be interested in the event in Paris. Do they have any ideas?"

"I'll check and let you know."

You do that. "Thanks."

"I understand things worked out with the contract there in Venice."

"With the security firm, yes." *Grant's on board. More help than you, that's for sure.*

"Sheik Nasar is pleased then. Bravo."

"Thanks." *I did it for me, not you. I told you after Maria's attack I'm leaving the Company. I'm not cut out for it.* "Anything else I should know?"

"Not that I've heard."

Terrific. "Nothing about the theft from Sheik Nasar?"

"I can't help you there. That's your private business. Although I will say the Italian Guardia are not happy with Mr. Warwick's nosing into the theft."

Coco could hear the irritation in her control's voice, too. "What's that to you?"

"We try to keep Nasar happy – and he's not that your boyfriend is investigating."

Really? "Since Nasar hired him for security, don't you think that is rather odd?"

Control sighed. "I'm just saying..."

"Saying what?" Coco persisted.

"Watch your step. Find Hakim. Get this over with and then you can go back to photography."

And you? You can go back to incompetence with other agents. "Until next time, then."

Coco flipped her phone closed. As ever, she felt as if she'd been flicked off big-time by her contact in Langley. Must be nice to sit in a cozy office with buddies tucked safely into cubby holes making calls out to the world.

Well, she was definitely not in a secure little office. She had to work hard out here in the cruel world. In a few sentences, she told Grant what her control had said how no support was coming their way on the stolen artifact.

"We don't need their help," Grant assured her. "But I will check out the Guardia's displeasure with me. I did them a favor last year that they ought to repay. Meanwhile, what's your call on our next step?"

"How do you feel about going to Paris?"

Without blinking, he said, "I'll call my pilot and tell him to file a new flight plan. And I'll call Jamal Hussein, too, and tell him we'll postpone our arrival in Dubai tomorrow."

"He won't be happy."

"I had Todd get our forensics boys on one of our planes yesterday. I can't do anything anyway until I know what the facts of the theft are. And I have to learn what I can about Ahmed's death."

"Agreed."

But that was not the end of the line for her. She knew it. Felt it. She had to retrace her steps, her conclusions. That meant doing the one thing everyone said had been unnecessary. Go back to check the two suspects whom she'd cleared three years ago when she declared the Madrid terrorist a member of the radical group. True, the Israeli Shin Bet—their internal security—would not be happy campers that she had returned. They liked monitoring their own problems. But monitoring was not her job.

My job is to solve this puzzle. Find the two other radical men still out there who attended that meeting. See if one of them claims to be Hakim.

She hit the redial on her phone to call control again. But she clicked off. She had the addresses for both suspects and she remembered how to get there. She needed no help from control. *Hell, when had she ever gotten any?*

She gazed at the one man who promised her help...and love. And if she could find this man Hakim, straighten out this puzzle, she stood a chance of getting out of this hunt. Stood a chance of living a normal life...with Grant.

That's what I want to do. Find these men, stop them and let the pros take over.

I have to do this. For my country. For Grant's safety and any hope for me to get out of this alive.

Chapter Seven

She was still as tight as a drum when she and Grant arrived at Marco Polo Airport and took a shuttle out to the private jet hangar. When she caught sight of Grant's sleek private flying fortress, she had to grin. "Money suits you well."

He assisted her up the gangway into the main cabin. "Nothing like poverty when you're a kid to make you appreciate a dollar."

"I'll say." She did a three-sixty in the lobby of the plane. Well, she'd call it a lobby, but he might call it the entrance. Nothing plain could describe for her the elegance of teak and ivory, gold trim, and woven carpeting that led from the cabin door straight back through a seating area. Dotted with huge lounge chairs on bolted casters, the living area also sported a table for meetings or dining, a flat panel TV, galley and at the far end, a closed door.

She ran her hands over the buttery texture of the white leather chairs and hummed her approval. "Love your taste."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Come meet the pilot." He took her to the cockpit, a small space as well appointed as the cabin. "Mark Calderon. Coco Dalton. Mark is a crackerjack, although he is very modest about it all. In 2004, he used to rocket diplomats into the Green Zone in Baghdad."

"An artful dodger. Impressive," she told the tall, dark man whose Latino heritage gave him a smooth golden complexion many women would die for in more ways than one. "Nice to meet you, Mark. Glad you're taking us to Paris."

Mark greeted her. "We won't be dodging anything today. Weather's good. No turbulence. We should be pulling into Orly in about two hours, give or take the tower's routing skills." He took hold of the cockpit door. "If you'll excuse me, I've got to file my plans."

She nodded at him. "Former Marine buddy of yours, too?"

"Yep." Grant led her back through the cabin toward the lounge chairs. "Plus Mark, Cord and Tate Ryder and I all played high school football together."

"Once a team, always a team?"

Grant smiled at her. "Friends are hard to come by. You learn a lot about someone when you work with them. Would you like a drink? Water? Coffee?" He had led her to the galley and pushed open a mini-refrigerator stocked with every imaginable concoction.

"The Italian orange." She ran her hands over the countertop, noted the microwave and the toaster oven as he opened her soda. "How long have you owned the plane?"

"Over a year. Bought it secondhand from a bank in New York. When the economy tanked last year, they had a fire sale. I offered them cash below asking price to help douse their flames."

She chuckled and accepted the bottle from him. "Which bank?"

He named one.

She made a face. "Ouch. Your cash didn't save them from death."

"They didn't plan well. They weren't honest with each other. They deserved to fail." He took her hand. "Come, sit and let's talk."

When they faced each other in separate chairs, Grant examined her features. "You're worn out with this."

"If I hadn't known I was seeing you in Venice, if I wasn't able to persuade you to stay and help me," she admitted with a weary sigh, "I'm not sure I would have been able to see it through."

"What about your control? Doesn't he help?"

She shrugged. "She. And no, she's not much of team player."

"So I figured from what I overheard of your conversation. Why doesn't she play well with others?"

Coco wiggled her brows at Grant. "She sees me as her competition."

"Ah."

"Yeah." Coco took a sip of her drink. "She knows about you helping me. I told her my plan a few weeks ago. She wasn't happy, but I told her she hadn't sent me any other resources so I was enlisting my own."

"And did she run it up the chain of command?"

"I didn't ask. Don't know if I'd even get an answer if I had." Coco shrugged.

"You are probably right."

Coco considered her soda for a minute. "I need to go to Israel and Naples, too. Will you come with me?"

"Wherever you go, I'm there."

She let her gratitude shine in her eyes. "If I made a mistake in IDing any of the three under lock and key, I have to start somewhere. Hakim implies he is a brother of the man in Madrid. I need to return to Jerusalem to take one more look at the man Langley says is his older sibling. He lives in Jerusalem and teaches English at a college there. When I saw him three years ago, I didn't think he was one of the men at the meeting in the desert."

Grant nodded. "Do we have photos of this brother?"

"We do. I've seen them. All poor. Taken in little or no light. At angles that face recognition software cannot capture or analyze well. That's one reason why Langley has needed me from the start of this. The technology of algorithms is not perfect. It cannot take measurements and determine if those fit the body language, the posture or the changes aging makes. I am not perfect either, but I can try. I need to."

"I understand need." He caressed her features with his silver gaze.

His sweetness on such a big, bold man always melted her down to mush. "Thank you," she said soundlessly, "again."

He took a swig of his own drink. "Tell me about all five men in that desert meeting who you thought were radicals."

Coco began a tale she'd rehashed so many times, it was now almost a litany. "From their arrival, their attitudes gave them away. The body language. Severe posture. Straight as a rod. And haughty. Above all others. The way they listened to those who were more moderate, debating the values of compromise and then dismissing moderation as a means to attaining anything in government. Their arrogance toward women was appalling, too, by our standards. They ignored our presence. There were three of us. The other two were Egyptian women. None of us spoke, thank god. My Arabic is good, but it could never be taken for Egyptian Arabic or Palestinian or Saudi. Not anything in-country. You know what I mean?"

"I do." He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Can you describe to me what the two men who are still at large look like?"

"One was slim, elegant as a giraffe. For brevity, we call him Mr. G. Dark skin. Long beard." She put her hand to her cleavage. "Down to here. But trimmed. Severely cut."

"Wealthy?"

"Definitely. Manicured nails. Buffed recently to a high sheen." She spread her fingers as she remembered their mannerisms. "A man used to refinements. Elegant fingers. Delicate touches to cups."

"Any jewelry? Any birthmarks? Moles?" Grant leaned forward.

"No rings. Nothing distinctive on the face. As for a marks on his body, impossible to tell. They were all wearing long white robes. Even their shoes were the same. Black leather. Polished to an inch of their lives. Wingtips."

"And the second man? What was his appearance?"

"Shorter. Five ten, maybe. Blue eyes. Round face. Overweight. Mr. C. for chubby." She stuck her hands out, as if hers were the ones she'd glimpsed long ago on a strange man. "Fat fingers, blunt. A silver ring with a vine carved in the center. Thick band. Left hand. Pinkie finger. A mole on his left cheek, smack dab in the middle."

"And you have seen pictures of men whom they suspect is this man?"

"Only two possibles. Both suspects live in Naples up in the hills near Pompeii. No one is certain if either could be Mr. C. Especially me." She searched her memory. "Both suspects are very reclusive and the photos I have seen are blurry, all of them derivatives from low-res mass-market video cameras. Because of that face recognition software has not been helpful here, either. So I have never been able to declare either man is Mr. C. Langley is not happy."

"At the meeting in the desert, did C. speak? Say anything you can recall?"

"Quiet. Never said a word, this one."

"Didn't that seem odd? I mean, weren't they there to share ideas?"

"True, they were. I didn't think much of it at the time. I did point that out, but my control dismissed it."

"I'm not! What do you think explains his lack of communication?" Grant asked in a tone that was almost rhetorical.

"He can't talk. He shouldn't. Or he can't speak Arabic well. I wondered if Arabic is his second language or he grew up in another culture."

Grant nodded. "Like Italy."

"Right," she agreed.

"Do you know anything about these two suspects in Naples?"

"Yes, one is a lawyer. International tax law. The other one owns an import-export company."

"In Naples," Grant said wincing, "export-import can only mean one thing. A connection to the mafia who control all trade in southern Italy. Even the garbage collectors belong! If this guy is connected to the other radicals in the desert, this means we have a hookup between terrorists with Italian gangs. Not good. Damn awful, in fact. And so similar to a situation I just helped Tate Ryder out of in Mexico. Give me these two names. I'll see if I can get Todd to get a fix on them."

