

SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

The Beauty

SONG OF
THE SIRENS
3

Morgan Ashbury

THE BEAUTY

Song of the Sirens 3

Morgan Ashbury

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000."

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

THE BEAUTY

Copyright © 2010 by Morgan Ashbury

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-267-3

First E-book Publication: May 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

All cover art and logo copyright © 2010 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *The Beauty* by Morgan Ashbury from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

Regarding E-book Piracy

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Morgan Ashbury's livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. Ashbury's right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher
www.SirenPublishing.com
www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

My father was a writer. A childhood friend of his once told me, “Jack never went anywhere without a pencil and a small note book. Every time you saw him he was writing.” By the time I was born, my father, mired in the realities of 1950s life with a wife and now three children to support, wrote no more. He died young, but I believe with all my heart that had he lived, he would have returned to writing in his September years.

Daddy, from you I inherited this talent, and this dream. I hope you are proud of me.

THE BEAUTY

Song of the Sirens 3

MORGAN ASHBURY

Copyright © 2010

Prologue

We are to be trapped, century after century, until we succeed in winning the hearts of men who believe we have betrayed them. This seems too cruel to me, not for ourselves so much as for those poor mortal women who at birth shall be infused with our souls and shackled with our punishment. And for those men who shall hunger and yearn for them and then, perhaps, despite their lack of faith, mourn.

My sisters move closer to me, their instinct to protect me despite that I am the oldest and, in truth, the strongest among us. My name is Ligeia. They call me The Beauty, as if I am but a countenance alone. But I cannot protest. I am as I allow others to see me, for with my beauty I have found that I can be bold or innocent, stunning or ordinary. This gift came from my mother, who pleased the lord of the gods, Zeus, and reaped the reward of a special brand of guile in return.

“I foresee many lifetimes cut short, many women ill-used in this curse those bitches have given us this day,” Thelxiope says. “And more men who shall fall prey to these gods and be their victims, as well.”

“Their time is nearly done,” Peisinoe whispers as she moves closer to me. “I have seen a vision. Soon men will forget these times,

forget us, as they throw off the gods, and become the masters of their own fate."

"But not completely, for destiny remains, and destiny will still touch those it will." My heart lightens then, for I look upon the faces of my sisters and I understand that the Moerae have unwittingly bestowed upon us a gift far more valuable than any punishment they sought to give. "We shall overcome this curse, which is also a blessing, for with it we are bound, the three of us, bound to find each other again and again through all eternity. To be sisters, again and again through all eternity. And surely, when this curse is done, this blessing shall go on."

And so it will be.

Three women. Three destinies. One fate.

Chapter 1

The dream came again, sultry, sexy, taking over her body. Taking over *her*.

“Do you know what I want to do right now?”

The provocative question vibrated against the skin of Alba Morel’s neck. Patrick’s voracious lips and his smooth tenor wrapped in a sexy British accent coated her skin, tingling her nerve endings and shivering her belly. The sensitive flesh between her thighs moistened, and she clenched her inner muscles to hold the delicious arousal close.

“I have no idea. What do you want to do right now?”

They were alone on the yacht, a ship Patrick had rented for the duration of his vacation on Santa Maria, a small island in the Caribbean. They’d met by chance at a local market, two people from different sides of the Atlantic, vacationing on the same tropical paradise. They’d only been together for two weeks, but already Alba knew he was the man she was meant to spend the rest of her life with.

The boat swayed with the gentle rhythm of the ocean, the breeze light and refreshing. Alba used the fingers of her right hand to comb through her long black hair, pushing it back from her face. Her left hand was braced against the rail of the boat. Patrick put his arm around her, so she wasn’t at all concerned for her safety. His intense blue eyes shimmered with heat, and she knew whatever he wanted to do would be torture of the most exquisite kind.

“Here, let me show you instead of telling you. That is, after all, the hallmark of a good writer.”

Alba chuckled as he gently turned her around and placed both her hands on the rail. He held his body flush against hers as he raised her skirt between them. Strong fingers caressed her bottom, latched on to the tiny scrap of lace she wore over her sex.

She gasped when he tore the insubstantial undergarment from her body.

The sensation of his hand working the snap and zipper of his shorts played out against her naked ass. Following the progress of his hand on its downward trek, she licked her lips in anticipation.

She waited for the motion of his putting on the condom, but he shocked her by thrusting hard and deep into her.

“Patrick!”

“Darling, I’ve been hard since you came on board my boat. I put the rubber on a few minutes ago, below deck. Now, step back from the rail, spread your legs, bend over and let me just take you.”

She could do nothing else. The power of his thrusts, the incredible hunger of her body for his overwhelmed her. She’d never thought to be so free, so wanton, as she had been with Patrick Jamieson. She never believed she could be that way with *any* man.

“Your ass is scrumptious, so white and firm. Do you want to experiment, darling? There are so many things I would love to try with you.” She felt him lean closer, change the angle of his thrusts. Sharper, deeper, Alba felt completely full, completely dominated. His tongue tasted her ear. Then he whispered, “I would like to spank you. Will you let me do that one day?”

“Oh, God.”

She would have sworn that the sound of a masculine chuckle, so smug and arrogant would have turned her off. Instead, she wanted only to submit to whatever he wanted to do to her.

“Come on my cock, baby. Come on me so I can drive you up again.”

Alba flew apart, the orgasm tearing through her, wave after delicious wave of rapture flooding her body, mind and soul. Nothing

existed, nothing mattered but the explosive sizzle centered where his hard latex-covered cock slid and slammed inside her hot wet sheath. The head of his penis stroked her G spot and Alba wondered if this climax would kill her.

The rapture ebbed, and Patrick slowed his thrusts, giving her time to catch her breath. Firm, knowledgeable hands caressed her bottom, stroked up her back, pushing both skirt and shirt out of the way so they could touch naked flesh. Fingers snaked around until he palmed her breasts. Her nipples, rock hard with the last vestiges of climax, soaked up the attention, telling her pussy to get ready for more.

Alba wasn't without her own moves.

Relaxing against the rail, she clenched the muscles of her perineum, a long slow embrace. Patrick hissed as he inhaled, and she felt his cock swell even more.

"Come with me this time," she invited, then clenching and releasing inwardly, moved her hips back a fraction, tilting her pelvis, taking him deeper.

"Siren."

He clutched her closer, his labored breath hot against the back of her neck as he groaned and pistoned his hips even faster. Tendrils of his blond hair caressed her cheek, and for an instant the sight of their blended strands, his pale gold, hers obsidian black, thrilled her heart. The strands of their hair mingled, seeming inseparable. She believed they would be inseparable, too.

"Together," his whisper accompanied those clever fingers of his reaching down to tease her clit.

Alba felt certain she went blind, the joy of her climax so immense it outshone the sun. Thrilling, shivering, her body greedily gobbled the sensations as her heart pounded and her blood raced. On and on the flame consumed her until every ounce of her energy evaporated, leaving her weak and heaving, trusting Patrick's strength to keep her from slipping overboard.

“God, sweetheart, each time is better than the one before. We’re going to kill each other.”

Before she could answer his fervent statement, he scooped her into his arms and brought her over to the extra-wide chase under the shade of an umbrella.

She loved this part the most, the way he seemed to need to snuggle and cuddle post-coital as much as she did. Alba’s head fit just nicely into the dip of his collar bone. His hands, infinitely gentle, stroked and soothed. She wound her arms around his neck and relaxed completely.

“It’s never been like this for me,” she admitted. “You and what you make me feel are a miracle, Patrick.”

“My sweet Alba.” He kissed her forehead, gathered her close. “When we’ve rested, let’s swim. Then, for dinner tonight I thought we’d fly over to San Juan.”

“Fly to Puerto Rico just for dinner?”

“It’s not that far, nor that expensive. We could stay over if you like, at the Carstairs. Their restaurant is excellent.”

“Now *that* does sound expensive.”

“It isn’t overtly but the cost doesn’t matter. You are definitely worth it. Besides, I have connections. What do you say?”

“I say yes. Thank you.”

“Wonderful. I’m feeling that I might get lucky tonight.”

Alba responded to the sound of teasing in his voice and lifted her head to encounter laughing blue eyes. “I think you’ve already gotten lucky, buster.”

“I was referring to the fact that the hotel has a casino, of course.”

“Of course. Do they also have a boutique? I’ll want to pick up something a little more appropriate to wear to dinner than what I have with me.”

“They do. I’ve never bought a dress there, but I’ve seen them.”

Oh, she loved the way he could tease. She loved him, though she hadn’t yet told him. Maybe she would. Tonight.

“Wonderful, then it’s a date.” She snuggled back down onto him, secure in his strength, and the way he wrapped his arms around her.

“Yes, it is. I’m looking forward to showing you San Juan, my Alba.”

* * * *

But the date never happened. Alba had waited for Patrick to pick her up. The next morning, a messenger delivered a hastily scrawled—very short and not at all sweet—‘dear Jane’ note.

Alba reached over and turned on the bedside light, the illumination proof that she indeed lay in her own bed in her New York apartment and not at the resort in the Caribbean.

Stupid to still be having that damn dream. Patrick Jamieson happened nearly three years ago, and she should be well and truly over him by now. Two weeks of unreality should *not* have such a tight grasp of her heart.

Swinging her feet to the floor, she reached for a tissue from the bedside table. Wiping her tears, she focused on the clock, the green LED flashing six-ten. Padding on bare feet to her bedroom window, she stretched and turned, trying to catch a glimpse of the city below and the river beyond. The world outside her Manhattan apartment remained black as midnight, seeming ignorant the sun would soon rise.

Autumn arrived ahead of the calendar. Yesterday had been wet with a chilling breeze. Alba recalled thinking that she hated this time of year, hated the dull dreary weather. *That must be why I had that dream. My subconscious was just looking for someplace warm. It couldn’t be because I’m still in love with the bastard.*

Resting her face against the cool glass, she allowed her waking thoughts a rare walk down memory lane. She’d never heard from Patrick Jamieson again. After she’d returned home, she’d seen one of his books on sale at Borders, and bought it. He penned tales of

mystery and intrigue, set in London of the nineteenth century. It galled her to admit he was a damn good writer.

Of course, she'd never told her sisters she'd read all his books. Just as she'd never mentioned the fact that she'd Googled him.

The speed and way in which he'd dumped her felt like the ass-covering actions of a married man. But he wasn't married—at least according to his official web site. In fact, his unmarried status and his age—he would turn forty on September twenty-first—had been about the only personal information the site contained.

If anyone knew anything else about the best-selling author, it wasn't anywhere for public consumption.

"Alba, you have got to put him in the past. Find yourself a man who can give you the love and commitment you deserve."

She often spoke to herself aloud. A habit begun in childhood, one she'd never outgrown, positive self-talk got her through a lot of rough times. Of course, no one but her sisters—and now the two men who had married them—knew about her quirky habit. Damn, she missed her sisters.

The phone rang, bringing her away from the window and her introspection.

"Hello?"

"Oh, damn, I didn't think about the time difference before I called! It's just after one in the afternoon here, but it's...oh hell, it's six am in New York."

Alba grinned, her sister Pamela's voice a soothing balm that put thoughts of asshole writers back where they belonged.

"I'd already gotten out of bed, P. J. How are you?"

"Oh, God, how can you wake up so early every morning? It's not natural."

"So you and Twyla have always said. Not to mention the grief the two of you always gave me when I would crash into my wine by eleven in the evening."

Her sister's laughter floated over the phone lines to her. Despite being a child of the late twentieth century, Alba still found it incredible that she could chat with her sister who lived all the way around the world in Athens.

"Yeah, we did. Listen, that's why I'm calling. Twyla and Nick are coming over in a couple of weeks. Nick is going to be consulting with Dylan about an upgrade to the security systems of the Moerae Corporation. So why don't you come, too? I know how much you hate fall, and I hear it's been wet and chilly in New York. It's beautiful here, sunny and warm."

No one could tell Alba that positive thinking didn't work. Here she'd just been missing her sisters, and Pamela called with an offer too good to pass up.

"Oh, sister, I am *so* there."

"Great. Listen, if you can get your ass to Florida, Dylan is sending the jet."

"Give Dylan a big squishy kiss for me as a thank-you. I'll give Twyla a call to coordinate."

"Not this early!" Pamela laughed.

"Don't worry. I'll wait until noon or so before I call her."

"I can't wait to see you guys. I miss you both," Pamela said.

Alba swallowed the tears that threatened. *That damn dream put me in a mood.* "I can't wait to see you guys, either, and I miss you back."

Once the call ended, Alba treated herself to a soak in her whirlpool tub. Since she had no real plans for the day, she extended her home spa-time by following the soak with a brisk, hot shower. When she emerged from the bathroom she felt better, warm and snug and balanced.

Damp black hair hung to her shoulders. She had a lot of it, but the fine strands dried easily. She preferred her natural color as opposed to the treatments and wigs she sometimes used in her work.

Thoughts of her work sent a shiver down her spine. She'd announced her intention to retire last month, and now waited to hear back. The longer the wait, the more frayed her nerves became.

"Positive thoughts, Alba." Yes, she would focus on the positive. She'd think about her upcoming trip to Athens. It had been a couple of months since she'd seen her sisters. They'd last gotten together when they'd gathered in Florida for Twyla's wedding to Nicholas Coultrain.

Cat burglar marries security consultant. Who would have figured? Of course, Twyla wasn't *really* a cat burglar, but she did steal—from thieves, returning the recovered goods to their rightful owners, usually for a tidy finder's fee.

Alba reentered her bedroom and got dressed, choosing casual black pants. She mated them with a soft red sweater, which she chose both for its texture and its warmth. She allowed her thoughts to stay with her sisters, mainly because that was one of the places they liked best to be. Twyla had begun to change the way she did business, adding her talent to Nick's and now they were building a business together.

Both her sisters had found men who were their soul mates, and she rejoiced in their good fortune. Thoughts of the man she'd truly believed to have been *her* soul mate threatened to resurge, and Alba shook her head as if she could shake them free. "There has to be a way to get that man out of my head!"

In the next instant Alba thought that statement should be filed under 'be careful what you wish for'.

A three-tone ringing sound tripped her heart. On the bedside table, the red cell phone that she used exclusively for her work lit up as it rang.

Be careful what you wish for indeed. Reaching out, she picked it up, flipped it open and pushed 'talk'.

"Yes."

"Giorgio's Deli, in Queens. One hour."

There could be no mistaking that voice, she'd heard it through that phone, and in person, for the last four years.

Closing the cell phone, she set it back down, then walked back to her closet.

Reaching inside, she pulled out a black blazer. Then, reaching further inside the space, she grabbed a leather holster and turned to her bedside table.

She kept the gun, a compact Beretta with a two point four inch barrel, beside her while she slept. It carried a seven shot magazine, a twenty-two caliber, long range bullet. It was her own personal weapon, not company issue, purchased legally, and licensed. It fit neatly into the holster that she wore at the small of her back. The cut of the blazer hid the weapon.

She could draw it faster and fire it more accurately than most. The sensation of the gun in her hand turned off her nerves and tuned up her caution.

In one hour she would discover whether her employer, the United States Government, would honor her request for retirement—or try to kill her.

Chapter 2

The world outside his bedroom window looked black as pitch. Patrick Jamieson ran a distracted hand through his hair, as if the action could comb out the images that had tossed him from sleep.

Sleek and sultry, lithe and lovely, Alba Morel always invaded his dreams, taunting him over and over with the biggest mistake of his life.

I never should have ended it the way I did. How many times had that thought haunted his sleeping—and waking—moments? He could have handled the situation so much better than he did. Yes, he'd known when he'd been called home that it would likely have been months before he would be able to see her.

Reality exerted itself over his wistful thoughts. Either way, their relationship probably wouldn't have worked out. The assignment he'd rushed home to fulfill turned critical, and ended up lasting nearly a year. Then afterward, it took a long time before he'd been up and mobile again.

Absently, he massaged the upper left quadrant of his chest. The puckered flesh where a bullet chewed through him—just missing his heart—had long since lost its angry red color. It still ached on occasion, usually if he caught a draft.

Or if he brooded in the middle of the night over what might have been.

He'd enjoyed one hell of a good career, all things considered. He'd devoted himself to Queen and Country, doing his patriotic best for England. Much like his father, and his father before him. Very much like his great-grandfather, who'd been a special agent for the

Crown against Napoleon's forces, and upon whom he'd based his fictional character, Piers Longbranch.

Patrick's family, titled as it was, also had always stepped up and done their patriotic duty.

Between getting wounded himself, and then losing his best friend who'd died in the line of duty shortly after, Patrick had been considering for the last year and a half that the time fast approached when he would call it a day in that arena. Last month he'd made his decision, and he'd informed his immediate superior and the Minister of his intention to resign as of the end of the year. It was late August now, so that gave him another four months. And then he would be free.

Free to do what? Do you actually think she'll take you back?

He knew it would be a long shot. He'd instructed Pedro, his houseman on the island of Santa Maria, to monitor Alba after his hasty departure nearly three years before. He'd expected her to be mad as hell that he'd left with nothing more than a hastily penned note that amounted to a brush-off of the most callous kind; he *hadn't* expected her to fall into abject misery.

Two days. For two days she'd locked herself in her suite at the resort, going nowhere, eating nothing. Crying. Pedro reported that 'la senorita' cried so much the maids at the resort began to worry. And then she'd flown home, cutting her planned stay short.

In view of that reaction, Patrick knew he needed to work on the story he would give her—no. He turned away from the window, took in his rumpled bed, then reached for his robe. There would be no going back to sleep today. Dawn would arrive in a couple of hours. He'd get himself some tea, then get to work on his latest manuscript.

And if he decided to try and win back the only woman he had ever loved, he would have to tell her the truth—as much of it as he could.

"Right. I can see that," he murmured aloud as he left his bedroom. "My Alba, I left you because I was called home by the Prime Minister, who personally asked me to take up a dangerous undercover

assignment in war-torn Iraq. Said assignment lasted not the two months anticipated, but for almost a year before my cover got blown and I was shot and left for dead in the mountains. But all that's behind me now." He didn't need to have an author's imagination to envision her reaction to a story like *that*.

His life held more intrigue than some of his novels.

Patrick made his way to the kitchen. Mrs. Barton, his cook, wouldn't be up yet, and he wasn't going to wake her just because he wanted some tea.

As at home in the kitchen as at the rifle range or the computer, Patrick brewed the beverage in minutes, and carried a full mug—he detested the tiny cups with saucers his majordomo, Parsons, often insisted on using—into his office.

The story grabbed him, as it often did, and it was some time later when the sounds of the door opening and Parson's precise footsteps snagged his attention.

"Excuse me, Milord. Mr. Hargreaves is on the line."

"Thank you, Parsons."

"Shall I bring you fresh tea, sir?"

"Yes, thank you. And in a mug, damn it."

"As you wish, Milord."

Patrick smiled, the tone of the man's disappointment so familiar, he thought he might really miss it if Parsons ever took it in his head to quit and he had to hire another to take his place. Of course that scenario would likely never happen as Parsons would be the first to remind him there had been a Parsons in service at Jamieson Hall since George the third created the first Earl of Avebury in seventeen sixty-three.

Patrick reined in his thoughts and reached for the phone.

"Good morning, Jonathan."

"Good morning, Patrick. Hope I didn't wake you."

The comment inspired Patrick to look at the lower right hand corner of his computer monitor to check the time. It was only seven-fifteen.

“No, I’ve been up for a while but you seem to be at your desk rather early.”

“Yes, I received a call in the middle of the night from Porter Thomas, a matter of some urgency he needed to discuss with me.”

Patrick frowned. Porter Thomas was an old acquaintance of Jonathan’s—his American counterpart, to some extent. Patrick met the man only once. His dislike of the American had been instant and absolute.

