

Across a Crowded Room

After anti-terrorist agent Jason DesJardin survived the explosion that killed Emily Holmes's father, he went deep undercover. Guilt and his dark past kept him from returning for her. When Emily discovers ties between the old bombing and the terrorists, she finagles an assignment to Jason's next mission. The balance of world power drops into her inexperienced hands, and she is forced to play a dangerous game of seduction with Mosel Reinhardt, the notorious international arms dealer. Is Reinhardt peddling the nanotech chip technology, or are Emily's instincts about him correct?

The mission heats up when Jason finds he can't resist Emily agency computer genius gone femme fatale—anymore than Mosel can. After years of waiting to have her again, the tables turn. Jason is unwilling to share her now, but will he be able to watch her seduce Mosel in order to find her father's killer? Would she stop if he asked her?

Genre: Contemporary, Romantic Suspense **Length:** 105,427 words

ACROSS A CROWDED ROOM

Elizabeth Marchat

EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

To anyone whose gaze once locked and connected with another's "Across A Crowded Room," especially if the memory still brings a smile to your lips and an extra beat to your heart. This story's for you...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I'd like to acknowledge all my family, friends, and colleagues who supported my dream of seeing this book reach print. "Across A Crowded Room" was the first full-length manuscript I ever completed. It's the one most authors stick under the bed, never to see the light of day. And believe me, it's been there on and off over the years. But Jason's and Emily's story held a special place in my heart, and I wanted it told. I rewrote, reviled, cursed, and edited the book within an inch of my life, and twelve or more revisions later, I believe it has finally become a book any author would be proud to share with her readers. I hope when you come to the words, "The End," you'll agree it was well worth the read.

ACROSS A CROWDED ROOM

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Chapter One

Later in life, when Jason DesJardin recalled that fateful night, he noted it hadn't been an ominous sort of night, not the kind that film directors like to portray in horror movies. It certainly hadn't been the kind of night anyone would have expected to change the course of so many lives.

Even the moonlight couldn't be blamed for producing the silhouettes that had haunted the walls in the children's room, creating imaginary monsters to initiate their nightmares. The real source of light was from a small bit escaping the upstairs hallway, sneaking warily through the crack beneath the door. Seeping in, penetrating the ebony space, turning black into shades of gray, it reflected off the ancient oak outside and cast back soft shadows on the walls. Jason hadn't slept soundly back then...not while his foster father drank.

* * * *

Past...

The man closed the door quickly behind him and became nothing more than a massive shape, a mere shade defined by a flash of light. The glow broke the smoky depths of the room and then dimmed to gray, allowing the stick figure shadows of the tree branches to resume their flickering limbo over the walls. As the man crept silently deeper into the room, Jason held his breath and waited.

Beyond the piles of discarded clothes and other remnants of the day scattered around the waxed wooden floor, the man watched Cade and Harry as they slept soundly in their bunk beds. The brothers' spindly bodies were still childishly fragile, defined by their delicate bone structure. Each had matching wheat-colored hair, sticking out at all angles from their round, freckled faces. So innocent as they slept.

The man stilled, allowing his eyes to adjust to the low light, and then glanced over his shoulder to make sure Jason slept.

With his eyes squinted shut and his frame sprawled across his bed, Jason engulfed the entire surface. His gangly limbs extended well beyond the mattress boundaries, and yet Jason didn't sleep. He allowed his chest to rise and fall evenly, faking it. A few stray hairs from an unkempt lock fluttered across his forehead with each outward puff. When a whisper of sound tried to escape, fear kept him silent. The evidence of his full masculine potential lay dormant beneath the surface of his still soft features. Jason knew that what kept the monster at bay was how the harder planes of his body had already appeared, seemingly mere moments away from emerging.

"Such a shame to lose all that softness." The man whispered. "Too old." He turned away from Jason and headed toward the younger boys.

The real monster wasn't under the bed—he was climbing into it.

The branch figures danced innocently around the quiet room, muted ghosts unable to forewarn the approaching peril, but Jason could.

* * * *

Present day...

As Jason recalled, Harry had been the perfect age, trusting, naïve, innocent. That night he'd slept soundly on the bottom bunk and barely stirred when Adam Kincaid approached.

The man had carefully placed his large hand over Harry's mouth to keep him from waking Jason and Cade. Even as the startled little boy had squirmed beneath him, protesting, the man's greater bulk pressed the child deeper into the mattress, muffling his frightened cries. Although Harry had kicked and tried to punch, Jason believed he was doomed.

* * * *

Past...

Jason sensed the danger the minute he heard the door creak open and smelled the stench of alcohol fill the closed room. He'd faked sleep to keep from drawing attention to himself until the man's perverted motives became obvious. The muffled sounds coming from Harry's bunk urged Jason to action.

Jason yelled for Cade, and they both jumped Kincaid.

They'd pounded him with their fists. Jason tugged him by the arms—trying to pull him off Harry. Cade kicked and shouted. All the while Harry screamed, begged, and fought back as best he could.

Useless. It all seemed useless against the man's greater size and strength. Their foster mother couldn't help. Kincaid had broken her arm the last time she'd tried, and with it, her spirit too. He'd finally succeeded in cowing her.

Jason's arms grew heavier with each strike. He and Cade pummeled the man until, as luck would have it, the drunk slipped off the bed on his own. Distracted, he backed down, rubbing his knee with nothing more than a groan. His body stilled on the floor for a brief moment before he managed to get to one knee, then stand, and stumble from the room, cursing them all under his breath. All three boys exhaled a sigh of relief when the outside door slammed shut. Jason swore aloud and wiped Harry's face with a Tshirt. "He's getting worse. Tomorrow we're out of here."

They needed a plan. Where could they go for help against their foster father, the powerful Senator Adam Kincaid? Who'd believe them? He hoped an idea would come to him soon.

A chill ran through his blood when he thought about what Kincaid could do to them. He shuddered. Instead of scaring the younger boys with his fears, he said, "Everything will be all right. Go back to bed. I'll find a way out tomorrow."

Cade's hands unfisted.

"I-I can't sleep," Harry said, wiping his forearm across his nose.

"I'll get Rocky. Will that make you feel better?"

Harry bobbed his head and sniffled, and Jason crept from their room at the end of the upstairs hallway. When he reached the outside door, he quietly called for Rocky, hoping the stray hadn't wandered too far to hear him.

The dog appeared as if manifested by magic. With only a stump of a tail to wag, it moved his whole rear end with emotion. Jason found it impossible not to smile at the crazy-looking dog staring up at him with round, trusting eyes. He bent over and hugged the dog, rubbing his furry head. Harry would be relieved to have another ally.

The dog could at least give a warning bark, the edge they'd need. Jason locked their door, blockading himself, the boys, and the dog inside. For good measure he barricaded them in with his desk chair. Only then did he release the breath he'd been holding and risk inhaling, relieved for the moment at least.

The mangy mutt they'd dubbed Rocky nuzzled the boys and licked the remnants of salty tears off Harry's little face. The dog, oblivious to the earlier threat, jumped on the single bed and waited for Jason to join him. Jason's heart still pounded hard and fast in his chest. He'd settle for resting, since sleep wasn't an option. Instead, he watched the dog sleep. Dreaming a dog's happy dreams, Rocky occasionally puffed little muted barks as his paws jerked spasmodically in merry chase.

Soon Jason heard the steady breathing as the two younger boys finally slept. Much later, Jason drifted into a light sleep until some sound woke him. His eyes burst open. What seemed like only seconds before, Rocky had been sprawled over his feet sound asleep. Now the dog stood at full attention in front of the locked door, his back hair bristled, his teeth bared in a snarl.

Kincaid was back.

Jason stepped toward the door, his heart beating wildly in his chest, his pulse thumping in his ears. The lump in his throat choked him.

He gasped, realizing his horrible mistake. He'd forgotten the others—the little ones.

His mind raced through a million possibilities. Fear crystallized in his gut, temporarily paralyzing him.

"Cade, Harry, grab the chair. Help me, quick."

Jason heard the bastard stumble up the stairs, scuffling down at the far end of the hall toward the two youngest children, Kate and Pete, in the room down the hall. The sound of their foster father's pronounced limp seized his heart and held his breath hostage.

Jason moved the chair away from the door and paused, fingering an old belt, one from a green flannel robe he'd outgrown long ago. He stared at the plaid. Fleeting thoughts overwhelmed him. His old normal life had disappeared the day his grandfather died. Last year, he'd been cast into this foster-care hell with the senator.

His stomach turned, and he fought the growing nausea, knowing he couldn't be weak. He wouldn't ignore the dog's growl. He trembled. Revulsion fought coherent thought. A jumble of options spun through his mind.

He couldn't afford to panic or hide in his room.

The muffled sounds coming from the hallway beyond his locked door were getting louder.

Someone has to stop this.

He turned around and winced. Fear flashed across the younger boys' faces, and then they looked expectantly at him. He'd have to be the one to stop Kincaid before he hurt the others. The expression on the faces of his foster brothers suddenly helped him understand why fate sent him here. None of them would have to face the monster alone.

Harry stuttered, "J–Jason, what are we going to do?"

The boy trembled when Jason put an arm around him. Cade started to open the door, but Jason stopped him with a gentle hand and whispered, "Please, stay here. Stay with Rocky and watch my back."

Jason tied the dog to the closet door. "It's for your own good." He held a hand up to Cade and Harry. "Remember, stay put."

Despite the questions clearly showing in Cade's eyes, the boy obeyed.

Harry? Well, he just seemed relieved. And Rocky growled, straining against the cord when Jason turned to leave. He went back to his dog, squatted next to him, and gestured for silence. Rubbing a calming hand over the pet's furry head, he whispered reassuring words softly in his ear. The dog quieted.

Jason listened at the door for sounds before moving out of the room and down the hall.

At first, all he heard as he listened at the other children's closed door was quiet pleading from behind the thick wood. "Please, don't hurt me." Then he heard the whimpering escalate.

Kate's voice ripped through the silence. "Please stop. No, no."

As the sound of more terrified cries broke through the quiet night, Jason's mind went blank. He turned the knob, wrenched the door open, and entered the room with no clear plan of action.

He paused, took in the scene, and before he had time to think, a furry blur rushed past him, flying in front of him. Too late he realized Rocky had broken free with Cade and Harry right behind him. The boys bumped into Jason just as the dog jumped Kincaid. The

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unexpected attack forced the senator to divert his attention and release Kate.

Kincaid shoved a thick black stick he was holding in between Rocky's teeth, preventing the dog's powerful jaws from chomping down on his arm. He snatched the dog by the scruff of the neck with his other hand, lifting him high off the floor. The dog growled and twisted to free himself from the man's grasp, but the senator ignored his vicious snarls and turned with a wicked backward glance at Jason as the dog dangled, snarling and snapping at his captor.

"Well, Jason, what have we here?" he asked, looking at the animal still squirming in his hand. Rocky wasn't a small dog, but the senator was a big man who easily overpowered the pet.

As the devil tail unfurled behind Kincaid, Jason noticed the stick was more than he thought. In fact, the handle was attached to a black leather whip.

A gasp escaped his frozen lips.

Kate had scampered off to the far side of the room as soon as Kincaid shifted his attention to Jason. In an attempt to disappear in the shadows, she hid in the corner by the closet. The youngest child, Pete, buried himself beneath his covers.

Jason stood his ground, afraid for the kids and the dog more than himself.

He stepped back, not saying a word, both his arms outstretched, as if defeated.

"Good idea," the senator said, a snide curl on his lip. "Now, back up. Go down the hall to your room while I get rid of this vermin." He shook Rocky in the air. The dog whimpered and then stubbornly growled.

Anger welled up inside Jason, overcoming some of his fear. He lifted his fists, moving toward Kincaid, but the man raised an eyebrow and shook the dog in warning. "Don't even think about it. If you want to see your little friend here again, you'll do as I say."

The senator's speech was still slurred, but Jason noted he seemed

steadier on his feet than he had earlier. A nagging thought pierced through Jason's fear, making it worse. What would happen to the others if something happened to him? Who would protect them then?

"Head back to your room and lie flat on your stomach."

"I didn't think I was your type anymore." Jason goaded the man. Kincaid's abuse hadn't escalated beyond physical violence to sexual abuse with any of them yet, but after tonight Jason knew it was just a matter of time.

The whip snapped at Jason's feet.

"Be ready to take your punishment when I get back."

The thought of the sting of the whip terrified him. The pain, the marks, the scars it left for weeks, months. Filled with fear and disgust, he took his time retreating.

He moved slowly, cautiously backing up toward his room, keeping the senator carefully in his sight.

Rocky whined as the senator dropped him out the upstairs back door before spinning quickly to grab Jason. He snatched him, roughly gripping Jason's arm before he could slip out of reach. Kincaid delivered two blows, one to Jason's groin, doubling him over, and the other to his gut, knocking the remaining wind out of him. He followed both with a quick punch to his jaw and another to his eye.

Jason dropped to the floor. Waves of nausea pounded through him. The senator twisted his arms tightly, high behind his back, further immobilizing him as he forced him backwards into his room. Then he pushed him roughly onto the bed.

With his face pressed into the pillow and the man's good knee pressed against his spine, he could barely breathe. Millions of black spots danced across the blank canvas of his vision. He gasped for air, hoping he wouldn't suffocate. Then what would happen to the kids?

He struggled, searching for an opening, holding out for that one breath of oxygen to stop his lungs from burning. The surrounding shouts faded. So did his pain. He was blacking out. *No, no, no.*

Kincaid wrapped the whipcord deftly around Jason's wrists and

stepped back, allowing Jason to turn his head right before he lost all awareness. He gulped in huge drinks of air, blinking back to consciousness. His vision was hazy. One eye had already begun to swell shut, and with his hands wrapped in the whipcord, he felt trapped, defenseless, helpless. Those emotions triggered another one—fury.

Too angry to feel the pain any longer, Jason chanced a glance at the expression of delight on his captor's face. The senator's usual aristocratic features were contorted in sadistic glee. Gone was the well-known image, the famous smooth good looks, the control of the ex-football-star-turned-politician. Here was the monster nightmares were made of.

He punched Jason again, this time in the temple. "I'm going to discipline you, boy."

The senator's threat made Jason's stomach lurch with both loathing and panic.

"I always knew you'd be a problem," the man rambled on in a crazed state, sounding almost maniacal. "Shouldn't have gotten so wasted before. Wasn't prepared. Not quick enough. Not on my game." He laughed hysterically at his own pun referring to his past career, a fame he had ridden to Washington.

The senator faced the bed, his back to the door. "Miscalculated earlier. Would have been tough handling you, but I was right about the attachment between you and that mutt."

Kincaid moved closer and kneeled over Jason, spilling his hot, scotch-filled breath in his ear. "I'm going to beat you first." His evil laugh filled Jason's head. "Are you thinking? Hey, boy? You just keep thinking. I see you worrying. Heh, heh, heh."

Jason grimaced at the sound of the black laugh. He shuddered, more with frustration and anger than pain. As the man straddled his back, he tried to buck him off.

"You can't stop me. When I'm done with you, I'm moving on to the others." Kincaid sneered, punctuating his words with repeated punches to Jason's kidneys.

"Don't touch them." He was numb to the physical pain but weakened by his injuries. Through gritted teeth, he managed to growl out his threat, "I'll kill you, you bastard."

When the senator released the cord wrapped around Jason's wrists, he pulled the whip handle up against Jason's throat. His vision darkened as he choked, gasping again for air.

Before the world went completely black, the door burst open, and something knocked the senator off his back. Jason took a deep breath when he heard Rocky's growls. The feisty dog landed on Kincaid's back with just enough force to unbalance and knock him off the bed. The jolt loosened his hold on the whipcord, giving Jason the opportunity he needed to free his wrists.

No longer thinking, Jason reacted. Colossal anger fueled his actions. He turned on Kincaid as he struggled to get up.

Jason's vision turned red just before he jumped the man. Right before it went to black and disappeared entirely, he saw Kate standing in the doorway with a pleased smile on her face, holding Rocky back with one hand, a large baseball bat in the other.

* * * *

Jason's vision cleared. He stood stooped over, straddling the senator's limp body, staring into the man's bludgeoned face, a bloodied bat on the floor beside him. The children and even the dog cowered in the hallway. The expressions on the children's faces said it all.

He whispered past his damaged throat, croaking to the others, "You're safe now." Disgusted with himself and the rage he still felt inside, he couldn't stand looking at the horror of what he'd done reflected in the kids' faces.

Once he managed to stand, he walked away.

Maybe no one would find out he killed that no good son of a

bitch. What difference did it make as long as the others were safe?

* * * *

Jason didn't get any farther than the back alley before he dropped to the ground, gasping for each breath. The cold air didn't make it any easier when he tried to inhale. The pain told him at least a rib or two were broken. He managed short, shallow breaths as he sprawled against the neighbor's brick wall in the back alley like it was a lounge chair, but breathing was becoming more difficult.

The blackness threatening to engulf Jason convinced him that he was dying. He waited for death and smiled, relieved. The kids were safe.

At least Kincaid can't hurt the kids now...

* * * *

Present day ...

Jason sat at his desk wondering how many times over the last several years he'd heard Cade retell the story about finding him that night, explaining how frightened he'd been.

When he'd rounded the corner Cade said he'd been just in time to see Jason collapse to his side. And he'd thought Jason was dead after the dog ran ahead. Rocky bent over, and sniffed Jason's limp form lying at the far end of the alley, turned, and whined. Cade explained how relieved he'd been when he reached him, then thankful Jason hadn't had the strength to get far. It had made his search easier.

Then Jason recalled the rest of the story.

* * * *

Jason woke to Cade shaking him. The warning note was clear in

his voice when he told him the senator was still alive. "We've all got to get out of here, now."

No one would ever believe their story, and alive, Kincaid was dangerous, deadly to them all. "You have to get the others out." His voice was so raspy Cade barely heard him. "He'll be worse than ever after this." Jason groaned.

"This is bad, real bad," Cade muttered. "I'll get the others after I get you to a doctor."

"No, get them now."

"You look bad. I can't leave you or lift you alone. If I help out, can you stand? Can you lean on me?"

Jason struggled to his feet with Cade's assistance. What Jason really wanted was to go get the other kids and run.

Cade turned him away from the house and talked some sense into him. "Listen, I can get you to a hospital then go back for the others. Don't worry, for now I have them hidden in the work shed."

Despite Jason's protests, Cade supported his weight and led him toward the main thoroughfare. At first, they hoped to flag down a car, but the early morning streets were deserted. To Jason, the short walk to the hospital seemed like ten miles.

The blood covered his hands and Cade's. It was probably better no one drove by and saw them. At least there'd be fewer questions.

Outside the emergency room door, Cade released his hold on him and said, "You go on in. I'll come back after I get the others."

Rocky pulled against the rope as Cade turned to go. "Go with Cade," Jason ordered. It wasn't easy convincing the dog to leave, but Cade might need him if he ran into Kincaid again.

Jason figured he'd decide what to do later when they were all together. They'd already waited too long to get out. Jason stumbled the rest of the way inside the hospital by himself.

* * * *

Once inside the emergency room, Jason gave in to the pain and collapsed. Before he passed out, he looked up. He'd fallen at the feet of a little angel holding the hand of a silver-haired man. Heaven? He wasn't a good candidate for heaven.

A little later, the pain convinced him this was more likely hell, or that he wasn't dead. No, he was on his back in a hospital bed with hospital noises beating like a million jackhammers in his head. The glaring fluorescent lights hurt, blinding him as he managed to partially open an eye, the one that wasn't completely swollen shut. He couldn't move without an ache or a sharp pain stabbing him in the chest.

When he finally focused his one good eye, all he could he see was a skinny little girl with a mass of unruly, curly mahogany hair. The ends were tipped with gold as if a halo surrounded her head.

Ah, yes, his angel in hell.

She stood inside the opening to his cubicle with a pale blue curtain behind her. Her eyes appeared huge in her tiny face, too kind, too old to be in the face of a child.

The sounds of beeping machines and groaning equipment drowned out the rest of the world, everything except her. He forced himself to concentrate on her enormous, liquid-filled eyes. Her eyes brimmed with tears, the droplets remaining trapped against their vivid green backdrop. Such sorrow in the eyes of this angel seemed more tragic because the tears didn't fall. They filled higher and higher, and yet not one drop toppled over the edge.

He was young, but knew something was off if he was seeing angels and stuff. If she was a hallucination, he didn't care. Her presence calmed his soul.

Amid all the flurry of activity over his injured body, her eyes became his entire focal point.

Despite being wild and confused, Jason understood he was being helped. Someone tried to clean up his badly battered face, carefully wiping his split, swollen lips with a cool, wet cloth. It won't do any good—they should let me die. Once Kincaid discovers me, I'll be better off dead. He must have groaned.

A man's voice, deep and kind, reassured him.

Questions.

If he replied, it was lost in a variety of voices as people scurried around, each repeatedly asking his name.

Jason thought he heard Cade. Don't tell them my name. Get the kids. Save the others.

He wouldn't talk. Even if he could, his sore throat throbbed. It felt raw, swollen. Strangulation could do that.

He managed to isolate the spots where he'd been injured by the pain. His back ached from the punching, the kicking. Deep breaths were impossible. When he inhaled, hot pokers stabbed at him. The cold stethoscope on his chest felt almost good. Then miraculously a mask covered his mouth and nose, delivering cool, clear oxygen to his burning lungs. He moaned. *So good.* Breathing got easier.

"Just take care of him," he heard the man urge. "I'll be responsible for any expenses."

The nursing staff poked, checked, prodded, and bustled around, waking him constantly as he dozed restlessly on and off between tests and treatment.

Sometime later, Jason awoke to hear a broken conversation between the person who had come to his rescue and someone in the hallway. At a certain point in the conversation, he heard the same deep, calm voice telling everyone, "Stop worrying about the kid's name and the paperwork, just take care of him, he's with me. His name is Holmes. H-O-L-M-E-S. Jason Holmes, my brother's son."

I guess that kid would be me, Jason thought with a relieved sigh. More kind hands moved rapidly over him, comforting his aches, more voices mumbled.

"...called us... got mugged and beaten on the way home from a friend's house. Terrible shame, he's such a great kid."

Jason knew better. What did they know?

Nothing, or the guy wouldn't think I was such a great kid after all. What if they find out about what happened? He held back a gag as his stomach surged. Nausea threatened. He prayed Cade had gotten the others out.

"Yes, I'm his guardian. I'll bring by the paperwork later. He's staying with my wife and me while his parents are out of the country." The man was lying.

Why? Jason wondered.

He'd once fantasized about running away, starting over, becoming someone else. *Problem solved. I'm someone else.*

* * * *

Jason remembered feeling a smile form on his lips before he'd fallen back into a shallow pain-induced sleep. That night thirteen years ago had been the beginning of the end for them all.

Chapter Two

The Middle Eastern man perched in the Queen Anne chair across from Senator Adam Kincaid and observed how the reflected light from the desk lamp warped the middle-aged man's appearance, turning his twisted grin into a formidable, frightening mask, one he knew to be a true representation of the man's character. Under closer scrutiny, what had once been a movie-star handsome face showed growing signs of aging and the owner's past indiscretions. A subtle alcoholic road map of broken capillaries formed beneath the surface of his tanned cheeks.

As Kincaid ran his fingers through his still thick hair—once sun streaked blond, it had faded and dulled—the slight man wondered how such weak men, men with all this man's vices, reached such heights of power. Kincaid, now the chairman of the Senate Arms Committee sat behind an oversized mahogany desk, appropriately suited to him, and gave him a wry smile. The expression transformed his fading good looks. The man suddenly had the answer to that question.

Charm. Ah, yes, his charm could be disarming.

The smile turned into a frightful leer.

... and deadly. He must never forget that.

Kincaid stared at the picture on the polished surface, and the man reminded himself not to forget just how deadly.

* * * *

Kincaid studied the smiling faces in the picture glaring up at him.

"Hmmm," he said, ruminating over his good luck. "How could it be, after all this time, the solution I've been waiting for has finally been delivered so simply into my hands? It must be a sign."

Adam Kincaid glanced up without expecting an answer from the man who'd done his bidding without question from the shadows. "Good job, Ahmet. Excellent."

Ahmet's eyes narrowed, and he looked tense, awaiting orders while Kincaid carefully scrutinized the details in the photo. "The search is ended. I've found the identity of my old sworn enemy. Everything I planned is finally possible because of this—and you, my friend." He pointed to the slip of paper in front of him. He nodded in the smaller man's direction. "I have you to thank."

"I but do my job, senator. What would you have me do now?"

He growled out the answer, "Kill everyone who stands in the way of my success."

"Yes, of course. But, sir, who is... 'everyone?"

His thoughts rambled, old memories replacing the present, he ignored Ahmet's questions.

Ahmet's voice broke through the haze. "Senator? Sir, who are these people?"

Kincaid, shaken from his memories, lifted his head and tapped the picture with his forefinger. "These, here." Kincaid sat up and rapped his knuckles on the photo, pushing back the old resentment. "They are the only thing standing between me and the Presidency." The answer to ten years of frustration lay there within his grasp. This photo represented a new opportunity for him and his vengeance.

Kincaid felt giddy, almost light-headed. Patience, patience, he reminded himself, trying to calm his racing heart. *Don't go off half-cocked*. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes, not now, not after everything he'd worked for was finally within sight. He'd take his time, prepare, gather his forces. Then take his revenge.

The crystal decanter on the bar across the room shimmered in the lamplight. Resisting the old urges almost overwhelmed him. He looked away. Control wasn't easy when his mouth watered for the drink he deserved.

Ah, to hoist a triumphant glass in toast, the voices taunted.

But there was no need to celebrate prematurely, certainly not before the first deed was done. With this new information in hand, the possibilities were endless. Just thinking of the potential power made him laugh, the sound rusty to his ears, the reaction very much out of character for his recently cheerless soul.

One little drink wouldn't hurt. His newfound freedom was at hand, but the demon in his head tried to tempt him as it always did. After all the years he'd sacrificed, hiding his depravities, the risk of one drunken binge wasn't worth the US Presidency.

If the past had taught him nothing else, it was patience, discretion, and self-control. He'd silence the voices in his head, burn up this excess excitement by doing something positive to further his plan.

He'd plan a murder.

Walking to the window, he shifted his cane and stood with a hip braced against the windowsill. His recent knee surgery promised to end his years of limping, a weakness he'd always hated. When he addressed Ahmet again, his gravelly orders were abrupt. "Meet me at my office late tomorrow afternoon. We have plans to make."

Not waiting for a reply, he slammed down the cane and picked up the magnifying glass, dismissing the other man with his inattention. He closely inspected the picture, reconfirming the accuracy of his findings.

He let out a sigh. Relief swept over him. Finally, he'd caught a break.

The picture appeared to be about seven years old. He didn't recognize the forty-something man in the photo, but there was no mistaking the young man beside him, dressed in formal Annapolis whites. The young teenage girl with them looked to have some potential for being a beauty by now.

The man with prematurely graying hair with the young officer

was as good as dead. This was the man who'd held the noose around his neck since that night. Ten years. He'd searched for them for ten years.

He rubbed his head, absently feeling the spot where the scar tingled as a reminder from time to time. His hair was still thick enough to hide the souvenir from the kid. He pushed a hand through his hair and swore. "Damn him, he'll pay. They'll all pay."

The threat of exposure had been no different from being locked up all these years. Potential questions about his treatment toward his foster children would raise issues of abuse he didn't want to confront. Risking his political future would be too great. Until all the witnesses were gone, he couldn't move forward with his life.

He'd been warned after that night. A phone call, just one, threatened him. "Stay away from kids. Stay away from *all* kids, or you'll be exposed for what you are. I have the proof."

That voice still haunted him. Now, the voice had a face. The information in front of him identified the one he'd hold accountable.

Kincaid flipped through the papers inside the open folder, passing over most of the information, focusing on the annotations claiming the two were father and son, Avery and Jason Holmes. He laughed out loud. The young man wasn't Avery's son. He was *his* runaway foster son, Jason Lawrence. And the only *credible* witness to his past improprieties.

The dossier claimed the senior Holmes worked with the Treasury Department as an accountant. Kincaid tapped the paper and laughed. The job was a cover. The man had to work with one of the covert government agencies, because he'd managed to keep the kids hidden for ten years.

No, he was no accountant, not with the strings he'd pulled to cover up everything that happened that night. He'd even arranged the kids' disappearance without questions from the local children's welfare agency, and after the threat, Kincaid didn't dare pursue them.

There were still a few holes in the research, but by a stroke of

luck, now at least his enemy had a face—an identity. Kincaid was ready to call in a few markers, mentally reviewing the prospects, those people on the fringes of society who were in his debt.

The senator lifted the fat stogy to his lips and blew a smoke ring. Lifting the cigar in the air, he dramatically flicked the large ash into the fireplace as he wondered about the best way to get rid of Holmes and the kid. Information could be bought, or better yet, bartered—no money trail. Nothing would stand in his way.

Tomorrow before he talked to Ahmet, he'd meet with the man who had unwittingly set his plan in motion. Once again, that strange sound rumbled from his chest. Laughter.

Chapter Three

Four hours after leaving Manhattan and her Riverside Drive apartment behind, Emily Holmes had plenty of time to contemplate her seduction plans. She worried her lower lip as the musical lyrics coming from her radio reminded her that she was *past the point of no return, no turning back now.* They made her wonder if she was doing the right thing. She braced herself against her doubts.

No, she refused to have any more second thoughts. She'd seen the blatant need in Jason's eyes often enough to know he wanted her, and she was done waiting. He could just forget anymore of that I-am-notworthy crap, forget the excuses about their seven-year age difference, and his honorable stand because her father had once taken him in and mentored him.

Without even thinking where she was, she turned down a side street and slowed. After all these years, her old convertible roadster practically found its own way onto the curved cobblestone driveway gracing the front of the old Georgetown residence. With the music and engine turned off, she slouched against the worn leather seat, threw back her head, and let silence wash over her. Home. She closed her eyes, turned her face to bathe in the warmth of the early spring sun, and grinned wickedly to herself. She'd turned twenty-one last week, finally old enough to convince Jason she knew her own mind and body, and they both wanted him.

Opening her eyes slowly, the soft green of the thin Italian cypress trees which stood like giant sentries beside the path to the steps caught her attention. When had they grown so tall? The ivy covering the brick walls crept higher than she remembered, thicker than ever. Other than those small details, the place appeared the same as it had her whole life. Overall, the scene warmed her heart.

On this rare mild day, the whispering breeze ruffled her already mussed hair, blowing the scent of cherry blossoms through it. Emily breathed in their sweet fragrance, releasing a sigh, and stretched like a cat, allowing the heat to soak into her bones even as the excitement rippled through her. For the hundredth time today, she unsuccessfully attempted to brush a wild tendril of hair off her cheek. She flipped her sunglasses up onto her head, using them like a headband to hold the stray hair back, opened the car door, and stepped out.

Suddenly the anticipation of the hunt was too much for her. She couldn't wait to get her plan under way. Reaching into the backseat of the little convertible, she grabbed her backpack and ran toward the house. The shortcut through the grass allowed her to avoid the slippery, moss-covered brick path to the steps.

Tapping the security code into the keyless entry pad, she barely waited until the lights on the pad stopped blinking before she opened the door and popped her head inside, shouting, "I'm home. Anybody here?"

No answer.

After dragging the backpack and duffle bag inside, she shoved them in front of her across the floor while trying to hold the door open with a hip. She listened to the silence.

Rosa was probably out shopping, just as she'd hoped. The house was quiet, empty. The door closed slowly when she stepped fully into the entryway. The familiar smell of old lemon wax filled the air.

In the entryway she inhaled the savory scent, pausing long enough to let the smells and interior play of light reflect memories, those of comfort and love.

Where is he?

Her ulterior motive for getting home early might be a big bust. Great, no one was home, just as she planned, but neither was he. How could she seduce him if he wasn't there? While fumbling absentmindedly with her things, she tried again. "Anybody, anybody here?"

Disappointed, she left the duffle on the floor blocking the door and crossed the room, moving deeper into the foyer and closer to the staircase. She returned to her bags and moved them toward the stairs, and stopped. Her mind shifted to a day long ago when she'd run up those stairs and flung herself into Jason's arms—back when she was younger, shorter, lighter.

Couldn't get away with that now, she thought and smiled. She looked up. Her breath caught in her throat. *Jason!* On second thought, maybe she could.

Had she managed to conjure him out of her head? No, not her imagination. Her imagination wasn't that good.

He stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at her with the same amusement in his eyes as he had the time she'd been thinking about. Only today, his shoulders were wider, bulkier than the last time she'd seen him.

Every time she thought he couldn't get any better looking, he did.

His dark good looks never failed to leave her insides feeling like warm gelatin. Lush black lashes framed his pale blue eyes, and he blinked when they made contact with hers. Her heart raced faster. She stared, then let her gaze wander over the heavy muscles in his upper body. They looked larger, harder, more defined than she remembered.

She devoured him with her gaze, eagerly taking in every detail until finally settling on his face. She couldn't make out his expression. Although he stood lazily at the top of the landing, his tight jaw revealed masked tension beneath his feigned casual stance. He acted as if he didn't quite recognize her, until his blank stare intensified. He suddenly looked ravenous.

He descended the stairs, gliding as if stalking prey, and paused briefly on the landing.

Reconsidering?

He took a deep breath and suddenly the hungry look disappeared.

Jason's mask was back, the casual attitude of a self-assured man. "Welcome home, squirt. I got your message, and your father asked me to stop by and help you with your things. He said to tell you he's sorry, he's tied up, but he swears he won't be late to the party."

Jason's hundred-watt smile practically blinded her. She may have stuttered something. What? She couldn't think.

He pointed to her duffle and opened his eyes wide. "Is that everything?"

"No need to sound so incredulous."

"So this is it?"

She shook her head and laughed. "No, my car's jammed full. Be forewarned, you'll be sorry you offered to help. I decided to bring as much home as I could this trip."

"Four years." Jason walked toward her one step at a time. "Stuff accumulates."

Emily started to interrupt him, wanting to ask about everything. As if reading her mind, he raised his hand to ward off the question. "Rosa's out shopping. I think she said something about picking up a *birthday* present before she heads over to Clancy's to set up."

He smiled. The dimple at the side of his mouth deepened as he wiggled his eyebrows at her playfully.

The smart ass. He thinks he knows a secret. "Ah, is that the reason for the smirk?" Emily asked. She knew he loved it when she smarted-off, and she'd never let him think he could hide a secret from her.

He opened his eyes wide in feigned surprise. "Me? I don't smirk."

"If you're trying for *indignant*, you'll have a tough time pulling it off with that *smirk* on your lips."

She recognized what the twitch at the corner of his mouth meant. They'd spent too many years living together after her father adopted him for her not to recognize it. Back then, she was a kid and he was a teenage menace.

The look was one of his teasing ones, the one he used when he thought he knew something she didn't. It was that annoying, I'm-somuch-older-and-wiser-than-you look that used to make her want to scream. Now it didn't bother her at all, because she had a surprise for him later that would wipe that look right off his face.

She looked down to hide the smile she felt threatening her lips. "Right. You. Don't. *Smirk*."

His smile did her in. Giving up the pretense of indifference, she dropped her things where she stood, ran up the remainder of the stairs, and threw herself at him. Almost toppling them both, she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist—just like the time she'd envisioned moments before.

He laughed, caught her, swept her up into his arms, and then he sank down to the landing with a thud and a grunt. "You're bigger than you were the last time you tried that."

"Good thing you're strong enough to handle me." Although she hit him without warning, he somehow had the presence of mind to brace himself for the impact as she jumped.

"Mmm, home." Nuzzling his neck, she sniffed his scent deeply into her lungs. She ran her hands over his shoulders testing the feel of him, the strength, and looked into his eyes. With a voice thick with emotion she said, "I missed you, Jason."

His blue eyes darkened before he bent to drop a brotherly kiss on the top of her head. "It's good to see you, too," he mumbled into her hair as the timbre of his voice deepened.

Brushing her loose, curly hair from his nose, he complained. "This stuff never changes. Can't you do something to get it under control?"

If she were in close proximity to him, her hair always seemed to reach out for him. She wasn't about to let him start down that old brotherly road. The response in his eyes was blatantly sexual. She'd heard the thickness in his voice. "You into hairstyling now?" she asked.

She fought him when he tried to release her. Emily ran a hand through her wild hair and pushed it in his face. "You love the stuff when it tickles and tempts." He didn't move.

Staring him straight in the eyes, she winked. "You know it turns you on."

His breath hitched as if she'd caught him. But he didn't respond to her.

Audacity—she'd need more than that to shake him.

He ignored her comment, but she felt his fingers twitch where they rested against her hips. She could see the temptation in his eyes to move his hands and test her curves. The truth poking at her bottom couldn't be denied, either, but he'd never admit it.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

He blushed at her words, realizing his blunder. He shifted his hands, from where they'd slipped to her hips when he fell, back up to the safety of her waist.

"Being home, I mean," she said. "I'm glad to be home and happy you could join us."

"Living undercover may sound exciting, but it's tough pretending to be someone else for a year."

For the last year Jason had temporarily worked for the same covert antiterrorist agency her father headed. It was a federal agency but had recently joined forces with several other countries' intelligence agencies. She suspected he was up to his eyeballs in aliases since it had gone international.

He fidgeted beneath her.

She grinned inside but maintained her straight face. She wouldn't let her pleasure show, not even for a minute. Now that she was firmly seated in his lap, she had him right where she wanted him. Trapped between her thighs. "So what's the news?"

"The Navy released me to the agency for my last re-up." His deep voice rumbled through her. "I'm working for your dad on permanent status."

She smiled against his rough cheek and relaxed into the security of having him surrounding her, his arms encircling her waist. "Lucky you," Emily answered.

He pulled away and grinned, flashing the dimple deep. "The undercover roles are tough to maintain. Playing a rich successful European playboy is the toughest part of the job. Especially the playboy part." He chided her.

"Oh, right, like you haven't been working on that rep for a few years. You're despicable." She punched him in the arm. He laughed and she frowned at him.

He geared up to set her aside, but she clung to the moment, refusing to let him go. He wore dark hair a lot longer than she remembered. She leaned into him, pressing her breasts against his chest as she reached around his shoulder.

He stopped breathing and went very still.

"What's this?" She tugged his ponytail, snickering. "Going for the pirate look?"

He'd tied it back, but that persistent front lock still escaped, dropping low on his forehead. Her fingers twitched with wanting to brush it back, but he beat her to it.

Forking his hair back off his face with the fingers of one hand, he took a long look at her with his eyes darkening as she watched. Then he shifted. Lifting her and his gaze, he pulled her up off his lap, bringing her to her feet and turned her bodily back down the stairs.

"Let's bring everything in and get you settled. We're supposed to meet everyone later at Clancy's."

My God, the man could drive a saint crazy.

He opened the door and took her hand, forcibly holding it as he dragged her outside to the car. Emily's fingers tingled where his touched hers and she held on, relieved that he hadn't released her completely.

"There are only five weeks left 'til graduation, and then I start my job with the agency," she informed him.

He chuckled as he ribbed her. "You computer geeks work out of the center in Boston, so you probably won't get much contact with the covert part of the agency."

"After graduation, I'm off to Quantico for advanced training. In six months, there's a good chance I could be joining your team."

"Not likely." Jason laughed and shook his head. "There's a long wait. Every military guy on a short list is looking for a job. I was lucky when the Navy loaned me to the agency to work with your dad and Harrison last year."

"Apparently, the temp position turned into a permanent assignment, huh?" Emily commented snidely, knowing how badly Jason had wanted it.

He picked up a couple of her bags out of the front seat. "Looks like you have ten years of stuff here."

"Can you believe I fit everything in this car?" Unlocking the trunk, she unloaded more of her things, dropping them on the driveway. "Look at how much is in here."

When he came around to help, their fingers brushed again. This time she didn't breathe or dare look up, afraid he'd read her intentions.

Could she handle being around him if their relationship didn't go to the next step? What if he never got past thinking of her as a surrogate kid sister? Would she eventually have to settle for that reality?

Tonight she'd find out. She was going to put it all on the line.

Emily would play him until he couldn't resist her. In the past when she'd flirted, no matter how aroused Jason became, he wouldn't act, and she stopped pushing. Tonight she wasn't leaving the first move or the last one up to him. This time, she refused to let him back off.

This was her final shot.

She had a plan, and his body's subconscious response to hers was her ally. She'd pursue that direction with her assault. Before tonight ended, she'd wear down his defenses and seduce him.

Only one thing bothered her. She didn't know much, and she

wondered if men's bodies reacted automatically. What if his responses to her were just that? What if he couldn't help getting hard? Maybe his erections were purely autonomic, just reflexes, impossible to prevent when he was pressed against her ass. She wanted his reactions to be about her.

Emily shook off her doubts. So what? Did she care why he responded, or could she use that to her advantage and worry about the rest later?

* * * *

She grew quiet, thoughtful, and Jason grew suspicious. He was in trouble when she was thinking. There was no way she'd missed his hard-on pressed between her thighs as they sat on the steps. He dragged her outside to distract her and then tried to avoid watching as she ran down the steps and out the door. Her voluptuous breasts moved against her small frame with a tempestuous sway. No matter how he tried, he failed to drag his attention from the enticing sight. Instead, he blinked, hypnotically following their movement, trying to prevent the sardonic smile threatening his lips as his gut clenched involuntarily and his cock swelled.

She'd turned the tables on him, growing up like this and becoming more beautiful every day. Over the years, she'd tested her sexual appeal on him, and now he should slap himself for where his mind kept going.

Damn, Avery would kill me if he knew.

And if she suspected how much she affected him with her sexual promise, he hated thinking about the torture she'd put him through.

* * * *

While they rummaged through her car, gathering her belongings, Emily snatched every chance she could to sneak a peek at him, admiring his long strides, the way the muscles in his shoulders bunched, the way he moved his hands, everything about him. Her heart gripped tightly as she approved of his smooth movements, shuffling things from her car to the sidewalk.

All the longing, the heat, and the discomfort, too, came rushing back to her. He couldn't hide behind the issue of their age difference any longer.

"You know, I'm catching up with you," she blurted out. "The difference in our ages isn't such a big deal, not like when we were younger."

"What are you talking about?" He paused and gave her a quizzical look.

"Our ages. I'm catching up." She picked up a bag as she explained her rationale. "There's not as much difference between twenty-one and twenty-eight as between seventeen and twenty-four or eight and fifteen."

"How do you figure that, Einstein? Seven years is seven years."

"Ah, no. Well, yes, but, no it isn't. Do not challenge me in this arena. The ratio changes. Seven years difference becomes less, relatively, as we age. Someday, it'll seem like nothing."

"...and your point?"

"We could hang out more. I'm not as much of a pest as I used to be. You have to admit it."

He smiled, but he didn't say anything.

"Look, Jason, I agree, I was a pain. It was puppy love."

Adoration was tough to get over, and nothing had changed except the intensity of her feelings. Jason would run if he suspected her plan.

He raised a skeptical eyebrow.

She drew circles in the gravel with her toes. "I know we acted ridiculously. You know? Me and my friends. You were so patient."

His brow furrowed, waiting for the punch line. "Uh, thanks."

"Having all my teen friends openly drool over you when you came home in your Annapolis dress uniform had to be annoying." She thought how he'd politely humored them.

Jason smiled.

"But, you should have expected it. Didn't you have any idea how fantastic you looked?" Thinking about it now made her gasp just a little under her breath.

He laughed. The sound, a loud guffaw, ruined her mood. "What?" he gasped, trying to finish. "Are you kidding? Why would I think that? You were all kids."

"I'm not now." She wanted to groan. Being reminded frightened her. "Never mind. My point, in retrospect, is that I appreciated your patience with all my gawking friends, and me, too. Recent experiences have made me more sensitive."

She liked his new, rugged Euro-look, the persona he assumed as part of the job he was doing in Monte Carlo for the agency. With his hair longer, his jaw shadowed with a day's growth dark against his tan skin, he looked delicious. If she didn't know him so well, he'd look dangerous, gorgeous but dangerous. Not far off from that "pirate" comment she'd teased him with earlier.

"Point taken. You're welcome." Picking up another box, he headed toward the garage, then stopped and turned as he asked, "Wait a minute. What *recent experiences* are you talking about?" He stared, going very still as what she'd said sank in.

Trying to pull off a casual attitude, she shrugged. "You know, guys following me around, showing up uninvited, making fools of themselves. More or less just being pests."

Jason's pupils contracted as she watched his body tense. "What guys?"

This was a dangerous side she hadn't seen before. His gaze swept over her from head to toe as if assessing her for the first time from another man's point of view. "No one in particular. It's nothing. But I understand your endless patience with the old teenage crush I had on you."

He put the box down, leaned against the car, and frowned. "Old

crush?" he asked, looking at her differently, with a new expression, one she hadn't noticed before.

She smiled, picked the box back up, and shoved it into his hands. With a quick peck on his cheek, she turned and grinned to herself.

He said nothing more as he thoughtfully went about the task of moving some of the things they'd taken out of the car into the garage.

Emily decided to change the subject to her party, and studied him, wondering what it was about him that she found so compelling. Jason's masculine features were near perfect, but she'd been around plenty as good-looking. He definitely had great eyes. Their steely blue clarity inside the dark frame of his lashes was very intriguing. Or maybe it was his mouth? Oh, she really loved his mouth. It was wide and full, and when he grinned, that dimple peeked out from the right side. There was something about his mouth when he smiled that screamed "kiss me."

That was it.

She wanted so badly to nip his full top lip and suck it, flicking her tongue over the seam until he devoured her mouth in return. He carried around a dark, edgy, bad boy expression veiled behind the effect of a baby face. Disarming and dangerous, quite a combination. Lethal to women, and all because of that damned dimple. "Absolutely charming!"

She wasn't aware she'd spoken aloud until he looked up from the last box and asked, "What?"

* * * *

He couldn't help staring. Emily's eyes focused on his lips, making him squirm when she spoke. He was too preoccupied with the way her lips moved to comprehend her words. Despite being aware that she was actually speaking, the words were a buzz in his head. They mixed into everything else about her as he attempted to finish what had become the monumental job of unpacking her car. She'd caught him not paying attention to what she said.

All he could think about right now were all the years of practiced distance that had vanished the moment he came down the stairs and saw her standing in the foyer with that look of contentment on her face—the one he wished he'd put there.

Then, when she sat in his lap, he recognized the look on her face and his body betrayed him.

He'd been trying not to focus on her ever since, constantly switching his attention to anything else, the house, the car. Anything but her. Just looking at her was difficult, always had been since she matured. He couldn't handle her beauty any more now than he could her sweetness as a child. He'd loved her then so differently, but not any less than he did now. Emily had been the cutest child, bubbly, warm, loving, and kind. She idolized him.

He recognized when his feelings for her meant trouble. In her late teens he looked at her differently, and she'd become untouchable. The realization knocked him on his ass. Desiring her became his own private hell, his closest kept secret. Making love to her became an impossible lifelong fantasy.

To dream of her was one thing, but pursuing her, here today, was something else, something forbidden, like the hug on the steps that had his cock growing with interest between the V of her legs. Pressed against her warm mound, he turned as hard as forged steel before he could escape.

To top everything off, he worried about guys sniffing around her. He found himself obsessed with desire and absorbed with jealousy. How could he be with her and feel like this? How could he stay away when loving her this way got worse every year?

In reality, staying away had been easier than the torture of being tempted. He groaned when their fingers brushed. He wasn't meant for her, not with his past, the latent violent tendencies, and the old anger. The haunting secrets of his past still raged within him, but looking at her beside the backdrop of the old Victorian mansion melted his resolve in direct proportion to the tightness in his groin. As it had when he held her in his arms, his brain muddled as she chattered away oblivious to his turmoil.

He couldn't help laughing at her. "Have we finally finished dragging all your crap out of that heap?"

That remark about her refurbished 1960 Morgan would get a rise out of her.

"Don't go there, Jason." She warned. Besides his mother's delicate blue diamond pendant that Jason gave her when she turned sixteen, the car was Emily's treasured possession. The car was a legacy from her own late mother.

After Jason had lost his own mother at twelve and his grandfather at thirteen, he'd lived in foster care hell until Emily's father, Avery, rescued him. The pendant was the only thing Jason had from his past.

When Emily confessed how she felt her mother's presence in the car, he'd envied her that and somehow wanted her to remember him like that.

He regretted he had no such belongings or a place where he felt his family's presence, so he asked her to take care of the one thing he had. The pendant. And she'd been as good as her word. He'd never seen her without it on.

When he'd run from Kincaid, he'd left everything else behind. Even his identity. But with Avery, who'd been a father to him and Kate, they'd had it all.

Avery's partner, Harrison, and his wife, Andrea, had taken in the other boys. Even old Rosa the housekeeper was like family. Rocky lived with Andrea and the boys—they'd all become his new world.

He smiled to himself recalling the first time Emily told him she loved him.

She asked, "What are you grinning about?"

"You'll be sorry you asked," he warned her, and sat down on the front stoop.

Emily lifted her chin defiantly. "Tell me," she demanded with a

hand on those luscious hips.

"I was remembering the time you told me you loved me."

Emily rolled her eyes at him.

"You blushed bright red, ran your little hand over my head, admitting shyly how my hair reminded you of dark chocolate. Remember?"

Emily tilted her head to the side and frowned.

"And with the utter innocence of a child, you admitted to loving me more."

Tears filled Emily's eyes when she looked away. "Well, don't let it go to your head, Hershey Man. I think chocolate's taken over first place in my heart." Her voice cracked with emotion.

"No doubt. I think you've put on some weight," he replied, giving her an out, knowing she needed the anger when he saw her eyes glistening.

"I have not."

Their feelings for each other had changed, intensified somewhere along the way. As she'd grown, he'd kept control, kept himself in check. But he didn't know if he could keep at it much longer.

"What brought that thought to mind?" Emily looked somber.

"I don't know, maybe the car." He tugged her necklace, got up, and walked over to the car. "Maybe thinking about the time you told me, in your words, 'not to make fun of your baby.' Or, maybe because it's your birthday."

He laughed at the face Emily made. He ran a hand gently over the hood of the car, marveling at the condition of the original puke colored paint. "You have to admit this is the ugliest color green in the world."

"No, I don't," Emily replied in a huff. "I am nothing if not loyal. The car is perfect, puke green paint and all."

Jason didn't argue. "I know," he responded softly. This was part of her appeal and his biggest fear of her love. Her loyalty would never allow her to see anything wrong with him. Just like the car. And just like the car, there was plenty wrong with him.

The old adage about discretion being the better part of valor used to be important to him. Whenever she tempted him, discretion went right out the window. Since he feared he had little discretion or valor left, avoidance had been his creed.

He expressed his feelings for her with a brotherly affection when he was around and suppressed his sexual desire for her by spending them elsewhere. As a result, his reputation with women was legendary. She never hid her distaste for his reputation. Ironically, without knowing, she was the cause of it.

Despite all the other women, the aching emptiness lingered past the physical orgasms, unsatisfied. He only wanted Emily.

When Jason couldn't stall outside any longer, they finished carting the rest of her things upstairs to her old room. Emily plopped on the bed and turned in his direction. He dropped a suitcase on the floor. From years of old habit, he flung himself face down on her bed. Jason sank onto the mattress beside her, half-heartedly listening to her jabber.

I love the smell of her bed. He sniffed. When she isn't here, it reminds me of her.

He popped his head up when he heard her repeat his name.

"Hey, let's go out back by the pool." She tilted her head to one side, giving him a questioning look, barely taking a breath between thoughts. "It's a beautiful day. Do you think it's warm enough to get in the water yet?"

He'd been temporarily lost in his own thoughts until he turned toward her again and focused. This wasn't a smart idea, the two of them lying on her bed, alone in her room, alone in the house. He almost choked when he really looked at her. Her arms were splayed wide, her short top crept high enough to expose skin and a whole lot of midriff. The sparkle of a gold hoop in her navel peeked out above her shorts like a promise.

Shit, when did she get that?

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Thoughts of her naked beneath him while he explored her body with his tongue shot into his head, and a frightening tightness gripped his gut.

This was trouble with a capital T. He grabbed a pillow and hoped it concealed his physical reaction as he got up. Wrestling back his desire with her body so close to his, he rolled off the bed.

"Ahh, swimming." Good, they needed a diversion.

Chapter Four

All Jason could focus on was her soft skin and that glint of gold.

Emily said, "We have plenty of time before dinner. Let's go check it out."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Okay," he agreed. Anything to get her off that bed before he lost it. Swimming? What harm would come from a nice cold pool? Perhaps he sounded a little too enthusiastic, because Emily crinkled her brow at him, and looked perplexed. With all his blood pooling ever lower in his body, he had to remind himself to act normal.

He wouldn't think about her that way. He shook his head to clear his wayward thoughts. "I haven't been in yet, but I heard the weather's been pretty warm this spring. I guess we could test it out."

He headed to the door, sure she was already suspicious about his stupid behavior.

Following behind him, she stayed on target. "The water should be warm. That solar panel Dad installed last year better come in handy for more than ugly roof décor."

He rushed down the rear stairs, heading straight to the poolside cabana in the back yard. She chased after him, barely able to keep up. She stared at him as if he'd lost his mind, shook her head, and grabbed her spare suit from the locker. Emily padded past him into the bathroom with a look of bewilderment on her face. He grabbed his suit and without a word rounded the patio into the other bathroom.

Although he was quick, hoping to get in the pool before she did, Emily rounded the corner at the same time he did, bumping into him. When he saw her long legs in the bathing suit, the lump forming in his throat was impossible to swallow. His body quickened.

Maybe he should have rethought this diversion idea. A horrible question popped into his head. What if he couldn't resist her? He was suddenly afraid, very afraid.

This pool idea seemed like another big mistake, until he jumped into the water, the cool water. With a sigh of relief, he thought, *Thank God*. The cold water helped.

Instead of getting in the pool right away, Emily grabbed a bottle of Chardonnay from the refrigerator under the poolside bar, opened it, and poured two plastic glasses with the dexterity of someone well practiced. He frowned, "A little too adept at that, don't you think? At least for someone whose twenty-first birthday was only last week."

"Give me a break, Jason. It was a long drive down here. And where do you think I've been, in a convent?"

He rolled his eyes. I wish.

"I've been in New York City for four years. You know, the Big Apple? Besides, I already did the drunken coming of age thing last week. You know, shots and all-night clubbing. Now, do you want something, or are you just going to treat me like a baby and nag me about my behavior?"

A bowl of strawberries with a chocolate crème dip was in the refrigerator. She slowly picked out a strawberry, licked the crème from the juicy fruit, and bit into it. She swirled her tongue over her lips and popped the rest into her mouth, then tossed one at him. He caught the fruit in the air and ate it.

Maybe a relaxing drink was what he needed. "I'd rather have a beer if there's one in there. Give me the bottle and keep the glass." His voice was beginning to sound sharp even to his own ears. Her body in that bathing suit was going to kill him.

What was wrong with him? She was totally covered. It was a one piece, conservative on someone else's body. However, on her it was killing him, and she didn't even realize it. Or did she?

Was that it? Her ultimate power? She was so unaware.

"Get in here, please. We don't have all day."

She took a sip of her wine and walked over to him as he watched her. "I'm coming," she answered, and he wanted to groan at the innuendo.

She bent over, giving him an unobstructed view of her cleavage as she handed him the beer. She kept her eyes on his as he took it from her. Their hands touched, and she didn't move away. When his lips kissed the mouth of the bottle, he wished he could take the pert nipple peaking through the material of the suit into his mouth. The muscles in his throat contracted with desire. He swallowed. He put the halfempty bottle on the pool deck as he slid underwater, floating just below the surface, still looking up at her.

She went to the shallow end and tested the temperature of the water with her toes before she slowly slipped in and under.

Jason watched the water sluice through her hair, turning it to burgundy, stretching the untamable curls down her back, calming the wildness. When the curls were wet, her hair reached well past her waist. She looked like an ephemeral mermaid. Sometimes when he looked in her eyes he saw the Caribbean, sometimes a shallow sea green, sometimes the deep teal of the marine waters. They were always an interesting mix of ocean colors. Chameleon colored.

He wanted to run his hands over her soft pale skin, cream colored against the turquoise of the bathing suit.

The coolness of the water wasn't going to be enough to temper his growing desire. But as long as he kept her attention on his face, he was safe.

Emily looked at him. "Are you grimacing or squinting? Is this still about the wine?" She didn't even pause as she continued. "Look, you're not my brother, I have a father, and I'm a big girl now. What's bothering you? I'm twenty-one, a grown woman. You're only seven years older." She interrupted the next words out of his mouth. "Okay, okay, almost eight," she conceded. "Big deal! It's time you stopped trying to act like some ancient elder. She forced him to accept her point of view.

"Okay, I apologize, you're right," Jason said. After watching her grow from an imp to a beauty, that "woman" stuff she mentioned was hard to miss. Standing before him, waist high in water, there was no doubt about that

Her eyes widened at his admission. She continued walking in the shallow water, moving toward him, until she stepped right up against him. His gaze drifted down to where he knew he would see her nipples pebbling beneath the thin material of her suit. He didn't want to get caught staring at her, but he couldn't take his eyes off them. Why was he torturing himself like this?

In spite of the water temperature, he grew painfully erect. Hoping she wouldn't notice what was becoming impossible for him to hide and knowing Emily, she *would* look. The knowing made him harder still.

God, what's wrong with me? I'm not some horny teenager.

He could only croak, "Okay, okay, you're a big girl now. I'll leave you alone about all that stuff." It was easier to concede and retreat than to try to deal with the power she had over his body. He wanted to disengage the arms she draped around his neck. The vain attempt was weak at best, but her body made his arms feel heavy, paralyzed. She pressed her body against him, rubbing her mound against his erection just to let him know she knew the effect she was having on him. The smirk on her face said it all. Then, while holding onto him, with the lightest touch, she brought her lips to his.

His heart raced, his breathing stopped. He panicked as a big smile started to form on her lips.

She dunked him.

He came up, sputtering and relieved. This, he could handle. Grabbing for her, Jason announced, "You know you just declared war, don't you?"

Emily slipped past him, sporting a huge grin. She was an excellent swimmer, the regional 100-meter champion three years running for her high school. But he laughed to himself. They both knew she was still no match for him, not if he really wanted to catch her. The time Jason spent as a Navy SEAL would guarantee that, if she played fair.

She wouldn't. Already wasn't.

His body's reaction to her teasing was a dead giveaway that she'd do anything to win, if winning was what she had in mind.

Even though he needed to avoid physical contact of any sort with her, he couldn't stop himself from falling for the bait, and despite suspecting she didn't want to win, his competitive edge kicked in, reacting too late. She was already way ahead.

He knew the minute when she let up and allowed him to catch her. *Chump*, Jason thought to himself as he touched her. He'd fallen right into her trap.

They both went under, her hair floating out all around her. He imagined it would be like that against the sheets. Her stare pierced through the water at him. Her eyes were the same color now as the pool water. Eerily, he was lost in the underwater world of Emily.

She swam up to his mouth, taking it in hers, instantly immobilizing him. She blew her cheeks out at him and planted big fish kisses on his motionless lips. They exploded out of the water laughing, Jason still holding her against his body as he leaned in helplessly for a real kiss.

Damn, he only meant it to be friendly, light and casual, but when they touched, her legs wrapped around his waist, and he felt himself drowning in her mouth. His last cohesive thought was, *Oh man, you're going under for the third time*.