"No need. I have addresses." She gave Grant a comforting smile. "I have to take a look at all three. Closely. Again. Try to decide if one of them might be this man who threatens me. If I made a mistaken ID, I have to correct the error. As a woman I was kept well back at the beginning of that meeting in Egypt. When introductions were made, I wasn't able to approach closer. I heard no names. After we began to serve refreshments, I did hear much of the conversation. Enough to be alarmed by the five who were fanatics. This Hakim the Judge, I cannot place which one he might have been. I go by faces." She admired Grant's, so solemn now, so attentive. "I see character in faces." *Like I see in yours.*

Gratitude to him once more flooded through her. She slipped out of her chair and crossed the aisle to Grant. Falling to her knees, she meant only to kiss him, show him that in his features, she found strength and integrity. But when her mouth left his, he gathered her up to him and smoothed her hair from her cheeks. "We're going to find this guy."

She tried to smile. Knew there were two things she wanted in this life. Freedom from fear. And Grant. She adored him. She'd known it instantly three years ago when they'd met. She couldn't tell him then how she loved him. Had no right to tell him that now either, unless and until she was rid of Hakim and the terror of him stalking her. "Grant, if we don't find him —"

"Don't say that, babe. Don't even think it." He sank his fingers into her hair, then seared her lips with his own.

Her fingers were busy pulling his polo shirt out of his trousers and unclasping his fly. "I need something else to think about. Something scrumptious that feels and tastes like you."

He pushed her off his lap, stood and grabbed her hand. Striding toward the rear of the plane, he yanked open the far door and pulled her inside. Whirling her back against it, he pressed her to the cool wood and sank his tongue inside her mouth. He broke away, both of them gasping. "You want mindless?"

Her answer was to hook a leg around his thigh and nibble her way down his throat. Her hands yanked at his zipper and felt their reward when they filled with his cock. She would not be the only one without a thought in her head. And he'd been prepared for her, too, because Mr. Security Guy went commando. Humming her delight, she stroked his length. "You are so wonderfully hard." She pressed her lips to the pulse at his throat and found the head of his shaft already wet for her.

"Ready, too." He dug in his jeans pocket and produced a foil wrapper.

She giggled as she thumbed the pre-cum around his tip. "I like a man who's prepared."

He tore the packet with his teeth as he dragged her forward. "Babe, with you I walk around hard 24/7."

In her peripheral vision, she realized this was a bedroom. She beamed at him. At the foot of a bed, she tugged at his shirt and whipped it up and off. She rubbed her nose in the hair of his chest. "The gray is here, huh?"

He snorted as he rolled on the condom.

She stopped him. "Give that to me." She played one hand through his chest hair and hung onto the latex.

"What did you have in mind?"

She tilted her head, coy as a teenage girl with her hunky boyfriend. "If I told you," she crooned as she pushed his trousers over his hips and felt them fall to the floor, "I'd ruin the fun." She licked her lips as her gaze traveled down the glory that was Grant. Beautiful pecs, yeah. Tapered waist, hard abs. Sinew and might all the way to his groin. No gray there. She grinned and wound her fingers in his black curls. Then cupped his balls with one hand, and wrapped the other around his thick rod. "I think you'd better lie down for this."

His silver eyes flashed wickedly at her. "I get a reward?"

"The sooner you go down," she whispered, "the sooner you will."

His face went stark. Putting one calf to the mattress, he fell backward.

"Wow." She knelt and noted the length and girth of his cock, tall and proud. "Rocket material." She pushed his thighs wide and nestled between them, placing the latex on the bedspread for later. Her lips almost touching his hot skin, she whispered, "Let's see if I can make it go off."

His eyes on her, he uttered nonsense as she put her lips to the base of his shaft and ran them up to his purple head. She licked off his pre-cum and reveled in his guttural praise. "Sweet stuff," she commended him with a wink. "I'm gonna take all you've got."

He gulped.

She rolled one of his balls while she sank her whole mouth over him. He said something like *un-hunh!* and flung himself out against the mattress.

Three years ago, she'd had him in her mouth. Often. As much as he'd let her, when he wasn't burying his cock deep inside her pussy. But she'd never been able to keep him in her mouth long enough to make him come. Today, she was determined to give him her all and take everything he had inside her. It was the least a girl could do for a guy who treated her kitty so well.

She opened wide and sank her lips down over his soft torrid skin. Beneath her touch, she felt his shaft pulse and jerk. She delighted in the way she heard him smack his lips as she sucked him with hers. She was good at it, too. For a woman who hadn't ever given a blowjob to any man but this one, she was impressed with how she was able to swallow most of him. Opening her throat, breathing deeply, she tried for lower and harder. The way he groaned, she figured she was doing okay for a gal still learning the ropes.

She rubbed her breasts against the edge of the bed, loving the friction. Giving him some of her own, she sent the edge of her teeth up to the crown of his cock. He cursed beneath his breath and she concluded she got the technique down.

He leaned up on his elbows and locked gazes with her. "You do that again, I'm gonna lose it, babe."

"Good," she tossed back and went about her business of making him happy. One hand squeezed his balls tenderly, but her mouth pumped him hard and fast. Then slowly and sweetly. She licked his length, powerful, red and hard beyond her sexiest dreams. Shivering, she smiled and preened, defined him with the tip of her tongue again up one side and down the other, then swirling over his tip. Making him groan. She was proud of herself. Spurred on by her success, she gave him a repeat performance. This time, her little licks became sucks and her adoration of his red helmet was punctuated by her own groans of delight.

He sank his fingers in her hair and held her head steady. Then he growled and exploded in her mouth, the warm cum darting to the back of her throat. She swallowed over and over. He tasted wonderful. She caressed his balls and his root, then eased her mouth up off him as he sighed, spent. She felt drugged with his response and her own was to press her lips along his beautiful veined length and kiss his tip.

Hands of steel hauled her up and rolled her to the mattress. Wrenched her tee shirt up over her head. Vied with her own hands to unhook her jeans and peel them down her legs. "God," he muttered as he placed a full moist palm over her pussy, "no panties. Such a smart cookie."

She spread herself out on the bed. "So eat me."

Beneath them, she felt the engines go from a purr to a roar. Just like her body did as he pressed the sides of her knees to the mattress.

"Like your women spread out wide, huh?" she teased him.

"I like my woman totally open to me," he corrected her, "so I can put my hands all over her." He snapped on the condom, then demonstrated by putting his palms to her moist tissues and rolling her wet lips open. "Prettiest pussy I've ever seen. Pink and drenched in juice."

"If this is what you're doing for takeoff, sweetie," she told him as she felt him expose her tiny bundle of nerves to the air. "I am so ready."

He sank a finger inside her core and she purred.

He pressed her clit with his thumb and followed it with a suck of his mouth.

She wiggled closer.

He stroked her G-spot with his finger and she felt her pussy get wetter. "I've got lots of fuel for your rocket, sweetie."

The engines revved higher.

So did hers when Grant grabbed her ankles and put them over his shoulders, then slipped his cock deep inside her pussy.

She inhaled, wild to watch him in his passion. "Honey?"

His hands cupped her ass and he was focused on how they fit together. "Yeah?"

The plane began to rumble down the runway.

She bounced along, Grant inside her. "Whoa," she laughed as Grant smoothly pumped away.

"Hang on!" he was chuckling, too, as he braced two arms to the headboard and held her in place with his hips and his cock, buried tightly inside her. As he rocked them both, she clenched his shaft with her vaginal muscles. Hanging on to Grant Warwick was her only ambition in life now. And she caressed him and hugged him, her pussy claiming the part she craved. He shuddered and buried his fingers in the flesh of her hips. She clamped down on him until finally he drove her up against the headboard with three huge pounding strikes that took her over the edge of consciousness.

"I thought the foreplay added new meaning to the term cabin fever," she told him minutes later when the plane leveled. "Takeoff was terrific. But you know," she whispered as she curled her fingers in his chest hair, "I've never been a member of the mile high club."

“I take it that’s an invitation, lady.” He beamed at her. “Let’s make certain you never want to fly commercial again.”

Chapter Eight

The late afternoon rain in Paris darkened her mood. Dreary and chilling, the drizzle made Coco shiver even in the new trench coat she had bought in the boutique near their hotel. She pulled the lapels higher as she and Grant waited in a tiny café in the Marais sector of the old City for his contact at the embassy. The man was half an hour late. She sipped her thick hot chocolate, then scooped up a forkful of her raspberry gateau to offer to Grant.

His dark brows knit together in appalled delight as he swallowed and licked his lips. "I can feel my arteries clog as we sit here."

"My thighs are spreading, too," she added and had to warn him with a grin at the intimate suggestion that made his brows arch. "Down, boy. Poor phrasing. Where's your man?"

"Got hung up, I guess. If he's not here in ten minutes, I'll call. Been to Paris often?" he asked and sipped his coffee.

"Four, five times when I was young and I came along with my parents when my dad was a delegate to one peace conference or other. But as an adult? No." She covered one of Grant's hands atop the table. "I've only passed through Paris on my way to some war or other."

He gazed into her eyes. "We'll come back and stay for a week when this is over. We'll play tourist and go to the Louvre and Malmaison."

"Have you ever been to Versailles?" She caught his enthusiasm for the diversion. "We'll take the Metro. It's so fast. I know a scrumptious bistro, open all day, dark with lots of French lace at the windows and china as thin as your skin. Best of all, they serve escargot, in a huge bowl, drowning in butter and garlic."

He laughed. "Woman, you love to eat!"

"Yes!" She feigned dismay. "And it's a problem too."

"Why's that?"

"I've had no time to learn how to cook, but worse, no one to share the bounty with."

He stared at her lips. "I can help you on both counts."

She held her breath. "When this is over?" *If it ever is.*

"A promise," he whispered and turned to look through the front glass. "Here he is. From the American Embassy."

"What's his name again?" Nerves were making her memory dull.

"Nick Chekov."

"Nice Irish boy, huh?"

"Yeah. We were in the service together. He's the assistant to the military attaché at our Embassy here."

That did mean something to her. So many attachés had a second job. For Langley.