“And now you want to discuss same with me?” Patrick asked. He wondered if his boss could hear the hesitation in his tone.

“Yes. I know I promised that I’d do my best to keep you benched until your retirement officially kicks in. But this is a potentially devastating situation. Porter gave me a heads-up when he called. He said he’ll know more by late this afternoon, at which time he’ll send me all the information via e-mail.”

“I can be there around three,” Patrick suggested. He’d rather just say no. But he’d never been able to turn his back when his country—in the guise of Jonathan Hargreaves—called.

“Three’s good. I’ll see you then.”

Patrick settled the receiver back in its cradle. For a long moment he looked at the phone, trying to understand the sense of apprehension that swamped him.

Why did he feel as if his life had just taken an irreversible turn? Whatever Jonathan asked of him, it would likely be of short duration and certainly wouldn’t change his retirement plans.

Jonathan said the situation could be potentially devastating, but then most of his assignments as an agent for MI5 could be all that and more.

* * * *

Porter Thomas resisted the urge to check his watch and his surroundings. He'd chosen a booth in the rear of the deli, sitting with his back against the wall. Mid-morning business—the customers appeared to be office workers for the most part—seemed brisk, most seeking takeout service at the counter. Some chose to take up space at the round bistro-style tables, by two's and three's, hunching over their bagels and lattes, speaking in whispers, or talking louder with wide, expansive gestures. Some chose seating in one of the handful of booths, so they could hunker down for more serious chatting or serious eating. A few patrons sat on their own, hiding behind the day's issue of the New York Times or Wall Street Journal.

Porter often wondered if those so occupied really read the forecasts and market reports, or if they were just putting on airs.

So many people put on airs, thought themselves better than others. Claiming to be fighting the good fight, standing for high, shining ideals, when in fact they were rotten to the core.

There had been a time when Porter believed in those ideals. Years when he'd struggled hard, done his best to protect liberty and democracy. He'd put agents in harm's way, stayed up all night eating antacids and worrying about whether he'd lose yet another young soul. There had been times when he wondered if he'd have to move, as he had in some instances, to eliminate any trace of an agent who'd been killed in the line of duty.

The last always seemed much harder than simply visiting a relative to inform them of the death of a loved one. He'd done both in his career. The agents used in long-term deep cover situations, assigned to the most sensitive targets, lived solitary lives. They had no close friends or relatives, and between assignments mostly kept to themselves. When they failed, or as sometimes happened, when they gave their lives to complete their missions, it would be Porter's job to go in and ensure that no evidence of their ever having lived could be found.

Porter took a sip of his Columbian blend. The crowd at the counter shifted and changed, young urban professionals with barely enough time in their day to grab a decent meal coming in, then leaving all in the space of minutes. Porter liked watching people. He found them a constant source of amusement.

He also directed agents who handled less volatile assignments. When he'd decided to diversify, he'd considered that roster, and chosen a couple such agents. He'd decided nearly at the time he'd had enough of scraping by on a civil servants' meager pay. All around him, people with less intelligence, less dedication managed to pull down six figure salaries and bonuses that made his head spin. And here he went through hell, giving everything and not even raking in a hundred grand a year. Fuck that.

When he'd been presented with a way to accumulate great, glorious gobs of cash, he'd grabbed it. He then craftily hid and invested that cash for his retirement—a retirement that would come a full decade sooner than he'd originally planned. There was only one tiny obstacle standing in his way.

One of the agents who unwittingly assisted him in his private enterprise wanted to retire. With retirement came full debriefings, not with Porter, but with his superiors.

It wouldn't take them long to discover what he'd done. Discovery would net him either life in prison or a bullet in the head. Neither option was, in his opinion, viable.

So he'd come up with a bold plan. He possessed just enough hacker skills, and just enough chutzpah to pull it off. Once this agent was dead, and the fatal error discovered, well, there'd be no one to blame. In fact, Porter thought he just might use the heartbreak of this tragic mistake as the catalyst for his early retirement. Oh yes, that would be perfect!

He'd hired a small-time private detective to shadow his agent so he'd be kept apprised of her moves. That pawn could be easily

disposed of, when the time came. In the meantime, today he would put his plan into action.

He caught sight of a familiar profile and felt his heart rate kick up a notch. He fought back a smile. He'd never shared coffee with a woman knowing she'd be dead inside a week. The idea held a certain appeal. Inhaling deeply, he watched as she ordered and received her drink and then headed his way.

He waited until she slid onto the bench opposite him before he looked up and into her startling green eyes.

"Good morning, Ms. Morel. You're punctual, as always."

* * * *

"His name is Raul Cohn, and for the last ten years he has lived in Qandahar. He was one of the very few 'westerners' the Taliban allowed in, which made him immediately suspect when our forces invaded in the wake of nine-eleven."

Alba sat looking at the photo, unable to ease the disquiet that made the hair on the nape of her neck stand on end. She intensely hated having to sit with her back to the door. Fortunately, the door to the kitchen had been constructed of shiny chrome. Situated ahead and to her right it acted like a large rearview mirror. In it she could see a slightly wavering reflection of what went on behind her. Not as good as having a clear view, but it would do. Lack of a clear line of sight ranked as the first reason for her unsettledness. The second was the photo Thomas just handed her.

Something about this man seemed familiar to her. She knew she'd remember where she'd seen him, eventually. She couldn't, however, let her distraction show. A sense of danger wrapped around her, and she always paid attention to her instincts. She knew she needed to appear to give Thomas not only her undivided attention, but her unquestioned loyalty as well.

“Shortly after the invasion, the man began supplying the allies with valuable information—his tip led us as close as we ever got to Bin Laden. But lately, the Taliban has been resurging, and once again his motives have come under suspicion. The problem, of course, is that if we appear to take him out, we’ll compromise other operatives we have in deep cover in the area. The enemy must continue to think we’re as witless as they believe we are.

“The military command wants Cohn. And that’s where you come in.”

“Will I be working with a delta force team there?”

“No, we’ve scripted a band of locals, from a tribe with a sworn hatred of the Taliban. These people have proven themselves steadfast and fierce. They’ll supply you with everything you need—not just your weapon, but your disguise. From the time you have wheels down in country, you’ll need to assume the persona of an Afghani tribeswoman.”

“Burkas are uncomfortable—and they interfere with the operation of my sniper rifle.”

“Can’t be helped. I know you’ll work around it.” He took the photograph from her, slipped it back into the manila envelope. “You’re to fly to London the day after tomorrow. There you’ll rendezvous with Captain Arthur with the RAF. He’ll get you on board a British military transport plane headed to Qandahar. He’ll also have the details as to your contact on the ground in country. Your tickets are inside the envelope as is all the information you need on the target and the location. The return flight is open-ended, of course. You will, as usual, destroy the file as soon as you’ve memorized the data.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Now, onto the much more pleasant topic of your retirement. When you get back, you’ll be contacted by Langley, and arrangements will be made for your debriefing. It shouldn’t be an overly long procedure, since you don’t have access to any codes that would need to be changed. I have been asked by Human Resources to

remind you, however, that your pension will not begin to be paid out for another ten years.”

Thomas said that with a trace of humor, and for one instant Alba thought that just maybe her fears and suspicions were groundless. Then she looked in his eyes. The humor, the warmth, didn’t reach them at all.

For the first time in all the years she’d known him she noticed that Porter Thomas had killer’s eyes.

She couldn’t let her thoughts show, dared not give the man any reason to think her attitude toward him, or toward her job had changed in the slightest. The weight of the Beretta resting against the small of her back reminded her she wasn’t defenseless.

She flashed him a quick grin, her chameleon nature allowing her to assert the role she needed to play. “It’s all right. I’ve been frugal with my pay.”

“I don’t doubt it, Alba. Of all the agents under my command, you’re probably not only the most by-the-book, but the most conservative as well.”

“Never made any sense for me to be any other way.”

“I’m going to miss you,” he said then. It was a rare show of emotion from a handler who, in her estimation, seemed to be getting more and more remote these last couple of years.

Just one more reason to be nervous. It seems as if he’s saying good-bye. Some imp made her goad him.

“Well, it’s not as if we aren’t going to see each other again. I’ll buy you a coffee just before I head for my debriefing.”

Something flickered in his eyes for just a moment, and Alba’s resolve hardened even as her memory stepped up to remind her *where* she’d seen the man in the photograph Thomas just gave her.

“It’s a date,” Thomas replied. Then he smiled, and Alba felt her stomach drop. She was sitting with a viper and needed to get away *now*.

She got to her feet as if nothing had changed, nodded to him once.
“I’m off, then.”

“Good hunting.”

Alba nodded again. “Thanks.”

All her senses came on alert as she left the deli. Paying attention to her surroundings and the people, she noticed the tail almost immediately. Mid-thirties, cap and shades, denim and denim, worn Nikes, she judged he wasn’t very good—which meant he *wasn’t* agency. She couldn’t a hundred percent positive, but she thought he might have taken a picture of her as she’d emerged onto the street just now. *Damn it.*

She kept her personal cell phone in the front pouch of her handbag, and her company one in a compartment in the back of it.

And in her front jeans pocket rested the special cell phone, the one she’d picked up just two weeks ago—prepaid, disposable—and not easy to trace in the middle of Manhattan. One of her more anal habits, she bought just such a new prepaid disposable cell phone every other month. She thought of it as her emergency lifeline.

Her boss had turned dirty, she had no doubt of it now—especially since he’d just ordered her to target a man already dead. The man in the photo Thomas gave her *was* named Raul Cohn, but he hadn’t been working with the Taliban. He’d been a British embassy clerk newly assigned to Afghanistan who’d been one of fifteen killed a year ago by a suicide bomber in Kabul. Report of the tragedy on ANN left an impression on Alba because the poor man just became a father. The story resonated since her own father had died before she’d been born.

So she couldn’t trust Thomas, and she had no way of knowing if he stood alone in his treason or if he worked in tandem with someone higher up the food chain. A giant target had just been hung on her back. She could practically feel it burning through her clothes.

As the morning grew later the crowds thickened, giving her a sense of some anonymity. Alba pulled out the disposable cell phone,

and by touch keyed in a private number she'd committed to memory.
Time to call on family.

He answered on the second ring.

"Pierce."

"Dylan, I'm in trouble."

Chapter 3

Son-of-a-bitch.

Patrick's right fist slammed into the bag, the first salvo in a right-left-right rapid fire attack that forced the man bracing the heavy exercise bag to take two steps back before he could dig in again.

Patrick didn't care. He tuned everything out except the explosions of his fists against the leather, the exertion of delivering blow after blow with as much power as his body could muster. If he hit hard enough, fast enough, *long* enough, he might be able to forget.

Son-of-a-fucking-bitch.

He felt the tendons in his neck pop with the exertion. Sweat oozed from his brow and began to drip stingingly into his eyes. But neither proved enough to block the images, and could never be enough to erase them altogether.

The Americans have been successful in infiltrating a sleeper cell of the Zoltana terrorist network. They've uncovered a plot to assassinate Prime Minister Clarke. The plot is imminent, and heralds a departure for the extremist group. Rather than relying upon a suicide bomber, their usual tour de force, they've contracted an assassin from outside their organization.

The words came, flooding his brain, and the exercise room all but disappeared to his mind's eye, replaced by the staid décor of Jonathan Hargreaves's office.

"They've even identified the assassin. Unfortunately, if they arrest this killer, it will tip their hand. Thomas reports his superiors have deemed it crucial this not happen. Unfortunately, the same would

result if we make the arrest ourselves.” Jonathan’s expression turned as serious as Patrick had ever seen it, but he didn’t miss the hint of distaste on the man’s face.

“They want us to kill their suspect?” A logical conclusion, and if that’s what Washington wanted, he could well understand his boss’ aversion—an aversion he shared.

“Well, that *is* what Thomas suggested, and I didn’t tell him we wouldn’t.”

“You know how I feel about killing.” If an assassination was being ordered, he would of course refuse. Some assignments in the past had gone south, and he’d been forced to kill. But that had never been the goal, never the preferred method, and always something that left Patrick a little raw inside afterward.

He wasn’t naïve. He knew there were some agents who wore white hats but who functioned solely as assassins. Most considered the option to kill a necessary one, but to his mind murder was murder whatever color the hat, and the sin went against his own moral code.

“Of course, and I’m not asking you to do that. *Our* concern is that we don’t tip the Americans’ hand, while protecting our Prime Minister. And it occurs to me that someone hired by the Zoltanas should have invaluable intelligence on the group. Personally, I have no idea why Thomas and his superiors aren’t even considering the possibility.”

“I agree. So you want me to isolate this assassin?”

“That would be preferable. Here’s the dossier. She’s quite a looker, actually.”

“She?”

Jonathan handed over the folder. Patrick opened it. The bottom fell out of his stomach, and out of his world.

She was even more beautiful than she’d been on that sun kissed yacht at Santa Maria. That had been the first thought flooding Patrick’s brain. Then he’d turned off his mind, told Jonathan he

accepted the assignment, and left that man's office with only one destination in mind.

As a member of MI5—Military Intelligence, group 5—Patrick held an officer's rank in the Royal Air Force. One of the perks of his rank, if you could call it that, was use of the training facilities maintained by the British Special Air Service. The workout room was particularly well-equipped, and maintained a roster of enlisted men. Patrick very nearly tagged one of the burly Special Forces officers for some hand-to-hand, but figured in the mood he was in he might seriously injure the bloke.

Out of breath, muscles screaming, he stopped pummeling the bag and rested his forehead against it.

"That about it then, Colonel?"

"Yeah." Straightening up, he nodded his thanks to the corporal and walked over to where a stack of towels and rack of water bottles waited. He'd pounded the anger down to a manageable level. Time now for him to figure out what came next.

No one bothered him, or bothered to make small talk. Patrick figured his mood must have been easy enough to read.

Read. Yeah, that's what he needed to do. Discovering that the woman he loved was a paid mercenary leveled him. Now that the information began to sink in, he had nothing but questions.

Did they truly met serendipitously on vacation three years ago, or had he been her target, then? Is that why she'd been distraught, because he'd left before she could fulfill her contract?

How many stone cold killers cry because a contract falls through?

He'd only given the file Jonathan handed him a cursory examination, exerting all his will on keeping his emotions from showing. But he'd noticed it seemed awfully damned sparse of information.

Patrick headed to his locker. A quick shower, where he simply went through the motions, and minutes later he was in his car, leaving London behind, en route to Wiltshire and home. He had only a couple

of days to add to the information gathered on Alba Morel. Having spent a career—two, actually, as author *and* intelligence operative—building contacts the world over, it seemed like a good time to tap all those resources. He excelled at gathering information, at research. He'd do so now.

He only had two days to decide how he would handle his deadly former lover. He couldn't allow his emotions any part in the planning of his course. He'd look, and he'd dig.

And then, by God, he'd act.

* * * *

Alba left her apartment at ten-fifteen the next morning, her gym bag slung over her shoulder. She'd donned a light jacket against the chill, and took a moment out on the sidewalk to adjust it beneath the shoulder strap of the bag. Three times a week she walked the six blocks to *Amazons*, a women-only fitness center. She'd been a member there for three years, and unless she was out of town, never missed a workout.

She kept her movements casual and her senses acute. By the time she'd passed the halfway mark, she'd picked out the tail, the same goofball as the day before.

Then she spotted the second one. This one appeared younger, more fit. A female. That could be a problem. The woman seemed aware of the man, but not vice versa. This meant that the two individuals following her *were* individuals, and not working together. Wasn't that interesting?

At the fitness center she eschewed the front entrance, electing to use the side door. She entered her code into the keypad and the door opened. Her steps became deliberate now. Waving to the woman at the desk, she headed for the locker room. Only a couple of other patrons were in the process of changing. Rather than just strip down in the common area, as she usually did, Alba selected a cubicle.

As soon as the lock slid home, she jumped into action. Jacket, shirt, jeans all came off. So did her bra and panties. Opening her gym bag, she pulled out the contents and hastily dressed. Her intimate garments had been made to order, and excessively padded. She held back a snicker. *Bet this is the first time someone arrived here one size and left a couple of sizes larger.* Over the underwear she donned a turtleneck sweater and a jumper. Nikes surrendered to black, ugly loafers.

Reaching up for her hair, she caught a glimpse of her watch. Two minutes, so far. She dare not take more than another two. In moments she twisted her black hair up and held it fast with two flat clips. The wig—auburn and short—fit perfectly.

The last items she donned were a black watch to replace her silver, and a pair of sunglasses. She popped a piece of chewing gum in her mouth as she turned her gym bag inside out. Coming in it had been white. Now it was neon pink. She stuffed her discarded clothes into it. Finally she listened, determining how many people were in the locker room. The door into the gym proper opened and closed with someone going out, no one coming in. *Only one person left. Excellent.*

The woman, totally naked, stood by one of the benches, pulling shampoo and soap out of her locker. Alba put the strap of the gym bag over her shoulder and headed out.

She altered her gait, letting her hips sway slightly as she walked past the front desk and out the front door. The taxi she'd arranged for waited by the curb and she slipped into the back seat.

She saw her male shadow lounging across the street from the gym, but the female was nowhere in sight.

Probably went in the front, said she wanted in a tour of the facilities. *Pure shit luck she wasn't in the lobby area when I came out.*

"You Mrs. Jones?" the cabby asked.

"Yes. The Carstairs on Park, please."

Alba knew to the driver she looked relaxed, bored even. One of her greatest talents—aside from her dead-accurate aim—was her

chameleon-like ability to blend in, to appear unremarkable, to assume the persona and attitude necessary to get the job done, whatever that persona and attitude might be. She used that talent on every assignment.

Today marked the first time she'd employed it on a personal level.

For the next ten minutes she kept up that façade, all the while being aware of the traffic around her.

When the taxi pulled up to the front of the hotel, Alba slipped the driver a twenty, enough for the fare and a normal tip.

The doorman tipped his hat as she passed him. The staff at any Carstairs hotel treated every person who came through the door like royalty. She knew that because she was very well acquainted with Dylan Pierce and his parents, and had even met the legendary Eugenia Carstairs—Dylan's grandmother—once. Service was the reason Carstairs Hotels remained industry leaders.

Alba walked across the lobby as if she owned the place, her demeanor and bearing totally different than when she'd left the gym. At the private penthouse elevator she stopped, inserted the key. The doors opened and in moments she'd been whisked to the top floor owner's suite.

"God bless you Dylan Pierce." Her brother-in-law gave her keys to the elevator and family suite shortly after he'd married her sister. This was the first time she'd ever used them.

In the master bedroom, on the bed lay the parcels Dylan had ordered and had delivered for her.

Once more she stripped, this time taking advantage of the luxurious en suite bath to grab a quick shower. Drying efficiently, she left the towel in the bathroom and walked naked back to the bedroom. Upending her gym bag, she emptied it, then pulled back the hidden zipper and took out the items she'd secreted in the pouch there: her Beretta, her clutch gun, and three passports.

One passport had been issued in her name, her own legal document; one under an alias and issued to her by her employer. The

third was her ace-in-the-hole, an identity no one at the agency knew about, one she as yet never needed. These items she placed in the brand new handbag.

She opened the rest of the parcels and felt her smile spread. She could tell Pamela chose these clothes. They were perfect for her.

This transformation took just a little bit longer. She took the time to apply the makeup a society diva would be expected to wear. They'd thought to include tasteful and expensive gold jewelry. The earrings looked a tad larger than she personally preferred, but they matched the persona she sought to project completely. She examined them closely, her eye critical, but they *looked* like ordinary earrings. *Nicholas's touch here.* Understanding the heart behind the gesture, she put them on. The blond wig was dyed to the perfect shade, a pale hue that didn't look sickly on her. The fashion contacts proved the most irritating to put in, but she practiced this and had them inserted in moments. Her green eyes now glittered a striking violet.