He took the light kiss to a smoldering one in under ten seconds. At first contact, his mouth slanted over hers, and when she whimpered,

he was a goner. Her plump lips opened just enough when he brushed over them. Then he dove in, driving his tongue between her soft lips. He explored the depths of her mouth as he wanted to explore the depths of her body. She tasted like Chardonnay, chocolate, and strawberries.

With the heat his body generated, he expected the pool water to simmer. He extricated himself from her grasp while he could still think, but all his thoughts were gibberish. He couldn't form a coherent thought and knew he was in deep shit. For good measure, he dunked her one more time before he dragged her up the steps. The air was cooler than the water, and man, did he need that distraction right now.

"Oh, oh, it's freezing!" Emily said as she shivered.

They both ran to the towels, accidentally grabbing the same one. They fought for a few moments more before finally wrapping up in it together. Then they repeated the battle for the other towel. He won that war. Embracing within their shared towel, he rubbed at her with the other. She shivered, rubbing up against him, warming him up and something more.

Emily's left strap slipped down her shoulder. He stared at it, contemplating her delicate skin, wishing he could taste her. His tongue touched a rivulet of water dripping down her cheek. His mouth moved to her earlobe. She trembled. He nipped at it and deliberately kissed his way down her neck. First to her collarbone, licking the hollow, then he nudged the strap farther down her shoulder. As the top of her suit dropped, her full, round breast was exposed to the cool air.

At first he could only stare at his unhindered access to her. Then a hand with a mind of its own cupped it, his thumb rubbing circles across the tip. He lifted the weight of it as he bent to brush his lips across her taut nipple. Its subtle beauty entranced him. The soft pastel color of her areola and nipple deepened to a more vibrant shade as he watched them contract. His beard rubbed swirls of friction across the delicate skin of her breast, heating and pinking at his touch. His tongue laved moisture over her sensitive nipple before he realized her hands were inside the waistband of his bathing suit.

Fire leapt inside him.

Once again, he broke away first. He grabbed her hands and lifted them gently to his lips, kissing each fingertip. "We probably should get dressed. The party! We're supposed to be meeting for dinner and birthday drinks in an hour."

* * * *

Emily groaned as he released her hands. She stood still. She let him stare at her heavy breast, exposed above the bathing suit. When she looked down at herself, she was amazed how her pale pink nipple had darkened to a rosy red, hot and wet from his mouth. She watched as his hand covered it once more before he lifted her top and pulled the strap back up her arm. A genuine look of regret passed over his face as he covered her.

She started to pout, but had to admit he was right. They didn't have enough time, not for what she had in mind for him. Nevertheless, a satisfied glow burned inside her. She'd broken down the wall he'd built when she turned sixteen. She was finally making headway.

He held her. "Emily, maybe this wasn't a good idea."

Her stomach dropped.

"It's not that I don't want you. God knows I'd die for you. And it's not about the age thing anymore, either." He stiffly turned away from her, releasing her to the chilly air. The chill went deeper. "It's that I don't deserve you. There's so much about me you don't know."

"Jason, I've known you since you were fifteen. What else is there to know? What?" she asked flippantly.

"I can't talk about it. You'll just have to leave it at that." His brows creased, his pupils dilated, and a darkness she didn't recognize slipped over him. The expression on his face looked almost deadly. She'd never seen him like this. His eyes went blank and cold. The change in him confused and frightened her. The trembling started with her lips, then traveled through her whole body. She passed it off as chills and tested him, chiding him with a light tone she forced into her question. "You mean, if you tell me you'll have to kill me? Like that kinda crap? Because you know my clearance came through last week."

The comment broke the tension building in Jason. The shadow passed. "Only you would risk challenging me and then follow it with a wink."

"Oh, aren't you so bad?"

He pulled her toward the house, shaking his head as if to shake out his demons.

Emily caught a slight grin tempting the corner of his mouth, and his dimple threatened to emerge. She felt better, but the scare left its impact on her. In self-defense, she continued to badger him. "I don't buy it. So don't even think you'll get past me later."

* * * *

At first he thought he'd frightened her, but when he looked into her eyes, she didn't look worried. He was. She'd seen his blatant desire earlier, and he knew she wouldn't give up.

"And don't think I'm done with you. Next time we're going to finish what we started today." She pulled away as they reached the house. With an air of determination, she flipped her hair over her shoulder and headed for her shower.

Several minutes later, Jason heard Emily scream a few obscenities from the adjoining bathroom, and he smiled as he gasped for breath under his own icy water. Fifteen minutes later, still hard as nails, gritting his teeth in the stream of the cold shower, he needed to figure out Emily's game. What was really going on here? He was having a hard time resisting her. He looked down at the evidence. In the past, she had always been flirty around him, testing her feminine charms. After today, he wasn't sure that's all this was. She had become impossible to resist. What might have worked before didn't seem to be working for him anymore. He was losing all sense of self-control around her. This time her threat worried him. Yes, it was going to be a very long, very hard night.

* * * *

Jason called to her. "Emily?"

"Be right there. I'm ready," she announced.

She rounded the corner upstairs, and when she came into view, he couldn't stop the response that escaped along with the rest of the air in his lungs. "I'll say!" He could see she was definitely ready for something.

She paused at the top of the stairs and glanced down at him. One of her hands flipped a stray curl back off her shoulder, and the other rested lightly on the old wooden banister.

Emily was fully aware of the impact she made. He could tell from the glint in her eyes. But regrettably, he couldn't focus on her face once she took the first step. She looked incredible, and he felt gut punched. The multi-colored flowered skirt was too short. It looked even more so from his vantage point.

Strategically situated at the bottom of the stairs, Jason wished he could be sorrier about the view. But in the deepest recesses of his mind, the only feelings he could drag to the surface were pleasure, pleasure, and more pleasure. He'd just caught a glimpse of heaven, and poking his eyes out now wouldn't be enough to erase the image of a sliver of black lace that was now branded in his memory.

He quickly tried to blind himself from the sight, but wasn't fast enough. His gaze dropped, and he locked on the image. The only thing he could do was turn away. Instead of soothing the impact, the image reflected repeatedly in the mirrored foyer. She was everywhere, taunting him. His mouth went powder dry. It took every bit of self-control to force his eyes shut and turn back to her and focus on her eyes.

After the day's events, he felt like a lab rat. She was the motivation, and he kept responding. He couldn't seem to stop his reactions, no matter how much he tried, and just like any good lab rat, he didn't care. All he wanted was the reward at the end of the experiment.

She is that reward, all right.

She smiled that womanly, all-knowing smile with a casual glance directed boldly at his fly. His body jerked to attention as she took that first step, giving him an even better view with her knee bent. An uncontrolled groan escaped as his body reacted. Was she aware of the power she wielded? Damn right, she was. It was maddening to be at her mercy like this.

In a few minutes they'd be with the whole family. How was he going to manage any self-control under the circumstances? With each step she took toward him, his anxiety increased. God, what was wrong with him? He was very worried. She was initiating a full-out assault on his senses, and his control was diminishing as the day wore on.

He winced. This was going to be a long night.

There was no point trying to hide his response from her. Since she walked in the door earlier this afternoon, he'd managed to sport a chronic erection. He was past being embarrassed by his dick. Trying to recover some ground, reclaim some of his masculine pride, he dragged his gaze back to her face and forced himself to stare directly at her. Making sure to hold her attention as she descended the rest of the steps, he boldly reached down and adjusted himself.

She flushed.

Score one for the boys.

Jason felt triumphant, felt a smile start, until she looked directly at his face. He had to rethink his success. Her blush was intoxicating. Her tongue flicked over her parted lips, her hand dropped to her blue diamond pendant, and she inhaled, drawing his attention to nipples alluringly visible through the thin material of her top.

No bra?

He swallowed. He readjusted.

This time her expression widened a little in response. A small smile tempted the corner of her lips, but she contained herself. She seemed pleased instead of shocked.

Rats, no ground gained for the men's side. Maybe he'd been too quick to claim victory.

When she reached the bottom step, he moved toward her, taking her coat from her. He had an urge to wrap her up in a useless attempt to cover her. Maybe if her body was concealed, he could put this hunger aside.

His hand lingered, refusing to be controlled as it slowly slid down her arm, taking in the silkiness of her skin. Caught in his own trap, a little voice in his head laughed as he draped her coat over her shoulders. He knew it wouldn't help. It was too late for him. He sniffed her hair one last time before they headed out the door.

He could cover her up all he wanted. He'd still be thinking of the contrast between that scrap of black lace against her pale pearl skin all night.

Chapter Five

Jason and Emily walked into Clancy's together. The local pub was a regular neighborhood hangout, and the table at the back was always reserved for parties.

"There's no mistaking which table is ours tonight." Emily nudged Jason. She loved the low, slow rumble as his laugh gathered and escaped.

A large birthday banner proclaimed the event with balloons. Music blared, and the scattered TVs were set to various sports events. Emily paused to appreciate the moment. Jason's hand was at her back, and the two most important women in her life were scampering around the pub finalizing preparations for the party.

Andrea, Harrison's very pregnant wife, was the first person Emily greeted. She carried the oversized birthday cake to a table that had been set aside for presents. Her long silvery-blonde hair could belong to a Viking princess. The entire family was anxious for the birth of their first biological child. The couple raised Cade, Harry, and Peter, but this pregnancy, after waiting so long, was a joyous surprise for the whole gang.

Jason took the cake from her and placed it on the table where she indicated.

Emily selfishly hoped the baby would wait until after graduation so Andrea could be present. She had become more than a friend to Emily. She was like an older sister. The race between the birth and graduation looked like it would be a close call.

"You look fantastic," Emily mentioned as Andrea brushed past. "No one would ever guess you're going into your ninth month." Andrea grinned as she swept by Emily and Jason, kissing air. Too busy to stop, she blew another kiss back over her shoulder. "Thanks, but I feel like a whale. Happy birthday, girl! Everyone should be arriving soon."

"Hey, Jason," Andrea continued. "You all should make yourselves comfortable while Rosa and I see to the final arrangements in the kitchen. Go get yourselves some drinks." With that, she disappeared back through the swinging double doors that led to a very loud kitchen behind the bar.

Emily looked at Jason and laughed. "Where do you suppose Rosa's at?"

"Up to her elbows in food as usual, I'll bet." Jason answered.

Seconds later, Rosa, the tiny, wiry Puerto Rican woman who had cared for Emily from the time her mother became ill, came out from behind the swinging kitchen doors, juggling trays in her hands. Jason grabbed them out of her hands and kissed her.

The whole family loved Rosa like the mother she became to all of them. By the time Kate moved in with the Holmeses after Avery adopted her and Jason, they'd all known Rosa would stay to become the surrogate mother Emily and Kate needed.

Emily kissed Rosa on the cheek. Her serious expression melted into delight. "Jes, jes, the birthday girl has arrived. Now we wait for the birthday boy, no?" She practically cheered her excitement. She scooped Emily into an enthusiastic embrace.

Emily giggled. Even after all these years, Rosa's heavy Puerto Rican accent still tickled her. Her expressions were often entertaining.

Rosa paused to pinch Jason's cheek before looking back at Emily.

"Ju are flushed." She ran a hand across Emily's cheeks. She tested the temperature on her forehead. "Do ju have a fever?"

Emily laughed, but she shifted her gaze as she felt a deeper blush settle in. Remembering the kiss she and Jason shared on the walk over to the bar had her blood pumping furiously. Her mind wandered in his presence, recalling how his arm remained possessively around her waist on the short walk to the bar, the way he claimed the kiss would be a private birthday kiss, the way his body leaned into hers.

Emily bent and kissed Rosa before she could interrogate her further. "I feel wonderful, don't worry so." She gave the slight woman an affectionate squeeze.

Harrison pushed through the door in front of Avery, interrupting Rosa's next words, much to Emily's relief. Both men pulled off sports jackets and threw them carelessly over a chair before attacking Emily with hugs.

Avery lingered in the embrace. He ruffled her hair and dragged her into the chair next to the one he picked for himself. "So, my little munchkin, you're twenty-one." His glassed-over eyes spoke sentimental volumes.

Bending down, he whispered in her ear, "Don't forget you'll always be my little girl, no matter how old you get." He kissed her with an enthusiastic smack on the cheek.

* * * *

Jason caught the quiet words of affection. The sentiment spoken lightly by her father brought sentimental tears of happiness to Emily's eyes, and a gut-wrenching worry to his. He did a quick reality check as he watched Avery interact with his daughter. The man held her hand in his as he leaned his head affectionately against hers.

Andrea struggled out from the back room, juggling two foamtopped mugs from the bar as Rosa directed a young man with platters of food to a table in the back.

Harrison grabbed Andrea and scooped up both beers. "What a wife! This is the kind of service every man needs."

She poked him and smiled. "Give me back my root beer, you oaf!"

Jason couldn't help the warmth he felt at their banter. Andrea was more than a match for Harrison's size. He was a bull of a man, and Andrea was equally large, but totally feminine. Until her pregnancy, she had still been working as an operative in the agency Avery headed.

Harrison was busy wrestling the real beer from his wife when Harry and Peter burst through the door in front of Cade. The two gangly teenage boys were laughing and teasing their older brother as they slammed into the bar.

Because Cade and Emily had both turned twenty-one within the last two months, the family party was a double birthday celebration.

Rosa squealed, "Ah, the birthday boy has arrived!"

Jason affectionately bear-hugged the three boys in turn before passing them on to other family members. He never forgot that until he was fifteen, he'd been their foster brother. He'd been one of them. Because of that year in hell, the bond they forged was stronger than most. No one talked about what happened. Avery and Harrison respected their silence. They just knew. The darkness of the experience blanketed all of them.

"Pete, you look like you're going to outgrow Harry." Jason loved the quiet, sensitive seventeen-year-old. He'd finally lost his baby features, and Jason thought he saw a stubble of red on his chin. Both Harry and Pete were going to turn women's heads as much as Cade already did. Cade wasn't as tall as the others, but he'd developed the muscle of a man. His surfer-boy good looks were infamous with the women at Georgetown University, and Jason didn't like the way Cade hit on Emily.

"Hey, Em, you look good enough to eat." He flirted, running tanned fingers through his shoulder length blond hair.

Cade's Romeo reputation and his charm worried Jason when Emily was around him.

Cade purposely glanced at Jason first, then casually to the table set nearby with their cake and piles of presents. He grabbed her around the waist, holding her out to admire her. He looked her up and down and gave her a teasing smile. "Nice. Better than that birthday cake, mm, mm."

He pulled her against him and nuzzled her neck lovingly. "This will drive him nuts," he whispered to Emily under his breath. "He hasn't a clue there's a conspiracy or that Kate and I are part of your plan. If he finds out, I'm dead meat."

She giggled at him and their scheme. Years ago, grinding her teeth in frustration, she'd broken down and confided to Cade about her feelings for Jason.

Jason's behavior made sense to both of them now. He told her he recognized the common signs of male frustration in Jason. None of which made any sense to Emily, since Jason's reputation with women rivaled Don Juan's. Cade intended to make it his personal quest to keep the tension high between them when Jason was around. They hoped it would goad Jason into making a move on Emily, or at least into admitting his true feelings.

She whispered, "His walls are tumbling down tonight."

Cade didn't move away from her or look in Jason's direction. "Oh, really? Then I'll help all I can."

* * * *

Jason watched the interaction between Cade and Emily with a mind-numbing jolt to his reflexes and a jarring in his stomach. He automatically stepped between them, affectionately hugging Cade. Cade grunted. Maybe Jason was a bit too enthusiastic. With an arm around his shoulder, he dragged him to the bar and away from Emily. "Let me buy you your first legal drink!"

Cade's earlier comment to Emily had rocked him. He didn't want anyone else to notice her, let alone touch her. Cade was like a brother to him and to her, so why did Jason feel this jealousy?

Cade released his hold on Emily and winked back at her. He responded to Jason, sounding sarcastic. "Right. That wouldn't be my

first legal drink. Jason, get a grip, I've been twenty-one for over two months already."

Jason felt his insides relax with the banter and the distance he put between Cade and Emily. "A whole two months?" he asked, and then chuckled.

* * * *

After the food, and cake, Emily looked up as the door opened again, and Kate, all freckles, arms, and legs, came flying through the door with Jorge.

"Kate, Jorge, I didn't think you'd get here 'til later?" Emily jumped up to hug them. "We saved you some cake. The strawberry icing was delicious."

"How was the drive down?" Kate questioned Emily with a knowing smile. Emily lifted a brow to let Kate know their plan was progressing well. Kate, always the conniver, had been the one to suggest the plan.

"I'm glad I got in early today." Emily dropped her voice so only Kate could hear. "I made a little headway." She spoke louder. "It gave me time to rest up before dinner. Which reminds me, are you hungry?"

"No, we grabbed a burger earlier, but I'm ready for dessert." Kate nodded when Emily winked at her. Emily turned to Jorge and asked, "How was your test?"

"Fine. I'm sure I aced it!" He looked at them both suspiciously. He'd been around the girls for as long as they could all remember, and Emily could see the wheels in his head turning.

She brushed off his questioning look. By the time he got a clue, it would all be over anyway. Guys who thought they were your brothers didn't like the idea of anyone having sex with you. Jorge wasn't going to like the plan. Cade was a different story. He was more like Jason's brother, so he was looking out for his brother's best interests. The "Jason Conspiracy" was well manned. Emily had assistance from Cade, Kate, and Andrea as well. The irony of the situation, plotting under the circumstances, was ludicrous. Jason, Harrison, and Emily's father all worked in intelligence. The real professional agents were oblivious to Emily's personal covert operation taking place beneath their very noses.

"I have an idea," Kate said. "Let's go bowling."

"Emily hates bowling," Cade said.

"It's your birthday, too, after all. Go on, all of you." Emily said. "I'll stay behind with Harrison and Andrea to support their dart game." He and Andrea were into a challenge match with several other Clancy's regulars. Harrison was nothing if not competitive, so getting him unintentionally involved with the plan had been easy.

Avery watched his extended family, smiling with affection, but declined either bowling or darts, using work as an excuse. "There are a few loose ends to clear up before next week's assignment."

Jason got up. "Let me go with you and help."

Emily held her breath and said a little prayer.

Avery waved off his offer. "No, that's not necessary. You stay, have a good time, and make sure the birthday girl here gets home safe." He patted Jason on the shoulder and kissed Emily on the top of her head.

"Don't worry, I did the traditional shots challenge at school. It took me two days to get over the hangover. Believe me when I tell you, it's not something I feel like repeating."

She laughed and turned her smug smile on Jason while she sipped her wine. Her father didn't know anything, but he had played right into her hands. *Thank you, God, and you, too, Daddy!*

She hadn't meant to catch Jason's eye, but she knew when he spotted the twinkle in hers. The sweat beaded on his upper lip.

Emily looked to Cade for affirmation of the plan. But his attention focused on Kate and he seemed upset. Something was wrong. He looked deadly serious, something Emily never before remembered seeing in his expression.

Kate's face had gone pale, ghostly white. Emily followed her gaze to one of the many TV monitors in the place. There, on the far screen, was Senator Adam Kincaid, big and bold and brazenly announcing something. Emily watched Cade walk up to Kate and she thought she heard him say, "Oh, God, please don't let Jason look up and see this."

Emily read Kate's lips as she whispered a question to Cade. "Why would he risk everything now? None of us has seen him since the night he attacked Jason."

Cade shook his head at Kate, as if to quiet her. He shot a quick glance toward Jason, reassured Jason hadn't seen the screen. Then he met Emily's gaze. His lips mouthed, "We have to get him out of here."

Emily felt a cold shiver down her back as she watched the exchange without understanding the meaning. *The man once attacked Jason? When? What was this about?*

"I'm tired." She moved in and whispered to Jason. "Let's go," she said.

Jason surprised her by not arguing. His hand settled on her back as he nudged her toward the door. A sense of foreboding and concern overwhelmed her. Without a reasonable explanation for what she'd just witnessed, somehow she knew bringing the subject up now would be a big mistake.

Cade couldn't seem to get them to the door fast enough. Emily's preoccupation with her own agenda to get Jason alone overwhelmed any other concerns she felt over the issue of Kincaid. But what about the pretense of watching the dart game? "Cade, will you tell Harrison we're passing on the dart game? I'm too tired to stay for the match, tonight."

"Go rest. We'll see you tomorrow. I'll let Harrison know."

As Jason's hand ran down her back to her waist, taking control of her senses, her discomfort with the previous incident between Kate and Cade eased, soon forgotten as her body took control of her mind. Cade practically gave them the bum's rush out the door.

* * * *

When Emily smiled at Jason with that gotcha grin, the blood rushed from his head to his groin. His reaction to her forced him behind a chair to hide the hard-on. Concealing what felt like a baseball bat erupting in his pants wasn't going to be easy. Trying to conceal it from the whole damned family would be impossible unless he slipped behind her and made a quick escape. The idea of being out of control like a randy teenager horrified him—the thought of discovery mortified him more.

Thankfully, Emily stepped in front of him, discreetly hiding his dilemma and announced she was tired. Jason sighed with a sense of relief. *Dilemma?* He chuckled to himself. A hard-on like this would make most men proud.

Chapter Six

The night air had grown brisk while they'd been in Clancy's, and cuddling on the way home posed more as a friendly gesture of shared body heat. Jason rationalized holding her against his body, all the time knowing that putting their bodies in close proximity was insane. The two beers must have deadened his mind. But the rest of his body was running on overload. He didn't think the small amount of alcohol he'd had was the cause of his mind shutting down around her. He suspected the agony of wanting her for so long was the cause, and knowing his body wouldn't be denied forever concerned him.

There was only her for him, or no one.

Her scent overwhelmed him, and her soft curves pressed against him in all the right places. He fought his arm when his hand slipped from behind to settle above her small waist, fitting perfectly under the round of her breast. He could feel the plump swell press against his fingers with each breath she took.

She leaned into him slightly when she laughed at something he said. His body was on red alert. Without consciously thinking, his unruly fingers wrapped around her breast, rubbing, involuntarily testing, searching for the nub of her nipple through the lightweight coat she wore. He stopped and turned into her. His head dropped to the sensitive spot behind her ear and he nuzzled her neck. When she arched into him, his body surged to attention, every muscle tightened with desire. He had fought this for so long. But tonight, he didn't want to stop, didn't think he could.

His will was as lost as his mind. He moved around to stand directly in front of her. He concentrated on dragging her coat open, absorbed himself with slowly touching her, finally rubbing his hands over her body the way he had so often imagined in dreams. He shifted his focus to watch her face as she followed the movements of his hands. They roamed, exploring her body, the flush of her heightened interest obvious in her pink cheeks and the marked catch in her breath. With each shudder, his groin tightened.

By her third gasp of pleasure, the torture of the moment spiked. He pulled her to him, sliding his erection against her stomach as he took her mouth hard. Frustrated, Jason placed both hands around her tight round bottom and lifted her higher, pulling her up against his raging cock. He ground between her thighs, pressing against her mound, trying to find relief. The feel of her only succeeded in intensifying his arousal. His need grew. He craved more of her. He nipped at her lip, then covered her mouth completely with his. He kissed her deeply, diving into her mouth with his tongue, ravenously mixing the taste of beer on his breath with the sweet hint of strawberry icing on hers.

He glanced around. The street was empty. As concerned as he was about their public display, he didn't stop mauling her in the middle of the street where she lived. Jason watched the mist from her hot breath rise with her smile. He tried to smile back, uncertain of his success as she stared hungrily at his mouth. He thought about devouring her right here, right now, damn the neighbors, but she grabbed his hand and dragged him up to the door of the old Victorian house.

Slipping his hands inside her coat, he undid her bra and pushed it up, giving his hands and lips full access to her breasts. He could hear her struggling to catch her breath as he bent in to nuzzle her nape while skimming his hands down her sides and over her hips. That short skirt ended up around her waist, and his fingers came into contact with hot velvet skin as he cupped her tight ass in his hands. That scrap of black lace he'd moaned about earlier would be no barrier when pushed aside, better yet, when he tore it off her. He wasn't the only one desperate for skin to skin contact. Emily tore off a couple of his shirt buttons accessing his chest, and her fingers scraped over his nipples, driving him to distraction. He suddenly realized she had his fly open and her hand wrapped around his throbbing cock before the door completely closed behind them. As fantastic as her grip felt, he grabbed and took both of her hands in his, inhaled, and lifted her fingertips to his lips. They had to slow down, or he was afraid he'd lose control, and he hadn't let that happen in a very, very long time.

Damn, what made him so crazy with her, so crazy he couldn't wait? After this afternoon, the hard-on he'd been sporting hadn't subsided for more than a few minutes at a time. He'd already waited too long. He was ready to explode. Her hair wrapped around him and her scent enveloped him. He was lost.

She pulled her hands free and grabbed his hips, pulling them toward her as she fell to the steps. His knees hit the bottom step, and he had her back against the railing, legs open, spread-eagled. He was on fire, blinded with passion, intoxicated with her.

Patience escaped with his good sense. He shouldn't take her there on the steps. Even though he didn't want to stop, thoughts tried to sneak through the red haze.

"Stop thinking," she said.

She was right. He'd been thinking too much, for too many years, and now all he wanted was the sensation of burying himself deep inside her, of finally being immersed inside her soft, tight heat. Merging their bodies as one.

Instead, he paused at her entry, still kissing her senseless. He waited until he was physically capable of dragging them up to the first landing, hoping he could manage the rest of the stairs and get them into the bedroom before every ounce of self control left him.

But the landing was as far as he got before she moaned. "Please, here, now."

He couldn't resist her. The need to brand her with the fire burning in him and make her his was too great. More than anything, he wanted to plunge into her without thinking and damn the consequences. He took another deep breath, still paused at her entrance despite his desire. The crown of his cock surged against her warm, moist opening, fighting back at him with independent intentions.

Emily lifted to him and arched, as if inviting him to push in past her hot, slippery folds, a silent request to take her deeper. The initial shock, the sensation of having him penetrate her, knocked the breath from her. Her gasp emptied into his mouth as he leaned in and kissed her.

Obviously she wasn't very experienced, but no matter what pace she wanted to set, he knew he had to prepare her to take all of him. He paused again to give her time to adjust, deliberately slowing his entry as she stiffened slightly. "Oh, Emily, you feel so good, so damned tight."

Gradually, Jason stretched past her tight opening, inch by painful inch, despite thinking he'd have to push into her fast and hard or die holding back. Somehow he forced himself to take her slowly, prepare her more for his size, make their first time together last.

However, her body and her moans goaded him on. She pressed against him, whimpering needy sounds, and her nails dug into his hips, her legs embracing his thighs. Then, just as he was ready to press further inside, he met an obstacle.

He paused. *Damn!* Suddenly cold with the realization, stark reality returned in a heartbeat.

Unbelieving, Jason stopped breathing for a moment, shocked at the barrier of her virginity. He stared into Emily's eyes, not really looking for answers, but the expression on her face told him everything.

"Don't think. Don't stop," she said as he held himself back. A flare of pure determination lit up her expression, warning him. She wasn't letting him off this time. As he held his ground, her next move really didn't surprise him. She did the only thing left to her when she impaled herself against him. Stifling a scream, she forfeited her own innocence and stared deep into Jason's eyes in defiance. With the deed done, neither of them moved.

Mine.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on her warm channel gripping his cock like a tight, silk-covered fist. Thoughts, doubts, consequences roared through his mind, followed by some other emotion. Satisfaction. Relief.

Guilt? Not as much as he'd feel later, he figured. She was his.

Yes, there was guilt, but the satisfaction prevailed.

Jason's control passed the point where he could stop if he wanted to. It was too late to undo what was already done. He pulled out a little, wanting to give her body time to accept and adjust to his size. He let her catch her breath after he'd fully breached her barrier, and then he filled her completely She was hot, slick, and anxious as he slowly pushed mercifully deeper, this time, reaching in, touching her womb. When she squirmed, demanding his attention, he joined her, shifting and driving into her. Jason surged in again and again, this time to the hilt. He cried out in defeat as she let out a cry of triumph. At his next thrust, Emily seemed more desperate for completion than he did.

Once Jason had fully seated himself inside her, she never missed a beat, driving with him, thrust for thrust. Her body demanded his. The act was desperate, almost violent with need, as they attacked each other like two wild animals. He held back his orgasm, barely, until he felt her spasms internally clenching his cock like a hand massaging him. She shivered her climax, and relieved, she relaxed. His climax pushed at him.

She made him senseless like no one had ever managed before. His orgasm exploded, far-reaching, pouring from him, draining him. He emptied everything, physically and emotionally, into her. His fear, his anger, his hopes, and damn it, his honor. Even at that, his cock stayed hard, ready to take her again. All rational thoughts fled his brain, as blood stayed pooled in his lower body.

The alcohol may have interfered with his thought processes, but his sexual performance suffered no ill effect. Instead of physically impairing him, everything stimulated him. On the other hand, maybe it was just this particular woman.

Jason grabbed the discarded clothes and picked her up, carrying both up the remaining stairs with ease and a determination to be feared.

* * * *

With her head buried in his neck, Emily murmured, "Only you," to Jason after he filled her. It had always been only him. Him, no matter where he was, or who he pretended to be. For a moment, she thought he looked pleased.

Success, finally. She belonged to him. He'd fought their attraction for so long and had been ready to stop tonight when he discovered her secret. Hadn't he known she would never give herself to anyone but him?

For honor—for his love and respect of her father, he believed she would someday belong to someone else. He was ready to accept the situation, despite his feelings for her. He'd tried to be such an honorable man. Thank goodness Emily didn't think like he did. Her father loved Jason and would want him for her.

She couldn't stop looking at him. At the moment he seemed even more dark and dangerous than usual. His hair hung loose like a curtain around their faces as he bent his mouth to hers, taking a nibble at the corner, sucking her bottom lip into his mouth. He devoured her.

His heavy beard formed a shadow against his jaw after the long day. His tight expression emphasized his full lips and his sensuous mouth. Just looking at him had her stimulated all over again. She could feel where his beard had slightly chafed her breasts. The thought of how his tongue tempted her breasts sent tingling sensations to her nipples. She looked down, curiously touched one, catching her breath at the sensation that zipped through her body.

At the sound of her gasp, Jason's gaze followed her hand to the point where her finger caressed her tightly beaded nipple. He growled, looking formidable with his jaw clenched, and the vibration coming off him sounded more animal than human. The passionate timbre of his voice sent ripples through her. Emily didn't think her senses would survive the onslaught.

What had she unleashed?

He carried her to her room and placed her on the bed. He removed the last of her clothes like he was unwrapping a gift, intently watching her as she stared back at him. Her body reacted to every movement, each nuance, every touch. When her naked body lay fully exposed to him, he finally shed the last of his own clothes, and for the first time, Emily saw all of what she wanted. This time, he obviously wanted back. She smiled up at him, and when he returned her smile, his dimple flashed.

* * * *

She groaned in pleasure as he approached. Her heavy-lidded eyes looked pleased with him. They didn't speak. This time he took her leisurely, almost painfully so. They moaned on each kiss. Each touch sizzled. The ache and the pressure built. His longing screamed for satisfaction and still he moved unhurriedly, savoring every stroke, every instant, taking his time, building her craving.

When she tried to take control of the speed, he held her, dominating the pace, maintaining the rhythm. He felt her climax approach with the spasms clenching him. A moan rumbled from his chest at the incredible sensations shooting through him as he fought back his release.

Holding back bordered on pain, a pleasurable pain, one that was worth dragging this moment out forever. But she was frantic with her new desires. He traced a path down between their joined bodies and rubbed her swollen clitoris, encouraging her climax. All the while he continued to pump steadily inside her tight channel, fast and deep, his mouth feeding on hers, soft and hungry, with soul-searching depth.

She writhed beneath him, frantic, whimpering with need as he pressed her to completion. When she shattered around him, he thought he could die a satisfied man, especially as her contractions milked him. The sensation of her orgasm, the way her eyes bored into his and then went blind in her pleasure, everything about her had him ready to explode. He wanted to watch as she came over and over again, but he lacked the control. Sharing this pleasure with her was a gift, something he wished he could experience for a lifetime.

The thought of being with her forever had never panicked him, but the possibility that it could be surprised him after years of denying the likelihood.

Slick, salty sweat poured off their bodies, an aphrodisiac on his lips, mingling with the fragrance of her and sex. He slowed himself, grappling for control before bringing her back up to a frenzied peak with his mouth and his hands. Then he drove into her with the force that holding back emotionally and physically for years had built in him.

She took him, all of his power, all of his demons, and all of his needs. Repeatedly, Jason buried himself to the hilt in the only woman he'd ever loved. She held on to him tightly, responding to his demands. They pumped in unison, established a tempo, and found their dance.

One of her long legs wrapped solidly around his waist, the other he held high over his shoulder. When they finally reached the ultimate experience of simultaneous orgasm, he collapsed breathless, exhausted onto his side, taking her with him, holding her body close against his.

He could only think he'd discovered his place, the place where he needed to be, where he'd always dreamed of being, of making a home.

"God, let me stay here forever." He murmured his prayer.

She smiled acknowledgement into his neck and kissed him again. They were devouring each other like they were each other's last meal, until the outside garage door opened with a wrenching sound.

He had just entered her again when reality intruded. He stopped. She stopped, listening.

"Fuck!" He pulled out and lifted himself off her. They separated, uncompleted this time, and like a couple of thieves in the night, neither spoke.

Jason didn't have to say anything else. Emily would know what he was thinking.

Chapter Seven

Jason sobered, disgusted with himself. He'd never wanted for women. Why did he have to take this one?

Why? Because none of them were her. No one had ever satisfied him as she had tonight, and yet he still wanted more, everything, forever.

Shit, she'd still been a virgin. He'd had no idea she'd waited for him, and the reality both shattered and thrilled him.

He'd learned to live with the life he'd made, with his capacity for violence, but he had never wanted her involved. He turned away from her and whispered, "I'm a violent man. I work a vicious job and live in the shadows. I survive by being aggressive."

"My father does, too."

But there was more. Jason was dirty, tainted by that bastard. And now could he stand to taint Emily with his potential, brutal nature?

God forgive me. What had he done? What made him think he'd ever deserve her? He knew the trouble was that he hadn't been thinking. He'd been careless. No condom, no withdrawal. Hell, no thought process at all. He couldn't even look her in the eyes. Forehead to forehead, he finally whispered, his lips breathing softly against hers, "I'm sorry. This can't be."

"No, Jason. Don't say that," she whispered. "Why are you apologizing?"

He moved away, shook his head, and murmured, "Know this..." He stopped and didn't say the rest. *I do love you. I've always loved you, my little angel.*

"What?"

He couldn't tell her. If he didn't hurt her now, she'd wait forever. For him. For nothing.

He turned on her and smiled. "Not bad for a beginner, babe."

The look in her eyes reminded him of the time he'd gutted a guy during a takedown. He turned from her before he took it all back, and his own heart exploded in his chest as he walked away.

* * * *

Emily couldn't breathe. What?

He was sorry. Why, for taking her virginity on the steps? She silently questioned him with her shattered heart, knowing her expression revealed all her inner turmoil.

He glanced at her—once. She reached out to him one more time hoping to stop him. But he was already gone. If not physically, he'd already escaped emotionally the minute he'd heard the garage door. She could tell by his posture, she'd lost the war.

He pulled on his pants, stepped into his shoes, and grabbed up his shirt.

God, he confused her.

She watched him go, willing him to turn around just once more. But he didn't look at her. The sound of his zipper was as final as the way he walked out, tucking his shirt in his pants without a backward glance. He strode out of her room and her life, sneaking down the rear steps.

Emily gasped. The pain felt like someone had ripped open her insides. Tears threatened, partially out of frustration, partially from disappointment. She bit down on her lip as she tried to gather herself together. Thankfully, the tears didn't come.

Emily hurried to the bathroom and stepped into the shower, at first standing back from the spray of water, reluctant to wash his scent away, wanting to retain something of him. The throbbing ache where he'd filled her made her feel alive, but the ache in her heart made her feel as if she were dying. She could still smell him on her body, his fragrance mixed with hers.

Standing in the stall, dry eyed, she knew she was totally responsible for what happened.

Questions whirled in her head. Thoughts she couldn't stop screamed through her mind.

He's a man with strong physical needs. She wondered if he'd had too much to drink. She doubted anything could breach his defenses sober. But she only remembered him drinking two beers.

She leaned back against the cool tile. He wouldn't return—not the way she wanted him to, anyway. Disgust with himself and his lack of control would keep him from making this same mistake twice.

She'd forced him into this, pushed all his buttons. His self-control and resolve were usually much stronger, but she'd planned an all-out assault and carried out her attack successfully. Unfortunately, she must have misread her opponent, and lost the battle. The ramifications of the aftermath of her victory shouldn't surprise her now.

For some reason, he'd never wanted this to happen. Now, she suspected there was more to his reluctance than the difference in their ages, more even than his loyalty to her father.

A dark fear, bitterness, and a ghost haunted him.

Losing him would leave an empty place nothing would ever fill.

She walked into the warm spray and lightly lathered the sponge. She'd never wash him entirely from her heart. She'd at least have this memory.

With precise movements, she touched each spot he'd touched, until the memory had tears finally falling. When all traces of him had been rinsed from her body, and when she was done, she collapsed to the shower floor on her hands and knees, head bent beneath the flowing water, salty tears washing away with the beating stream.

Despite trying to hold them back, great gasping sobs escaped. She stayed until the water ran as cold as her heart. At least she would have her memories. Hopefully they wouldn't destroy her. * * * *

Walking out of her bathroom, drained, frustrated, and angry, she sighed when she heard her father call.

"Emily, Jason, anybody home?"

Hearing his name sent a stabbing ache through her heart.

She shouted down the stairs, trying to sound as normal as possible. "You're back early. I thought you were going to the office for awhile?"

"Got done early. Isn't that Jason's car out front?"

She choked. *He left the car?*

Emily made up an answer, "Yeah, I think he went back to Clancy's to pick up Harrison's car. Did you know Harrison and Andrea stayed to shoot darts?"

"Oh—right."

"They didn't want to drive."

"Good idea. Has Jason gone to bring them by here?"

"Yes, I guess he walked back over. When they get in, would you mind thanking them for the party? I'm heading to bed. I'll see you all in the morning."

She wasn't sure how she'd deal with tomorrow or any of them come morning. The one thing she was sure of—Jason would be gone. He had a way of disappearing into his various identities when it was most convenient for him. This time it would suit her, too.

* * * *

Th-thump, th-thump, th-thump. What was that infernal pounding in her ears? It beat like a million drums, and her head was ready to explode. Emily felt like she'd tied a super one on last night. Her eyes, too fat and sore to open, were swollen shut.

That racket? The pounding beat? Couldn't be the heart ripped out of her last night, still beating. *Oooo, too loud. Shhhh, be quiet, you'll wake everyone. Especially me.* She couldn't face the inevitable empty days after the night before.

The light shining through her open curtains proved just how distracted she'd been. When she rolled over to avoid the morning light, she realized Kate was in the bed beside hers. Emily closed her raw lids and covered her head with her pillow. She wasn't ready to cope with Kate, let alone the rest of the world. Maybe if she were really quiet, everyone would forget she was there.

She smelled coffee. The aroma alone would wake Kate, and that meant Emily would have questions to answer. She silently waited with the pillow over her face. Birds chirped good morning calls to each other on the wings of what seemed to be a fantastic spring morning. And she wished the skies would blacken—that it would rain and thunder, and she could bury herself in the storm instead of in reality. Soon, being forced to join the threateningly bright day and inevitably the cheery humanity around her, Emily dreaded facing life after last night.

Still burrowed beneath her pillow, she heard Kate stir. "Is that coffee I smell?" Her feet hit the floor with a thud.

"Uhm," Emily muttered into the bed.

"Emily, you have to get up. Tell me what happened after you left Clancy's. Did the plan succeed?" She kept on talking about how she'd waited up forever with Cade before finally coming up to bed. She let Emily sleep so they could talk first thing this morning.

Emily groaned. "It worked, but I think it backfired."

Kate didn't act like she noticed anything wrong until Emily popped her head up from under the pillow. Her swollen eyes were a dead giveaway. It was very apparent something had gone dreadfully wrong. "Oh, Emily, honey, what in the world is wrong?" She switched beds, and the movement jarred Emily's aching head, causing her to moan. Kate asked, "Are you sick? Can I get you something?"

Emily tossed her head from side to side before the movement pained her even more. She stopped in mid-shake, thinking about the question for a minute, then slowly nodded. "Some aspirin would help, and a big cup of coffee". She absolutely wasn't up to rehashing last night—her seduction plans had gone very awry.

Chapter Eight

The early spring night was crisp and clear and still. Distant streetlights within the grassy median looked like sparklers, silver rays of light shooting from the tops of thin metal spikes. The military-cut branches of the neighborhood trees stood at attention, casting shadow soldiers on manicured lawns.

In the quiet evening, a black Lincoln Town Car idled along the empty street. Enough light exposed the government license plate to confirm the cliché.

A man, whose features were indistinguishable except for his large size and a flicker of pale hair, quickly stepped from the sidewalk into the waiting car. No interior lights flashed to expose the passengers. They remained anonymous—mere silhouettes against the rear window.

As the sedan edged away from the curb, another car, identical to the first, approached. The first paused briefly at the stop sign and then picked up speed as it whipped around the corner in a cloud of billowing exhaust.

The new arrival stopped in front of the same house, pulling all the way into where gravel curled in front of an old ivy-covered mansion. The overgrown lawn filled with scattered weeds was a sign of neglect in this well-groomed neighborhood. The house, set back on the property, was veiled in darkness and vacant long enough for the wild ivy to take hold across the threshold.

The air stilled—only the slightest hint of a breeze disturbed the exhaust fumes drifting from the tail pipe. A stream of smoke snaked up, ribboning through the chilly night air. Nothing else moved until the driver's door clicked open. He stepped out casually, unfolding his long body, a well-dressed man in a long, black tailored coat. He carried himself with an air of authority as he surveyed the vicinity.

The silver hair of the person in the backseat reflected under the interior light. He leaned forward, saying something to the muscular man who rode shotgun. The man got out, quickly inspected his side of the building and then, as an afterthought, walked over and checked out the adjoining property. This burly guy, almost as tall as the driver, seemed to have shoulders as wide as he was tall. Only after glancing around again did he signal the man in the back seat an all clear.

The three men worked with a precise team-like efficiency, inspecting the area around the house, while someone watched furtively from between overgrown bushes. Using the bushes as cover, he sank to his haunches and moved to the back of their car. At the rear end, he dropped to the ground beneath the bumper for a minute and quickly disappeared again, back into the bushes, just as the three men returned from the perimeter search.

They seemed satisfied that the house and grounds were empty, until a sound diverted the driver's attention.

The driver stilled, listening.

* * * *

Jason Holmes squinted, studying the bushes until the movement of a shadow farther down the street distracted him. He watched a dark figure moving slowly away. Despite the distance and the lack of good light, he thought there was something remarkable about the character's appearance. At least from where he watched, his mannerism, a distinctive walk, something rang familiar. He recognized the guy, but couldn't quite place who he was.

Trying to get a better view, he switched positions with his husky partner. "Harrison, do you notice anything familiar about that guy, the way he moves, maybe?" Jason quizzed him before he turned to look at the third man in the backseat and asked his opinion. "What about you, Avery, did you detect a slight limp? It's barely perceptible."

No one answered, each lost in thought. Avery Holmes shook his head as Jason continued to speculate. "Maybe we should've made these arrangements ourselves."

There was no doubt to any of them that the setting was fishy. Harrison James commented, "I don't like this choice of location. It's too open."

Jason looked back at the house when Harrison asked Avery, "Who owns this place anyway? Do we know?" The other team working with their antiterrorist agency had been in charge of setting the location.

Avery answered, "I think it was Franklin who knew about this place. An old buddy of his recently acquired the property. I think he set it up."

"Franklin, wasn't he your old partner, Avery?"

"Yes, I recommended Franklin for the assistant deputy director's position last week. By next month he will be the second in command." Avery smiled at Harrison. "You'll have to clean up your paperwork for him."

"Shit, that's what this department needs. More bean counters. No offense, Avery."

Jason walked out to the street to get a better perspective. Tonight, maintaining Avery's cover and his overall well-being was his responsibility, and he didn't take it lightly, especially under the circumstances. His mind kept turning to Emily and to what they'd done. He felt restless and growled out his concern, "This isn't what I expected. The contact should already be here, waiting."

Harrison started back to the car. But before getting in, he did a quick recheck of the perimeter. He casually tossed a yo-yo while he scouted the area. He finally stuck the toy back in the pocket of his leather bomber jacket. Then, he patted himself down as if searching for something. Jason recognized his partner's old habit. The cigarettes weren't there. Harrison fidgeted outside the vehicle for a few more minutes, then he straightened up and focused. "Did you see that? Did someone else just come out of those bushes down the street?"

The uneven lighting made it hard for Jason to discern details as the figure continued to move in and out of the obscurity of the bushes. The man deliberately stayed away from the more clearly lit side of the street.

"Harrison?" Jason asked. "Are you sure we're in the right spot? Is this where we're supposed to meet Ahmet?"

Avery had stressed the importance of this meeting to him earlier. If US security wasn't at stake, Jason would have talked Avery out of it. When the contact insisted on delivering his information directly to the agency director, specifically Avery, there wasn't any way Jason could persuade Avery from it.

From the start, Jason had been suspicious of the contact's motives. No one outside the agency should have been aware of the director's identity. Except for a choice few members, Avery's position as head of the agency was top-secret. Hell, information about the agency itself was on a need to know basis outside the CIA and the FBI.

This Middle Eastern contact was supposed to lead them to the location where a terrorist leader was cutting a deal to purchase an untold number of arms. Their contact was late arriving, and it looked like they were going to miss the arms sale. In this kind of location, anything could go wrong, and Jason wasn't sure it was worth the risk to Avery.

Harrison pulled out his notepad, flipped it open, and studied the page. He nodded, rubbing his left hand back and forth through his short, bristly hair. "Yeah, this is it. Dispatch gave me the details yesterday."

Just as quickly, he flipped the notebook closed and shoved it back into his left breast pocket. Harrison patted himself down again and groaned, "God, I wish I had a cigarette. This yo-yo Andrea gave me is a shitty substitute. It keeps my hands busy, but something's missing here." He ran his hand down his face. "I'm not comfortable without a cigarette dangling from my mouth."

"I don't like this." Avery said, finally agreeing with Jason. "We'll wait a few more minutes, and then we're outta here."

But Jason still watched for anything at all. He was focused on the shape disappearing in the distance. He dropped back behind the steering wheel, and still the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. His instincts signaled warnings. He knew Harrison well enough to know he couldn't attribute all the man's nerves to nicotine withdrawal. And Jason tensed even more knowing Avery was uncomfortable. It made his fear real. Avery was too experienced to trust a situation riddled with screw-ups like this one was.

Pressing the lines between his brows and scrubbing his hand over his forehead, Jason turned around in his seat to look directly at Avery and asked, "Did you see who was in the lead car tonight? I couldn't tell."

"No."

"Everything going down here tonight looks suspicious," Harrison added. "I hate having to hold our position under the circumstances."

Avery glanced up at him, his expression deadly serious. "I didn't see inside the car, but Franklin's guys were supposed to be on first shift."

"I saw them pause at the end of the street before we pulled up. They picked up someone I didn't recognize." Jason asked, "Why would they do that?"

Harrison bent over, leaning with both hands on the hood of the car and grumbled into the open window. He dismissed Jason's question before getting back in. "Maybe one of them was in the bushes taking a whiz." He added, "You don't know everyone. I'm sure there are a few other unknowns out there like you and Avery."

Growing tenser as the situation escalated, Harrison interjected, "Let me tell you, this quitting smoking shit is going to kill me long before heart disease or cancer." Avery said with a snide laugh, "It'll more likely kill us first."

Jason's short temper snapped. "God, Harrison! Shut up or light up before you drive us nuts! Something's wrong here. I can feel it."

The big guy gave Jason a look as if he'd been asked to strangle a puppy. "You know I can't smoke. Andrea would kill me. I have to quit before the baby comes or else."

After responding, Harrison gave him an appraising glance. "My, my, Jason, aren't we a little testy? What's eating you?"

Jason ignored him, hoping Harrison would drop it. But he was on a tear and Jason feared what was coming next.

"Don't worry. Emily will be back by the end of next month all graduated and ready for training. You'll probably be working together—"

"Don't go there," he growled low beneath his breath. Jason gave Harrison a deadly stare, and the man had the good sense to cut himself off in mid-sentence. Harrison took the hint from Jason's expression that he'd overstepped the boundaries. When Jason glanced briefly over his shoulder at the man in the backseat, he frowned at his partner. He didn't care what Harrison thought, he'd gone too far breaking their unspoken rule. Even if Harrison didn't understand why mentioning Jason and Emily in the same breath, specifically in front of her father, was forbidden, Jason imposed it.

Harrison dismissed Jason's irritation with a shrug. "Okay, don't get your panties in a wad. I'm the one playing with a yo-yo here."

Jason grimaced and tried to offer a weak apology. "Sorry, you're right. I'm antsy tonight. I haven't been comfortable with Ahmet's clearance or this meeting."

Harrison turned to Avery in the backseat again. "This is fuckedup. Should we stay?" Jason looked in the rear view mirror at Avery. "Could Ahmet be working with another faction?"

Avery didn't get a chance to answer before Harrison unfurled another question at him. "Do you think your cover's been compromised?" Avery raised a shoulder noncommittally. "It appears we have a problem. At the very least, the agency could have a mole. No one outside our team was supposed to know about this meet tonight."

"What do you think it's all about?" Harrison turned to Jason. "Wasn't this area supposed to be clear before we got here?"

Jason nodded. "Avery, I thought C team was keeping this area cordoned off tonight?"

"Those were my orders. If that guy moving around down there isn't one of ours, someone's ass is gonna be in a sling come morning!"

Although it was unusual for Avery to accompany them, and Harrison was lead tonight, Jason didn't wait for any more of Avery's responses. He moved his coat aside for better access as he pulled out his weapon and phone.

Harrison absently reached in a pocket and pulled out a stick of gum. "We need to get out of here. Something's wrong," he said, and popped the gum in his mouth.

Avery added, "I don't know what's going on, but let's check in. At the very least, our contact is overdue. We may have to maintain our position—but we don't have to be open targets."

The two men skulking around in the distance put the three agents on edge.

"According to prior reports, no one, absolutely no one is supposed to be in the area. That's what Franklin's team was supposed to do here earlier—perimeter clean up," Avery said.

Jason suggested, "Maybe the guys are Franklin's."

"If so, why are they sneaking through the shadows?" Harrison asked.

Jason picked up his phone to call headquarters just as Avery pointed to a slightly built Middle Eastern man approaching from the opposite direction. "Hey, look over there. That must be our contact."

Instinct warred with duty. Instead of relief at the appearance of their contact, Jason felt the tension whip through the men in the vehicle. With a nod directed at Jason, Avery whispered, "Place the call anyway. We may have to wave him off, but I'd rather err on the side of caution."

Jason pressed the button to call their direct contact at headquarters. Madeleine at Central Dispatch would identify Jason with caller ID as usual. He shook his head when he heard her slow flirtatious response. "Hey, babe, you're up late. Didn't you get my earlier message? Franklin called in to apologize about getting tied up. He couldn't get to the sweep. Something about an incident across town. You did get the message that they cancelled the meet? Didn't you?"

Madeleine kept talking, but Jason didn't hear anything else she said. Instead, all his attention shifted to the rounded eyes fearfully staring directly into Jason's through the windshield. As sweat beaded on the man's dark upper lip, more rivulets dripped down his forehead, despite the coolness of the night. And recognition of the man previously lurking in the shadows struck Jason like a bolt of lightning.

What was going on? Nothing made any sense. He couldn't put the puzzle together, even with the added pieces. His hand gripped the steering wheel, welded firmly in place as he reasoned through the information.

Madeleine's rambling sank in. Jason realized the tall blond man, the one they'd seen get into what they thought was Franklin's vehicle, could be an important lead.

They'd been set up. But why?

Before Jason could react, Harrison opened his door, prepared to chase the guy down.

Something else distracted Jason's attention and the full impact of the situation brought time to a grinding halt. An unusual pungent odor seeped from the back of the car, faint but distinct. As time teetered, before moving forward in slow motion, he wondered, *That smell*, *what the hell is so familiar about that sour smell mixed with...what*? The man outside still stared, frozen in place. Then Jason noticed him open what looked like a cell phone—but it wasn't. Ahmet pushed a couple of buttons, looked around, quickly dropped the device, and ran.

Jason looked back at Avery, who had his cell phone to his ear, and that smell grew stronger. Time wasn't moving slowly enough, or maybe his thought process wasn't moving fast enough.

Think, damn it, think! Uh, something. What did this remind him of? The scent of vinegar mixed with the smell of burning wire and—*?*

Something registered. Unfortunately, the recollection struck a beat too late. All coherent thought fled as his brain clicked into reflex mode. With a shriek of frantic warning to the others, he roared, "Get out! Get away from the car!"

Shit, too late! With his hand on the door, the car exploded behind him as the latch released. He leapt, escaping at the same time the impact of the blast threw him from the developing fireball. His body hurtled through the overgrown lilac bushes. Heated metal chunks and shards of glass flew all around, ripping through his substantial wool coat, tearing into the thick muscles of his back and legs.

Flattened by the impact, he landed spread eagled on his stomach in the soft grass in the median. Bits of burning debris, scattered amongst larger chunks, and remains of the vehicle littered the quiet suburban street. The smoldering rubble lit his view of the destruction surrounding him.

He saw the cell phone still clutched in his outstretched hand. Before the ringing in his ears silenced, and the world went to black like a scene in a bad movie, he had the presence of mind to press 911. As the nothingness of oblivion enveloped him, he watched Harrison's yo-yo roll past.

* * * *

Jason's world had become a sudden flash of searing pain and blinding light, before thoughts began invading the new blackness. When his mind clicked back, one thought repeated—if he survived, someone was going to pay for this. The ringing in his ears muffled the sounds of sirens in the background. He struggled to recall something, almost embracing the memory that teased him. The more he tried to remember, the farther the notion danced out of reach, barely beyond the edges of recognition, taunting him from some deep dark place.

Although he may have lost track of time, he figured Fire Rescue arrived at the scene quickly, because of his phone call, or perhaps Madeleine had sent them. But when he opened an eye they were still putting out the flames scattered across the road and several lawns. He maintained a mild state of awareness, noting the hands lifting him onto the stretcher before he opened his eyes in the ambulance. What he could hear was still too garbled to understand amid the loud ringing in his ears, and the pain was nauseating. He gave in to the relief of oblivion when the paramedics injected something cold into his arm and closed the ambulance door.

* * * *

Bright lights and emergency room noises dragged him painfully back to reality. He realized that he escaped the exploding car by jumping on reflex alone. He wasn't sure if the others actually heard his warning over the simultaneous explosion, and escaped. Had that been Madeline's voice he heard screaming his name?

Something had alerted him to the danger. For whatever reason, he thought it was important. Subconsciously, when he had smelled the odor coming from the back of the car, warning signals triggered. Something he'd seen recently, or something he'd heard. There it was again, almost tangible, and then it disappeared.

Finally the memory came flooding back. He remembered what it was now. The London bus bombing. A witness told a BBC

newscaster about his experience during the bombing. That's what caused Jason to react. He remembered the witness's description of the distinct smell.

As soon as he could, he'd investigate that type of explosive and the terrorist group who claimed responsibility in the London incident. This had been the same type device, he was sure. Maybe the incidents were connected somehow.

With a silent vow, he swore he'd find the ones responsible if it took the rest of his life.

Reality felt distorted, but this wasn't déjà vu. He could see his hand. It was the hand of an adult male, not a fifteen-year-old. It dripped with blood. But something about this reminded him of when he'd last been in a hospital emergency room. It had been a blur of noise. Pain and activity surrounded him, and he'd seen her staring at him from the hall. The antiseptic smell and clatter rudely jarred Jason back to the present.

In the midst of all this chaos, an instant of clarity touched him. Franklin escorted Andrea in, and Emily clutched her. The women embraced briefly, and Franklin hurried Andrea off.

Harrison?

Clarity hazed. His eye contact with Emily caused the rest of the world to drift away. There was only her. He felt her in his thoughts during those brief moments. He recalled the sensations of being buried deep within her just nights before. She knew he felt that he'd betrayed her father with his actions. When he looked into her eyes, she could see into his mind, understand his feelings. From only this eye contact, he knew she recognized how he fought his feelings as well as his will to live. She'd panic if he closed his eyes to give into peace—to give up.

He had to find a way to wipe away the pain etched on Emily's face, but he took the coward's way out, closing his eyes to escape the world, to shut her out of his thoughts, and to shut her out of his pain, the pain he could feel in her eyes.

The beeping machines slowed and then stopped. Emily was screaming something. He closed his ears to block her demands.

* * * *

Jason couldn't move without hurting. The good news was he was alive. The bad news was he was alive. He was in excruciating pain, but finally coherent. He knew where he was and why he was there. He also remembered what had happened, not only that night, but also the weekend before.

Someone on the inside was involved in Avery's murder. That was a fact. Only a limited number of people knew the details of the team's identity and the night's mission. That would make tracking down the Judas easier—proving it would be more complicated.

"Oooh, I see you awake, good lookin'. Welcome back to the land of the livin'."

When he glanced back over his shoulder, a motherly, full-figured black woman with a rhythmic island accent smiled brightly at him, her teeth starkly white against her dark brown skin. He assumed the woman goading him with a chuckle was his nurse. She had a contagious laugh and efficient hands.

Despite the pain shooting through him, he turned from his belly, slightly more to his side for a better view, and squinted at the nametag riding high on her ample bosom. "Thelma?"

Always a charmer for the ladies, he tried a grin. His face hurt. "Ah, Thelma! Like Thelma and Louise? Will you be the death of me, dahlin'?" he managed to ask before dropping back into the pillows.

When she gave out a full-bodied laugh, he imagined her ample bosom jiggled. "Oh, like I haven't been hearin' that before. You better be gettin' you some original lines, sweet cheeks."

Thelma checked his vitals while Jason complained. He groaned his pain, collapsed back to his stomach, tunneled his face into the hole in the bed designed especially for his type of injuries. With all his back injuries, he figured he'd be recuperating on his belly for quite a while.

"I be right back with sometin' for your pain, honey."

"No, please, no more," Jason protested, lifting his head as much as he could. "I need to get my wits about me, and that stuff makes me stupid."

"Trust me, I know what I be sayin', the stupid part would be not takin' it. Don't fight it, baby. You be recov'rin' faster if you res' well and you be restin' better if the pain is minimal. You have plenty time to worry 'bout your wits later."

Tittering, she went about her business, straightening his sheets, checking the dressings that covered his entire back side, and documenting his vitals.

"Oh, yes, I almost forgettin'... A very purty young ting be sittin' outside waitin' for you. She be here all t'is time waitin' for you to wake up. Should I send her in?"

Unfortunately, Jason thought, as long as his brain was functioning, the real pain lay there, in his memories, in the knowledge of his treachery. He knew who was waiting.

He never lifted his head out of the bed where he had burrowed, shaking it for emphasis. "No, I don't want to see anyone. Send her away. Tell her to get back to school and finish. We had an agreement. I expect her to live up to her end of the bargain. Tell her she has a job to start soon. I'll get back to her when I get out."