One look at Chekov and she had to blink. If ever there was a body double for Grant it was this tall, muscular man with a hearty handshake and a gravelly voice. But there the similarities ended. Where Grant was dark, Nick was fair. Where Grant was bald, Nick had a wild crop of curls. Where Grant seemed patient, Nick talked in clipped patterns, bounding over issues as if he were on fire. He seemed to personify what Grant called him—Check.

"Who's investigating the murder?" Grant asked him soon after he sat down and refused a drink.

"French police. Interpol came in, too. They're finishing up the DNC now. Lucky I could learn about the note."

"What's a DNC?" Coco asked Check.

"Jargon." He grinned. "Means forensics, you know, dust and clean up."

Grant leaned forward, lowered his voice against the six other patrons. "Anything you can tell me about the note? The paper it was written on? The pen or pencil used?"

"The note? Written on a phone book page. Torn out of the directory right there in Suleiman's apartment. The writing implement? A blunt black magic marker. Must have taken it with him. Police haven't found it."

Grant paced. "What about the nature of the room?"

Nick shook his head. "Looks odd."

"Why's that?" she asked him.

"Nothing's disturbed, except the body. He was badly beaten. But the room wasn't tossed. Odd for a murder scene where the perp wanted to extract info. And so far, no latent fingerprints. I made a few inquiries and we can go there, if you like."

"Ahmed's apartment? We can get in?" Coco was astonished.

Nick nodded. "It's about two blocks away off the Rue de Rosiers."

Grant examined her features. "I think we should."

She grabbed her purse. "Let's go."

The apartment was on the top floor of a huge home with low mansard roof of red tiles. Nick had a key, removed the French police tape across the door frame and let them in.

"Don't touch anything," he advised. "Just look."

Ahmed's entire living space was only as large as her living room back home in D.C. Dust over the flimsy table and kitchen counters. Carpet that was stained and curling at the corners of the walls. A mattress flung on the floor, bed linens threadbare and rumpled. One big hole in the carpeting. All of it covered in transparent plastic sheeting to preserve whatever evidence remained that the police had not yet picked up for analysis.

"What's that from?" Coco asked Nick, pointing to it.

"Police cut out the carpet where the body was in a chair. They wanted to test the rug for fibers and blood. See if they could get anything to lead them out to a suspect."

Grant crossed his arms. "Did they take anything to the lab besides the carpet?"

"Not as far as I know, no," Nick responded.

"So then, this is all he had?" she asked Nick as she pulled open the only closet door. "Did they take his clothes?"

"I would assume."

"All his furniture, too?"

"There were no major pieces of furniture except that table there. As you can see from the surfaces of the counters and some of the items spread on the floor, the forensics guys dusted for fingerprints on what was here. But they've gotten only Suleiman's prints."

Coco was troubled about Ahmed's possessions. "What about a computer?" Coco pressed him. "Have the police looked at his files, his emails?"

Nick shook his head. "No computer."

Grant turned to Coco. "Do you know if he had one?"

She shrugged. "He got in touch with me by email. I just assumed he had a computer."

Grant and Nick stared at each other. The two of them fixed on her at the same moment with almost the same question. "Could he have had a laptop?"

She walked the perimeter of the tiny room. "The only way to know that, minus the hardware itself, is to see if he had a hard-wired internet connection." She stopped and pointed. "Here."

Coco had a deeper feeling of foreboding and looked at Grant. "Ahmed contacted me via email. If he accessed his email account through his own computer—desktop or laptop—then he may have other info on there." *About me. Others who attended the Stars of the Desert meeting.* "This murderer is a radical, that much I know. And if he has a list of

people from Ahmed's computer that he wants to act on, so many more people could be in danger from him."

Grant bent to the floor and peered at the cut wire through the plastic layer. "Forensics should check the fingerprints on that cable."

Nick agreed. "If you two know special facts about this case, you need to talk to the Paris police yourself."

She caught Nick's golden gaze. "I can't. I'm with the Agency, too. And what I know is very top secret."

The embassy man's stiff demeanor wilted a little. He smiled. "I see. That changes things."

She tipped her head. "Meaning?"

"I'll let you know what else develops in this case."

Coco nodded. "Good of you." But she didn't feel good at all. Not about the cable or the fact that the police had missed its significance. The hair on her arms stood up and she clasped her arms together. Was she just cold?

Grant stood. "Have the police gotten any ideas about why his tongue was cut off?"

Nick glanced at Coco, and she knew he was deciding if she could take the ugly answer. "Either he told them what he wanted to know...or he didn't. Do you both have any idea what the murderer wanted from Suleiman?"

"Yes," Coco admitted and hated to.

Grant said, "We need to learn before he hurts anyone else."

Nick inhaled. "I hear you. Let me do a hustle on the cable analysis. How long you both here for?"

"Tomorrow," Grant told him, grabbing his hand. "Thanks for this, man."

"How do I get in touch with you?"

"Cell phone," Grant told him and gave him the number. "It's a secure line."

* * * * *

Grant hailed a taxi to take them back to their hotel. Their ride was a silent one. He was reviewing the interview with Nick and making a list of items he had to investigate on his own. Without Nick. More work for Todd. Grant wondered if Coco was assessing the same issues. She was certainly quiet enough and he decided to let her be. Minutes later, he took her arm as they climbed the steps of the George V to the reception area. "Let me check the desk. I expect a package."

Sure enough, he had the small special delivery that Todd had sent from Washington this morning. This would brighten Coco's mood. He grinned. *I'll make certain of it.*

As they took the elevator up to the tenth floor, he asked her what she'd like for dinner. He'd take her out to one of his favorite restaurants, ply her with all the foods she loved, fish, cream, butter and sugar. "We'd better work out in the gym in the morning or we'll be able to wiggle the flab!"

"Agreed. What do you have in the box?" she asked him as he opened the door to their suite.

"Surprise," he told her deadpan.

"Really? I'm intrigued." She spun in front of him to walk backward past their living room to their bedroom. She dropped her purse to the floor and widened her eyes at him. "For me?"

"None other. But you have to work for it."

She opened her coat, unbuttoning it and loosening the sash. "What kind of work?" She let the coat drop to a chair as he backed her to the wall and nuzzled that special spot behind her ear.

"Take your clothes off and I'll show you."

She reached to the hem of her tee shirt to rip it off, but he caught her hands.

"Come over here, by the mirror." He led her to a six-foot-tall cheval. "Do it now." He whipped off his trench coat, loosened his tie and positioned one of the chairs to face her. Then he sat, toed off his shoes, dispensed with his socks and unbuckled his belt and his fly. Hard as hell for her in an instant. The package in his fingertips, he crossed one ankle over a knee. "I like to watch."

"I remember." She winked at him. "Let's see if I can inspire you."

She began to move in slow motion. A lift of her tee shirt here, a slow unzip of her jeans there. A bump. A slither. A flash of material as she flung her shirt up over her head and threw it at him. He laughed as he peeled it from his face. She twirled to face the mirror and there in the glass, her deep purple gaze met his. Her mouth was open, her lips plump and wet. She shimmied out of her jeans, her hips and her thighs and her blonde pussy in his view. *No panties. She was his woman all right.* She was into the dance of it now, away from her troubles, her eyes half closed, her cheeks pink and her breath picking up tempo.

Like his.

She did a little bump and grind and her jeans slid slowly as molasses down her trim legs. He swallowed hard on desire. He loved her knees, he hadn't lied the other day. He liked her calves, too. Hell, even her toes were a turn-on. He was so damn lost in her.

She whirled around. Her fingers of one hand lifted a breast, like an offering to him. Her nipple pointed at him. Yeah, that was his, too. One of her hands drifted lower, swept down her waist and paused at her navel. She knew he liked her outie bellybutton.

"Come here, pretty lady," he beckoned her in rough voice, "I've got something for you."

"I did well?" she asked as she straddled his legs and sat, her pelvis tilted up, her lush labia open and sending up a musky aroma of her need.

His cock strained at the fly of his trousers and he could feel the surge of cum that demanded he fuck her soon. He sank two fingers inside her sopping wet cunt. "Very."

She licked her lips. "Gonna let me see what's in the box?"

He found her clit and rubbed delicately around the swollen nub. "Before or after?"

"Hmmm. How about during?"

He barked in laughter. Sent his fingers up inside her higher, harder.

She bucked.

"On the bed," he ordered her. As she climbed off and took his hand, he grabbed the package. And where the hell was a condom?

When she got to the bed, she sat.

"No," he instructed, "on your knees." He ripped open the brown wrapping paper, slid the string off and had to pause to appreciate the sight he was offered.

Coco had slipped onto the golden coverlet, her forehead to the satin, her arms before her as if she were praying. The soles of her feet pointed at him, but so did her lovely ass. Straight up in the air, her cheeks really did look like they formed a heart with the point composed of the deep pink petals of her pussy. From here he could smell her. He inhaled, his nostrils flaring with the heat of her. He almost dropped the blue box. He caught it, and sent his gaze back to the luscious sight of her. The long, frilly edges of her cunt were swollen and hanging in sweet invitation from her channel. What made him swallow and had his cock jumping was the cream that coasted her tissues.

"Come closer, sweetie," she pleaded, petulant. "And for god's sake, will you please take your pants off so I can play with your cock?"

He grunted as he stripped. *Play with me?* "Oh, no, you had me in the jet. Now it's my turn." He thumbed open the box, admired in a glance the workmanship of the gold ring on the stud, encrusted with five tiny diamonds. He extracted it. The box fell to the floor. He put the ring over one knuckle of his index finger and climbed up on the bed behind her.

She wiggled back against him.

He smacked her on one buttock. Then bent to lick her and bite her in the same place. "My party, babe."

She mewled in objection.

But she halted.

He smiled and went back on his haunches to admire the pretty picture and full fragrance of her lacy pussy ass-up for him. He covered her glistening pink core with an open palm. She felt like molten satin.

"Nice and warm," she whispered.

He dropped his third finger inside her core. Juicy and hot.

"Pet me," she pleaded.

He stroked her slow and easy. She was swelling against his flesh in sweet response.

She pressed back, a cry in the back of her throat. "You want me to beg?"

"Maybe later, we play that game." He slipped his index finger inside her and let the diamonds massage her clit.

"Oh! God!" she crooned. "What *is* that?"

"You like it?" he continued to caress her with the diamonds and rub of the gold against the big mound of her ball of nerves.

"I do, I do," she groaned and moved with him, drenching her channel and his fingers in more hot juice.