As much as the woman who left the gym had been notable in her ordinariness, the one who looked back at her from the mirror in the master bedroom of the Carstairs penthouse suite was a vision few would forget.

And none would connect to Alba Morel.

Back in the lobby, she handed a valet parking ticket to the doorman. Moments later a sleek, new Mercedes SLK350 in stunning Metallic Palladium Silver rumbled to a stop before her.

What a blessing her sister married a man of means!

Not that she cared about that sort of thing, normally. But when one needed to get the hell out of Dodge without getting one's ass shot off, having relatives with deep pockets was a fine thing, indeed.

Alba memorized the route she needed to take. Manhattan traffic proved hideous, as anticipated. Checking the time on the dash, she knew she'd need to step on it once she left the city behind. Vigilant, she kept checking her mirrors and scanning surrounding traffic until she was satisfied she'd gotten away clean. Nearing noon, the

interstate was busy, but moving well. After less than an hour she took the required exit, following the country roads until she came upon the private airfield.

Two men stood on either side of the gated entrance, armed with automatic weapons, and a third stood, arms akimbo, smiling. Alba stopped the car because she recognized him. He pulled open the passenger door and got in beside her.

"If I didn't know it was you, I wouldn't recognize you, little sister."

Alba laughed. She hadn't realized until that moment how tense she'd been. "Nicholas, I didn't expect to see you! Is Dylan here too?"

"Of course he is. Take the road on the right, and go around the hangar."

She followed his directions, maneuvering the zippy little car and rounding the converted barn. The Moerae Corporation's Gulfstream G550 stood shining under the midday sun. Two more armed men flanked the stairs.

She parked right next to the plane. When she emerged from the car, one of the guards stepped forward, his palm extended. Alba gave him the keys, then boarded the private jet.

"We're clear," Nicholas reported as he followed her in, then turned and closed the door.

"Good." Dylan stepped forward and swept Alba into a fierce hug. "Here you are, safe and sound." Then he stepped back and examined her, top to toe. "Incredible. Pammy told me you were a chameleon but I didn't completely believe her."

"In my line of work it comes in handy."

"Yeah, about that," Nicholas said, delivering his own hug.

"About that," she agreed. She felt no qualms being completely honest with these men, security clearances be damned. She trusted them with her life.

"Thank you, both of you, for coming to my aid."

“You’re welcome. Now buckle in. We’ve filed a flight plan for Gatwick. Our wives should be arriving at the London townhouse shortly. They’ll be ticked that we’re not waiting until they’re with us, but Nick and I want to get as big a head start on planning as we can.”

“Planning?” Alba realized her considerable acting skills had no affect on her brothers-in-law when they looked at each other and chuckled.

“If you thought we’d just ride to the rescue then leave you off, you’re sadly mistaken, little sister,” Dylan said.

“You both keep calling me that, and I’ll remind you that between my sisters and myself, *I’m* the oldest.”

“Yeah, but you’re not older than us,” Nicholas pointed out.

“That’s right,” Dylan agreed. “Now get comfortable, and let’s see what we can come up with.”

“I don’t know what we *can* do,” Alba reasoned as she buckled her seat belt. The plane started to taxi, and she felt herself relaxing because, planning notwithstanding, she’d gotten away from New York when a part of her believed she would end up dead.

“Well we’re sure as hell going to do something,” Nicholas said. His expression turned fierce when he looked at her point-blank and said, “Some asshole targets our sister, he’s going down.”

Chapter 4

“What the hell do you mean, you lost her?” Patrick kept the cell phone held tight against his ear as he got up from his desk and wandered to the window in his study.

“I followed the subject into the fitness center, but couldn’t find her anywhere. She’d vanished. I did catch site of a taxi leaving just moments after I came out of the director’s office into the reception area—told her I might get a membership to get into the place. But I didn’t see the Morel woman either inside the club, or in the cab. Caught a silhouette of a lone female passenger, short hair, cap style, gum chewer. Wasn’t her.”

Patrick tried not to cringe when Angie called Alba ‘the Morel woman’. Instead, he focused on their conversation. “I know you’re good, Angie. Sorry I snapped.” Angie Matheson was one of the best surveillance agents he’d ever worked with. They’d been friends for years. Currently assigned to the consulate in New York City, she’d said yes without hesitation when Patrick called her yesterday to ask a personal favor.

“You’re allowed to snap. I shouldn’t have lost her, Patrick. But as a consolation, I do have two interesting pieces of information for you.”

“I’ll take what I can get.”

“The first is that I wasn’t the only person following her.”

“To be expected, I suppose. All things considered.”

“Not really. This guy isn’t with the government. When I realized I’d lost Morel, I followed *him*. He’s a private detective, name of Harvey Miller, with a tiny office in Manhattan that ranks one level

above squalid. I gained access to his office after he left for the day. A man named John Smith hired him late last week and paid him up front, in cash.”

“That sounds suspicious.” Patrick returned to his desk, opened up the file on his computer that he’d been putting together since the night before.

“Exactly. And this chap turned out to be the only one tailing Morel. No US agents shadowed her. Period.”

Patrick didn’t ask if she was sure. One thing he could say about Angie, she had excellent instincts and skills. If she said no agents followed Alba, you could bank on it.

“Well, that’s damned odd.”

“You want the second bit of news?”

“Sure.” He knew his answer sounded distracted. He couldn’t help it. Everything Jonathan said at that briefing yesterday indicated the Americans would be keeping Alba in their sights until she boarded the plane for Heathrow tomorrow morning. They’d made her a high priority. They didn’t want to risk losing track of her. He had not one single doubt about the matter. If there had been American agents tailing Alba, Angie would have seen them.

Why hadn’t there been American agents keeping Alba under surveillance?

“My luck the manager of the fitness center had another appointment this morning, so she gave me a free pass to the facility as consolation, which I used this afternoon. Nice place, I may actually join. Anyway, I acted the chatterbox, all, ‘my new friend Alba told me about this place and so on and such,’ with the instructor who showed me around, and this woman—a real Chatty Cathy herself by the way—goes on about how *nice* Ms. Morel is and how it’s good that she and I are going to be mates, since both Ms. M’s sisters have moved away—the one that moved to Paris *before* marrying the rich guy from Greece, and the one who moved down to Florida just recently after marrying the ex-cop.”

“The file says Alba doesn’t have any family.” He’d entered every scrap of information the government handed him, noting that he’d put “foster care” under the family column on his spreadsheet. Then Patrick’s memory quivered and he closed his eyes, reaching for the piece of information that danced so tantalizingly close. And then he remembered.

Foster sisters. Alba mentioned foster sisters a couple of times. Patrick shifted in his chair. He’d been so focused on the woman—being with her, making love to her—that her words at the time carried less import.

Now he sat straighter in his seat, grabbed a pad of paper and a pen. This would give him an entirely new angle of investigation, and one the Americans didn’t appear to have. “I don’t suppose you got the names of her sisters?”

Angie’s very smug chuckle came across the phone lines and put a smile on his face. “I not only got the names of her sisters, I got the names of their husbands.”

* * * *

The stench of refuse stung his nostrils. Porter Thomas breathed through his mouth as he looked down dispassionately at the body of Harvey Miller. Poor dumb bastard had been going to die anyway—once Alba boarded the flight to London, Miller would have been a loose end, and expendable.

Thomas checked both ends of the alley. Even if some homeless bum *had* seen him knife the P.I., he didn’t have to worry. His own mother wouldn’t recognize him in this disguise, and the homeless never talked to the cops at any rate. He looked down one last time at the body. Mr. Miller turned out to be a disappointment. Thomas tried to keep his anger reined in as he turned and walked out of the alley.

Fucking asshole hadn’t really lost Morel, she’d shaken him—which meant she’d made the tail, became suspicious, and fled.

That would never do.

Alba likely wouldn't take that flight to Heathrow—but he'd be willing to bet she'd go to London anyway.

Thomas emerged from the stinking alley, leaving it and the lifeless carcass behind him as he headed toward his car. What he needed to do now was *think*. He hadn't been the one to recruit Alba Morel out of college, or the one to train her. But he had his predecessor's notes. Plus, he'd spent enough time with her over the last few years he should be able to figure out what she'd do next.

He didn't think she knew he wanted her dead; there really wasn't any reason for her to think that. He'd been careful and only used her three times for his own ends. But she'd obviously spotted the tail, and he did think maybe she'd twigged that her target this time wasn't legitimate. The woman could be such a damn girl scout at times. In her mind there would only be option: follow the assigned course, and see what happened when she got there.

Fortunately, the last step in the trail he'd handed her would prove deadly before she got off the plane in Kandahar.

If she'd had this reaction during the last assignment, he would have been in a world of trouble, and likely would already be sitting in a jail cell. But this time there was no target. He'd grabbed an obscure face from the dead files and made up a story. There was no target for her to warn or rescue. And if she somehow made it through England and landed in Qandahar, the rebels waiting for her there would kill her.

Unlocking his car, he got in, started it, and pulled away from the curb as if he had all the time in the world.

She'd eluded his surveillance, but he knew where she would go, and he'd covered all the possible scenarios. Besides, he didn't have to worry about her, really. She *was* an excellent shot, one of the most accurate sharpshooters he'd ever seen. But she really didn't have any investigative skills or credentials whatsoever.

Thomas sighed, relaxing now that he'd thought it all through. He *would* have preferred that Alba hadn't given Miller the slip, because now he had to cool his jets and wait for either his friend Hargreaves—another patsy—or the Afghani militants to report in with news of a kill.

Ah well, if this job had taught him anything, it was how to wait for the outcome of a mission.

* * * *

The vibrations of the Gulfstream's engine soothed Alba's jangled nerves. A half hour into the flight the Atlantic Ocean stretched blue and beautiful beneath them. Her brothers-in-law allowed her a few minutes, once the plane reached cruising altitude, to ditch the wig, freshen up and relax. Dylan even brewed a fresh pot of coffee. But it was time for her to come clean with them. They'd come when called without question. Although she'd been orphaned young, she had observed enough to know that's what the best families did. The other quality the best families boasted was total and complete honesty.

"About a year and a half ago, I was sent to Paris on an assignment. My target, Patel Khalid, a minor diplomat attached to the Malteri Consulate there." Alba cradled her cup of coffee, grateful for its warmth. "My boss, Porter Thomas, told me the interrogation of two separate prisoners at Gitmo revealed Khalid as a key member of Al Qaeda, placed in a sleeper cell right here inside the United States. He said Homeland wanted to talk to him, but quietly. They didn't want Al Qaeda alerted that they found out about their man. I met up with a special ops team, we put Khalid under surveillance. Then I took my shot, the team packaged him up, and I went home."

"This would have been a Delta Force team?" Nicholas asked.

"They're the ones I most usually work with, but not always, and not this time. Sometimes the 'men in black', as I think of them, are with an agency that doesn't officially exist."

“Nice,” Dylan commented dryly.

“Yeah, my tax dollars at work,” Nicholas confirmed.

Alba appreciated their efforts to lighten the mood. She set her cup down, sat back in her chair.

“Anyway, about six months later, I caught an item on ANN. A man who’d been kidnapped by Torbaru extremists had been rescued from his kidnappers. He’d been tortured, and in rough shape. But they found him alive. That man turned out to be Patel Khalid.”

Nickolas and Dylan exchanged a look she couldn’t read. It felt as if they didn’t know which one of them would give her the bad news.

“Alba?” Nick said, his tone gentle, “it could very well be that our government turned Khalid over to a faction of the Torbaru Freedom Fighters in exchange for something they wanted.”

“I considered that. As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what I’d thought happened, at first. I intended to read my boss the riot act, because a clause in my contract forbids that sort of game-playing with *my* targets. They want to screw around like that, and sometimes I know they need to, then they use another sharpshooter. But I subsequently learned that Khalid had been working undercover for us, and that a Delta Force that rescued him.”

“Are you sure?” Dylan asked.

“Yes. We don’t socialize a great deal, but I have occasion to see some of the people I’ve worked with in the past from time to time. I happened to be talking to one man I’ve known for a few years, and he told me all about it. He’d been on the rescue team and he described the hellhole the TFF had held this guy in, and that rescuing him almost cost him a team member. So yeah, I’m sure.”

“All right. But that isn’t the only thing that’s caused you to rabbit. What else happened?” Nicholas asked.

“A couple of months ago I gave notice of my intent to retire. By this time I suspected that my boss had gone rogue, so the only thing I could think to do was just tell him I wanted out. Made it seem as if I was having trouble with my talent, and that I didn’t want to mess up

on assignments because I could no longer hit the target. Aside from the jokes flying about sometimes, we *are* allowed to retire. We have to go through a debrief which can last as long as a month—during which time we’re kept at an ‘undisclosed’ location. Some agents are in possession of special codes that would all need to be changed before the agent is released. In the case of sharpshooters, we’re taken through each of our cases, and have to ensure all pertinent data is on file, for future reference. If Thomas had gone rogue, that would come out then. They’d deal with him.”

“We didn’t know you’d planned to do that,” Dylan said, frowning.

“Pammy and Twyla would have worried. I would have told you all just before I went to Langley for my debriefing.”

“I take it something happened?” Nicholas asked, and Alba smiled.

“Yeah, a couple of things, actually. Thomas called yesterday with an urgent assignment so I met with him. He gave me this.” Alba reached into her bag and set the file her boss had given her onto the polished table between herself and her brothers-in-law.

She sat back as they went through the dossier, reading the surveillance reports on Raul Cohn, the list of suspected activities of years past, and the list of ‘leaks’ allowing for the placement of improvised explosive devices *just* where they would do the most damage. Alba read the file thoroughly, and could admit the information presented one hell of a damning case.

It just wasn’t legitimate.

“What’s the punch line?” Nicholas asked as he looked up from the file.

“This.” She pulled out the file she’d been able to put together, the real life and times of Raul Cohn. There could be no question this was the same man, for her boss used the exact same photograph as the news agency in the poor guy’s obituary. She’d printed out the article she’d found in the ANN archives, as well.

“His having left a baby behind would have made him stick out in your mind,” Dylan agreed softly.

“Exactly. And Thomas wouldn’t have necessarily realized that. No reason he would, really. I’m just a tool, in a way.”

“Likely he just pulled a face out of the dead file without researching it very well,” Nicholas observed

“You said a couple of things,” Dylan reminded her. “What else made you certain you’d been played?”

“When I left my meeting with Thomas yesterday, I was followed. I noticed the tail immediately. Definitely amateur hour; the guy was a joke. He’d been there waiting for me when I came out, but hadn’t been on me before, because I would have spotted him. So he knew I would be at that Deli, and the only way for that to happen would be if Thomas hired him.”

“Not a part of the agency then?” Dylan asked.

“No, as I said, too amateurish.”

“Could the guy have actually been someone wanting to, say, steal your purse?”

Nicholas played the role of devil’s advocate, and that was fine with her.

“No, because he never once got close enough to me. And this morning, when I left my apartment, he was there again. And this time, he had company. A woman followed me from my apartment to the gym, a pro. The first tail wasn’t aware of the second, but she sure as hell made him.”

Alba let that information sink in. Nicholas frowned, and she guessed that of the two of her brothers-in-law, he would be the first to figure it out, because he’d had occasion to work as a cop, *and* as a covert operative.

“You think he’s sold you out? Thomas has?”

“Jim-Bob, or whoever Thomas hired to follow me, took at least one picture, likely with a digital camera. So a few hours after meeting me in that deli, I’ll bet Thomas sent a report of some sort floating over the internet to a very friendly government near you.”

“Oh, hell,” Dylan said, understanding plain. “You think he’s asked the Brits to pick you up. Damn it, we’re headed straight there.”

“Hey.” She leaned forward and squeezed his hand, “What better place to face Daniel than in the lion’s den? If you weren’t taking me there, I’d have asked you to, because that is where Thomas sent me anyway. The evidence I need to prove what he’s done is likely there.”

“We’re going to have to work fast, and keep you—as much as we can—under wraps,” Nicholas said. He reached over and gave one of her dangly earrings a swat. “So keep those things on. Until I can get another, more discreet G. P. S. device on you.”

“Oh, you betcha. I thought the earrings had to be your touch, Nick.” She felt her smile fade. She didn’t mind letting them see she was more than a little worried. “I’m just not certain I know how to go about *proving* that my boss has traded jackets in the middle of the game.”

“I have a friend who’s got contacts with Scotland Yard,” Dylan said. “And when we put all our heads together, something is bound to pop.”

“I hope so,” Alba sat back and exhaled deeply. She had some contacts Thomas didn’t know about, too, people inside British intelligence who knew without question where her loyalties lay. Even so, if her boss *had* played fast and loose with the truth and painted her as a traitor, proving her innocence might turn out to be a real challenge. “I really hope,” she said again. “You might say I’m betting my life on it.”

Chapter 5

Every question he answered just raised two more.

Patrick secluded himself in his home office, working through the night. Tapping sources in more than one European country, gleaning information, he looked for the facts that would help him understand the woman he'd met three years before on a tropical island. Help him understand *her*.

It hurt, realizing the woman he'd met then, the one he'd dreamed of so often since, had turned out to be nothing more than a fantasy, an illusion. The truth finally sank in that the Alba Morel he remembered was not a real woman at all. He was uncovering the real woman, an assassin and mercenary whose services went to the highest bidder. Nothing he'd learned so far told him the information Jonathan dropped on him two days before had been false.

"Thomas strongly suspects Ms. Morel to have been behind the assassination of Gareth Willoughby."

Jonathan's announcement had come as a shock. Patrick closed his eyes, the pain he'd believed buried swamping him anew.

Gareth had been Patrick's best friend since the day they'd met at Eton. They'd attended Cambridge together, enlisted together. Patrick chose the Air Force, and Gareth followed him there. Then later Gareth also chose government work, leaving behind a distinguished career with the RAF.

The fit had been perfect, with MI5 grateful for such a useful recruit. Gareth, whose dark eyes and swarthy complexion made him

perfect for a deep cover assignment in Islamabad a year and a half before, told Patrick that he'd finally found his niche.

Patrick recalled the day he'd found out his friend's cover had been compromised, that he'd been marked for death. He and some of Gareth's former RAF colleagues scrambled to put together a rescue mission, determined to go into the Margalla Hills and 'kidnap' him from the band of extremists he'd infiltrated before the assassination squad could reach him.

They'd been in the air when word came of Gareth's death.

After he'd finally received all the Intel from the incident, he'd realized Gareth had been the victim of an assassin—an unknown, unseen killer of incredible skill.

The shot, a witness claimed, could only have come from a cluster of rocks more than three thousand meters away.

Gareth's body, of course, had never been recovered. The band he'd been with would have buried him in an unmarked grave immediately. Patrick tried to find that grave, but failed.

Gareth's parents and his friends were left without a marker, without a place to go to remember him, and to some degree, without closure.

Patrick turned his attention back to the file he'd assembled so far on Alba Morel. If it turned out she'd been the one to pull the trigger on his best friend, he wasn't sure what he would do.

He knew himself well, and knew he'd undertaken this assignment without any bias for or against the woman. If Alba *was* an assassin, then by God he would feel no sympathy for her at all. No, it wasn't completely true he had no bias here. To some extent, he *wanted* her to be guilty. Yes, he knew that was self-serving. Her guilt would relieve his regret at having left her as he did three years ago.

And yet, though he'd not proven the charge one way or another, too many things simply weren't adding up.

The Americans weren't following her. In fact, when he tried to access Homeland Security's database on suspected terrorists—

something no one but the Minister and the American Secretary of State knew he had clearance to do—Alba's name didn't even come up. He should at least have been able to corroborate the information he'd received in his briefing the other day, because his clearance ranking, despite his being a Brit, stood a full level above Porter Thomas's. But he'd had no luck whatsoever finding any mention of her as a suspected assassin in any databank in the world.