Thelma shook her head. "You should tell her. T'at gal's been here every day, honey. She hurtin' bad. too." The woman tsked at him. "She sure look like she could use a friend."

She paused when he clenched his jaw. For a second she must have thought he might change his mind. But he didn't look up from under the pillow where he'd buried himself. She stepped out into the hallway without arguing with him further.

* * * *

When Ahmet triggered the incendiary device, the unusual smell had registered right before the bomb exploded. Jason blamed himself for not placing the odor sooner.

What really worried him was who he thought he'd seen walking away from the meet that night. Until he could disprove his suspicions, everyone might be in danger. He'd keep quiet. Even he thought he was being obsessive. His suspicions were bizarre. He'd have to find concrete evidence to tie all the players together, because for now, none of this made sense. But even disregarding his fears, that limp couldn't have been a coincidence. In his line of work, no one believed in coincidence.

Maybe it was the drugs affecting his memories. Things he thought were relevant could have been concerns conjured from old nightmares. At the moment, Jason found it impossible to discern fact from fantasy about what happened that night. Maybe his past made him paranoid.

When Jason left the hospital, he still felt guilty about so many things. One, he'd sent Emily away without seeing her and had no intention of doing so. The rest, guilt over what he and Emily had done, guilt over Avery's death and guilty about Harrison's injuries, only made him more determined to get to the bottom of all this before anyone else got hurt. He hated himself for surviving and possibly putting everyone he loved in danger, especially if his memories were accurate. Until they caught the bomber, he was sure no one he cared about would be safe.

Any further investigation he'd handle alone. He'd assumed his new identity as Jason DesJardin permanently when he left the hospital. The sooner he left the country, the sooner everyone concerned would be safe. Even he wasn't sure how the details tied in, but he knew he had to trust his instincts. Jason Holmes had to die. So he arranged his death.

Chapter Nine

Boston, three years later...

Emily Holmes dropped the phone in the cradle after leaving a cryptic message on Jason's voicemail. Let the big deal, antiterrorist agent figure out what she meant. Her hand swept across her chest as if rubbing at the pain the old wound he'd carved in her heart caused the night when he walked away and left her to mourn both him and her father. After three years, the memories freshened the ache. Jason had taken her virginity, walked away without a backwards glance, and then *died* later that week in a car bombing—the car bombing which killed her father. Only, her father *had really* died.

Jason disappeared, going deep undercover, faking his own death—and staying far away from family and friends. *Why?*

She still wanted to know, and he'd still never answered that question to her satisfaction.

What does he know?

Since then, her vow to find those responsible for destroying her life and her future remained steadfast. And now, she had a solid lead. Except for one teensy little problem, her plan was flawless. The flaw was convincing Jason to cooperate. In order to accomplish her goal, would she be able to bury her emotions? In return for getting Jason Holm...no, not Holmes...Jason DesJardin, to help track down her father's killer, could she beg? Her lips felt tight against her teeth as she smiled. *Yes*. This was worth the risk of having the old scars ripped open again. Anything would be better than the present slow bleed with no solution in sight. The room needed light and heat this morning. She flipped the light switch and the lamp brightened the dim room. *Why hasn't he called back?* She was itchy. Irritable. Impatient. The chill settled in her bones. She scrubbed her hands over her folded arms for friction. *Keep busy, do something,* she told herself. She reached for a letter opener and opened her mail, all the while trying to ignore the cursor on her monitor while the PC worked to pull up the report she needed.

What would she do when she was finally alone with him? Would she want to seduce him or shoot him? "Probably both," she admitted to the empty apartment.

If talking to yourself was a sign of insanity, she'd plead guilty. She grinned when the next thought came. The seduction route she'd already taken once before.

And how'd that work out for you? The frown almost hurt. Not so well, right?

She already disregarded that approach days ago. The muscles in her face tightened with a pointed slow crawl to her eyes. As she recalled, since then she'd turned into a damn good shot.

She flipped the letter opener in the air, catching it like a professional knife thrower, and wondered how she was going to suppress the overwhelming desire to gut him the way he had her.

The dreary morning looked the way she felt. With snow clouds threatening in the dull, overcast sky, the forecast called for the cold, depressing gloom of a typical Boston winter day. The cup of hot chocolate she'd fixed earlier this morning sat ignored, covered with a thin skin. She looked at the clock. Five hours had passed since she placed the phone call to Jason.

This favor, she could only ask him in person. After all this time, the man who had been raised with her like a brother, had once been her friend and her first lover, was a stranger to her. Not her Jason anymore. To the rest of the world Jason Holmes had been killed as a consequence of the explosion, the same one that killed her father. To the outside world, Jason DesJardin was an international real estate mogul. To a close few, her included, he remained an undercover antiterrorist agent for the same department where her father had been the director before his death—the same agency where she worked covertly as a computer consultant. They had Harrison and the others running interference for them most times, but she knew that Jason kept tabs on her and vice versa, at least according to Andrea.

As she stared at the blinking cursor, for some reason, she believed Jason really would be dead if anyone ever found out that Jason Holmes was still alive. She was counting on their past relationship to influence him in her favor. Once he understood the significance of what she'd uncovered, he'd have to agree to let her join his mission. If there was ever any hope of solving her father's murder, she had to get through this. And, if that meant speaking to him, being alone with him, playing nice, or begging, so be it.

Making the call had been nerve-wracking enough. How was she going to deal with him in person? When his recorded voice asked her to leave a detailed message, the knot in her stomach clenched and spasmed. Nausea overwhelmed her. Hell, it was all she could do to force her voice to speak into the recorder in a clear professional manner while her brain screamed for her to rethink her decision. By the time she hung up, she wanted to spit bile.

If he called back, she'd have to speak to him. Maybe she'd let the call go to voicemail.

She wasn't ready for this, was she?

No!

Could she just forget the past?

No.

Was there some other way to get in on this mission? At least, without choking on the request? She hated asking Jason for a favor.

No. There was no other way.

Her emotions vacillated between anticipation and dread as she gazed at the phone. "Ring, damn it."

She hoped the message she left sounded desperate enough to pique his interest and yet aloof enough to keep him from knowing how much she still hurt.

The information on her computer screen paused where the cursor blinked irritatingly back at her. As she struggled to fight her fear, she remained frozen with dread, chilled from the inside out by her discovery.

The phone rang. She jumped.

The loud sound in the quiet apartment jarred her attention away from the screen. The number on the caller ID tore through her with relief and anxious anticipation. Her heart raced and her stomach clenched. Despite the physical effects adding to her nerves, she needed to hear his voice.

She answered without saying hello.

"Jason?" She managed to mumble. "I have to see you right away."

The pulse in her ears beat so loudly, she could barely hear his answer.

Jason's voice sounded tired, but perked up, drawing to full attention at her tone. "Are you all right? The family?" He sounded seriously concerned.

She wasn't annoyed by his question, but couldn't waste time with small talk. She sniped, "Yes, yes of course I'm fine. Everyone is fine. But I have to see you as soon as possible, and we can't discuss this over the phone."

She heard his sigh of relief.

"Okay." He sounded amused. "Are you always in a hurry? And why so crabby?"

Crabby? He didn't know what crabby was.

She ignored his questions. "Jason, where are you, and how long will it take to get back here?"

She heard his muffled chuckle. "Well, as luck would have it, I am here. In Boston."

"Good, then come right over." She wanted to cheer her good luck, yet a sudden strange sensation hovered low in her belly.

"Geez, Emily, give me a break. What day is it? I think I got in yesterday, or maybe last night." His speech sounded garbled. "Damn jet lag."

She heard a rustling sound and imagined him rubbing his broad hand across his beard-shadowed face. The image made her stomach flop, and she was speechless at her body's traitorous reaction.

She'd recovered by the time he asked, "What the hell time is it, anyway?"

"It's Tuesday, almost noon," she spit out, annoyed as she envisioned him looking at a watch still set to some foreign time zone. "Why didn't you call back sooner?"

* * * *

One thing Jason never forgot about Emily was her impatience. He looked out the window. Last night, he'd left the curtains open. The hotel room didn't look bright enough to be almost noon. But he remembered overcast Boston days never did.

"I've been comatose since I got in." He wouldn't think about what he'd been doing when he let the phone go to voicemail. Thank God he hadn't answered or his erection would have died on the spot. "Sorry, must've left my phone in the other room." Jason lied. "I didn't hear the ring." He grimaced as his face heated. Why did he feel the compulsion to lie to Emily about being with another woman? Why did it bother him? Even now, after three years, the thought of how he left could make him feel guilty without her saying a word.

"Jason, I have to show you something." Her voice sounded breathy, the tone conspiratorially excited when she whispered, "I've been up all night. I couldn't sleep."

Visions of her naked, tossing restlessly beneath him against white satin sheets, slapped Jason awake. He shook himself back to reality and prayed for composure. Regressing, even if just for a moment, was forbidden. Thinking about that night, the one haunting every moment, waking or sleeping in his life, just caused more pain.

Must be more tired than I thought. He needed a shower—a cold one.

There had to be something wrong with him to allow those images to creep up on him. He'd given up hoping he'd recover someday. After all these years, the memory hadn't faded, and the visions were crisp, the pain vivid. He wouldn't risk her life, too. She was off-limits. He couldn't afford to return to that time or place, nor would she want him now. Something where his heart belonged clenched with remorse.

He shook off his melancholy, addressing her first concern. "I'll be by as soon as I can get there. Have you eaten anything?"

"No. Bring chocolate donuts, lots of them."

"Okay, but I'm bringing jelly for me," he answered to no one in particular, since she'd already hung up. The woman didn't have a shred of patience in her. He couldn't resist the laughter threatening to bubble up in his chest. He'd get to see her. She brought out the kid in him. Before everything changed.

Her incessant civility grated against his nerves. He couldn't blame her for hating him. Since he walked away that night... No, not that night. The night they made love. The night she gave him her virginity. She'd forgiven him for running that night. It was after Avery died, and he'd chased her away from the hospital. That was when she'd changed. When he'd hurt her beyond repair.

It's what he'd wanted. Wasn't it? To toss her away? For her own good? To protect her from... What the hell was he protecting her from?

He flipped the phone shut and then turned it off silent before he crawled out from under the warmth of the down coverlet. He didn't bother looking beyond the long, tan legs of the woman lying next to the indentation he left behind in the mattress. Naked, he headed into the hotel shower without another backwards glance, a habit he'd developed to perfection. The woman in his bed was just one more body in a long line of substitutes for the one he really wanted. None of the substitutes completely satisfied him. It wasn't the same without the emotional satisfaction. And he had no intention of entering the emotional arena again. When he participated in sex, emotions never entered into it. He wasn't proud of his sexual practices, but over the last three years he tried to choose wisely.

Since losing Emily, his heart remained barren. Each of his replacement encounters knew the score up front. He had nothing to give any of them. He'd given his heart away, long before the car bombing took his life from him.

The one he wanted, he could never have until he found the man who killed her father.

He turned the spray to cold—to wake up or to atone?

* * * *

By the time Emily disconnected the call with Jason, she was totally disgusted with herself for allowing him to churn up her emotions. Why was she surprised? The man always had a way of riling her. Despite her best efforts to remain professional, her pulse kicked up a notch, making her feelings of anticipation and frustration aggravating. She exhaled and tried to calm herself.

The anger making her ears ring finally toned down. Or had it? Yes, she could hear the light scratch at her door and the mewling sound forced a smile to her lips. Immediately, the thought of the graystriped tomcat did what all her meditative efforts could not. The cat who owned the building was late this morning—probably beat after a long night carousing the back alleys. He called to Emily through the panel of the door instead of squinting with his usual accusation from the window by the fire escape.

She opened the door with her head cocked and a hand on her hip. When she hailed the stray, he proudly presented her with a gray, limp mouse. She jumped back as he dropped it at her feet. "Tom, you shouldn't have. You had me at meow!"

She nudged the carcass with her toe and said, "Eeeww, Tom, this better be dead. I really don't need a morning offering, but I appreciate the thought." At least he earned his keep by holding the rodents at bay. "Go on in and make yourself at home. As if you need an invitation," she mumbled as she took the umbrella from the stand by the door. Emily flicked the gray furred body down the hall toward her busybody neighbor, Mrs. Crutch's apartment.

Tom sauntered past, ignoring her until she came in and joined him. Emily left the umbrella outside, shut the door, and followed the cat into the apartment. She needed the cat's company this morning. He snaked himself against her leg several times politely before finding his way into the kitchen.

"No wonder you couldn't wait to get in today." Emily shivered and continued the one sided conversation she regularly had with Tom. The cat looked up from his food, then, as usual, proceeded to make himself at home and ignore her.

The weather report called for heavy snows later in the day, and the apartment already signaled the frigid climate with the force of the wind outside. The cold penetrated through the old building's lack of insulation. The sweatshirt and jeans she wore weren't enough to stop the biting chill seeping in through the single-paned glass windows, and the building's heating system took its time pumping the steam heat up from the old furnace. The trip from the basement to the radiators five floors up took longer for the heat than it did to walk.

She missed Maryland's milder weather on days like this, but the memories intruded on her there. Although today, she suspected the ice running through her veins had more to do with the data she'd discovered than the room's temperature.

The feather down quilt on the recliner looked warm and inviting. Before returning to work, she wrapped it around herself, then went back to stare at her computer. Her monitor with the enlarged and digitized picture of Adam Kincaid taunted her. The Chairman of the Senate Arms Committee grinned widely while shaking hands with a suspected illegal arms dealer named Mosel Reinhardt. The caption gave her pause. They were together at last year's Charity Ball for Feed the World's Children Foundation, an event that took place each year in Monte Carlo.

What was a US Senator doing shaking hands with someone with known terrorist contacts? In Monte Carlo? The Charity Ball was an event she had every intention of attending this year. For that, she would need Jason. His next mission had something to do with Mosel Reinhardt, from what she had deciphered from the paperwork back at headquarters. She glanced at the folder on the desk. Mosel's international benefactor and playboy persona was a cover for his illegal arms deals. He also owned a computer chip company, and there, she was the expert.

As mission specialist, Jason was the only one who could get her assigned to the Monte Carlo operation. When the team went in to recover the nanochip, she planned to be with them.

Emily scrubbed her hands together, hoping the friction would produce enough heat to thaw them. When she turned around, Tom settled and curled tightly up against the cold. He looked like nothing more than a ball of gray fluff on the spare chair by her desk.

"You have the right idea." She shivered, looking at the cat all cozy and relaxed.

"Until today, I swore I'd never ask him for help. Listen to me. I'm talking to a cat." Her vow seamed trivial now, compared to the need to share this information with him—to negotiate his cooperation in return. She didn't know how Kincaid fit into her family's life, but the man sent a shiver up her spine. None of this could be good.

The information she'd gathered pointed to a connection between Senator Adam Kincaid and an international arms dealer with ties to a Middle Eastern terrorist group. She'd gone as far as she could with her research. She needed Jason to pull the data together, and for one more thing.

But, until he got there, she'd have to be patient. Something she'd never been good at.

An old memory kept nagging at her. The night of her twenty-first birthday, the night she'd put out of her mind for more than one reason, when Kincaid's image appeared on the TV screen at Clancy's. The frightened expressions on the faces of the kids her father had rescued from foster care burned in her memory. No one ever talked about their past life, including Jason.

A blast of wind rattled the windows. Emily pulled the comforter around her and frowned. She should get cleaned up. Memories continued to overwhelm her.

After he'd walked away, her life turned upside down. She survived despite the events and his callous treatment, maybe because of it. The funeral came and went, she'd returned to school, and graduated on time that spring. Like Jason had instructed in his last message to her, she went to work at Boston College and took the undercover job with the antiterrorist agency, according to their prior plans.

She paced in front of her computer screen. The computer with its nagging cursor blinked at her. She walked away from her desk.

She didn't have to push herself to remember the last time she saw Jason. It was on Christmas Day at Harrison and Andrea James's house last year. He arrived late and left early. At the time, relief spread through her when he only stayed for dinner. Each time since her father's death, when they were all together, being with him became more awkward than the last.

Since the night they made love, an impenetrable wall stood between them. He remained emotionally distant during all their previous encounters and her heart still ached. After all this time dancing around their relationship, pretending there was nothing but professional interest and an old friendship between them didn't change her feelings.

During the last three years, no one at work even remotely suspected they had a past or had once spent a passionate night making love after years of working up to it. On the few occasions they found themselves together in a work environment, they remained professionally friendly, polite to one another, and always personable.

If she planned to join Jason's mission, she'd have to get past these personal emotions. When Jason arrived, he'd have to deal with what she'd discovered, and she didn't think that Harrison had filled him in about her bombing investigation.

She sat at the desk and stared. The break they needed to uncover her father's killers blazed at her from the monitor. Viewing the information on the computer screen for the umpteenth time didn't help. All it did was make her restless.

She didn't have this data before. Most of the data confused her. It could make all the difference that she discovered a link between Kincaid and the arms dealer. This was evidence that could open the files in her father's death. Who knew it would take three years to come up with something. Until now, every turn ran into a dead end in the investigation.

The other data she discovered concerning Kincaid left Emily baffled, and convinced the rest of the family knew something she didn't. She suspected Kincaid's past was somehow connected to the boys and Kate. What were they hiding from her? What was it about Kincaid's past association with child advocacy that had tied him to the foster care system and Jason? Were his frequent visits to third world countries and Southeast Asia related to his interest in child welfare or arms deals?

As she chose her clothing and put on her makeup, she decided the earlier look she was sporting with the quilt probably wasn't going to make him regret leaving her. And she did want him to regret it—bigtime. She cleaned up and changed into a warm, fuzzy green sweater and brown wool slacks, knowing the colors did great things for her complexion. Acknowledging the kind of fashionable women he dated, Emily always made a point of looking as good as possible when she saw him.

One has to have some pride.

She wanted him to ache for her, to hurt like she'd hurt when he left. A rejected woman needed revenge. Looking great was always the best revenge.

When the knock at the door finally came, Emily jumped. Her heart pounded, her stomach flipped, and her emotions were at odds with wanting to see him and dreading it. Sharing the newest evidence with him would bind their investigation together. Was she up for it? She hoped and prayed she could keep her personal feelings under control. Focusing on the new information would prove useful.

Tom rubbed her ankles. She took a deep breath and looked through the peephole. *Oh, God!* She exhaled and took in another breath, this time more shallow than before. Emily turned the lock, opening the door to the one man who could change her life—if he only would.

Chapter Ten

When Emily opened the door, Jason was distractedly brushing snow from his hair onto her with a curse. "Damn, this weather is ungodly." He juggled a couple of plastic bags and a large box as he tried to maneuver around her.

The lock of hair that historically dropped over his forehead hung in its usual disarray, and his tan cheeks were chaffed red from the bite of the cold wind whipping ruthlessly outside. He looked disheveled and smelled yummy. A mixture of chocolate, Jason, and was that a faint scent of raspberry she detected, all mixed together? Ah, yes. That would be her chocolate donuts, and his jellies.

She sniffed in the direction of the chocolate. "Thanks!" she said as she lifted the box and turned. Giving him her back prevented her from making unnecessary eye contact. She wasn't ready yet. It would be easier dealing with him once she had something chocolate in her mouth. Then she would turn around, look at him, and try to act like a normal human being.

"Man, you must be starving. Let me inside before I freeze."

She realized she hadn't moved aside to let him in far enough to close the door. One glance at the window showed a world gone white with quiet swirling snow. Only a hint of a threat earlier, the weather now promised a blizzard before long. He had a valid complaint. It looked very bad out there. She popped courage in her mouth in the form of sugar and chocolate before she allowed him to enter the apartment.

She sensed him following too closely behind her. The idea of his presence took up a great deal of space inside her head as well as the small kitchen. He dropped his bags on the counter and moved to the alcove. Thankfully, breathing came easier for her as he put a little more distance between them. He shook the rest of the snow off and hung up his coat in the mudroom. Her breath caught in her throat when his broad shoulders distracted her from what she intended to say.

Forcing herself to look away to regain her composure, she managed to suggest, "Just leave your shoes there, too. It's the warmest place in the apartment. They'll dry before you do."

Handing him a towel for his hair, she said, "Go ahead and dry off a bit." Once she realized she was talking too much, too fast, she bit her tongue to keep from showing all the signs of nerves—the exact thing she wanted so badly to conceal.

Was it asking too much to seem casual? All she was aiming for here was *natural*. Why couldn't she manage to pull off *natural*?

Anyway, what is natural between us anymore?

"I asked you here to show you something really important." Her eagerness to show him what she uncovered was genuine. Obviously, it mattered to her. Hopefully, it still mattered to him.

The offer should have enticed him into her office, but he resisted. "Time enough later." Instead, he emptied the contents of the bags he brought with him. "Look, if it doesn't entail the world coming to an end in the next ten minutes, could it wait? I'm starving."

"It'll wait." She sighed. "It waited this long." He looked tired. "Let me throw some breakfast together for you," she offered.

"No, don't bother, I'll get it. I have a bad case of jet lag. I need to keep moving." He shivered. "I need to acclimate for a minute. And, please, hand me that cup of coffee before I cry like a baby."

"Okay, but afterwards, you have to come in here so I can show you what I found." Blabbing on about how relieved she was that he was in the country when she called, she eventually admitted, "I don't think I would have survived waiting much longer."

He laughed. "You never could."

She blushed. And went on to explain in detail about her present project for the agency and droned on about the research it required while he unpacked bags and looked for pans.

He made his way deftly through her kitchen, completely comfortable in his role. "This job wouldn't be so bad if I wasn't changing time zones by twelve hours or temperatures by fifty degrees."

That stopped her, cold. She quickly calculated the numbers. "What? Oh, poor you," her sarcasm dripped. The tan he sported would have given him away, even if his own words hadn't.

She squinted, eyeballing him closely. "Tell me you haven't been someplace where the mean temperature's been in the seventies, while I've spent the last few months trying to get this apartment above forty-five degrees."

Jason laughed at her contempt. He made no comment, but raised an eyebrow, looking at her a little closer. "Is your nose that red with the cold?"

She covered her nose with her hand. "*If* it's red, it's the cold in here." She crossed her arms and rubbed her hands up and down, trying to produce enough friction to warm up. She saw Jason's eyes drop to her arms.

"The apartment is chilly. It's not just me adjusting to the temperature difference." Jason agreed.

She wanted to throw something at him for that.

He took a bite out of one of the donuts he'd brought, put down the pan, and walked toward her. "Let's see what we can do to warm this place up, then."

He made the statement innocently enough, yet his voice deepened just a notch, enough so that when they both looked up at once, they locked eyes. Uncomfortable with the moment, unspoken memories heatedly rushed through Emily's mind.

He looked away first, glancing aside to the living room. "How about that fireplace? Does it work?"

"I haven't dared try it. I'm not sure we won't asphyxiate ourselves." She picked up the kindling and brought it over to the hearth where Jason examined something. She hoped they wouldn't end up suffocating to death now that she'd found a lead in the investigation.

He checked the flue and seemed content it was clear before he went about starting the fire. Satisfied the smoke vented sufficiently, he brushed off his hands. "There. That'll be better once it gets underway."

She watched his muscled thighs as he rose from the squat. Her internal temperature edged decidedly higher and so did her level of frustration. Smashing part of a donut into her mouth, Emily gave him an innocent, wide-eyed look. She swallowed.

He turned toward the kitchen. "Now how about some breakfast? I'm still starving for real food."

She wasn't following him into the kitchen feeling like this. "I'm fine, you go right ahead."

"Okay, but you need to eat something with more substance than sugar and flour."

"I'll be right there." She needed distance to regroup. It was too close in there for both of them, and he took up enough space just being in the apartment. He'd only been there a few minutes and already she felt overwhelmed.

She lingered by the fire. It felt good, both having him here and the pleasant warmth seeping into her bones. Between his innuendos, the fire going, and the radiators finally putting out some kind of heat, the apartment felt cozier than Emily could ever remember.

Five minutes later, the smell of bacon and eggs filling the air tempted her taste buds with the promise of real food. Her stomach growled. "Traitor. What, what was wrong with the donut?" she silently muttered to her disloyal body.

When the hunk cooking breakfast in her kitchen called for her to come and get it, she was tempted. The only thing saving him from her

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lust at the moment was the chocolate donut. She intended to slake her desire for him with the other five if need be.

After catching a glimpse of his butt in her kitchen, she was afraid even chocolate was a sorry substitute. Unfortunately, it would have to do. If her half of the donuts didn't work, she'd be forced to fight him for the other ones he'd brought for himself. She wasn't too proud to resort to jellies before resorting to him again.

It was aggravating to still feel so much for the man. She refused to eat herself into obesity, but at least donuts wouldn't break her heart.

Across the breakfast table in an arrangement too comfortably domestic for her tastes, she revealed information about the material she'd accumulated over the last three years. He looked impressed and curious as she began relaying some of the details of her research. She didn't tell him yet about the new evidence she'd recently discovered.

"How come I didn't know you were investigating any of this?" The surprise in his voice was apparent as he tapped his knife on his plate for emphasis.

"I told Harrison." She shrugged. "You haven't exactly been easy to talk to lately, since we don't even see each other."

Oh, God, did that sound like whining? She stood up and paced. Suddenly, everything she'd been working for since the night of the bombing became clear. "Jason, they killed my father. Did you think I'd just let the agency bury his murder under a ton of red tape, call it top-secret material, and let it go at that?" The pitch of her voice raised, but she tried not to yell. "And you?"

She forced her voice to a whisper. "Was I supposed to forget that, too?"

Jason's face turned pink, then red.

"Did you think I'd ignore what happened to you and Harrison? Look what it did to all of us. Didn't you think I'd want revenge? Justice? Or at the very least closure?"

He exhaled when she stopped. She put both hands on the table and waited for his answer.

* * * *

Jason's mouth moved but nothing came out. He felt like a fish out of water with his mouth hanging open. God, I love this woman. If I never realized it before, how could I not know it now?

His angel had turned into a warrior.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, quiet when he admitted, "I've always thought of you as, I don't know. Something else. Angelic? Compassionate? Gentle? Tender?"

He saw her bristle. "I didn't say or mean 'weak,' Emily. I'm sorry, I never thought of your feelings quite that way. Not as if you wouldn't need justice. I should have realized."

She visibly relaxed when he touched her hand and said, "You never struck me as the vindictive type before." He gave her his crooked smile, hoping to ease the tension he sensed building in her.

Emily pulled her hand away, wouldn't let him touch her, and shifted her gaze from his smile as if the eye contact was too much.

When she turned her face back to look at him, she snapped, snarling each word separately. "I. Wasn't. Vengeful. *Before*."

She turned away again, refusing to look at his face when she coldly added, "I've grown. Someone destroyed my life and someone is going to pay."

He didn't try to touch her again. He wanted to soothe her, but touching wasn't the way. His hand had sizzled when he took hers earlier. They couldn't afford these kinds of distractions this time, not if they were going to find her father's killer.

"I understand." Jason contemplated the revelation he'd just made about her. "I was so preoccupied with my own vengeance and guilt, I never once thought about what you might need. God, I was such a jerk. Emily, I'm so sorry."

Emily didn't look surprised by his apology, but she did look determined. In a normal tone of voice, she brought him back from the

ledge he skirted. "Here, look at what I have. It means something, but I can't figure it out. I accidentally came across this while working on the Monte Carlo assignment."

He interrupted her. "I didn't know you were already working on that mission." The surprise in his voice was obvious.

"I'm not, not directly, anyway. My assignment is to review the basics on the nanochip and handle the background check on everyone associated with your upcoming mission. While doing that, I ran into an interesting coincidence."

She went on to tell him that two years ago she found a name from the London bombing distantly linked to a man believed to be a contact for a terrorist group out of the Middle East.

"El Marat was the organization's leader, but no one could link the bombing directly to his group. Indirectly though, it was possible. The explosives in the car bombing that killed my father and the ones in the London bombing were identical, just as you suspected." Emily nodded at Jason.

"The man we believe was instrumental in the DC bombing, Ahmet, had indirect connections to El Marat. He also made contact with a well-known arms dealer in Monte Carlo. Guess who?

"Mosel Reinhardt?" Jason asked.

Emily smiled. "Yup."

"Then I found this." Emily lectured on as Jason listened intently. "El Marat had indirect dealings with Reinhardt, and now I've found evidence that Senator Adam Kincaid's got ties with Reinhardt, too."

Had Emily paused for effect? If so, then his reaction wouldn't disappoint her. Jason's expression went flat, and his emotions turned back to that red haze he always experienced at the thought of Kincaid.

Jason stared down at his hands and didn't speak as Emily continued. "Do you believe in coincidences? In my end of the business, coincidences usually mean something. They're not necessarily what they seem, so I did some digging." He didn't move or glance up. Emily bombarded him with her theories while he was trapped in his own thoughts. Kincaid's previous ambitions and his past history for abuse were still buried. Now Jason started to put pieces of her puzzle together, and he developed a new theory of his own. Kincaid had motive, and Jason suspected it wasn't all about Avery. Now she had a name, a contact. They'd need proof.

"It's kind of like the six degrees of separation theory. Someone knowing someone, who knows someone, who knows someone else, and so on and so forth."

Jason responded, "Mosel Reinhardt? We're ready to go into Monte Carlo and infiltrate the company he owns."

"I know. That's where the coincidence comes in."

He raised an eyebrow as she went on with her explanation. "We believe El Marat's group kidnapped the scientist who developed the nanochip technology, and then they stole a triggering device based on the computer chip which uses the same technology."

Jason nodded in agreement. "We retrieved the scientist last week. But as you must have already figured out, we have to go back in and recover the chip."

"I think the arms dealer's interested in the triggering device."

He could tell Emily was determined to make her point, but he needed her to understand the relevance of what she'd uncovered. "The triggering device is not as important as selling the technology off the chip itself."

She thought for a minute. "The nano-technology could upset the balance of world power."

"It would be better if they didn't suspect the original chip with the accurate technology was missing. Instead, we need to substitute a counterfeit chip for the original."

"That's right, perfect, exactly what I think we should do. And while we're at it, we need to find out what all these people have in common." Emily beamed at Jason.

He shot a smile back at her. "Let's see what you have."

He got up from the table, picked up her empty plate with his, and dropped them in the sink on the way into her pseudo office.

Emily sat down at her computer as Jason pulled up a chair, leaning closely enough over her shoulder to read the information off the screen, but maintaining a safe enough distance to prevent contact.

She pulled up files, determined not to let his proximity and familiar scent sidetrack her. The research she compiled for his mission popped up with the cross-referenced database she had compiled on her father's death.

He whistled. "You should see the stuff I have."

She turned to face him. Only then did they look at each other, and she realized how much time they'd wasted working alone.

She wanted to grab him in a bear hug and never let go.

He held out a hand for her to shake. "Partners?"

"Partners." She'd settle for that, for the time being, and shook his hand. "We have the same goal and with both of us working on it, we may get to a conclusion faster."

This was the first time she felt confident, hopeful that they might actually get somewhere with the bombing.

"We have to trace every single person on these lists, and track any coincidences their association may spit out. My program will crossreference and match any similarities."

She'd wait and see if they were both on the same path.

"I need your list to add to mine. I have big gaps that are bothering me."

"Okay, I've shown you mine, now you show me yours," Emily teased.

Jason's grin was wicked when he reached inside his shirt for a memory stick he had taped to his side. "I never leave home without it."

Emily practically lost it when he lifted his shirt and exposed the happy trail she wanted to follow. Her mouth went dry, so she kept it shut. He popped the stick into her USB port and waited for the data to download. After the cursor started blinking, he tapped on the keyboard and brought up his list.

Emily scanned some of the information, stopping at one point and gasping. She turned quickly with eyes wide, staring at Jason, whose expression looked grim. "My God, this can't be. Who else knows about this?"

He shrugged, "Let's hope that anyone else who cross-references the data doesn't tie Jason Holmes with Jason DesJardin like you have."

"Don't worry, I think it picked it up this way because of the way I ran the search."

"If someone else inputs the same data, can my new identity be uncovered?" he asked her.

Emily gripped the keyboard, her fingers numb. "If the informant in the agency puts this same information together, yes. Jason, you know what that would mean?"

"Yes, I know." He replied too calmly Emily thought, for a man whose life was in mortal danger. But the fear she read on his face wasn't for himself. He said, "I'm in danger."

She also understood what he meant when he added, "So are you and the others."

Emily knew that for all their sakes, nothing could happen to him. No one could find out Jason Holmes was Jason DesJardin.

Jason looked pensively at her, sitting deathly still. "If what we suspect is true, I brought this on us all. Go in there and scramble that data. We have what we need."

Emily stared at her screen and wondered if this would be enough. "I have to get into the agency's system and scramble this information."

"Do it," he ordered. "Go ahead."

It was a few awkward minutes before he spoke, as he watched her hack into the covert agency's computer system. "When the team for the Monte Carlo job is compiled, I want you on it. The regular computer agent isn't available, and we can't afford to postpone going in to exchange out the chip before they sell it. I'll make my recommendation tonight."

Her heart leapt in her chest. She was terrified to breathe, afraid something might give her feelings away. Outwardly calm, inwardly anxious, she reminded herself that she was capable of performing the chip switch.

Time had changed Jason, Emily thought. Age made a subtle difference in his appearance. He was harder, bigger, not quite as lean. Instead of the long-limbed GQ model guise he used to pull off easily, he now conveyed power with a bulkier build, more muscle, more mass. Even his bone structure had taken on an angular edge, his jaw broader, his forehead wider. There wasn't any softness left in his face until he smiled. The familiar dimple still flashed with the sparkle in his eyes when she stated with absolute confidence, "I'm all in."

"I suppose you are." Jason's smiled.

While she reviewed his data, she could sense him already planning. She knew they could accomplish more than one mission in Monte Carlo if he included her.

He said, "I have an idea." Then a worried look spread over his face. "You haven't done any field work yet, have you?" He paused.

She answered, "No, but—"

"I've been impressed with your work to date. Still, you're not really a trained field agent. That might be a problem."

"Jason, please, give me a chance." Emily stopped when she realized he wasn't paying attention.

He flipped the calendar on her desk, running his finger over the dates. "Can you get to Quantico tomorrow for additional training and be ready to leave in two weeks?"

Her stomach flipped with enthusiasm, even as she hesitated. She paused as if thinking through her schedule. "If you can arrange it. My training that is. I don't have any personal commitments pressing." Even if she didn't want him to know how desolate her life actually was here in Boston, she admitted, "You know I have no private life, but if I did, I'd put it on hold for this opportunity." No matter what she had to do to find closure she'd do it. She had no more shame or pride where Jason was concerned. "There's no way I'd stay out of it," she said emphatically.

"Good, then I have a proposition for you. We know we have to get the nanochip, and you're the most likely candidate to manage it. We've traced the chip to this Mosel Reinhardt, the arms dealer that keeps showing up on multiple lists, including yours and mine. I've run into him before. He and I have been competitive in...well, let's just say we both appeal to the same women."

"Really? What has that got to do with anything?" He had the good grace to blush. *Cute*, she thought.

"It'll be clear in a minute. I think you could get both his interest and the chip. We can arrange to get you a job with his company verifying the chip for the terrorists."

"Me, *moi*? You think he'd be physically interested in me?" She was cynical at the very least.

He ignored her sarcasm. "Listen up. The mission requires someone who knows what she's doing to get in there and switch out the chip for one that won't be easily detected as a fake. That same someone will have to steal the original, get it out of the secure building where they're guarding it, and pass it to me at some point, so I can get it the hell out of the country."

"Oh, you want me to get the playboy interested in me and switch the real chip for the fake chip?" Emily ventured to interrupt.

"Of course. You can switch the chips can't you?"

She nodded, almost insulted.

"Your credentials are impeccable."

"Why, thank you. I've a knack for that, it seems. I'm not sure about getting Reinhardt's interest, or smuggling the chip out of the building and passing it to you. That sort of thing isn't in my regular job description."

"Never mind, we'll get to that later. Here's the rub. We, you and me, need to infiltrate his compound in DC when he comes over here to make the deal. I need someone who can get in there with a camera, so we can identify his contacts. One of them, we believe, is his US contact."

"You think it's this Kincaid, don't you?" She hated the way he tensed when she mentioned Kincaid, but she wanted to know who the man was to him. "Who is he?"

"No one. He's not the issue. You need to stay focused."

"His name keeps coming up-"

"Ignore it for now. We have to be very cautious, can't use anyone we normally would. There's no way the agency would allow it. This part is only between you and me. I think the Monte Carlo mission is somehow linked to the mole, so no one in the agency can know about this element of our plan."

"Our personal mission is piggy-backing the agency's." Emily was impressed with the idea. Her data and his confirmed there was a link. This was one way to dig a little deeper.

"Yup, but there's still the part where you have to get Mosel's trust, and he doesn't trust easily."

"How am I even going to get the position with his company?"

"The agency is handling that, and you have a couple of other things going for you."

"Oh, what?"

"Well, for one, you can verify the nanochip technology. You have the expertise and the reputation in the field. Two, your grandfather was an international philanthropist in the art world. Your attendance at the Charity Ball will be no surprise. Three, you're beautiful. One of Mosel's biggest weaknesses. Put all that together and no one will ever suspect you." Emily practically dropped the cat she had picked up off the chair. Tom gave an annoyed meow. "You think I'm that kind of beautiful?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course," he answered offhandedly. "Then, all I have to do is pay enough attention to you and his competitive edge will take over."

Her stomach dropped. "Oh, thanks." For a moment she thought, maybe, just maybe, there might be something he still found attractive about her. She turned and started to stand but he caught her by the shoulder.

"You'll have to gain his confidence, trust, and interest. We won't have much time to pull it off, so I might have to give him a little push." Jason's eyes darkened as he leaned down and put his hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. His lips twitched like he wanted to kiss her, but he lifted his head and said, "Have no doubt, Emily, there's plenty about you that's attractive, but don't get overly confident. Mosel's a playboy of the first order. You'll have to watch your step. And remember, I'll be covering your ass. Uhm, watching your back."

* * * *

The thought of watching her ass made him edgy and nervous. The thought of Mosel watching it made him crazed. *Not yet*, he thought. *Don't start something. You won't stop this time*.

He changed the subject and moved away from her. "Mosel's in this nanochip thing and the bombing up to his ears. I don't know how or why, but you could get close to him and possibly find out more. Despite his public image, for some reason, we don't have much on him. Not all his contacts are on that list. You could help both ways."

Jason moved to look out the window while they talked. The white wall of snow that had been falling outside had slowed, and now individual flakes were visible. After spending the last three years building his cover in Monte Carlo, appreciating the beauty of a simple snowflake seemed absurd. When he was with her, stuff like this always filled his head. It was weird.

She stepped up beside him at the window and lightly touched his shoulder. "I'll do whatever I have to. Especially if he can also lead us to the agency contact who betrayed you and my father."

He turned to look down into her face. "You always do that."

She never acknowledged his part. It made him crazy that she saw him as a victim of the bombing, same as her father—not the reason for it.

"What?" she asked firmly. Her expression told him she already knew the answer.

"You always dismiss my responsibility." He brought his hands up over his head and leaned back into his cupped palms.

"Let's drop it. We're never going to agree on this. Someone betrayed all three of you. Someone you all trusted." She glared at him.

Her anger surprised him.

Her touch was light on his shoulder. "You can't prepare against betrayal, Jason."

With that gentle comment and her sweet sympathy, every instinct to take what he wanted surged to the surface. His body fought his mind again for supremacy. Before his body won, he had to get out.

He turned and put both hands on the window sash to keep from touching her. Thankfully, the snowfall had slowed enough to use as an excuse. He was anxious to get out of the apartment and away from her soothing presence. Her innocent support cut right through his restraints. The longer he was with her the more his resistance wavered.

"We have work to do," he said brusquely.

He had to get this mission underway, and the comfort of being here with her was killing him. "I'll be in touch. Your orders for Quantico should arrive tomorrow morning, so be ready to leave when they get here."

"Will you send a driver to take me to the airport?"

"Sure thing. You don't have much time. Better get packing." He relaxed, but he didn't miss the way she'd stiffened and bristled at his refusal to respond to the comment about the bombing. She'd let him change the subject.

Emily's smile looked wary. "If we can get two missions accomplished for the price of one, we're that much better off. Right?"

"Right." He chanced a smile for her.

She followed him to the mudroom where he picked up his coat. She was suddenly quiet and contemplative, but he was afraid to pry.

He slipped into his shoes. "I better get going before the snow starts up again. And Emily, thanks. Thanks for calling me. I hope this gives us the break we need."

Then he made the mistake of looking at her. Her eyes were sparkling, glassy.

No, damn. Please don't cry.

He broke his promise to himself and hugged her. While he fought the sensations swirling within him, he managed an affectionate kiss without throwing her to the floor. Despite the demons in his head yelling for him to go back and take her, he fled into the Boston winter day, not daring a backward glance.

He shivered, relieved at the cold and his escape. Someone had wanted Jason Holmes dead, and until he found out who that was, everyone he cared about was in danger. Jason Holmes needed to stay buried.

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Emily still tingled from his touch. She brought her fingers to her lips, licked their tips, entranced with the taste, remembering the flavor of his mouth. That jelly flavor. Raspberry and confectioners' sugar mixed well with chocolate. It was a delicious combination. She'd never be able to eat jelly or chocolate without thinking lurid thoughts about Jason's mouth.

Chapter Eleven

When Emily's private plane touched down on the runway in Nice her stomach knotted. This was it. The mission was underway. She smoothed her skirt, stood up, and disembarked.

Customs was a brief inconvenience in the executive area of the airport. She wondered what sort of people used this section, and then she remembered, people like the man she was meeting.

A chunky uniformed man met her outside security. The sign bore her name block printed in red magic marker. He didn't speak when she introduced herself, only nodded politely in acknowledgement. He arranged for the retrieval of her luggage and ordered several people around in French before leading her to the awaiting black limousine.

To her surprise, the man waiting inside was none other than her new boss, Mosel Reinhardt, and although she'd seen pictures of him, nothing could have prepared her for the real thing.

Oh, hell. This was going to be some plan!

From what she discovered, Reinhardt had never made apologies for his behavior, his politics, or his womanizing. Born a twin in East Germany and orphaned, his adoptive parents were assigned outside the country in Southern France, developing vineyards on multiple estates. His appearance alone would have fit in nicely had he been born during Hitler's regime. People always commented on his size and physique right before they cowered at his eyes of icy steel. Some claimed that they could slice through a situation at a glance. He was cold, sharp, succinct, and single-minded in his politics. His one weakness—beautiful women. Their one weakness—him. And Emily was here to seduce him. Good grief, this is almost laughable.

"Monsieur Reinhardt, you didn't have to come to the airport to meet me. How very kind of you." The man sitting across from her stared at her with the coldest ice-blue eyes she'd ever seen. He was about six and half feet tall, judging from the length of his legs and still under forty, judging from his physique.

"Please, chérie, call me Mosel." His voice was smooth, deep, and mellow. It sent tiny flicks of heat to her cheeks.

Even if she hadn't already researched the man extensively, she would have recognized him. His picture graced the cover of the latest issues of the tabloids, touting him as one of the world's most eligible bachelors. He made the number three spot in the top fifty list of the world's sexiest men. Magazines splattered across the airport bookstores pasted their walls with his image. He was reported to have a twin, some darker image of himself, living in Amsterdam, but there were no images she could find.

Emily did a quick hormone check when he took her hand. His picture didn't do him justice. Sex appeal oozed from the man like honey from a broken comb. She was relieved she didn't have to try to seduce number one or two on the list. How much sexier could they be?

Inside the limo, with their legs bumping together, Emily found the intimacy disconcerting. Pheromones filled the air, sending a rampant flash of heat through her body.

"Naturellement, you must understand how I desired meeting you." Mosel purred. The heat in his voice strangely contrasted with the lack of warmth in his gaze while he appraised her.

Emily lost the train of the conversation. She sat in silence waiting for him to continue so she could pick it back up without making a fool of herself. Thankfully, she didn't have long to wait.

"Your grandfather would never have forgiven me for being remiss by allowing his brilliant and beautiful granddaughter to find her own way in a foreign country. Are you aware that your maternal grandfather was a mentor of sorts to me?"

Stunned, Emily could only stammer. "No, I didn't know. I wasn't aware you knew my grandfather in that capacity." *Uh, where was the agency's intel when she needed it?*

"Acquaintances only, I was quite young at the time." He paused, gazing out the window before turning back to her. "We had similar interests. We met years ago. I admired his leadership in the field of philanthropy and have patterned my nonprofit charities after his."

Her heart beat in her ears. She fingered her diamond amulet but didn't react when he continued with a look of genuine concern. "My condolences. I grieved to hear of his passing."

Emily nodded. "Thank you. It has been a long time now." She wondered why pertinent information regarding Mosel's association with her grandfather hadn't been in his dossier. Hopefully, no other important information was missing.

"This," he said, sweeping one hand at her, "is a pleasure. He took a glass of champagne from the bar and handed it to her. "I'm so fortunate you were available to fill this contract."

"I'm very interested in all aspects of this nanotechnology field. It's an opportunity one would have to be insane to turn down."

"So young," he mumbled. He angled his head, examining her more closely, making her more unnerved for the moment. "You are reputed to be one of the best in your field, which makes you the one expert in nanochip technology I would trust. You also come very highly recommended."

"Thank you so much." The way he scrutinized her made her uncomfortable. She blushed at his compliments. "I'm flattered." How could any woman resist him? My God, he defined charisma. Jason was right—Mosel was way out of her league. She'd have to be extremely careful. They'd turned off onto a side road while still on airport property. Her nerves must have been getting to her. Emily glanced out the window. "Where are we going?"

"To my helicopter. The trip will only take a short while. Then you can get settled into the apartment I've arranged for you during your stay."

"An apartment? Not a hotel?"

"I hoped you would like life here enough to stay for a while longer. I plan to recruit you away from your present position with the college."

He never stopped holding the fingers of her one hand, stroking them gently as he spoke. The college job was her cover. Mentioning it should have caused her a bit of distress, but he'd lulled her into a false sense of security. She couldn't respond. She was hardly aware of what he was doing. It mesmerized her, preventing any concrete thought from taking hold.

Everything about him compelled attention, from his white blond hair to his pale eyes. His facial hair was darker, accenting his ruggedly handsome features—his bone structure so strong that the hollows beneath his cheeks dipped deep before filling back in above a strong, broad jaw.

He had full lips, wide and generous, but she noticed his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. They were cold, calculating, belying the words pouring politely past his lips. He was incongruous. Everything about her first impression of him put her on guard. He was a contradiction.

But then again, she couldn't deny their instant chemistry. It was nice to experience that instant flash of heat. Until today, Jason had been the only man who'd ever caused her temperature to soar. All the previous men she'd been with left her unmoved enough to make her wonder if there was something wrong with her. Was she even capable of responding to the type of attraction Mosel pulled from her? Feeling this spark with someone other than Jason proved that the rest of her life wasn't doomed to an existence without that heat.

"What? Is something troubling you?" Mosel leaned into her.

She smiled, lost in her lustful thoughts. She'd failed to respond to his comment. "No, nothing is wrong. All of this is unexpected, overwhelming. Thank you again." Emily chewed nervously at her bottom lip. She took a sip of the champagne and gazed out the window.

She loved the tropical landscape with the sun and palm trees, such a nice contrast to the gray sky over Boston she left ten hours and sixty degrees ago.

Here she was, amiably sharing small talk with a man she believed was somehow involved with her father's murder, a man she intended to seduce if necessary to get what she needed from him. She was casually passing time with this international playboy while her things were loaded into his helicopter.

"I hope you won't mind that I've made some arrangements to show you around later tonight and during this week? I suggest you rest this afternoon, and I'll pick you up for a late dinner."

"That sounds fantastic." When Emily smiled this time, it was genuine. She didn't have to fake her enthusiasm. Spending time getting close to this man wouldn't be a hardship. And if he did have anything to do with her father's death, it would be a pleasure bringing him down. The years had hardened her heart after Jason had broken it. The only thing that mattered would be finding the man who killed her father and getting her revenge.

Chapter Twelve

The amplifier on the bass guitar was jacked so loud, Jason could feel the music resonating through his body. His heart practically set its beat to the tempo. He was unsuccessfully trying to pay attention to a group of acquaintances from town as he waited anxiously at the bar for Emily to make her first appearance in Monte Carlo.

The spotlights flashed and the music blared. He should be relaxed, knowing somewhere Harrison and the team had her back. He was sure their setup tonight was going to be effective. But he glanced at his watch for the hundredth time. Where the hell were they? Emily and Mosel should have been here by now.

He knew she arrived in Nice yesterday. The surveillance team had been in place and watching. Mosel picked her up and brought her directly to Monte Carlo by helicopter. They landed at the heliport yesterday afternoon. The reports indicated they'd gone out to dinner, and then she returned to her room last night. Alone, to his relief. The team observed Mosel's limo pick her up earlier this afternoon and take her to corporate headquarters.

Until she got here, and he made the move to introduce himself to her, she didn't have the information about their next contact. He needed to meet with her to arrange the details for the rest of their plan.

According to the surveillance team, Emily and Mosel had left the restaurant more than half an hour ago. He looked at his watch again. It was a ten-minute drive at most. The team following Emily up to this point observed that Mosel showed obvious signs of interest in her. That interest already bothered Jason despite how it figured instrumentally in their plan. He could kick himself for setting her up and putting her in this situation with a rake like Mosel.

To top off his already short fuse, the guys on the surveillance team picked tonight to start acting like children. Two of them got into an argument over who would monitor the audio equipment and who got to be on video. Jason didn't know what was wrong with them. Usually the audio and video assignments were so boring the guys fought over who'd get to go out for coffee.

As his impatience grew, his annoyance did, too. He started envisioning Mosel's mouth on Emily's, and his insides churned. His stomach burned. Maybe he had an ulcer.

He was already having a tough time controlling his concerns. He wasn't going to acknowledge it for what it was—jealousy.

A warm hand glided around his waist. Jacqueline, the attractive blonde standing beside him, ran her long slender hand up his back beneath his jacket and whispered something provocative in his ear. He snapped to attention when her hand dropped, traveling suggestively down his thigh just as Mosel and Emily walked through the door.

Mosel's white blond head became visible above the crowd. Jason breathed a sigh of relief, knowing Emily was in the room. The tension inside him died down and he relaxed, bending his head closer to listen as Jacqueline spoke. His body leaned against hers, but he only paid half attention to the woman's body sliding up against his. He kept his eyes surreptitiously focused to where he expected Mosel and Emily to emerge through the crowd.

At first, he didn't recognize the woman standing with Mosel. Then the blue diamond pendant flashed between her breasts, and her identity struck him like a fist to the gut. Was this his Emily? No, this was Emily as he had never seen her before. For the briefest moment, he embarrassed himself, feeling himself gawk. Surely, his mouth had dropped open. The breath he took stopped in his chest.

Okay, so now he understood the argument over monitoring the video equipment tonight. The surveillance crew had already checked

Emily out earlier. He'd discuss this with the guys later. He was also going to have to speak to Emily about that dress.

Who worked with her and dug up this wardrobe? She didn't need to show so much cleavage or leg to pull off this job.

He licked his lips. After seeing her, Jason knew Mosel wasn't going to make this easy on him. No man would back down without a fight if this package were the prize.

Jesus, when did her legs get that long? He blocked out the memories of having them wrapped around his waist while he was buried balls deep inside her.

Regrouping, he took a moment to get back in character, smiling in response to Jacqueline's suggestion before looking back across the room at Emily. When their eyes locked, something happened. The air was sucked out of his lungs, as if he had entered a giant vacuum. The air space between them sizzled, a connection. He watched her react. He could tell she felt it, too.

Staring at her face, he hoped he'd find answers to his concerns. This was her first mission. He scrutinized her, questioning her with his eyes.

Are you all right? Do you need rescuing already?

He saw amusement on her face. The corner of Emily's lips twitched, a brow arched in interest. Then a grim look formed on her face as her eyes met his.

What is it? What's wrong? He wished he could ask her.

Then her focus turned to something next to him. It wasn't until that exact moment he realized Jacqueline had her body plastered against him like superglue. Jacqueline's eyes followed Jason's back to Emily. He almost showed his surprise. He'd been so preoccupied with thoughts of Emily, he hadn't even been aware of the woman with her body wrapped against his.

Emily's gaze dropped to the bulge forming in his pants for her, and he realized Jacqueline's hand was heading for trouble. To protect his honor, he reached down, lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips. Playing his playboy role, he turned all his attention on her. His heart resumed its normal pattern.

Right before he recognized Emily's attitude for what it was, jealousy, he smiled. A man of his experience knew that look between two women when he saw it. Nevertheless, he was surprised.

It must have shown, because when he chanced to look back at Emily, a succinct sign of amusement passed over her expression. She enjoyed making him squirm.

Before the night was over, he would accomplish his first assignment, an introduction to Emily for the record. The fleeting glances she cast his way insured it would happen. But he feared if she kept up the looks he wouldn't be able to wait for his cue. He wanted her in his arms, not Mosel's.

He resented the satisfied look on Mosel's face, the one claiming he enjoyed flaunting his lovely new employee in Jason's face. And even though he set the whole scam up, Jason hated it. All he could think about was getting her away from the other man. Having to watch Mosel touch her almost made Jason physically ill. He couldn't wait to take her home tonight, away from everyone. And he would be the one taking her home. He was depending on Mosel's good breeding to prevent him from denying Jason the privilege if Emily agreed, and Jason would be very insistent. Besides, she'd been instructed to agree. They would talk about Boston, a place they both had in common according to their story, and then he'd take over. He took a long, lingering look at her, not hiding his interest. It was almost time.

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Emily flushed, anxious and embarrassed by Jason's blatant interest. The more he stared, the more sweat formed in the cleavage between her breasts. His unabashed attention disconcerted her. Mosel's hand rubbed small circles at her hipbone. In spite of having Jason right in front of her as the other man touched her, or maybe because of it, a gradual heat rose through her body. She attempted to tear her eyes from Jason's but couldn't.

As much as she wanted to play it cool, hoping to ease the tension rising in her by diverting her attention elsewhere, it kept locking on the irresistible male across the room. While she played mind games with his head, the woman with him played physical games with his body. The evidence in his pants was plain for all to see.

Emily hoped the effect Mosel's hands were having on her wasn't as evident as Jason's erection. But she lost hope of that when Mosel bent to nibble her earlobe. The heat that shot through her caused her to inhale sharply. As soon as his nostrils flared, she knew her aroused scent was in the air.

Playing the two men against each other was dangerous. To be successful, she'd have to develop some courage and self-confidence. She looked at Jason thoughtfully, flirting beneath her eyelashes—then openly, directly at him—finally, brazenly daring him to look away.

Unfortunately, he appeared up to the challenge. He didn't look away. Instead, his lids lowered, his chin came up just a notch, enough to cause a provocative pucker to his mouth and a tense set to his jaw. Her pulse quickened in response. "Who would break eye contact first" had just become a dangerous game.

The faster her heart beat, the shallower her breathing became. She realized Jason was out-classing her rapidly. The quickening sexual response in his eyes, and Mosel's hands on her hip, was a far more erotic experience than she'd ever expected. Mosel saw her watching Jason, but he seemed to enjoy this game they all played.

Jason threw her off-kilter. Oh my God, his expression is piercing straight into my soul. What's the matter with me? You'd think I'd never seen a gorgeous guy before.

Emily knew better with this one. He had an unfair advantage. She'd already seen and had all of him once, and once would never be enough. She still ached for more. The heat in her body rose easily because she was so aware of all his special talents. Emily saw his raw sexuality as she felt her own burning up inside her.

He briefly nodded in her direction. The exchange was mundane. There was no mistaking the amused quirk at the corner of his dimpled mouth. It was a soft contrast to his harsh shadowed jaw. She tore her interest back to the man at her side. When he spoke to her, she needed to keep up. But the pull from across the room kept her gaze shooting in Jason's direction. Unable to resist the magnetic pull, she met Jason's eyes once more. This time he stared at her—looking intently at her with a dark desperate passion.

He's very good.

She was acutely aware from past experience the extent of his potential. He smiled, and his smile went all the way to the crinkle at the corner of his eyes. With that, the tension inside pulsed through her. Her body quickened for him.

Was it possible to climax like this? She began to think she might spontaneously combust, but then he moved away from his group, excusing himself. While the conversations carried on around her and the music blasted, her attention stayed focused on him and the sexual mind game they played.

Was he leaving? Had the game ended?

Her first reaction was disappointment, followed briefly by confusion, until... No, he was making his way through the crowd, casually approaching her and Mosel. When he reached them, he held out his hand. "Monsieur Reinhardt, good to see you again." Before he turned his attention and a full-blown smile on Emily, he asked, "Are you going to introduce us or are you going to keep this fantastic discovery all to yourself, Mosel?"

They had probably played these games before, and if she knew Jason, he was forever changing the rules. He held his hand out to Emily, not waiting for Mosel to respond. "Jason DesJardin. And you are?"

Mosel looked shocked by Jason's behavior. He responded politely although he didn't appear to want to. "I am pleased to introduce Miss Emily Holmes. Miss Holmes is doing some contract work for my company. She lives and works in Boston, in America. This is her first time in Monte Carlo." His hand flinched possessively at her waist.

"Mosel, my friend. Please, perhaps you'll let me help? Boston, did you say? I'm also from Boston."

Jason was slick—she had to hand it to him. Before the sentence was out of his mouth, he maneuvered her away from Mosel. "Miss Holmes, would you care to dance?" He was halfway across to the small dance floor before he finished asking.

Emily looked back at Mosel, opening her eyes widely at him and shrugging as if asking, "What can I do?"

"We are, after all, fellow countrymen," he said over his shoulder. He whirled her into his arms and added, "You need to be careful." The comment was growled out between his teeth.

"You know, Jason, I don't know how I managed to get through all these years without you." The stiff sarcasm dripped in response.

Once they were on the dance floor moving slowly to the sax music, the warnings he issued beneath his breath about Mosel meant nothing to her. He was the real danger.

"I know how to do my job."

"Harrison, wipe that smirk off your face. I know you're listening." Jason spoke into his microphone.

He turned his comments back to Emily. "I know you know how to do your job, it's this job I'm worried about. He's notorious. I've known him for years." To Emily, Jason sounded almost pitiful.

She took mercy and let her body relax against his. But she continued acting indignant as he held her. "I'm supposed to seduce him. How can I do that while you're interfering and challenging him? Are you planning to seduce me, too?"

Jason let out a sardonic laugh. "He'd probably be up to the challenge of a ménage. He's always more interested if I am, too. We

have years of experience with competitive conquests under our belts. It's like an unspoken dare. Don't forget, this so-called seduction isn't supposed to get real. No one expects, well, you know."

He was getting all protective and big brotherly on her again. That had to stop immediately. She wanted to remind him about his own reputed behavior. His reputation was no better. For the moment she held her tongue, and enjoyed the feel of his arms surrounding her.

"I have a lunch date with him tomorrow. That should be safe enough to appease you, but please try to stay out of the way so I can relax with him. I'm trying to gain his trust and get more personal, but you're crowding me."

At first he grunted, and then admitted, "You're right. We're running short on time anyway. We may have to move up our time line. The Ball is only two weeks away, and the drop will have to be ready by then. I guess we're going to have to be more aggressive between now and then to play him."