He fucked her with his fingers then, rhythmically, forcefully, until he had to have a taste of her, pulled his fingers out and bent to eat at her sweetness from behind. This way, he got his tongue inside her in a new angle that thrilled him and made her scream. He nipped at her delicate edges over and over, then licked her to soothe her.

She was panting, groaning when he flipped her over and spread her legs wide. Lucky for him, he had dumped a fistful of condoms in the nightstand drawer right after they'd checked in. He yanked the drawer open, tore one off and snapped the latex on. In the next second, he buried his cock deep inside sweet, hot pussy.

"Oh, *yes!*" she shouted as she gripped his hips and held him to her. Wild to take her fast and hard, he pumped into her at a clip that stunned him and had her groaning with each stroke. He slammed into her, holding her as if he'd never let her go. She arched her hips, offering up her cunt to his relentless claim, until he felt her pussy clench and throb, milking him with a feral pulse. She tumbled into a fast, hard orgasm and he followed an instant behind. His cock as stiff as granite, his hips pounding against her juicy core, he felt himself drained of every ounce of strength. He sank to her side and pulled her against him. His lips against her forehead, he caught his breath and stroked her back.

"What *is* that?" She caught his hand minutes later to look at the ring.

"For your bellybutton." He displayed it, then put a finger to her navel and pressed. Could he impress her that she belonged to him? He meant to keep her until she admitted it. "Tomorrow, we'll go to the souk and have a jeweler pierce it and put this in." He held it up and in the sunset drifting through the sheers against the windows, he saw the diamonds sparkle.

She took it from his finger and put it on hers to hold this way and that. "Your eyes on me," she said and reached up to pull him down for a spellbinding kiss.

In more ways than one, babe.

When their breathing had returned to normal, he strode into the bathroom and took down from their hooks the white terry house robes. He encouraged her to put hers on and he donned the other. Sitting on the bed, he pulled her next to him.

"What bothers you?" she asked. "Nick? Something at the murder scene?"

"The cable cord, yes. I'm surprised they didn't find that and check it out." He caught her puzzled expression. "What about Nick?"

"I don't know. I didn't like him. And I have always liked your friends. Mark. Cord. Tate." She was frowning. Then she shook her head. "Sorry. I need to blow that off. He just rubbed me the wrong way. Too stiff. I don't know."

"We've got bigger problems."

Her big purple eyes were sad. "Lots of them. If Ahmed's murderer took his computer, then the culprit probably also has my email. My website. My ID. My —" She sat straighter and looked at him in horror. "I never thought, but of course, they have my office address, too."

"And with your real name, they can easily reference your father." Grant hated to say it. "And also —"

"Oh, my god, Grant! My mother!" She rose up on her knees on the bed.

"I'll get Todd to put a detail on her now." He turned, in search of his phone.

"The house! And her office!"

"Right, both." Where the hell had he put his phone?

Ah. The living room in his trench coat.

His distinctive ring led him right to it.

Fishing it out of his pocket, he read the caller ID. *Nick*. "Hey, what's happening?"

"Found out from the Paris homicide squad that there was no computer in the room when they went in."

Oh, Christ. Grant rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Okay. Do you have them analyzing any fingerprints on the cable cord?"

"I suggested that would be a good idea. They wanted to know where I got the idea there might have been a computer in the apartment when the man died."

"And you said?"

"A little birdie told me."

"The usefulness of being on the embassy staff, eh?" Grant scoffed. "Let me know what they say."

"Where are you staying in Dubai? The new Oasis hotel is supposed to be decadent."

"Heard of it, but we have a change of plans."

"Oh?"

"We're taking a detour to Jerusalem."

"The King David then?"

Something about the query didn't sit right with Grant. "Maybe."

"Working?" Nick joked. "Or praying?"

"A little of both."

Chapter Nine

She pulled the draperies open to view the solemnity of the gray Old City walls, capped by the golden Dome of the Rock and a Russian church tower within the confines of Jerusalem. She had lived in the newer part of this ancient city for two years when she was a teenager and her father was an American envoy. This hotel, small but elegant, didn't exist then. In her travels here since her dad's posting, Coco had always stayed near the American Colony compound outside the Old City's walls. But she knew the city well, its weaving roads, its busses and bustling markets. Its people. But when Grant had changed their reservations from the famous King David Hotel one block away to this one, his action left her wary.

"We're still so close to the Old City that we can walk in New Gate," he had explained, where the four-lane ring road around the fourteenth-century ramparts assured a visitor of hailing a taxi quickly. And close as they were to the Arab quarter and the souk, they'd easily found the jeweler her mother had often patronized. The wizened old man was thrilled to see Coco and quickly and painlessly pierced her navel, then inserted the solid gold ring with five small diamonds. Afterward, he demanded she and Grant stay and eat a snack of hummus with ripe red tomatoes, freshly baked pita and strong black coffee.

"Traffic is sparse today," she told Grant as they waited now for her friend to arrive and take them to the east side of town on a day when few taxis were in service.

"Shabat," he replied, looking up from reading a text message on his cell.

"Yes. Friday after two o'clock begins the Jewish Sabbath and the majority keep to the laws and avoid using cars and modern conveniences." She and Grant had quickly finished their lunch awhile ago because the restaurant was about to close until

sundown Saturday. "For Christians and Muslims, Friday is a day to get around town easily."

"That'll make our job easier today." He smiled at her.

"If Jason ever gets here," she worried.

"He's with an international aid organization, so he probably works around-the-clock."

"Still, Jason has always been late for everything."

"Hmm. He takes after you?" Grant teased.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'd say you can be replaced, but that is not true."

His gaze turned hard as steel. "Don't ever try it."

"Never," she whispered.

The house phone rang.

"That's probably him now." Grant picked it up, listened to the receptionist and after a minute said, "Yes, great. Send him up."

Jason Gregory had the tall, slim, pale look of a man who needed a vacation, a tan and a life, and not necessarily in that order.

Coco was shocked at how slim her old friend from high school had become. At thirty-three, he appeared a decade older. Gray strands threaded through his sable brown hair. Her first instinct was to call attention to it, but her manners took hold as they hugged each other.

"You look terrific, kid," Jason told her as his blue eyes sparkled. "Though I'd say the worry lines don't add a lot."

"I'm going to try to improve that with your help," she told him as she hooked her arm in his. "Meet Grant Warwick." The two men shook hands. "He owns Warwick Security and we met three years ago in Washington. Grant is helping me, too."

Coco watched Jason assess the man who was at least two inches taller and weighed twice as much. She had to smile at her old friend's unabashed assessment of her lover. "Does he pass inspection?"

Grant grinned. "Please say yes. I assure you, Jason, I've worked hard to get here."

That did the trick for Jason who ended his exam and gave Grant a hearty grin. "Seal of approval, done. You guys ready? It's going to rain, so we'd better grab umbrellas from the concierge."

Downstairs at the front door, Jason pointed a remote at his car to unlock it and they got in, Coco in front, Grant in the back seat.

Jason waved his thanks to the doorman for the courtesy of the parking space, then turned the ignition.

"I have the address." She told Jason the specifics. "I think I recall this neighborhood, but I wanted you along to tell us." She also wanted the assurance of a friend driving them around and the impartial appearance of the organization's marked car.

"Glad to help. I recognize the street." Jason pulled into the ring road traffic and zipped around the periphery of the Old City walls, headed for the east side of town, the Palestinian sector, administered by the Israeli government since 1967.

Within ten minutes, Jason parked on a residential street and looked at a two-story structure with ornate green shutters and a patio. The rain that had begun as a shower was now a downpour.

"This is the right apartment," Coco assured the two men. The color of the shutters was no longer red, but this was definitely where she had come before to examine the brother of the man she'd identified in Madrid. She checked her watch and wondered how long they would have to sit to glimpse anyone coming in or going out.

"Tough to see anything with the shutters closed," Grant commented.

"I'll go check the mailbox listing," Coco put her hand on the door handle.

"No, you won't," both men objected.

"I'll go," Jason volunteered.

He hopped out, pulling up his collar against the rain.

"And he wanted us to bring umbrellas," Coco jested, as she watched Jason peer at the mailboxes on the front porch alcove, then turn toward the small market next door.

"He's going to ask around," Grant said. "How's his Arabic?"

"Better than mine," she responded.

Within a few minutes, Jason was sprinting out of the shop and into the driver's seat.

"Our man and his family have moved," he announced, swiping rain from his hair.

Coco clutched. *What now?*

"Don't worry. The owner of the store told me where they've gone." Jason was grinning as he turned the engine and eased them into the road.

Coco was so pleased she could have kissed him. "How did you do that?"

Jason kept his attention on his driving as he shifted up to a higher speed. "Told them I needed to find him, that's all. Which is true. But the shop owner says that the family moved but keep the apartment for when they come into the city occasionally. That's all."

"But he taught college courses here," she said, surprised that he'd moved.

"Now he teaches in Ramallah." Jason glanced at her and named a small university.

"So we're going through a checkpoint into the West Bank?" she asked him.

"We are. Ever been through?"

"A few times," she told him, full of trepidation that her control had not known about this move. *Or had she just decided to keep me in the dark?*

"You two do have your passports, I hope?"

"Jason," she assured him, patting her purse and feeling more dismay at this turn of events than she hoped she showed, "we don't leave home without them."

Grant grumbled about the change in plans. "Did the shop owner give you any information about the man and his family?"

"Just that the man, his wife and two sons left three years ago."

Coco stilled. *The timing means my control should have known about this.*

Grant was silent in the back.

Jason glanced at Coco. "Why? Is the timing of the move significant?"

"Maybe. Did the shop owner have any ideas why they left Jerusalem?"

"Got a job in Ramallah. Moved quickly, though. Does that help?"

Coco swiveled to look at Grant. "A lot, I think."

Grant said, "Jason, tell me. How difficult is it for someone to move from Jerusalem across the Separation Wall?"

"From what I hear, not tough at all."

Traffic began to slow as they approached a long line of cars and trucks snaking toward a concrete forty-foot-tall guard tower. Brown-uniformed Israeli guards with machine guns worked the lines of cars, examining passports, and checking out vehicles entering the West Bank. From either side of the tower stretched the twenty-five-foot-tall slabs of concrete strung together like gray dominos over hills and into valleys.