Patrick had considerably better luck following the threads of Alba's foster sisters and their husbands.

He knew Dylan Pierce and his family. Actually, he likely knew the family better than he knew the man himself. Although they were nearly the same age, from what he recalled, Dylan spent a fair bit of time in his younger years in the United States. The senior Pierces split their time now between London and Athens. While in England, Maria Andropolis Pierce worked for several of the same charities his own mother supported. He'd even met Dylan's paternal grandmother, Eugenia Carstairs, on one memorable occasion.

Patrick couldn't hold back the smile as he thought about the matriarch. Ms. Carstairs and his mother hit it off on first sight, and whenever the hotelier crossed the Atlantic, the two of them could be found together, thick as thieves. He considered for one moment using that connection for information, but decided to hold it in reserve.

The early morning silence was shattered by the ringing of his cell phone. Only one person would be calling that number.

"Good morning, Jonathan."

"Patrick, I just received a call from our agent in New York. Ms. Morel missed her flight."

When Angie reported losing her, Patrick felt reasonably certain Alba wouldn't behave as Thomas—and Jonathan—expected. "Are we certain that she didn't purchase a ticket under a different name?"

"Reasonably certain, yes. I'll have the video records of all the departure gates for the UK shortly. I'll run it through our facial

recognition program. I'll let you know if anything comes up, but from where I'm sitting, it looks as if Ms. Morel has changed her mind."

"What does your friend Porter Thomas have to say about this latest development?"

"He reports that his agents followed Ms. Morel to JFK, and that she obtained a boarding pass and entered the secure passenger area. But where she went from there, no one seems to know."

Well, that's an outright lie. Patrick felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. He knew from Angie Matheson that the only person following Alba had been that private investigator. Either Jonathan had been lied to, or was himself lying. Patrick didn't even think twice about his next decision. From this moment on, he could trust no one but himself. At least until he knew for certain what the hell was going on.

"Let me know as soon as you have something, then," he said smoothly. "Unless there's something you want me to do?" No trace of his doubts would be discernable in his voice.

"I think I have it covered. I've quietly increased security at Number Ten Downing, and added more plainclothes officers to the route for the motorcade for the opening of Parliament."

"Then until we receive word that Ms. Morel is actually *on* British soil, I'll keep myself on standby. I'll be waiting for your call."

Any guilt Patrick might have been feeling, for not disclosing to Jonathan the day before that he in fact knew Alba, vanished. He didn't know if Jonathan had simply been made a patsy for Porter Thomas, or not. Best to err on the side of caution.

For a long moment he sat quietly, his mind turning over all the small puzzle pieces he'd been able to gather so far.

Thomas insisted that, one way or another, Alba would arrive in England. That much, at least, Patrick bet was the truth. Reaching for the telephone on his desk, he called the number of another contact.

"Good morning, Derek, how are you today?"

“Well enough, Milord. Bit of a nip in the air, which I don’t appreciate m’self. It’s not even autumn. We should still be enjoying balmy days yet.”

“But of course there’s no damage been done to the atmosphere,” Patrick agreed, a smile tugging his lips. Paul Milford was a born again environmentalist. In his sixties, he’d been with the Home Office since his early twenties. The man had been a particular favorite of Patrick’s father, and never let either of them down.

“‘Course not,” Paul chuckled, clearly enjoying Patrick’s humor. “Now, Milord, what can I do for you today?”

Patrick explained what he needed, but not why. Paul was one of the few people he could trust to be discreet, no questions asked. Not even the Minister would be able to pry information out of the man that another gave him in confidence.

Paul said he’d get back to Patrick and in fact returned his call in just five minutes. “Right, then, here you are.” Paul reeled off the information, and Patrick wrote it down.

“Thanks, Paul. Love to Millie from me.” Millie was Paul’s five-year-old corgi.

“You’re welcome, Milord.”

Patrick hung up the phone and studied the instrument for a few moments. He needed only one more piece of the puzzle. He usually didn’t like to involve his mother in anything even remotely connected to his work. But this last bit of information could likely be obtained easily and the asking of it would seem innocent enough.

Of course, the price for getting innocent information from his mother involved chatting with her for a good fifteen minutes. He did make a point of calling her on a regular basis, so it wasn’t much of a hardship for him. The impatience he felt stemmed only from his anxiety over this entire situation.

A few minutes after Patrick hung up the phone and sat back, all his puzzle pieces assembled. He wasn’t completely comfortable with the picture they made. He had answers, but also more questions.

Since a chain of events that resulted in the death of Dylan Pierce's elder half-brother a few years before, the entire Pierce-Andropolis empire had been on heightened security status. No one got close to the family without being carefully vetted first.

He also heard enough through his circle to know that both Dylan *and* his father were men of the highest moral integrity.

So finding out that the Moerae Corporation's private jet had been sent from Athens to New York, and then on to London at just this time told Patrick how Alba disappeared; confirmation from his mother that the Pierces did indeed have a townhouse near Hyde Park told him where she could likely be found now.

But he had no idea why Dylan would consort openly with anyone who might be a suspected terrorist, neither did he have any idea what the hell he was going to do with Alba once he got his hands on her.

* * * *

Having lived a solitary life, Alba had never experienced having two big, strong men surround her in cotton batting to keep her safe from harm.

She wasn't enjoying it now that she was experiencing it, either. A woman used to doing for herself, to fighting her own battles, she found the inactivity unacceptable.

She'd worked for nearly a decade in a profession that drove some insane, and others to drink. She, however, maintained a healthy lifestyle, healthy relationships—well, except for that whole not-getting-over-Patrick thing—and a healthy balance of idealism and cynicism.

The fault for her current possession of bodyguards could be blamed on her genes, of course. Blessed with a slight frame and elfin-like features, she appeared harmless, bordering on helpless. How ironic the same visage that allowed her to go nearly anywhere at any time unchallenged should work against her now.

Her sisters had been no help in this regard. They, who knew her strengths and talents, stood behind their husbands' protection scheme one hundred percent. Unfortunately, Alba needed to meet with one of her contacts. He might be able to get information for her, possibly the evidence that would prove her boss a traitor. But the man, very skittish by nature and one to skirt somewhat under the law at times, would suspect a trap if she showed up with either of her brothers-in-law in tow. Even if Dylan and Nick would listen to reason and allowed her to go on her own, they'd have her followed—and her contact would sure as breathing spot the tail.

So Alba arranged for the meeting without telling anyone.

She checked her watch. It was three a.m., the perfect time for skullduggery. She figured she'd be gone and back before her overprotective family became any the wiser.

She pulled her black t-shirt over her head and paused to glance at her reflection in the mirror. Light from the street cast her room in slight illumination, twinkling off the diamond studs in her ears.

She reached a hand up to remove them, then paused. These weren't as eye-catching as the dangling ones Nick gave her in New York—but as tracking devices they would be just as powerful. She knew this part of the city, knew where she needed to go, and hadn't been in England long enough for anyone to have tracked her here yet. So there really was no reason to leave them in.

But there was no reason to take them out, either. Besides, on the off chance her family *did* become aware of this little nighttime adventure, she could point to the earrings as being her lifeline.

She put her right leg on the settee in front of the vanity, and pulled up the leg of her jeans. She'd set her ankle holster out and made quick work now of securing it. This piece of equipment she referred to as her clutch piece. The Kel-Tec P32 fit into the holster easily. The weapon, about the size of a dollar bill, carried an eight shot magazine, .32ACP caliber, and in her hands, was deadly.

Her contact could be considered reliable, but not necessarily trustworthy.

She brought her leg down and shook it slightly, inspecting it to ensure no sign of the weapon could be seen.

Now all she had to do was get out of the house without being detected.

It took her a few more moments to disable the alarm system than she'd anticipated. Nicholas had fitted a nifty little backup device to it that certainly won her admiration.

No wonder his business continued to expand by leaps and bounds.

In a matter of minutes she'd slipped through the house and opened one of the kitchen windows without alerting anyone.

A medium-sized shrub grew just under and to the left of the window and she climbed through the opening and then slid down behind the shrub easily. Once on the ground, she scanned the area.

Two guards patrolled at the back of the house, and only one, she knew, in front. The fence between the Pierce's house and the one next door had obviously been erected for decorative rather than security purposes. She waited until the guard in the rear and closest to her turned his head away. Her movements quick and lithe, she slid from behind the bush to the fence and was over it in seconds.

No guards watched this neighbor's yard, but still she climbed a second fence, putting her two doors down from her brother-in-law's house.

She pulled a watch cap out of her back pocket, slipped it on, then straightened. Taking on the bearing of a teenager with attitude she made her way around the house and out to the street. Alba never once looked toward Nicholas' house, just reached the sidewalk, turned left and walked away.

She'd go two blocks, and then make a right, and she'd be in the busier neighborhood of Hyde Park. She hoped she didn't have much trouble getting a cab this time of night, and shouldn't because tourists flooded to this area. But she could always play tourist and have the

concierge of one of the popular, nearby hotels call one for her, if necessary.

Of course, she'd rather not. The fewer people who saw her, the better. She checked her watch. Three twenty-four. Not bad.

"Going somewhere, darling?"

The voice blasted her with an echo from the past, set her senses reeling. Spinning around, she looked up into eyes that glittered bright blue in the face that haunted her dreams.

"Patrick!"

"I'm sorry, Alba. It's for the best."

Before his words fully registered, she felt the sting where his hand clapped her shoulder.

She pulled away from him, and stumbled. Understanding came instantly, surrounded by total disillusionment. She took one more step, faltered, and knew she'd have fallen if he hadn't caught her.

"Don't fight it. It will only hurt more if you do."

His whispered words comforted her, but she knew that comfort to be a lie. She wanted to scream but couldn't. For one instant she felt the oddly secure sensation of being lifted into Patrick Jamieson's strong arms.

Then a loud buzzing swamped her brain and the lights went out.

Chapter 6

Patrick thought he'd have to battle back his anger. But another emotion entirely threatened to swamp his senses and overrule his brain.

God help him and curse him for a fool, he *wanted* her. Gazing at her body supine on the bed, wrists cuffed together and to the headboard, stripped down to her underwear, he wanted Alba Morel with a passion that defied logic.

Turning away, he focused his attention on starting a fire in the old stone fireplace. This crofter's cottage, preserved and tucked away in a corner of his Wiltshire estate, featured neither electricity nor central heating. It *did* have a small bathroom—containing only a toilet and a sink. No hot running water, only cold.

As a lad, he'd often taken to camping out here, enjoying the challenge of doing for himself away from the prying and sometimes stifling eyes of his grandmother and the household staff, who'd been loath to allow the young Viscount to lift a finger. Only his nanny ever understood his need to be on his own, and thank God for her.

He looked around the small cottage. Over the years, it had been maintained, the stonework pointed when necessary. The bed, smaller than a double but larger than a single, had been replaced just the year before. The wooden table and chairs set before the fireplace were antiques, though in need of refinishing. That was one hobby he enjoyed, and the set would be the next to be done. One other chair in the cottage stood near the bed, an upholstered and under stuffed piece that offered little by way of comfort. The cottage qualified as rustic, no doubt about it.

A soft groan snagged his attention, and he looked over at his prisoner. She would be awakening soon. Turning back to his chore, he struck a match to paper and kindling. Sitting back on his haunches, he watched as the flames caught. He fed more wood into it until he could set a couple of logs upon it. It didn't take the dried oak long to catch and soon the heat pouring out from the hearth filled the cottage.

"Who are you?"

Patrick stiffened, the question asked in a frigid tone slicing straight to his heart. Schooling his expression, he looked over his shoulder. Piercing green eyes still hazed with the after effect of the tranquilizer stared back at him from a face far too pale.

"It hasn't been that long, darling. You knew my name straight off on that sidewalk."

"My mistake. The Patrick Jamieson I knew was an author, not a kidnapper."

"Well, the Alba Morel *I* knew wasn't a hired assassin, either, so deal with it."

He turned back to the fire, but not before he saw her shiver. Though a part of him regretted the necessity, he got to his feet and took up a blanket folded at the end of the bed. Shaking it out, he tossed it over her. It landed mostly on her legs, falling short of her bra-covered breasts.

"Hope you enjoyed yourself," she said.

He knew she referred to his having undressed her. Patrick had never heard that edge of bitterness in her voice. *You don't really know her, old chap.* That was something worth remembering.

"I wanted to see what other weapons you were concealing besides the P-32."

"Sorry to have disappointed you."

"Oh, I don't know," he stood over her, the sense of power flowing through him a startling thing. He'd never before understood the appeal of having a woman chained to one's bed, but he was beginning to. Besides, the edge in her voice got under his skin. Some devil

within him couldn't resist lording it over her just a little. He hadn't known what to expect when Alba awoke, but this hard-edged smart-mouthed woman wasn't it. "I'd say you had a couple of weapons there, and they're quite...well honed."

"If I knew you considered sex a weapon, I'd have stayed clear of you three years ago. I thought our meeting a matter of propinquity. Of course, in light of very recent events, I'll have to reconsider the possibilities."

"*You'll* have to reconsider? That's funny. I've thought the exact same thing."

"But then, you're not the one who's just been assaulted, abducted, and confined. Are you?"

Her accusations burned his conscience. "You've quite the sharp tongue. I had no idea. Just try to keep in mind, darling, that you're in a very precarious position. You'll want to have a care not to antagonize me."

"Or what? You'll beat me? Or rape me?"

He felt the tether of his emotions and his temper intertwine and draw taut. Had she always lit his fire and sent him close to the edge so easily? He didn't think so. "Oh, darling," that devil within him began insisting, and Patrick couldn't think of a single reason to resist the urge. He bent over her, used his tongue to lightly taste the delicate flesh on her neck, just beneath her earlobe. "Trust me when I say that if I decide to have you, it won't be rape."

"You don't interest me anymore."

She sounded sure, but he noted she never met his eyes. This close to her, the scent of her perfume teased him. *Lily of The Valley*. An old fashioned fragrance for a modern woman, and one that evoked sensual memories of their time together in paradise. He flicked his gaze down her chest and saw the reaction she couldn't hide. Her nipples beaded, pushing against the lace of her bra in their attempt to reach him. "Liar. Your nipples have peaked."

"I'm cold."

“No, you’re hot. For me.” His mouth captured hers in a kiss instantly carnal. Had they ever been apart? Her flavor sank into his bones, drenched his soul, so that he wanted more. His right hand cupped her chin, his tongue forceful in its demand. Triumph ran hot in his veins as she opened to him, as her tongue met and stroked his. His penis hardened, and he knew it would take no effort at all to sweep blanket and panties from her and simply plunder.

He gave himself one instant more to drink her in, then pulled back. Her eyes, glazed in passion, blinked and then slowly cleared.

“Like I said. It won’t be rape.”

He needed to take a moment, step back, step away. He hadn’t brought Alba here to indulge his prurient sexual fantasies. He needed to find out who’d hired her, what she knew of them, and what she’d been paid to do.

He needed to find out what in hell was really going on.

Fresh predawn air would clear his head and, hopefully, settle his libido. At the door he turned, gave her what he intended to be an insulting visual perusal, and wondered if she could see more raw need in the look he offered than he intended.

“Scream if you like. There’s no one to hear you except me. We’re well isolated here.” He told the lie smoothly and hoped she wouldn’t test the strength of its truth—and her lungs.

“Go to hell.”

“Oh, I might eventually, love. But I think I’ll be in good company. Don’t you?”

He didn’t wait to see if she would try to steal the last word. He exited the cottage, closing and then locking the door behind him.

* * * *

Alba shut her eyes the instant the door closed. The sound of the key in the lock echoed for a long moment. Did he think, even handcuffed, she would be able to escape? Or did he lock the door

against intrusion by others? Perhaps they weren't as isolated as he claimed. She listened hard, but could hear no sounds of civilization.

Her throat burned and her eyes stung but she would *not* cry.

She'd known that someone would be after her, that they'd be gunning for her. Never in a million years would she have guessed that person would be Patrick Jamieson, or that he would find her so soon after she'd arrived in England.

Her heart leapt, literally filled with joy in a split second, when she'd heard his voice, seen his angel face and unforgettable blue eyes. And it shattered, broken into a thousand pieces when she realized he'd drugged her.

The Alba Morel I knew wasn't a hired assassin, either, so deal with it.

Shock, outrage and a sense of betrayal kept her silent, kept her from denying the ridiculous charge. She sensed that anything she might say to him would fall on deaf ears any way. She didn't know enough of what *was* going on—had no idea who he worked for, or what he'd been told—to be able to formulate a plan. Inhaling deeply, she took stock of her situation.

She lay half-naked, her arms above her head, her wrists handcuffed to a bed. The cottage appeared rustic, and from Patrick's implication, was located in a deserted piece of somewhere. She didn't know the time of day, and doubted Patrick would tell her when he returned. She'd reacted to whatever drug he'd given her in very short order, which made her suspect he'd used a Pentothal derivative.

She had more than a passing familiarity with the various blends available.

Her logical self told her that if he intended to kill her, he would have done so already. However, she couldn't dismiss the possibility that he grabbed her to hand off to someone else.

She was rather familiar with that scenario, too.

She had no way of knowing if that someone else he might hand her to would end her life, or not.

How could she have allowed herself to become aroused when he kissed her? She should have bitten his damn tongue rather than respond to it with her own. All she needed to do was look at her wrists encased in shiny metal to remind herself that as sexy as she found him to be, as hot as he made her feel, he could no longer be trusted. She deliberately refused to dwell on the logical conclusion: he had never been trustworthy. Her instincts were telling her he wore a white hat, and logic told her that her boss had painted her as some sort of villain.

But for the first time in her life, she didn't know if she could trust her instincts.

What a hell of a mess! Her brothers-in-law were going to read her the riot act the next time they saw her. She sincerely hoped they got the chance.

Her cheek itched, and she tried to relieve the irritation against her arm. The motion scratched an earring against her shoulder.

Well, that was something, anyway. He'd taken her pants and shirt, her jacket and socks, shoes and gun. But she still wore her earrings.

She'd have to keep her eyes and ears open, and be ready to take advantage of any opportunity. No doubt her brothers-in-law would come to her rescue, but it would be nice if when they got here she'd have already seized control of the situation. That might dull whatever lecture they felt righteous in giving her.

She'd have to steel herself against Patrick's potent appeal, too. The idea of using sex as the weapon he'd likened it to be flashed through her mind, but she dismissed it. She'd drawn two lines in the sand when she signed on to work for Uncle Sam, and using her body to get the job done had been one of them.

She'd never crossed that line and didn't intend to start now.

Technically, this isn't part of your job. So responding to Patrick's advances wouldn't actually be crossing the line.

“Oh, shut up. What good of an inner voice of reason are you, allowing me to get nabbed in the first place? If I get out of this jam I’ve a mind never to speak to you again.”

The door burst open, and Patrick entered, gun drawn, piercing her with a glare. “Who are you talking to?”

“Myself, of course. I don’t know if you’re aware of it, but I’m the only intelligent, reasonable human being in the area.”

So much for telling him the truth. She’d done just that, and how did Patrick respond? By searching every inch of space in the small cottage as if looking for an enemy.

“Oh, now you’re on the scent. My partner in crime is actually Thomas T. Thumb. A dedicated man is our Thomas, volunteering to have his entire body shrunk for the good of the cause. Unfortunately for him, of course, the super-downsizing-beam has a nasty side effect, turning anyone who submits to it invisible to the human eye. Dogs can see them, of course, which is why it *looks* like they’re always chasing their tails. They’re not, of course. Just miniature, invisible men.”