"There's no 'we're' about this. I'm going to have to get aggressive."

Jason visibly winced.

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Emily planned a series of sexual seductive balancing acts to keep Mosel's interest piqued enough to follow her when she returned home, while intending to proceed slowly enough to keep her out of his bed.

The following day, when he took her to lunch, she took a bite of her salad, and broached the subject of Jason. "Jason DesJardin has offered to take me to a club dancing this evening. He's very charming."

Mosel's mouth twitched with irritation, but he said nothing. What would have been flattering under normal circumstances was actually only exhausting. Jason's act was trying to force Mosel to step up his game, and she knew Mosel's interest would rise to the competition. They made her feel like the ball in a tennis match.

The plan seemed to be working. Jason's behavior still confused her. Mosel's interest escalated nicely. Apparently, too fast for Jason's taste, and not fast enough for Emily's. Jason was afraid Mosel wouldn't take no for an answer, but she wanted to get Mosel back to Washington, DC, and find out about his contacts.

They figured Mosel would meet his US contacts once he was back in DC. And she needed Mosel to trust her enough to invite her to his estate. She could get the pictures of his contacts and forward them to Jason's contact in the CIA and cross-reference them with their IDs.

The more interest Jason showed in her, the more interested Mosel seemed. His attention remained professional, although he seemed truly concerned about Jason. Emily's conscience twinged a bit when Mosel showed protective signs toward her, especially when he tactfully tried to advise her about Jason's reputation. While trying to remain discreet, Mosel commented carefully. He apparently didn't want Emily to mistake his concern for jealousy. At least she understood *his* motivation.

Jason's, on the other hand, had her baffled. His motivations kept her guessing. He seemed to have no problem appearing jealous privately, although he tried to pass it off as protective concern.

The sexual chess match going on between the two men appeared at an impasse. They both seemed to be walking that same fine line between concern for her and jealousy. She dreaded looking any deeper into either of the men's motives. This game they played with each other gave her a headache.

She took two aspirin and prepared to meet Mosel. He was taking her out on his yacht. Jason was steaming.

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Jason's eyes were focused on the reconnaissance monitor when the Mediterranean seemed to explode, spitting an exquisite, familiar looking mermaid into the air. Emily emerged from the depths of the Mediterranean and climbed the ladder onto the yacht deck, her skin shimmering with droplets, the turquoise blue of her string bikini almost matching the water below. Her excited smile reflected her sheer joy of living. When she flipped her waist length hair, the result produced an arc of fine mist, shooting a sparkling diamond spray into the sunlit sky. Caught up in the pleasure of the moment, she dripped water from her sea-drenched body, forming a small puddle beneath her feet, a bubble on the waxed wooden deck of the luxurious yacht. She grabbed a towel and dried a silky-looking tanned leg, then completed the ritual on the other before she plopped unceremoniously into the chaise.

Emily basked in the heat of the sun, lazing about until a large shadow interrupted the light. She pulled her sunglasses from where they sat on her head like a headband, dragged them down over her eyes and grinned up at the man standing over her in shadow.

Jason wanted to kill someone.

* * * *

Mosel stood over Emily, looming like a mountain, forcing her breath to catch in her chest as he stared down at her. She shielded her face with her hand to block the bright sun beaming behind him and couldn't miss how his thick, muscled legs stood merely inches from her like tree trunks. His broad tan chest rippled when he reached out to hand her one of the two glasses he held, and then he sat down, straddling the chaise. Facing her, his long graceful fingers stroked intimately up her calf while they measured each other.

Heat raced into her, through her, but she took her time examining him, evaluating his fine chiseled good looks as he studied her painted toes. She found him surprisingly fascinating, as well as appealing and amiable. The sun shimmered off his oiled body, a magnificent looking male specimen. Defined muscles rippled in his arms as he moved his hand up her thigh. She put her hand on his, stopping him before he reached her apex.

He lifted his glasses to stare into her eyes. Looking for what, she wondered. What would he see in her expression? Arousal? Admiration? Yes, definitely that. It was impossible not to appreciate all that beautiful masculinity. Power? Hmm, he exuded that.

Charming, wealthy, and there was no doubt a definite chemistry simmering between them. She wondered why he of all men affected her when no one except Jason had ever appealed to her this way. Damn her luck, it would have to be now and under these circumstances that her libido decided to step up.

Although she should feel revulsion for who and what he was, when he touched her, what he could be didn't faze her. None of that mattered to her body, and he was very good with body language. There was no doubt, the man would take what she offered if she dared. He might take it even if she didn't. His body recognized the invitation from hers no matter how many times she tried to deny it. How many times had he taken the opportunity to push her when her pulse kicked up a notch? He read her like a headline, knew exactly what she liked, how she liked it, and when she wanted it. The minute heat pooled low in her body, he moved in like a shark sensing blood.

Her heart couldn't afford to let her mind forget her mission even if her body wanted to. The sparks flying between them couldn't ever ignite. There was the mission to consider, and always, there was Jason. Her heart sank when she thought about him, wondering if he was the one watching.

Despite Mosel's wolfish approach to her, she trusted him to a point. She felt remarkably comfortable with him in so many ways, and yet she knew when to draw the line. What she felt toward him was more than pure lust. Strangely, she thought he'd be insulted to know that she *liked* him and she wished that she didn't.

He might believe lust was enough for him, but she was getting the distinct feeling he might be mistaken. The sensations he inspired in her with a glance or a light touch were electrifying, far from a mild infatuation. Mosel had her insides quaking like only one other man ever had.

With Jason, often a touch wasn't necessary to set her body blazing with need. With him, a look, a glance, or a flick of his head could set her off like a bottle rocket. It had been three years since she reacted to a man that way, and still everyone failed to match the standard Jason set. Emily wondered if he set the bar that high or if the fault lay with her. The explosive arousal Emily experienced just thinking of him could bring her to her knees, and if he touched her, her body tingled, anticipating more.

Then perhaps there was a good reason for her special reaction to Jason—he had been her first lover—but now she suspected he wouldn't be the last man to satisfy her. The way her body responded to Mosel was proof Jason hadn't effectively ruined her for all other men.

She pulled off her glasses, squinted as she caught up Mosel's hand, affectionately weaving her fingers through his. "Can we take the skiff into port and come back later?" she asked.

"As long as you agree to join me later. I have a short appointment this afternoon."

"Wonderful. I have a few things to pick up from my apartment. And then, you know, I have to get back to work or at least check in on the project by Monday."

He smiled that slow sexy grin. "Not a problem," he said, and her heart missed a beat.

He was hot, and God, she loved the chemistry between them. At least now she knew there wasn't anything wrong with her. At least she could thank Mosel for that tidy bit of information. She also realized what the difference in her feelings was. She'd never stopped loving Jason. But the more time she and Mosel spent together, the more he ingrained himself deeper in her heart.

What if he'd actually been involved with her father's murder?

She sipped her drink, determined to stay focused on her role. "I don't want anyone to think I'm getting preferential treatment or using you in any way."

"Let me worry about all that."

She slipped her glasses back on. Perhaps she could lie better from behind the dark lenses. "You know my friends are coming from the States? I already scheduled time to be with them. I hope it doesn't seem excessive."

He stood and ran his hand up her arm. "Don't worry so much what people think, *meine liebling*."

He reached around her waist with his other hand, surrounding her, brushing back strands of loose hair from her face. "Anyway, I know what your real motives are."

"Do you?" Emily's heart jumped involuntarily with concern. Hopefully, the pounding in her chest would be mistaken for ardor.

He lifted her glasses back onto her head and looked her straight in the eye. "Oh, yes, I do."

Mosel pulled her down to the sundeck. "You're trying to seduce me with your rare beauty, intelligence, and innocence. Did I tell you it's working?"

He bent over her, tipping her chin to his, and lightly kissed her mouth, his tongue running across the seam of her lips.

"Mmm, you taste like salt." He pulled back and licked his lips.

"I-I've never seduced anyone in my life." *Okay, a little lie. Just once.* She could hardly count something that had gone so badly that she still hadn't fully recuperated from the after-effects. She swore she'd never try her hand at seduction again. And here she was neck deep in another seduction.

"A joke. I was only teasing, *ma chérie*." He laughed and pointed. "Your mouth is open."

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"And you switch languages like you switch women." *Or political allegiance*. Emily smiled wryly and shrugged nervously. His reputation was as outrageous as his behavior.

He pretended to be wounded.

"Sorry, but all the men at work tease me about being gullible."

"No, liebl..." He stopped. "I'm sorry."

One more time Emily was reminded why she was attracted to him. Remembering his position, an arms dealer of international stature, was hard when he seemed so charming, so very normal, so damn endearing. He was mysterious in a certain way, withholding a wealth of undiscovered secrets. Add charisma and sparkle to his undeniable good looks and such a man was irresistible to both women and men. His secret was a promise of untapped potential, somehow guaranteeing any ensuing trouble might be well worth the risk.

She reconsidered her reasons for being there. The job she performed, both personally and professionally depended on it. Her responsibility to the agency came first. As fantastic as he seemed, she had to remember what this man and his associates were like.

Even though his many kindnesses surprised her, Emily fought to maintain her perspective about Mosel. He was an assignment. For the time being, her assignment was pleasant and attractive. But that didn't mean he could be trusted. This type of intrigue might be foreign to her, but she constantly reminded herself, he was her mark.

"The men at work are forever pulling tricks on me. I guess it would be fair to admit I am a bit naïve." Emily laughed, uncomfortable about playing into the role, even though she fit into it perfectly. Now she understood why Jason picked her for this mission. She didn't have a lot of acting to do, so far. It wasn't a challenge for her to pull off innocent. On so many levels, her naivety flickered through. The seductress part would be a stretch for her. Harder for her to play and even harder to figure out why she'd gotten this assignment. If anyone knew about her shortcomings in that department, it was Jason. Suddenly, she felt awkward in her role. This man seemed to genuinely like and trust her. She'd never have imagined Mosel could become so interested in someone like her. Maybe it was the challenge. In any case, she found it extremely flattering, and although her ego was on the rise, she wondered if he was playing her. That wasn't possible, was it?

She allowed him to continue to handle her. He wasn't getting out of line, and the casual fondling felt good. It had been so long since she'd wanted any man's touch or since a man had made her feel this desirable. She leaned into him, relaxed, and thought to herself that it was too bad she couldn't let herself feel more. Aloud she asked, "So, can we take the skiff back soon?"

Mosel nuzzled her neck. "I hoped we would just stay here tonight."

"We can come back later, for dinner." She raised a brow and left the rest unspoken.

"Of course, dinner. I will be the perfect gentleman. Have I not promised?"

"And you've lived up to your promise." Emily nodded her head once in agreement. "Thank you.

Mosel laughed good-naturedly and pecked her lips. "You are so refreshingly honest and such a tease."

A practiced smile she didn't feel surfaced. *I am neither of those things*.

Guilt ate at her for wanting him and for letting him touch her. While those thoughts surfaced, something kept niggling at her from deep in her heart. She feared he wasn't what he seemed. Emily kept her emotions inside, but couldn't help the threat boiling within. *If you* had anything to do with my father's death, I will personally take pleasure in ripping your heart out.

His background was common knowledge. Homeless, a twin raised in a state institution in East Germany before being adopted by a wealthy couple who were well-known philanthropists. There was more to him than they knew, she was sure of it. If only she had her own PC with secure access. Just so much surfing and hacking could be accomplished safely at her apartment, and she didn't dare play around at work. The next time she met with Jason, she'd ask if he knew anything else. She'd need all the ammunition she could muster to stand her ground with Mosel. He was wearing down her resistance each time they met.

Chapter Thirteen

From the balcony of his hillside home, Jason had an unobstructed view of the bay and Mosel's yacht. He didn't take the binoculars away from his eyes as he watched the seduction scene play out on board.

The man touched her and then kissed her.

Damn. Jason squeezed his eyes shut. What the hell did she have in mind acting like this? She was wearing next to nothing. Why hadn't she put on the silk thing she had with her, the one he bought when they'd been shopping?

Jason winced and groaned aloud. This plan was going to kill him. Just wait until he got a hold of her. He'd like to shake her brainless for doing her job too well. Instead, he'd take the next opportunity to drive some sense into her head. She was playing with fire. It was as if she was enjoying herself, like she was playing *him* instead of Mosel.

He'd have some questions for her all right. Hadn't he bought the cover-up with her safety in mind? After she'd tried the bathing suit on, the result of seeing all her naked flesh exposed forced him to carry their bags to conceal his unprofessional hard-on. He'd personally shoved the cover-up in her bag before she left this morning.

Now she was out there with Mosel wearing next to nothing, flirting, and God knew what. He adjusted himself, annoyed at the direction his thoughts kept dragging his body whenever he thought about her.

Harrison lounged on the patio with his feet up on the table, a beer in his hand, and a smirk on his face. "Jason, chill out. She's doing her job. Don't make it harder by second-guessing her decisions." He took a long pull on the bottle. "She instinctively knows how to be a seductive woman."

"Shit! That's what I'm worried about. Believe me, I'm not the one to second-guess her ability in that department." Jason hissed. "I am concerned with how well she's accomplishing her mission, though. I've never seen Mosel this infatuated with anyone. Something about it concerns me."

"Like what?"

"For one, how will he react when I take her away from him? And I. Am. Taking. Her. Away. He may not be ready to part with her so easily at this rate, even for what doing business with me might bring to the table."

"He's not in this alone. No matter how much he wants her, his friends are too powerful and dangerous to screw with. He'll back down at first, to make you happy, and as soon as you're out of the picture, he'll be right there to pick up the pieces. He's a professional, he won't risk fucking this up for a woman."

"I'm not so sure about that. Hell, look at her!"

"Emily will steer him in the right direction."

"I'm not sure where she's steering him, but *I'm* not happy with the direction they're headed."

"She knows how important it is for your cover to remain intact for the future. When she's finished with Mosel, you'll still have your cover, and she'll look as innocent as a newborn," Harrison lifted his almost-empty Heineken as if in toast. "Mission accomplished. We'll have the chip, we can still use your cover, and she'll be safe! Don't forget what's important, buddy. Don't lose sight of the ball."

"I know, I know, but just look at them," Jason practically whined, as he watched the interaction. Without realizing, he admitted aloud, "I can't stand watching him touch her."

"You have it bad, my friend." Harrison shook his head and stood up. He moved to a better angle and picked up the other pair of binoculars to improve his view of what was bothering Jason so much. Jason intercepted him. "Never mind," he said, taking the other binoculars from Harrison before he picked them up to look. "I don't want you looking, she's practically naked."

"I think I've seen her naked before." Harrison quietly chuckled, trying to hide his amusement. "Well, topless anyway."

"It had better have been when she was a baby in diapers, or I'll have to kill you." Jason lightened up. Harrison loved Emily—like a baby sister.

"Okay. Then I guess I better not remind you the B team has them under video surveillance."

"Oh, shit." Jason dropped his head in his hands. He wanted to scream. Glued to the view, he moaned. "Where did she get that bathing suit? That's not the one she bought when I was with her, and that one was bad enough. Can you even call that a bathing suit?" He stomped around the balcony. "Shit, look at her legs. I bought her a damn cover-up. Why isn't she wearing it?" He paced along the wall like a caged tiger.

He turned on Harrison. "What are you smirking about?"

A full-blown laugh erupted from Harrison. "Jason, sit down and have another beer. And for Christ's sake put down the glasses. You're driving me nuts. The guys will make contact with us if she needs help."

He picked up the binoculars Jason relinquished and put them out of his immediate reach. "Calm down, she's perfectly fine. You're meeting her in two hours, and you better either get yourself under control or ask her to marry you."

Jason gasped. "What? What are you talking about? She's like my kid sister."

With a skeptical look, Harrison tossed Jason a beer, and pulled another out of the mini fridge. He corrected Jason, "No, don't pull that shit on me. She's like *my* baby sister. She's never been like your sister. You've been in love with her since you first laid eyes on her when she was eight years old." "That's just sick! I didn't love her that way," Jason protested, but he knew Harrison was right.

"Didn't' is the optimal word." Harrison pointed his bottleneck at Jason. "Maybe not back then. But even then, there was always a deep connection between you two. By the time she finished high school, we all wondered what you were waiting for. Was it Avery?"

He nodded and took a pull from the bottle, remembering being barely conscious the first time he saw her. She'd made him feel better with her presence, until she grew up. He mulled that over. By the time she entered her mid-teens, he took to avoiding her completely, trying to replace his feelings for her with all the other women.

That hadn't worked, either. All those women gave him his present "player" reputation, but none of them came close to his fantasies of her.

"Avery loved you. He knew how you two felt about each other. He trusted you to take ca—"

"Butt out." He grunted a warning at Harrison.

"Too late for that."

Harrison had a right to know. "Being seven years older mattered. Avery's kindness always held me back, kept me from responding to her no matter how much she flirted. I hated that my feelings weren't more brotherly. But you're right, they never were. I felt brotherly toward Kate, why didn't I feel the same way toward Emily?"

A smile threatened Harrison's lips. "You tried to play the big brother role when she was in high school. You managed the annoying part real well when she started dating. If I remember correctly, you had a big problem with jealousy back then, too."

"I worried that I wouldn't be able to resist her." If he let himself believe he could have her, desire crept in and then the guilt. Always the guilt. "Let's change the subject for a few minutes."

"Good idea. Before you beat yourself up over Emily and drive me and yourself crazy, I'd like to remind you there's a difference with memories you have as a child and those you make as an adult. Remember when Avery brought you to my place to help Andrea take care of me?"

Jason mumbled an acknowledgment.

"You helped me down to the porch and asked me how I felt. I told you it wasn't too bad, that the medication finally took the edge off. I lied. It hurt like a son of a bitch."

"I know. You were playing all macho, big bro for me, so I let you."

"Did I ever thank you for that? You know, for helping me get outside for a smoke? Andrea wouldn't let me smoke in the house and I was becoming a desperate man."

"Don't mention it. You were always a 'desperate man' when it came to smoking." Jason shook his head. "I haven't forgotten all the times you tried to quit. You were incorrigible."

"Yeah, especially then. With my leg elevated, I was out of commission and totally pissed. You saved me from going stir crazy. You know how much you helped us out, right?"

"Jeez, Harrison, don't mention it. Cripes, it was a lifetime ago."

"Yeah, well I just want you to know favors go both ways."

"Thanks, I'll hold you to that." Jason laughed and eased back in the chair. "The house reminded me of my grandfather's place. I liked the wraparound porch and being in the quiet country. The nippy air felt clear, good, almost too good. Being out in the suburbs away from Kincaid and the trouble scared me. What if I let down my guard, relaxed, got too secure?"

"Sorry, I didn't know you were affected that way."

"It was a long time ago."

Harrison reached for the lighter he still always kept on him. "Avery used to taunt me about using a flip fluid lighter in a day and age when butane ruled."

"I remember you laughing at him and saying, 'There's nothing classy about a butane, and I'm all about class.' You were always so full of shit." "Shit rules the world."

Jason stared vacantly out at the yacht, as Harrison picked the glasses back up.

"You never talk about that time when you were shot. Why now? Fess up, what are you driving at?"

"Nothing—just shootin' the bull." He leaned back into the chair, settling in for a long conversation, and let out a gruff laugh. "Thank God the surgery was a rousing success. The bullet that lodged in my thigh came too close to the family jewels for comfort." Harrison winced. "Even if I could've told you I'd been shot, I still wouldn't have admitted to almost getting my balls shot off during my first assignment. Especially to a fifteen-year-old I was trying to impress. I wasn't allowed to talk about it, anyway."

"Yeah, well back then I wasn't big into talking much, either."

"I gathered as much. I tried confiding in you, hoping to get you to talk. Like the time I told you Avery was my father figure."

"You were trying to make me feel better about Avery dumping me and the others with you and Andrea. If there was one thing I was good at, I excelled when it came to reading people." Jason's gut clenched with the memories, and the dark poured in.

"There's something you should know," Harrison said. "Avery did almost the same thing for me. Rescued me from a drunken stepfather. You had questions back then I couldn't answer."

"Lots of them."

"I can now. When Avery left to visit his sick wife, you must have wondered where he went, what would happen to you and the others if something happened, but you never asked. Didn't you wonder why Avery did what he did for you? I didn't need to hear the questions to know you had them. Andrea and I couldn't have answered most, even if you'd have asked. Only Avery could."

"I didn't have to ask to get answers. Avery was a white knight."

"True—you were a very sharp kid. So what happened?"

Jason laughed and threw a bottle cap at his friend. "I know that you're trying to distract me, so I guess I haven't gotten too dense."

Harrison chuckled. "All those questions. Did Avery ever get a chance to set you straight, before...?"

"Yup, as a matter of fact he did, years later."

Harrison nodded. "Good, because when I told you Avery would probably fill you in, I didn't think it would take so long for him to get around to telling the details about what happened to me that night."

"I wondered where he disappeared to when we stayed with you, that's all."

"I figured I owed you some sort of explanation."

"I appreciated you telling me about Sarah, how sick she was."

"Avery had Emily with him at the hospital that night, making arrangements to get me out and bring his wife back from the hospital in Maryland."

"The explanation helped me understand his motives, why he took me in and adopted Kate, why he sent her to live at the farm in Maryland with Emily and his father-in-law during the last stages of his wife's illness. He knew the next year would be rough on Emily and Kate would ground her when he couldn't be with her."

Avery had tried to spend as much time as possible with his dying wife and the rest of them tried to be supportive, but Jason had been in high school and couldn't afford to get behind. At those times, he stayed with Harrison until Avery came back into town.

"Fate's funny in some ways. We were all good for each other." Emily was the best thing that ever happened to him. "It hadn't been all that long since my own mother had died of cancer and then my grandfather followed six months later. You know that's how I ended up in the system with Kincaid."

There, it was back. The black rage. The emotional change flowed over Jason. This conversation had just turned in the wrong direction fast.

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"And then with our sorry lot," Harrison reminded him, "and Emily."

Her name flipped the switch back. It was a palpable thing. "I just feel responsible for her."

Harrison resumed with sarcasm, "Well go tell that to someone who'll believe you. We all thought it was puppy love, and you'd both eventually grow out of it. When she got older, I thought for sure you'd both come to grips with your feelings. Then the bombing—" Harrison stopped, his jaw clenched. He loosened his neck, twisting his head and shoulders. "Well, hell, everyone knows how you both feel, except you two, you and Emily. You aren't fooling anyone but yourselves.

"Drop it."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of. It's not like she's really your sister, Jason. She never was. You barely even lived with her."

He thought about Harrison's words carefully, and then he took a long, cool chug. "It's not that. Let me handle Emily."

He'd felt unworthy of her. Until he slew his demons, he couldn't move on. It shamed him to think he'd betrayed her father's trust. Making love with Emily the weekend before the bombing seemed like a betrayal he would never be able to fix. Worse yet? What would Avery think of him leaving her after the bombing? He would have understood his reasons. He was doing it for her own good—to keep her safe. But not telling her? He wouldn't have approved.

And this? Jason wasn't sure how Avery would have felt about him dragging Emily into all this. Emily needed closure, too. The whole family did. He chugged the rest of his beer, wiping his hand across his mouth, and tossed the bottle into the trash.

He picked up the binoculars, then put them back down, took a handful of nuts from the dish on the table, and walked to the railing, tossing the nuts in his mouth. He glared out to sea and watched the yacht from a distance as it bobbed on the sparkling crystal-capped waves. He didn't have to look at his watch to know how much longer it would be before they met. He hungered for her like a starving man.

It would be a long eighty-six minutes.

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When the skiff finally dropped Emily and Mosel off at the dock, Jason tormented himself by watching them from his vantage point. Mosel jumped out to tie up and help Emily as she stepped into his waiting arms.

Jason growled under his breath. That dark inner demon he'd fought all his life was surfacing.

Then Mosel took her face in his hands and tilted her chin up for another opportunity to brush a friendly kiss across her mouth, skimming his thumb along her jaw and down her neck.

God, what if they completed the mission successfully so he had a free shot at a real life with Emily, and he lost it to Mosel? Wouldn't that just be peachy?

Jason dropped the binoculars and walked out.

Chapter Fourteen

Emily vaguely acknowledged a mental, *Mmm, not a bad kisser*. *Not bad at all!* She found it very disturbing that her overall response to Mosel wasn't the same sexual indifference she'd experienced with every other male since Jason. With him the emotional and the physical merged, weaving, blending, peaking, and exploding like nothing ever had before or since.

Why now? Why of all people, Mosel? Her reaction to him was dangerous under the circumstances. She had to keep her head straight. Although she might refuse to allow herself to react to him emotionally, finding out she wasn't immune to him, physically anyway, took her completely by surprise.

And there was the crux. She feared him on a certain level, and her body responded to him on another. The response was a first after all these years. The damn blond god sexually aroused her with his scent and with the feel of his muscles tensing beneath her fingers. The sensation of lips dragging against hers and the taste of him made her crazy. And then, there was always her body's response to the press of his long, hard length between her thighs. She had little control over her reactions, and her good sense abandoned her. Her knees went weak with each stroke of his tongue against hers, with every brush of his fingers over her nipples. She should have stopped him, but she didn't want to. It felt too good to feel.

He knew just how to handle her, too, going slow, then moving in before she could change her mind, stimulating all the erotic desires she'd suppressed for so long. She wondered if all she'd needed to get past her hang-up over Jason was a very hot guy with all the right moves. Jason warned her he was dangerous, but she'd never believed he could have affected her this way.

It astounded her how a man who may have been involved with her father's murder, who should have completely repulsed her on so many different levels, was irresistible and physically desirable to her.

She shuddered. Her own response disgusted her.

Who knew this subversive part of her nature existed? Why was her sexuality manifesting itself now, of all times? Maybe it was the climate or the locale. Recently, her skin felt too tight for her body. Her breasts ached and her nipples stayed contracted with need most of the time. Maybe it was having two sexy men working on her hormones daily. At any rate, her libido apparently chose now to peak. As a result, she knew she was radiating some sort of pheromones, because even the old man in her building started flirting with her.

A need for something, something that frightened her, filled her to her core.

Careful to keep this moment friendly and light, she tried to keep the kiss to a peck, but Mosel reached for her and pulled her back into him. His kiss made her melt, his touch drove her mad. Emily wanted to let go, to let him drag her off and fill the emptiness between her thighs. Then she thought of the team watching, Jason reacting to her clutch with Mosel.

Heat spread like a plague through her insides, building and rising to the surface. The idea of the men watching, of Jason seeing another man touch her, kiss her—well, wasn't she a naughty girl getting off on being a little exhibitionist.

With a sheer force of will, she rolled out of Mosel's arms, shifted quickly out of his reach, and flashed him a smile. "I'll meet you here, back at the dock, in four hours for dinner and that evening cruise you promised." Her breathing was labored, nerves and arousal. Her body demanded more contact, but she needed to put space between them to think straight. Her rendezvous with Jason was set to coincide with Mosel's business meeting this afternoon. While the team followed Mosel, she and Jason could finalize the exchange and the Charity Ball details.

Mosel's eyes narrowed on her, and he shrugged to loosen his shoulders. His suspicious glare turned into a leer. "The cruise won't be the only thing I promised. Don't be late. I've been patient long enough."

The panic rose again. Emily glanced away to keep Mosel from reading the fear in her eyes. She turned, hurrying off in the direction of the street, hoping to flag down a passing cab. Luckily, one was dropping off a passenger right in front of her at the end of the dock. She hopped into it before anyone else could get in, directing the driver to her apartment and wondering about the taxi's previous passenger. Why was the man going down to the dock now? Curiosity compelled her to look back. She watched out the back window of the taxi as Mosel and the man greeted each other with the friendly French greeting, a kiss to both cheeks.

Ah, the meeting.

There was something familiar about him. But what? Where could she have seen him before? The slightly built, swarthy-looking man may have been Middle Eastern, but that would be no surprise. Mosel was reportedly dealing arms all over the world. Still, she thought she recognized this one from somewhere.

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Monte Carlo charmed her. She loved the historical nature of the city as well as the modern aspects interwoven in the buildings, new and old, blending flamboyant and classical architecture. Her apartment building was archaic with marble floors and intricately carved Italian marble banisters. The atmosphere made her feel exotic, sexual, and romantic.

She examined the Baroque building in the heart of this tropical Mediterranean city and smiled with admiration. Monsieur Demaret, her retired neighbor, was at his regular position as building sentry. *"Bon jour, monsieur, how are you today?"*

"Excellent, and you, mademoiselle?"

"Wonderful, thank you." She nodded and patted the dog's head. "Hi, Duke, how are you doing?" Emily rubbed the Labrador's head as she removed her hand from the quick handshake with Monsieur Demaret. The dog nuzzled her in return.

She made her getaway to the elevator with a quick good-bye before he could trap her into a long conversation.

The apartment joined the long list of lies. It was only a prop, a temporary stop to successfully completing a task. The agency considered her the most competent and best-equipped agent to handle this assignment, but she doubted that. In any event, she kept few personal belongings here to minimize her losses, knowing she would be abandoning them when she made her escape. Another six months here, and she could have turned the apartment into a replica of the one she lived in back home. Essentially, it looked like she'd made herself at home, but to anyone who knew anything of her or her personality, certain essential items were missing. Personal touches.

Standing on the balcony in this fantastic locale, looking at her reflection in the ornately carved bedroom mirror, made her question the new sensual aspect of her personality.

Working with Jason again, especially in this capacity, felt weird. They seldom bumped into each other socially back home. The parties she attended because of her grandfather's legacy were also sometimes hosted by charities seeking Jason's wealth. They often drew invitations to the same fundraisers.

His dates were always elegant foreign women of impeccable taste and bearing. They made her feel a little frumpy, with her unruly curly hair and the glasses she hid behind. She and Jason had never renewed the intimacy they once shared, not as friends or lovers, but they had managed to maintain an air of civility, a civility she sometimes resented.

She lost her self-confidence and her self-esteem the same night she lost her virginity. She held a deep bitterness towards him for the way he left her after her father's death. Her attitude, her only defense mechanism, left the relationship between them strained. Despite knowing it was her own fault, she couldn't stop the childish thought. *He started it.*

Life and work were easier to focus on than facing the world without Jason and her father. Her heart beat with anticipation. She looked at her watch. *Ten minutes more until she would meet Jason*.

She changed clothes, checked her email, and repacked the bag she would take with her on the yacht. Tonight, her needs would be different.

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Jason watched Emily sneak down the outside backstairs and manage her way through the small alley between the old buildings. He devoured her with his gaze as she crept through the alley toward him. There were plenty of bushes for cover, but she stopped to sniff some damn local flora. Hell, she wasn't being careful. She couldn't afford to be lulled into a relaxed state under the circumstances.

When she made her way to the spot where she'd agreed to meet him, he decided to teach her a lesson. Without letting her know he was there, he took her from behind, hauled her up against him, turned, and pressed her against a small scraggly tree. He wanted to thrash her for her carelessness, but instead he bent low to kiss her, mumbling something about a couple looking out their window.

He'd made that part up, the part about the couple watching.

Harrison's earlier suggestion was haunting him as she melted against him. *Tell her how you feel*. He couldn't, not yet. But after endless hours torturing himself watching her with Mosel, he had to mark her with his own scent—he had to taste her. He'd been going crazy with jealousy and concern all damn day. Mosel's hands had been skimming over her, touching and caressing her the way only he should. So Jason did the only thing he could think of. He cupped her face in his hands and marked her with his kiss. He stamped it on her, branded his need into her—she was his.

He wished it was that easy. Alley or not, there were people in the area. He took his hand off her ass and slid it to her waist, but he didn't loosen his hold on her. His cock still pressed against her belly.

Fortunately, he had the presence of mind to take a breath before he lost all control. It was difficult since she wasn't objecting. Where Emily was concerned, he never felt sure he could manage his feelings or his desires and she was too damn responsive to him. With her, he skirted the edge of control, unable to quite grab hold when she was around.

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"Jason!" She was shocked, first by his appearance and then by the physical assault of her mouth. She couldn't remember a time when she'd been commandeered like that, but she wanted to try it again.

God, the man's mouth is lethal. It had been a long time since he'd really kissed her. What was he saying to her? Someone watching? Why? Who cares?

Electrical charges plunged through her body. She was lost. The warmth spread between her legs where his thick erection pressed into her. That easily, she was ready for him. She returned the kiss but tried to shake off the spell he wove with his tongue before he lifted his mouth from hers. Her ears were still ringing, making her feel off balance. Thank goodness he didn't release his hold on her because her knees were shaky and her legs felt like overcooked pasta. *This is what's missing with every other man.* Not only the instant explosive desire, but the loss of time and place. She didn't care about anything the minute their bodies touched, but her body wouldn't stop trembling.

"Are you chilled? Oh, shit, that reminds me. What were you thinking wearing that getup with Mosel? Where'd that flimsy cover thing get to?"

"What?" The interrogation snapped her back to reality. She straightened her back. "I don't know what you're talking about. It was perfectly beautiful out on the water today—"

"The lack of clothes, the getup, no cover-up thingy. You know. The one I bought for you? Get it?"

She placed her hands on her hips. "I'm supposed to be seducing him, and you want me covered up in what? A burka, I suppose?"

There was a strange expression on his face, as if a burka might not be such a bad idea. "You do know you're not expected to... Hell, you don't have to fuck him! You're not supposed to *really* seduce him. You do know that don't you?

"Excuse me, of course I know that. But what if I have to?"

"You won't."

"I might."

"You won't." The growl was threatening. "Mosel's notorious. He's dangerous on so many levels I can't explain. You have to follow my directions explicitly, and if you get in too deep, abort the mission. I'll get you out. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried." She frowned at him, frustrated. "Mosel isn't the problem. You are. You keep interfering. How am I going to infatuate him if you don't let me?"

The look on his face said he was contemplating something new.

"What?" she asked, but he didn't explain. He just looked at her, and despite her anger, maybe more so because of it, she kept shivering as he ran his hands up and down her arms. She could smell the leather of his jacket, and his aftershave smelled like comfort and security to her.

She decided to take the initiative to distance herself and gather some self-control. "What's the plan for the Charity Ball?"

Suddenly, he looked like he'd come upon a revelation.

"What's that look, Jason?"

"Don't worry. When you meet me, just follow my lead. No matter what, remember we are madly infatuated with one another, spontaneous attraction, you know. Can you handle that?"

"Well, acting that out might be a stretch. After all, I probably know you too well to be infatuated!"

The old sarcasm wasn't foreign to either of them.

"Fine, fine, just be a smart ass," Jason snapped back, and then he chuckled, apparently amused with her comeback.

It showed a crack in the ice wall they'd allow to form between them. The teasing camaraderie was the part of the old relationship she missed the most. She had to believe even after all this time, no one knew him the way she did.

"Ah, Jason, you may as well be prepared. I'm going back out on the yacht with him tonight." She waited for the explosion she knew would come.

His eyes narrowed and the lightness in his expression darkened. He stared at her as if he'd been slapped. "You shouldn't have set up anything tonight without checking with me first."

"I couldn't help it—"

"You should have made an excuse."

"I-I couldn't-"

"Yes, you could! You didn't want to." They both knew what Mosel had in mind, and the position she'd put herself in. Furious was a mild term for the emotion she sensed rising inside him.

"I can handle this—"

"Oh, right. Like you handled him this afternoon? It looked like he was doing all the handling." He grabbed her arm and jerked her

against him. He snarled. "Just what do you think is going to happen? That he's going to let you tease him like you did all day and get away with a good night kiss? He's a damn player, an arms dealer, for Christ's sake. This isn't some college boy. He's going to expect to fuck you!"

He took her by both of her shoulders, with his fingers digging into her flesh. He shook her, his voice rising, sounding slightly panicked. "How do you plan to get out of this? What the hell were you thinking?"

"Jason, stop."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to rescue you out there. It's not like I can just drop in unannounced." And he stopped suddenly, realization taking hold. He quieted and released his grip on her as if he'd been burned. "You...?" He turned away from her, unable to look at her as he choked out the rest of his thought. "You're prepared to go through with it, aren't you?"

She glared at him, never losing eye contact. What was she planning, really? "What do I have to lose? An attractive man wants me, the one I'm supposed to be seducing. Well, it worked."

He released her with a push. He sounded disgusted when he asked, "You were never planning to stop, were you?"

His voice was low, almost a growl. He turned and sneered at her as if revolted by her very presence. "You'd go that far?"

"If it would seal the deal. Yes. Wouldn't you?" She snapped back and lifted her chin in the air. "Haven't you?"

He flinched. She could see the pain her answer caused him. He looked like he had been gut punched.

His voice turned to a soft whisper. "This is different."

She softened, realizing his predicament. "I'm not planning on going through with it. I'm not counting on it being necessary. I think I can maneuver my way through this. Well, I hope I can at least for tonight." "By God, I hope you're right, because I'm not sure I can leave you with him tonight. Not under the circumstances. Not after what I've been watching all day."

She watched his jaw clench when she responded. "It's not up to you anymore. The plan's underway, and we'll have to play out our hands—win, lose, or draw. That's the deal."

"He's not prepared to take no for an answer," Jason warned.

"I understand. But what he finds intriguing about me is more than just your interest in me. I think he's fascinated that I can find him attractive and still control my sexual urges where he's concerned. My impulses are there, and I let him know that. I'm just not ready to go through with them like every other woman he encounters. My guess is not many women have ever resisted him."

Jason lifted her chin and stared deep in her eyes. "Just make sure you're one of the ones who can."

Guilt made her glance away.

"Hell, you're attracted to him, aren't you?"

"Oh, my God. What did you expect?" Emily snipped at him. "He's charming and sexy, and I'm playing this part. To be perfectly honest, I don't understand my feelings, and certainly not these mixed signals from you."

Jason let out a long sigh. "This wasn't supposed to get so complicated."

"No?"

"I knew he'd have a passing interest in you because of your grandfather. I hoped he'd be interested enough to want to pursue you when he gets back in DC. I wasn't expecting this full-blown assault or your interest."

"Dammit, I'm not interested. Attraction and interest are two separate things. Get real. You should know that better than anyone. Besides, how could you even suggest such a thing? He could have been involved with my father's death." "Sorry. I have to somehow get him to back off a little, for a while at least."

"Well, you do what you have to, and I'll do what I have to. For now, I can only go with the cards I've been dealt."

"Okay, try to play it a little cooler, at least until I figure out what our next move should be. Your father would kill me—"

Emily's patience snapped, poking him in the chest, punctuating each word with her finger. "Don't bring up my father!"

"Emily?" Jason held his breath and held her hands, as if afraid of what her answer would be. "Promise?"

"I think you're wrong about playing it cooler." She lifted her brow. All he had to do was tell her he still had feelings for her. "If your reasons are all about my father, then it doesn't matter who I sleep with." All he had to say was don't do it.

"Jesus! Emily, please!"

"I don't know. You go back to watching again. If I need you, I'll let you know."

If he thought sitting through Mosel's moves earlier was bad, he better gear himself up for the full-blown assault. If he really cared about her, tonight's surveillance would be agony for him. He may as well get used to this. If he didn't want her, someone else would, and from now on she would take what she wanted.

Chapter Fifteen

Had Mosel been involved in some way with the bombing? She waited on the dock, her nerves getting the better of her.

Then she saw him wave. The casual greeting and his broad, genuine smile sent her stomach into a quick flip. Her anxiety about being alone with him jacked up a notch. His white teeth were contrasted against his tan face, his khaki shorts clung to his thick thighs, and the thin black T-shirt that clung tight like tissue paper over his massive chest draped loosely over his narrow waist. The familiar liquid heat flowed like lava through her bloodstream, heating her body, settling between her thighs.

Emily looked back up at his face. He was checking her out, too, and from what she could see, neither of them appeared disappointed with their assessments. He tossed the heavy stern line over the post on the dock and did the same with the bowline, securing the small watercraft to the dock.

He took her overnight bag from her and swung it down into the skiff. Next, he reached up for her, both arms extended. She was forced to drop into his grasp. When he lifted her into the small boat, he dragged her body down the length of his. She felt the hard bulge of his erection enlarge between her legs as her breasts pressed against his chest, her nipples pebbling. Without allowing her feet to touch down, he balanced her there and leaned down for the kiss they'd both anticipated since the wave on the dock.

His tongue sought hers, driving into her mouth with an aggressive approach. What he wanted he took. The exhibitionist in her rose to the surface. She could almost hear Jason cursing, and she bet the rest of the team was groaning with their hands on their crotches about now. Let them watch. It was turning her on.

She exhaled, surrendering to the moment—entwining her tongue with his, nipping his bottom lip. For now he made love to her mouth without touching her elsewhere. Her breasts pressed against his chest, needing the friction. Apparently he was satisfied with just holding her even though her body wanted more.

Was he trying to confuse her? It was working. He had set her senses off-kilter and she had to pull back. He'd come alone, thank goodness, and the skiff would need piloting. So, to her relief, this pleasant exchange would have to end.

One of them would have to break this lip-lock so he could captain the skiff out to the yacht waiting in the harbor. Yet, neither seemed to be in a big hurry to separate. They could either stay here all night kissing, or else... Emily had no problem with the kissing, but she was a bit worried about the *or else* part.

He tasted great and smelled even better. She was on overload already, and her pulse picked up a beat. She wondered if her earlier encounter with Jason left behind residual effects and had her primed for more.

She waited and let Mosel break the kiss first, allowing him the satisfaction of believing she had lost control. The absence of his mouth on hers left a hungry need on her lips. She wondered about her response. The kiss left her breathless and aroused.

"Sorry. I'll try to hold off until we're at least settled on the yacht," he said. Holding her face in his hands, he kissed her mouth again for good measure, nibbled her ear, and whispered hoarsely, "I want more of you."

And Emily didn't doubt him. Her own voice was throaty with desire. "I suggest we hold off on all this until after dinner, at least. It seems we lose control when we touch." Lately that wasn't an exaggeration. "And you promised me food. I didn't have lunch, remember?"

She watched his smile grow. It was a slow, simmering shock to her senses. When his smile hit his eyes, he was breathtaking—not the iceman beneath the surface she'd been observing up until now.

"I promised to feed you, and I will."

Emily felt the perspiration bead on her upper lip. She ran her tongue over it. Mosel's expression went dark—predatory.

"Don't. Do. Not. Do that. Or we won't make it to the yacht, I promise you. And, you will miss out on the best French green peppered filet mignon in the world." Mosel kissed the ends of his fingers for emphasis.

"Okay, my mouth is watering now." She did lick her lips.

"And so is mine." He bent in to grab another kiss, but she placed a hand over his mouth and raised an eyebrow in warning. "If you even try to assault me again before I'm fed, I'll have to restrain you."

Mosel actually laughed out loud. She liked the sound of it. It sounded a bit rusty, but she appreciated it better for that.

"Go on then, let's get underway. Is there anything I can do to help?" Emily asked. Years of experience boating back home made her an expert on the water. She knew there wasn't much to maneuvering the small watercraft until they reached the bigger vessel.

Mosel shook his head and motioned her to join him. She went forward and sat next to him as they headed out of the harbor.

Five minutes later, she tossed a line around the ladder of the yacht moored in the outer harbor, as Mosel turned off the skiff's engine. She was nervously trying to figure out how she would keep the events from escalating tonight. The last thing she needed was to complicate everything by ending up in his bed, tempting though it might be. Staying out of it wouldn't be easy, especially since celibacy had her body protesting even while her mind kept trying to stay on task.

He was after all, an illegal arms dealer working with terrorists. He was also probably responsible for innocent lives being in jeopardy.

He may even have had something to do with Dad's death.

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She'd have to keep chanting this mantra to remind her libido why she shouldn't be attracted to him. Then there was always the biggest reason—Jason. He still set the bar pretty high where her feelings were concerned. Even if he didn't want her, the thought of having sex with Mosel on this assignment, with Jason looking over her shoulder, was just damn arousing. Maybe it was her way of thumbing her nose at Jason?

Sexually stimulating? Yes. Out of the question? Hmmm. Why?

If she was honest with herself, it felt very naughty having Mosel touching her while Jason watched. The idea turned her on. She imagined Jason's eyes taking in every little detail. She imagined how needy his hard, hot body had become as he watched her slide against Mosel.

That is just weird! Was she turning into a little exhibitionist? Tease?

"Watch your step, Emily."

A couple of Mosel's regular crew greeted them, helping her aboard and putting her more at ease. But as soon as they sat down to dine, Mosel informed her the staff was leaving after they reached their destination. "We'll have the yacht to ourselves until morning."

"Oh." Her heart dropped to her stomach, and her voice threatened to falter. She'd told Jason she would do this if she had to, but she wasn't sure she really could. Part of her wanted to, part of her didn't. "W-where are we headed?"

Emily wondered if Jason was watching when they cleared the harbor.

"Actually, not very far, but the cove where we're headed is very private and exquisite this time of year. We'll be able to view the castle fireworks and celebration tonight from there without the noise and crowds of all the other boats." He handed her a drink.

"Oh, I didn't know there was a celebration scheduled. How nice." She'd always loved fireworks, especially when viewed from the water. With the warm Mediterranean breeze and the spectacular landscape, she eagerly anticipated the exotic event despite her misgivings.

She relaxed as she drank her champagne. Waiting for the chef to announce dinner, they munched on the *pâté foie gras* spread over thinly sliced pieces of toasted French baguettes. Everything was almost perfect, but she reminded herself this was a mission and the image was surreal.

The scenery on the way to their private cove, rocky hills covered in city lights reflecting over the water, lulled her easily into her guise. The breathtaking view as the sun sank low on the horizon had Emily falling in love with the country. The climate was temperate, and the landscapes magnificent.

Satisfying, feminine pleasure overwhelmed her, knowing this sexy man couldn't keep his hands off her. Feeling gorgeous was easy when a man known for his taste in beautiful women kept telling you he found you irresistible and then worked diligently to prove it.

Fed and satisfied, Emily relaxed, full with the aftereffects of food, alcohol, and the setting sun. When the crew left with the chef, she didn't get the panicky, rolling nervous stomach she'd expected. The champagne had done its job.

As the crew departed, enthusiastic about their night off, they laughed and waved to Mosel with a promise to return the following morning with hangovers. Then, the skiff pulled away. The sound of her heart thudding in her ears grew loud enough to drown out the skiff's motor as it moved farther away from the yacht. The lights off its bow grew dimmer until they were completely out of sight.

She had a million questions, but she figured he'd be careful how far he pushed an employee as well-known as she was in her field, and with a socially prominent name in charitable circles, to boot. How much would he risk? He wouldn't want to damage his position with her old family friends—her grandfather's friends. Or, maybe he wouldn't care? Maybe she was safe.

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She took a good look at the man and laughed at herself. Who was she kidding?

What happened tonight between them would completely depend on how far she took it. It would be her call. His reputation with women corroborated his seductive talents, and she'd already experienced enough to know she was interested. Tonight he'd encourage her, try to persuade her, and, given the circumstances, he'd certainly try to seduce her. Finally, should the evening progress as he intended, he'd accommodate what he believed to be her wishes. No more, no less. He'd never have to press himself on any woman. He'd fill her needs and stop there.

Emily held all the control—now that she'd lost it.

He downed the last bit of champagne in his glass, and she clearly recognized his intentions. The problem was she still wasn't sure about hers.

She wore no bra under the flimsy floral silk dress she chose to tempt him. Her breasts, high, full, and one of her best assets, attracted his attention from the minute he'd spotted her on the pier. As the night air drifted across her arms, blowing up her skirt across her naked bottom and tickling her skin, her nipples reacted. Jutting prominently through the thin material, they immediately caught Mosel's interest.

As if mesmerized by the sight, his hand lifted and brushed across one erect nipple. Emily couldn't move. Her feet were welded to the spot on the deck.

He said nothing for a moment, looked as if he couldn't find just the right words to express himself. As he watched, fascinated, her nipple tightened further under his scrutiny. Emily's eyes widened with shock.

"Ah, a bud in the center of a delicate flower. You are so very beautiful. So young." He didn't look at her face as his hand softly covered her breast. He focused on his thumb, gently rubbing her nipple, unimpeded. She inhaled sharply at the sensation, watching the hand producing the fire consuming her to the core. Her inner muscles clenched with desire, and she hated her body for its betrayal, its lack of control.

He cocked his head, questioning. "What do you have on under this stunning sheer dress? It's been driving me crazy all evening. It looks like there is nothing—nothing to stop me from this." He stepped forward, not giving her time to respond, and cupped her bottom in his large hand. His one hand slipped down the outside of her dress, then under and up as he lifted her into his blatant erection, proving the truth of his words.

The long fingers of one hand splayed across the bare skin of her buttocks, dropping smoothly between her legs, searching, seeking. The thong underwear didn't provide much protection. His free hand roamed to the thin straps holding the top of her dress up. He untied them and let them fall away. All it took was a finger beneath the top of the dress to loosen it, and then he brought his mouth down to the swell of her breast. He released his belt, and she heard the zipper. His tongue traced the upper curve of her breast and lowered deep into her cleavage, searching until he trapped her nipple between his lips and sucked. Groaning as the pleasure ripped through her, Emily leaned into him. He ground his released erection against the apex of her thighs, keeping his lower body pressed tightly to hers. He lifted his head to take her lips, driving his tongue deeper into her mouth.

She pulled away to take a deep breath. Liquid poured from her sex.

Jason was watching.

She tried to hold the top of her dress up and pulled her bottom away from Mosel's probing fingers. His one hand still played with her nipple, and his other delved deep between her cheeks until she managed to extricate herself from his grasp.

"You're wet, ready for me already." He pulled her back against him.

"Wait, I, I can't breathe." She held the top of her dress up with both hands, but he kept his hands on her ass and his huge cock pressed firmly between her legs, not releasing his hold on her.

Mosel's expression softened, but his voice sounded deep, rough. "I'm sorry. You looked so beautiful in the light coming off the water. I could see the silhouette of your body through the dress, and the temptation to touch, to taste, overwhelmed me."

He sniffed his trembling fingers, the ones he had buried inside her folds moments before. "You smell delicious." He licked the moisture from his fingers and groaned. "Let me kiss you, taste you, bring you to orgasm with my mouth."

Emily let her gaze drop and flushed. She licked her parched lips, trying to drag moisture into her mouth, air to her lungs. Her internal temperature stoked up to critical, and she understood why Jason considered this man dangerous. Because, dammit, she wanted him to taste her. All she could think about were the years she'd suffered seeing Jason with other women—the torture of imagining his hands on them, his mouth, his body inside them, bringing them to orgasm and not her.

A pulse beat inside the juncture between her legs, and the pressure building deep within her was one that Mosel could satisfy. She felt his need jerking against her mound, prodding her to allow him access, anxious for entrance. He needed satisfaction and so did she. It had been so long.

Something primal inside her wanted to accommodate him satisfy all his desires—satisfy the itch she knew he could deftly scratch. As his mouth traced down her abdomen, he lifted her skirt, exposing her hips to his view. He moved the skirt of the dress higher, crumbling the thin material and licking his way between her legs.

I'm going to stop this. I am. Soon. Oh, God. In a minute. One more minu...

His hand splayed under her hips, lifting her, giving him better access for his mouth. His tongue danced over her folds, and his teeth pulled at the string of her thong, creating more tension. She placed her hands on either side of his head to move him away, but instead lifted to his lips as his tongue slipped inside her.

Oh, yes. Oh, no. Oh hell, she was coming, and she'd be damned if she could stop herself now. Mosel was devouring her like a gournet meal and making it sound that way, too. He moaned and groaned and encouraged her every response, bringing on the second climax and her scream of satisfaction as he tweaked her nipple and drove his tongue deep. She shuddered and the spasms inside her didn't stop even when he stopped licking the nub at the top of her entrance.

Jason will be going nuts if he's watching. The thought had more juice gushing from between her folds.

"You're so hot, so wet. I need to be inside you."

Mosel kissed his way back to her mouth, and she tasted herself on his tongue. He nuzzled her neck, whispering a concoction of French and German sweet nothings in her ear. "You taste as sweet as you are. So good. You smell so feminine, so sexy." He took her hand and placed it on his cock. "See what you do to me. Feel how much I want you. I can't think straight."

She loved and hated her response. But more than anything, she loved discovering the power she could wield over a man with her body, turning this strong, virile man into a diminished, desperate mortal who desired what she could provide. Only she could bring him immediate satisfaction, and for now, that heady feeling, knowing she could reduce him to this quivering mass of rock hard need, intrigued her.

She smelled the scent of her arousal in the air, the atmosphere wrought with sexual tension.

"Emily, I want you." He slipped two fingers inside her, waiting for her response.

She couldn't. Not that. All she could see in her mind was the image of Jason looming over her with his dark hair and blue eyes boring into hers as he stretched her and plunged inside her for the first

time. The scene morphed into the moment Jason turned away and left, and the next scene was Jason with a blonde, a redhead, a brunette. One, then another guy from work, straining and panting out their own orgasms as she collapsed unsatisfied. No more, no more.

Then she heard the foil of the condom rip.

The hell with them all. This wasn't about Jason, or Mosel, or the two other selfish bastards she'd slept with, tonight she needed this for her. *In for a penny*...

Mosel's cock poised at her entrance just as the fireworks exploded overhead. She glanced up for a brief moment and watched as a flare of light came toward the yacht, falling, falling...

And before Mosel thrust inside her, it hit the yacht.

Chapter Sixteen

Jason's gut clenched when he saw the explosion in the west cove. It had to be Mosel's yacht. That's where they were reported. A scary moment of déjà vu blasted through him. He kicked up the engine into high gear, searching the inner coves for signs of Mosel's vessel until he spotted the flames behind the rise of rock blocking the actual wreckage. He shut down the motor to listen.

He shook, the fear almost consuming him as he approached the burning debris. When he couldn't find any sign of Emily or Mosel on the larger remains of the wreckage, utter remorse and niggling hope battled for position in his mind.

She's a great swimmer. If she's conscious she'll be able to at least stay afloat for a while.

He checked his watch. How long had it been? *Not long*. He searched with the light. He encircled the wreckage in wider and wider loops. Hoping. Praying. Damn, he needed help. The team was on their way.

* * * *

When the yacht exploded, the impact blew their bodies apart and tossed them both overboard. Emily felt the force of the water knock the wind from her lungs as she hit. The light from the explosion directed her as she struggled to the surface. The yacht was in flames, what little there was left of it, and she didn't see Mosel anywhere as she frantically searched the surface. She dove under the water, hoping the fires above would provide enough light as she hunted for him. After a couple of dives, she desperately rescanned the surface. She caught sight of a mass drifting several feet from the burning debris. Emily worried how safe it would be to venture closer to the yacht, but she couldn't leave Mosel. He floated face up on a small piece of the deck.

Stroking smoothly, she reached him and noticed his breathing was shallow and irregular, and he was unresponsive to her voice. The responsibility to get them both away from the burning ship fell to her. Emily grabbed him beneath his arms and swam purposefully away from the wreckage.

He was too heavy. His shorts were wrapped around his legs. His clothes were dragging them down.

Emily gauged the distance to shore and figured it looked questionable in their present condition. She paused, felt the bump on the back of her head. Warm, wet, and sticky. Blood. She wasn't sure how much she'd lost, but she knew she couldn't afford blood loss and the strain of dragging Mosel too. Hell, were there sharks in this part of the Mediterranean? Where weren't there sharks?

Her dress had ripped off her with the impact of the explosion, but she still had on the cute sandals she bought earlier in town. It broke her heart to kick them free, but her life and Mosel's would depend on her strength and ability to get them to shore. She treaded water, holding him afloat as she struggled, removing his shorts and shoes to lighten the load. She used his shirt to hold him afloat.

If she hadn't been consumed with getting them to safety, she would have had time to wonder about what caused the explosion. Keeping herself focused, Emily instinctively stroked, stroked, stroked while she recalled the flash of the incoming blaze from the fireworks. An unexploded rocket couldn't be capable of that much damage, but she wasn't a munitions expert.

She kept swimming toward the coast. "Stay alive, Mosel." She hoped she'd have the strength to get them to shore. The rocks in the cove looked ominous with the waves breaking against them. Too bad he hadn't chosen a more hospitable spot to seduce her.

Damn, I know Jason and the team were supposed to be observing from somewhere. They've had plenty of time to find us, and that explosion should have been more effective than a dozen flares.

"Jason, Jason," she called, then cursed herself for forgetting about Mosel. Thankfully, he couldn't hear her calling for Jason. The man remained unconscious. Her secret was still safe.

Her arms ached and her lungs burned. Just when she thought she couldn't stay afloat a minute longer, she thought she heard the hum of an outboard motor somewhere off in the black distance. It sounded like it was coming closer, or maybe it was wishful thinking. Then she swore she heard her name being called.

"Emily, dammit, Emily, where are you?" It was Jason's voice, the panic in his tone obvious.

* * * *

"Here, Jason. We're over here."

She knew he couldn't hear her clearly enough yet, not over the engine and the distance. Not enough to determine where the sound had come from. When he turned off the engine, she should again.

He pointed the large probe light and slashed it through the dark repeatedly, covering every inch of water, and then he stopped on them.

"Don't move." He dropped the light and restarted the engine, blindly heading in her direction, slowly. Suddenly, the light hit the water again, and the boat came up alongside Emily.

He circled around to her and only then realized she held Mosel's unconscious body afloat. "Shit!" Jason reached down to grab her.

"Thanks, but would you mind taking him first?" Emily reminded him.

"Of course, you'd be concerned about him first."

Relieved of Mosel's weight, she inhaled, catching her breath.

Jason had Mosel half in the boat, when he stopped. "What the hell?" Mosel was naked from the waist down. Jason roughly threw the unconscious man's body into the boat and glared at Emily as he reached down to help her up to safety.

Jason's lips were moving, but no sound escaped. As her body emerged from the water, she felt the waves of anger roll off him when he saw what she wasn't wearing. She assumed her intact t-back was little consolation for her otherwise naked state.

She saw the moment understanding hit Jason and anger roiled. "You better have a damn good explanation." His eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. Every muscle in his body was taut with tension, anger. He was furious.

She wasn't sure what to do first, cover herself or Mosel. Thank goodness Jason saved her from having to make too many decisions. While she tried to catch her breath and spit water out at the same time, he ripped his own shirt off and threw it at her.

"Put that on." He wouldn't look at her.

She put it on quickly and crawled to Mosel, turned him over, and started administering CPR. It wasn't long before he coughed up seawater and started breathing regularly. The bump on his head would have him confused for a while. None of the scrapes and bruises looked too serious.

* * * *

Jason glanced over his shoulder at her efforts. A brief thought flitted in and out of his head before he growled at her. "That's not necessary, because if he survives, I'll have to kill him, anyway."

He picked up the radio and directed the team to their location. He needed help. But first, he had to find pants or something for Mosel.

Jason rummaged through the hatch until he came up with a blanket that he could throw over the bastard. He'd watched as Emily's

mouth covered the other man's, jealousy biting into his gut, and then he saw the blood. Hers. His knees went weak. Pulling himself together, he went for the first aid kit.

He couldn't let anything happen to her, no matter what.

Jason took out the first aid box, fussing about as he rummaged through it. He had the radio on, talking to Harrison while he applied pressure to the cut on her head. It was still bleeding, but not like it had been when the team arrived. As soon as Harrison boarded, she passed out.

A half hour later at the hospital, Emily was whisked away for Xrays. Jason decided to stay away from her at the clinic. Staying in character required a great deal of effort on his part, especially under the circumstances. He was torn between worry and wanting to kill her. There was no doubt, as soon as Mosel was well enough to stand, he was going to definitely kill him.