Waved past the gates by the guards, they picked up speed along the two-lane highway. Within an hour, they entered Ramallah, a city that resembled Jerusalem's new city with its pale ivory and ochre buildings, its bustling populace. Some women in modern dress, others in their long gowns and head scarves, *abaya* and *hijab*. The language now Arabic, instead of Hebrew. The aromas of cumin and cinnamon reminiscent of the souk in Jerusalem.

Once more they came to a stop in a residential neighborhood. At four in the afternoon, people walked the street, women chatting over fences, men coming home from work. A few houses down, a group of four boys played soccer in the road. The

house that she and the two men examined was a pale ivory with paler white filigree around the front porch and the windows.

"This house looks deserted, too," Grant observed.

The children in the street caught Coco's eye. "See those boys?"

"Want me to drive down?" Jason asked.

"No, too obvious. Stay here." She reached into her purse and pulled out a tiny digital camera. She focused on one of the boys, hit the zoom and turned the dial to movie mode. "Nothing like genetics," she murmured with a lump in her throat. "This boy—see the one in the red jersey? What would you say he is? Ten? Twelve?" She stopped the movie mode and switched to high-resolution picture capability, then continued taking one shot after another. "The shape of the jaw. The eyes. The brows. Oh, yes!"

Grant sat forward, his voice reverberating in her ear. "You think he is related to your man?"

"Has to be," she said, shot a few stills of the house and put her camera down. A woman came out, called to the boy and entered the house again. "Uh-oh." She dug in her purse for her sunglasses and a scarf.

"What's the matter?" Grant asked, his tone wary.

"The man getting out of that car?" She lowered her face as she tied the scarf and jammed on the glasses.

"Which?" Jason asked.

"The one that just parked. The man in the gray suit waving to the boy."

Grant put a hand to her shoulder. "What about him?"

She could barely get the words out. "He looks familiar. He and the boy are going into the house together?" She refocused her lens to a higher speed. The sun was setting, but she could see that the man and the boy were affectionate, knew each other well. "I don't understand," she said on a down note as the two figures entered the front door of

the house. Suddenly, it opened again and the man came bounding out, looking like he was headed straight for their car. "Oh, Jason. Get us out of here. Take that road to the left..."

But the man only picked up the soccer ball from the edge of the street and took it inside.

"That was a scare," she whispered.

Grant squeezed her shoulder.

As Jason drove them quickly away, she told Grant, "He's one of the men at the meeting in the desert."

"Which is he? G. or C.?" Grant pressed.

She looked over her shoulder at Grant. "Neither."

"But you said..."

"I know, I know." She raised her hand. Closed her eyes. "He's lost weight. That is not the sibling of the man I identified in Madrid. That is the man who would not talk."

Grant searched her eyes. "You're sure?"

"I know what I see. This man is one of the five I've been searching for. But he's not the one I expected to see here. He's not Palestinian. Not Arabic."

"I know," Grant said slowly. "He looks European."

Jason agreed. "I'd say Greek. Or Italian."

* * * * *

How could that be, she asked herself a thousand times on the ride back to Jerusalem. Jason and Grant remained silent, letting her think.

The still pictures Langley had shown her had been such poor shots. True. But had Langley confused the suspects?

Were some of the pictures incorrectly gathered or labeled? Mistakes happened. Intelligence was not always perfect. Face recognition software was good, but not foolproof. Neither was she, clearly.

The fact that made her stomach churn was that her control had not done her job. Had not told her that the man had moved, taken his family and gone to Ramallah. But then, was that man whom she'd just seen in Ramallah the brother of the man she'd sent to a black site?

He didn't look like it.

He didn't act like it.

He had totally different features, body build and posture. The boy was not his son, though. No. That she knew, too. The boy was the son of the Madrid radical or his nephew. That's how closely the boy resembled his elder male relatives.

But she had the pictures. Clear ones, this time. And in high resolution. She'd make copies of her camera disk when they got back to their hotel. She'd go to an internet café, and buy a flash drive. Transfer the jpegs. And send the disk to... *Not* her control.

Who then?

Her control's supervisor. Hey, it was jumping rank, but this had merit. If she got chewed out, terrific. If she lived, she wasn't interested in a promotion. *What the hell good would that do her if she were miserable, without Grant...or dead?*

But why the son or nephew of the Madrid radical lived in the same house with the other man bewildered her. *Did they all just live together for companionship and protection?*

"Where are the birth records and housing records kept for those in Jerusalem?" she asked Jason.

Jason shook his head. "No clue. I'd have to ask around. Why?"

"I have to discover why these people live together. Are they family? Related in some way? By marriage or blood? Or are they just a big commune? And I have missed that, too."

* * * * *

Grant itched to get out of the car, out of the West Bank and Israel, back into his own jet where he could feel secure and keep Coco safe.

Jason dropped them off at the front door of their hotel with a promise to find out where vital statistics were kept and see who had access to look at them. "I think you'll have to get Langley to ask the Israeli government to open private records."

Grant knew putting that request through channels could mean he'd be much older and grayer before they had results. "Thanks, Jason, for everything," he bade him goodbye as he and Coco stepped out of the car. "We'll be in touch."

Coco leaned in to peck Jason on the cheek. "I appreciate this."

"No idea what you are into, but stay safe," he told her.

"I have good help," she told him and waved him off.

Grant took her arm. "Let's walk a bit, shall we?"

The rain had subsided and dusk had turned the sky to silver storm clouds. They strolled along the sidewalk, virtually alone.

"Tell me all that you're thinking," he ordered.

"My control has holes in her head."

He snorted. "Big ones."

"A lot of people missed details. I should have been allowed to take longer to identify these suspects. I realize Langley wanted fast results three years ago, but what's the good of mistakes and sloppy work?"

Grant agreed. "Waste of time and money. And people die who shouldn't."

"Like Ahmed," she added and hooked her arm through his to press closer. "Grant, I want to go to Naples to look at the other man."

"I'll call Mark and tell him to prepare a flight plan."

She stopped and faced him, her expression forlorn. "I don't trust anyone now. Only you."

He tried to smile. "I'll keep earning that."

"Won't be hard. Let's get out of here, shall we?"

They passed through the quiet lobby and up the elevator to their floor.

Grant entered their room and stopped to survey it. Some air about it felt different. He saw it then. A hand print, or rather an indentation of a hand into the made bedding.

He raised his arm, barring Coco from entering behind him. "Wait," he mouthed to her.

She examined the room herself.

His gaze took in the glare of the lamplight and a swirl of a hand or a cloth across the surface of the night table. A flesh-colored powder seemed to have been swept away, and whoever did it, missed a light sprinkle near the base of the lamp.

He put a finger to his lips for her to be quiet.

She nodded.

He took his handkerchief from his trouser pocket and covering his index finger, put it to the substance. No change of color. He shot her a glance. Coco didn't use face powder. So what— "Oh, *shit!*" He threw the scrap of white to the floor and watched it begin to disintegrate at tiny pinpoints wherever the powder had touched the fabric.

He stepped backward. No fumes. No odor. But in concentration, it could do harm to fabric and perhaps to skin too.

He examined the floor and the bedspread more closely. Was it in their *bed*?

He didn't care. Wouldn't wait to find out more. He had to move them out of here. *Fast.*

She stood next to him now, clutching his arm, mesmerized by the handkerchief on the floor. "What *is* that?" she mouthed.

He took her arm and nodded toward the door. "You know, I'm suddenly hungry. How about we have some dinner now?" He glared at her, willing her to respond nonchalantly. Bugs could be anywhere.

She caught on that she shouldn't say anything about noticing the powder. "Yes. Dinner. I'm starved."

He took two steps toward the door.

"Wait! Wait!" She dug in her heels and pointed at her camera bag. "I need to freshen up a minute."

You mean you need the jump suit? He shook his head at her. "You look just fine," he proclaimed. "No need for that."

"But I do!" She tore away from him, ran to the bathroom and returned with a hand towel to drape over the handle of the bag. "See! I look better already!"

He growled in frustration. "Now, babe! I'm gonna eat a bear." *God knows, I'm loaded to kill one!*

Downstairs he didn't bother to stop to check out, but walked to the portico and hailed a taxi. "Tel Aviv," he ordered the driver as they got in the backseat. It was the way they'd come in from the airport an hour away, and it was the way they'd leave.

"Your things?" she asked him. "Mine?"

Grant had his phone on pronto, exhaling in disgust as the taxi driver sped them toward the highway west. "I'll call the hotel and tell them we'll check out tomorrow. That'll be enough time to get Todd out here to talk to the locals, bring a forensics guy and see what that substance was." He eyed the driver and with a wary look, warned her against saying anything too explicit. "We can do without our belongings. Especially if we can learn something from that event."

She crossed her arms, beginning to shake with the tension. "Crazy people. Wanting to scare us."

Put us in the emergency room. Grant didn't want to think about what else. The powder was on their bedding, maybe in the sheets. *If we had gotten into bed, we would have been eaten to the bone!*

She shook her head, horrified. "Mark? He's at that hotel, too. If they've done the same thing to him..."

Grant nodded, already calling his friend and pilot on his cell. "Hey, Mark, problem. Where are you? Sightseeing? Good for you. Listen. Do not go into your hotel room...." Grant explained only briefly, a wary eye on the cabdriver. "By any chance, did you have a conversation with anyone and mention where we were staying? Hmm. No? Okay. Thanks. I've got Todd flying over here and he'll get your luggage and check us out and pay the tab. Just leave. Catch a taxi for Tel Aviv and rev up the engines. We've got a change of destination. Right. Tell you when we see you."

It was half an hour later as they approached an airport security checkpoint for all cars entering the Israeli airport before he could speak freely. As the driver got out of the car to show his identification to the guards, Grant urged her to stretch her legs, too. He took her out the other side of the taxi.

"I began checking in Venice the first night we were together and I tell you we've had no tail. But someone knew where we were," he told her.

"My control knew we were in Jerusalem."

"Nick Chekov, too."

"And Jason," she added, "but he has no reason to do anything like that."

"I am not sure of anyone or anything at this point, Coco." He jammed his hands on his hips and watched a 747 overhead dip low for a landing at Ben Gurion.

"Did you tell Jamal, too?"

"I did," he replied. "And Todd."

"But none of them knew we were at that hotel," she added. "True?"