Patrick straightened slowly and looked at her a long, silent moment. She met his gaze unflinchingly, and knew her face to be void of all expression. She didn’t know why her subconscious chose this particular personality type, but she’d go with the flow...unless it proved to be futile.

The look of concern that crossed his face in the blink of an eye told her it might be an effective persona. She watched silently as he holstered his gun—a Glock 9mm she couldn’t help but notice—and approached the bed.

He brushed his hand across her forehead. Then bending closer, he looked into her eyes as if searching for a speck of wood. *Ah, he’s wondering if the drug has addled my brain.*

He stood back up, and held four fingers up.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Why would you? They don’t look as if they’re carrying any cash. Now the cops will be after you for committing a hold-up, and you’ve nothing to show for the effort.”

Okay, maybe that was a tad overplayed. Impatience crossed his face, and that wasn’t the mood she’d been fishing for at all.

He grabbed one of the kitchen chairs, brought it closer to the bed. Spinning it around, he straddled it, then rested his arms on the chair back. For a long moment he stared at her. Alba didn’t know if he thought he could unnerve her or not. She’d developed tremendous patience and had become very good at waiting, and at holding her entire body absolutely still while she did so.

That ability was a requirement of her profession.

“I think we’re both too old to play games, so let’s cut to the chase,” Patrick said. “I’ve stopped you from assassinating our Prime Minister, and now that we’re aware of the plot, we’re watching carefully so that if the Zoltanas try to hire another mercenary, we’ll be ready for them. We’re convinced that you have, in your possession, a wealth of information with regard to the group’s activities not only in North America, but here and in Europe as well. We’ll want a complete list of all the members you met while they arranged for you to make this hit, as well as every scrap of conversation you may have overheard, and every tiny detail of your meetings with them.”

Patrick’s demands answered a few questions. Alba’s mind began to turn over the possibilities. “I never expected him to use the Zoltanas. They’re too obscure. I thought he’d use a group he’s dealt with before, like the TFF. Color me surprised.”

“If you cooperate,” Patrick continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “you can look forward to spending the rest of your life as a guest of the Crown. But at least you will *have* a life. The Americans want you dead.”

She’d spoken her thoughts aloud—a sure sign that despite everything, she really *did* trust Patrick. She’d think about that later.

For now, maybe being honest would be the best policy. “I’m sure he does.”

“He?”

“Maybe I should hold up my fingers and see if you can tell *me* how many. Except it’s rather hard to do, being restrained this way.”

“Alba—”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Patrick, use your head. Can’t you smell a setup when you step in one? The experience is rather similar to stepping in dog shit. The deeper you go, the worse the stench.”

His frown told her she’d nailed it this time, and that a crack existed in his belief in his own information. It was a slim thread, but it was the only one she had. She’d never explained herself before, and thought a full explanation right now would only complicate an already complicated situation. *Short and sweet, then.*

“Look, I *am* a sharpshooter, but I’m not a mercenary. I recently discovered that my boss is playing for himself. Not knowing what else I could do, I tendered my resignation, hoping to bypass him and get to the next level. His response was to come up with a dummy target, but I caught on. Since he had me followed by some police academy dropout, I took matters into my own hands and left town. I came to England, because here is where my boss was sending me, so here would be where I might find the proof I need of his treason.”

“Your boss. Just who *is* your boss?”

“A low-level schmuck you’ve never heard of in a branch of the NSA you won’t find any information on anywhere, because it doesn’t officially exist.” Anyone else might think she wove a tall tale, but if Patrick *was* a British agent, he’d know there were such agencies operating outside the public ken.

And if he himself was dirty and worked for her boss, she’d just signed her own death warrant. Talk about an either-or situation that spanned both ends of the spectrum.

A look entered Patrick's eyes that she couldn't decipher. For a long moment he stared at her, and she wondered if he weighed some decision. Then he said two words—a name.

“Porter Thomas.”

He'd caught her off guard, and her first reaction was elation. Perhaps he believed her after all! Then the other possibility chilled her to the depths of her soul.

“My God. You *do* work for him.”

Insult crossed his face. “Not bloody likely.”

She'd go with the elation, then. “So you believe me?”

“No. But you've given me something to think about.”

Chapter 7

She'd fallen asleep.

Patrick stepped out the door to place a phone call and to collect some food from Mrs. Barton. He'd been just a few minutes longer than he'd intended.

Now he stood watching her, feeling free to do so because she was oblivious to his scrutiny. *She doesn't look very comfortable.* He'd been so immersed in their conversation, in trying to discern whether she told the truth or not, he'd not given a thought to her comfort. *Well, she didn't complain.* She likely wouldn't either, but he knew from his own training days just how painful it could be, having your arms stretched above your head for more than a few hours at a time.

He set the sack with the food on the table, and went outside again. It only took a few minutes to find what he needed.

When the cottage had been built—one of several that dotted the estate of the first Earl of Avebury—the land around it had been barren of trees. Fields of crops would have surrounded the sturdy little structure, fields ripe with barley and later, corn.

The family's wealth originally came from a combination of agriculture, rent, and other enterprises. Some would say there had been a Jamieson or two among the Moonrakers of lore, smugglers who hid their goods in the bottoms of ponds, and, when the excise enforcers came upon them claimed they were trying to scoop the cheese they could see on the moon-reflecting water. Patrick wasn't sure if the rumors were truth or not.

In recent generations, Jamiesons made their money primarily through investments and industry.

The last tenant to live and farm here passed on several decades before, and Patrick's father saw to the planting of oak and yew trees, in order to extend the woodlands of the estate.

His father also erected a gardening shed just behind the cottage. They kept the shed stocked with myriad supplies, so that the grounds crew wouldn't have to cart everything they needed from the main shed closer to the manor.

Patrick returned to the cottage armed with a length of chain and a padlock. He broke the brand new lock out of the package, pocketing one key and placing the other on the narrow mantle of the fireplace.

He unfastened Alba's handcuffs from the iron headboard and refastened them again, then looped the chain through them, locking the chain to the iron. She'd be able to sit up, and even had enough chain to reach the bathroom and the small table.

The sense of being watched brought his gaze back to her face.

"Giving me enough rope in the hopes that I'll hang myself?"

"No."

The expression in her eyes—guarded, with a twinge of fear—tore a hole right through the center of him.

Look, I am a sharpshooter, but I'm not a mercenary.

He'd put things in motion to check out her story. He had means and contacts no one knew about. It would take a couple of hours, but he would know the truth. By her own admission she was an assassin; it only remained to determine whose side she killed for.

In the meantime, his heart believed her, but he wouldn't let that interfere with his duty.

She began to lower her arms, gasping when that action netted her pain.

"Let me help." He sat on the side of the bed and reached for her shoulders. Leery of causing her more pain, he began to massage her joints and muscles. When she sighed, when her eyes closed in obvious

appreciation, he increased the pressure of his fingers, and as he massaged, brought her arms down, one at a time. He continued on massaging until he felt the tightness in her shoulders relax.

He needed to get his hands off her because he'd done all he could to ease her discomfort. He should get up, move across the room, or at the very least break out the food he'd brought. But he didn't do any of those things. He didn't take his hands off her, either, and that was probably a mistake.

Green eyes smoky with arousal and confusion stared back at him. Years vanished, everything disappeared but the desire she stirred in him.

"*My Alba*," the whispered endearment escaped and then he sealed the words against her lips with his own.

Her flavor intoxicated him, feeding the hunger and the need for her that had been growing within him ever since he'd left her. No woman's mouth tasted as sweet; no woman's taste aroused him so thoroughly or so quickly as hers.

"Patrick."

The sound of his name floating on a sigh emboldened him. He opened his lips, used his tongue to taste and to tease, to drink in her essence. Her response, hot, ready, shot straight to his libido.

Mine.

Stretching out beside her, one hand angled her head better for his mouth to plunder while the other stroked curves, reacquainting him with the feel of her, the heat and the strength and the silk of her. Fingers nimbly dipped into the lacy bra and found a nipple that felt hot and hard and, he thought, begged to be suckled. When she pressed her breast closer to him his lips weaned themselves from hers and he accepted the wordless offer. His teeth nipped, his tongue soothed, and all the while his passion rose.

Impatient, he jerked the blanket he'd covered her with from between them. "You're so hot, baby. I need to feel all of you against me."

He didn't give her a moment to agree or refuse. He simply tugged the bra and panties off her until she was totally, gloriously naked. He moved her arms out of the way, above her head, and the image of her cuffed and chained aroused him incredibly. With hands that shook, he touched and caressed, grasped and slid and delved. He needed more of her, he needed all of her.

He needed to press her naked flesh into the mattress with his own.

Levering himself up impatient tugs divested him of his own clothes.

"Hurry."

That one word, whispered, sped his heart and heated his blood. If he didn't get inside her right now he'd explode.

At the last second he pulled up his discarded trousers, pulled out one of the condoms he'd grabbed from his room earlier in the day. It took him bare seconds to put it on.

I'd rather not wear it.

That thought shocked him, aroused him, spurred him to come down between her legs, spread her wide, and plunge.

* * * *

The first touch of his latex-covered cock against her intimate flesh made her come. Alba angled her hips and used every muscle at her command to capture and hold him. The orgasm shimmered through her and she cried out, anchoring her hands to the iron bars of the bedstead and her legs around his muscular hips.

The heat of his body surrounded her as he wrapped her in his arms and pulled her impossibly closer. When his mouth came down on hers, the kiss punishing and primal, she surrendered even as she devoured.

"Mine." The single word against her lips sent shivers down her spine. The fierce declaration flooded her senses even as she felt his thick cock shiver and flood the sheath within her.

His tongue stabbed and swirled and dominated hers and she wanted nothing more than to absorb him, give him everything he demanded. The last of her rapture sparkled in her belly, and she didn't care if giving in, if opening to him turned out to be a mistake. It felt right, God help her it felt right even in the face of his distrust and the shackles that bound her.

The weight of him as the strength left his muscles and he rested upon her felt sweet. It had been one of the things she'd loved before. The first time they'd had sex, she'd wanted to celebrate that the sensation of being squashed afterwards had been a comforting one. So different from her memories of the past, of those murky, frightening days with her mother, before the State of Pennsylvania took her in and then finally placed her with the Gibbons.

"I was rough with you just now."

"No." She wanted to wrap her arms around him and moved to do just that. The jangling sound of metal starkly shattered the mood.

As if he'd only now remembered the chain and the handcuffs, the circumstances, Patrick jerked his upper body away from her, his eyes penetrating in their stare.

"I *was* rough. I wanted to be rough. And I had no bloody business either wanting *or* taking."

She read the regret in his expression, and the distrust. "Don't apologize. If you have regrets, then get off me, stay away from me. But don't apologize. Leave me with that much, at least."

She would not cry. Neither would she act the part of the wounded flower, or the lover scorned. The timing of the hormonal explosion on both their sides was regrettable. But she could live with it. Just pick up the pieces and move on. She had become very good at that.

For a long moment he simply held his gaze on hers. Whatever he searched for, he must have found it, for he nodded at last. "All right. You'll want the bathroom. I'll make some tea. There's some food, too."

She turned her face away rather than stare at his hard naked male body, all muscle and lightly tanned flesh. She wanted to stare at him, to drink in every inch of him, but knew she would be just setting herself up for more hurt if she did. Her body rejoiced in homecoming as he'd surged inside her, the feel of him instantly familiar and *missed*. But she couldn't let her body have its way, not completely, and not yet.

When he turned his back she scooted from the bed, taking the light blanket with her. The bathroom turned out to be the smallest she'd ever been in. It wasn't easy doing what she had to do having her hands handcuffed. But at least he had restrained them in front and not behind her. The tiny sink didn't offer anything but a miserly trickle of cold water. But there was soap, so at least she could wash her hands.

Alba wrapped the blanket around her body sarong-style. She looked for a mirror, but saw none. Closing her eyes, she shook her head. "The man has you in chains and you're worried about your hair. Not good. Not good at all." She spoke quietly, hoping Patrick wouldn't hear her but unable to quell the impulse to do so.

Moving slowly, she left the bathroom. The entire cottage was tiny. Just two steps to the bed, and she could see the rest of the room from there.

"I know you prefer coffee. I'll try to have some in the morning. For now there's tea, and sandwiches. And I think worrying about your hair is refreshingly normal, under the circumstances."

"It's impolite to listen in on other people's conversations."

"My apologies."

She gave him high marks for not laughing out loud. The appearance of that little half-smile, the one that told her he used all his willpower not to laugh, for some reason stabbed at her heart. For just one second everything else disappeared and they were back in the Caribbean, new lovers learning each other.

She stepped toward the chair nearest her and caught her foot on the chain.

The mood disintegrated. Alba felt the smile slide off her face, and didn't try to hold it in place.

"Do you want me to unfasten the chain?"

"Only if doing so means you trust me completely, that you know I'm not your enemy."

His hesitation was more than brief, and Alba shook her head. "Never mind. I just hope, for your sake, that whoever you have to turn me over to doesn't kill me in front of you."

"Fuck." His curse resounded with impatience and anger.

She hadn't meant to push his buttons. She'd only spoken her honest thoughts.

"No one is going to kill you. You're safe with me."

She held up her hands, snapped her wrists out so that the small chain between the handcuffs and the larger chain rattled. "Easy for you to say."

When he turned away to get the tea and sandwiches Alba tamped down the remorse that wanted to supplant the tiny flare of anger in her heart. If their positions were reversed, she'd like to think she would have extended the benefit of the doubt first. He hadn't even questioned the information he'd been handed, just acted upon it. That reality alone made *her* question what happened between them in the past.

Though difficult, she finally managed to sit on the chair at the table. Patrick said nothing as he adjusted the table closer to her. He placed a half-sandwich before her. She was starving, and didn't even think to not trust that the food he gave her was free of contaminants. The silence stretched between them. Alba waited.

"Gareth Willoughby."

She snapped her head up, her gaze instantly connecting with his. The name had been another echo from the past. Date, time, angle, and circumstances all instantly came to mind. She flicked her eyes down then sought his gaze again, confident she revealed nothing.

"Who?"

Patrick didn't respond for a long moment. When he did, his words seemed stiff. "Nothing. Just someone I used to know."

And his expression told her she'd told him more than she'd meant to.

"Used to know?"

"We grew up together. My best friend, actually. Or rather, he was. Before an assassin killed him."

Oh hell. Alba suddenly knew that the situation between them, as unhappy as it had been up to that point, just got a whole lot worse.

Chapter 8

She had been quick, but not quick enough.

Focusing down at his plate, Patrick felt his world shatter for the second time that week. Even though a tiny part of him understood this had been possible, the sure and certain knowledge was nearly more than he could take in.

Alba's eyes lit with recognition before she'd shuttered the look, and that was all the confirmation he needed.

The only woman he'd ever loved had murdered his best friend.

In the face of this new knowledge, Patrick's actions of just an hour before seemed superfluous. He'd contacted Angie and asked her to do some digging for him, utilizing her special relationship with a couple of the members of the NSA, the National Security Agency in the United States. He'd also tagged a couple of his own personal sources. His goal clear, he knew that within a couple of hours, he'd learn the truth: either Alba was indeed a mercenary whose services went to the highest bidder, or she was not.

It hardly seemed to matter now. If the information came back confirming her status as an agent for the United States government that would raise a whole new set of questions, questions Patrick didn't want answered about the man who'd been closer to him than a brother.

Gareth, what in the hell did you get yourself into?

Patrick understood the irony. Now he almost hoped Alba was a mercenary, a gun for hire. Better for him for Gareth to be a dead

patriot rather than a traitor whose death had been ordered by the government.

He looked up and encountered Alba's steady gaze.

He'd always held his stand against assassination as a tool of civilized society. Thinking of that stance now, and her words of just moments before, he felt the need to restate his assurance to her.

"I would *never* turn you over to anyone who would kill you. One of the reasons I decided to take you in the first place is that my boss's American contact *does* want you dead. I don't believe in what our agencies term 'righteous sanctions'." He wasn't going to tell her the rest—that *his* boss didn't know he had taken her.

"I see."

"Do you?" He doubted it. He doubted she had any idea of the blow she'd just dealt him. He'd told her Gareth had been his friend, but not that they'd been as close as brothers; not that he'd stood beside Gareth as his best man; not that he'd poured scotch down him when his wife left him. Some things men experienced together bonded them for life. Those kinds of experiences he and Gareth had shared in abundance.

He still visited the man's parents and called them mum and dad.

He couldn't tell her any of this. For the first time in a long while Patrick felt the degree to which he walked a solitary path. His entire life, he'd been alone, really. He'd thought to fill that void with Alba in reality, as she filled that void for him in his dreams and imagination. It occurred to him now, for the first time, that if he turned his back on her, then he truly would have no one.

He got up from the table, unable to sit still a moment longer. Restless, he wished he could go to the gym. There at least he could take his anger out on an insensitive bag—or one of the enlisted who served as sparring partners.

The tension he thought he'd blown off the day he'd been briefed by Jonathan returned, stronger than before. He knew himself, and knew this level of stress, of emotion, could be dangerous. He'd

always sensed he could be very reckless if he ever had his back against the wall. He was pulled back to the conversation when Alba treated him to a dry chuckle.

“Yes, I do. But you’re not in any mood to listen to anything I have to say, or believe anything I tell you.”

Patrick felt his temper being to rumble, and that wasn’t good. He needed to keep a cool head, keep his emotions in check. He had to hold on till he heard back from Angie, then he would decide what to do.

Thomas hadn’t presented Alba as an agent gone rogue, he’d presented her as a mercenary, a gun for hire. If Angie came back with the news that Alba *was* on the side of the angels, then he would have no choice but to do all he could to go after Thomas, who by his betrayal of Alba proved himself a traitor. But none of that logical thinking seemed to matter. He couldn’t prevent himself from taunting her.

“I suppose there are more shades of grey for you than there are for me.” He heard the bitterness in his words but couldn’t regret the tone.

Alba tilted her head to one side. Then she held her wrists up, the handcuffs and chain looking obscene against her pale beauty.

“Nothing gray about this. And I would say any man who has sex with a woman he has kidnapped and chained to his bed could write the book on shades of grey.”

It wasn’t just a sharp tongue the woman had. She possessed a sharp mind as well. He needed to get himself under control. His gaze roamed the small kitchen, landing on the tea pot.

“Would you care for more tea?”

“No, but thank you ever so much for asking.”

She was goading him again. He caught that glint in her eye, and damned if he wasn’t beginning to really like that about her.

“I’m afraid the after-dinner entertainments are few. You can sit on the chair, or the bed. You can talk to me, or go to sleep.”

“I don’t particularly want to talk to you at the moment. You’re in a pissy mood.”

“You would be too if—” Patrick stopped, stepped back. He had shouted at her, and nearly lost his temper. He *never* lost his temper.

Alba surged to her feet, knocking into the table, sending her chair backwards. He thought she’d have been right in his face if her chain had been long enough.

“Pardon me all to hell. Forgive me for not being sensitive to *your* mood, to whatever insult crawled up your ass! Bad form on my part. After all, why should I be feeling out of sorts? Just because the man I’ve been in love with for the last three years thinks I’m some sort of a damn terrorist, drugged me, kidnapped me, has me chained and won’t believe a damn word I say!”

Her temper pushed his over the edge. Two steps brought him to her. His hands seized her arms, lifting her off her feet. He shook her once, but even in this explosive moment he found he could control the action. Two more steps and he pressed her back against the wall, next to the fireplace. An old hook, left over from the days when heavy pots would be suspended so they could be swung over the fire protruded from the wall above her head and he made quick work of looping the chain over it.

Flashing eyes, heaving chest, the heat of temper pulsing from her body churned his blood, fired his arousal. Every thought vaporized in the face of the inferno this woman ignited within him. Patrick could only want, and by *damn* he was going to take!