* * * *

The hospital sounds confirmed her location. Jason's accusing eyes still haunted her. She didn't care what he thought. *Nothing happened*. *Well, almost nothing happened*. And what if it had? He'd already thrown her away once. *Thank goodness the yacht blew up when it did*. His anger stabbed into her as if she could read his mind. She was too tired to argue with him over this tonight, and her head hurt like the dickens. She closed her eyes and let the blackness take over.

Emily woke up in time to see Jason present his charming, *yes I'm* as fantastic as I look smile to a very young attractive nurse, right before he looked up and met Emily's eyes watching his performance. The sneer he flashed at her was instantly there and gone. He'd concealed his true feelings so fast no one else would have noticed. But she caught it.

"Hey, there you are, fine, just as they said." Jason smiled broadly at her. "I'm relieved to see you're doing well." "How's Mosel?" Emily couldn't resist aggravating him. "He looked so pale when I last saw him."

He bent in to kiss her cheek. "Maybe that's because his ass was naked," he growled under his breath. Jason's brow furrowed and his lip curled just a little when he stepped back and answered civilly, "I just came from him. You'll be delighted to know he's doing fine. Just a bump on the head, a few scratches. Nothing a few days here won't fix."

"That's good," she commented and put her hand to her own head. "I guess we'll both have a headache for a day or two. Do they know what caused the explosion?"

"No." He shook his head. "The authorities are going to need some answers tomorrow." He dropped his voice so only she could hear the rest, "And so will I."

"I don't know what I can tell them or you." She decided that would be all she would say to his whispered challenge. "It looked like a rocket from the fireworks display came right at the boat and exploded."

His voice dropped to a quiet whisper again as he bent to her ear. "We all know that yacht wasn't blown up with a bottle rocket." He kissed her forehead and walked out as the nurse came in.

"You can go home in a couple of hours. Monsieur DesJardin has made the arrangements. Someone will stay with you overnight." The woman had the nerve to sound a little disappointed.

Emily guessed the man couldn't help himself. Jason was a chick magnet, always had been.

He'd acted jealous. Ha! She could only hope. Her lips curved, remembering his earlier expression, and something that felt a lot like satisfaction, maybe even revenge, spread through her.

How does it feel? Her smile broadened. She wanted to throw his jealousy back in his face. After all these years, despite her aching head and body, it was satisfying being on the other end of jealousy.

* * * *

Two days later, while she was getting dressed, Jason asked Emily, "Do you feel well enough to go in to work today?"

He'd been staying with her since the first night to keep an eye on her. She wasn't sure what excuse he was using for yesterday and today. The doctor said to watch her for twenty-four hours. She had a mild concussion, but it just felt like a bad headache.

"Sure, I have a few things I have to do anyway before I leave town."

"Good. Here, take your antibiotic. The cut on your head still looks inflamed."

He handed her the prescription bottle, opening for her. She took the pills he handed her, looking around for her glass of water.

"What's the rush with the chip? You can't make the exchange until the night of the Charity Ball."

"I'd like you to do the forgery at the complex while Mosel's still laid up. He's scheduled to get released tomorrow. Take those," he said, referring to the pills.

"Water?" she said.

"Oh, sorry, I'll get it." He went to the sink and filled a glass.

She took the glass when he handed it to her, then the two pills before she asked, "What's the deal with Mosel?"

"When he comes back I have a feeling he's not going to want you working much after that incident."

"But that's ridiculous—"

"Men are strange about endangering women they feel strongly about, and I'm betting he'll blame himself. Besides he's going to go all macho after he finds out you rescued his ass."

"Jason, you rescued his ass and mine."

"That's a technicality I won't let him forget, but in theory, you the petite woman—pulled him from the burning debris and treaded water keeping him afloat until help arrived. He'll be all over you."

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"Oh, please, I've always been a strong swimmer." She finished putting her shoes on and brushed through her hair. There was no hope for it, so she clipped it up.

"I know that and you know that, but I'll feel better if he isn't fawning all over you while you're trying to do this part of the job."

"Okay, then let's go. I'm ready."

"The explosion looks like it worked right into our hands. We may not get another clear shot at this after today."

"Do you have any idea what happened?" Emily was sure it was some sort of intentional explosive.

"No, but if it interrupted what I think was happening, then I'm grateful. Sorry I didn't think of it myself." He held up his hand to stop her from arguing. "And I don't want to talk about it." His jaw tensed and his fist clenched on the glass of water she handed back to him.

Time for a change of subject. There was no convincing him about what hadn't happened with Mosel. Hell, she hadn't convinced herself she would have stopped him if the yacht hadn't exploded. Guess she'd never know now if she would've done whatever was necessary to find her father's killer, even if it meant sleeping with an accomplice to his murder.

Jason helped her out the door and down the back steps.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Sure."

"I'll drive you to work."

"That's not—"

"Uh, yes it is. Doc said no driving for a week. Call me when you're ready to leave. I'll be watching the front, Harrison will be out back." He stopped and turned to her in the stairwell. "Emily, if anything, and I mean anything at all, seems suspicious, back off. Don't fuck with it. We have time. You can abort and reset the mission. Don't risk blowing the whole thing to get it done early. Okay?" His eyes were dark with concern, and she knew this was all business.

"I know how important getting that technology out of there is. I won't risk world annihilation. Don't worry, I'm really good at this part of my job."

He looked like he was trying to hold back his smile and lost the battle. "Oh, dammit, Em, I know you are!" The smile turned to a frown. "I'm not worried about that. I'm just worried about you."

"I'm worried about you, too. We'll be okay. Just you wait and see."

And she believed it, for now. She had to, she was about to steal a nanochip from one of the most notorious men in the world and keep the world safe from terrorists, for the time being, anyway.

Chapter Seventeen

Although she was feeling better, Jason said he wasn't going to let her out of his sight, not until after she'd switched out the chips. Mosel had returned to work, but he'd told her to stay home and relax, just as Jason suspected.

She'd finished forging the new chip. The copy was almost an exact replica of the original. Almost. Mosel called this morning and asked her to stop by to verify the authenticity of the chip for his buyer. It was the only chance she'd get to exchange the forgery for the original without anyone noticing. She couldn't wait for Jason.

He hadn't called this morning, but she'd see him tonight at the Charity Ball where she'd pass him the authentic chip. She'd checked in with Harrison, and since Jason had gone out to confirm the drop site tonight, she'd have to do this switch alone with just the team watching her back. Jason was going to be furious when he found out she was going in early.

* * * *

When she entered Mosel's office, a Middle Eastern man stood up to great her. Ah, El Marat had been the man in the taxi by the docks that day. Mosel introduced Emily, and she smiled as if she were clueless.

The butterflies in her stomach were doing aerial acrobatics as she led the men into the laboratory. She'd practiced the sleight of hand trick for years as a kid, and then again here, recently, until the dealers in the casino were oblivious to her tactic. She could switch out a man's jockey shorts while he was still wearing them she was so good at this. This was so going to work. She unlocked the vault, and started the show.

Emily smiled and charmed the men as she worked. *Ah*, *Daddy*, *this one's for you*.

Twenty minutes, a few pats on the back, several handshakes, and a hug from Mosel brought the meeting to a close. Her butterflies had settled and the nanochip was concealed on her body where it would stay until she turned it over to Jason tonight.

"Do you need a ride home?" Mosel had been distant since the accident.

"No, I have a car picking me up."

"DesJardin, again?"

Emily shook her head. "He saved us, don't say his name like that." She turned her smile on Mosel and said, "No, it's just a driver, waiting."

"Emily, thank you for staying out there with me, for keeping me afloat until help came."

She walked over to him and hugged him. "What else was I to do? Let you drown? Never." She smiled up at him and studied his face. No, if I find out you were involved with my father's death, I want you staring into my eyes when I take you out.

She cupped his cheek, shaking her head. "I'll see you tonight."

"Tell DesJardin he has my gratitude, but I will still expect a dance with you." He winked. "I'm not giving up so easily, *chérie*."

* * * *

Back at her apartment, Emily had time to think about her assignment here while she prepared for the Ball. After weeks of being pursued by the two hottest men she'd ever encountered, she couldn't believe she was more sexually frustrated than ever and as equally confused about what she wanted. Years of hanging out with nerds had negatively affected her daily routine and her self-image. Until recently, she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt like a sexy woman. Now she couldn't seem to keep men from fawning all over her. What was with those deep, sexy looks old El Marat kept giving her today, anyway? *Yeck*!

She'd always kept her ponytail tight to control her unruly hair. Mainly, just keeping it out of her face was a constant challenge. Makeup? Who needed it in the college computer facility? The focus in the computer lab was nanotechnology. The guys only checked out digitized equipment. Stylish clothing was optional. Emily figured her fellow geeks wouldn't notice if she showed up to work stark naked.

Immersed completely in the technology, until recently she'd walked the road to geekdom along with her fellow coworkers. For three years, she'd buried herself in it. Work never hurt her. Losing people did.

She'd put those thoughts aside. Tonight was going to be the last step before the final act in their plan, the one they'd all been working toward. Her sister, Kate, and Jorge, her best friend, were enjoying a European vacation before joining her here in Monte Carlo. It would be good to spend time with the two of them tonight—be with them again after so long. Emily recruited them into visiting while she worked on her project here, so Kate would have an opportunity to take some small part with the outcome of her mission.

Kate and Jorge maintained a relationship that looked a lot like a blooming romance. What must have caused years of sexual tension had suddenly blossomed into more—she was all too familiar with that story herself. Facebook kept them in touch, but it had been at least a year since she'd seen them.

Jason would also be showing up sometime tonight so she could complete their assignment.

She walked through the apartment. There were traces of her everywhere already, in the plants she had added and the pictures she scattered on desks, bookcases and shelves. She would miss all of this after tomorrow. Her suitcase and backpack were packed by the front door as if for a short excursion. The story was that she would be traveling with her friends from America for a week, when in fact, she wouldn't be returning here at all.

The night breeze rustled through the apartment from the double doors. It called to her. Emily stepped out on the balcony, contemplating who she was supposed to be tonight. For the last three years, she'd avoided relationships. They could hurt you if you let them. Lately, she'd forgotten to listen to her internal warnings, but then she'd already discovered you could live with a broken heart. What would another shattered piece matter?

The warm summer breeze blew in off the Mediterranean Sea, keeping the air from becoming stifling. The plants were a mix of tropical palms, cactus, citrus, and temperate foliage. The sea air smelled wonderful. Little wisps of wind whipped the lightweight curtains around the French doors.

Her stomach clenched with unexpected eagerness. The nanochip that she'd stolen from Mosel's facility earlier in the day was taped securely to her body. The chip Emily left behind in its place would be virtually undetectable as a fake until the terrorists tried to use it. She had a job to do. She would meet with Jason one more time tonight, and then she hoped Mosel followed her back to DC.

Funny thing about tonight, three of her closest family and friends were going to be in the same room together, and to preserve Jason's cover, the truth of their relationship would be kept secret. He'd never formally acknowledge family in public.

Emily turned to pick up her bag just as the buzzer rang. She ran to the open balcony door and shouted to Jorge, "I'll be right down!"

Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the hallway, the night, and the intrigue.

This is it!

She'd been eager to handle a field job on her own. So far, she'd done her part, and now all she had to do was pass the chip to Jason.

Then he would make the drop, and finally, she was scheduled to get out of town. He'd tell her about the arrangements later.

She couldn't turn back if she wanted to. This mission was too important for two reasons. First, the safety of the world depended on her getting the chip into Jason's hands tonight. He needed to get it out of the country and safely back into the secure vault where it would be kept indefinitely. Secondly, they planned to discover those involved with her father's murder once she convinced Mosel to see her in Washington.

A tingle of satisfaction ran up her spine. She was her father's daughter, after all. She'd never thought about shirking her duty. Anyway, now wasn't the time for second thoughts. She'd gotten into this with her eyes wide open. She'd act her part and have fun doing it. Who knew when they'd let her out of the facility in Boston again?

Tonight Cinderella was going to the ball. Tomorrow, she'd worry about Act II of this charade.

Chapter Eighteen

The bronze sun set low over the western Mediterranean. Light reflected a shimmering gold, casting flames onto the Casino's façade as the limousine pulled under the portico overhanging the circular drive.

The front of the building resembled a castle more than a modern day casino. The numerous tri-globed lamps lining the boulevards began to glow in the dimming evening light. Date palms lined the streets, interspersed with citrus trees of all varieties.

A double marble staircase complete with ornate balustrades led to a luxurious landing. The enormous carved wooden doors made the building look like a regal palace. There were even a few crenellated towers for effect. Numerous flags, representing the royal house, stood at attention along the walled parapets. The silk materials whipped in the warm summer breeze. The vision looked like something out of a fairy tale.

"This casino isn't anything like Vegas," Emily mentioned to Kate under her breath. She shifted self-consciously while they waited for the valet to help them out of the car and escort them to the stairs.

"So, Mosel Reinhardt sponsors this event?" Kate asked Emily.

"Yes, my grandfather had something to do with this charity years ago. Now, the Charity Ball is held here at the Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino. Wait until you meet him. He's a platinum blond, Germanborn god of a man. The playboy of the Riviera also owns Delta Star, the company I'm working for here in Monte Carlo."

Emily whispered to Kate, "More importantly, he's a known illegal arms dealer with contacts to the terrorists I believe killed Dad." Emily had managed an invitation from Mosel for Kate and Jorge. Her invitation had been more of a command, since he was still in relentless pursuit of her. While she tried to hold him at bay, Jason had kept Mosel's interest up by dating her on off days, keeping the competition between the men hot and heavy. She hoped she survived the onslaught of attention. This wasn't the first time they made her feel like a ping-pong ball in play.

Before she ascended the steps, Emily rolled her eyes, took a deep breath, and got into character. Those days in high school plays handling the props had never prepared her for this!

* * * *

Mosel Reinhardt walked into the ballroom like a CEO walking into a meeting of the board. He glanced around, appraising everything, and with a slight smile, approved. He checked the buffet tables and the activity at the bars spread around the room. He noted the smiling faces of his guests, the efficiency of the staff. The music played, upbeat and modern, not his personal favorite. Steely rock would be out of place here, more appropriate at the clubs he frequented almost nightly.

Lights twinkled from the enormous authentic Austrian crystal chandeliers, interspersed impressively from the ballroom ceiling, as well as from sconces, reflecting along the mirrored walls. "Good, everything is going as planned. Is the girl coming tonight?" he asked, questioning his companions, two muscular men always present to do his bidding.

"She said she would be delighted if she could bring her friends. She's taking an extended weekend trip with them tomorrow, but we included them in the invitation. We encouraged their presence, believing she might not come without them."

"Good thinking. The more opportunities I have with her personally on a social level, the more opportunities I'll have with her." He added almost absently, "She is different than the others. Tell me as soon as she arrives."

Mosel walked off to recheck the card room setup.

The Charity Ball, an event his family's wine distribution business sponsored for years, covered his arms dealing. He continued the ruse to maintain contacts with all the right people despite his periodic reputation at unacceptability. He unwittingly exposed his darker side from time to time. He sneered as he thought how he was presently notorious among the genteel aristocratic society he ran with, for making some politically incorrect statement to a woman he hit on during a fundraiser. After her quick rebuke, he discovered she was "press." The woman rapidly exposed his callous nature to anyone and everyone in his acquaintance, and then some. So Mosel sporadically worked at improving his image with his political and social acquaintances through his charities.

Currently, his most recent female conquest was trying to put herself to right for the evening in his private room upstairs. While he impatiently waited for another woman to arrive, one in whom he had a specific interest, his perusal of the rooms confirmed her absence.

He had been unproductively pursuing Emily for six weeks. She showed a slight sexual interest in him beyond attraction. Sometimes her polite friendliness bordered on friendship. Mosel wasn't used to a woman taking him so carelessly for granted, sexually, especially after he'd come so close. He'd never had to put an effort into attaining a woman. In all of his experience, there was something special about this one in particular.

She was, of course, beautiful, bright, and genuine, with a hint of innocence. His behavior in her company was, by his standards, impeccable. He tried to always be the perfect gentleman, sensitive and attentive without appearing too interested. Just thinking about her brought a tightening to his gut. His recent release with the woman upstairs hadn't been enough. Nothing but the inaccessible woman with the rounded tight body and cherubic face would be enough to assuage the craving he felt when he thought of her.

"Mosel, the arrangements are perfect. I think this will be more successful than ever. The Children's World Organization can never thank you enough for your kindness." The tall, straight, matronly woman of sixty plus, silver streaking through her stiffly coiffed hair, fawned over him. Mosel charmingly took her hand and acknowledged her importance with a click of his heels—one that would have done the Nazi SS proud. He bowed his head. "Oh, Madame, each year I realize how instrumental you are in this charity's success. They should give you an award."

She smiled, pleased with his recognition. "You overestimate my import, Monsieur Reinhardt."

"No, Madame Rousseau, your contacts in Europe are instrumental in the success of this event every year," Mosel said.

Her husband, Mosel's banker in Switzerland, stood alongside. He interjected, "The charity is lucky to have your interest, Mosel."

"Please don't mention it. This is my pleasure and passion," Mosel replied, bowing respectfully to the gentleman. He genuinely had a soft spot for kids, one that wasn't completely self-serving. Mosel always felt like a king in their presence, and their expectations weren't much. Poor children were easily pleased.

"Children are our future," he continued. And he meant it. "The earlier you begin molding those small minds to your causes, the more indoctrinated they become. More art critics." Mosel established followers to his ideals with his client's money. He smiled the smile of one who knows a secret as he made his apologies, excused himself, and moved through the crowds.

While scrutinizing the room for the woman he anxiously awaited, he noticed Jason DesJardin. He continued shaking hands and moving through the potential donors with casual familiarity. The lovely blonde woman he recently enjoyed himself with upstairs had managed to refresh herself and join a group of his guests. Mosel noticed Jason DesJardin in the mix. As he'd instructed her earlier, Jacqueline oozed her charms all over Jason, one of the world's most successful international real estate CEOs. She pressed her abundant breasts up against him, running her long fingernails over his chest. Occasionally she teased down the man's abdomen, to where his cummerbund met his pants, a promise of more in her manner.

Mosel knew the impact her feminine wiles could have on a man. His groin tightened just watching her work DesJardin. He picked up two glasses of champagne from the tray carried past by a waiter. Handing one to Jason, he said, "Monsieur DesJardin, a pleasure to see you again. I don't believe I thanked you properly for coming to my rescue last week."

"No problem. I was heading into the cove myself when I saw your yacht take the hit. I'm only sorry I wasn't able to get to you both sooner. Miss Holmes struggled with you for quite awhile before we arrived. You're lucky she was there."

"Yes, I am. I'm told her heroics saved my life."

Jason shrugged. "How is she doing? Her injuries are healing?"

"I've heard she is well enough to attend tonight, I'm relieved to inform you."

Jason continued his interrogation. "Have the police determined what happened?"

"No, not that they've informed me of. My staff is handling the insurance and all that nonsense. I'm going to be shopping for a new boat, it seems. Anyway, I'm so glad you could join us this evening so we can pick your pockets."

Jason laughed at the honesty of the remark. "That's okay. I never mind my pockets getting picked for a good cause."

"Perhaps later we will have the opportunity to get to know one another better and talk. We always seem too busy with," Mosel glanced at Jacqueline and blatantly perused her body, "other distractions. We haven't taken time to become well acquainted ourselves. Such a shame. We seem to have so many similar interests. And tastes."

"As much as I would like that," he replied with a friendly grin, "I'm afraid these affairs don't lend well to intimate conversation. Perhaps lunch sometime soon?"

They socialized simultaneously at the same functions all over the world, but for a reason Mosel didn't understand, they never ended up in the same circles. Now, it looked like he owed Jason his life.

"After all, business ventures aren't always to be developed at every meeting." Mosel thought slyly, *But this time I will feel him out*.

Mosel thought DesJardin could potentially be useful to his Middle Eastern contacts, after his group worked out the appropriate changes to the third world governments. That is, if Jason's political attitude truly leaned in the direction mutual acquaintances speculated. Mosel wanted to get a measure of the man. Many believed Jason to be a speculator with an attitude that was all about the money. According to Mosel's sources, he didn't give a damn about the politics, just about the clink—exactly the sort of man he could work with.

In the coming months, he would have need of real estate in multiple locations and would be needing to move some money. Working with him may be exactly what he needed.

"Lunch, ah, what an excellent idea, DesJardin. I have a prospectus for another castle and estate I may want you to broker for me. What do you think?"

Jason disengaged himself from Jacqueline's embrace. He gazed over Mosel's shoulder, apparently distracted by something behind him.

"Uhhh, that would be great, call me." Jason's height almost matched Mosel's. Reaching into a pocket, Jason pulled out a business card with an ease that years of practice provided. He handed the card to Mosel without so much as a backwards glance, and excused himself politely without waiting for anyone's response. Mosel bristled as Jason dismissed him. He wondered if maybe the reports about Jason being such a ladies' man were exaggerated as he pulled away from Jacqueline and moved to the stairs. Then Mosel followed Jason's direction and saw what, or rather who, had snatched his attention.

His stomach clenched in a burning ache. *Well, this is interesting*. A blaze of anger rose up through him.

Mosel watched the dance of interest between Jason and the one woman Mosel craved with a passion he'd never before experienced.

This turn of events was a little disappointing. He tried to bring his anger back under control.

Ever since they'd met at the nightclub, Mosel had to admit he was afraid he'd lose this one to Jason. In addition, he knew DesJardin wouldn't be a gentleman with her. For some reason, thinking about Emily being used disturbed Mosel.

What should he do? He wondered. As host, he could only let this game play out. He owed Jason after last week. If Jason wanted her, it would be in bad taste for Mosel to interfere and risk losing a potential alliance with DesJardin's company.

He would put his personal feelings aside for the moment, and hope she would be able to handle Jason. Unfortunately for Mosel, he'd felt her passion. He hardly believed she would prefer Jason's dark roguish good looks to his own refined elegance, until he saw the expression on her face when she looked at Jason.

Mosel ran both hands over his hair, smoothing it back from his face. He was a practical man and a realist. Regrettably, that made him completely aware Emily's expression didn't bode well for him. *Ah*, *but one never totally understands the feminine heart*.

He would bide his time. Jason had a reputation for one-night stands. Mosel watched with interest as Emily and Jason made eye contact. A little pain burned beneath his heart. He shrugged internally. *There could be many moves in the game of chess or love, could there not,* he thought wisely, *before checkmate?*

"Ah, Jacqueline, it appears you are not enough to hold our intended's interest tonight." She rounded on him, ready to pounce, her expression vicious.

"No, no, *ma chérie*," he grabbed both her hands, protecting himself and coaxing at once. He dragged her to the dance floor, laughing, and whispered into her neck. "Perhaps he smelled my scent on you? Like a wild cat, I have marked you. Come, you are with me tonight. Are you not?"

She seemed appeased with his attempt to charm. Their two pale heads and long, lithe bodies blended into one another on the dance floor, getting lost in the dancers.

Chapter Nineteen

Emily whispered in Kate's ear with what lately was an uncharacteristic giggle. "I feel like Cinderella."

"Well, don't look now, Cindy, but I think that's Prince Charming walking up the stairs." Kate whispered under her breath, "As I live and breathe, doesn't he look sexy tonight! Good grief, he gets better looking daily."

"Hey, Kate, chill," Jorge growled with what sounded suspiciously like jealousy. "I'm standing right here." Jorge Alvarado's looks were impressive. A mind-blowingly handsome man in his own right, he had dark Spanish features and a diplomatic air he probably inherited from his father, the assistant to the Spanish Ambassador to the United States. Even after all these years, Emily still thought of him as one of her best friends.

Kate appeased him with a sexy grin and a long once over, while Emily checked him out more closely. Appraising him objectively, she had to admit Kate was one lucky girl. "Jorge cleans up nicely. Quite the thing in that tux," Emily said.

With that, Jorge puffed up and smiled, smoothing a hand down the front of his jacket. "Thanks." He instinctively moved closer, into Kate's space along the step, firmly establishing his rights, making it clear she was with him.

"Oh, boys, boys," Emily grinned noting his slick moves, "always territorializing."

Kate MacMartin's red curls bobbed about her head, loose ringlets occasionally flipping across her lightly freckled nose. She groaned. "Now he's going to be impossible."

She nudged him in the ribs and gave him a quick peck on the lips. "Don't worry, Jorge, after I pick my eyeballs up from the stairs and shove my tongue back in my mouth, I promise, I won't notice anyone but you."

Instead of letting her get away with the quick buss, Jorge grabbed her and gave her a very thorough kiss. "There, just remember the promise."

Kate melted into Jorge with a sexy smile and Emily reevaluated Jorge, more impressed than ever. She hadn't thought he had it in him. He'd always seemed so controlled and just—just Jorge. But the air sizzled between those two, and it made Emily happy.

There was something about Jason's expression when he stared at her that bothered her. He was still mad over last week. Explaining Mosel's lack of trousers and her attire to a raging madman hadn't been easy. Eventually, he'd calmed down, but he hadn't been convinced. She was sure he would have preferred that Mosel had drowned, despite their plans, especially when she tried to explain why she'd taken off his pants. It wasn't her fault he went commando under his clothes.

When he'd grit through his teeth, "Don't lie to me," and she'd said nothing. He confirmed that most of the earlier exchange was on the x-rated surveillance tapes. He'd made it clear why he hadn't been satisfied with her explanation for her own lack of attire, let alone her choice of underwear. "I was assigned to visual surveillance. I saw everything before you blew up."

"Seducing him is my job."

"And you're damn good at it, too." Jason had spit the accusation out at her, and then said the one thing that destroyed her. "Nice progress. In three years you've gone from tiny black lace to black string."

She should have been angrier, but instead she was upset, confused. His comment was a huge breach of character. He had never

mentioned anything about the night she seduced him, never once acknowledged their intimate past.

Past. She'd acknowledged that's what their relationship was, especially when he reacted like a disappointed older brother last week.

She glanced up as he crossed the veranda in front of the ballroom, all his attention directed on her. His tight jaw belied his casual attitude as much as the contrast of his appearance. His broad shoulders filled out an immaculate tux, and his bearing oozed wealth and style set against his slightly disheveled, dark chocolate-colored hair—too long by conventional standards. She recalled her penchant for chocolate. He looked good enough to eat. There were so many things she could do with chocolate and him.

His focus was riveted on her. She ripped her attention away from the lure of him, back to what Kate was saying. But as Emily tried to continue a casual conversation, she just kept drifting back to Mr. Chocolate Cupcake across the room. Her mouth salivated at the sight of him. She devoured him with her eyes. As the music drifted around them, she kept trying to ignore him, but her gaze kept returning to his. She was enthralled, captivated, fascinated. And so, apparently, was he. Or that's what his expression said. He watched her like a ravenous wolf.

"Em, what's the matter with you? It's Jason, for goodness sake, remember?"

"I'm acting." Emily answered defensively. "I'm supposed to keep his attention."

"Well done, then." Kate might be younger, but she was far more worldly than Emily.

"He looks very, very interested, and you do look fantastic tonight, Emily. Doesn't she look fantastic, Jorge? Never mind, don't answer, and wipe the drool off your lower lip, Jorge." He bent to Emily and whispered in her ear, "If I wasn't halfway in love with that redheaded witch, I'd never let you out looking like this. I'd keep you home with me."

Emily smiled with pure feminine satisfaction at the unexpected light flirtation, and Kate added with good humor, "And you, Em, can wipe that pleased smirk off your face." She grabbed Jorge's arm possessively.

Another set of eyes bored into her. She turned to see Mosel watching her with amused interest. Her lips twisted into an awkward smile for him before she was forced to acknowledge Jason's approach.

He lightly bumped into her. "Excuse me."

The body-to-body contact lightly brushed her hip, but she said nothing. Then he stepped into her space on the broad landing, crowding her—moving in, brushing against her, a light physical contact, but enough to get her motor running. According to their plans, he only perfunctorily acknowledged Kate and Jorge.

He was taking over, taking control.

Static? Electricity? Sparks? Was he playing a game with her now? After the incident with Mosel, they'd barely spoken. He'd told her how he watched Mosel kiss her, suckle her breasts, and how he'd heard her when Mosel brought her to orgasm with his hands and his mouth. Although she still didn't understand why, the seduction obviously upset Jason, but the lack of clothes weighing Mosel and her down had actually saved their lives.

"You're feeling better?" Unspoken innuendos passed between them. His intense expression made her heart skip. Without lifting his head, only his brows, he thoroughly scrutinized her.

She nodded. His inspection made her breathless.

"What can I say? You look, well, I'm speechless," he whispered conspiratorially.

The heat radiating up her body had Emily flushing all over. His devouring stare made her antsy. His breathing was as shallow as hers.

Wow, where did this intensity come from after all this time? Lust? Interesting.

Then, just as quickly, with an air of indifference she wasn't expecting, he made his apologies and started to leave. Her heart slammed to her feet.

He was playing a part, just an act. Disappointment and anger churned inside her. She was sick of his controlling attitude. Feigning a need to shift, she wiggled her torso, leaning against him to balance herself before he could get by. Only a brief contact, but enough.

When she glanced up, Mosel observed her with renewed interest. His expression almost frightened her. He'd been polite while she healed, yet still blatantly pursued her. What would he think of her now? What would he do later, after what was going down tonight? Would he be hurt, disappointed, angry?

This game the three of them played was out of her class.

She lowered her eyes, no longer able to meet his when she discovered she didn't want to hurt him. She liked him too much, even if he did scare the hell out of her.

Maybe that was part of his allure.

* * * *

Jason felt an edge to his self-control snap.

She's doing her job. This is an assignment. His mind rambled down an uncomfortable side road while his insides wrenched with discomfort.

She looked incredible. Maybe her unpretentious demeanor was the most intriguing part about her, the reason for Jason's interest and probably Mosel's too. She was, beyond a doubt, attractive in an amazing way. Her medium sized frame gave the appearance of fragility, yet she radiated an inner strength. She was round where real women should be round and delicate where women should be delicate. Jason loved her wild curly hair, full of burnt copper hues,

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barely under control, threatening to burst free from the pins at any moment, so much like her.

He wasn't fooled anymore by her childlike features, her subtle sexuality, or her full imperfect lips, the upper slightly larger than the lower. She was one of the most sensuous women he'd ever known, and she wasn't even aware of that part of her arsenal. He almost felt sorry for Mosel. Because Jason would never, ever, let him near her again. The man would never win this game. No one else would.

The metallic copper color of her dress accentuated the highlights in her hair. The dress was made from some flimsy, clingy material, like scales on a mermaid. His gaze lingered over her body. God, how he loved these new synthetic fibers that made undergarments obsolete.

The back dropped to below her waist, just a hair above the dimples he knew were there. He could already feel the heat and blood dropping to his lower body.

The slit in front was considerably higher than he cared to speculate about, since just thinking about what lay beneath it made him hard. The top of her dress plunged low enough to interest him, actually, too much so for his own good. The bodice barely covered the rounds of her breasts on the sides. A wrong move in any direction could prove interesting as well as stimulating. Suddenly the thought of anyone other than himself glimpsing any part of her intimate skin again pissed him off.

* * * *

"He hasn't taken his eyes off you," Kate bent over and whispered in Emily's ear. "And the other one, the Nordic-looking god over there, what's the deal with him? He looks like someone sucker punched him. He's watching the exchange between you and breathless over there. It's almost frightening. I hope you haven't gotten in over your head. What can he be thinking?" Emily tried to hide her unease. She tried to be cool. "You're right, his expression is strange." A certain level of fear shook her. "It worries me."

"If I didn't know you better, I'd think you just seduced two fantastic men into obsession."

"You think?" Emily asked pensively, taking no insult from Kate's comment. Everyone knew Emily was no femme fatale.

"Yes, I do think! Very intense!"

Each time Emily glanced in Mosel's direction, he was still watching her. His gaze hadn't shifted. She lowered her lashes shyly and shivered. "That's the idea."

Emily was too preoccupied with the men staring holes through her to adequately respond to the ongoing conversation. Kate and Jorge would understand. Besides, they were charmingly preoccupied with each other and knew she had a job to do tonight.

Jason returned, this time never shifting his attention, staring directly at her. She could tell by the expression on his face he knew the effect he'd had on her. Her heart picked up a beat when she realized his intention.

The dance had begun.

This was it. Her heart was galloping rapidly. She found herself holding her breath again. She'd been nervously babbling, but stopped talking in mid-sentence. She downed the remaining champagne in her glass in one gulp. The bubbles tickled her nose briefly. She scrunched it.

He was so beautifully masculine. Just the way he walked fascinated her, like a big lazy jungle cat.

Lifting her chin, she assumed an attitude. Was this wild brazen behavior or dizziness from the champagne she'd just swigged? What had gotten into her? Him, from the first time she'd laid eyes on him.

Breathe, in, out, just breathe. Do not hyperventilate! When you black out and crash to the floor in a heap at his feet, he'll see he's

Across a Crowded Room

affected you exactly the way he planned. What modern woman swoons?

He was right in front of her now. She had to look up. Way up. Without words, he took her hand and led her to the dance floor, taking full control of her body. She hoped his hold on her was steady, because her head wasn't. Her knees weren't going to hold up without his firm support.

Heart, beat, just beat.

Inhaling, exhaling, heart beating. Why was it necessary to remind her body to perform these routine behaviors? Wasn't breathing and heart beating an autonomic function of the brain? The rest of her body's reflexes didn't seem to have a problem keeping up. She was melting inside for him.

He confidently held her against him. Maybe even somewhat possessively. Her body relaxed into his, comfortable in his knowledgeable embrace. At least a head taller than she, he had to bend to whisper. At first, his quick breath on her ear sent chills through her, followed slowly by an unbelievable, seeping warmth. Heat spread through her core, pooling in the deepest center of her body, moistening her folds. Her internal thermostat went haywire. His large body was not at all bulky, and every single inch of him was like forged steel. Their bodies fit—molded together as they moved around the dance floor. It was if there was no one else in the world. The room and all conscious thought vanished from her mind in his powerful arms.

Emily moved around the dance floor with Jason, uncomfortably thinking about the situation as it was, and how it was beginning to turn out.

This meeting tonight was planned, but it's supposed to look like they happened upon each other by chance. *He's with his group. I'm with mine. He's a soooo much better actor than I figured.*

She, on the other hand, she didn't have to do very much acting. I'm actually ridiculously infatuated with him, always have been. But this sexual thing, where did this uncontrollable ache come from? She thought she'd gotten over him. God, I hope he thinks I'm just as good at acting as he appears to be. I would just die of embarrassment if he suspects how I feel. This assignment had turned into full-blown lust.

She stiffened at the thought of him recognizing he was really affecting her. She was a bit embarrassed to give the impression of being so easy with two different men, in front of everyone.

Emily knew she was flushed, a dead giveaway. He held her very close, nuzzling her neck from time to time. He seemed to be enjoying her discomfort way too much. With that thought, a small spark of resentment piqued her anger. Moving into him slightly, Emily knew how to get even with him.

Tit for tat, all's fair...and anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger. How does that apply again? Oh, yes, that so applies!

She smiled a little evil smirk. *Watch how fast his smugness vanishes when he gets a load of this.* She rubbed her body against him seductively.

Looking up at him, she thought, *Uh-oh!* Too late, she realized what she had done when she saw his smug expression replaced with something a little frightening as his blue eyes darkened to black and his lids dropped.

"I don't think I'm cut out for this sexual conspiracy stuff," she said as she felt him harden against her. *Perhaps I should rethink my moves*? Emily tried to back up.

Arms banded around her like steel. Their power didn't let her back away. "Oh no, it's a little late for retreating now," his deep voice whispered.

Oops, these games can get dangerous! She reminded herself.

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Jason knew this was an act on her part, but he had to question where she learned this seduction act so well. She teased him when they were younger, but it had always been obvious teasing, well, except for that night at Clancy's.

He'd always blamed that night on the pool, the alcohol, and runaway hormones. And he couldn't think about that without being overcome with the dark guilt raging inside him.

Now, he was powerless to her charms. She'd never seemed like the seductive type before. It might kill him at this rate, but so help him, he loved it.

Holding her was going to be difficult enough without her turning into a siren right within his embrace. Not wanting to take advantage of the circumstances, he tried to evaluate the situation. Her little seductive act, rubbing up against him, and parting her lips at that sweet angle was just all a sane man could take, let alone a man with his kind of hunger.

All he wanted to do was explore those places where the dress met her skin. And she smelled, well, delicious. *I just want to bury myself in her fragrance. Does she smell like orange blossoms?*

Hmm, he could do what he wanted with his part. She'd think it was all part of their plan. He was tired of wanting her and not being able to do anything about it. This might be the only chance he got to bring them close enough to explore both of his motives.

The overwhelming issue creeping around the back of Jason's mind was fear for her safety. This for him was a critical issue. Jason didn't plan on taking any chances with her life, not after sacrificing all these years apart from her to keep her safe.

Mosel, with Jacqueline in his arms, sidled up alongside Jason and Emily. "Oh, Monsieur DesJardin, you must let me steal my brilliant and breathtaking new employee for a dance."

He smoothly gathered Emily into his arms as Jacqueline folded herself around Jason.

Emily and Jason smiled, politely taken aback, if only momentarily. Their preoccupation with each other cooled for the moment. Jacqueline moved her body up against Jason's, and raised one finely arched brow at his arousal. "Darling, I'm so glad to see you, too." She ignored the possibility his state was caused by a desire for someone else.

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Mosel couldn't believe how good she felt in his arms. Her hair smelled of a spicy orange scent. He held her reverently, but he would not let this moment pass without letting this woman know he was a man of strength and passion. "Did I thank you properly for rescuing me? You know, Emily, I would like to spend more time with you, socially."

Emily wasn't any cooler, but she shivered as his deep voice purred against her neck. Apprehension and fear overwhelmed her. Could she even handle her own desires? Doubt surfaced, maybe because she was still humming from her encounter with Jason. Two fantastic looking men, both dangerous and sexy, were strumming her strings.

She tried to maintain a friendly manner, but his long fingers brushed the skin inside the side of her gown just at the base of her breast, and he looked into her eyes, reminding her. She was afraid to move and barely breathed out her answer, "I'd love to, Mosel. You know, after I get back from my trip with my friends." She remembered the way he held her on the yacht—the way he kissed her—the feel of his body against hers. She turned away and met Jason's furious glare.

* * * *

Jason thought his head might explode as he watched where Mosel's fingers caressed the side of Emily's breast. He held her closely against his body, pressing his cock against her mound. His space. There was someone in his space with his woman. He controlled his anger and was even charming to Jacqueline. He let her believe the hard-on was for her, as he nuzzled her neck and maneuvered himself back to Mosel and Emily. But when he reached them he'd reached the end of his patience.

"Okay, Reinhardt you've talked long enough. Your brilliant and beautiful new employee has unfinished business with me. You can have her when she returns to work." And with that, Jason had Emily back where he wanted her.

She moved, he groaned. Silently his body begged hers to move into his. He was sure he wanted to handle all her sweet softness.

Relieved to have her back and away from Mosel for several reasons, he gave up to the moment. He tightened his grip around her waist and in doing so, lifted her up and into him, their bodies aligned—fitting perfectly.

When he could speak, he said, "You're doing great." He whispered into her ear, and then nibbled seductively down her neck and across her jaw. "Mosel's chomping at the bit. By the way, you didn't have to let him handle you like that."

"I actually was paralyzed. I was afraid to move. I was trapped. His hands had me surrounded on one side and his, uhm, body on the other. Thanks for coming to my rescue, partner."

Emily was almost ready to jump out of her dress. *Oh, if only all Jason's interest was real.*

What was she thinking? She had to stop that train of thought right now. She was a professional in a skilled working relationship, that's all. He made his decision years ago.

Oh, his hand dropped a little low on her back and the other one, was it rubbing, oh, so very close to the edge of her breast. Oooh!

She wanted to shift into it, to make his touch definitive. The nipple peaked in apprehensive response.

And what was that he was doing with his mouth?

She whispered back. "I think I need some air. I guess I'm more nervous than I expected."

Where did that catch in her voice come from? She started to pull away.

"That's not going to be feasible, unless we dance a little closer to the end of the room." Her nipples had pebbled firmly against his chest, and his renewed erection tented his tux pants. For now, she realized, he needed her body for cover more than she needed his, especially when he said, "I'm afraid I'd embarrass us both if you step aside now."

Pulling her closer, as if that was possible, his voice sounded rough. Almost to himself he said, "Thank God the music hasn't stopped."

As he pulled her body even more tightly up against his, she confirmed her suspicion. The evidence of his dilemma pressed emphatically against her abdomen. She was in turn, at first flattered and then impressed, finally, pragmatic. Her mind had wandered down this road before.

He's a man. None of this means anything. I'm just a body and his erection is just a result of friction. We're playing our parts.

He lowered his head and his warm breath blew against her ear. He whispered, "Let's give Mosel and the guys something to really think about." Taking her chin in his hand, he lifted Emily's face to his and ravaged her mouth thoroughly with his. Supporting her quaking knees with his vise-like grip, he didn't forget to keep her body pressed firmly against his. He tasted like champagne and heaven.

The kiss took Emily totally by surprise. The man was a devil. He was fiery and bad and everything she wanted. Now she really couldn't think. Were those fireworks going off in her head? Wasn't that cliché? Who really saw stars? She was asking herself ridiculous questions—analyzing her physical reaction while she put everything she had into her response.

She was no longer thinking "tit for tat." Hell, she was no longer thinking. So she guessed it was a good thing Jason was doing the thinking for both of them. In another minute, she would have forgotten they were in a ballroom, on a dance floor, in public, and she would have totally jumped him.

Chapter Twenty

At least he had the forethought to dance them into a quiet corner partially obscured by the large potted schefflera. When Emily looked up, he'd somehow maneuvered them to the edge of the crowded dance floor. The white French doors, only a few steps away, were open to the garden where smokers took turns polluting the air.

The music wafted lightly in the aromatic night air. A mixture of sea and pine and floral fragrance enveloped them in the embrace of the garden. The surrounding lush tropical plants provided an erotic background for the next step in their mission.

God, I'm so hot. The thought no sooner came to mind before a soft breeze blew the tendrils of hair escaping from her pins and lifted them slightly off her neck.

As the flames licking at her began to cool, and before she could think, she was back in his arms, his kisses igniting, demanding, and enflaming. She responded. Climbing his body with a passion she'd only experienced once before, Emily returned his fervor—demand for demand. She lost all sense of direction or decorum. For the moment, she was lost in this compelling man and her own swift flash of desire.

She could do this. It was just a performance, just a role they were playing. No one would know it wasn't just a role for her. Three years hadn't cured the attraction. Could her reaction simply be stronger because this was Jason?

Either that or she had more pent-up sexual potential waiting to escape than she realized. Maybe it was the champagne, or the essence of danger. But God, his mouth. *I'm smothering!* Her body was ready to erupt into flames. She needed to breathe.

Emily pushed away to catch her breath, gulping air in deeply as she held Jason at arm's length. "What's going on?" she asked.

"We need to make our attraction convincing," he answered, his attention riveted on her cleavage. He couldn't seem to tear his gaze from her rising and falling breasts. "But if you keep breathing like that, and they pop out, all bets are off. My control is limited. My fingers are tingling, probably from a lack of oxygen to my brain, because it's all pooled lower. Any more temptation than your nipples pressing against that material, and I'm a dead man, babe."

Control. He needed to get *himself* under control? Hell, she was the one who needed to straighten up. She liked that he found her desirable and she wanted to tempt him all the more. But hadn't she already tried that tactic only to have it blow up in her face?

Stepping back and pulling her with him into the shadows of the brushy palms, they both seemed to fight to regain composure. "Sorry, I got carried away, but the performance had to appear real. You know, in case anyone was watching." He paused and exhaled. "You were, ah, great." His voice cracked.

"I understand." Emily added a little nervous laugh. She flicked her head to the dance floor. "I was just surprised, that's all. By now, my reputation as a woman with no self-control should be well established."

"My infatuation with you should be pretty damn clear, too."

He was cool, collected. She knew she couldn't possibly pull off cool and collected right now if her life depended on it. A throbbing hollow pain just below her heart followed a familiar inner sinking feeling. He seemed capable of separating his body's response from his assignment. She wasn't sure anymore where her body's response started and where her assignment ended. She'd already done the difficult part by smuggling out the actual chip, or so she thought. Now, she was just Jason's cover, but by all rights, a very important part of the assignment. Protecting his cover was vital to ensure other future work. She wondered why she felt desolate.

Protecting Jason? She'd risk her life for him. Even after all these years, she couldn't imagine a world without him in it, whether he was with her or not. She searched his face, looking for the truth. The shadows made reading his expression impossible.

"Emily, you do have the information on you, right?"

She nodded.

"I'm afraid to ask where. That dress doesn't have a millimeter of space to spare between flesh and fabric, not that I've been able to determine, and believe me, I've been scrutinizing every inch." His gaze lingered over her dress, then focused hungrily on her lips.

His reaction secretly pleased her. She didn't know how she got her voice to sound normal when she asked, "Is that a compliment or criticism?"

"Hell, no, never criticism." His voice sounded thick with desire but he didn't move.

"Don't worry." She patted his cheek. "I have the goods." She pulled away from him and leaned against a palm tree, the smooth bark cooling her heated back. "It doesn't take up much space. I had to forego my weapon, but the chip's small enough to fit just about anywhere. There was still room left to store it in a very special spot," she crooned at him.

He followed her to the palm, extended one arm up over her head, leaning his head against his forearm as he looked down at her body. "My mind just slipped to the spot my body has been aching to get to all night."

His wayward thoughts were followed shortly by his roaming hand. Jason smirked like the bad boy he was, running his hand up under the slit in her gown and skimming it over her naked rounded hip, as the other dropped between her bare thighs. With a little too much amusement in his voice, he said, "Let me find it myself."

"You can't. It's between, ah." She tensed as his hand moved up. She was wet and embarrassed.

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His grin turned into a groan when she parted her thighs.

She felt herself flame beneath the hand that now moved higher on the inside of her thigh.

"Hold on," he said with a little frown of concentration. He steadied her firmly in his grip.

Leaning into her with his body, his mouth moved down her throat, his hand slid smoothly to the spot where she concealed the chip. She gasped as he cupped her.

"What, no panties?" he whispered. "I've had a bet going on with myself all night. No panty lines to mar the effect."

Emily groaned as his hot breath tickled her ear.

"Hmm, great hiding place. Lucky for me it's just the spot I've been dreaming of checking out."

She could only nod as he continued his exploration, as if he still searched for something. Surely, he'd already found the small chip on the inside of her leg. As his hand roamed intimately over her, she instinctively responded, moving into it.

Answering his touch, her body reacted with a gush of warm liquid. He accepted the invitation, parted her, and slipped his fingers into her moist, wet opening.

Her body had betrayed her. The sound escaped with the sharp intake of air as she gasped. Flushed with heat in the pale, reflected garden lights, she didn't stop him. It felt too right.

His words may have sounded amused, but the gravel in the tenor reverberated through her body, then his frown warned her. "Good thing Mosel didn't get here first."

She stood paralyzed. "What difference is it to you?"

"He'd find this." He ran a finger inside her, sending sparks through her body.

"After the explosion incident, he's definitely going to be disappointed to find out I got here first. And make no mistake, we will make him aware." He appeared pleased about taunting Mosel. "He hates losing, especially to me. He'll take this as a challenge." "I feel like the goal in a soccer match."

"No, you feel good." He knew what he was doing. He just wasn't sure why he was doing it. Actually he did know why. He wanted her desperately. There were other ways to handle this, maybe a dozen other ways, but none would have been as satisfying as her response to his touch.

He brought his mouth to the place where her shoulder and neck met, bit lightly in frustration, then licked to soothe her, murmuring. "You know what's even better?" he asked. Not expecting an answer, he smiled at her when she merely shook her head.

"It seems you're just as interested as I am." Feeling the wet evidence of her desire, Jason growled, frustrated. "Hold that thought."

His fingers rubbed magically over her sensitive spot, before reluctantly moving to where she had placed the chip at the apex of her thigh. He detached the tape that held the chip, pulling it and himself away from her.

The exchange made, he leaned back with a quick glance around, adjusted himself, and regained his practiced attitude. He had to leave her to make the drop.

He gathered her into his arms, whispered instructions quietly in her ear, warning her, "Don't let anyone see you. Until I return, everyone will think we're otherwise engaged. I'll be back in, say, ten minutes. Stay here until I come for you, then we have to go back inside together."

He whispered a low warning. "Because of Mosel's interest in you, we're both being watched. As long as we stay together, they won't suspect anything other than what we're showing them. Remember, I'm depending on you. You're my cover, understand?" he chucked her under the chin.

Uneasy now, feeling like a yo-yo, she tried to compose herself. She murmured a quick, "Sure, just be careful." As he disappeared into the dark, she backed deeper into the brush, hoping no one would come looking for them. The performance on the dance floor should have discouraged anyone but a voyeur.

She jumped when the doors suddenly opened to a couple staggering and stumbling towards her position. She was thankful they appeared entirely engrossed with each other.

If I sink any deeper into the bushes, I'm going to snag this dress. Shit, too late.

Trying to be quiet and maintain her anonymity in the garden, Emily attempted to disengage herself without divulging her position. The couple continued to grope in the dark just beyond where Emily hid.

Thankfully, their position blocked her from the light as three men came out of the ballroom. Two had guns visibly in their jackets. They reached for flashlights, obviously ready to search the grounds for something or someone—her or Jason or more than likely both. Two were the men she saw with Mosel earlier, the third looked familiar, but she didn't have a good view of him from behind the tree. When she tried to move forward for a better view, he stepped into the light and she saw it was Adam Kincaid.

What is he doing here?

* * * *

Jason went out the back garden steps to the dark alley where Harrison had the rookie meet him. Jimmy was where they planned when Jason walked past, depositing the plastic case in his hand. With the drop made, Jason was anxious to get back to Emily and the Hotel Gardens. He was semi-erect just thinking about her. All he wanted to do was get her out of here tonight.

* * * *

She tried to stop her heart from beating so loudly. Surely, they could hear it above the muted music.

Where did Kincaid go?

Time dragged. Emily couldn't tell how long she had been trapped out here. Her legs were stiff from crouching.

Jason should be back by now.

Someone grabbed her from behind. She would have screamed, but a big hand covered her mouth. Her snagged dress tore as she spun around. Someone simultaneously knocked her to the ground. A large male body came down over hers. The hand stifled her scream, quickly replaced with a mouth. She struggled until Jason's familiar taste, scent, and shape penetrated her senses.

Then she relaxed against him and sighed, opening her mouth to the kiss, the memorable flavor, sinking into the kiss he seized, as well as the moment.

Her unruly hair came undone, unleashing itself from control wildly—much like she, herself, was doing. Her dress rode high above her hips, and Jason rapidly dragged the top down to her waist—his hands covering her breasts.

Oh, thank you, she thought with relief as his mouth dropped to suckle. Before she knew what happened, she felt Jason's erection intimately pressing against her nakedness. His big body and narrow hips pushed impatiently between her long legs. He grunted like a mad man as he reclaimed her mouth.

My God, what's wrong with him? He'll draw attention to us with all that noise.

She realized in a moment, a moment too late, that was the idea. She knew with a certainty that their sounds would at least draw the guards' attention. The thought of being caught in such a compromising condition, let alone in the bushes, horrified her. What if the guards called Mosel?

Her heart sank. *What if Kincaid is still out here?* Could Kincaid identify Jason after all these years? Would Jason's cover be blown?

She had to warn him. She squirmed under him, hoping to free her mouth from his long enough to tell him. He wouldn't free her mouth. His body held hers in place like a vise.

Acting or not, at least Jason was still fully dressed. Emily was next to naked, totally exposed. Her dress now resembled a belt draped across her bare body at the waist. The sandals she wore had fallen off her feet in the skirmish. He had her right knee pulled up, draped over his hip.

If anyone was watching, what they were doing would seem obvious. His fingers checked her, plunging deeply, readying her as he released himself from his pants. A second later, she realized the position they were inevitably approaching and the consequences of this so called charade here in the garden.

She started to speak as he released her mouth, but something in his expression silenced her. He stared a warning at her. She held her breath and waited frozen in place.

Jason looked frightened—of her and for her. He paused long enough for his purpose. He looked to her for approval, confirmation that she understood what this meant.

She froze. He moved his fingers inside her, coaxing her. Her pupils clouded, he waited for her to stop him. To both her surprise and his immense relief, she didn't.

Drowning in him, recognizing her last chance to stop the insanity, Emily took a deep breath as she opened, arching into him. He never looked away from her face, watching her expression as she lifted. He plunged through her folds and she felt him push fully into her. He buried himself in her to the hilt, balls against her bottom.

This was where she always wanted him to be. Maybe not here, in a public garden, but with her, buried in her. She felt full, complete, alive, for the first time in three years. And at the same time, she was scared to death.

* * * *

It was only supposed to seem real. Had he taken this pretense a step too far? What excuse did he have for now for going over the edge?

I want this more than anything, her more than life itself. They were so close to uncovering Avery's killer, he believed he could face her now. At this point, he didn't even care how he got her—just as long as she became his. He was willing to keep her anyway he could. When this was over, they'd straighten out all the rest. Jason couldn't hold back. He didn't want to hold back anymore.

I love her—she has to feel that.

When he returned and saw the guards approaching her hiding place, he panicked. What if they discovered her out here? They could both be exposed. She could be killed. The world would be subjected to the horror of terrorism beyond belief. So much was at stake, he'd hardly had a moment to think. The guards needed to believe Emily and Jason had been out here working themselves up to this point, slowly, over the time they'd been missing.

Anticipating where they'd be by now, put Jason right where he'd wanted to be.

* * * *

Although she'd been physically ready, she was caught completely by surprise at her own desire and confused by his. This wasn't part of the arrangement. She didn't believe the attraction he demonstrated to her was anything but physical. They'd spent years with each other, and the only time he'd ever showed any interest in her was when she threw herself at him.

What was she doing? She wanted him. That cool, reserved act she'd taken toward him over the last three years may have fooled him before, but she was going to have to do something pretty damned spectacular to play this down in the future if it didn't work out between them this time.

Her embarrassment increased as she felt the spasms of a climax approaching. She knew he felt them too. She glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the guards.

"They're Mosel's men," he noted.

"Yes." She realized they'd been the ones who previously searched the garden. The conflict rose. Between the danger and her embarrassment, she didn't know whether dying here would be better than facing embarrassment of their report to Mosel. "Oh, no! I'm going to look like such a slut."

She knew she was supposed to be an experienced woman in this role, but she didn't want to get caught up in all that with Mosel. Something about the intense way he glared at her scared her.

More important, she needed to worry about the danger. She didn't see Kincaid, but she couldn't take any chances. She had to make sure Jason didn't look up.

As the guards stepped into their section of the garden, Jason felt her clench with tension as she nodded her assent. He picked up the tempo, and groaned against her neck, becoming increasingly unable to contain himself.

Then, meeting her determined gaze, he looked at her questioningly. She tried stifling the threatening moans by biting down on her bottom lip. She moved in unison with him, her head pressed into his forehead, then searched to take his mouth in hers. They maintained a momentum she was unwilling and unable to stop, caught in fear and the animal drive of the ultimate passion.

As her internal spasms clenched him with her approaching climax, he wisely nudged her lips gently with his. He brought his mouth down over hers, sucking the very breath out of her to prevent her inevitable scream of ecstasy. Although her inner embarrassment was fully complete, she was reluctant to sacrifice the moment. This was what they missed the last time—she had him all now.

Emily tensed as the men aimed their flashlights on them. She squirmed a little beneath Jason, knowing he deliberately exposed her. But he held her firmly in place, and she held his head and his attention to her breast. She bit down on his shoulder as she held his head close to her. She wasn't going to let him turn at the distraction if Kincaid was anywhere around.

"Get lost," was all he grumbled at the two guards. They made some insulting remark in French about getting a room, and what Emily thought sounded like "sharing a little of that ripe something or other."

She knew what they meant and flinched at the thought. Then, to make matters worse, they made sure to observe the couple closely with their flashlights, as if identifying her private parts later might become a necessity.

Jason growled something insulting back in French, never missing a stroke.

Eventually, the two voyeurs walked off, chuckling, amused at catching a couple of guests, someone of Jason's ilk, with his pants down. Literally.

With the guards moving on and no Kincaid in sight, the imminent danger passed them by. She sighed in relief, expecting Jason to jump up. Instead, Jason paused, cupped her face in his hands, and kissed her gently. With a whispered apology, he proceeded pumping, continuing the pace, deeper, harder, faster. He brought her back up to a frenzied peak. The tingling inside her resumed to heated volcanic pressure as he brought her to another orgasm and finally gave in to his own release, spilling into her. He collapsed, as visibly relieved as she was, in more ways than one.

She noted how he gathered her gently against him as he rolled her to the side to avoid crushing her beneath his full weight. "You did fine. Now the sooner we get you out of the country, the better. It'll be too dangerous for you here if your infatuated new boss discovers the information has been compromised."

She nodded. Tension and horror slowly replaced the boneless sensation of the post-coital repose. Reality seeped in. Emily was mortified. As her head cleared, the scene that replayed in her mind became a fancy. Yes, it had happened, but it wasn't real—it was an act—a farce.

Crying wasn't an option. She wanted to believe the reality of his desire. But she'd only be fooling herself. She believed he had never wanted her, never would. And yet, he was the only man she ever wanted, the only one who completely satisfied her.

Tonight she took advantage of another opportunity to be with the one man she could never have, the one who rejected her repeatedly three years ago. A professional now, she would not cry, even though she hadn't bargained for this. She bit her lip to keep the threatening tears at bay.

* * * *

She tensed in his arms. Jason shifted his weight to one side, his face burrowed in her neck, her hair tickled his nose—it always did whenever they were close. Her hair seemed to reach out and grab him whenever he was within striking distance.

Adrenaline shot, lust assuaged, he was afraid to look at her. She'd grown very stiff as she stilled against him. Her reaction frightened him. He wanted to groan. Could his timing be any worse? So far, their sexual encounters were now screwed up, two for two. He might have had the presence of mind not to relax his full weight on her afterwards, but nothing stopped him from taking advantage of her when he had the chance. She was so delicate, and yet so responsive.

He couldn't move. Between the combination of fear, lust, and apprehension, his emotions were shot. *God, we're like gas and flame—instant combustion.*

He gulped in her scent.

What was it about her that made him so crazy? She would be wondering about his reputation. His seduction techniques needed vast improvement with her, anyway. No woman would forgive a man for something like this. What could he say?

He finally moved off her, thoughtfully and efficiently, pulling her tattered dress up and down as he did. He wanted to tell her how he felt, but after all these years and without the arrest of Avery's murderer, and this debauchery of a plan tonight. Hell, the timing wasn't quite right, yet. But soon, soon he'd be able to put everything in order.

When the time came, he hoped it wouldn't be too late.

Straightening himself out, at least his voice sounded composed. "If we eventually need an alibi, we have it, and the guards as witnesses. It'll give us the time we need to both get out of town, safely. For effect, it needed to be real." Jason justified their actions with that simple statement.