Grant nodded, wild to figure this madness out. "True." *Or was it?*

Chapter Ten

Coco bit her lower lip as she saw the late summer sun begin to set behind the villa she'd been watching for two days now. This was the one owned by the export-import guy. Picking up her camera and looking through the zoom lens, she saw no activity in the house that sprawled over the mountainside. A multi-story home, it sat nestled into the hill. *Easy to get in the windows with a grappling hook in the light of the moon.*

Her heartbeat picked up a notch at the idea she could get in and out easily. *But not if Grant throws a fit.* "No one was home in the other suspect's house, either. I get the impression everyone has gone south for the summer except you and me and Mark," she speculated to Grant.

And she was getting antsy. Grant had posted Mark on a detail to guard her at a distance. This was while Grant waited for a team of three to arrive in Naples and take shifts guarding Coco as she finished this job.

"Doubt it. This is June. August is beach month. Refresh my memory, how many people live in the house?" Grant asked, changing the tone and the subject.

"Three years ago, there were four. Two women, a young boy, and the one man whom I suspected was the fifth one — the shorter, fatter one at the meeting in the desert. A candidate for Mr. Chubby. But here, I could never get a good look at him or a decent photograph." She sighed and focused on a very testy Grant. Surveillance was not his favorite activity. *Not mine, either.*

And I know what to do about that. But damn if Grant is going to agree to let me put on the cat suit. He'd have a stroke at the very idea. But it's what I do well. Ballet and yoga are such good training for breaking and entering.

"Let's get dinner," he offered.

"Yes, and I'm tired. We had no lunch and we need a decent meal. Gnocchi with shrimp and calamari caught in the bay this morning, smothered in tons of fresh parmesan."

He chuckled, turned the key in the ignition of their rental car and took them into the village.

"The restaurant we went to yesterday was good. Let's go again."

"No, we'll go down the street by town hall. We don't want the same people to see us and wonder why we're back."

"Good point." She tucked her camera back into her duffle and her fingers brushed against the cat suit. *Time to bring it out, Coco. Get inside that villa.* "Maybe we eat and call it a day. What do you think?"

"Sure."

In the tiny café, they sat by the floor-length window drinking water and waiting for their order. The two of them were the only patrons, and opera music played over the stereo system.

Grant's cell phone rang.

"Hey, Todd, how are you?" he greeted his assistant and fixed on Coco's eyes as he listened. "Yeah, we're good. We chose a bed and breakfast on the outskirts of Naples."

Coco smiled. Grant was not telling anyone where they were staying. Not until he learned where the leak was in their network.

"You got our luggage? Wonderful. No powder on it. Interesting, that they would have just done the bed, I agree. Hm. A neurotoxin. I figured. Enough to be corrosive. All right. Any word from the Paris investigation? I see. Nothing new? No mention of fingerprints on the cable connector?" He frowned and looked up at Coco. "What do you mean? No, I was certain there was a computer in the room."

Coco felt her heart pick up tempo. Nick certainly should have called Grant by now to share any further developments about the computer—and he hadn't. But from Grant's expression...

She watched him close his phone up as if he were in a dream. "Tell me."

"Todd says he talked to a friend in the Paris police and the investigation into Ahmed Suleiman's murder is nearing an end. And no one has said anything about a computer or a laptop missing from the crime scene."

She leaned over the table and lowered her voice because new patrons sat down at the next table. "Nick said he would tell them." She folded her arms, stymied at this turn of events. "Unless they have another suspect."

Grant's features grew tight with strain. "But they don't."

"Maybe they didn't take Nick seriously." *Is that grasping at straws?*

Four more people entered and sat on the other side of the room.

Beneath his breath, Grant said, "A chance of that, yes."

"From the look on your face, you don't believe it."

"I don't," he affirmed and sat back to let the waitress serve them.

His eyes narrowed out on to the street in concentration, then he placed his napkin on the table and rose. "Eat your dinner. Wait here for me, okay?"

She watched him exit to the sidewalk and press a few buttons on his phone, then proceed to pace before the restaurant.

She glanced down at her lovely, large shrimp, took a bite of one and closed her eyes at the succulent taste of fresh seafood. Oh, to die and go to Italian heaven. She tried her gnocchi covered in ripe tomato and basil sauce. She was probably going to gain so much weight that when she tried to put the damn cat suit on, she'd rip the seams.

And then she gulped on her last bite.

Across the street, entering the town hall was the fat man she'd been looking for. His gait, his posture all spoke of the man in the desert. No doubt about it.

She started to rise from the table, but remembered where she was. She sat down. Raised her chin to catch the waitress's eye. Asked for the check.

Searching for Grant, she cursed that she couldn't see him.

The waitress was slow, but Coco got up, took out fifty Euro, knowing it was too damn much to pay the bill, but she had to follow the man. Now!

She apologized profusely in Italian to the young server proclaiming the food to be excellent, but she had to go. The woman stared at her, accepting the overpayment but clearly thinking the Americano had rocks in her head to leave without finishing her dinner.

Coco repeated her praise, left the café and pushed on her sunglasses as she dodged cars to cross the street.

On the curb, she whirled to check for Grant. He had his head down, deep in conversation, as he stood at the end of the block.

Coco knew she couldn't wait. She spun and ran up the steps.

Inside, the town hall was a marvel of medieval Italian architecture. Wood so dark it was almost black, mold so pungent it made her cough, gilt so bright it assaulted her eyes, even with sunglasses on. But she couldn't—dare not—take them off. She scurried along the corridors, right and left, looking into tiny offices, trying to look fairly normal in her haste, excusing herself when she entered and found no one who resembled the man she sought.

She sprinted up the main stairs to the second floor. Here the smell of mold was replaced by the aromas of stale coffee and lemons. She repeated her pattern of ducking into all the offices. *Where had he gone?*

She ran for the stairs again and nearly collided with Grant.

"What the hell are you doing, honey?" He grabbed her by her upper arms.

"He was in there! I had to follow him! But I can't find him. Unless he's hiding in a damn closet, how did he get out?"

"No clue. Come on, we'll go outside. You at the front door. I'll see if there is a back entrance, okay?"

An hour later, Grant walked toward her as she sat on one of the elaborately carved stone benches in front of the hall. Night had fallen and the streetlights showed his weary concern for her. "No luck."

"Me, neither." She scanned the town hall.

"Time to hang it up for today." Grant took her hand. "Mark needs a rest as much as we do." Grant raised a hand to his ear and pulled on his lobe, a sign to Mark, wherever he was, that they were going off duty for a while.

But desperation gnawed at her as Grant drove them back to their *pensione*. Someone knew what she was doing. Someone wanted to stop her. But that was not going to happen until she finished this job, identified the last men who had been in the meeting in the desert. The sooner she completed this, the better off she would be. Grant, too.

But would he ever agree to let her go alone into the man's villa? Hell, she doubted she wanted to. But she'd done this kind of thing before. Well, to be honest, *twice* before. Once in San'a to take a photo of a man Langley thought might have been in the desert that day. An Al-Qaeda suspect whom no one in the world had been able to find in more than three years. The second time she'd hunted in the suit was in Cairo, when Langley thought another radical who hid in the attic of a politician's house might be one of the men she sought. Both times she'd gotten up to the rooftops, slid into an open window, crept along the halls and found what she'd needed. In each case, one man. Alone. Startled by her presence. Her camera. Stunned by her precision and timing. Her quick actions. A picture. A portrait. Clear. Crisp enough for her to see that neither one had attended the meeting in the desert.

But this man she'd seen this afternoon was someone she needed to see up close. Very close.

Because she wasn't going to leave Langley's service without IDing these men. She had made a promise to herself. To her father. Finding the men who mattered most to him. The men who had ruined his last mission.

Inside their rooms, she tossed her purse on the desk and decided she needed to clear her head. Grant watched her silently as she gave him a sad look and warded him away with an open palm and a shake of her head. She went toward the bathroom.

Dropping her clothes to the cool tiles, she walked into the huge shower and let the three jets train hot water on her face, her breasts and her back. Hands to the wall, she closed her eyes and flexed her muscles. Soon, she felt the supple cover of Grant's sleek flesh to her own. His fingers teased one nipple and she sighed. His other hand delved into her pussy and she undulated. He pressed her back against him, teasing her clit with dexterous strokes that made her cry out for more. Burying his fingers in her hair, he inserted his cock between her thighs and slid his length along her swollen lips.

"All of you is mine," he told her gruffly, his mouth near her ear.

"I know," she said and wiggled her ass back against him. "Have every part of me."

He nipped her earlobe as he traced his thumb around her rosy hole. "Won't hurt you."

"I trust you," she murmured as he took cream from her cunt and spread it around her dark entrance.

"Talk to me, babe," he urged her as he prepared her with soft intrusions of one finger into her ass. "You want this?" He invaded her with a swift caress.

"I do." She gasped as he sank deeper inside her virgin hole. "I want all of you all the time."

He surged inside her more firmly. "Then tell me everything." His other hand caressed her clit and he had her panting, her pussy flooding with cream and expectation. "No hiding. No secrets." He pulled her around to face him and press her to the tiles. "I can feel you thinking, churning." He lifted her chin. "I love you, babe. Badly. Deeply. And I want you forever."

Overjoyed at the declaration she had wanted for years, she tried to kiss him.

But he caught her, his hand caressing her throat. "You let me inside your sweet pussy and you can let me take you in your luscious ass, but you and I aren't gonna make it through this or have any future at all unless you also let me inside your big clever mind."

She smiled at him with trembling lips. "Grant Warwick. I am amazed how well you know me."

He clamped her to his side and turned off the jets. Then he led her outside the shower to stand on the fluffy rug. There, he wrapped a huge towel around her, rubbed her down and picked her up in his arms. In their bedroom, he stripped back the coverlet and laid her down. Hovering over her, he brushed her wet hair from her cheeks and met her gaze with his own intense one. He slid to the floor, to his knees and opened her thighs. Her pussy at the edge of the bed, he rolled open her labia and nuzzled her channel. He licked her and fondled her folds until she moaned. Inserting one set of fingers up inside her sopping channel, he sent two fingertips of the other hand into her ass.

Then he massaged her until she grabbed for his shoulders, the sheet and her sanity. She pounded and throbbed and just when she would have screamed, he flipped her over and smacked her on one cheek. She was whimpering in desperate need when she heard him snap on a condom and probe her asshole with the tip of his blunt, hot cock.

"Easy, babe," he growled and sank inside her one small bit at a time. "Christ, you are good." He hummed in concentration as he delved farther inside her.