“You’ve been a fire in my blood, a specter haunting my waking and sleeping moments since I met you. I was going to come for you. Do you understand that? I’d resigned my commission and was going to come and find you because I’d reached the point where I knew I couldn’t do without you anymore.”

“Well, you came for me, didn’t you? But you don’t trust me, and right now I don’t think you even like me. And until you do, I don’t want *you*.”

“I can make you want me, you know I can.” He flicked a look down at her breasts. The thin blanket she wore wasn’t up to the task of hiding her arousal. “I don’t have to force you. All I have to do is touch you.” He suited actions to words. His left hand held both of her wrists, and even though the hooked chain kept her arms high above her head, the sense of power that surged through him by holding her with one hand was immense. *Where did this need to dominate, to control, come from?* It was new and heady, and yes, dangerous; but at the moment, it was also completely irresistible.

His right hand lightly caressed down the front of her body, fondling her breasts. He felt the heat, felt her strain as she resisted, pressing those luscious globes into his hands—into his care. Oh, she wasn’t so cool and biting now. She was hot, and getting hotter.

He leaned forward, his tongue lightly stroking the side of her neck. Pulling back, he watched the pulse point there as her heart rate increased. He felt her tremble, and smiled.

“I won’t have to force you. All I’ll have to do is taste you.”

Her gaze met his and he saw hunger burning there. He told himself that if he’d seen fear, or anger, he wouldn’t take her. Just as his lips landed on hers, he knew he lied.

Nothing would stop him from taking her. Not now. Not ever.

He pressed his body close to hers as his mouth ravaged, as his hand caressed and squeezed her breast. His tongue tasted every corner of her mouth, her delectable flavor going straight to his cock. Already hard, he relished the surge of heat and hormones. When he pushed his hips into hers, she mewed in response. She melted into him, and he could swear he felt her mound, through the blanket, spreading its lips to welcome him. His hand left her breast and reached for the top of the blanket.

The crash, the splintering of wood, pulled him from the precipice of sexual bliss, plunging him into action in a heartbeat.

“Bastard. Get your hands off her!”

Patrick spun around, instinctively shielding Alba, and found himself staring into the business end of Sig Saur .357. The man on the other end wore an implacable expression and looked as if he would have no trouble pulling the trigger.

“Nicholas, don’t!”

Patrick heard Alba’s shout, recognized the name. He watched the flash of disappointment that swept the man’s face just a bare instant before he saw the fist racing toward him.

* * * *

“Get out of the way, little sister.”

“No. Nicholas, I’m not going to let you tie him up.”

“Alba, go get dressed, sweetheart, and leave Patrick to us.” Dylan sounded like the voice of reason, but she knew better.

Alba stood in front of a somewhat groggy Patrick, her hands on her hips as she faced her brothers-in-law down. She still wore the blanket she’d donned earlier. She’d love to get dressed, especially since a quick search turned up her clothes. But she didn’t want to leave the room for even that long.

Both Nicholas and Dylan seemed more than a little pissed off to have found her half-naked and appearing to be on the verge of being ravaged.

“He didn’t hurt me. For God’s sake, he’s a member of Her Majesty’s Secret Service! You can’t tie the man up in his own country!”

“Alba.”

She turned immediately at the sound of her name. Holding the blanket in place, she squatted down so she could look into Patrick’s eyes.

Nicholas had hit him hard, and he’d gone down like a stone. He’d lost consciousness for a couple of seconds, and she couldn’t help but worry about him.

His vision seemed fine when he met her gaze, but Alba could see he would likely have a shiner.

“I’d rather neither of these gentlemen get the opportunity to look at your very sweet ass. Go get dressed. I’ll be all right.”

“And before I forget,” Dylan said as he held his hand out. “Call your sisters. They’ve been worried sick about you.”

Alba took the phone, then gave her brothers-in-law a good stare before she scooped her clothes and made her way to the tiny bathroom.

“I’m leaving the door open,” she called out. Hopefully she could dress quickly enough that she’d be back with the men in mere minutes.

Yes, there was a part of her that would almost relish having Nicholas try out his knot-tying technique on Patrick. He’d brought rope with him, being the always-prepared sort of guy.

If they hadn’t ruined the handcuffs getting them off her, she knew her brothers-in-law would have been happy to truss him up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

She worked as quickly as she could, scrambling into her panties and bra, then her black t-shirt and jeans.

How considerate of Patrick to leave her P32 in its ankle holster.

As she fastened it into place, she could hear the low rumble of male voices in the next room, but couldn’t make out any of the words.

Since this entire situation was her business more than theirs, she headed back into the fray without so much as trying to tidy her hair.

“...not very damn smart if you thought for even one minute she was a mercenary,” Nicholas said.

“I make no apologies. I acted based on the information given to me by an unimpeachable source.”

“Yeah, well—” Nicholas stopped talking because Alba wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

Then she turned to Dylan and gave him a hug too.

“Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

Dylan raised one eyebrow. “You’re welcome, despite the fact that sounded suspiciously like a kiss-off.”

Before she could respond to that, a cell phone rang.

“That’s mine,” Patrick said. “I’d asked one of my contacts to check out Alba’s story.”

Her brothers-in-law looked at each other as if trying to decide what to do. Alba solved the dilemma by reaching into Patrick’s pocket, retrieving his phone, and handing it to him.

“Alba...” Nicholas sounded severely put-out.

“Nicholas, we’re on the same side, here.”

“Did you call your sisters?” Dylan asked.

“Not yet. I will in a minute. And I’ll tell them I was delayed calling them as I had to babysit their husbands who momentarily slipped into Neanderthal mode.”

“Jamieson here.”

She turned at the sound of Patrick’s voice and watched him as he listened to whatever his caller said. “You’re certain?” He listened a bit longer, but didn’t meet Alba’s glance.

“Thanks, Angie. No, I think that about covers everything for now. Thanks.”

Patrick closed his cell phone and frowned at it. When he looked up, he didn’t look very happy.

“According to Angie’s source, Ms. Morel is indeed employed by the United States Government...as a sniper.”

Alba saw the distaste on his face. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything she could—or would—say to that for the time being.

She had a bigger priority at the moment.

“So the next question is, were you handed a bill of goods by someone who had been duped, or did that person deliberately lie to you?”

Patrick nodded. “That is the question, isn’t it? And I don’t have an answer as yet. But I will.” He looked around him. “Right. Why don’t we take this party up to the house? I need a bloody drink.”

“Up to the house? So, we’re not in the middle of nowhere?”

“You’re on His Lordship’s estate in Wiltshire,” Dylan said, rocking back on his heels.

“His Lordship?” Alba knew she sounded like a parrot, but the revelations kept coming and she wasn’t certain she could keep up.

“See? The man’s a gold-plated liar. You should stay away from him, little sister,” Nicholas said cheerfully.

Probably good advice. But Alba knew, looking into Patrick’s eyes, it was advice she was destined to ignore.

Chapter 9

He didn't know what to make of her.

How many times did he dream of seeing her here, in his home? Now she stood in the corridor just off the great hall, perusing the portraits of his progenitors, and he couldn't read her thoughts, or her mood.

Patrick quite simply didn't know what would come next.

Alba turned and looked at him, her head cocked to the side just a tad. "You carry the look of them."

"The Jamieson nose," Patrick said.

"I think it's amazing to have so many generations of your family laid out before you this way. To know where you come from. That's one thing my sisters and I had in common when we first met; not knowing our own "great-greats". My father died before my birth, you see. And in any event, he hadn't married my mother. I'm miles away from this scene."

He sensed the distance she sought to put between them. His logical side thought it would be for the best. But the man in him, the feral creature who knew deep down that he'd met his mate three years before on a sunny Caribbean island, would have none of it.

"Rubbish. You can be anyone—and anywhere—you want to be."

He caught the flash in her eyes. That she had a fiery side thrilled him. She stepped close to him and said, "Be careful what you say. You might end up eating your words."

Clever girl. And probably right. He might end up eating more than his words before this particular adventure ended.

“Excuse me, Milord. Your additional guests have arrived.”

It had to be a testament to Patrick’s state of mind that he hadn’t even been aware of Parsons’ approach.

“Thank you, Parsons. Please have Mrs. Barton send in some tea and sandwiches. And coffee.” He’d said that last while holding Alba’s gaze.

“Right away, Milord.” Parsons bowed, his back stiff, his head dipping to levels reserved for display before guests. Patrick wanted to snicker, but easily squashed the urge.

“If you’ll excuse me, I want to go see my sisters.”

He could see she did, as her face lit up with Parsons’ announcement. But he didn’t want to let her escape without knowing how he felt. “We’re not done, you and I. You know that, don’t you?”

She raised one eyebrow and studied him and damned if he didn’t have to fight the urge to squirm.

“Aren’t we? Funny, based on your reaction to the information you’ve gleaned about me thus far, I would have sworn calling us ‘done’ would be a gross understatement. At least it would be from your perspective.”

Patrick hated letting anyone have the last word. But as she’d so very neatly stated the truth, he didn’t know what more he could say.

Instead, he let her make a tactical retreat. He turned and watched her until she’d rounded the corner that lead to the front entranceway. The sound of joyful female noise put a smile on his face when he would have sworn that at that particular moment, nothing could.

* * * *

“I really don’t have any answers for you,” Patrick said. “I don’t know if Jonathan was lied to, or is complicit in this mess. My gut tells me that for the foreseeable future, we can’t afford to trust anyone not here in this room. We’re on our own.”

Patrick brought them to the library, a nice large room equipped with plenty of chairs and a desk that held a computer. He sat at that desk, nominally in charge. Alba didn't mind that since they occupied his house, and his country, come to that. She felt relieved to no longer be alone with the man. Of course she noticed that her sisters made no secret of studying Patrick and she guessed she couldn't blame them for it. At least they behaved more reasonably toward him than their husbands. She'd told them she couldn't blame Patrick for kidnapping her, given the circumstances, and now that she was free, she really did feel that way. They were all on the same side, and currently in *his* country, after all.

Funny how she needed to keep stressing those last two points to her family.

"How would you have proceeded if you'd boarded that plane at JFK and arrived here as usual?" Dylan asked her.

"My instructions were to meet with a Captain Arthur at Upper Heyford—an RAF base—where I'd be put on a transport flight to Afghanistan."

"Let me check on that officer." It only took Patrick a few minutes to access the information. "It would have been a long wait for you. The good captain is currently on tour in Iraq."

"So Thomas obviously counted on your agency to take me out before I got that far. If memory serves, Captain Arthur provided my transport the last time I came to England, I think about ten months ago." Alba paused as her mind sorted through all the various puzzle pieces. "I wonder why Thomas felt so certain that your government would kill me."

"I *do* know that my boss and your boss have been friends for some time. I could never see what Jonathan liked about the man, quite frankly. I loathed him on first meeting. But friends they are, and my read of your boss is that Thomas is arrogant enough to believe that because he requested a sanction, one would be given." Patrick gazed

off into space, and Alba wondered where his thoughts took him. Then he sat forward.

“If you’d gotten to Upper Heyford, and been unable to locate Captain Arthur, what would you have done?”

Very aware that they were treading into confidential territory, she tried to think how she could answer that question without giving too much classified information away. Although of the people in that room with her, Patrick happened to be the one she personally trusted the least; he was in fact the only one with a sufficiently high enough security clearance to hear her answer.

“I’m pretty certain they can be trusted,” Patrick said, proving he was pretty good at figuring out her thoughts.

On a personal level she wasn’t certain how she felt about that.

“After going through my usual channels, if I discovered the Captain unavailable, I’d have assumed an ordinary bureaucratic snafu. They happen. I have a contact in London. I would have gotten myself on a MATS flight to where I needed to be.”

“That’s what I thought. You’d do what you needed to do to get the job done.”

It sounded as if Patrick just gave her a compliment, but as he wasn’t smiling, she didn’t think he meant it as such.

“I wonder what you would have found if you landed in Kabul as scheduled? When would that have been?” Dylan asked.

Alba blinked, because for a moment, she’d thought it had just been her and Patrick alone in the room.

That is really not good.

She looked at her watch, did the math. “Actually, it would likely have been in about four hours from now. Coming into Britain, there’s a protocol I would follow, which would include checking in at the U.S. Embassy, having one of our naval attachés contact one of theirs. If all went according to plan I would be wheels up right now. ”

“Son of a bitch,” Nicholas said.

Alba could tell by the expression on their faces that both her brothers-in-law reached the same conclusion as she, and it wasn't a happy one.

"There's a thought. It's easy enough to find out," Patrick said. "Just excuse me while I make a phone call."

Since Alba followed Dylan's line of thinking, she wondered at the irony. Although she'd known her target for a fake, she in fact planned to follow the route to Kabul, to see what would happen next.

Patrick's kidnapping her likely saved her life.

The room felt almost empty without the man, which was silly, really, Alba thought. Her sisters and their husbands were still there. Pamela spent her time perusing the bookshelves, Twyla chose one of the two settees to lounge on, with her legs over the arm of the thing—a deceptively casual pose. Both women seemed exceedingly placid and relaxed, but she knew they'd been paying close attention to not only the dynamics of the situation but the content of the conversation.

"Do you think we can wheedle an invitation to stay here for the next few days?" Pamela took one of the leather bound volumes from the shelf and opened it carefully. "My God, is this a first edition of *Captains Courageous*?"

Alba smiled. It was so rare to hear awe in P. J.'s voice. Nothing fazed her sister, whose life's journey had taken her from orphaned foster child to respected art conservator to the wife of a multi-millionaire.

"It is." Patrick came back into the room and chuckled when Pamela gingerly closed the book and carefully slid it back into its position on the shelf.

"My great-grandfather met Kipling in India, and they remained friends until *that* Earl of Avebury passed away. Please, feel free to examine the book, or any book here. And as to the other, no wheedling is necessary. I thought to suggest that you all remain here as my guests. I've excellent security and I'll be adding to it for the next few days."

"I have excellent security as well. And Nicholas and Twyla combined are among the best security experts on the planet." Dylan effortlessly managed to convey an air of implacability.

Although Alba had enormous respect for her brother-in-law, she wasn't certain he'd win in a contest of wills against Patrick.

"I know you do, and they are. But it's easier to be secure out here in these lovely pastoral environs than in the middle of London. As well as the obvious advantage that no one will ever think to look for Alba *here*."

"You hope."

Patrick said nothing, merely waited as he held the challenge of Dylan's gaze. Nicholas moved to stand beside his brother-in-law, effectively against Patrick, and Alba wondered if the men would end up in a brawl. The three of them seemed equally matched, not only in general physique and conditioning, but in hardheadedness as well.

The question was settled by Twyla. Lithely arising from the settee, she went over to her husband and gently stroked his face.

"Sweetheart, give Dylan a hand bringing our luggage in from the car, please? Oh, and we packed a bag for you as well, little sister."

Pamela left her position by the book shelf and kissed her husband on the cheek. "Down, boy."

Dylan's expression went from coldly fierce to charmingly baffled in a heartbeat. "You *packed* for us? You want to stay here?"

"I did, and I do. Come on, Twyla and I will give you both a hand."

"Parsons will direct you to the rooms he's prepared. And just give him Alba's bag," Patrick said.

"But..." Nicholas lifted a hand, and Alba knew he wanted to protest leaving Patrick alone with her.

"Hush." Twyla took her husband's hand and sent a saucy wink to Patrick as she led Nicholas out of the room.

"When they aren't trying to beat the shit out of me, I like your brothers-in-law. And I have the feeling their wives could be even tougher on me if I don't toe the line."

“You’re a very perceptive man. About some things.”

Patrick walked toward her, his movements bringing to mind the stalking motions of a large cat approaching its prey.

“I said we’re not finished, and I meant it. So while I instructed Parsons to prepare a couple of guest rooms for your family, I didn’t have him prepare one for you. I want you under my roof *and* in my bed. No chains, and no handcuffs.” He flashed that killer grin of his, the one that drew her to him three years ago when she’d seen him surrounded by the wares at that open air market. “Well, no chains or handcuffs unless you want them. You want to be in my bed,” his tone softened, lowered with this last sentence. He leaned forward just a little. Just enough. “You want me inside you.”

Alba wanted to deny him, wished she could tell him to go to hell and mean it. But she couldn’t, and damn him for knowing it.

“All right. *You’re* right, about everything you just said. But there’re still walls between us, Patrick. Walls and years. We’re not starting fresh here, we can’t and I won’t.”

“We’ll see.” He stepped back one pace, made a point of looking at her clothes. She didn’t need the once-over to tell her she looked like something the cat dragged in. She *felt* like something the cat dragged in.

He extended his hand to her, raised his right eyebrow. Why hadn’t she noticed that lord-of-the-manor attitude before?

Because you were too busy fucking his brains out, that’s why.

“Let me show you where you can freshen up.”

Alba gave him her hand but she’d be damned if she would give him her heart. Not so easily, at least, as she did last time.

* * * *

Tonight definitely ranked, Patrick mused, as the oddest dinner he’d ever hosted. Not often did he break bread with two men who would quite happily see him run over by a trolley, two women who

eyed him with completely open curiosity and not a little guardedness, and the woman he loved who at the moment would just as likely as not reach in and tear his liver from his body.

Let that one slip in, didn't you old boy? Well, bugger it. He *was* in love with Alba, and he'd caught that same admission from her in the crofter's cottage earlier, so they were on even footing in that regard, at least.

"Did you know that a lot of Americans believe the national dish of England is fish and chips?" Pamela asked.

Pamela Pierce reminded Patrick of a waif. Petite and pixie-like, she didn't look as if she'd be equal to the task of keeping her husband in line.

Patrick looked down at the very excellent roast beef and Yorkshire pudding Mrs. Barton served. He returned his attention to his guests. He appreciated Pamela's attempt to keep polite conversation going.

"Well, fish and chips constitute the working man's lunch. There was an attempt several years back to levy a tax on the meal served in pubs. The outcry against such lunacy, as you might imagine, came loud and boisterous."

"So the tax was defeated?" Twyla asked.

"Repealed, because it was passed, but didn't work. The pubs came up with an ingenious way to avoid it. They listed on their menus and charged for an order of salt—a tax exempt commodity—and with every order of salt, the patron received a free plate of fish and chips."

Alba's sisters laughed, her brothers-in-law shook their heads, and Alba said, "You made that up!"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. But I am a writer, and making things up is what I do."

"Odd that you think of yourself as a writer, rather than an agent for MI5," Dylan said.

"Do you have a numerical designation? Like double-oh-something?" Twyla asked.

“Sadly, no. But I do hold the rank of Colonel in the Royal Air Force and I *am* a member of the British Special Air Service.”

“Your country’s version of the Seals?” Twyla said.

Patrick saw it then, that light in her eyes he’d missed before. On first meeting it had been difficult for him to reconcile the woman he’d read about—a highly skilled and elusive thief—with the sleek blond-haired vixen he’d met just hours before.

He wondered why she’d decided to let him see past her persona.

“Most people don’t understand that, as your Seals are Naval operatives, but yes.”

“That makes you a dangerous man, doing dangerous things,” Pamela said.

He tilted his head, reading the concern behind that statement. “I’m set to retire from the service at the end of the year. The only dangerous thing I’ll be doing after that,” he paused long enough to shoot Alba an assessing look, “depends on how things work out for me on a personal level.”

He could tell he’d surprised both women, who understood him perfectly. The men didn’t catch his meaning, and that was probably a good thing.

Alba just played with the food on her plate and pretended not to have heard him at all.

Before he could make the mistake of saying something that might rile her, his cell phone rang. Since he knew who would be on the other end of the call, he decided to take it elsewhere.

“I beg your pardon.” He excused himself not only from the table, but the dining room, as he drew the device from his pocket.

He didn’t go far, just out into the hallway.