"Em, it was real—" But he stopped himself. Instead, Jason continued, holding his hand out to help her up. "Sorry I didn't have time to warn you and then," he appeared ashamed, "well, I'm embarrassed to admit I was too far gone to stop. I want to assure you, I'm healthy.

* * * *

Healthy? She didn't think she could talk. He acted so matter of fact. What the hell does that mean? Oh yes, right, of course, he would be assuring me he's free from STDs.

He wasn't thinking she could possibly be infected. The damn man was her boss, he knew she had no sex life. *Get a load of him. Of course he has! Well, thank goodness he's healthy!*

Actually, right now, she wished him dead. Death would be preferable to facing him. Although her death would make it easier than facing the world.

"You have nothing to worry abo—" Then he stopped, choking over his next words. "Emily, are you using birth control?"

She started to nod her response to Jason like an imbecile, not knowing what to say and increasingly terrified she would burst into tears, but she stopped when she realized what he had asked. Her insides ached with emptiness worse than any hunger. Emily thought if she opened her mouth, she would cry. *Must be hormones or postcoital shock—if there's such a thing?*

So she didn't respond.

He looked down the path where the guards had moved on. "Emily, I'm truly sorry. That situation came out of nowhere, but it more than likely saved our lives. I know it wasn't part of the plan, but making it real was the only way. They had to think we'd been here a while working up to this. I'm sorry if I took you too fast. Please say something."

Her mind stuck on "birth control." Why would she be on birth control? Jason, of all people, knew she wasn't dating. He was in the agency. Hell, when would she have time to develop relationships—even if she'd had the inclination? She'd just had her first orgasm, no, make that second orgasm, in three years. There had been Mosel.

She kept her head down, unable to focus just yet. Nothing she thought escaped her mouth. Sorry, again? Where had she heard that before?

Damn, she didn't want him to be sorry. For a moment, they'd had each other the way she wanted. If nothing else, it was real for her.

Her voice sounded strangled even to her, while she struggled to sound reassuring. "Please, I'm hardly innocent. I knew what I was getting into with this assignment. This is scarcely the melodrama you're making it out to be. Bodies react sometimes with a mind of their own. Think nothing of it. I understand. We barely had time to think. I appreciate your concern for my welfare."

"Wait!" Jason tensed. "What's this crap about 'bodies'?"

"Playing big brother again? Don't you think that's a bit inappropriate under the circumstances?"

He bristled as he grabbed her by the arms. Maybe there was more to this for him as well. "Tell me you don't go around making a habit of following through with everything your body reacts to, please!"

"In response to your distasteful question, of course I don't. How rude!"

"You weren't acting, you couldn't have been. No one's that good."

"I'm reassuring you, I'm fine. We are, after all, intimately familiar with one another."

He winced. That was a low blow, but she couldn't help striking out. She held up her hand to stop him when he tried to touch her. He tried to straighten out her dress, his help annoying her more than his words. She shrugged him off, slapping at his hands.

Emily turned cool and efficient. Not an easy task, while she was feeling all rumpled, torn, and broken inside. Outwardly composed, she changed the subject. "Did you accomplish your objective?"

"Sure, right before I saw those goons come out to the garden and panicked."

"Good." If the mission were compromised, millions could die. With the false information imbedded on the chip she exchanged for the original and the information on the original confiscated, the terrorists would be misled by the technology. She felt better knowing that part of the operation was accomplished.

"What are you thinking? Talk to me, please." Jason seemed concerned.

"I'm relieved. Believe it or not, I was thinking that no matter what, the world feels safer just knowing the nanochip technology is out of El Marat's hands."

"The weapons can't operate properly without the codes, and the ones they are going to get from Mosel's contact are fake. The only other person with the real codes, Professor Rankin, is back in US jurisdiction. The recovery team brought him out of Riyadh right after the kidnappers demanded an outrageous ransom. Instead of paying the ransom, the Special Forces extraction unit went in after him."

What was her sacrifice, compared to removing the danger of madmen with nuclear arms from the world? Her sacrifice was the possibility that she would totally lose her heart to this man all over again.

"Don't count your chickens. I'm not going to feel safe until we have you back at headquarters for debriefing."

He'd talk to her later about the details of that and the personal side to their assignment. As far as she knew, he hadn't shared any other details with anyone. Emily fidgeted. "Speaking of feeling safe, I have something to tell you. I don't know what it means, and I know you're going to be upset, but Kincaid is here. You can't afford to let him see you."

Jason whirled on her. His normally deep blue eyes went totally black as he glared at her, disbelief written on his face. "What are you talking about? Where is he?"

Emily told him about spotting the senator and hiding from the guards before he got back. "It's why I held your face to mine. Jason, he can't see you."

"Or us, together," Jason growled. "I have to get you out of here tonight—without him seeing either of us."

Chapter Twenty-One

They'd stalled out in the garden long enough, each lost in their own thoughts. Now, the time for this evening's final act had come. The time was just barely past nine o'clock. Their departure would be obvious.

"We have to get going." Jason seemed almost apologetic. "Look, you have to find Kate and warn her about Kincaid. She can be our eyes. He'd never recognize her after all this time."

"You wait here and I'll send Jorge back out for you once we find out where Kincaid is."

"Look what I've done to your dress. Sorry." His voice softened, "Can you straighten yourself up a little?" He grabbed pieces of her tattered dress, trying to help, unsuccessfully piecing them together.

She pushed his hands away until he backed off.

"Please—try to hold that dress together. Looking disheveled will confirm everyone's ideas, but I don't think you need to flash so much skin. Mosel will get the gist of where we're at in our relationship without seeing it for himself." He turned away from her to check the surrounding area for anyone who might be watching. "And I certainly don't want the rest of the team getting a glimpse of—uhm—all that."

He emphasized what he referred to by dragging his gaze thoroughly over her body. Her face flamed, thinking of what the team may have seen. He chucked her under her chin. "I know you're embarrassed, just remember that *femme fatale* attitude you were carrying around a while ago."

"Okay."

"Tell Kate and Jorge when we get out of here, I'm taking you home to finish this or continue this, whichever you think best. They know what to do tomorrow. Tonight, they seem sufficiently preoccupied with each other."

She held onto her dress, clutching the torn pieces together and nodded.

"But, no matter what, we have to get out of here without Kincaid seeing either one of us."

"I understand."

"Just find Jorge, and make sure Kate locates Kincaid. Try to act as if you're up for more. Remember you're totally infatuated with me in case Mosel or one of his goons is eavesdropping. Once the coast is clear, I'll make my excuses to my group, set up tomorrow with Jacqueline and meet you at the stairs." Jason worried about getting out with the right people noticing. And no one else.

It was a well-known fact that Mosel supplied the weapons to the terrorists in Eastern Europe. If Emily and Jason completed the scam they set up, Mosel would end up having to make contact with his American associate. He was going to get played against the Middle Eastern group by Jason's team. For years, Jason suspected the contact responsible for Avery's death had something to do with the terrorists and the agency. Now he was sure Kincaid had something to do with it, too. Future politics aside, Kincaid had no reason to be running with the Mediterranean jet-setters. Specifically with ties this close to a major arms dealer with direct terrorist contacts. His connection with the sub-committee financing arms made Jason even more suspicious.

What was really going on? All this was too coincidental to write off. He only hoped his suspicions were wrong—because if he was right, if Kincaid was involved, it would tie Jason to Avery's death. He didn't think he could stand feeling any more responsible.

"Emily are you okay with this?"

* * * *

No, she wasn't. How did she feel about Mosel? He was somehow involved with her father's death, but how? She wasn't ready to face him, and she couldn't believe he was one of the bad guys. Confused as she was, she didn't want him hurt. He could be so damn charming. Sometimes, she had seen him as cold as ice. But never with her. He'd been a friend, a friend who wanted more. He fancied himself a ladies' man and appreciated other men of his caliber, but had the competitive games finally gone too far?

Tonight he would see Jason's conquest and have to concede his loss. But Emily knew he was going to be disappointed, not just over the loss to Jason, but in her. Her behavior would disappoint him.

Once he'd acknowledged Emily's attraction to Jason tonight, he'd backed off because he owed Jason his life. He had been pursuing her with undaunted fervor and, she'd purposely led him on. Now, he'd conceded to Jason, even if it was only temporary.

The expression on his face as she stood at the entrance to the French doors spoke volumes. Her appearance was indicative of her behavior. If Mosel's guards hadn't already reported in, her appearance said it all. His expression portrayed a mixture of desire, anger, and worry. She could see it all in his eyes.

* * * *

Mosel was angry. Emily's clothing practically fell from her body, and what a body it was. For a moment, he allowed his rampaging hormones loose. His pulse beat, his loins grew heavy with desire, and he didn't hide the evidence of his arousal as the woman emerged alone and watched his reaction.

Jason had saved his life, he was his guest and an important contact for Mosel, so tonight Jason would have his way. But that didn't change how much Mosel wanted her—the fresh, sweet Emily. Except for his own reputation, Jason's was unmatched at seduction, and he wasn't one for lasting relationships. Neither was Mosel, but Emily seemed like a woman who expected commitment.

Her pouting lips were swollen, her naturally pale skin flush with her recent lust. Mosel was furious at Jason for beating him at his own game, but there was more to his feelings. He desired Emily more than ever. Then a grin stole across his lips. He smiled openly. Jason would show his true face soon enough with Emily, and then, when he was out of the picture, Mosel would pick up Emily's broken pieces. He could be her friend, be supportive, play the part of the confidante. Or perhaps he had moved too slowly, played the conservative lover too well, been too much of a gentleman. Maybe she wanted to be swept off her feet as DesJardin had done. Mosel could be whatever was necessary to win her.

* * * *

She tore her gaze from Mosel's, shading her gaze with her lowered lashes, and made her way across the room to Kate. She stood a short distance from the doors, but the walk seemed interminable. She held Kate's hand and explained. Kate trembled when she mentioned Kincaid. Her fear couldn't be disguised, but her face never gave away her feelings. She smiled at Emily, lifting her eyes and started casually searching the ballroom. A moment later, she said something to Jorge and he nodded. Kate grabbed Emily and they went to the garden doors.

"Jason," Kate whispered, "Come on in. Jorge is going to keep Kincaid busy in the cigar bar while you guys make your excuses to Mosel."

"Thanks, Kate. Stay away from him." He gave her a firm directive.

Surprisingly, she had nothing to say. As Emily watched him take charge, she hardly believed he was the boy she grew up with. Kate's face was pale as he ran a soothing thumb across her chin. "After we're gone, get out. Don't let him see you, Kate, hear me?"

She nodded like a zombie.

"Tomorrow's plans are still on."

Emily wondered what frightened everyone so much about Kincaid. She knew his name came up several times in her crossreferenced database, but why did he have the effect he did with Kate? And with Jason?

* * * *

Jason caught Mosel's expression. He stepped fully into the room with his arm around Emily and ran a hand through his hair—it smoothed well enough. He growled now, pulled her into his embrace, and grabbed another quick, harder kiss as they passed through the French doors. Jason released her, looked up, and cocked an eyebrow in Mosel's direction. The message was clear. He got there first. Tough luck.

He played a dangerous game, establishing his dominance and his possession. He branded her and flaunted it in Mosel's face. Mosel would back off for the time being, but Jason hoped Emily would be able to handle him after this. His kiss had been a taunt and a claim. He was afraid she'd be annoyed. Instead, her mouth sizzled under his lips.

Jason was pleased to see the kiss had the desired effect. Emily blushed, and appeared apologetic regarding her state and intentions. Mosel kept an appropriate distance, watching intently, but not approaching. He would be discreet, ignoring her uneasiness.

Jason reminded her, "He'll get over it. But I'm warning you, you better be very careful."

Moments later, playing her part well, Kate just laughed at Emily's discomfort, chiding her about her good fortune to snag a keeper her first time out, and a rich, handsome one at that. She quietly asked if

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the other good-looking East German, chomping to get at her, would be willing to part with her when the time came.

Emily shook her head. "I don't know. He'll have to."

Jason thought the part played out well, because Emily's discomfort was genuine. Although Kate knew she'd be used as a ruse tomorrow when they'd all meet at the hotel restaurant, she didn't know why. Jason would tell his little foster sister later when they were safely back in the US.

Looking down at Emily's hair, he affectionately reached over and tried to push some of it out of her face so he could kiss her again, gently this time. Touching his lips to hers, he murmured into her mouth, "Get your purse. Let's get the hell out of here."

While he went to make their excuses, Emily snatched her purse and headed for the stairs. She kept her head down until she located him. He was apparently having a difficult time prying free of a blonde attached to two huge breasts. Emily felt a twist in her stomach and a pang of resentment toward the woman draped around Jason like a boa constrictor. She wanted to rip her off the man she loved. *Loved? Oh, no, not again. What have I done?*

She stood, shocked, unconcerned with the bimbo anymore. Only the sudden realization concerned her now. How often had she tried to be as aloof, professional, and detached as Jason managed? In the past, whenever they were together, she worked at it. It hadn't been easy with her feelings for Jason mired in the past. He was a brother, a friend, a lover, a promise, a pain, an ache, and now her boss. *Great! How can I ever get "aloof" back?*

Emily cringed with the revelation.

The blonde seemed resolute to keep Jason with her, and Emily didn't miss Jason's determined effort to extricate himself from her grasp. While he pried himself loose, the blonde followed his glance to the stairs where Emily waited.

Her expression turned on Emily and went dark. The reason for Jason's sudden departure struck home. As an afterthought, Jason bent

over Jacqueline's neck and whispered in her ear. She smiled a slow, sexy smile.

Mosel politely shook hands with him and nodded without comment before Jason turned back to join Emily. A giggle bubbled into her throat. Her emotions were all over the place. It was maddening, insulting, and exciting. Her sense of female independence warred with her inner woman—the one that wanted to be dominated and captivated. Ugh, she was so disgusted with herself.

With a calm that surprised her, Emily accepted that she'd definitely made an enemy of the blonde and possibly Mosel, too. She'd never been the object of anyone's jealousy, or the subject of interest for two such attractive men. Even if it was a farce, there was no way she could make eye contact with Mosel. She chanced a glare at the blonde, who now stared at her like she knew something Emily didn't. An ugly, suspicious thought rose to the surface. She sneered at Jason as he approached. "Your date?"

"No, just part of the group I came with." Jason grimaced, shifting the direction of Emily's attack. "What's Mosel's keen interest in you? Is there more I should know?"

"Not that I know."

"We do this all the time, and it's never been like this. He seems to care. You were only supposed to whet his appetite, finagle an invite to this charity thing and another back in the US, not bring the man to his knees. He looks like he's been kicked in the balls."

"I guess I'm more irresistible than you thought." She felt smug. "He thinks I'm smart and cute, and he likes me."

"I think your lack of clothing the other day on the yacht could be the cause. We already discussed that beach thing, that silk cover-up you never even took out of the bag. And I already told you, I saw everything the other night on the yacht—before it blew up. Your definition and mine of letting him kiss you, are very different. You were playing with fire and enjoying it." He rubbed his hands over his face. "Why shouldn't I enjoy my part?"

"That man is deadly, extremely dangerous. Be very careful playing games with him!"

She glanced at her gown. "Uh, more dangerous than playing with you?" She regretted the comment before it was out of her mouth. He looked thunderstruck, but said nothing. "Let's just get out of here before we're spotted." Remembering the danger if Kincaid spotted Jason, she encouraged him to the door.

"This way," he muttered and led her through a maze of corridors.

Emily didn't let the conversation about the blonde drop. "I guess she had other intentions for finishing up tonight."

"She's nothing to me, no one. If there were ideas about tonight, they were all on her part. I'm working, remember?"

Working? How could she forget? Emily wondered why he bothered explaining. He certainly didn't owe her an explanation, but when he seemed uncomfortable about the bimbo, she began to enjoy herself at his expense. "Obviously. My appearance and our departure put her nose out of joint." She couldn't remember ever feeling like this. Powerful.

"She wasn't part of the original plan, and never part of this plan." Jason did sound defensive. "And, I'm still not clear on Mosel's intense interest."

She ignored the Mosel comment and went straight to her concern. "Ah, yes the plan. There seem to be a lot of things that weren't part of *the plan*. What now?"

* * * *

Jason cringed as he handed the valet his claim check and waited in the shadows. A change of subject was warranted, so he decided to share the new plan.

Under his breath, he confided to her. "We'll go to your apartment, pick up what you need, then go back to my place. Tomorrow, Kate

and Jorge meet you. You do the sightseeing thing, Kate gets sick, and you're on a plane back to Boston before evening."

"What do you mean? I'm staying with you? That wasn't in the plan. And what about you tomorrow? Where will you go after I leave?"

"Like you said, the plans changed. There's a glitch. I arranged to meet Jacqueline tomorrow." Jason mumbled the last part.

"Excuse me? What did you just say?"

"There's a glitch. Kincaid. Why do you think he's here? He showed up on both our databases several times."

Jason purposely evaded her other question, using Kincaid to throw her off the Jacqueline part. Emily's impulse to question him about the other woman was a female thing.

"Not that part. You know which part I'm talking about. Jacqueline!" She sneered the name. "What did you tell her about us? She seemed way too pleased with herself when we left!"

"Look, Em, I'm not completely comfortable that you'll be in the clear tomorrow. What if the switch is discovered before you get home? I don't want you here if that happens. And I'm not sure what Kincaid is up to." Jason grabbed her arm to get her attention. "You have to understand, he can never see us together." He looked around to make sure no one could hear them.

Emily stared back at him, appearing confused, but not saying a word. Her dress was a mess, and her hair still escaped the pins.

"You'll be safer if you stay with me tonight. After our performance earlier, no one would question it. In fact, with the heat and the flames coming off us tonight, it would seem suspicious if we didn't end up together. Besides, I don't want Mosel showing up on your doorstep later, thinking I didn't finish tonight's job and left you wanting."

"God forbid!" Emily growled at him. "So, to all interested parties, tomorrow, you'll be with Jacqueline. After tonight our little thing will have been a one-night stand, a short fling? For some reason, even knowing this is all pretense, I hate that it'll be her."

"My usual M.O." He shrugged before he saw the flash of pain in her expression. He immediately regretted being the cause.

"Oooh, I see, stick with the usual." And she asked, "Is the blonde your usual M.O.?"

Jason pulled her aside, keeping his voice low so only she could hear. He ignored the blonde comment like she'd avoided the Mosel one.

He hated the sarcastic tone that crept into her voice. Now she understood why Jacqueline had released him so quickly, and he was a little embarrassed. "Damn it, Emily, I hate leaving you like this. Tomorrow with Jacqueline will mean nothing to me. Look, things got out of hand in the garden tonight. I feel..." Suddenly, he was unable to complete a thought. "I feel terrible about the way things happened, but if they found you alone out there and questioned you..."

He stumbled over his thoughts and couldn't shut up. "It had to be credible. You've been under surveillance all week, and they doubled up on you since you left the office today. I don't know if it's because Mosel has a personal interest and is keeping his eye on you because of me, or if he wants to make sure you're clean. It could be anything at this point—or nothing. I don't know anymore. I am sure someone entered your apartment earlier tonight."

He knew her well enough to recognize when that weepy feeling sneaked up on her. He watched how difficult it was for her to pull herself together, but she did. She asked, "And, what's the deal with Kincaid?"

"He shouldn't be here."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Jason ignored her and went on talking, "After you leave town, I have to stay behind for a while. They can't know when I arrive in Washington." He had to find out how Kincaid was mixed up in all this, but his former relationship with the senator was the black hole in

his life. Every ounce of regret he experienced was because of that man.

"While you're out with Mosel tomorrow, you'll catch me with Jacqueline when you stop for brunch. She's sure to tell him tonight where we're to meet. In order to undermine our relationship, he'll make sure to have you meet him at the same place. You'll catch me."

"How can you be sure he'll suggest the same meeting place?"

"I know him, and it's what I'd do." He continued, "But if he doesn't bring the location up, you'll have to casually suggest it. Later, after you catch us, you can admit what a big mistake you made with me."

He saw her contemplate that thought a little too long for his taste. "Emily, this is almost it. We've almost accomplished what we came here for. I can feel it. Remember?" He tilted her chin so she had to look up at him. He saw the tears threatening when she nodded.

He lowered his voice. "I have this position I have to fulfill here for the agency. Everything's taken care of, and I'm not due back in Boston until next week. Going back now would look suspicious. You have to keep Mosel hanging on until I get back."

He hoped the chip wouldn't become an issue. Not only would Emily be suspect, so would he. She'd be safe back in Boston, but he'd rather not risk his future cover if he didn't have to. He leaned into her so only she could hear him. "Besides, I'm staying on here with B team to redirect the evidence just to make sure. Right now, our guys and theirs are still watching us. So let's keep up the front. Once I get you out of here tomorrow, you'll be safe. And I'll be able to breathe easier."

He put an arm over her shoulder, nibbled on her ear, and whispered, "I need you safe, and I need to be clear of any suspicion to keep up my cover. Once you clear security in Nice, you're home free."

Jason took her arm as their valet brought the late model silver Porsche Carrere around. The young man cast him a knowing glance regarding Emily's appearance. Jason wanted to punch the kid just for looking.

* * * *

She still wasn't sure why Kincaid mattered, and she was sick thinking about Jason's rendezvous with the blonde tomorrow. What kind of performance would he have to give to convince her he wasn't interested in Emily beyond the challenge of one-upping Mosel? She knew he'd do what he had to. The pain stabbed, gutting her, spilling her old insecurities.

"Emily, I'm sorry about tonight, how it happened."

He said "how" not "that" it happened. Emily's heart settled back in her chest.

As Jason helped her into the car, she noticed how he carefully tried to block the valet's view of her exposed thighs, and everything else Emily's dress was no longer concealing.

In a crazy moment of rebellion, just to aggravate him, Emily shook off his hand, recouped a little dignity, and purposely flashed a little more leg and valley-deep cleavage for the boy. To further aggravate him, she added, "Don't be silly. I'm hardly the little wounded virgin. Been there, done that."

Jason visibly winced, undoubtedly remembering how he'd been the one to wound the virgin.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that." She softened her comment by acknowledging their past. "You've never done anything without my full consent and participation."

He seemed skeptical until she added, "Look, you gave me time to say no tonight. I responded. I believe the acknowledgement was clear. I gave it. You saw it. We did what was necessary—what we had to do for the mission. We're a team."

"Right, a team."

"Besides, you know I didn't fake the orgasm." Feeling bolder, Emily pushed a step further. "We, or at least I, enjoyed myself. I must admit to being briefly embarrassed—but the excitement was a real rush. It's not like I didn't know this assignment would be different, unorthodox, and certainly dangerous."

"I wasn't expecting the plan to turn like this."

She thought about what he'd just said, what she'd admitted. It was all true. "I'm fine, really. I guess I was just unprepared for the intensity of the situation. The danger and all. It's nothing I've ever done before."

The moment the complete concept hit him, his head swiveled, and he looked directly at her, narrowing his eyes. "I should hope not. And, it's not likely to be anything you'll ever do again."

His knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, apparently trying to get his emotions under control. "Emily, we have to have a talk."

"We are talking."

He rolled his eyes.

Softening for a moment, she realized he was taking this conversation way too much to heart. She touched his shoulder, giving in a little. "I've missed your visits since Dad died. This operation has been the closest we've been in a long time."

Jason relaxed at her touch, loosening up. Then his shoulders began shaking with suppressed laughter, and his eyes crinkled. "Oh, you can say that again."

She figured it must have been all that repressed tension causing him to find humor in the recent situation. Nodding in agreement, a grin split his face. "Right," he said, "you have that right. We've never gotten the chance to be quite this close! But, oh baby, have I wanted to for many a sleepless night."

Emily punched his arm. "Oh, for you it's easy to laugh, you had all your clothes on. Your backside wasn't hanging out for the world to see. Sure, you can joke now." * * * *

Jason knew he'd never let any other man near her now that he'd had her again. She was his. He was furious just thinking about the possibility. He was losing his perspective fast.

"When those guards showed up, it was like *déjà vu* on the steps. What is it about you and timing?" she asked him with a little smirk forming on her lips. "Let me tell you, at one point tonight, my position mortified me!"

Was she laughing, just a little? If Emily could take this like an adult, as a friend and co-worker, he could try to lighten up a little. Grinning broadly, his insides sparkled with pure male pleasure.

"Just 'one' point?" he asked, and burst out laughing at that. "And, which position would that have been, the one against the tree or the one on the ground against the stump?" The memory had him getting hot.

She punched him harder for that. Despite the light banter meant to relax an uncomfortable situation, the subject matter had blood rushing to fill his cock. He was hard and ready in a matter of seconds. Just thinking about her backside had him wanting her all over again. The conversation was heading downhill fast.

He squirmed in his seat to adjust himself. The tense atmosphere between them eased.

She sighed. "This is what's missing in our current relationship."

And in his life, he thought. Since he'd taken Emily's virginity and the car bomb had taken Avery's life, he'd punished himself. He'd been Jason Holmes when he'd made love to her that first time, and he'd lost that identity the night after her father was killed. He'd lived the last three years filled with guilt and in fear, not for himself, but for her safety. Now, here he was endangering her all over again.

But she was right. He missed this, too, so all he could do was agree and wish it had been otherwise. "I know."

* * * *

Emily saw the loss in his eyes when he glanced at her. She had to stop putting the blame all on him. They'd both suffered by being unable to acknowledge their feelings for each other. She hadn't been the only one who'd lost everything. He'd lost her father, too, and his relationship with the family, not to mention all his friendships.

And love, because certainly, they had once loved one another, even if it were impossible to define exactly how. They'd meant so much to each other in so many ways over the years, how could it be so easily dismissed.

"I know you were lonely, but it was too dangerous for me to be seen with you. I wouldn't risk it."

She nodded.

"Giving up without a fight?"

"What good would it do to continue this old argument? Tonight, I'm thankful for this much, your smile, and that you're trying to lighten my mood."

"Me? I'm just trying to get on your good side so I can get into your pants again."

"I thought you were through teasing me, Jason."

"Who said anything about teasing?" He met her gaze, the sparkle in his eyes taunted, his voice deepened, and the atmosphere thickened. His attention dropped to her body. "From my perspective, there wasn't any *teasing* going on tonight!"

That easily, her body responded. Meltdown hit her hard and fast, but she hid her reaction by taking another jab at him—this time without the same intensity as before.

He pulled away to avoid the jab, then return his hand to her knee and squeezed lightly. "Seriously, though, when I get back to DC, I need to see you. There's so much we need to discuss."

"It's okay, I'll be fine. You don't need to-"

"No, I do need to. *We* do need to talk. There's too much unsettled between us, both personal and business. Tonight got out of hand way too fast. I've never been in a situation where I couldn't control myself unless it's been with you. Where you're concerned, I don't have any control. You should know that from our past experience. My mind turns to mush. I'm desperate. I can't think about anything but having you."

She couldn't think of an appropriate response. "Hooray" didn't seem right under the circumstances, not with him sitting there declaring his uncontrollable...well, lust if nothing else. Was she supposed to be sorry? Not likely. So, she kept silent and let him continue.

"I care about you, Emily. I have for years. But we need to talk when we get home. There's something I have to take care of here first."

Emily's insides jumped with hope. If he touched her now, she wouldn't stop him, and she'd probably go off like a bottle rocket. Hell, she might just need to seduce him on her own. All those wasted years! One taste of him wasn't enough!

"Okay, we'll talk when we're both back on familiar ground. Right now, we're not dealing with reality. Let's just take tonight one step at a time." She sounded so sensible, so under control for someone who was very out of it.

Jason reached his hand out for hers and held fast. "Don't bet on what's reality and what's not. We're almost at your place. I have to call in to make sure no one's waiting for us."

Both of them kept quiet, lost in their own thoughts during the remainder of the drive. As they cruised along in traffic on Princess Grace Boulevard toward Emily's apartment, she thought about their relationship. During recent years, she'd done research for his team occasionally. Things only started thawing out between them recently, and his attitude began to change last year

"Jason, do you think the chip exchange will fool them?"

"You tell me. You're the authority in that department."

Even though the other computer specialist retired last month, there could've been an alternative method for the passing of the chip. Although she was the only female operative in the department with the ability, she wasn't really field material.

"There isn't any reason they would have to suspect anything. Until the sale is made, there won't be anyone testing it. And, even then, they may not recognize the different technology immediately."

She thought his performance with her would've been uncomfortable, especially because he'd distanced himself from her. Why had he chosen her for this mission?

"What's wrong?" Jason must have noticed her grimace.

"Nothing, really. Jason, why me?" He had to have suspected the intimacy of the plan in advance.

"You were the most qualified."

"No, really, why did you choose me?" If he wanted to keep his distance, this was the wrong way to do it.

"Emily, who would ever suspect you of anything devious?"

She thought about her plan the night she seduced him three years ago. "You." She asked the obvious question, "Where do I go from here?"

He gave her a questioning look.

Her former uncertainty turned into a bigger issue since this mission paired them up as lovers. "What am I supposed to think of all this?"

"We'll go to your apartment and get your stuff together."

"Damn, don't act stupid," she snapped. "You know I'm not talking about that. Just don't talk to me at all if you can't be honest."

"The plan is for you to leave first. With my valuable contacts all still here in Europe, my identity has to be protected at all costs, especially since the agency will need to utilize those contacts again." His identity couldn't be compromised. If Kincaid saw him, he'd probably recognize him. There's no way he'd have forgotten about him.

"I'm sorry. We'll do what we planned on doing, and when I get back, we'll take some time off together. We'll get our relationship settled."

Emily turned to look at him, stunned.

Jason glanced over at her and emphasized his meaning. "And Emily, in spite of how things have been between us, we do have a relationship."

"Okay, I'll wait." She'd trust him. Without understanding the whys of their plan, it was probably safer if she knew as little as possible while developing her affiliation to Mosel. "It's easier to act innocent if you are innocent," she said. Well, as innocent as possible under the circumstances.

"True enough."

"Tell me something, what was the purpose of bringing Mosel into this originally before I discovered his association with the terrorists?"

"Mosel also has contacts with the opposition terrorist group. We, or rather I, needed him to accept me. The easiest way to achieve that was to gain his respect by taking the woman who piqued his interest. It certainly appears you've piqued his."

Emily grunted.

"One thing about Mosel, he's ruled by his...let's just say his opinions and self-esteem are measured in his feminine conquests. I needed to win one he wanted badly and hadn't managed to get, in order to garner his attention."

She grunted again.

"I owe you big time, Emily. You made me top dog in the Mediterranean playboy set tonight." Jason smiled a tired smile at her, shifted gears, and pulled away from the intersection.

"Sure, like you needed any help in that arena."

Clarifying the agency position, he said, "More important, if we can keep our cover intact, maybe there's a good chance of

undermining the competitive terrorist group. And, just maybe, we can throw suspicion regarding the chip switch in another direction if we need to. Let them kill each other off. You're familiar with the phrase 'no honor among thieves?' I think it's the same among terrorists. The consequences of this job are perhaps the direct of all the jobs we've undertaken since the agency was established." Jason continued, "It is certainly the most dangerous for you."

He picked up his cell phone and called security. "Harrison, run the check on Em's place, we're almost there."

In the quiet of the car, Emily could hear Harrison's response. "Hey, Jason, tell Emily that was some performance tonight. She looked great. Did you know she could look like that?"

Jason growled. "If you keep shouting, she can hear you herself."

"All the guys want to be first on her dance card." Jason heard that comment in the background from the rookie before Harrison could shut him up.

This subject Jason wasn't willing to discuss, let alone with Emily sitting right next to him able to hear every word. She blushed so brightly it was visible in the dim interior of the car. He cleared his throat again, blocking the sound from the other end of the conversation, but the rookie rambled on while Jason quizzed Harrison.

"We didn't have a great vantage point to watch the goings-on, but it looked damned realistic from my perspective. I was rooting for you, boss." Jason tried to halt the kid's runaway mouth by coughing into the phone.

Then he grimaced as he heard the rookie in the background again. "Half the security guys are betting it was the real thing going down."

Jason's jaw clenched with anger. "Harrison, I'm gonna kill him when I get him alone." The rookie was out of line.

"Just cover our backs. And, Harrison, tell the others to shut up and pay attention to what they're supposed to be doing. We're doing our jobs—tell them to do theirs." Was the snap of control like protesting too much? Would the quick retort only confirm the speculations the rest of the team were making? Jason regained control and said more calmly, "We don't have time to discuss much now, we're almost out front."

He popped the phone back into his jacket pocket, preventing any further comments. He knew the speculation from her teammates made Emily uncomfortable. He leaned across the console, patting her knee supportively, turning to a professional approach.

"Em, keep a low profile when we get out. We'll go in the back as soon as we're cleared. Just remember, as long as you've been the one person involved with the chip, we could both be in real danger. You know what that would mean to the project."

Harrison rang back with the all-clear code. Several low rings, coming from his jacket, interrupted Jason. "Okay, we're ready, let's go. Remember what I said. The guys checked out everything, but you can never be too sure."

No one knew that better than Jason. After what went down with Em's father, he'd never have enough fail-safes in place to suit him. Going in through the back would avoid the possibility of neighbor interference. Emily had made friends with a few of the tenants, but old Monsieur Demaret, the man in the apartment at the downstairs entry, seemed particularly protective of her. Now wouldn't be the time to explain why her hair was askew and her dress split to her navel.

They checked around. Coast clear.

* * * *

Once inside her own place, Emily took a deep breath, leaned against the closed door, and sighed. The weariness from the tension began to set in almost immediately. She couldn't move. Her knees were like jelly. Watching Jason check out the apartment, his gun in his hand, she wasn't sure the weakness she experienced was a result of the evening's events, or his effect on her. Just watching him, so unruffled, made her ache for him all over again.

Braced against the door, not sure she could accommodate the offer she was about to make, Emily asked, "So, do you want anything?"

"You better rephrase that offer if you don't want to end up on your back, right here, right now."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

"Something to drink? Eat?"

"Oh." Jason had just finished checking the bedroom and small bathroom when he heard Emily's offer. She was killing him. Cautiously, before he turned to glance at Emily over his shoulder, he took a deep breath. Being alone with her set off all sorts of alarms in his head. This time, what would he use as an excuse? He turned and exhaled. When he saw her exhausted expression, his attitude switched from sex to concern. Emily was moments from collapse.

"Down, boy," he thought to himself. Now wasn't the time to jump her bones. She was dead on her feet and her dress was split to her navel. He'd done that, but he didn't want to think about it right now. Everything except Emily could wait.

He walked over to her, slowly taking her around the waist. His first instinct was to support her, but when the sensation of her nearness and scent surrounded him, he brought his arms around her and held her for his own satisfaction. At first she shivered in his arms, and then she relaxed against him. Up to this point, she must have been operating on pure adrenaline. Running his hands over her shoulders, his face buried in her hair, Jason kept reminding himself she wasn't used to this intrigue. Computers were her specialty, nice, safe computers.

He lifted his lips from her forehead and stared down at her, saying, "Thanks, I could use a chilled glass of wine. How about you? Just point me in the right direction. I'm capable of finding my way around your kitchen while you get cleaned up." "There're several bottles in the wine cooler. Pick whatever you like." She told him where the glasses were as he led her into the bedroom.

"A nice warm bath will do you a world of good. Go ahead, get the kinks out, and I'll go scrounge up food and that wine while you relax. I'll help you get your stuff together later."

Jason turned on the tub water and lit the rose-scented candles sitting on the ledge before he went into the kitchen to pour the wine. He returned, handed her a glass, and then left her to herself. He didn't trust himself to let her relax. If he stayed a second longer, they'd both be in that tub, and he was sure there would be no relaxing going on.

"That bath never looked so enticing. A nice soak is all I need." Emily dragged her hand through the bubbles and looked at the steaming tub like it was a life line.

"Enjoy the ambiance while I see to dinner." Jason chuckled, turned without looking back, and closed the door behind him.

Emily ached all over, but mostly with desire. The very fiber of her being still reached out for him as she took the scrap of what was left of her dress from her shoulders, dropped it to the floor, and stepped into the fragrant water.

She couldn't stop craving him, the feel of his hands, his scent, his heat. Her body screamed for more. Even though the discomfort from the evening's adventures ran from tip to toe, she still wanted more. The hot bubbling water felt wonderful all over her sensitive skin.

She slipped farther down in the tub, realizing she had developed an insatiable sexual appetite for this man as well as rekindled her old emotional need for him. During certain moments tonight, he seemed to demonstrate similar feelings toward her. Was it possible he felt the same way?

Emily lathered the washcloth with the fragrant soap—something sandalwoodsy and rosemaryish. She giggled. Were those even words? Maybe not, but they were two conflicting scents, both invigorating and relaxing at the same time. As she scrubbed her body with the strange herbal mixture, she thought of the similarity between the fragrant soap and the vibes Jason gave off. The inner turmoil she felt began to subside a little, even though his conflicting behavior confused her.

For many years, he'd tried to play the older brother role, and he could be just as annoying as one, too. Between Jason and her father, the few times in high school when she'd tried to date, the poor guys were too intimidated to ask her out a second time. Coming to the house once was usually enough.

She put her head in her hands thinking about tonight. "Brotherly?" Definitely not tonight. That "brother" thing ended long ago. It never worked for her, anyway. She spent night after night and year after year mooning over him like a starstruck teenager. Hell, she was a teenager then, what was her excuse now? She thought back to when he came home the weekend before his graduation from Annapolis, dressed up in his white Naval uniform. Even thinking back now, she felt a tingle of warmth flowing through her. She was so thrilled when he admitted he'd missed her and he spun her around in his arms. Jason wasn't usually that demonstrative. In fact, he even seemed surprised at himself that day. He was out of the country a lot after that.

Lazing back in the tub, Emily couldn't keep a smile off her lips. Ah, the *coup de gras*. Her best friends in high school, Liz and Amy, lived off the encounter of Jason kissing her smack on the mouth for a week. And she lived off it for years.

She considered the reason for her inability to gauge him. Too many times, he'd acted like a complete jerk, as if being in her presence was unbearable. So typically male, he remained aloof, almost cold to her in the presence of others. As she got older, there was no time for the old wrestling, hugging, or touching. The hug and buss in front of her friends was the last time they touched. Well, until the night she seduced him. His arrogant, distant attitude stopped when he asked her to join this mission. He treated her in a professional, respectful manner at all times while they investigated the possibility of infiltrating the complex she robbed today. She was part of a team, his team. A year of groundwork had been laid for tonight's heist before he'd brought her on board.

The knock on the door brought Emily back to the present. She jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Isn't that water cooling off?" Without hesitating, Jason stepped into the bathroom, holding the huge bath sheet out for her. He wrapped her in his arms as he enveloped her in the towel, and she sank into the security of his embrace with a sense of being home at last, even if only for a moment.

He briefly brushed his lips across her forehead, his voice rough again. "Hungry?"

"Mmm, starved."

"Come on, I'll feed you."

Jason had transformed the dining room area into what appeared to be an intimate setting. The small table was set, and her sterile looking dining area looked completely altered into a warm bistro. Candles provided a muted light, dancing over and enhancing the colors of the plants she had scattered around the room. "Wow!"

"Champagne?" Jason asked, handing her a fluted glass.

Emily stood dumbfounded, puzzled. "Where did this come from? How long was I asleep in the tub? I feel like Rip Van Winkle." She glanced down at her hands to confirm her statement. "If I was in there that long, as long as all this should have taken to prepare, I would be more waterlogged than I am." She eyed him suspiciously. "I know I didn't have champagne in this apartment when I left this evening."

Jason kept moving around her kitchen, bringing things into the dining area as he moved from one room to the other. "I sent Harrison for a few things.

"Well, I'm starving and, whatever this is, it smells heavenly." Emily moved to sit down at the table. The towel Jason had wrapped her in was still in her one hand, the champagne glass in the other. She dropped the towel to the floor and placed the fluted glass on the table so she could adjust the robe she threw on on the way out of the bathroom.

Then she picked at the plate in front of her, stabbing a small piece of food from the top. The sauce covering what appeared to be some sort of seafood crepe was delicious. Emily inspected the other food with interest. As she investigated, she waited for Jason to sit. When he didn't, she looked up. He stood staring, watching her lick the sauce from her finger. He had the champagne bottle gripped by the neck, his knuckles white with pressure, a dark, hungry look on his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he grumbled, turning his back to her.

"Spit it out."

"You're killing me here," he admitted.

She raised a brow at him.

"I want you so much." He shrugged. "I have a lot to make up for, including my earlier bumbling attempt at making love to you. You should have a soft mattress to lie on. I want you naked beneath me with no bugs, dirt, or spectators."

She frowned. "Right, the spectators."

"But you're hungry and tense and exhausted, and I'm such a bastard." Jason shook his head as if to clear it. Only after his speech did he chance glancing back at her. His concentration refocused on her mouth, and she finished seductively licking her fingers.

"I'm just being selfish." His voice went gravelly, but a hopeful expression crossed his face.

The statement sent every thought of food from her mind when she saw the expression on his face. She sucked on her finger and thought of tasting him. The smoldering look Jason gave her quickly took her mind off the table and set her body on fire. She ran her tongue over her lips, stood up, and dropped the robe from her shoulders as she approached him slowly. "I'm not that hungry right now, for food, that is. It's you I want to dine on." She wiggled her finger in his direction. "Come here, I'm naked." She looked around. "Now, where's that bed?"

Jason devoured her naked body with his eyes. When she got close enough, he moved up against her so he could resort to using his hands and mouth. "How did my skinny little angel turn into this?" he asked, and handed her the bottle of champagne.

She squealed when the cold pressed against her breast, and he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom, whispering in her ear, "It would be a shame to let the champagne go flat. We'll have plenty of uses for it tonight."

She was so hot by the time he dripped some of the chilled bubbling liquid over her breasts, she only gasped from relief, imagining the steam rising from her body as it dripped down her breasts. His mouth and tongue soon followed, but she wanted to see him, touch him. "Take off your clothes, now. I want to look at you, it's my turn."

Jason shook his head and held her wrists, stilling her roaming hands. "Not this time. I want this to last, and if you touch me it'll be over way too fast." A sound like a low growl rumbled from his chest. "No control around you. Remember? Do it my way now, then we'll try your way, later, okay?"

She wasn't having it all his way. "Jason, please take your clothes off before I rip them off you."

Emily felt out of control, and Jason still had both her hands pinned over her head pressed into the pillow. The sensation of his rough clothes against her sensitive skin felt arousing and sensuous.

"Okay," he relented. "But don't move."

Emily acquiesced, unable to breathe while she watched him peel the clothes away, layer by layer, down to his tan flesh. Rippling muscles and broad, thick shoulders flexed as he moved. Her gaze followed each movement and then slipped lower, tracing a faint darkened line of hair leading to his groin, and his jutting cock.

Oh, wow! She'd never seen him naked before, not fully anyway. He'd bulked up into a man in three years. Her imagination had never pictured anything like this. He was a vision, magnificent in all his powerful male beauty as he climbed on the bed and straddled her.

Jason smoothed her hair around her face, spreading it over the pillow. The tenderness made her tremble with expectation. Then he took her right hand and brought it to her breast, positioning her thumb and forefinger at her own nipple. She did as he directed, unable to move, and then she smiled, not daring to remove her hands from where he had placed them on her body. She wouldn't chance ending this too soon as she examined his completely aroused body.

He manipulated her fingers in his as he brought his mouth down to her other breast and licked. She arched her back, reaching toward him, shuddering as he teased her nipple. In her stimulated state she probably would have preferred taking this hard and fast, but he seemed content to drive her crazy with a slow deliberate assault. She twitched.

"No, don't move. You agreed. Stay right where I put you." And then he touched her knees, gently separating them until she opened to his view. *Oh, God.* She should be embarrassed, but she wanted him to see what he did to her, see how she craved him.

He cupped her, slipping two fingers inside her to test her reaction. Her engorged pink nub swelled at his soft touch. The sensation made her want to beg for more. But it wasn't necessary. He bent down over her mound, parted her curls, and then he lowered his face to nuzzle her. His lips brushed over her sensitive nub and kissed her there. Nothing had ever felt so good, and then he whipped his tongue over the throbbing tissue emerging from between her swollen, throbbing lips, and she felt the liquid heat pour through her body and pool inside her sex. A sensation like an electric shock shot up her spine, and she screamed. He held her down, exploring her entrance with his tongue, and when he suckled her clitoris once more, she screamed. He licked, suckled, nipped. She reached for him again, this time digging her fingers into his shoulders. He stilled her by holding her hips in place and feasted on her until she was frantic, thrashing uncontrollably beneath his mouth and begging, begging for anything.

She arched into him again. This experience was more than she bargained for. Could she endure this much pleasure? "Please, Jason, please, now, now, don't make me wait."

He took her left hand and placed her middle finger against the pulsing nub at her entrance, pressing, rubbing, rotating, and he stepped back while she groaned and writhed beneath her own hands.

Watching him watching her was killing her. This was more erotic than anything she'd ever imagined. She looked her fill as he cupped his balls in one hand and stroked his other hand up his cock.

She tried to imprint this moment to memory. His masculine beauty, his dark brown chest hair, the trail dividing those perfect abs, and the short, tight curls surrounding his long, thick erection.

His hand wrapped around his shaft and he pumped once, twice.

She wiggled her eyebrows and then gave him a shy smile. "Don't make me beg. Get over here. We'll take more time later, and I promise I'll make it worth your while." She bribed him with a bigger grin and crossed her bare breast on the promise.

Jason shook his head, and he gave her his famous half smile, dimple and all. "This time's just for you, babe." With that, he bent his head and feasted on her folds with his mouth and his tongue, taking her until she screamed out his name and a curse. Her body shuddered and spasmed with the power of her release.

Only then did Jason allow himself to consider taking his own satisfaction. It was pleasure enough knowing he could finally make love to her the way he'd always imagined.

He rose, straddling her again. This time he teased her mouth with his lips and his tongue, not allowing their bodies to make contact. She arched, struggling to bring them skin to skin, but he wound his fingers with hers and kissed her. Then he relaxed his arms, lowering his body down to hers, covering her body with his. He moved between her spread thighs, pressing against her wet velvet opening, and kissed her soft lips. He wanted to merge soul deep with her and when she responded with as scalding a kiss as he'd delivered, he thrust deep. Finally he realized he was at home in her arms and hopelessly in love with her.

Her tight, moist heat welcomed his aching, hard cock as he drove her higher, wanting to give her more, give her all he'd withheld these three long years.

She returned his thrusts and dug her nails into his back, gripping him like she'd never release him. He loved the way her climax clenched around his cock like a fist, taking everything he had to control his need. "Come again for me, Emily," he whispered. "Come again. Say my name."

The pressure built, and he held back, waiting for the thrusts to take her to the next level. Her breathing was labored, and he knew she was close. He slipped his hand between their bodies, touched her sensitive flesh, and she arched, stiffening.

She muffled her screams against his shoulder as the first wave of her orgasm brought him to his. "Jaaaason!"

His name on her lips made him smile as the last of his orgasm shot into her and they both collapsed onto the mattress.

She had no idea what she did to him, what she meant to him, how she made him feel whole, peaceful, completed. She smoothed the edges of life for him, and he couldn't tell her. Not yet. But soon, though. If only it wouldn't be too late.

"I'm starving." She pushed his weight off her, rolling him to one side. "Get up." Emily rolled off the bed in a heap. "Let's go see if that scrumptious food can withstand the rigors of microwave reheating."

She popped out of bed, jiggling just enough to force Jason to avert his attention. They'd end up dying of starvation here in bed if his body had any say in the matter. He had just finished with her again and felt himself firming up from just looking at her ripe little body. The groan escaped, but he squeezed his eyes shut. He let her bounce naked into the kitchen as he headed for a cold shower. They still needed to get to his yacht tonight. There was no way he'd be able to protect her here if he needed to.

Actually, the food reheated well, and Jason tried not to. Reheat, that is. He sent Emily into the shower after they finished eating. "Let's get out of here before I start all over again. We'll have the rest of the night at my place, and I'll feel better when I feel safer."

"You could feel better?" she teased him, running her hands over his bare butt.

He reached back and smacked her hand away. When she emerged from the shower, he had her clothes laid out, a backpack, and her suitcase in hand.

Emily dressed quickly into her jeans and tank top, slipping on her sandals and hopping from one foot to the next as she headed for the door. She took an opportunity to grab his butt playfully again. "Yes, you are feeling better all the time!" She giggled.

Jason opened the door. "Show a little respect." He couldn't suppress the smile. Her light-hearted teasing soothed his wariness. He needed this—he needed her. No one messed with his head like she did.

He had to laugh at her antics before he tried a more serious approach. "I called Harrison. He and the team are clearing us to move out of here within five minutes. It should take us that long just to get downstairs. Remember, don't make a sound. I don't want to have to spend time on lengthy explanations."

Jason followed closely behind Emily while making their way to the stairwell. He wanted to avoid the elevator and any possible noise. Although her neighbor watched TV with the sound turned up, there was always the possibility someone with better hearing would pick up the old lift's groan. The neighbor's TV blasted loudly enough to cover the squeaky door to the stairwell. It sounded like something out of an old horror movie.

Jason pushed her through the opening and practically sent her sprawling down the stairs in his haste. He took hold of her upper arm to keep her from toppling over. "Sorry, I heard the elevator door open."

Emily stepped down the stairs cautiously in the dimly lit stairwell. "Who would be coming into the building at this hour?" she whispered. "Most of my neighbors don't go out socially, and if they go out at all, they're usually home by this time."

As they reached the lower landing, Jason's phone began to vibrate against his chest. He put his hand out to stop her at the last step. Putting his finger to his lips, he indicated his coat pocket. He pulled the phone out and put it to his ear without saying a word. He listened, closed it, and placed it back in his pocket. He frowned at Emily, still preventing her from moving forward. He waited. The phone vibrated again, and this time Jason moved Emily out toward the front door, blocking her body with his as he replaced the phone.

"Someone's out front watching your apartment. Leave the bag in the hallway. Harrison will come back for it. I have the backpack." They'd need to make it out the back in a hurry, and they didn't need any excess baggage slowing them down. A team member would bring her bag to them later. He'd keep her with him until she left with Kate and Jorge in the morning.

Jason took Emily's arm and stilled her against the side of the building with his body as he listened for the men he knew still searched for them. Pulling her against him through the shadows, they ran to his waiting car. He bent to whisper in her ear. "This is really important. I'd just as soon not have any of those goons to deal with. Who knows what's going on in their minds? Hopefully if they didn't notice us leave, they'll expect me to stay here all night. We'll give them the slip. I'd rather not have them show up at my place, and I don't feel like staying up all night here worrying about what they're doing."

Emily's eyes were large as dinner plates, and he could see her pulse throbbing in the little crevice at her neck. He wanted to calm her, reassure her. But he knew danger still threatened.

"I have a private place for us to stay safely until we meet Kate and Jorge in the morning. Her designer job and Jorge's position with Columbia University make them unlikely candidates for corporate espionage, so they're safe."

For outward appearances, their plans remained as normal as possible. Because a multitude of available data existed regarding the three friends' long-standing relationship, everyone felt comfortable that their backgrounds were clean and their cover secure.

"Okay. Do they know about this change?"

"Yes, I had Harrison get a message to Jorge with the details." Jason helped her into the car.

He was satisfied with his new plan to get Emily back to Boston, hopefully before anyone suspected the nanotech chip was switched and the information compromised. Their original plan called for her to tour France, traveling up to Paris for a few days with her old friends. But that was before they knew about Kincaid. Kate's fake illness was going to interrupt their plans in order to get them out of the country.

"I need to get you all back to the US and safety as soon as possible. Kincaid shouldn't be here." He couldn't risk being seen by the one man who knew he wasn't Jason DesJardin.

They rounded the corner to Harrison's car, and Jason found Emily's bag already in the backseat. He slipped back into the driver's side, checked his mirrors before pulling into the dark back alley, and kept his headlamps off.

"Harrison is going to have one of the other team members take my car to my place later. That should keep any potential tails busy." He reached over to pat Emily's knee, ostensibly to reassure her, but left his hand there for his own peace of mind. She affectionately put her hand over his and squeezed. The gesture reassured them both.

Jason considered their plans in his head. There was enough evidence to make the whole trip appear totally innocent. When Kate feigned illness tomorrow, her hospital arrangements made everything credible. After the doctor examined her, Dr. Rincon knew to recommend the ambulance trip to the heliport and then the helicopter to the airport in Nice. From there, it was a straight trip to Massachusetts General and home.

"You're thinking too much." Emily tried to reassure him. "Stop worrying. I'll be careful. They aren't going to suspect anything for awhile, at least until I'm back at the farm and maybe not even then. There's nothing to link the chip degradation to me, anymore than to anyone else who had access to it. Does your informant tell you when he thinks the terrorists plan to take possession of the chip and make the first strike?"

Jason shook his head in the dark as he drove through the back alley streets of the city. His forehead creased in worry. "That's just it. They're real careful with everyone who has worked anywhere near that project. If it wasn't for Mosel's attraction to you, you wouldn't have had the freedom to come and go as you pleased."

She could feel the muscles of his leg bristle with tension beneath her hand. Latent jealousy, she surmised. She leaned over and kissed his neck. "It'll be all right. And we'll find the men who were responsible for that night."

As the car moved to the larger streets, Jason turned on the headlights and opened the windows. The soft Mediterranean air slipped past. They drove along the scenic boulevard, the hills above twinkling with lights reflected off the dark sea below. "Where are we going?" Emily asked, sounding curious now.

"I thought we'd stay someplace a little out of the way. My place is too obvious. There's a safe house, well, not exactly a house, down by the yacht basin." He pulled into the parking lot where nothing but multimillion dollar yachts were moored in the quiet cove, just off the docks.

"Not a boat," Emily mumbled under her breath.

"Grab your backpack. I just need to check in with Harrison." He pulled out his cell phone and walked toward the skiff at the nearest point on the illuminated dock. Emily could see him nod but couldn't make out his words. "Is everything set?" Jason asked Harrison.

"Yeah, everything checked out. The team went over everything, and they'll be keeping watch all night. You can relax. We have your backs, for tonight anyway."

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Jason took her bag and threw it over his shoulder as he helped her into the small boat. He followed her down into the skiff and untied the rope. Emily went to the other rope and helped. Years sailing and boating back in Eatons Landing came back naturally. Jason went to the back and started the engine as Emily settled next to him. They headed for an absolutely gorgeous yacht some thirty yards from the wharf.

"This is just enough room for the team to keep the perimeter under surveillance. We're surrounded by open water and safe."

Déjà vu. She wanted to freak out, but Jason didn't notice. "Okay, but what about fireworks?"

The scowl that followed her question matched his. "You know fireworks didn't blow up Mosel's boat as well as I do. I'm sure no one knows we're here tonight. Harrison says your apartment is still staked out."

He pulled his gun from his back waistband and put it in Emily's hand. "Until we get aboard, you hold onto this and stay sharp."

She turned over the heavy gun in her hands, examining it. "I'd rather use my own."

"Unfortunately, my hands are full and yours is in the bag." He maneuvered the skiff alongside a larger vessel.

She noticed the name, "My Angel." She remembered admiring it several times when she was aboard Mosel's. Was this the surveillance location?

While Jason secured the smaller craft to the larger one, he gave her a hand up. She climbed the steps up to the upper deck. Once aboard, he took the gun back and shoved it back in his waistband. His hand remained possessively on the small of her back as he directed her to the main cabin. Chills quickly spread through her in anticipation.

Jason took Emily's back pack from her and tossed it on the chair beside the small, low table, the same place where he set his gun. "Let me get you something to drink while we review the plans for tomorrow. What can I get you?"

Emily sat down in a pale oyster chaise. Now that they were here she let herself relax. She leaned back and flipped off her shoes before tucking her feet beneath her. "I'm fine, maybe just some Evian water."

She hoped shadows beneath her eyes didn't show the strain of the past few days. Exhaling and glancing around, she said, "Wow." Taking in the opulence of her surroundings for the first time, she realized this yacht was more upscale than Mosel's. "Hmm. This place is great. Is it 'ours?" The suite was decorated in light-colored shades of white against the deep, rich dark tones of the wooden trim.

"No." Jason pulled a bottle of Perrier water from a small refrigerator under the bar. "This okay? Looks like this is it. I didn't restock."

She nodded. "Anything's fine with me."

He unscrewed the top of the bottle, poured the fizzing contents into a glass of ice, and handed it to her before answering her question. "This vessel is mine, actually. Part of the image I portray." He shrugged, and she raised one brow at his answer.

"Real estate's been lucrative?"

"You probably don't remember, but you've been here before."

Emily frowned, and then looked as if something registered. "Oh, yes. Harrison picked us up the night of the explosion in this craft. Right?"

"Yup, this was it. Listen up, now." Jason turned all business, sitting forward in his chair across from her with his elbows on his

spread knees, his hands clasped as if in prayer. "The plan is for the three of you to visit every touristy spot in the city before Kate feigns a mysterious ailment. She should wait until you're at lunch with Mosel. Then, you and Jorge will take her to the Princess Grace Hospital. Take a cab, if you have to. But I think Mosel will probably arrange transportation.

"When you get to the hospital ask for Dr. Anjanette Rincon. She'll be waiting. She knows what to do. After she examines Kate, she'll suggest that Kate return home to be seen by her regular physician. We'll get Kate confirmed with something serious enough that you'd be expected to accompany her."

Jason got up and paced the small space between the table and the bar, reciting the arrangements clearly.

"How will we leave the hospital?" Emily questioned, taking a sip of the bubbling Perrier.

"Dr. Rincon will take care of that. She's got all the instructions. She'll fill you in with the details when you get there. We're comfortable with the plan. After all, you wouldn't possibly be expected to let your sister out of your sight under the circumstances. Everyone knows how close you two are." Jason finally stopped pacing like a caged animal and sat down beside Emily, a cold beer in his hand.

"The doctor will make the necessary preparations for transportation via ambulance to the heliport, then on to the airport in Nice. Mosel will probably try to assist. Let him. Rincon will make sure he follows her orders. Don't talk to him yourself. At the Nice airport, you, Kate, and Jorge will take a private chartered flight back to Boston. Massachusetts General will be awaiting your arrival."

"What are we going to do when they find out there's nothing wrong with Kate?"

"Don't worry, our contacts are set up to meet you when you arrive in Boston. You're to be taken directly back to the agency for debriefing. Kate and Jorge will be secreted out of the hospital together later. After your debriefing, you're to meet them at the farm. Harrison and the boys will all be there by then."

"And you'll join me there in what, two weeks?" Emily asked.

"Yes, as far as I know, barring any complications," he replied hesitantly. "There are a few loose ends I have to tie up here, first." Circumstances had changed, and he felt the need to share some of his speculations with her before she got back to Boston. He worried that further knowledge could be dangerous for her, but he had an idea, and if she went along with him, it would improve his chances of exposing Avery's murderer. Once that was done, he'd be able to move on with his life, and hopefully that would include her.

"Emily, think about this carefully before you agree. I want to give you information, and I have a plan that would benefit from your help. But here's the drawback. When you return to go through debriefing, you'll have to do it without divulging our plan."

"Whatever you think. When I go through debriefing, will they know if I'm withholding information?"

"Maybe. They'll suspect something. I believe your inexperience and the 'post mission' fear factor will fool them. The emotional state caused from suppressing our information will probably pass for excitement and nervousness over your first debriefing.

"If there's any doubt in your mind about pulling this off, tell me now. The information and the setup of this plan are instrumental in capturing the people responsible for your father's death. The agency can't know what we're up to. Someone in the agency is up to his eyeballs in your father's death."