She flung back her hair, breathing purposely, not daring to spoil the electric sensation of being taken by him in the ass.

He whacked her sharply on one buttock, then the other. The sting thrilled her, shocked her and made her moan for more. He complied, then slid into her more easily, quickly and gently. He wrapped one arm around her hips and found her clit, bringing

her to a fast, hard orgasm in a flashing moment of ecstasy. She came, torrid, teeth grinding, loving the possession of his shaft inside her darkest hole.

At the last thrust of his own release, he pulled her to the floor and rolled her to her back. With a soft but determined tongue, he found her tender clit and lavished it with kisses that had her keening. Climbing up into another orgasm, she felt it shake her whole body for indescribable moments. As the thrill dwindled, she sank to the blissful recognition of what this lovemaking had really meant.

Minutes later, she curled against him, her fingers twining in his chest hair, and told him, "I have to go into that house, Grant. I'll get pictures of them, then get out fast. Make a positive ID. Finish this." She told him why she had the cat suit and how she'd used it twice before. "All the ballet made me agile. It's a skill I can use. I know what I'm doing. I'm good, quick and precise. And you mustn't stop me. I wouldn't stop you from doing your job." She looked up at him, declaring he could not challenge her on this.

In the dim light streaming through the draperies, his handsome face was a study in grim acceptance. "I'm going with you."

She rose up and kissed his lips. "Before we go, I want you again."

Chapter Eleven

By ten o'clock with only one light left on in her suspect's villa Coco had decided it was a good time to try to enter and take pictures of her target. She and Grant drove up the hillside, parked a half mile away, then made their way up the lonely lane, obscured by old olive trees and wild rose bushes. Grant kissed her goodbye and she made off through the grove of pines toward the house.

Finding an advantageous spot on the hill, she tucked her tiniest camera into the skin-tight turtleneck of her black cat suit and turned toward the cover of trees where Grant waited. "Be back in a flash," she mouthed, knowing he had binoculars up watching her.

A hand to her balaclava, she patted one stray curl beneath the thin black fabric. Her blonde hair was now fully concealed. She inhaled. *Ready, Coco. Go.*

She threw up a grappling hook to the balcony railing, felt it latch on to the concrete and hold. Tugging to secure its tautness, she shimmied up the line and remembered years of climbing thick hemp ropes in gym class in grade school. *Elementary, my dear Coco.* She'd always been a whiz at this kind of thing. Little did she ever think she would do it to save her father's golden record as a diplomat. Or her own life from radicals.

Hand over hand, she reached the banister. One foot to the wall for leverage, she pulled herself up and over the railing, then slithered to the terrace floor. It was covered in dried leaves from the autumn. *Unswept*, she thought. *Bad housekeepers.* Wincing, she crept toward the balcony door. Extracting a pick from her inside wrist pocket, she jimmied the lock open. Carefully. Slowly. She slid open the door and peeked inside. Dim. Dark.

Good.

She hustled inside. Closed the door silently. And paused.

Voices. Male. Three different ones rose from the first floor.

She drifted toward the far door to the hall. Back against the wall, she closed her eyes and listened to the conversation. Arabic between two men. One baritone, one bass. Then a longer discussion in Italian, understood by all three. The one native Italian speaker whom they called Bando dominated, switching back and forth from Italian to English, talking about business in America and problems there to be cured soon. Whatever those orders were, the two who spoke Arabic shared a brief aside in their native tongue about Bando and someone that even in Arabic they called *capo*. Coco lifted her brows at the astonishing words.

Tough luck, Bando, buddy. These two Arabs don't like you, insult your intelligence and cast a few nasty aspersions on the purity of your capo's virginity. Wow. A female is the head of this group? A *mafioso* capo!

But more interesting to Coco was the topic they settled into—a discussion of shipments they'd recently sent to ports in New Jersey. Women. Ukrainians and Georgians. In cargo containers, they had stored over one hundred women. All destined to become prostitutes in the United States, undocumented, illegal aliens. Another eight cargo containers were on their way to Jersey, too, filled with uncut heroin.

These were all slated to fly right off the docks and into circulation because this group of smugglers had perfected their system through that East Coast port. With longshoremen on the take and customs officials looking the other way, plus a few moles in the U.S. government, these guys were congratulating themselves on their cleverness. All with the help of a federal official in Washington. A woman.

Coco wished she had a tape recorder with her. She had to get closer, hear more!

True, her control would just have to be happy with what she told her—and what she showed her. *Pictures, Coco. Move your ass!*

She heard no one else moving around in the house. Hadn't since she entered.

Now was the best time, before any of the men left the living room to go to bed which, she reminded herself, might very well be up here.

She reached out and pushed open the door slowly, learning immediately that the damn thing creaked. She froze a second. Tested the door's hinge. Got no sound and pushed it wider.

As she slithered through the space she'd made, she let her eyes become accustomed to the light refracting up from the living room below. Realizing she would be on an open balcony with free view to the living room, she was overjoyed. But she also knew she'd have to be very careful how she lifted her face and how much of her body she exposed to them below.

She elbowed her way forward along the tile floor, headed for the carpet runner, and hoped she could settle there, take her pictures and leave.

That's when she felt the butt of a gun at the back of her head and a hand clawing at her balaclava. Ripping it up over her face, her captor snapped her head back and had Coco reeling.

"You will rise now!" ordered a woman with a scratchy contralto Italian accent. Distinctive. Harsh. "Look at me, Miss Dalton." Coco got to her feet and turned to face her captor. "It is what you came for, *si?*"

Coco blinked. She couldn't believe her eyes. This woman was the person Coco had been searching for all these years. Not a man. But a woman! With the same sharp features, the hell-black eyes and an android-like body that moved like a hermaphrodite's. Part Italian? Part Egyptian? But one definitely related to the one Coco had sent to the black site. The one she had sent by mistake.

"Ernesto!" the woman called, her smug gaze glued to Coco's. "Muhammad! Ibrahim! Come up here and look who visits us! The American woman from the meeting in the desert! Just as we thought she would come, eh?"

Exclamations of delight drifted up the stairs. Coco willed herself to remain expressionless. Footsteps on the stairs brought all three men to stand beside their capo and view this intruder.

"You tried to follow me today," sneered the short, fat one with an Italian accent.

My Mr. C. Chubby. And aligned with mafioso to boot, if I got all the conversation correct.

He walked around her. "But I eluded you." He grinned at her, his smile made sharp as a ferret's. "It is good to have her come to us."

"We shall see," snapped the woman as she thrust the butt of the gun in Coco's guts. "What do you wear, *Signorina Dalton*?"

Coco rubbed her stomach, scowling at each of them in turn, working on remaining silent until she had to speak of consequential things.

One of the Arab speakers casually stepped forward to take a bit of the fabric and rub it between his index finger and thumb. "Good. We should get this. What does it do?" he asked Coco.

She stared at him, mute.

He backhanded her across the mouth.

She staggered, then caught herself against the hall banister.

"I asked you. You will answer!" he yelled.

Very well. "The material is hypoallergenic." Which it is. Among other things.

"And this means?" He turned to his friend, the one who must speak Arab as well.

"It means it is very useful for intruding in areas where substances might harm the body." This one stepped forward now and Coco recognized him as the one who must be the brother of the man from Madrid. Irritated and imperious, this one ran his hands down Coco's body. From her throat to her shoulders, to the swell of her breasts, her waist, her hips, this man felt every muscle she had. "You are very fit."

Coco glared at him. *And you are a dog.*

"Ibrahim, stop this!" commanded the woman. "She is not here to pleasure you. We have work to do now that she has taken our lead and arrived."

Coco swallowed repeatedly, fighting the trepidation that rose in her mouth.

"Muhammad, get the rope in the garage. We will transport her as we planned."

Coco braced herself. *Where are we going?*

"Ernesto," the woman said with disgust, "you secure the ropes. Years on the docks mean you are more expert than Muhammad." She stuck the butt of the gun in Coco's ribs. "Let us go downstairs. Oh, and give me that camera from inside your suit, *Signorina*. You will not take any pictures ever again."

* * * * *

Grant waited among the pines, more anxious by the minute. Coco was taking too long. The lights were still on downstairs. At least, no changes there. But he worried.

He ran a hand over his head. If he had hair, he'd be pulling it out.

Christ. Could he have stopped her from doing this?

Once they got out of this, he was going to take her away for years, decades, damn it and keep her safe and warm. Married. He grinned. *Yeah, that, too, Warwick.*

He heard a whistle.

He turned toward the sound. Mark.

He answered in a similar call.

In a minute, Mark was standing in front of him. Camouflaged in greens, the two men sighed at their intolerance for delay.

"Shall we follow her up?" Mark asked.

"You're right. She's been in there too long." Grant lifted a shoulder and began to take a run through the woods.

At the foot of the hill where Coco had hoisted herself up her tether, Grant threw a grappling hook up to the same railing so the two of them could climb at the same time.

"Wait!" Mark whispered. "The garage!" He pointed toward the wide doors that lifted to let out a dark Mercedes, four door, lights on, screeching out of the driveway, around the curb to bounce into the street and careen down the main road.

"Shit!" Mark cursed.

"Come on!" Grant snagged his shirt. "We're going after her." And he headed back toward their van, on the other side of the line of pines.

When they threw themselves in the front seat and slammed the car doors, Grant had the engine up, and they were pulling away in a flash.

"Take this!" Grant dug his BlackBerry from his shirt pocket and threw it at him.

"What the hell?" Mark caught it, took a look at the lit screen and shot Grant a pained look of delight.

"Read it, tell me where I'm going."

"Roger! I see the beam. But how the hell did you do that?" Mark held up the device in his palm.

Grant grimaced. "She's got a tracker on. But she doesn't know it."

"Where the hell does she have a tracker on in that damn suit?"

Grant pressed his fist to his chest. His heart hurt and his stomach rolled as he thought about what these assholes might do to her if they found the answer to that.

Ten minutes later they were winding along a narrow lane up the side of Mount Vesuvius where small villas gave way to larger ones. Grant had dimmed the headlights when the Mercedes had turned into this dirt lane and he was hugging the steering wheel trying to keep them on the road.

"Might be faster if we ditch the car and walk," Mark suggested.

"Maybe, I just don't want to lose them."

"There! Look! They're pulling off. Slowing. Pulling into the driveway of that villa. Stop here."