“Yes?”

“Bloody bugging hell, Jamieson!” Derek Storm, one of his contacts in Afghanistan, sounded strained. “You nailed it right, an ambush had been laid, waiting for that plane about to land. We gave chase, but one of the bastards blew himself all to hell before we could

get close. Toby caught a bit of it; he's not too bad off. But we lost two of the perimeter guards. The other bastards got away, but whatever they'd planned to do has been stopped. You're a frigging hero for having called that one. The plane was loaded with personnel."

Shit. "Do me a favor, mate, and keep my involvement to yourself." Patrick's mind worked fast. "I needed to test the information from a new informant and I don't want that person at risk." He'd given a plausible enough line, and fortunately Derek bought it and agreed.

Patrick ended the call and felt a shiver chase down his spine. He doubted Porter Thomas possessed such a long reach as to be able to arrange everything on his own halfway around the world and on a British air base.

He couldn't shake the feeling the man had help. Finding out who that help could be just moved to the top of his priority list.

Chapter 10

“I suspected as much, I must admit it. And now I know.”

Alba turned to give Twyla her full attention. Patrick took Dylan and Nicholas to the control room for his security system, leaving her alone with her sisters for the first time since they’d arrived.

“It’s so obvious. I wonder if that’s why our husbands had their backs up so high when they got here.” Pam asked.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re talking about?” Although Alba had a pretty good idea she knew the answer to that question. Her sisters used the same smarmy-sweet tone of voice that echoed back to their teen years, to Saturday nights spent experimenting with hairstyles and makeup and teasing each other about boys.

“First, let me congratulate you on your taste in men,” Twyla said. “Patrick is way superior to Todd whatever-the-hell-his-name, the one you were seeing the night I met my Nicholas. As a matter of fact, he’s superior to every other man you’ve dated—not that there’ve been very many.”

“*And* he’s an Earl,” Pamela said. “I married a Greek tycoon—all right, half Greek,” she corrected. “But you netted an *Earl*. Well done, little sister.”

“What do they call the wife of an Earl?” Twyla asked. “Besides lucky?”

“A Countess,” Pam replied.

“Hmm. Countess Alba Jamieson. Sounds swank.” Twyla gave her a big smile.

“Well if you want to be exact, she would be known as ‘Alba Jamieson, Countess of Avebury.’” Pam turned her head to give her just as wide a smile as their sister had.

Alba laughed. “You two are just *too* funny. I would like to point out that this Earl you seem to have married me off to just recently drugged and kidnapped me. Not to mention the fact that he walked away from me three years ago in the first place.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter, because here you are together again, and you’re still in love with him,” Twyla said.

“I’ll get over it.” Alba heard the edge in her voice and wondered what her sisters would make of it. In the next instant she realized they simply chose to ignore it completely.

“And he’s in love with you, too.” Pamela said. “Which makes it perfect.”

“No, he isn’t.” Alba had absolutely no doubt in her mind about that. “He can’t be in love with me. He doesn’t even know me.” No, that wasn’t the heart of it. “He doesn’t even *trust* me.”

She thought for certain that very true point would convince her sisters that Patrick couldn’t possibly love her. It didn’t.

“Yeah, funny how that works,” Twyla said. “You’d think trust before love, but nope. Not for any of us three, apparently. Voice of experience speaking, by the way.”

“He thinks I assassinated his best friend.” Alba hadn’t allowed herself to think about that. But now their conversation about Gareth Willoughby came back to her in vivid detail. In the face of his seemingly implacable attitude, there hadn’t been much she could say.

“*That* could be a problem,” Pamela said. She came over to Alba and put her arm around her. “If you’ll recall the road Dylan and I traveled, you’ll know that I understand exactly how you feel, too. He thought I’d seduced and then ripped off his brother.”

“I refuse to justify my life to anyone,” Alba said. Her tone sounded petulant even to her own ears, but she didn’t care. “Not even to Patrick Jamieson, Earl of Avebury.”

She wasn't certain what response she expected from her sisters. They loved each other as if born sisters of the blood. That love always demanded brutal honesty between them.

Pamela nodded. "Yes, of course you shouldn't. It was that way with me. And you, Twyla?"

"Yes. Before we settled things I experienced a moment or two when I felt compelled to explain everything to Nicholas. But then I understood he needed to accept me, warts and all *on faith*. I'm not sure why, but I just knew it *must* be that way in order for us to...I don't know, stick, I guess."

Alba folded her arms in front of her chest. She felt her right eyebrow rise and couldn't help it. "Are you two seriously suggesting something otherworldly is at play in our lives?"

"Go ahead and sneer. I don't blame you." Pamela frowned. "But I experienced a kind of vision - a flash of something eerily familiar, and you were both there with me, but you looked...different. And I saw three other women there as well. And looking at them caused fear and loathing in me."

"The flash I got showed me on a rocky headland," Twyla's voice sounded distracted, as if caught in the vision again. "I called out to a man who dove off his ship—not a modern yacht, mind you, but an ancient looking vessel—he dove straight off it and into the ocean and tried to swim to me. And I knew that man had been Nicholas, and he would be killed on the rocks. Gave me the willies, let me tell you."

"Well the only bizzarro moment I ever experienced happened on the day I arrived at the Gibbons' and met the two of you for the first time." Though that wasn't quite the whole truth. She did experience that sense of having met her destiny one other time. But as she'd only mentioned it to her sisters once a few years before, she could see no reason to bring that up now.

"And when you met your Patrick. As I recall, you mentioned that the day after I met Dylan and felt that same sense."

Well hell, she'd forgotten what a good memory Pamela possessed. Alba shook her head. "He's not *my* Patrick. I guess he never was, really. And that sense likely had probably just been my fanciful imagination running away with me."

"Oh, sure, like you went around all the time back then imagining meeting a man who would be your life's partner." Twyla immediately looked stricken as she realized what she'd said.

Since Alba knew the reason for her sister's immediate remorse, she went over and gave her a hug. "It's all right." She'd never been able to fool these women who loved her beyond measure and without conditions. She guessed she should be honest, with them and herself. "And you're right, the both of you. I never could have imagined myself with a man before Patrick came into my life. And I certainly haven't, since."

"Look, all we're saying is, don't close and lock any doors. Let yourself go with what feels right, and the past, and whatever else stands unresolved between you, be damned."

She liked their advice better than what her brothers-in-law offered, Alba thought. She just didn't know if she could take it, even if those words were the ones she'd most wanted to hear.

* * * *

"Your entire set up looks top-of-the-line."

Patrick held his smile. Nicholas Coultrain hadn't sounded too happy about that admission. Not that he could blame the man. Patrick never had a sister, but over the last few hours, because he couldn't help himself, he'd imagined how he might have felt being in these men's shoes. Walking in and finding the man who kidnapped their sister apparently on the verge of ravishing her.

Patrick knew that it was only as a testament of their love for Alba that he still had his life and all parts still functioned.

“Yes, but nothing is foolproof,” he said now. “I’m glad to have the two of you here. Especially since we don’t really know what we’re up against.”

“Care to share that phone call you received during dinner?” Dylan wore the look of a man who wouldn’t be put off.

“I’d called a friend of mine earlier, a Colonel assigned to a unit in Afghanistan. Gave him a heads-up about a RAF transport plane about to be landing. I told him it might be the target of insurgents.”

“And was it?” Nicholas asked.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Any casualties?” Dylan asked.

“Two. That’s why I didn’t want to tell Alba. She finds out two soldiers lost their lives and she’ll beat herself up over it. The fact is, the body count would have been a hell of a lot higher if they hadn’t been warned.”

“Because those insurgents weren’t going to wait to see if Alba was on the plane, or not. Given the means to breach your security they’d decided to make it count.” Nicholas displayed a good grasp of the situation.

“That’s exactly right. And I’ll wager whoever set that breach up knew it.”

“You’re going to have to tell her,” Dylan said. He raised his hand when Patrick opened his mouth. “None of these three women we’ve gotten ourselves tangled up with are exactly what you’d call fragile. In this instance, Alba’s at the heart of this intrigue. She has a right to know what happened.”

Damn it, Pierce was right. “Yes, all right. In the meantime, this incident has convinced me that the stakes are far too high for us to trust any regular channels. I’ve a couple of contacts I can get information from, but no one outside this building knows that Alba is here with me. And no one is going to.”

“I’ve taken the precaution of having my London townhouse staff sent to Greece for an impromptu vacation. They’re in the air right

now, as a matter of fact. It occurred to me that in the course of natural events, tongues would wag, and word of her having come—and then disappeared—would make the rounds.”

Nicholas laughed. “You’re going to be voted employer of the year and your neighbors are going to hate your guts.”

“No help for it. I didn’t realize until Alba went missing how potentially deadly the situation is,” Pierce said.

“I would never have hurt her,” Patrick said the same to Alba and he felt moved to repeat that pledge to her brothers-in-law.

“Even if you had been ordered to?” Nicholas asked.

There was the steel again, that sharp edge he’d seen the moment he’d laid eyes on Coultrain.

“I’ve never taken those kinds of assignments—not ever. And if I discovered a kill order had been issued on Alba, I’d have moved heaven and earth to get her away from England, to keep her safe.”

Coultrain looked as if he wanted to say more, but Dylan clapped him on the shoulder.

“Let’s get back to the women,” Dylan said. “It’s been a long day. I’d like a cup of tea, and then some sleep.”

“You’re satisfied with my security arrangements, then?”

“I am. But I reserve the right to call in some reinforcements of my own, should the need arise.”

“If the need arises, I’m counting on you flying us the hell out of here—or barring that, pulling whatever strings your considerable influence has tied to it.” Patrick heard his own words and realized that at some point during the evening, he’d made a decision.

“That’s a deal,” Dylan said.

Patrick nodded, and knew his resolve had just been set in stone. He’d left the only woman he’d ever loved once, for Queen and country.

He would never do so again.

* * * *

“Is that one of my shirts you’re wearing?”

Alba turned, the sound of Patrick’s voice and the closing of the bedroom door working together to send shivers down her spine.

“My sisters, it seems, forgot to pack pajamas for me. Imagine that.”

“Have I mentioned that I really like your sisters?”

The tension that coiled in the pit of her belly from the instant she’d stepped into Patrick’s bedroom simply unwound, released by her own laughter.

“You would.”

“Well, as it happens, I like their husbands, too.”

Alba cocked her head to the side, took in the almost playful expression on his face. “Even though they very nearly beat you senseless?”

“Even though,” he said.

His electric blue eyes must have some mystic power. Looking into them simply melted her insides. He came toward her, slowly, not warily or cagily as before, but more as if relishing every step that brought him closer, then closer still until a bare inch of space separated them.

“I can hardly blame them for wanting to go to the mat to protect you. The fact is, I feel the same way.”

He’d gotten too close. *Physically or emotionally?* Alba pushed away the question. Knee-jerk, she knew, but she did the only thing she could do. She reached for a defensive shield. Any shield, any guise would do. “That’s not the impression—”

“I love you, Alba.”

“Patrick, you don’t—”

“I don’t what? Know you? Trust you? Doesn’t seem to matter one damn bit. I love you. And you love me, too. You admitted it back in the cottage.”

He reached out, grabbed her shoulders, drew her closer, so close the heat from his body warmed her inside and out.

Alba knew probably a dozen different self-defense moves. She could pin him to the ground in seconds, flat. But with the heat of him, the scent and the feel of him filling her, any will she might have to do so evaporated.

“We love each other.” His gaze took in the whole of her before focusing on her eyes once more. “We fell in love with each other on that moon-washed beach the first night we met more than two years ago, and we’ve never stopped loving each other. Not either of us. Tell me.” His shake, fuelled by the force of passion long denied, jarred her. The trembling she felt in his hands touched her emotions. “Tell me now. You’ve never stopped loving me, have you?”

The desperation in his tone undid her completely. Patrick spoke the truth. Nothing else really mattered but this.

“No. No, I’ve never stopped loving you.”

“My Alba.”

Alba raised herself up to meet his kiss. The flavor of him thrilled her, took her back, took her away. He belonged to her, this man whose memory haunted her nights and shadowed her days. He belonged to her and damn all the consequences.

She belonged to him, too. Heart and mind, body and soul. For good or for bad, every bit of her belonged to Patrick Jamieson. Even the knowledge that in the end he might never be able to accept her for the woman she’d become, might even turn from her, couldn’t change the reality of her emotions. Later, some day in the future, he would very likely walk away from her and shatter her heart. That didn’t seem to matter, either.

For now she had him, and by God she would enjoy him.

“Since you’re wearing my shirt, I don’t have to apologize,” his words whispered moistly against her neck.

“Apologize? For what?” she asked.

“This.”

Alba gasped as Patrick tore open the garment, sending buttons pinging against the floor, to roll under the bed. Cooler air caressed her naked flesh.

And then his hands did.

Up and down, cupping and kneading her breasts, his fingers latched onto her nipples, pulled and squeezed as his tongue ravished her mouth.

She opened wider for him, raised up closer to him, offering him more, offering him everything. Her body tingled everywhere he touched, her blood heated with each sweeping brush of his hand. When he wrapped his arms around her, lifted her, she wound her legs around his waist.

The mattress received her, held her for the thrusting of his hips. The ridge of his cock, covered with cloth and zipper, found her pussy wet and ready. She dampened his trousers, the way he dampened her soul.

“Please. I want you inside me.” Alba didn’t care if she begged, as long as her begging gave her what she needed. “I need you inside me so I can be whole again. *Patrick.*”

“There’s been no one else.” Patrick’s lips left hers, bussed the flesh of her neck, until he found the hard little nub of her nipple. His teeth nipped, his tongue soothed, his hot voracious mouth drew the pebbled flesh inside. “I couldn’t take my pleasure in any other woman, because you were there, right there in my heart the whole time we were apart. You’re in my soul.”

“Me, neither. No one has been inside me since you. I dated...but I couldn’t. Only you. Patrick, *only* you.”

“Then let me *be* inside you.”

His breath heated her face as he smoothed her hair back, then cupped her cheeks. “Let me be naked in you, give you my seed.”

There were dozens of reasons why Alba should say no. Too much between them remained unsettled. Logic demanded cooler heads, and caution.

Logic could go to hell. “Yes. Come inside me. Give me your child.”

His lips took hers once more, his tongue thrusting deep into her mouth. She returned his kiss, feeling the movement of his hand against her moist folds as he opened his pants, shoved them down and out of the way.

His cock felt so hot, so hard against her. He brushed the tip across her clit, and she began to come even as he thrust hard and deep inside of her. She felt him pull back and fought to keep him in, keep him deep. His second surge brought him all the way home, the head of his erection nudging her cervix, the gate to her womb.

“*Oh, God.*” Alba didn’t know if those words formed a prayer or words of thanksgiving. Patrick began to take her hard and fast, his own inarticulate curse telling her he was as enraptured as she.

“Mine!” he swooped his hand under her bottom and pulled her into him as he held himself deep and began to come.

The sensation of the hot ejaculation, the knowledge that they could at that very moment be creating a life together pushed her over the edge.

“I love you.”

Even as the rapture consumed her, his words found a home in her heart.

Chapter 11

Not a dream this time, but real flesh and blood. How many times had he awakened from his dreams, believing her here, only to find his bed as empty as his life?

Patrick looked down at Alba, snuggled against his right side. He kissed the top of her head, pulled her just a tiny bit closer.

The answer to that self-imposed question was too many times to count. And now that he had her here, he'd never let her go.

They needed to build bridges between them. He'd start with the simple things—some of the questions and answers they should have shared the last time, the innocuous getting-to-know-you things most couples explored *before* diving between the sheets.

He wouldn't think of the big issues between them. At least, not yet.

"Tell me about your sisters." That seemed a good place to start. He liked both Twyla and Pamela, two women completely different from his Alba. "When did you meet them?"

"When we were eleven. They saved me—they and the Gibbons."

"Your foster family?"

"Yes."

Her voice softened just a little, telling him these parents who'd taken her in had been good people.

"The three of us arrived there the same day," she continued. "And it felt like we'd known each other all our lives. This sense of belonging immediately bonded us together. Before the first month ended, we vowed that we would always be sisters, no matter what."

“That’s the way it felt for me, the day you and I met. It felt as if we belonged together from that first moment,” Patrick said.

“Yes. I felt it, too.”

Her answer came slower, and he guessed he’d surprised her with his admission. “I didn’t want to leave you,” he said. “Nothing short of the most urgent summons could have compelled me to leave you.”

She remained silent, and he took her silence for interest. *If she didn’t want me to continue she’d change the subject.* “I’d been called home, an emergency situation, and I had no choice. But I thought that whatever the assignment might be, I could deal with it quickly. I would deal with it and be back within a couple of days. Weeks, at the most. Only, it didn’t work out that way.”

She moved then, raised herself up and looked down at him. Her hand brushed his shoulder and the puckered flesh of a bullet wound.

“Is that when you got this?”

“What I thought was going to be a short assignment turned into a year in country—Iraq. I spent a year playing cat and mouse, gathering intel, avoiding insurgents. Then one day, my luck ran out. They thought they’d killed me, and so they left me where I fell. If some villagers hadn’t come by when they did, I would have died.”

“I really am glad you didn’t.”

He thought to tell her about the reports he’d received, and her reaction to his apparent desertion. Then what she’d said earlier, about her sisters and her foster family echoed in his thoughts. *They saved me.* An odd choice of words, and one that sent a shiver over his skin. Patrick sensed a deeper wound in Alba their first few days together in the Caribbean. But under the spell of the sand and sea and tropical breezes, it had been easy for him to ignore that wound. Especially easy, since they melted into each other almost from their first moment and spent a great deal of their time together naked and making love.

A part of him didn’t want to ask, but he needed to know her completely. He needed to fill those voids she believed existed between them.

“You said they saved you—your sisters and your foster family. Saved you from what?”

He thought then that he might have surprised her for the second time in just a few minutes. He wrapped his arms snugly around her, so of course he felt the tension that came over her. He knew her well enough to understand the involuntary reaction annoyed her, and releasing her tension took effort and focus.

“Oh, just from the horror of my early life. My father died before I was born. I think I told you that. The fuller truth is he left my mother and then died. I didn’t find out until much, much later that he hadn’t even known I’d been conceived. My mother...” her voice trailed off. “I suppose I should consider myself lucky that she carried me to term instead of aborting me. I’m not really sure why she did that, since she didn’t have any interest whatsoever in being a mother. But then, when I was around eight, she decided that I could be useful after all. An asset to be bartered in exchange for the drugs she needed.”

“My God.”

His blood chilled. Understanding washed over him, and he could do nothing but hold her closer, run his hands up and down her arms.

“You were the first man I’d ever allowed to touch me. I know I wasn’t a virgin, but I—”

“That’s not true.”

Years of living life on the edge, of needing to choose words and demeanors wisely served him well now. Though he’d never found it more difficult to push aside rage, for her he gathered every ounce of tenderness, allowed it to be the only emotion to touch her.

“I was the first man you *chose* to share yourself with. So you were very much a virgin, my Alba. I just wish I’d known. I’d have taken greater care with you, made your first time an even better experience for you.”

“If our first time had been any better I might have died of bliss.”

He read the truth of her words in her eyes, and he marveled, now that he knew some of her history, that she'd let him near her at all. That sense of belonging together, of destiny, rose up anew.

No other explanation fit as to why him, and no other. They'd been made for each other.

"I love you." He didn't think he could ever tell her enough, and though he knew she didn't quite fully believe in or trust in his love, he would say it again and again until she did. "I love you, Alba."

She reached up, brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. And she looked at him as if trying to see beneath the surface. That sort of close scrutiny he'd never been comfortable with, but from her it felt good, it felt right.

"Maybe you do," she said softly.