He paced, lecturing. "I know that's a lot of pressure to put on you, but I don't think I can pull this off without you." That was an unfair tactic, but he was a desperate man.

They both knew she couldn't turn him down, no matter what he wanted. "It will mean you'll have to continue to play Mosel—you'll have to gain his trust and his interest again. Can you con him all the way to Eatons Landing?"

"If you think for one minute we can get the people responsible for my father's murder, I could do anything."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Before you jump into this, remember for a minute what happened the last time you were alone with Mosel. You're attracted to him."

"Yes, I won't deny it. He's a remarkable man."

"And maybe a killer."

Emily could see the concern in Jason's eyes. He knew she'd felt a sexual attraction to Mosel back then. There was no denying that she may have succumbed to Mosel's seduction. Then there was the unknown factor. Who blew up the yacht? Someone wanted Mosel dead—or was it her someone wanted dead?

She walked over to him and took his hand. "We don't know who all the players are, do we?"

"No," Jason murmured. "It appears unknown levels of activities are taking place, and that scares the shit out of me." He grabbed her arms and turned her toward him so she could see just how serious he was. "Are you sure about this? Can you pull this off?" He turned away, and his voice cracked forcing him to stop on the next sentence. "Because if anything happens to you..." He couldn't finish his thought. He dropped his head, his shoulders slumped, his hands fell to his side.

Emily stroked his face. "He was my father."

Jason glanced back at her, composing himself, he nodded. "And you remember what we agreed? Can you handle a little white lie to a lie detector?"

"For this I can!" A stubborn expression masked her fear.

Jason picked up the bottle he'd placed on the bar, downed his beer, and sat pointing the neck of his empty bottle up at her. He looked directly into her eyes, warning. "Don't get so cocky. Remember, there's a leak in the agency, and Franklin will be the one questioning you. He's a pro. Debriefing is his specialty." Her expression held. "Bringing my father's assassin to justice is enough motivation for me. For that, I could bald-face lie to Saint Peter at the pearly gates, and he'd never know it!"

"Why does that not pacify me?" Jason put his bottle on the bar and returned to sit next to her. "Just make sure you never try it with me again."

He was thinking about the night he hauled Mosel and her out of the water, both practically naked. She raised her brows at him. "Does that go both ways? Cause there's plenty I don't think you're telling me."

"I'm your boss." The dimple started. "Your clearance isn't as high as mine. I'll never be able to tell you everything." His smile teased, but she was out of energy for this kind of banter.

"Right, I get it. Just don't think you can play that card on a personal level with me." The last of her sentence drifted off into a low mumble. "I believe in tit for tat. Don't ever forget that."

She had dozed off talking to him, unable to raise her heavy lids. He peeked at her through her lashes. She smiled a lazy grin at him. He lifted her easily and carried her to the bed, gently depositing her there. Jason removed her clothes, placed a loose throw over her, and then went back to the galley and grabbed another beer.

He sat at the table and reviewed his facts. Within the week, Emily would be securely back at Eatons Landing, and then he'd meet up with her as soon as he could. Jointly, they would entrap the agency mole. They would discover Avery's killer. Whoever had been involved when that bomb was planted three years ago had also given up information to the terrorists related to the nanochip technology. And they planned to sell it through Mosel's company.

Someone in the agency, or with close ties to the agency, had given them up that night. Avery had the meeting with Ahmet, who was going to give them the terrorist contact's name.

According to the information Jason gathered, discovery of the chip switch would take a couple of weeks at least, maybe longer, before anything even seemed suspicious. Hopefully they would have enough information to intercept the terrorists before they planned to deliver the chip to headquarters. Besides Emily, now Professor Rankin was the only person capable of identifying the fake, and the US had him back. At least Jason could breathe easily on that count.

Jason knew Mosel's contact at the agency revealed Avery Holmes's identity to the Eastern European terrorist group. But he wanted the team member who gave Avery's identity to Mosel's contact. This time Jason would be ready to pick up Mosel's DC contact before he made his getaway.

Jason didn't think Mosel was involved directly with Avery's murder. But whoever was behind the bombing and the chip sale was endangering the world, and Mosel was a freelance weapons dealer without conscience. If he didn't broker it, someone else would. That's just the way the rotten underworld worked. Mosel always worked for the highest bidder. From what they'd been able to uncover, he didn't concern himself with consequences, or what he was doing when he put the information out there. He was detached, emotionally uninvolved. It was his contact, the insider, Jason blamed. Jason wanted that man. The man in the agency.

And he thought he knew who it might be, but he'd need irrefutable evidence, unquestionable proof, and that would take setting one more trap. Mosel's attachment to Emily was unusual for the man. He'd need her to play Mosel for a little bit longer, but very carefully. When Mosel showed up in DC, it would take more selfcontrol than Jason thought he had to set up and follow through with this plan. Mosel's very presence in all this was a wild card and they couldn't afford any surprises. Although he expected Mosel to be attracted to Emily, he'd never expected him to be this obsessed. Jason smiled. She sizzled. In hindsight, why shouldn't the man be just as infatuated as Jason was? Mosel's feelings worked to their advantage, but personally, it worried him. It made the plan easier in one way, but more difficult in another. He didn't want to take any chances with Emily, but the painful rehashing of her father's assassination had gone on long enough for both of them. He had to expose the traitor.

Because he couldn't be seen with Emily, she'd be on her own after tomorrow. He'd called in Cade and the boys to watch over her when he wasn't around. She'd be safe with them until he could get home.

Jason turned off the lights, went into the cabin, and undressed. Emily was curled up with her back to him under the throw. Touching her was becoming an elemental need for him. He slid in behind her and held her against him, pressing his erection between her thighs.

Her body responded, turning into his. Her warm breath flicked over his lips, her hands glided down his chest and abs until she stroked him in one hand and cupped him with her other. Her lips brushed his chest as she rolled him to his back and traced the path her hands had taken moments earlier with her tongue. When her lips surrounded the crown of his cock, Jason did everything he could to keep from thrusting the way he wanted. Instead, he forced himself to lie back and allow her to torture him in the most delicious ways imaginable. He didn't want to know where she'd learned her techniques, but she was one of the best, damn her. So innocent, so curious, so ravenous, so fucking determined.

He gripped her head in his hands and lifted her face. "Come up here and kiss me."

"If you insist." She glided up his body one slow inch at a time, kissing along the way, and dragging her breasts against his skin as she went, until at last, she straddled his waist. He could feel her hot, wet core pressed against his lower abdomen. The tension building inside him was pure agony. She was a natural at this type of seduction, too good for his own good. He needed to be inside her, and he needed it now.

"Mount me. Ride me. Take control, Em."

She rose up, scraping her nails lightly over his nipples and then down his sides as she did. He shivered as the sensation sent ripples to the base of his spine.

She scooted behind his cock and played with him, ringing the tip and stroking him lightly. He gripped his self-control tight as she rose up on her knees, and then sank down over his erect shaft, slowly encompassing him in agonizingly exquisite heat. When he was entirely seated inside her, he arched up, thrusting his full length deep, his balls pressed against her bottom, and his cockhead touching her womb. Damn, she was wet, tight, and hot. This angle gave her the control to pump, and he liked how she felt clenching him and taking him deeper with her rhythm. Her movements started slow as he gripped her hips in his hands, guiding her until she built up the momentum herself with the passion growing within him. Her tempo kicked up, and she increased the pace. But he needed more. He flipped her to her back with one swift movement and held her wrists above her head. He paused at her entrance, then pressed himself into her, hard and deep, with one swift thrust, and then he started the quick, firm strokes that they would need to bring them both to orgasm. He struggled, holding off the rising pressure behind his balls begging him to release, until he felt her internal spasms signaling her climax. As the flood of pleasure hit him full force, her hot channel clenched around him, her wet heat drowning him in ecstasy.

She was never going to forgive him for tomorrow. Once she found out what he really had to do with Jacqueline to convince everyone he was still the same old *love 'em and leave 'em* Jason, she'd hate him. When he thought about what he had to do to save his cover, how was he going to send her off with Mosel so the other man could pick up the pieces of her broken heart?

* * * *

Kate and Jorge waited at the train station for Emily. She seemed anxious to start their day. Everyone had been briefed on the plan accordingly.

It was drizzling. The rain came down in a steady fine mist all morning. "Good," Jason thought. It would slow down traffic and give them more time before they arrived at the station. The overcast day was as gray and dreary as his mood. God, how he hated sending her off now.

When he reached for her during the night, she responded as enthusiastically as she had earlier. He was thankful for their physical relationship, because he needed her more emotionally than he ever imagined possible. At least the physical covered up his emotional need. They'd slept wrapped naked in each other's arms, and he made love to Emily several more times. Desperate to mark her, he suckled her breast and neck, leaving behind an enthusiastic love bite, as if putting his stamp on her claimed her. He hated the idea of being separated from her. And when she stirred again right before daybreak, he pushed into her soft responsive warmth—quietly and gently making love to her. Did she know his secret? That somehow being inside her pushed aside his fears, the ugly past.

His anxiety wasn't just about the separation or making up for lost time. Jason was sending her off to be with another man, one he didn't trust at all, one she admitted she found attractive. He knew Mosel's innate sexuality enticed her, and he might be the one man who could threaten his relationship with her.

Anything could happen when he put her at Mosel's mercy. Their imminent separation could be permanent if the attraction she felt to Mosel was real, stronger than Jason believed. How many times could she deny him? What if he was playing with fire?

Neither of them seemed to want to talk about the future. Instead, they chose to ignore the potential consequences and concentrated voraciously on their lovemaking. It was too difficult to face the possible danger each of them would be risking in the coming weeks.

* * * *

Even though Jason had revealed some of his emotions to Emily, they both knew they'd never be free to explore love and a future until they acknowledged their demons. This was their best chance to settle up.

"There they are." Emily wouldn't look at Jason as she waved to the couple waiting. She was using every ounce of her energy to prevent from sobbing and begging him to stay with her.

"I'll just get out here." She still didn't turn to him, but she couldn't resist the question haunting her. "What time are you meeting Jacqueline?"

"Em?" Jason put his hand on her leg.

"When do we catch the two of you going into the hotel?" The unasked question hung in the air like a fog. *How far will you go to convince her I was just an easy conquest?*

"Please, don't." Jason felt her pain. He knew he was feeling the same way, worrying about what she would have to do to regain Mosel's interest. "I'm not going there over this. We're *both* going to do what we have to do." He clenched his jaw and his voice cracked. "And, we're not going to discuss it *ever* again."

"No." Emily glared sharply at him, realizing he was thinking about her and Mosel. "I'll see you in two weeks. We're going to finish this so you and I can go on from here. Right?" Tears brimmed but didn't spill. She blinked them back.

"Right! This time we're all working together. All of us will have closure. We won't feel like victims anymore. But Emily, be careful. Mosel's dangerous now on more than one level. Don't take any chances. You know I couldn't survive if—"

"I won't."

He gave her that lopsided grin. *That damn dimple of his*, Emily thought. It undid her. Tears poured from her eyes as she turned and

ran from the car without a backward glance. By the time she reached Kate and Jorge, her face was wet with tears and rain, but she had her practiced smile on.

"Okay, you two, let's get this act going." Emily grabbed and hugged them both—partly for effect if anyone was watching, and partly because she needed the physical contact of friends she loved.

After wandering the shops and stopping for coffee and baguettes mid-morning, Emily checked her watch and knew it was time to meet Mosel. The group positioned themselves near the hotel lobby where the two were staying, just in time to see Jason enter with Jacqueline on his arm. The sight made her visibly sick, wondering what lengths he was willing to go. But the ache in her gut confirmed she knew how seriously he took his job. Emily didn't have to do much acting to seem devastated, not knowing he'd be naked in bed with Jacqueline in moments. There was nothing he wouldn't do to maintain his cover, now more than ever.

God help him, where did he get the energy after this morning and all last night? She was torn between screaming and crying, and tearing the bimbo's hair out. Being jealous was insane under the circumstances, since she'd be facing the same situation with Mosel soon.

It didn't matter that Jason had agreed never to return to this moment when it was over, because the jealousy almost knocked her on her ass when Jacqueline looked at her like she'd won the lottery. Emily only hoped when the time came, she'd have the willpower to let it go.

Thank God, Jason never looked up to acknowledge her. Kate and Jorge edged Emily to the bar where Mosel had agreed to meet them. Kate patted Emily, whispering in her ear. "Emily, it's all right. Isn't this exactly how it's supposed to go? So why are you so pale?" she asked.

"I'm worried about him."

"That empty look in your eyes looks all too real. What's wrong, did something else happen? Did he—?"

Emily shook her head. How could she admit to spending the night making love to a man she was sending off to be with another woman? This was so screwed up.

Mosel sat at a table in the back waiting for them. He stood as they approached, reached up to shake Jorge's hand, and kissed first Kate on both cheeks, then Emily. He paused. "*Meine liebling*, what is the matter? Are you ill?" He looked to Kate for an answer as Emily just stared straight ahead. Kate only shook her head in warning to him.

Emily gazed down at her hands in her lap. "I'm fine. Only I've made a terrible mistake." She choked naturally on his name, imagining his mouth doing things to Jacqueline he'd just finished doing to her. "Jason, Jason DesJardin is here in this hotel, with someone else." There was no pretending her pain when she thought of Jason touching Jacqueline's lush breasts, of her kissing his broad chest, or envisioning her hand.... She stopped her rampant thoughts. They were upstairs in the hotel suite doing what Jason had to do to prove he was what he'd always been.

A frown crossed Mosel's face. He lifted a brow, but he didn't seem surprised. Instead, he reacted sympathetically, and she'd be damned if he didn't seem to mean it. "I am sorry he hurt you. You know, I suspected this might happen when I saw you together." He patted her shoulder. "I didn't feel comfortable letting you leave with him last night, but what was I to do? Wouldn't I just have appeared jealous?"

She kept her gaze lowered and nodded. He lifted her chin gently and looked into her eyes. "DesJardin's reputation is quite infamous."

If she weren't so upset, Emily might have laughed at the irony. Both of these players were warning her off the other. She shook her head. "No, there's nothing you could have done. It was chemistry, and I was a fool." She paused. "I don't know what got into me. I'm usually so grounded. This behavior is so out of character. The palace, the atmosphere, and he appeared to be Prince Charming." As she thought about what Jason was doing, she had no problem bursting into tears.

Kate and Jorge sat quietly, absorbed in the drama. The theatrics seemed real enough that Kate looked suspicious. She acted too sympathetic and furious not to see something else was going on besides what had been their original strategy.

Emily got up and excused herself, claiming a need to get herself under control. This was Kate's cue to follow her. She stood to go with her, mouthing over her shoulder to the men that she'd watch over her.

But then Kate leaned on the table as Jorge looked on, concern written all over his face. She kept to the script. "I–I'm really not feeling well myself." She expressed her regrets to the men as she stumbled away from the table, following Emily into the ladies' room.

The plan was moving along well. Now all Jorge had to do was wait until the women were out of range and confide to Mosel that Kate had been in poor health lately.

Shortly after Kate arrived in the bathroom lounge, she collapsed on an elaborately carved wooden chaise upholstered in gold-threaded brocade. "He really hurt you, didn't he?"

"I did it to myself, again." After waiting several heartbeats, Emily took a deep breath. "I can't think about that now. If you want to help me, focus on the plan. I don't want to fall apart."

She pinched Kate's cheeks until she looked feverish. "Here it goes. Wish us luck."

Emily ran back to the table, hysterically breathless. "Come quickly!" she yelled. "Something is wrong with Kate!"

"Kate didn't want you to know that she hasn't been well lately." Following behind Emily, Jorge reconfirmed his story loudly enough for Mosel to hear. "She keeps having these dizzy spells and becomes extremely feverish. I wanted her to see someone before we came, but she said she's being treated and it's not serious. I did make her check in with a physician here when we arrived. I'll call ahead." He stopped at the bank of phones outside the restrooms and placed a quick call.

Before Mosel stepped through the door to the lounge area, he heard Jorge identify himself, ask for Dr. Rincon and give a brief explanation of the situation. He listened as Jorge received directions.

Mosel watched Emily use the elaborately embroidered hotel hand towels from the pink marble counter, turning the cold-water tap to full and quickly wetting them. Without a word, she handed the cold wet cloths to Jorge, who had already loosened Kate's blouse so he could begin wiping down her face and chest.

"Where is the doctor, Jorge?" Mosel asked.

"She's at Princess Grace Hospital. Can we arrange for a car to take Kate there immediately? This is apparently more serious than she wanted to let on."

"Of course, I'll have mine brought around." Mosel agreed. "Do you want to carry her, and the valet can have the car out front for you? I'll only be a minute. Are you going to be all right, Emily?"

She didn't look up at Mosel, didn't have to fake being upset. She was, but not over Kate. Her thoughts were still on the two people in the hotel suite upstairs. She nodded, choking back more tears. "Please, please hurry."

As Jorge carried Kate to the car, Emily knew not to look back. Her tension was real, although not for the obvious reasons. During the ride, she kept her attention on Kate, afraid her nerves were finally going to give her away. Mosel was up front with the driver, giving directions to bypass traffic. At the hospital entrance, he helped Jorge with Kate, and then returned for her.

Kate was rushed into an emergency room as soon as Jorge asked for Dr. Rincon. Everything went exactly as planned. There had been no need for concern, after all. But Emily couldn't help thinking about how far Jason would have to go to convince Jacqueline he was still the same old womanizer. Emily knew what he'd have to do to maintain his cover.

I hope I can pull this off, she worried to herself.

When Dr. Rincon appeared with the prearranged news that Kate would have to get back to the States, Emily acted confused. Dr. Rincon took the initiative and made all the arrangements, glancing to Mosel, including him in her suggestions. She recommended that Emily accompany her sister if possible.

"My job?" Emily stuttered, questioning Mosel.

"Emily, don't worry. I'll make whatever arrangements must be made at work. You just take care of your sister."

Her task to reclaim his interest seemed to be working. Only he'd have to be interested enough to follow her back to Washington. Once he was there, the terrorist contacts would try to meet with him, and Jason would track him to their location.

Emily looked to Mosel questioningly. He didn't wait for her to ask again. "Don't worry. You must go with your sister."

She pressed herself against him and hugged him. "Oh, Mosel, thank you. Thank you for everything. I'll call when we know something, okay?" Emily's relief was genuine.

He held her lightly, tentatively, as he waved off her gratitude. "It is nothing. I will check on you all personally at the end of the week. I have a visit scheduled to some friends in Washington. I will see you then, no? Maybe we can make new memories."

With his last remark, she leaned against him and hugged him to her. "Yes, maybe we can. You've been so wonderful. I don't know what we would do without you."

He brightened, even more interested than ever. He bent over and brushed a kiss to her cheek, intimately placed where her jaw met her ear and neck. He smelled good, and having a man's arms around her felt good, especially when all she could see through a green haze of jealousy was Jason with the blonde boa constrictor.

"Thank you so, so very much." Emily hugged Mosel close again, this time turning her face up to his for the kiss that she needed.

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"I will see you soon." His lips touched hers, and she opened up with a passion she didn't feel. Instead, she remembered Jason's hot kiss and poured herself into this one.

When Mosel hardened against her, she knew their plan had worked. "Of course, soon. That will be even better. Hopefully, we'll be back in Washington by then."

She waved good-bye to Mosel from the front seat as Kate and Jorge were packed into the back of the small waiting ambulance. The heliport was only a short distance away. Within the hour they would be boarding the private jet from Nice and on their way back to Boston. Emily blocked her thoughts about Jason. She wasn't going to breathe with relief until he was back with her in Eatons Landing, and they put this all behind them. If she could.

Chapter Twenty-Four

At first, Emily was confused by the medicinal smell that seemed to engulf her. Where was she, and why did her head feel like it was going to blow up? The fumes permeated her senses, jogging her awake. As understanding returned, she became progressively more alert, finally recalling where she was. Massachusetts General, the top floor, the private government suite. She slowly assimilated her sterile surroundings, a hospital room where she apparently spent the night.

She could tell the sun was already high in the sky, yet there were few sounds coming from outside her door. Her tongue felt like swollen sandpaper, and her head pounded. If she didn't know better, she'd swear she had a hangover. Lack of sleep couldn't do that. But drugs could. The thought made her furious. This was her government at work. How dare they drug her! She wondered if they'd done it to get information out of her or to ensure she would still be here this morning.

Worry snaked through her mind, and anxiety began to poke at her stomach. If they didn't trust her, what would that mean for her debriefing session?

Filtered light streamed through the slashes between the blinds that covered waist-to-ceiling-high windows. She squinted, and rolled her legs over the side of the bed, moving her head gingerly, careful not to jar it.

Until now, she thought she knew something about how things worked in the system. The agency controlled this floor. It was a sort of hospital penthouse for spies or agents, accessed only through a special elevator. When they were bringing agents or subjects they wanted kept in low profile into the country, this was where they were kept until a safe house was found.

Yesterday, when she arrived exhausted, tense, and confused, she planned to get this debriefing over with as quickly as possible. She was anxious to move on with her plans, ready to move forward. Last night she hadn't noticed guards outside the door or anything unusual. In retrospect, she realized that meant nothing. Since this was her first debriefing, she didn't actually know what was usual, the norm, or what to expect. And Jason and Harrison weren't very helpful on that account before she left. Neither went into detail. She figured they hoped her ignorance of the procedure would mask the real reason for any tension she exhibited during questioning. Her inexperience would show. It would be to her advantage. And that was a positive in their plot. Better than giving away their plan to uncover the leak in the department, especially when they didn't have a clue who they were up against.

She couldn't risk making a mistake. She couldn't take a chance blowing the plan or Jason's life. Jason's warning, "Trust no one!" echoed through her thoughts, reminding her to be careful. His words reverberated through her thoughts as her head pounded. She was beginning to feel less guilty about keeping her mouth shut to these people who had shut her up over night and had the audacity to drug her.

In the light of day, last night was a blur—like an out of focus film. Bits of the film replaying in her head were coming into focus.

When they arrived, Kate and Jorge were whisked away from her, and she was led up here to a lounge while two female operatives built like Barbie clones—one blonde, one brunette—helped her with her belongings. They weren't into answering questions, so she gave up trying to pry information from them.

One of them got her tea. So, that was when they drugged her! She would have smacked herself in the head for being so stupid but it hurt too much. The cloud blocking her memories cleared. Franklin came by to say hi and told her to rest; he'd be back in the morning. She protested, telling him she'd rather get it over with and get home. He smiled and shook his head patiently as if talking to a small child. He was calm as he told her it was too late. This way would be safer. He added that before a debriefing, she wasn't allowed any other contact. This was standard procedure. He patted her hand. He was composed and staid.

Everything about the rest of the night became fuzzy after that. Her suspicions stayed with her. Now, she wanted to ask if it was standard procedure to drug agents before a debriefing.

Her feet hit the floor, and the dizziness swirled, upending her world. She paused, allowing her body to adjust before she made the move to stand. When she did, she held onto the chair for balance. Okay, she could do this. *Give it a minute and the room will stop rolling*.

She shuffled to the door, keeping her head from moving too much. She slowly tested the door. It wasn't locked. She peeked into the hallway, quietly trying to get her bearings, trying to place the exact location in the hospital where she'd been taken. Down the hallway, by the exit sign depicting the location of the stairwell, two heavily muscled men lounged in black pleather and aluminum waiting-room chairs. An orderly in green scrubs bustled around a corner, and a custodian with a mop bucket wiped down the floors with gray water. That was the extent of the floor activity. There wasn't any possibility of mingling in a crowd to mask her escape.

So this is the way of it, she thought to herself as she closed the door without making a sound. Patience, she would have to be patient. Emily temporarily gave up any thought of leaving. She'd have to remain here until she figured out what was going on and hope things would go the way they planned.

Resigned, she looked for the bathroom. There were two doors to choose from. After the long night, her bladder was bursting for attention, so she hoped her first choice was the right one. Her eyes felt like they could explode in their sockets, and her body ached in every muscle. The small bathroom off her room was already set up with her personal care items.

"Thoughtful of them," she noted while rummaging through the bag on the counter, anxiously searching for an aspirin. She threw two into her mouth and scooped up water from the tap with her hand, not waiting to find a glass. There was nothing left to do at the moment but go with the flow. It was easier than fighting the unknown.

She assumed the other door led to a closet. Maybe that's where they put her suitcase. To her surprise, a few of her clothes were already hanging, and some underwear lay out on the shelf. She picked up her things and carefully walked back to the bathroom. Cleaning up would feel great. It would make her feel better to get the grime of travel off her body and the cobwebs out of her head. She turned on the shower and let the water warm up a bit before relaxing into the flow. She'd freshen up and wait for them to contact her.

As she suspected, she didn't have long to wait. While she wiped herself off with the large fluffy towel, more luxury hotel style than hospital issue, and reached back in to turn off the shower, she heard a tap on the outside door. The formality, under the circumstances, amused her. She opened the bathroom door, leaned out into the room and called, "Come in, I'll be right out."

Emily toweled her hair dry as she stepped into the room, a robe securely fastened around her, when one of the female agents from the night before, the blonde one with the tea, put down a tray of food on the coffee table. Emily raised an eyebrow at her and decided to be blunt. "If it's anything like the tea from last night, I'll pass."

The woman had the courtesy to appear uncomfortable, shaking her head. "Sorry, not my idea. But probably a good one. You needed a good night's sleep. I can't ever rest well or soundly in a strange place, let alone a place that smells so much like antiseptic." She scrunched her nose, gestured to the room, smiled, and nodded to the food. "Today we need you awake to fill us in. You can eat in peace. There's nothing in any of this." She reached down and grabbed a piece of toast just to prove the food was okay.

"I know you think I should probably thank you, but I feel like I have a hangover." Emily ran a hand over her face, adding, "I just woke up a bit ago, I'm still trying to get my balance. What time is it, anyway?"

The Barbie clone answered, and Emily shrugged. "I think I'm still on Monte Carlo time."

"Drink the coffee. It'll help. I think your headache is more from the time change than the sleeping pill. You've been asleep fourteen hours, much longer than the pill's effects. I checked on you every couple of hours this morning. Sometimes the adrenaline dive after a mission causes this type." She grinned, shaking Emily's hand and laughing. "Joanne Johnson. Just Jo is fine. Nice to meet you." It was a friendly, honest handshake. Her smile was open and genuine.

"So what should I expect? Can you tell me? This is my first time." Of course, Jo knew that.

"I know, it's no biggie. I can tell you this much—relax. Franklin's got the equipment here. We often use this floor at the hospital for just this purpose. Unfortunately, we sometimes need the building's medical facilities." She let that hang.

Emily could see how an arrangement like this could be advantageous for more than one purpose. Anything medical could also be handled here. Who'd suspect? "When do we start?"

"I'll let Franklin know whenever you're ready. In a hurry to get home?"

"God, yes," Emily practically groaned. "And yet, who can complain about the luxurious Riviera? Really though, I feel like a jerk saying it, but it's just not home. I'd like to crash someplace familiar, like in my own bed."

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Ten hours later, in the private car returning her to her Boston apartment, she was finally able to wind down. She relaxed. After reviewing the day in her head, she was satisfied that the debriefing went well. Although she was nervous at first, the questions were routine, and she fell into the familiar pace of answering honestly. She only felt herself tense once, and that was when Jason's name came up. Fortunately, that happened up front, in the beginning, when they would have expected her to be nervous. A couple of hours into the procedure, she felt more confident. Certainly she could pull it off without a hitch, if she could settle down and get through it. There was no way they should be suspicious, there wasn't a hint of what she hid. She was sure they attributed any anxiety to her inexperience.

She rested her head on the back of the seat until the car came to a stop at her apartment. Jo Johnson got out to help with her bags and reassured her, "You came through that just fine. It wasn't so bad, now, was it?"

"That's a relief." Emily thought as she shook her head. "Thanks. I'm glad it's over. I don't know why the thought of debriefing is so scary. I guess you're always wondering if they'll find a missed step, a possible hole in your work. You know? Find you lacking, I guess."

"I never would have suspected you to be so insecure." Jo looked at Emily, puzzled. "You're so bright and beautiful."

Emily laughed out loud at that. "Who, me? You've definitely got the wrong girl. Me? I'm a geek, a computer nerd."

Jo looked quizzically at Emily like she was being polite, but Emily meant it.

"You have to be kidding. You've been brainwashed with all that old programming from high school. You know, because you were younger and smarter than everyone else was? It actually impacted your self-esteem. Have you looked at yourself lately?"

It was nice having a woman to talk to, especially when it was one who thought such nice things about her. Part of what she said was right, though. Emily hadn't completely gotten over the old self-image. "It's not easy to change the way you think about yourself. It's who I am. Big, curly, auburn hair, stick figure, too young to do what the other kids could, and too smart to talk to any of them. I know what I look like now, but the geek's still here," she tapped her head, "trapped inside, reminding me every minute, creating doubts. I've been practicing self-visualization. The tactic is supposed to reprogram the way people think of themselves. I'm getting better."

"Well, get over all that self doubt, you're one hot babe now. Not many are as smart as you are, either. By the time you're thirty, I expect you'll be heading up your division. It was a pleasure meeting you, Emily." Jo smiled. "Can we stay in touch? It's a bitch finding women friends in the agency."

Emily never had an adult friend outside Kate and Andrea, and family didn't count. The thought made her happy. "I'd love to stay in touch." Despite their bad start, it looked like they clicked. "And Jo, thanks again for helping me get through my first debriefing. Hopefully, it won't be my last. I discovered I like fieldwork." She laughed conspiratorially. "Don't tell anyone, but I think I'm really an adrenaline-rush junkie at heart."

They both laughed, yet beneath the surface, they each understood the danger that could be. That rush led to closer and closer calls, greater and greater risks. It wasn't smart for an agent to indulge those feelings. Those risks got you killed.

* * * *

When she stepped into the foyer, the message light on her phone blinked, nagging furiously at her from the table. Before she dropped her bags where she stood, she kicked off her shoes and put her mail on the Victorian table.

She pressed play. Her voice mailbox was full. "You have forty messages. Please clean out your mailbox." *Oh, crap. Later,* she thought, hating the demands of machinery. Wasn't she the one that

should be in control? The cell phone in her bag beeped at her. Unfortunately, she knew she couldn't ignore that. Those were the messages she'd have to get to now. She decided to clean out the phone messages later when she got around to it.

She went into her office and sat in the dark at her desk, prepared to sort through everything systematically. First she organized her mail into the old-fashioned slots on her desk. The junk mail went into in the trashcan, bills to the right, invoices to the left. "So much paper even in a paperless society."

She put the cell phone on speaker and pressed through the phone commands as the messages played. She punched the keypad, listening to each one, taking notes, saving some, discarding others. One of the messages was from Andrea. "Hey, babe, when should I pick you up Saturday? Call and leave the flight number, time, and airline on the machine. I'll be there. Can't wait to see you and hear all about Monte Carlo."

The rest of the messages were mixed. In amongst the rest of the personal messages were two left within the last few days, one from Rosa and one from Cade.

Cade's caught Emily's interest. Jason said he would use him as a contact. Could this be the message he'd promise? She'd save that for last. If she listened now, she'd be distracted through the rest.

The last two messages were from Mosel. Not bad. Had she expected more? He must be working on his self-control. The first one brought back the fear, the doubts, the guilt. One, that she could fool him, and two, that she was actually fooling him. She kept getting mixed signals from him.

Mosel's deeply accented voice reached out of the dark. "I hope Kate is well and you arrived home without incident. Please call and let me know you are safe." He spoke with authority and not without a certain element of suspicion. The voice that could inspire hot lust now wrought a shiver of fear from her. In the next message from Mosel, he said, "I'm beginning to worry. You should have called by now. I checked the hospital in Boston, and I was relieved to hear Kate is improving. Now I'm concerned about you." Mosel's deep baritone demanded answers to his concerns.

His second message had come in less than an hour ago. Another chill ran through her at his tone, she didn't know why. Was he really concerned, or was it something else? As soon as she got through the rest of the messages and gathered some courage, she'd call him back.

There was also the issue of coming up with a reason for where she'd been all this time. The damn debriefing took longer than she expected. If this part of the plan had been agency sanctioned, they'd have allowed her to call Mosel when she arrived. But since this scheme was about finding her father's killer, Jason didn't want to share all the particulars, especially since he suspected a leak in the agency.

More than twenty-four hours had elapsed since she'd landed. Could she claim to have slept through more than an entire day? Possibly. After all, it was the truth. She could play up the exhausted, concerned sister, collapsed and fatigued. All plausible.

In any case, his would be the first call she returned after she got herself together.

Emily walked into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of California's finest Cabernet and a large wineglass. She opened the bottle, sniffed the cork, watched the rich, dark liquid flow as she slowly poured, and inhaled the bouquet deeply. She forced herself to enjoy the moment. Stepping into her living room, she plopped down on her overstuffed couch, sprawling in front of the fireplace.

Ah, it felt good to be back with her own things. The tension smoothed as her surroundings comforted her. She swirled the dark burgundy fluid in the bowl of the goblet, watching it flow down the sides as she thought about the phone call she had to return to Mosel. Her mind thought more clearly now that her muscles relaxed. Jason's setup had worked. Mosel's reaction to the situation back in Monte Carlo was right on target. He dangled from their hook.

She dialed his number. Her insides fluttered when he answered. She tried to sound like she had been sleeping. As tired as she was, it wasn't hard.

"Ah, I'm relieved to hear from you." He sounded it, too. Why would he worry?

"My arrangements for my trip to the US are made. Maybe you can join me while I'm in town?" It was both a question and a demand.

"Of course, I hoped we could see each other again when you visited. I'll be in Maryland for a while. As soon as Kate can travel, we're going there to stay and spend time with family. And I'll feel better when I get Kate settled. She'll stay at the family farm while she recuperates."

She and Mosel discussed meeting again. So, the stage was set. Her stomach fluttered.

"How are you doing?" The question was direct. She knew what he meant. She paused to think about what happened to put herself in character for her answer. Back in Monte Carlo, when she pretended to be lost, devastated after Jason dumped her publicly for the blonde bimbo, Mosel was right there picking up the pieces.

The sexy woman had made it clear, repeatedly, that she had the hots for him. Leaving him with her was one of the hardest things Emily had done on this assignment. Her renewed relationship with Jason was too tenuous, still. Their feelings for each other were still up in the air without Emily having to deal with a determined other woman. Knowing Jacqueline had it bad for Jason and wasn't afraid to pursue it didn't fill Emily with warm, fuzzy feelings. In fact, it made her nauseous every time she thought about the hotel scene. But she swore she wasn't going to think about that anymore.

"I'm sitting here drinking a glass of wine, contemplating all that, just now," she answered honestly. "I really haven't had time to think about myself. That's probably a good thing." His deep voice soothed, "You should take this time to reflect. Take care of yourself. Let me take care of you. I can see to your needs."

Oh, she bet he could. A flush went through her. Mosel would be more than pleased to play the role of knight in shining armor for her, rescuing the damsel in distress, and all that. But Emily hated her part in this role. This weak, needy woman role was the old her. Returning there didn't sit well with her.

Mosel would enjoy the superior role, the power and the control he would have over her since she was theoretically unhinged. Keeping in character and staying out of Mosel's bed, now that she'd delivered herself into his hands, would create a predicament for her.

How to answer? Flirt. "I'll just bet you could."

He laughed. "I see you're feeling better. I'm relieved."

"By the time you get here, I'll have put Monte Carlo as far behind me as it is."

According to Jason's plans, Emily needed to discover Mosel's DC contacts by ostensibly building a relationship with him. By seeing him, spending time with him, and staying in close proximity, they believed she would encounter many of his friends and acquaintances, just as she had back in Monte Carlo. Only Jason suspected the men he would meet with here were involved with her father's murder.

Mosel's voice dropped an octave, deepening to a sexy pitch. "I'm glad to hear it. I have some wonderful plans to complete what we started on the yacht, before we were so rudely interrupted."

Oh, great, she thought. *I'm sure you do*.

Emily had to walk a tightrope. "I-I, eh."

"You're stammering. Are you blushing? I love the way your skin heats up when you blush. I can feel it in the air."

"Yes, yes, I am blushing. You're miles away and you're still seducing me." She wanted to remain indifferent to his advances.

"Have you never heard of telephone sex?"

She laughed at his audacity. "Of course, but I've never tried it."

"Would you consider trying it? I could definitely use a release, and you?" He pushed her, tempting her.

"Unless we're heading into a phone sex conversation, we better stop." She giggled nervously. "This conversation is almost over. Call me when you get in. Will you need a lift from the airport?"

"No, but thank you. I have a few business associates meeting me. I'll call as soon as I'm free."

If she could get agents to the airport, they might be able to transmit photos of those contacts to Harrison for Jason to disseminate.

"Call me with your flight information. I would like to arrange my schedule, free up my time while you're here."

So far, Jason hadn't been able to detect much background information about Mosel apart from what was already known. The Middle Eastern contact he met with in Monte Carlo was the same man Emily saw with Kincaid during the ball.

Surprisingly little detailed information existed on Mosel, other than the obvious public stuff in the agency's portfolio and the suspected relationships he maintained with arms brokers. Personal information on Mosel was sorely lacking. They hoped the social contacts would lead to information confirming a relationship between Mosel and the DC bomber.

"Yes, I will. I want you open and free for me when I come." He was doing it again, using his seductive tone. The double entendre didn't get past Emily, either. It was far more blatant, bordering on crude, but it had the intended effect.

Her pitch responded to the arousal he drew from her. Seductively she responded, "Did I ever properly thank you for all you've done for me?" She let that sink in. "If not, I'd like to have the opportunity to express my appreciation while you're here."

"Oh, *ma chérie*, I am at your disposal. Appreciate away. But I owe you my life. There is nothing to thank me for."

She giggled. He laughed. "I'll see you next week. I can't wait for your proper 'thank you.""

She had a headache when she hung up. All this emotional intrigue was tying her in knots.

An envelope she didn't recognize dropped out of her small overnight bag as she rummaged through it, finding her bottle of aspirin. She opened the envelope, picking out a pack of pictures from inside. They were pictures of her and her time aboard Mosel's yacht, others at his estate outside the city. A note dropped to the floor from between the photos.

She unfolded it curiously. "Give us a chance. Open your mind. Can you open your heart? Not everything is as it seems."

A strange knot formed in her throat. The note was unsigned but she knew it was from him, Mosel. She glanced back through the pictures, surprised to see for the first time the deep expression of affection so obviously etched across his face when he looked at her.

How had she missed that? All that playboy stuff misdirected her.

Reflecting on the last few months, she was suddenly even more uncomfortable than before about deceiving him. There was something wrong here. Although Jason and Harrison believed Mosel was involved chin deep with her father's assassination, Emily's feelings weren't as certain. There was something about him that made her question his involvement.

If she went through with the plan, what would happen to him? The arms dealer could be arrested, or worse yet, he could be killed. The terrorists weren't known for their tolerance of mistakes.

Her emotions regarding Mosel were mixed up with fear, anxiety, and, strangely, even affection. How was she going to deal with him in the coming weeks? How was she going to deal with her feelings? As an agent, she wasn't expected to prostitute herself. She wasn't prepared to succumb physically for just any case, but this was about her father. If need be, would she respond to Mosel's physical advances in order to find her father's killer?

And what about Jason? He set this up, but did he intend it to get so out of hand? Her renewed feelings for him were making this more difficult, even though they hadn't made any commitments to each other. No matter the situation, even if she did find the mark attractive, her mind and her body were fighting the thoughts of a sexual encounter with anyone other than Jason.

And that was the dilemma now. She did find Mosel attractive. Emily still didn't know how she could find a man who was probably tied to her father's death attractive. And it disgusted her to think she could feel what she did when it was just about the sex. She chastised herself every time she wondered about the possibility of finding herself naked, lying skin to skin beneath Mosel's exquisite body. Something just didn't seem right about that when her feelings for him were so confused. It would be better if she didn't care at all about him. It would be easier to disassociate herself from the physical act then.

It wasn't the same with Jason. With him, they connected emotionally and the sex was part of a larger sentiment. She was bound to him. If it weren't for her deep feelings for Jason, she would have found a way into Mosel's bed already, and that thought bewildered her.

She never found anything about the assignment to play him repugnant, nothing in the least. Until recently. And now her reasons weren't about her, Jason, or her father. The new issue mystified her. She liked Mosel for more than his charm and good looks. She was growing fond of him, strange as it seemed, as a friend. How was that possible? And there was another thing to consider. She was beginning to believe that he really cared for her, too.

Emily took a long sip of her wine, rolling it around her tongue before swallowing, leaning back, and closing her eyes. She was reluctant. What was it about seducing his heart, a man reported to have none, that made her ashamed?

She tossed the packet of pictures on the coffee table.

He had been generous and giving with her and others when no one was aware. She knew his charitable nature was supposed to be part of his persona, a cover for his illegal associations. But it went deeper. If he was as reported, cold and calculating, why did he protect her from Jason? It didn't all feel like an act to get into her pants. How could she explain his actions with Kate? Could there be more to him than he let on? Despite information to the contrary, Emily was beginning to trust Mosel implicitly with her life. But the consequences of a physical relationship with him scared her to death.

She would play him. It was her job. But she didn't feel good about it. She was going to have to be very careful for herself, for Jason, and, with a gnawing concern growing deep within her, for Mosel too. A heart was a terrible thing to have broken. She knew that firsthand.

She wondered, remembering his prophetic words in the note.

Maybe all this would be clearer in the morning. She was exhausted. And where was Tom? She missed the scruffy cat while she was gone. The lady who lived a flight below her usually took care of him when she was out of town. Emily went to the door and called. When he didn't come, she murmured, "Damn independent cat. He'll show up when he's good and ready."

She went to the window by the fire escape, the one where he usually appeared. There was a man across the street who seemed to be interested in her window. Why? Her concern grew. First, getting drugged before the debriefing, and now this. She wasn't sure if this was a threat, or where a threat would be coming from.

She went back to the foyer and took her gun out of her handbag. She stuck it in her belt, feeling more in control. It was then she heard Tom at the door. Good, it would be nice to have company while she returned the other phone calls. The first call would be to Cade. He'd know what to do about the guy outside. She knew he was in Boston and could have her apartment under surveillance within minutes of her call.

She thought back to her arrival and the debriefing. Franklin was openly friendly. She hadn't detected any change in his attitude toward her. So why this? Who was out there?

She thought about Franklin.

When she arrived, he had wrapped a fatherly arm over her shoulder and congratulated her on her mission, giving her an affectionate squeeze to emphasize his words. She couldn't help but smile since she'd always liked Franklin. She was also relieved that her mission was successful and the nanochips were successfully switched, the technology safe again. World power was balanced again, for the time being, anyway.

So far, according to Franklin, the switch had gone undetected. That was good, not only for her but for Jason as well. The longer it took to determine the switch, the harder it would be to figure out exactly when the switch took place, thus protecting them both from suspicion. His cover would remain intact, allowing him to resume his work in Europe, later. That was essential to the agency, but tough on her.

She was doubly relieved to be out of there. The adrenaline rush of fieldwork was fantastic, but without more practice, she was out of her league. All of this intrigue still felt very foreign to her.

Little did Franklin know what she and Jason were planning. Over the years, Franklin had been one of her father's oldest friends. They even worked together as partners years earlier, and then together again for a while shortly before the incident. She wished she didn't carry this feeling of dread and the underlying distrust that suspicion built within her. She wanted to trust him, confide in him.

Franklin made sure her training position was kept open at Quantico while she settled her father's affairs. He was also her main support after the bombing. She choked up just thinking back on that time. That time when Jason walked out on her. At a time she needed him most.

After graduation, there was still unfinished personal business at home, and Franklin readjusted her training schedule to accommodate her special needs. Since she joined the agency, he was always there for her professionally and she always considered him a friend.

Now she worried. It wasn't like her. She hated not trusting anyone, especially someone who had been her friend, someone as close as Franklin was. She felt disloyal not being able to confide in him about where their investigation was heading.

By the end of the week, she'd be back in Eatons Landing. Maybe once there, she'd be able to sort through her emotions. She had to put some distance between the job and her feelings.

Before getting ready for bed, she put the wine glass in the sink and took her phone with her into her bedroom to finish her calls. Tom jumped up on her bed to make himself at home as she put her gun on the night table with the safety off.

No need to waste valuable time with a safety if someone makes the mistake of coming in here uninvited.

Chapter Twenty-Five

When Emily walked into her kitchen the next morning, Cade was already sitting at the table with two cups of French cappuccino in front of him. Tom sprawled on his lap, purring so loudly she could hear him across the room. The wine glass from the night before rested upside down in the rack.

She sat down across from him and took a sip from the cappuccino he'd brought for her.

"Thanks." She lifted her cup in salute. "And for last night, too. I don't think I could have slept if you hadn't come by."

After she placed the nervous call to him, she couldn't keep him away. Cade came over, made a few calls for himself, and spent the night stretched precariously out on the old couch. He claimed it was broken in and comfortable with the ugly overstuffed green pillows, despite the fact that most of him dangled off its edges.

"I appreciate the sacrifice. That couch is too soft."

He smiled his charismatic smile, the one that brought women of all ages to their knees.

"What's a big brother for?" He jerked his head to the window. "He was from the agency, by the way."

The sarcasm in his voice didn't elude her. "They forgot to tell you they were sending him by. They wanted to watch over you; make sure no one followed you because of the chip switch. There's no evidence to date that it's been discovered yet, but they said it was routine, a precaution." His disdain dripped from his words.

He didn't seem all that confident they were giving him the straight story. "My take is they're keeping an eye on you. Got any idea why?" "Yes. No. I don't know. Someone at that agency isn't on our side. I don't know who, but Jason and I plan to find out."

Cade had a way of putting a body at ease. He had an easy, carefree air about him that communicated relaxed efficiency. But she knew he was on top of the situation, and before long, he would have a confirmation report detailing who ordered the guy outside. "Yup, I got that."

She slumped in her chair. "Well, thanks again. I was too tired to deal with much last night. I can't wait to get out to the farm." She rubbed her hand over the back of her neck.

He got up and went to the cabinet where she kept her aspirin. He tossed the bottle to her. "What time's your flight? I'll give you a lift."

"Mine's at noon, what about yours? I thought you were going, too."

He winked. "I am, but no one's supposed to ever know where I am or what my plans are."

Emily rolled her eyes at him. "Okay, spook, don't tell me, just show up. And I'll take that lift."

She looked at the window. "I'm going home to surround myself with people I trust for a while."

Cade was silent. "Are you thinking of my favorite small Maryland town? The one we call home?

"Yes, what really relaxes me is the old farmland off the creeks. My family farmed there for generations."

"It's beautiful any time of the year, but my favorite season was always in the late spring. We got out of school to spend a long weekend there with you guys. It was great."

"We loved it when you all came to visit."

"Oh, we liked it any time you invited us."

"When I was younger, I loved it when my father escaped work in Washington and we stole away for quiet times with Kate and Jorge on the sailboat. Occasionally you'd all come to visit. It was never quiet with you guys around." She smiled.

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"You were all so full of everything, just everything. I didn't want peaceful or quiet when I could have the life you all brought with you." She frowned.

"Then there were the times Jason would join us. Those times, they were the very best."

She looked forward to the occasions she spent with her three favorite men—her father, Jason, and Harrison.

"Usually it was just Kate, Jorge, and me causing trouble around there. But I loved having you guys join us. The adventures were always greater when we added you into the mix."

Emily looked sideways, smiling at Cade. It reminded her how much Kate brightened up when they were around.

He flashed his model smile. "We loved it, too, what a great place. It was a time we could be open and free. Every kid should have a place like that. It chased away the nightmares."

Emily didn't miss a thing Cade said to her, and she decided not to comment on the thread their conversation took. Something familiar clouded his expression when he mentioned the past. His dark expression forced her to skirt the subject.

She left the bad memories and pressed on with the good ones. "Having town within walking or bike riding distance from the farm was great."

Cade said, "We could ride a bike or take a boat anywhere we wanted to go."

"We could skinny-dip in the creek when it got too hot to breathe."

"Yes, but you stopped that just when it would have been interesting."

Emily laughed at his complaint.

"Nothing was beyond us. Playing pirate in the cove, battling imaginary invaders. It was great, just great." He sighed.

"Jorge always seemed so relieved when you guys came. He got a chance to hang with real men. I knew he was relieved to get a break from us girls, even if most of the stuff we did wasn't girly stuff." "Emily, the poor guy needed us for a change of pace."

"Usually summers together were bike rides and sailing the little sloops through long adventurous days. It wasn't bad. He just occasionally needed a guy talk."

"The original three musketeers from Crab Creek had to add a few openings when we came down to the Bay," Cade said.

"Jorge looked forward to moving back into DC with his father when he was older. I think he missed you guys."

"I can understand why! Man, he was trapped out here with the two of you for so long, I was afraid about how he was going to turn out," Cade said.

She slung a napkin at him. "We were good company. So good I might remind you that when I went to New York he let me move in with him."

"He wanted to get into your pants by then."

Emily gasped. "Cade, that's so not true!"

Cade laughed. "No, you're right. You were more like a sister to him."

When Emily got accepted to Columbia, Jorge had already been there a year. She reminded Cade, "Kate was determined to go to New York when I left for school. There was no way she was getting left out of any adventures Jorge and I cooked up in the Big Apple."

"That's true." Cade raised a brow. "But his ulterior motive for hanging around was Kate." Emily looked surprised at his insight.

He furrowed his forehead, not sounding entirely approving. "Do I look stupid?" Cade asked.

Emily cocked her head to the side as if asking him if he really wanted her to answer that.

"Hey, watch it. I don't need any smarting off from you."

Emily said, "Jorge and I've been good friends. But you're right, there is something going on between those two. I can't believe it took me so long to notice."

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When Emily graduated and moved to Boston, Jorge stayed on working toward his master's at Columbia. He remained to attend graduate school. Eventually Kate finished design school and got a job with a major design house. Jorge and Kate still lived together in the old Brownstone.

"Spies are really bad observers when it comes to family and friends." Cade mentioned this offhandedly with a look that reminded her of their own experiences hiding things from her father and Harrison.

"Thank goodness," she laughed. "We'd have been in deep doodoo all the time if they were as good with us as they were with their jobs."

By the time they reached their teens, Jason had already graduated from Annapolis. But that didn't stop her plans for him.

Cade looked at his watch. "You better get ready if you're going to catch that flight. Go ahead, I'll take the cat to that neighbor and let her know you're going to be gone again for awhile."

"Come on, boy." Cade scuffed Tom's head. "Let's see you settled, so Emily can go straighten out her life."

Emily just snorted. *Not very likely. At least not soon.* She couldn't see where her life was headed. It was probably best to just circle for a while.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Emily! Hi! Over here." The familiar sound of Andrea's voice carried through the baggage claim area.

Emily turned in time to see a mother's dilemma. She shouldn't laugh, but couldn't stop herself when she saw Andrea's predicament.

Andrea waved one hand wildly in the air to get her attention, one blonde, curly-headed girl tugged at her coat and another tiny one wrapped tightly around her mother's neck. Emily waved back with a big smile, acknowledging them as she picked her luggage off the belt. "I'll be right there. I can handle this. You look like you have your hands full."

The three-year-old stopped tugging on her mother and started bouncing up and down when she spotted Emily.

"Aunt Emiwy, did you bwing us a pwince?" she asked. Her baby sister's eyes danced with delight and expectation as the toddler poked Emily. The little one's eyes grew rounder as she looked around, as if looking for Prince Charming to pop out of the luggage belt.

Emily gave Andrea a questioning look. Andrea shrugged. "It's Rosa, putting thoughts in their heads! She's sure that Monte Carlo is full of princes, and she may have said something about Cinderella and a castle and Grace Kelly. It all got jumbled up in the translation. These two are sure you brought a prince home with you."

She looked at the carry-on bag, thinking she could help. "Got that? Okay."

Then she looked at the expression on Emily's face. "Uh-oh. Oh, no, did you? Bring home a prince?" And she started to look around, as if Emily may have a prince stowed somewhere waiting. Emily laughed, and for the first time in a long time, relaxed. Andrea may have been a retired agent, but she was the best interrogator in the lot. Nothing got past her. A secret quirk to her lips and a quick lift of her brows let Andrea know there was a great deal more to her adventure than a temporary assignment in Monte Carlo for a computer company.

After years living with Harrison, Andrea usually knew better than to ask. Her clearance was high, but one agent never asked another. Instead, she'd wait for just the right moment and let the parts Emily could tell sprinkle out, until the whole picture could be arranged like a puzzle.

"Interesting."

"No, sorry, I couldn't fit him in my bag, Kayla. But I did bring pictures of the castle."

The little girl whooped in excitement at that and the baby joined in, delighted with her sister's glee.

"Cwown?" the littlest asked and pointed to her head. Andrea stared in disbelief.

"Oh, great, now I have to provide the tiara. The child is eighteen months old, and one of her first clear words is 'crown.' We are in such big trouble. Harrison doesn't know the half of it."

Emily laughed. "You can never be too young to start expecting to be treated like a princess."

A lesson well-learned, thanks to Jo. "Every little girl should always feel like royalty."

"What have you done with our old Emily? She was slightly insecure when she left and not very adventurous. Did you leave her somewhere?" Andrea teased, but Emily could see she approved. She was pleased with the change the field experience produced.

"I hope so," Emily confessed. "It feels so good to be this new person. I'm not afraid. I have confidence. I can do anything! Okay, maybe not quite anything. I haven't turned into Super Woman like you yet." But Emily did feel better about herself. It felt good to be doing something positive toward exposing her father's killer.

"How's the house coming?" The Jameses were building their own home on the property adjacent to the farm. After spending the last three years out there, they fell in love with the area and decided to stay. Although Emily told them they could stay on in the main house at the farm, they insisted they wanted something of their own.

She thought maybe she might stay out there a bit more. She might like to spend some time in her old home with Kate when they could get together.

"Wait until you see how much is done. You'll be so surprised."

Emily took the little one out of her mother's arms, kissed her loudly, and bent down to Kayla and puckered up for a kiss.

"Super Mom, get the bags and let me take these two princesses off your hands," Emily said.

"How did I go from Super Woman to Super Mom?"

"Need you ask?" Emily retorted, gazing at the two beautiful children. She smiled widely at Andrea. "It is a step up, you know?"

"Is it?" she asked with an arched brow. Andrea loved being a mother after waiting so long, but Emily knew she missed the action of the agency. "Let's go home. Everyone's waiting for you. All the boys came out to see you."

"It will be good to be home." Kate and Jorge should be back by now. Rosa was waiting, and Harrison would have arrived back two days ago, according to Jo.

Andrea threw the suitcases in the trunk, then scooped Kayla away from Emily and deposited her in one of two car seats in the back. After depositing a kiss to the top of her head, she held out her hands for the other child, efficiently repeating the entire procedure.

"Is Harrison home, too?"

"Yes, hop in. We'll talk on the way home." And the women climbed into the Escalade.

"Nice minivan," Emily ribbed.

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"Don't you dare call my vehicle," she whispered, "a minivan!"

Emily laughed, and Andrea smiled, looking in her rearview mirror to see how the two girls were faring in the back. "They've fallen asleep already. They were so hyped on this trip to the airport I thought this might happen."

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure no little ears were listening, then asked conspiratorially. "Okay, spit it out—how was it?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jason had made his excuses at the office in Boston when he checked in. After arranging to get out of Europe early, he didn't stop long enough to check out how Emily's debriefing went. Instead, he headed straight out of town—straight to Harrison, who sneaked home early, too. He wanted to be in Maryland when she arrived.

Jason looked at his watch for the umpteenth time as he paced along the concrete sea wall, waiting impatiently for her with the rest of the family instead of meeting her the way he wanted to at the airport. He had to forego the trip to the airport when the girls insisted they were going. When Andrea heard about Emily's flight, there was no denying the girls the pleasure of the trip. Andrea claimed it was a girl-bonding thing, so he had to be satisfied waiting at the dock while Harrison fished. How do a two- and three-year-old develop that female attitude? Genetic programming? Women ruled from the second X chromosome. All men were a lost cause where they were concerned.

He interjected a comment periodically to Harrison, mostly on his poor opinion of fishing, while taking slugs from a bottle of root beer. Harrison came prepared. He'd pulled the frosty brown bottle out of a mini cooler by his side and shoved it in Jason's hand as soon as he'd stepped on the dock. "Here, you look like you could use this."

"This is root beer."

"Anything else, and you'd be asleep before they got home. Jet lag is going to kick in eventually. You want it to happen when you aren't expecting it?" "True, I did get some rest on the plane, but not much. I was too worried." That seemed like an appropriate expression, but it wasn't exactly what he was feeling. Worried was one emotion, but how could he explain all the rest?

Jason sat down on an old overturned wooden box. As he looked out over the end of the fishing pole Harrison handed him, he visibly relaxed in spite of himself. It was impossible to stay uptight with this view. The light off the marsh water shimmered silver. It glinted in concentric circles where unknown creatures below the surface played. The little finger of land where the dock sat projected into the cove, giving a wide unbroken panoramic view of the river beyond.

"Man, it's beautiful out here. I can understand everyone's fascination with this place."

"In all the years you lived with Avery, and even though Annapolis is just across the peninsula, you only made a couple of brief trips out here. Right?" Harrison pointed toward the house.

Jason remembered Emily and Kate spent most summers hanging with Jorge here while Rosa cared for them. "You know that during the week, I stayed with Avery in DC to finish high school at first. Did a stint in summer school to catch up. Then later, when I went to Annapolis, I just didn't have time to get over here. Even though it's just a few miles, we all only saw each other at holidays."

The unspoken rule was Kate and the boys never discussed their foster care life or that eventful night. The history was something he didn't want Emily involved with, and that's how he wanted it to stay. He didn't think he could stand her knowing about what took place in Kincaid's home, especially the last night.

Harrison had been there. "Too bad you missed all the good times out here. We used to visit quite often when Kate and Emily were younger and living here."

Jason hadn't lived with Emily and Kate for long in DC when they were younger. The girls lived here until Emily's mother died. He was already in Annapolis by the time they moved back to Washington. Jason jerked back when he realized Harrison was talking to him. "Andrea fell in love with this place when we came out here for my recuperation. You know, after the bombing incident? I think it helped Emily to know we were here. You know how much she loves the place."

Harrison baited his hook. "We're just caretakers here until she gets her life in order."

Jason knew Harrison referred to the event that had molded all their lives from that point forward, Avery's murder.

"That's why we bought the property next door. This place has a beauty that heals your soul. Looking back, there were times I don't think I'd have survived without it. I wish you would have come back here with us instead of heading over to Monte Carlo alone."

Harrison may think the farm could have helped Jason deal with his feelings, but finding the man responsible for Avery's death was the only thing that could do that.

"You didn't deserve the life you were dealt. You were a good kid," Harrison said.

"Thanks, but it couldn't be helped. I had to maintain the new cover I developed. Getting back to my place and my work kept me sane," he added.

Harrison nodded in agreement. "I can see that. You still think Kincaid is mixed up in this?"

"This and more. He's in it, all right. I know it. It's the why and the how I haven't got worked out."

He thought back sequentially to when his suspicions started. "His sudden public appearances nights before the bombing put me on to him. After the low profile he'd been maintaining for years, it was like waving a red flag in Avery's face. That was the first suspicious thing I noticed."