Climbing out of the car, Grant paused to listen to the conversation. *Damn. I know Arabic when I hear it, but tonight I need Italian!*

Mark elbowed him, made a hand signal for one woman and three men.

Shit. Grant wondered how many were inside. He and Mark would have to strike like lightning to get Coco out.

Grant watched through the branches as two men hauled Coco out of the backseat and led her inside the house. From Coco's lazy gait, he could tell they had given her a sedative. *Or beaten her.* He ground his teeth. Gazing at Mark, he tilted his head and indicated the two of them should pick their way through the scrub. Close to the walls of the house, they each took a path round it in opposite directions to meet once more.

"On my side, easiest way is in through the back door on the ground level," Mark told him.

"No entry on my side. Let me see the GPS. " Grant leaned over Mark's shoulder to watch the screen with the beam rising to the second story of the house. "Not good. It'll be tougher to get her out from up there."

* * * * *

Coco felt as if she were floating. Oh, she saw her feet climbing the steps. Knew the Italian and his buddy who spoke Arabic held her up. Understood she was going to meet someone important. But whatever the Italian had pumped into her in that syringe in Naples had washed through her like a giant wave of euphoria. Morphine? Cocaine? What?

"Too much," she told them and stumbled on the next step. If they hadn't caught her up in time, she would have hit her head, been down and out.

"Put her there," declared Lady Capo.

Coco felt herself pushed into a soft leather chair. Thank god. She closed her eyes.

"Look at me!" commanded the Italian man.

Coco's eyes drifted open and locked on his dark ones.

"Ernesto!" Lady Capo cursed at him. "I warned you! You gave her too much."

Sweet, whatever it is. Even if I shouldn't love it. Coco yawned. Closed her eyes again.

Strong fingers captured her jaw and lifted her face, then in Arabic, someone new cursed the Italian.

This voice I know. Coco bit her lips and forced herself to look up at the man who spoke.

No. No. That's not right. She shut her eyes and shook her head. Tried again to look at him.

Oh, yes, Coco. You were right. It is Jamal. But why?

And is Nasar here, too? She glanced around. Yes, in the chair in the far corner. *Nasar. I once thought we were friends.* "Did you find your Sunni poem?" she asked him. "The Guardia didn't want Grant or me to find it. Why not, hmm?"

Nasar cursed in Arabic.

"Did you make up this story," Coco babbled on, just wanting to sleep, "just to get us to Venice? Why? Why'd you do that, hmm?" She squeezed her eyes shut to think. "Quicker to stop me, right?"

Nasar told Jamal in Arabic that she was too damn smart and to proceed with finding Warwick.

"You are confused, I see, my dear Coco," Jamal spoke. "Open your eyes when I talk to you!"

"Why? Hmm? I can hear you with my ears." She smiled, knowing she spoke in a long, slow slur.

"We need to know where your Mr. Warwick is," Jamal said, sounding like a persuasive friend.

Her lips twitched. She might be drugged and sloppy with her speech, but she understood what Jamal wanted and why. But he couldn't know that, could he?

"Naples," she offered. "In bed," she added, her mouth curving in remembrance of when she'd last seen Grant there. Naked and beautiful.

Lady Capo cursed in ripe Italian.

Coco pointed a finger at her. "The capo who's a man or a woman. And Hakim. Who's he? Or is he a she? Hmm?"

Jamal drifted away. Then he spoke from far off. "I think Mr. Warwick has followed you. You are lovers. He would not permit you to come alone."

"Why not?" Coco thought she'd play his game.

"Does he know what you do?" Jamal persisted.

Coco nodded.

"Does he know about who you saw in the desert?"

She smiled.

Jamal fumed. "Isn't that against your rules? To share the details of your mission?"

"Sure is." Coco shifted in her chair. "Untie my hands. They hurt."

"Who else knows?"

Coco grinned. "Lots of folks. Want a list?"

Jamal's eyes rolled. "Name them."

"Mark and Jason. Todd." *Hell, might as well make this worth her while.* "French police. Interpol. Nick."

The Italian man scoffed, then rattled off a series of words that ended with Nick's last name, Chekov.

Coco closed her eyes. That made sense. They knew Chekov in the Paris Embassy and had gotten info from him. *What kind of info, Coco?* Oh, yeah. Knowledge that she and Grant knew Ahmed had a computer and the murderer took it.

"Did Ahmed have a laptop or a desktop?" she asked Jamal. And when he didn't answer, she let her gaze wander to Nasar. "What was it?"

Sheik Nasar looked at her with fire in his dark eyes. "I do not know or care." He got to his feet. "Tell us where your Mr. Warwick is."

"I am right here, Sheik," Grant called from the top of the stairs, both arms extended, aiming his Glock at the man.

Coco grinned from ear to ear. "Grant, I knew you'd come!"

"Doesn't matter," murmured Jamal.

The last thing Coco knew as she felt a burst of heat hit her arm was that Lady Capo had a weapon, too, and that the ugly silver thing was pointed directly at her heart.

Chapter Twelve

The breeze off the Aegean ruffled Grant's hair as he felt a taut, hot body lay beside him on the chaise longue. Late June now and the sun beaming down on the island of Mykonos was hot enough for him. Yesterday they'd arrived from Naples to stay at a small hotel near the beach. The two of them needed a rest from the grueling debriefing they'd had with more law enforcement agencies than either of them ever wanted to hear from again.

Sheik Nasar and Jamal Hussein were in the custody of Interpol shrieking their heads off about how innocent they were of steering a radical group, the Stars of the Desert. Both men admitted there was no one man who was Hakim, the Judge. They created the concept to frighten Coco. The woman Coco had nicknamed Lady Capo was a hermaphrodite who was indeed a Neapolitan mafioso boss, heading an export firm. That firm sent a lot of goods into New Jersey ports, and all of it was now being inspected for contraband. Nick Chekov had lost his post in Paris and maybe his freedom, pending an investigation into his ties to Lady Capo and her smuggling cartel. And Coco's control was getting a good hard look-see by an internal CIA review board.

After all that, Mark had flown them down to the Greek island, then left for Dubai to pick up Todd and the forensic team. Coco and Grant told themselves they were going to devote themselves to getting a tan. Period. This worked for Grant, not because he especially needed one, but he because he did get a charge out of looking at Coco without a bathing suit or any other stitch on her lovely body. A sight he got endless pleasure from and one he had worked too damn hard to get. And keep.

He frowned at the memory of how Nasar and his people had drugged her and roughed her up. He wanted to light up their asses that night in Pompeii in revenge for

how they had played him. Mark kept him sane until the *carabinieri* arrived to help them handcuff the cartel and take them up to Naples for the Guardia to interrogate.

Coco leaned over and kissed his lips. "Guess what?" she asked him like a kid, her color and spunk coming back now that she knew she was free of the creeps who had tracked her.

"I give. Tell me, babe."

"I got a call from Maria's plastic surgeon," Coco announced as she flung herself backward, both arms over her head to grip the rungs of the chair. "She is very excited about the progress they made on this last procedure. She thinks Maria has a good chance of having another operation soon."

Grant reached over and cupped Coco's cheek. "Terrific. And you feel better, too, right?"

She gave a little nod. "Not so guilty."

"That was not your fault. You should see that in time."

"I will." She squinted into the sun. "But there are other things I feel badly about."

He stared into her sorrowful violet eyes and waited. He was not going to push her to tell him anything. She didn't owe him. She might not even be able to tell him everything about the Stars of the Desert. That was fine. He understood the top secret nature of what she had done and for whom. He loved her. He wasn't going anywhere and though she had not told him so yet, he had the feeling she would never leave him again.

She licked her lips, sat up in her chair and faced him. "I have to tell you why I took the job with the Agency."

He tipped his head. "Didn't you?"

"Not all of it. When I was invited by Ahmed to go into the Egyptian desert to attend this meeting, I knew only what he told me about those who were going to attend."

Grant nodded. "I gathered that."

"It wasn't until I came home and told my father where I'd been, who I'd seen that he told me more about a few of them. At the end of his career, he was a mediator in Cairo to end a civil war in Sudan."

"I remember. It did not go well."

"No. In fact, it was his last mission and it was disastrous. The failure to come to a cease-fire was because two men pulled out of the talks at the last minute. They said they were threatened by a new group called Stars of the Desert and they buckled under. The negotiations failed, the civil war went on for three years longer and..."

"And your father," Grant went on when she got choked up and couldn't, "left Cairo in despair."

"He refused to negotiate with terrorists and he died, heartbroken." She stared at Grant. "Thousands more died in that war. My father felt responsible. You can see why I felt I had to identify them."

"I do." He reached out and brought her closer, her skin lusciously flush to his. "It was business and personal."

"When we met three years ago, I had just begun. I felt I couldn't stop. And I had a wild idea that if I did it all quickly, I could come back and find you, make it up to you." She traced patterns on his chest. "It didn't go that quickly."

He threaded his fingers through her hair and put his lips to her forehead. "We can't plan everything."

She looked him in the eye. "I hurt you."

He smiled. "That's over, babe. You're here now."

"I love you, Grant." She bent closer and brushed her mouth on his. "I love you." She kissed him, softly and tenderly. "I won't ever leave you again. Not for work, not for anything. Can I spend years proving it to you?"

He crushed her closer and took her mouth with an ardor he knew would only grow. "You bet you can. But I have two demands."

She laughed, an impish look in her eyes. "Really? Like what?"

"You'll marry me."

"Oh, darling. Yes, that'll be so easy. How about next week? As soon as we can get home and get a license. And the second demand?"

"You're going to have to go barefoot for awhile."

She blinked. "Is that so?"

"I'm gonna burn all your ugly shoes."

"Let me guess. I won't have a need for them any longer?"

He nodded. "You got that right."

"I'm not running away from you ever again."

"Only coming toward me."

She arched her brows. "Coming for you, with you?"

"Repeatedly."

She snorted. "Twice a day?"

He took her up over his body and positioned her to let him prove the power of his love for her. "Minimum."

About the Author

An award-winning author of more than two dozen romances and mysteries, Cerise DeLand creates heroes readers crave. Cerise has met many men in her worldwide travels and created the best of the best from all the wonderful places she's lived and visited. Today, she lives – and writes – in wild west Texas, where a never-ending stream of cowboys, vaqueros, para-military types and diplomats stroll into town and fuel her imagination for red hot affairs.

Cerise welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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