Jason wound the line in and recast, watching as Harrison pulled on his pole. "You got something there?"

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Harrison pulled up hard, snagging the fish good. "Yup." He smiled wide as he fought with the fish tugging at his line. He reeled in the fish, unhooked him, and tossed him back in. "I agree. I think you're onto something. I wasn't sure until Monte Carlo. Then, too many coincidences. I just don't believe in them."

"I know. Neither do I. Then when Emily ran across that API photo with him at a charity fundraiser with Mosel last year, I remembered I had information in my files about him. It's strange how his name keeps popping up when I investigate anything to do with arms or terrorists. Is it a coincidence it's Kincaid working with the Senate Arms Appropriations Committee? And this year—Monte Carlo."

Jason's rod was long forgotten on the dock as he ranted, "What was he doing socializing with all those guys, illegal arms dealers and terrorist contacts? Mosel had to have every known dealer in the world at the ball."

"You're preaching to the choir. I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this. At least I feel like we're heading in the right direction for a change."

Jason never believed Avery was the sole target that night. He'd always felt his presence was a danger to those around him. That's why he left, why he faked his death.

Jason wasn't sure what he told Harrison was the whole truth. He tossed bread to a family of ducks swimming by, giving up on the fishing. He couldn't contain a grin as the fuzzy bobbing ducklings scrambled around for the treat.

"What's the plan when Emily gets here?" Harrison asked over his shoulder. "Are you taking her into DC or am I?"

"You'll have to. I can't be seen with her there, or for that matter, anywhere. I'm not supposed to be in the country right now. When I left Boston, I was reportedly heading to Dubai with the pretense of looking at property for an international money launderer."

"Who's covering for you?"

"Me. I went and left without going through the system." He glanced at Harrison. "You'll have to take Emily back into town after we hash through everything. We'll set the plan here and stay in touch by phone after that. Andrea can be our contact."

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

The house was finally quiet, the day's excitement drifted away with the children's laughter. Andrea and Harrison came into the room together, with Emily trailing a short distance behind them. Jason wished he and Emily had had a moment alone together today, but with the kids it was impossible. He imagined having a wife and the frustration of getting alone time with her.

Stealing kisses and moments with your wife. He startled himself by considering that frustration of marriage and wanting it. He was touched by the close relationship his friends enjoyed, knowing he probably wasn't cut out for the same thing. Anyone in their company for more than a few minutes could appreciate the unspoken affection between them. They were perfectly suited to each other—size, temperament, direction.

Harrison jokingly tousled Andrea's hair, making her look as disheveled as she probably felt. She smacked at his hand and moved to the refrigerator, taking out a pitcher of iced tea while Harrison grabbed a couple of glasses without any communication.

He groaned to Jason with a shake of his head. "Those two are a handful," he said, referring to his two little daughters as he sank into a chair. The large family-style kitchen table was worn, evident in the distressed wood. "They wouldn't go to sleep until Emily showed them pictures of the castle."

Jason laughed at his friend. They had painted the kitchen in all shades of mellow yellows and soft, contrasting greens. To Jason, the danger facing them all seemed impossible here in this bright and friendly safe haven where they could keep the windows open to the relaxing night sounds.

It was probably why Avery loved this place so much. He thought about Emily living here with the sadness of her mother's illness for so long. He thought about Avery's loss and the guilt at not being at his wife's side when she died.

He looked up and made eye contact with Emily at just the exact moment when he realized he didn't want to waste any more time. Life was too short, and suddenly he understood he didn't want to miss out on the love and happiness that waited for him. He wanted this, babies and stolen moments with his wife—her. It was right in front of him in a beautiful bundle if he just had the courage to take it.

He sprawled in the chair, legs stretched, hitting Emily's knees beneath the table. He tapped his knuckles on the worn wooden table. "You know I'm not fine with this plan to set Emily up with Mosel. There must be another way to find out who he's with when he's in town."

Emily sat up straighter in her chair, moving her knees away from his contact. "Wait, just a minute here. Why the change of heart? I'm ready."

"I'm not," he shot back at her.

Even Harrison was shocked. "We've been through this before. The compound is a fortress, what's different now?" Harrison looked truly puzzled and glanced at his wife for reassurance. Andrea shrugged.

Jason got up and moved across the room.

Harrison started to push on, but Emily soon interrupted, seeing the change that had come over Jason's expression. "What? We have to get into the estate. You know he brings in those contacts. You haven't been able to track them down because they come in limos. No one's gotten a heads-up or ID on any of them. He's good, damn good. This is one sure way to find out who he brings in."

Andrea walked over and placed a hand on Jason's shoulder. "I know it's scary, but it's been a long time, and this is our best shot. It will mean a lot to each of us. This isn't just about your revenge, Jason."

He pulled away from her touch, not wanting to listen, and sat back down. She followed him and ruffled his hair before sitting down in the chair next to him. "I'm sorry, Jason. As much as you've taken this upon yourself over the years, each of us wants closure for a different reason. Don't back out on us now, we can do this. Emily knows what she's doing, trust her with this." She smiled at Emily, who nodded her thanks for the vote of confidence.

"I'm not going to do anything foolish or dangerous. I'm no hero," she reassured the men. It gave Jason pause.

"Are we agreed?" Harrison asked, looking at Jason for confirmation.

Jason picked at the lime in his Corona and nodded, keeping his head down. "When you get back to the house in DC, return his call. He'll be anxious, after all. Find out when he's expected to arrive. I think he should be here by Friday. That gives you a few days to get yourself in character." He didn't look at her while he talked. He just kept picking at the thin slice of lime, reviewing the plan.

* * * *

His deep voice did something to her insides. Tonight it seemed deeper, softer, and more serious than usual. They hadn't had much time together, none alone since she arrived. He distracted her from the conversation whenever he glanced her way. It wasn't easy keeping a professional distance when they had shared so much. He recited the instructions without a glance in her direction, to her relief. It enabled her to concentrate on what he was saying.

"I get it. Whenever he decides to meet with me, I'll be wired and the cameras will be in my earrings. That should get you a good look at all his associates and from that, you can cross-reference them with previous contacts. With the new voice recognition programs, we might also be able to get a confirmed ID on someone whose looks are disguised. There's got to be a connection to the bombing."

"Speaking of bombing, what about Mosel's yacht? Did you ever discover what that was all about? Was it a freak accident, or what?" Emily hoped she wasn't the target, but if Mosel was, this whole scheme was getting really complicated. You couldn't figure out who all the players were without a scorecard.

"There are no freak accidents." Both Jason and Harrison spoke in unison. Emily frowned. Jason kept going. "I got some intel before I left that says the rocket was meant for Mosel. We don't know who or why. But I have my suspicions."

Harrison didn't want Emily worried any more than she already was. "Don't sweat it. Your cover is still completely intact. I checked, and I'm comfortable with this."

She visibly relaxed. Emily knew Harrison loved her like a baby sister, and he'd never let anything happen to her. Then he added, "We'll be following with a team so you won't be alone." She knew they'd be all over her in ten seconds flat if she needed them.

Jason continued, "Make sure when you pump him for information it's casual. There's an art to extracting information without the sub getting suspicious. You have to take advantage of the conversation, ask questions as topics come up, the inconsequential as well as the possibly important items."

"Really?" Andrea and Emily were both smiling. Andrea held up her hand. "Please, who did you learn this technique from? I'm sure it wasn't a MAN!" She stared blankly at Harrison. The girls started laughing, and even Jason joined in.

"No, you're absolutely right, no one interrogates more subtly than a woman. As a guy, you just get caught up talking about yourself and spilling your guts to that interested, pretty, and oh-so-innocent face."

Harrison shrugged at his wife. "Someone's got to fill a guy in."

"Emily will pretend to be lost and devastated after Jason dumped her so publicly in Monte Carlo." Harrison accidentally shared that information with Andrea for the first time. Her brow raised a notch and took a quick glance at Emily and Jason, who both looked uncomfortable with the subject.

Harrison just plowed on without noticing their uneasiness until Andrea stopped him. She noticed Jason squirm and Emily's face drop. "Exactly what are you talking about? This apparently needs to be discussed, or so it appears."

Her husband blew her off. "What? Oh, it was nothing, part of the plan. While Emily was working the chip deal, she and Jason hashed out a deal to get Mosel interested in her so he'd follow her back here. Jason hooked up with Emily during the charity ball, swept her off her feet, and stole her away from Mosel."

Emily blushed, remembering the garden. Harrison continued to fill Andrea in on the not so sordid details, but Emily knew the woman could read between the lines. Harrison didn't have a clue. Emily had to wonder how he managed in the spy business so long.

He wasn't stopping to breathe. "He retrieved the stolen chip from her and made the exchange, but we needed a way to get Mosel interested enough to follow her back to DC. He's very competitive with Jason. Especially regarding women. The next day we arranged for one of our operatives to be seen meeting up with Jason in a hotel where Emily, Kate, and Jorge were having brunch or lunch or tea, something like that, with Mosel—"

"Wait," Emily jumped in. "Wait just a minute. What did you say?" She narrowed her eyes as she stared at Jason. He was very still, but glaring daggers at Harrison.

Harrison looked confused. "Which part?"

At that, Emily jumped up, turning her back to the table and looking out into the dark night through the window above the sink. She murmured, "Jacqueline is one of ours?" She turned on Jason and through her teeth she asked, "Why didn't you tell me, you rat? You let me worry all this time and weren't going to tell me?" She threw the first thing she laid her hands on, a large wet sponge, directly at his head. It hit him right in the face before it plopped on the lime he was tearing apart.

He jumped up and moved around the table before anyone saw him. He held on to Emily's wrists to keep her from thrashing him, but he quickly backed her up against the sink with his body and wasn't budging.

"Whoa, stop right there. You never would have pulled that day off if you knew."

"And besides," he glared at Harrison, "your clearance doesn't give you the right to every undercover agent's ID. That's what we're fighting here, anyway. Isn't that what we suspect started this whole mess?"

They apparently forgot there was anyone else in the room. Emily looked livid, but something else crept over her expression the minute his body hit hers. Andrea was at first confused until some of the information began to sink in and she noticed their body language. She started to suspect there was more going on than either she or Harrison was privy to. She glanced at her husband and rolled her eyes.

"Harrison, honey, let's check on the kids. We'll be right back, so no fighting, you two." Andrea grabbed Harrison and pulled him into the family room. "What happened over there that you've been holding out on me? I didn't expect Emily to keep anything from me, and I guess I was wrong about that, but I certainly expected more from you."

He looked genuinely confused, then brightened visibly. "Well, now that you mention it, all those clutches seemed pretty authentic. He paced like a bear whenever we staked out Mosel's while she was there, but he denied everything when I confronted him. I think there's really something going on between them and he won't admit it. What do you think?" She smacked him, shoved him back against the wall, and placed her mouth over his ear. "Yes, Mr. Agent Man, I'd bet my life on it, and I'm glad you're quicker with foreign terrorists than you are with people you know. The country's secrets are completely safe with you."

"Now, Andrea, don't be so sarcastic." He didn't let her pull away, running his big hands over her rounded hips. "I've been watching those two for so long I've given up reading anything into their behavior. I thought it would never happen." His lips curved into a grin, then his mouth covered hers. He tracked kisses down her jaw and mumbled into her neck, "Let's go to bed and finish this bullshit in the morning."

"What about them?"

"They can find their own way to bed."

* * * *

Emily's anger mixed with relief as she relaxed against him. Her body heat notched up when she felt him press his arousal into her. Her body missed his. It both recognized and automatically responded. Seeking to be closer, she ground herself into him, feeling at once provoked and comfortable.

He felt so damn good, so right. They were a match. Physically and emotionally, they completed each other. The chemistry between them was impossible to ignore, and she didn't want to. Sparks flew when they touched, drawn to each other like magnetic forces. She loved the way his body fit against hers, the way she reacted to him. Just his hands holding her in place like this thrilled her. The blue of his eyes darkened at first touch, his breathing became shallow, his pulse quickened. She saw in his expression the moment when he realized what he was going to do.

She observed him as he bent to kiss her. She knew when he remembered where they were, then she watched him disregard the consequences as he took her mouth anyway. He plundered. It felt like he poured everything he had into the kiss, urging her to sense his feelings, his emotions, his soul. Apparently, he wasn't ready to declare those feelings verbally. So she'd let him off the hook for now, but not indefinitely.

"Come to bed with me," his raspy voice whispered in her ear. "We'll finish the plans in the morning."

"What about—?"

"Don't worry." He didn't even glance over his shoulder. "I think they figured it out."

* * * *

The earrings looked fantastic with the dress. Of course, diamonds looked great with anything in Emily's book. But there was nothing to compare to the style of a basic black strapless dress cut up high on the thigh and diamonds—very big diamonds. Her hair spilled around her shoulders, setting off the dress from the top up, and the thin, strappy five-inch heels drew attention to the length of her legs, setting the dress off from the slit down. Her body set off the parts in between, where the dress itself was. As she inspected herself in the hallway, the doorbell rang.

She picked up her wrap from the hook and her handbag from the table before she opened the door. "Mosel." she hugged him with real enthusiasm. Seeing him brought back her questions about him. Who was this man, really?

He stepped back to take all of her in. "*Chérie*, did you grow taller?" He checked her out, holding her at arm's distance before pulling her back into a friendly embrace. "Oh, no, those shoes are deadly! So high, so sexy," he crooned.

She couldn't help but laugh. For some unknown reason, she kissed him on the cheek and hugged him affectionately. "Only you would notice the shoes."

"Make no mistake, with those legs there isn't a man breathing who isn't going to notice. I notice everything about you. You are delectable. But those legs are unforgettable, and the shoes, *ooh la la*, unforgiving." He gave her the once over again, emphasizing his interest by kissing the tips of his fingers for emphasis.

She humored him with a nervous laugh, needing to keep a balance. It was nice to be admired, but it made her nervous, too. She didn't want him jumping to conclusions. Keeping his interest without letting him get too close posed a problem. It would be some juggling act, especially since she was unclear about her own feelings toward him. He was really a nice guy with her. When they were alone, he was warm and caring, nothing like his ice man reputation. Emily took his arm and aimed him back to the door. "Okay, thank you for the compliments. I dressed up like you asked. Where are we off to?"

* * * *

For the next week they met at least once every day, socialized with businessmen and politicians, talked about Mosel's family and business. He seemed focused on his charity. They never went to his estate in Maryland, and he never mentioned it. From everything Harrison indicated, it wasn't far from her own place. She needed to speed the relationship along on one level but keep it placid on another. If he didn't include her in more of his time, she'd have to start suggesting it.

She decided tonight she'd talk about her childhood and bring up the farm. If she had to invite him there, so be it. She knew watching was hurting Jason. It drove him crazy with worry and proprietary jealousy.

Every time Mosel touched her or she touched him while this romantic intrigue developed, Jason knew about it. He either heard it, saw it, or found out about it. She knew it was torturing him. Just remembering Jacqueline touching Jason set Emily's teeth on edge, even now, knowing her part was an act. She wasn't all that sure how much Jacqueline acted. Touching Jason wasn't much of a hardship. She understood his frustration and protectiveness. For his sake she needed to nudge Mosel forward.

She hurried to the restaurant where they were meeting for dinner before attending one of the many gallery openings across town. She hoped to get a weekend invitation tonight, or she'd have to invite him to her farm to get things moving.

The weather held, the breeze promised to keep the late summer air cool enough without a threat of rain. The limo Mosel sent waited in the driveway. The driver who stood by the open door looked familiar. Emily suddenly realized where she recalled seeing him and blushed ten shades of red. He was one of the guards outside in the garden the night of the charity ball. She lowered her face as she entered the car, but didn't miss the appraising look he gave her. "Thank you," was all she could muster. Oh, she longed to get this business over with.

Inside, she dared not lift her head for fear of making eye contact with the driver in the rear view mirror. The ride seemed longer under the circumstances, but surely she could survive a few more moments of discomfort.

Mosel waited by the curb when she arrived, still flushed with her embarrassment. He commented on her high color as she rushed out of the limo. Mosel caught up with her, taking her arm and slowing her down.

"It's nothing, I had to rush earlier and I guess I'm overheated from running around." Shifting her body closer, she added, "Here, now I can relax." She smiled while still trying to hurry away from the driver's leer.

"Emily, are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, of course. I could use a cool drink, some water perhaps? Before the wine makes me even more flushed." She tried to laugh, but the effect sounded stilted even to her. "You look beautiful, flushed or no." He stopped her, and took her face in his hands and publicly kissed her. She knew the team was watching. Well, that was going to help her blush. She thought she could hear Jason screaming in her head. Poor Jason, would he believe this would be as painful for her as it was for him? She hoped he was listening and her next statement would make up for his misery.

"I'm heading out to my farm in Maryland this weekend. Would you like to come by and see it?" There, she put it out there. Now he would have to play.

There was a cute expression around his lips, if one could call anything about this iceman cute. "You, you live on a farm?" He looked like he could barely contain himself as the disbelief rolled over him. The cute smirk was practically a sneer when he said the word "farm."

"Please, it's not what you think. No animals or crops."

He changed his expression to "What, me, I wasn't thinking anything," but she just ignored it.

"No, really, calling it a farm is an old habit. Come for a visit and you'll see for yourself. It was a real working farm at one time."

"Yes, I would like to see your place. Actually it is a wonderful idea. I have a small estate I retire to when the city life is too much, and I have plans to meet with some old friends there soon. Maybe we can coordinate our time in the country."

Okay, so it wasn't exactly an invitation, but at least she was getting closer to the goal.

They walked into the restaurant, discussing the details of meeting in Maryland. Emily gave Mosel her address, pointing out she was staying in the remodeled boathouse and garages across the field from the main house.

He seemed surprised that their properties were so close. "We're almost neighbors. No?"

Emily did chuckle at that. "Well, not exactly neighbors, but we could have bumped into each other at the grocery store one day."

"Grocery store, oh, yes." He laughed deeply then. "You're making a joke. Right?"

Then she realized it was a joke. The chance of ever running into Mosel shopping for groceries was ludicrous. The man had servants for everything. He'd probably never been in a grocery store in his life. Then she frowned at the thought.

"What, what are you thinking?" Mosel saw her expression grow concerned, incredulous.

"You've never been shopping?"

"Of course." he straightened indignantly. "I've been shopping. I shop all the time. Who do you think picked out my new yacht?"

Emily giggled at him. He looked insulted. "Not that kind of shopping—grocery shopping?"

"Grocery? No, no, of course not." He looked at her as if she'd lost her good senses. "Why would I want to go grocery shopping?"

Emily had a gleam in her eye. He seemed confused. Everyone had to experience an American superstore at least once in a lifetime.

"What are you scheming? I can see the smoke billowing." He looked at her skeptically, making swirling signs in the air signifying the smoke. She giggled again.

"Oh, you just wait," she threatened. "I have a big surprise for you."

"What, what are you cooking up in that head of yours?" Now he was interested, curious.

This was fun. So much more so than the sexual tension stuff they'd been muddling in. "No, no questions. It's a surprise, and we need to change the subject." She watched when he gave in and she saw the moment he decided to resume the seduction. Nope, she wasn't going back there.

"Remember, you're supposed to be telling me about you. I'll start if you have a problem with that. I'll tell you about my farm."

He made a face at the term "farm."

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She told him how she liked the peninsula the property sat on, the privacy of the three-sided expanse of water the backside of the house opened to. The wraparound porch and the widow's walk she added on to the small house where she stayed were miniatures of the ones at the main house.

She explained that during storms not only was the ship's master in danger, so was everyone else fishing or crabbing the flats with him. So, although ships' captains usually owned the big houses, the rest of the crews' families lived nearby. Emily expanded on the history of the area for him. He seemed fascinated by her stories.

"Okay, now it's your turn." She picked at her food as Mosel described the property he owned. She angled for information. "How did you come to have a place here? With your European business, I would think it would be difficult to find time to get away to so many different places."

He poured the chilled wine already standing beside the table. "Many years ago I bought a small company in Maryland. I needed a place here, naturally, when I came to see to my business. Many of my friends and contacts operate from this country. Sooner or later everyone gravitates to the seat of world power, and there is no greater seat than here." He handed Emily the glass he poured for her, placing it into her hand with both of his. He dropped his hands to his lap and leaned back, looking at her quizzically.

"What about the area interested you enough to buy a place there?"

"It was your grandfather who recommended the country life in Maryland. Are you surprised?" he asked when she gasped.

"Absolutely, I wasn't aware you were on such close terms with him."

"He was very kind to me when I was younger and I alone was responsible for the family's philanthropy. He was a mentor to me. How is it you came to this area?"

"Well, you knew of my grandfather? This was where my grandmother, his wife, was from. For generations her family settled

here. I was raised out on the family farm about half of the time and lived in Georgetown the rest."

"Ah, yes, that must have been wonderful. Which did you prefer?" Mosel watched her intently, with more than casual interest.

She knew he wanted her sexually. They were both playing games with each other. Sometimes, like now, she felt like he was humoring her. It wasn't as if he didn't respect her opinions, but she often felt like he could see right through her charade. It was unnerving.

"I've always enjoyed the times I spent in both places. My father's family home in Washington, DC enabled me to be exposed to a world far different than the one I knew in Eatons Landing. I was very fortunate." She paused, thinking about the loss of her mother and father. "Then again, what about you? You've told me so little about yourself. Come on, I've told you my story, you tell me yours."

He got that look again. Emily felt like he didn't quite believe her. Well, she damn well knew not to believe him.

So far, the dinner was relaxing, despite all the mutual lying the couple was doing. It would stay that way, too, as long as the subject matter remained neutral. Emily hoped she could keep talking. God help her if she ran out of subject matter.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mosel had sent the limo less than an hour ago to pick her up. After spending a wonderful time at her place the day before, Mosel wanted to reciprocate by inviting her back to the estate. Later, guests would be joining them for dinner, but for now, they would relax and tour the grounds. This was the chance Emily and the team had been waiting for. She hoped they would finally make the connection between the terrorist contacts and the Washington, DC people behind the car bombing.

"Have you heard from Jason?" Mosel bluntly asked as they walked out on his dock.

The question caught her unaware. "Why would I?" She affected a hurt attitude, but an aspect of fear shot through her.

"I heard he's been spotted around town, and I wondered if he tried to get in touch with you." The casual way he spoke triggered an icy suspicion Emily had never experienced with him before. Or was he warning her in some way?

"I doubt he would be brazen enough to attempt speaking to me after I caught him with Jacqueline. I think I made my opinion of him perfectly clear then, and he seemed very blasé about the whole situation. He apparently felt my reaction was ridiculously childish. Perhaps monogamy after one night is too much to expect in some circles, but it's not in mine."

She went on, "Please, I don't want to ruin today discussing him. Tomorrow let's go to the zoo. What do you say? Something casual, fun and light?" She took a sip of her wine and tried to slow her galloping heartbeat. The whole time she tried to regain her composure, she also tried to figure out how to let Jason know he'd been reportedly seen in town. Although her conversation with Mosel was being monitored, there was no way of knowing if the one listening picked up on the danger.

They agreed on certain words to signify an emergency. In her opinion, this was one. By mentioning the zoo, anyone listening would contact Jason. She hoped the tech was savvy enough to realize this tidbit of information was immensely important for Jason's safety.

Mosel agreed to the next day's outing and changed the subject to discussions about the next gallery opening and the artist's work being displayed. All during the day, Emily longed to get home and tell Andrea to contact Harrison.

* * * *

Emily glanced around the street twice before she noticed Andrea sitting by herself at the sidewalk café with huge sunglasses and a floppy straw hat to protect against the sun. She looked like a movie star. The other patrons kept stealing glances her way, as if they should know who she was. She did have that remote air about her. Not that she was distant. God, no, she was just so compelling with her size and grace and beauty. Everyone felt they were in the presence of greatness.

She looked up as Emily contemplated her and waved. "Hurry, I'm ready to order. I'm starving." Nope, totally down to earth.

Jason and Harrison had called her in—that's what this meeting with Andrea was about.

The small restaurant claimed to have the best food outside of the district. The variety was incomparable due to the exclusive clientele gravitating to the area. Their table gave them privacy, a distance from any of the others, so their conversation would be uninhibited.

"Do you have anything for me?" Andrea asked professionally. "I love this. Harrison never lets me do stuff like this anymore. I know it's off the record, but all the years of training and the need for the inevitable adrenaline rush just don't go away with the wedding ring and babies. Sometimes I miss my other life."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I never knew you felt like that." Emily took Andrea's hand in hers and patted it. She was impatient to ask about Jason but held back.

Andrea left her hand in Emily's. "Yes, but don't get me wrong, it was no sacrifice. I wanted to do it. I was trying to get pregnant anyway. So having all those kids around was going to kill me or cure me."

They both laughed before Emily asked the expected question. "Did my warning get back to Jason?" Andrea nodded.

"Harrison caught on as soon as he reviewed the transcript. He headed out to find Jason and provide cover. I didn't expect Jason to disappear during this crucial aspect of the mission. Did you?"

"No, but I know he had some leads he wanted to follow, and I know watching Mosel and me together is hard for him."

Andrea winked at her, picked up the menu, and said, "Let's order, then you can tell me all about your adventures."

She took the wire and earrings that Andrea slipped in her hand and dropped them in her purse, concealed behind the menu. She'd need them to transmit the data when they were at Mosel's estate.

They ordered soft shell crab and salads accompanied by a carafe of fruity Sangria that the little café was noted for. Emily had spent almost every moment of the last three weeks with Mosel and was now more confused than ever about him. As she spent more time with him, she found she genuinely liked him.

The food came, the waiter disappeared, and Andrea gave her friend a knowing nod. "So, what do you think? Is there anything else we don't have? Anything we should know that we don't? What have you gotten so far, anyway? No one's filled me in on anything. I'm not familiar with any operatives, ours or theirs. Whoever *theirs* is anymore." Andrea tried to fill in the missing pieces with what little she knew. "Jason recognized El Marat, but that's no biggie. We assumed he was the one Mosel sold the arms through."

"At least that's confirmed."

"Yes, and both Harrison and Jason were surprised by someone else, but they were close mouthed, said they had to do some checking. I think Jason is following Mosel out to that meeting he has tonight. The one you were pointedly excluded from."

Emily shifted closer to Andrea. "I'm pretty much done here after this weekend. I didn't think we'd ever get the chance to get into the estate. I pushed Mosel by telling him I needed to get back to Boston soon."

She sat back a little. "He's trying to talk me into going back with him to Monte Carlo, for business and pleasure."

"Would you consider his offer?"

"If I discover he's not one of the bad guys? Is that what you're asking?"

Andrea laughed. "Oh he's one of the bad guys all right, even if he's working for the right side. You know what they say about agents who've worked undercover so long you can't tell which way they'll roll? Well, I think if he's on our side, there's no way we'll ever know the answer to that."

Emily thought about that, and how she felt about Mosel.

"What does he say to your excuses?" Andrea asked.

"I've put him off, explaining I'm not ready to jump into anything else after getting burned so badly my first time out. He's trying to be understanding, but he's pissed at Jason for ruining what he considers his big opportunity with me."

"Is that what happened? Did Jason ruin it?"

"For appearances, maybe. But in fact, there's never been anyone else in my heart. He makes me crazy, but I don't think there'll ever be anyone else. But to give the man his due, Mosel's the only one who's ever lit my fire like Jason does." Emily wiggled her brows. "Hot? Huh? The man looks cold as ice."

"Ice hot." Emily shivered. She'd been picking at her food, concern growing for Jason's safety. "How will I find out about tonight? Will you or Harrison call to let me know what's going on?"

"Of course! But you know how stakeouts can be. They could be tied up all night."

"Well, that's okay, just as long as someone lets me know something eventually. I've been feeling like I'm on the wrong side of this for a while now."

"What do you mean?"

"I know this is ridiculous, but I really 'like' Mosel."

Andrea pointedly studied her.

"No, don't give me that look, it's not at all like that. I just told you there's never been anyone for me but Jason. It's something else. Mosel comes across as this perverted bad boy, a twisted international womanizer, but he's really so different. Sometimes I think he's acting, playing a part, and the only time he's real is when he's with me. Does that make sense?"

Andrea picked a tomato out of her salad, then took a long sip of her Sangria and popped a cherry from the glass into her mouth. "I don't know. Women have been fooled for years by men who seem perfectly normal in public, and then are monsters in private. What would be the point of being a public monster and a sweetheart in private?" Andrea stopped her words and whipped off her sunglasses. She stared at Emily and went deadly serious. "Unless he *is* playing a role. Do you think he could be playing *you*? If so, we have to get this information to Jason. It could be vitally important."

Emily didn't want to panic, but she couldn't stop the fear from building. "Maybe I'm paranoid, but this isn't the first time the thought crossed my mind. I felt like this once before with him in Monte Carlo."

Andrea stared at her pointedly. Emily tried to argue away the fear. "He's not a bad guy, I know it in my bones." "Okay, if you think he's a good guy, then what's the problem?" Andrea settled down to analyze the question.

"I think he subtly tried to warn me that Jason was in danger. But how would he know I was still concerned, or that I could do anything anyway? Unless he has some idea about what's going on?"

Andrea argued, "Hell, we don't even know what's going on. That's part of the dilemma. Nothing is as it seems. No one is who they say they are. In DC, your brother could be an agent for one bureau, and you could be an agent for another and never know it."

Emily nodded and took a long sip of her wine. She had mixed emotions about going back to the security of her computers.

"Do you think Mosel is working undercover with the terrorists?" Andrea asked.

Emily hesitated, then sat back in her chair before answering. She thought back to how protective he'd been in Monte Carlo, how he was the one who made such quick arrangements for Kate and Jorge and her to get out of the country shortly after the chip switch. And she remembered he was also involved with Jacqueline.

"No, not with the terrorists. But yes, I do think he's undercover with someone, possibly even one of our agencies."

"You're kidding! Him? I know sometimes governments broker arms to other countries, but with the way things are going right now, I can't imagine our government brokering to terrorists."

"Me either, that's what has me confused. Unless Mosel can at least control the sales and report the factions that are out there shopping. And with his IT company, he has a great deal of control. This could all be a set up."

Andrea's phone rang. Emily watched the growing concern on her face as she covered the mouthpiece. She mouthed that it was Harrison. "I'm with her now. Okay, we'll stay together." She hung up.

She didn't meet Emily's eyes when she snapped the phone closed. "Harrison says they have Jason. Someone must have spotted him in town, and Harrison got word through the department that El Marat's group picked him up outside a restaurant where he followed, get this—Senator Kincaid."

"What, his old foster father? What does he have to do with anything? This is all so weird." Emily spoke faster with each word. "We have to get to Jason. Does Harrison know where they took him?"

Emily was already calling for the bill and throwing money on the table. Andrea placed her hand over Emily's. "Calm down, remember your training. I know it's hard at a time like this, but we can help if we're smart. Aren't you supposed to meet Mosel this afternoon?"

She picked up their things and walked Emily to her car.

"Yes," she answered. Emily worked to get her breathing under control, to sort information, but everything kept jumbling together. As they walked to the car she asked, "Where did Harrison think they took Jason?"

"El Marat's limo was spotted heading out east of Mosel's estate. He thinks the farmhouse at the end of the property may be where they're holding Jason."

"I'm going to meet Mosel then. But listen, you have to back me up. We know this area better than any of their people. Get a hold of Cade, let him know what's happening, and then tell him to meet me at the oak at Crab Creek and come in the dinghy. You stay on Alder Road, where all the kids go parking. Wait there until you hear from me. Keep your cell phone on. There's no way Harrison and the guys will get to that farmhouse without anyone seeing them."

"Emily, do you think this is a good idea? If it doesn't work we could be risking his life." Andrea was just saying what was expected. She knew they couldn't sit by and wait for Harrison this time.

"Don't worry, I'm no hero," Emily laughed. "But he may kill me when he sees me."

"What makes you think he'll see you?"

"I'm going to make Mosel take me there. We're going by boat. I'm going to walk right in. Cade will be my backup on the water, and you're covering the road. I think Mosel is a good guy. I'm about to risk our lives on it, so you better hope my instincts are good."

With that parting shot she waved and got in the car. "I'll call you as soon as I can."

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Chapter Thirty

Emily drove herself to Mosel's estate, not waiting this time for him to send the driver. Time was running out, and every minute Jason was with El Marat's men, he was in danger. She worried how long he'd be safe with them and was concerned about his treatment. What if they hurt him? Tortured him? She didn't want to even think about what they could be doing to him.

All the way out to the estate she wondered what Senator Kincaid had to do with all this. In the recent research she turned up, she realized he was the foster father the others had escaped all those years ago. She never even knew who it had been before. She never would have suspected a US Senator of fighting with Jason. No one ever told her what went on, but she had seen Jason firsthand. No one ever talked about it. None of the kids he fostered had any contact with him since her father arranged for their adoptions that night.

Apparently her father had kept his own identity from Kincaid to keep the kids safe. The only people who were aware of his existence were a handful at the agency. How did Senator Kincaid figure into this?

The gates opened as she announced her name into the intercom. Mosel was outside in front of the house waiting for her as she drove up. He didn't look surprised. His expression was one of concern, as was hers. Without speaking, she knew he realized she had figured something out.

"Don't say anything. Come with me," he whispered into her ear, and walked out past the formal gardens, down to the deceptively peaceful riverbank. "Who are you?" Emily asked directly, holding his arm as they walked. To anyone watching they appeared to be very close friends or lovers who had grown comfortable with each other.

"I can't say," he replied in no more than a whisper, "but we have to get Jason out of there."

She let out the breath she was holding. "I knew it, I knew you were my friend. I knew you were my white knight," she whispered.

He shook his head. "Hardly a white knight."

A wide smile broke over her face. "I liked you too well to believe anything bad about you."

He smiled. "Good, I'm flattered."

She cupped his cheek affectionately and leaned into him. "I have a plan," Emily started, but Mosel stopped her, pulling her to him away from the house.

"This is a serious and extremely dangerous situation. Kincaid intends to kill Jason. Someone has revealed Jason's past identity, tying him to your father."

"What do you know about the bombing that killed my father?"

"Kincaid recently found out he actually missed killing Jason in the bombing that killed your father years ago and intends to correct the mistake." Mosel dodged the actual question. "I do not know why. But make no mistake. He is a very dangerous man. I do not want to see anything happen to you."

"Me either. But we have to save Jason. I've sent for reinforcements." She told him her plan and about Cade and Andrea.

"When Andrea makes contact with Harrison, we'll have the entire team at our disposal. We just can't risk waiting until they arrive. What if they decide to kill Jason before we get help? What if they're hurting him?"

* * * *

Mosel saw the worry on her face and knew he'd lost. He'd actually known it back in Monte Carlo. He saw the way she and Jason looked at each other, as if the world disappeared when they were together. They weren't even aware how deep their feelings for each other ran, or wouldn't admit it, anyway.

Jason was a worthy opponent. He'd have to help him out.

Emily was babbling quietly, trying to fill him in. "Cade is welltrained for this sort of situation, so when Andrea gives him my directions, he'll know what to do. You and I will just walk in through the front door when everything is in place, like nothing's amiss."

Mosel shook his head. "No, I'll go in alone. They won't expect anything from me. I've known El Marat's men for years."

Emily's doubts must have shown in her face. Mosel reassured her, "If you show up, they'll be suspicious."

He gave her a look, weighing whether to add the rest. His identity was at stake. She must have understood his dilemma because she seemed surprised, maybe flattered when he added, staring directly into her eyes, "It may even impair my ability to work in the future."

He could tell she wasn't entirely sure what he meant by that, but he noticed when she realized he'd entrusted her with a secret.

She nodded. "Okay, I understand."

"You stay back after we get there and meet Cade by the boat. I'll bring out DesJardin and send him back your way." Mosel held her shoulders. "Emily, you and Cade should be ready to help in case he's injured. They have held him too long already. Kincaid is a sick man, so I've heard."

He watched her face go pale and decided that was more than enough said. "Make your calls from down here. I never know who's listening closer to the house." He gave her a strange look and let the remark catch.

Mosel blocked her from view as she dialed Andrea and quickly filled her in. Just as he suspected, Emily countered Andrea's suspicions and protests. He heard her assure Andrea, "He can be trusted. Even if he couldn't be, what does it matter right now? He's my only hope."

She closed the phone with a sigh. He sensed a big part of her was relieved that she'd been right about him.

They walked toward the "Regal Commodore," his forty-four-foot sports yacht. Emily untied the slipknot at the stern and helped him cast off.

When they were aboard, she moved up into the cockpit, looked around, and said, "The marsh grass looks different through my eyes today. This has always been my peaceful home, a place of refuge from the city and the intrigue of my father's work. Now it's filled with danger, and all I feel is dread and fear."

Mosel noticed her white knuckles and the tension in her body. He prayed they wouldn't be too late.

* * * *

Jason heard groaning. It was coming from him. With consciousness came the inevitable pain. His head ached, and the pins and needles in his arms were so bad he couldn't feel his hands. Well, at least he knew he was alive. The pain told him that if nothing else.

He squirmed around to get a better look at his surroundings. He tried to figure out where Kincaid had him taken after they discovered him tailing them. The meeting with El Marat proved he conspired with known terrorists.

Abu, the lookout, recognized Jason from three years ago—from the night of the bombing. Men didn't meet face to face under those circumstances and ever forget the eyes they stared into. It was just Jason's bad luck to run into the one man from back then who could identify him. He tried to back out of the shadows until he bumped into the gun. The gun he'd felt pressed against his temple convinced him to go inside the old farmhouse. They'd tied his hands behind his back, but at least he was able to sit up. He figured there wasn't anywhere for him to run. This place must be pretty isolated. Earlier, all he could smell with his face pressed into the old barn's floor was rancid hay. Now he wished he had stayed buried in the dirt outside as the smell of cheap cigar smoke brought back old memories that made his gut clench. Waves of nausea rolled over him with the old reaction to the fear.

No one was more surprised to see Kincaid show up here in person than he was. He thought the senator would be too wary to show up himself, not chancing exposure by putting himself in the middle of this. That was too much to wish for. They'd hit pay dirt! Of course his excitement was tempered by the fact that his hands were tied and Kincaid held a gun he'd likely use to finish the job he'd attempted so many years ago.

"I thought we killed you off with Holmes in that car bomb. Too bad, we'll just have to do it right this time." He directed the last to a nervous Abu.

Jason realized that somewhere behind him, there was another man in the room. "Wait, isn't this Jason DesJardin, the real estate financier?" El Marat asked.

Obviously, his reputation had gotten around. "Yes, it's me. What's all this about? What have I got to do with anything?" Jason stalled.

Kincaid grinned and lit up his cigar. The alcohol weight had accumulated, and the belly had gone soft from years of easy living, but the old, recognizable evil came shining through. He circled Jason with a slow steady appraisal that made Jason's skin crawl. He remembered the man's touch and the old deep-seated anger began to well up inside him.

Jason remembered he was a grown man now. He could handle this coward who abused children. He was beyond uncontrollable fury at this stage of his life. He could do this.

Sure, he could. Then why were his insides seething?

"What were you doing outside spying?" El Marat asked.

Jason smiled, "Spying? I don't know what he's talking about. Don't be ridiculous. I financed this place. I was checking it out when this crazy man put a gun to my head." He shifted his head to Abu.

Kincaid backhanded Jason across the head with the cane.

Some things never change. Jason shook off the pain.

Kincaid's face reddened. "He's lying. Abu can confirm he worked with an antiterrorist agency years ago when I had his car wired to blow."

He kicked Jason. "You should have died with your new daddy back then."

"You've mistaken me for someone else, I'm afraid. I don't deal in politics, as you well know." He directed all his conversation at El Marat, betting the terrorist leader held all the real power in this room.

Kincaid growled. "I'm not the one mistaken." He laughed.

Jason tried another angle. "Do you know what I've heard about Senator Kincaid? I've heard he likes to hurt little boys and girls. Do you know what kind of pervert you're dealing with?" Jason spit the information out, hoping to diffuse the situation, shocking El Marat.

Kincaid took his cane to Jason's legs.

That was familiar.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Emily followed behind Mosel. He wanted her to stay back, but she refused. He circled around one side of the old house, and she stayed toward the back by the dock where Cade hid the boats. Before coming ashore, she checked in with Andrea, who was stationed on the road waiting for Harrison and the team. They were only moments away.

She positioned herself where she could hear what was being said and practically went insane when Kincaid hit Jason. When he admitted to wiring the car bomb, she almost couldn't contain herself.

She nodded to Mosel, and as planned, they burst through the doors simultaneously. She jumped at Jason and knocked him down. Her first instinct was to get him out of firing range.

While she struggled to get Jason to cover, Mosel took out Abu and then turned to take a body shot from Kincaid. Before Emily could get off a shot, he took another round as she watched helplessly. Kincaid escaped through the side door.

When she looked up, El Marat had his gun aimed at her. She opened fire without hesitation. Suddenly there were more of the terrorists than she realized coming through doors.

Before she had time to doubt they'd survive, Peter took aim through a window, and the semiautomatic rifle blasted. Jason rolled over her to protect her from the spray of bullets flying around, so she missed the rest of the action.

Harrison's team secured the farmhouse before many other shots were fired.

"Is he dead?" she asked Harrison as they bent to put pressure on El Marat's wound.

He rolled El Marat over to examine the damage. "No, he'll survive."

Emily scrambled frantically around searching for Mosel. She'd seen him get hit several times and knew it was serious. When she finally found him, a team of medics scurried around him. A medic treating him shook his head at her.

Emily had only to look at his pale skin and blood pouring out of his wounds to know he was critically wounded, but she had to know who he really was before he died.

"Tell me now, who are you?" Jason limped up to them and kneeled beside Mosel.

"If I tell you, I'd have to kill you." Mosel tried to laugh, but gasped for air and choked while she held him.

Jason's face was torn and swollen where the cane had connected, and his wrists, still tied, were bleeding.

"Go ahead and try, "Jason said. "Thanks for everything, man. I wish you'd tell me your story, though. I feel like I still don't know what the hell this was all about."

Mosel pulled him toward him, choked, and quietly spoke into Jason's ear, "I was there that night, the night of the car bombing, working as a liaison on Franklin's team." He coughed. "I called off the meet. Too late. I'd grown suspicious with the arrangements." He winced with his pain, and Jason didn't think he'd last to finish the story.

"Someone intercepted my message." Mosel paused. "You never received the update. I was a trainee with INTERPOL, on loan to the agency. I didn't realize that you and the chap who got blown up back then were the same until this year during the chip assignment."

"Were you in on that?" Jason asked suspiciously. Mosel could only nod as the medic shot him full of painkillers.

Mosel gathered what little remained of his strength to explain, "Go to INTERPOL. They'll fill you in. Kincaid has been under investigation for years." He choked again. "Did we get him?" Emily saw Kincaid being hauled into a black agency van. Mosel closed his eyes. "Yes, yes, we got him, Mosel," she whispered then stood beside Jason and untied his hands.

Jason wasn't moving as the paramedics worked feverishly over Mosel. When the paramedic shook his head at them again, Emily turned away. She wouldn't watch life flow from the man who helped save their lives. A team stepped in front of them, blocking their view, and still, Jason didn't move.

She wondered what Mosel divulged to him when he whispered in his ear. When she couldn't watch anymore, she ran down to the water for refuge. It was then she finally cried for the friend she couldn't help trusting. Looking back at the war zone, she saw Harry and Pete picking up around the farmhouse. Harrison stopped by and said something to them just as another helicopter set down.

When she turned around to see what was happening, she saw Jason standing over a body bag and watched as they whisked the lifeless form off to a waiting medevac helicopter.

Cade came up to check on the members of his family. He put an arm around Jason first. "They got the bastard. This time he won't get away with it. Emily taped his confession to the car bombing. He did it to get rid of any credible witnesses to his abuse. I just wonder why he waited so long."

"I don't think he knew who was behind getting us kids out. Someone must have let it slip or sold him the information. There weren't many who knew the story." Jason stopped mid-thought. His mind clicked away. His expression turned black. Even Cade's usually light personality went dark as the realization hit.

Emily still wasn't sure she understood the situation with Kincaid. "Knew what?" She looked at both men. They seemed reluctant to answer.

Andrea came up to the group and put her arm around Emily's shoulder for comfort. Emily looked into her face and knew it was terrible. "Let's go home and let everyone get things cleaned up. They have a bunch of paperwork to take care of here, and we'll just be in the way. Cade can take you back in the boat. Later, Jason can come with Harrison. I'll meet you all back at the main house. We'll talk then."

She ushered Emily toward the dock. "Come on, Cade, take Emily back to the house." He looked up like a zombie and responded as he was told. He didn't speak. His blank look frightened Emily more than anything she'd ever seen. This wasn't Cade.

Emily watched helplessly as Andrea managed them. She turned and walked to the water, then down the path following Cade. As they rounded the corner, she saw the little skiff that he'd left there.

They didn't speak on the way back. Each kept their thoughts to themselves. Emily couldn't understand why Senator Kincaid would want to have her father and Jason killed. It made no sense to her.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

The children were playing tea party in the playhouse with Kate when Emily and Cade got there. Pete and Harry waited silently in the kitchen. The entire family had gathered together when the report reached them about Jason's abduction. Everyone should have been elated that he was okay, but Kincaid's involvement, for some reason, had dimmed the mood.

Emily felt the threat of tears, the ones she hadn't thoroughly shed for Mosel, tugging at the edge of her emotions. Later, when she could feel something again, she was sure they'd come. Mosel's death unnerved her, and she was sure when the tears started, they would appear in torrents. He'd died protecting her and had actually saved Jason. The way he cared for her and why would be a mystery to her forever.

Now the bigger mystery remained. What were these people, her family, hiding from her?

Hours passed, and the mood didn't lift. It was past dark when Jason and Harrison came in with Andrea. Looks passed between everyone, eyes shifting to avoid contact. Emily went to Jason and touched his arm lightly. He finally looked up, as if just realizing where he was, like a man coming out of a coma.

Andrea nodded reassurance to Emily. "Let's all sit down in the family room. Rosa will take the girls, won't you please?"

The old woman smiled at the two sleeping children flung over the couch. "I'll carry this one," Harry offered. And Peter picked up the other sleeping child.

"Emily needs to know," Andrea said. "Who is going to fill her in?"

Kate blurted out, "Kincaid abused us." The room went dead silent.

Cade added, "Jason saved us, and your father helped us all escape. He protected his identity and ours. Then when Kincaid discovered your father's identity, he had him killed to prevent anyone finding out about his past. He had plans to run for president."

"He must have discovered who your father was and then put it all together. Jason's undercover identity as Jason DesJardin was now high profile but his old identity as your brother Jason Holmes had been wiped out years ago. You knew he'd been reported missing after the bombing that killed your father," Harrison said.

Jason hadn't lifted his head. "The only person who knew was Franklin." He spoke like a broken man.

Emily gasped. "No, he wouldn't."

Jason still didn't look up. Harrison patted Emily. "It's true. Franklin was the mole. They found the evidence. He's already been arrested."

Andrea said, "And although Kincaid got away in the confusion, we fixed him good with El Marat. He's been set up. That chip deal you pulled off was his. Trust me. El Marat's men won't let him go to trial, especially now that they believe he double crossed them."

Emily stared at each member of her extended family and was suddenly angry. She couldn't bring herself to voice her feelings. She didn't know how to deal with this information, and she was pissed off at the whole bunch of them for leaving her out of so much over the years.

She wasn't even sure what feelings she should be experiencing. Her disappointment in Franklin warred between resentment and murder. She hated Kincaid, that's for sure. There was no doubt about the vile feeling she felt overwhelming her. But then she realized how much more these people she loved must be suffering with their memories, vile memories bringing back unbearable pain and suddenly she realized something else—guilt.

"You all kept this secret from me all these years? Why? You all suffered at this man's hands and I never knew? I could have understood so much more. I'm so sorry."

Jason jumped up, angry. "You're sorry? You? What have you got to be sorry about? Your father would never have been involved if it wasn't for me. He'd still be alive. I cost you your father's life."

She'd guessed right. They were feeling guilty. "Don't be ridiculous. Kincaid and only Kincaid started this." The thought of anyone else accepting responsibility for the man's demented behavior made her furious.

Jason was beyond hearing. "I failed to save anyone. I bashed his head in and would have killed Kincaid that night. What does it say about me? Because for years, my only regret is that I failed to kill him back then."

Kate was pale and still. Cade went to stand at her side, putting an arm around her waist. "Tell him, Kate."

"Tell me what?" Jason looked at them both.

She began to speak quietly, as if in a trance, confessing. "No. Jason, it wasn't you. It was me. I hit him with the bat. You took it away from me and punched him senseless, but I couldn't stop screaming for you to kill him. I goaded you on. I wanted to kill him. And I've wanted to ever since. What does that say about me? Cade took the bat from you, dropped it, and told Harry to get me out of there. But I wouldn't go, I wanted to bash him." Kate shivered.

Jason shook his head at Kate, looking incredulous. "I didn't beat him with the bat?"

"No, and you didn't let me either. After I knocked him off you with it, you took it away from me." Kate's admission had Jason feeling stunned, relieved he wasn't the dark violent monster he thought he could be, yet still confused with his anger. Harry didn't say anything Emily noticed until he uttered, "He beat me the most, up until that night, that night he had attempted the unspeakable." Harry stopped talking.

Listening to their confessions was unbearably painful, for Emily and for them. She could tell by their body language.

Peter stood up, facing them all, admitting, "I hid in the bed, and I wouldn't come out from under the covers until Cade made us leave. What kind of coward am I?" He rubbed at the tears streaming down his handsome young face.

Jason smiled at his foster brother. "Today, you helped Emily get me out of the farm house. How could you question your courage after something like that?"

He reached over and tousled Peter's blond hair. "Believe me," Jason laughed. "I could barely contain myself when I saw you coming through the window. I wanted to scream out, 'my hero' like some southern belle in a bad movie." Jason imitated a young girl's voice to break the tension that was mounting. "You looked like the cavalry coming over the hill in an old western."

As each admitted to the guilt stored in the deepest recesses of their hearts, Emily finally comprehended the real damage the senator had done. "Stop this, all of you, there isn't a single one of you who should feel guilty about anything. You were helpless children. Only that monster is responsible for the events that happened that night and since."

She looked at Jason and poked him in the chest as she spoke. "Including my father's death. Apparently, greed, jealousy all played a big part. Since Franklin was involved, evidently the outcome would have been the same."

Jason actually looked at Emily for the first time since he walked in. She was remarkable. Could she really believe what she said? He hoped she was right.

Andrea had tried to tell them this same thing over the years—that Kincaid had been the problem. Although Jason believed Avery endangered himself by saving them, the fact that Emily didn't blame him was a greater shock than he expected. Ever since he discovered Kincaid's involvement, he was determined to finally even the score. Now, here was Emily claiming it was Kincaid and Franklin, not him, who were responsible. Well, of course they were directly responsible, but she didn't blame him at all.

Emily hugged Kate to her and reached out for the others as she stared Jason down. "You are not considering what happened objectively, any of you. All of you are still damaged children when it comes to that man. If you let him scare you, let him make you doubt yourselves, then he's won. Bury him. Turn the lights on and the monster under the bed disappears, so to speak. Let's put it behind us?" They all gathered round with Harrison and Andrea looking on.

After kissing each of them, Emily went over and took Jason by the hand. He still couldn't move. "Come with me."

With a little tugging, she coerced him onto his feet and drew him out the door with a glance to the rest. "We'll see you all tomorrow."

Jason stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. Then something happened that none of them ever expected to see. He blushed.

They could hear Harrison guffawing, and the rest joined in the raucous laughter as she led Jason out the door. At least they could provide the entertainment. The sound of their laughter lightened their hearts almost as much as being in each other's arms. Emily said with an arm around his waist, "You look like you need some extra TLC, and I'm just the one to give it to you."

She walked him to her place, slowly allowing the anticipation to build. The room smelled of roses from the rosebushes off the kitchen. The evening breeze blew the scent through the open windows. It was clouding over out on the bay,

"Storm's brewing out there," she said as she turned her attention back to him. Her emotions felt like scrambled eggs. She hoped he could accept how she felt, could deal with his own screwed up emotions. She walked up to him, just out of reach, and examined his expression, looking for a break. Then she stepped forward and took his face in her hands and stared deep into his eyes. "I'm not afraid of you." She rubbed her thumb across his lips with one hand and cupped his hard jaw with her other, refusing to allow him to draw away. She leaned in, stretched to touch his lips to hers, softly mingling their breath. She ran her tongue inside, testing. He let her take him, deepening the kiss. Her hands held his head to hers. She was determined to hold him to her. His hands moved from where they rested lightly at her waist to a slow ascent up her sides. His thumbs drew lazy circles on the underside of each breast. Every movement between them was loving. This was a blending, a mating of like hearts, a merging of souls.

Emily sensed when Jason recognized the difference in their lovemaking, the exact moment when he accepted himself and their feelings for each other. She felt the shift in him and the earth moved beneath her and something inside her stirred. He nibbled her neck and held her closely against his body, inhaling her scent, murmuring against her skin. Touching, stirring her, giving himself to her completely, yielding to his feelings. It was a slow surrender, but not a retreat. Instead, he turned the tables on her, taking his slow, deliberate attack into a full-blown steady assault on her emotions as well as her senses. The offense she initiated, pouring herself into him, turned back on her. She never felt so wonderful, so enriched or complete.

* * * *

Jason kissed her like a man possessed. Maybe he was. She seeped into him and healed him. With one arm around her back and the other under her knees, he swooped her up, heading to the back sunroom. Tonight he'd make honest love to her as the storm raged around them with only candles to light the room between lightening strikes over the water. Tonight, when he took her, there would be no doubt that it meant forever.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The morning air cleared, like crystal, the way spring rains have a way of doing. Everything sparkled. Inhaling the fresh air filled her lungs as her heart filled with Jason last night. She rested her head against the headboard and studied him. That stray lock persistently dropped over his forehead. He seemed relaxed, young as she'd never seen him appear before.

The white feather down comforter contrasted against his tanned skin. It barely covered him as he sprawled, taking up the entire center of the bed, pillows strewn about. The sun streamed through the uncovered windows and glistened off the water, reflecting dancing rainbows on the walls and ceiling. If she could hold this moment in time as she held it in her heart, she would share it with the world. She was so happy.

She felt her stomach grumble.

The realization of all they had gone through brought an ache in the pit of her soul.

"What's that face for?" she heard him ask. She didn't realize Jason was awake and staring at her. He ran a hand over her cheek, thumbing her lips, coaxing a smile. "Your stomach's growling, too."

She bent over, kissed him senseless. He saw too much. "Mosel sacrificed himself for us. I'm glad I wasn't wrong about him. My instincts were good. I feel good about that, but I'm indebted to him for his sacrifice."

Jason flipped her under him, surrounding her with his body heat. "This is too beautiful a day for worries or regrets. Mosel wouldn't have wanted me to waste it with morbid thoughts." Jason irreverently teased her. "He would want me to touch you, let's see...here?" He cupped her cheek, pressing his lips lightly on hers. "No, here." He ran his hand down her neck, her shoulder, her breast, and held. She gasped as heat flooded her.

He moved his hands with a pace she couldn't keep up with. She giggled as Jason playfully tickled her until his erection at the juncture to her opening demanded her full attention. He slid into her waiting warmth as she accepted him with a sigh, holding him desperately against her body. And still a sadness enveloped her. Jason could feel it. He looked into her sad expression, unable to stand her sorrow. He winked at her then whispered in her ear, "Mosel would need a new identity if he survived."

Kissing her lips, he stroked her from inside, coaxing her, drawing her to him. She felt her insides grip with the oncoming orgasm. How could she feel like this knowing Mosel had died for them? Her eyes flew open. "What? Wait a minute. What are you saying?" She stopped his pumping movement, holding him back with all her strength, freezing time.

He smiled down at her. "If I tell you, I'd have to kill you." He nipped her neck.

"Oh, Jason, how? Never mind, come here." She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the forehead, then his nose, and then she smacked him a big one on the lips and screamed a rebel yell.

Mosel is alive! She thought how wonderful life could be.

She settled her hips under Jason. Tingling sensations sparked through her, and she arched seductively into him, lifted up, and gripped him with her internal muscles. That elicited a gratifying groan.

She whispered, "We wouldn't want to disappoint Mosel, now would we?"

Chapter Thirty-Four

The autumn colors were even brighter this year than most, or maybe it was his mood. The sun reflected the ambers, bronzes, and golds off the still water, creating a blaze of fire on the river. Jason watched as fish broke ripples in the silent surface, finally at peace with his life. He expected the peace to be short-lived, though, here at the farm in Maryland.

Cade bought Mosel's estate. It actually had been a government property that was used for espionage years ago. Jason and Emily decided to stay on at her farm after the wedding, at least until after the babies were born. The twin girls they were expecting in December would be a handful if he knew anything about women.

Her uncontrollable auburn hair still tickled his nose and managed to find him whenever he was within reaching distance. As she pulled the crab trap out of the water, she hopelessly tried to brush the hair out of the way. Unsuccessful with her hair, she gave up trying.

He loved it and her, and he finally wasn't afraid to admit it. She let out a wild whoop as she pulled the trap onto the dock. He couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face as he enjoyed the enthusiasm Emily evoked for their simple life.

"Look," she said excitedly. "There are six. Mmm, good eating tonight."

She didn't expect it when he came up behind her. He reached around her round form to caress his babies growing large inside her.

"Mmmm," he kissed her neck and nipped her ear lobe, "good eating tonight."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an old crabbing boat anchored off the bend. Years of practice taught him to never let down his guard. But now, he suspected someone was watching his back for him. For a while, anyway. Maybe, it was the way the old man on the crabber's deck kept watch. It could be something about the way he moved that reminded him of someone else, someone younger.

Jason held the woman he loved from the first as she blossomed, growing big with his children. He watched the old crab boat out of the corner of his eye, feeling a little sorry for the man he'd worked with for so many years.

* * * *

Mosel watched them together. He always knew she belonged to Jason. The sparks between them were evident to any good observer. Knowing they were a match eased the ache he felt in his heart. Unfortunately, their happiness reminded him what he was missing in his own life. He and Jason had both cared for Emily. And although he envied Jason's new future, he never figured himself for a home and hearth kind of guy.

Still, it gave Mosel hope. Anyone could change for the right woman. If Jason could change his life, maybe there was still a chance for him. The thought made him smile behind the scraggly beard he wore as part of his disguise.

While he sat throwing crab traps into the river, he had plenty of time to reflect while he recuperated, letting his emotional wounds heal as well. The boat was a good way to watch out for his friends and keep them safe until Kincaid was confirmed dead. Anyway, it would be a while before he fully healed from the near death experience, longer still before his heart recovered.

He should have been more careful. Emily never made him any promises. In many ways, she tried to warn him. He knew what he was getting into and couldn't help himself. Maybe he was getting soft, thinking about really falling for a woman.

No, he realized. He was just testing the waters. He chuckled, reassured himself he would be fine. He stretched his stiff muscles. Someday he'd find the woman who was suited to him. He figured when the right time came, the woman wouldn't have to put a gun to his head. He hoped he didn't have to put a gun to hers.

THE END

HTTP://ELIZABETHMARCHAT.WORPRESS.COM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Marchat lives with her husband and her daughter's cat near Tampa, Florida. After raising five children, she now finds time to write the stories of her heart and occasionally gets to spend time with her grandchildren.



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