It was a beginning. Patrick lowered his head, ran his tongue lightly along the seam of her lips. When she opened to him, he drank deeply. As her flavor fed him, he allowed that knowledge to bolster him. She was giving him a chance, and he'd make the most of it.

* * * *

Porter Thomas surveyed those closest to him at Kennedy Airport. This late at night, only people traveling tended to clog the concourse, and those traveling often looked rumpled, weary, were not particularly brilliant conversationalists, or expected to be.

He joined the shortest queue and when it came his turn he presented his documents at the check-in desk. From the moment he'd opened his secure email account this evening to this moment, waiting to have his passport checked and his boarding pass issued, exactly six hours, ten minutes had passed.

He'd used the special protocols he employed as a director of covert operations when he needed to get an operative on the next flight out without raising security flags. Despite the 911 Commission's report, the various arms of the American security

network did *not* always cooperate. There were times when operatives needed to be deployed without any other branch of the Intelligence Service being the wiser.

Bureaucratic paranoia made his personal subterfuge all that much easier.

Idiots.

When the airline official checked his ticket, she would see it had been purchased two months ago, by Mr. Peter Townsend of London, England.

He felt confident that no one he knew would recognize him. He'd dyed his hair black, and affixed a very thin moustache. With the help of some state-of-the-art prosthetics, he'd padded his face and body so that he looked not only a decade older, but quite a bit heavier.

"Going home, Mr. Townsend?"

"Quite." He could manage a few words, a few sentences, in a passable English accent. But he decided that Peter Townsend could be a bit of a snob, unwilling to engage in meaningless conversation with service personnel.

The woman behind the counter got the message, of course.

"Please place your bag on the scale."

His bag had been stored in his closet, packed with everything a man might need for a month-long stay. There'd been no way to pack any kind of weapon, but he did have plenty of cash on him, and a credit card in his alias.

He'd made these contingency plans more than a decade before, refreshing them from time to time, never truly believing they'd be necessary. Standard operating procedure that he followed, to the letter.

He'd always been behind the scenes and less likely than one of his agents to be a target. But then he'd gone rogue, and he'd been very glad of the training and the preparations, and the S. O. P.

The email he'd received earlier shocked him, but he could admit to himself now that, in the back of his mind, he'd known this might

happen. As the warning came from his liaison with the Zoltanas, he'd heeded it immediately.

Thomas' final destination in London would be a flat he'd acquired, sight unseen, in an undistinguished part of the city.

Anyone who knew him, who would hunt him, would never expect him to leave the United States. They'd expect him to either go to his cabin in the Poconos, or go to his childhood home—an affluent suburb of Los Angeles. He'd cultivated the façade of hating international travel and international destinations.

He had contacts in London, of course, should he need them. He'd have to make that decision soon. And he'd have to use the internet to ferret out who'd put a contract on his head.

He stepped into the restricted concourse, submitted to the standard security scans, and removed his shoes. All the while he kept his expression bland, maybe even a little bored.

If he made it onto the plane he could be reasonably certain he'd gotten away clean. Thank God it was the weekend, and no one would expect to see him in the office until Monday.

By the time his employer noticed him missing, he'd be tucked away in his warren. He could be reasonably certain it hadn't been Uncle Sam who'd put a price on his head. Why contract out the work when they had so many fine sharpshooters in house?

No, his employer would assume he'd been snatched, or gone to ground, and that was all for the good. He could monitor their progress as they tracked down the threat to him. Given their resources and patriotic fervor, once they got word of a price being put on his head, they'd assign agents. He should have no difficulty keeping himself abreast of whatever updates were filed.

The only thing he really worried about was that, in investigating, they might discover his moonlighting. He thought he'd been very careful, but discovery had always been a possibility.

All Porter Thomas could do for the moment was get to London and stay low.

* * * *

“Mr. Hargreaves is on the phone, Milord.”

“Thank you, Parsons.”

They’d nearly finished breakfast. Mrs. Barton just brought in a fresh pot of coffee, and Pamela was in the process of pouring out.

The majordomo appeared at the door of the dining room, and Alba wondered if the man was part specter since he moved so silently. She met his gaze without blinking. Alba wasn’t altogether certain what he thought of her, or why that should matter, but she sensed disapproval from him.

At least the housekeeper seemed to like her.

The touch of Patrick’s hand on her arm drew her attention but she kept Parsons in her peripheral vision, relaxing when the man left the room.

“He disapproves of me, too. I’m supposed to be married, with the heir and the spare in knickers by now.”

The expression struck Alba’s funny bone and she snickered. “Does he ever smile?”

“I don’t know. There’s never been a Mrs. Parsons. Hmm, come to think of it, I should perhaps point out his lack of issue. Since he is fond of reminding me that there has been a Parsons in service at Jamieson Hall ever since the first Earl of Avebury.”

“If you do, let me be a fly on the wall, please.”

“I will. Now I’ll go take that call and ask Jonathan if he’s heard any word of your whereabouts.”

Alba watched him leave, and as she returned her attention to her cup caught Nicholas staring at her.

“Did I grow an extra nose, or something?”

“No, you grew something worse. A boyfriend.”

The expression struck her as so ludicrous she laughed. “You should talk. You’re sleeping with my sister.”

He grinned, fast and fun, and Alba could see what had drawn Twyla to the handsome devil in the first place.

“‘Boyfriend’ sounds so...adolescent,” Pamela complained. “Why don’t you just call him her lover?”

“Or her mate?” Twyla offered.

“I never knew the two of you enjoyed torturing your husbands, so,” Alba said.

Her sisters grinned while their husbands both endured the teasing stoically. Alba thought to say something more, but Patrick returned and he didn’t look happy.

“Jonathan reported a piece of disturbing news. It seems Porter Thomas is missing.”

“Missing?”

“He reports that Homeland tried to contact him late Friday night, and couldn’t find him. A search is underway. Jonathan wondered if *you* hadn’t somehow laid a trap for the man. I’m afraid I agreed that it could be a possibility. He said he’ll let me know of any further developments.”

Alba looked at Patrick for a long moment, taking in the way his eyes seemed to be unfocused, and followed his line of thought with no trouble.

“You think he’s coming to England, don’t you?”

“Yes. If he believes you made it here, and it’s crucial to his own personal agenda that you’re dead, and if he thinks we don’t realize you’re here...yes, I believe he will come here and try to kill you.”

“He’d have to find her first. And maybe the first place he’d look is the townhouse,” Nicholas said.

“If he’s smart, that’s exactly where he’d go,” Dylan said.

Alba took in the calculating expressions on the faces of the men, then looked at her sisters.

“Maybe *we* can lay a trap of our own,” Pamela said.

Alba nodded her head. “We could do that. It would have to be a baited trap, of course. And there’s only one way to do that.”

“Fuck.”

Patrick’s uncharacteristic curse told Alba he didn’t like that idea, and the scowls on her brothers-in-law’s faces underscored the sentiment. But she also knew Patrick respected the professional in her enough to know she’d spoken the truth.

Finding Porter Thomas wouldn’t be enough. They’d have to get the man to incriminate himself, something he’d likely only do if he believed he was about to kill his only witness.

Chapter 12

Patrick never minded giving way to those who outclassed him. In this case, he could only watch in awe as Twyla's fingers danced across the keys of her laptop. She'd installed a program that allowed her to access the Internet piggybacking on another signal. Now the printer beside her began to hum, printing off airline passenger manifests for flights originating in the Eastern part of the United States, landing in Great Britain for the last forty-eight hours—information she obtained by hacking.

Patrick could have gotten the lists through legitimate means, but anyone who cared to check would know he had done so. He'd rather no one be privy to the fact that he was in full investigative mode. He was supposed to be working on his current manuscript and waiting for Jonathan to alert him to Alba's arrival in country.

As well, the computer he used for the Internet made up part of the national security grid, and if they wanted to, his bosses could remotely see everything he'd done and everything he had on the hard drive. So not only could he not use it to access the information they needed, he couldn't even use it to organize that information once they had it.

Dylan scooped the pages, handing them over to Patrick.

"I doubt he'd be stupid enough to come over on his own passport," Patrick said as he scanned the sheets. "So we'll be looking for things like similar ages, gender, that sort of thing."

"He's arrogant, but not stupid," Alba agreed. "I guess we can eliminate the obvious ones—females and anyone under thirty?"

“Yes, then we’ll feed the rest back in here after I disengage this ISP and find another. I can at least sort them, see if anything obvious comes up.”

“We’ll look for hotel reservations, short-term rentals, to begin with,” Patrick said. “That will give us someplace to start.”

Perhaps because he had become so in tune with Alba he noticed her distraction. He gave her his attention.

“I have a flat in Paris,” she said the words slowly. He could tell her mind sifted through all the knowledge gained from more than a decade on the job, using that to try and get into Thomas’ head.

Neither Dylan nor Nicholas caught her meaning, but Patrick understood her instantly.

“That’s standard operating procedure for your organization, isn’t it? To set up a bolt hole and keep it...for how long?”

“Two years, along with a separate persona which may or may not be replaced from time to time. Of course, being the untrusting sort, I had a *third* identity all set up that no one knew about which I ended up using to get myself out of New York. I’m betting Thomas has the same safety net as the rest of his department. He’d have seen them in the same light as a fringe benefit. He wouldn’t have been able to resist having that kind of a setup, and no one above him would think anything of it. They would likely assume it to be an extra resource kept on hand in case one of his operatives had an emergency.”

Patrick didn’t know the man as well as Alba did, but everything she’d just said fit with what he’d assessed.

“So we skip hotels, boarding houses?” Dylan said.

“Yes. The idea is to hide in plain sight, so he’d have someplace in a large urban center. It won’t be a house, either. Over here, people notice when a house has no one living in it. But a flat? You can get away having a flat empty and no one the wiser. The landlord wouldn’t care as long as the rent is paid on time. Mine is paid annually, and is in a building near the Champs Elysées.”

“And anyone who gets curious would just figure it’s a getaway place for some celeb or busy executive,” Nicholas said. “Or a love nest for a man and his mistress, which would explain its lack of use and would barely even raise an eyebrow. Clever.”

“And there’d be a bank account, too,” Alba said. “Something that has seen only deposits, and likely just one every two or three months, just to keep it active. That, too, would be emptied every two years, and then reestablished in a different branch of a different bank.”

“If we initiate duplicate searches, looking for that information, and put everything together I’d be willing to bet we only get a few matches. And Thomas will be one of them,” Patrick said.

“Yes, I think so. The tedious part will be simply searching and comparing.”

“Why not hack into the NSA computer and see what’s there in Thomas’ file?” Dylan asked.

“Anymore, that’s like opening a triggered bomb,” Twyla, clearly the computer expert among them, said. “In very recent times, the mainframes of most of the U.S. and British security agencies have acquired a nifty new tracer program, one I haven’t been able to duplicate or break. We go in, it follows us home. Not a good idea.”

“Makes sense,” Dylan said.

“Your tax dollars really at work,” Nicholas confirmed.

“Well then, that makes the arrangements I’ve made all that much more necessary. I’ve arranged to have a few more laptops delivered,” Dylan said. “That way we can all be searching for the bastard.” Then he shook his head and smiled. “Nicholas has always told me that investigation is ninety-nine percent boring grunt work. I think I finally believe him.”

Patrick clapped his hand on Dylan’s shoulder. “Cheer up. It could be worse. We could be trying to do all this from some corner of the world that doesn’t even have electricity or indoor bathrooms.”

“That sounded like the voice of experience,” Dylan said.

“It was.”

* * * *

Alba looked up from the laptop perched on the small desk adjacent to Patrick's and watched the man she loved lost in his work. She imagined that when he was here in his office writing, he would be just as absorbed. She took a moment to stretch the kinks out of her back.

Dylan brought in not just enough laptops for everyone, but a server to connect them all. They were nearly ready to have all their data tossed together and sorted. She hoped that something solid came out, because she'd prefer knowing where their quarry might be hiding as opposed to walking around blind trying to find him.

"You seem very absorbed," she said to Patrick.

"Mmm. I went off on a tangent."

She waited, knowing he'd look up and talk when he got to a point where he could. She didn't have to wait long.

"It occurred to me that Thomas must have money stashed somewhere, and likely some under his real name. He's been working for himself for some time, and probably you're not the only assassin he's used to his own advantage, so he may have quite a pile of cash accumulated. He'd have to hide most of the money, but I'm willing to bet he's got some stashed that he can access, because who wants to sit on a fortune for years and not have some fun right *now*? He struck me as the sort who'd want some to play with."

Alba heard everything he said but her mind latched onto his calling her an assassin. She tried not to let his words wound her. She very nearly opened her mouth to say something, but then a wave of will rose up, washing away that urge.

Damned if she would explain herself to this man!

She came back to the moment to see Patrick watching her, a guarded expression on his face.

"I guess it's the nine hundred pound elephant in the room with us, your profession. It's there, even though we've both been ignoring it. That doesn't mean I don't love you, Alba."

It felt more than a little unnerving, the ease with which he could get into her head. She'd been described as enigmatic by those few she'd worked with and allowed marginally close. She felt the need to protect herself against this sort of intimacy, an intimacy far more intrusive than the sharing of bodies. "I know you believe that."

Patrick opened his mouth to speak, but she forestalled him by getting to her feet. "Don't." She didn't care if it looked as if she was running scared. This man could talk her into, or out of, just about anything. She didn't want him to talk her out of this stance she'd taken, this line in the sand she'd drawn.

He would have to accept all of her, and be okay with that, or he would have her not at all.

"I think I'll take a walk. I need some fresh air."

Did she want him to follow her? She didn't know for certain. All she did know was that she needed to get away, get outside. She needed for one damn bit of time to feel free of walls and people and stress.

She needed to *feel* it even if it was only an illusion.

* * * *

Patrick watched her go and it was all he could do not to throw something at the wall just for the satisfaction of watching it shatter.

He was a peer of the realm and such behavioral anomalies had been trained out of him years ago.

"Oh, bugger it." He picked up his tea mug and heaved it hard. And looked up into the sudden, wraith-like presence of Parsons as the ceramic shattered against the paneling.

"Was the tea not to your liking, Milord?"

"The tea tasted fine."

“Shall I bring more? In another mug, of course, since we wouldn’t want the two-century-old Wedgewood lodged into the paneling, would we, sir?”

Sometimes having Parsons make his somewhat snide observations felt just like having his grandmother Jamieson peering over her glasses and down her nose at him.

“Bugger the Wedgewood.”

That shut his majordomo up.

“Mrs. Barton wanted to know, sir, if your guests would be staying for dinner this evening?”

Patrick felt his right eyebrow rise in autocratic ire and couldn’t help the gesture.

“My guests will be staying indefinitely,” he said in as precise a lord-of-the-manor tone as he could manage. “And if I have my way, one will be staying, period.” Patrick wondered if he imagined the look of disappointment on Parson’s face. What he’d told Alba—that the servant didn’t even fully approve of *him*—had been true enough, and something he’d grown up with and learned to live with.

However, if his majordomo was going to try and impose that same attitude on Alba, then Patrick thought it might be time for Jamieson Hall to have a new head of staff.

“Very well, Milord. I’ll see to that tea, now.”

Parsons’ bow seemed excessively stiff and formal, a subtle message that while Patrick as Earl of Avebury may give the orders, he didn’t necessarily have the last word.

He forced his attention back to his computer screen, tried to find the threads of the trail he’d been following.

The hurt on Alba’s face and her subsequent latest attempt to put distance between them grated on his conscience and his nerves.

Would it have hurt you to watch your mouth, old man? They needed time, the two of them, to work through the minefield of their relationship. Unfortunately, time wasn’t in great supply. But if he didn’t make some headway with her soon, they’d have unraveled this

mess, and she'd be on her way out of his life before he knew what hit him.

"Well, bugger it." He surged to his feet, his attention on the glass door leading outside to the gardens, the very door Alba exited just a few minutes before.

His grandmother would definitely disapprove of the number of times he'd used that 'vulgar phrase' in the last couple of days. Patrick cast one glance toward the door of his office, and then looked out toward the direction Alba went.

He didn't let himself think, he just followed her. He cast his eyes heavenward as he stepped out from under the eaves. Earlier, he'd thought they would be in for a rainstorm. Now, however, the skies had cleared and warm autumn sunshine bathed the lawns and woods.

He wasn't a mind reader by any stretch of the imagination, but he thought he was beginning to know his Alba quite well despite her belief to the contrary.

He saw no sign of her, and the grass appeared dry enough that no trail was visible. Patrick didn't need a trail, he felt pretty certain he knew where the woman had gone. She'd go to the crofter's cottage, certain he'd never think to look for her there.

Hands in his pockets, he walked a route so familiar to him he thought he just might be able to do so in his sleep. He'd trod this particular path more times in the last few days than in the last few years before.

He'd gotten out of the habit of going for long walks on his estate, preferring instead the more antiseptic atmosphere of the gym for his exercise.

He needed to amend that. Smelling the musty scent of earth, listening to the distant twitter of birds, Patrick understood that avoiding this part of his life was like denying an entire facet of his personality. As a boy, watched and fussed over by his autocratic grandmother nearly every minute of his day, he'd found freedom and refuge in these fields and woods.

He entered the small stand of trees that separated the lawn of the manor house from the rolling fields, the trees a mixture of very old and reasonably young, of conifer and deciduous. Deer and boar no longer lived within the confines of his property, but small creatures—squirrels and rabbits and other rodents—did.

“Up here. *Hurry.*”

Alba’s whisper echoed of urgency. Patrick reacted instantly, his well-trained instincts kicking in even as he leapt for the lowest branch of the stately maple he’d just walked under.

The tree had grown sturdy and wonderfully full over many years, tall and straight with branches just far enough apart to make climbing a bit of a challenge.

He hadn’t climbed a tree in the last decade, but his woman sat perched another ten feet above him and he found he remembered the skill.

Patrick straddled the branch on the opposite side of the tree from her and followed her gaze.

From this angle, he could see the fountain in his circular driveway, and could almost see the front door. Three nondescript sedans had pulled up in front of the manor. Only one man was visible, and he stood almost at attention by the front end of the lead car, his gaze sweeping the area with military-like precision.

A red beret perched on his head and an assault rifle filled his hands.

“How the hell did they get on the property without the alarms sounding?” he asked, his voice pitched low. His laneway spanned nearly a quarter mile. The alarms should have shrieked and he should have heard them.

“That’s one question. Who they are is another.”

“British Special Forces,” Patrick said.

“Is my family in danger?”

He could see her panic in her eyes. “No, they’ll only be questioned. Dylan strikes me as the kind of man who will make damn sure they’ll be left alone as quickly as possible.”

“I don’t think there’s any doubt they’ve come for me. When you go back, give me a few minutes. I think I can make a clean getaway. If your security grid is still disabled, that is.”

“I’m not leaving you to fend for yourself, darling. I think your family will stall them well enough. And the grid doesn’t really matter.”

“Then please tell me you have some medieval escape tunnel hidden nearby.”

“I do, but I have a feeling that’s the first place they’ll look. Come on. Those men won’t stay inside for long. Once they realize we’re not in any of the thirty rooms, they’ll come outside looking for us.”

It was harder climbing down than up, but Patrick managed it quickly and mostly silently. Alba seemed to have no difficulty whatsoever. As she dangled above him, he caught sight of her ankle holster.

He could only wish he had thought to arm himself this morning, too. Taking her hand, he led her, in a sprint, across the small meadow. Beyond the open grass the trees stretched out for miles.

Patrick was very glad it hadn’t rained. They could look forward to a bit of a hike ahead of them before they could get to more modern transportation.

Chapter 13

The soldiers stormed into the library like the commandos they were and for one horrible instant Dylan thought they would all be shot. If Nicholas hadn't happened to be near the front of the house and seen the cars pulling up, they might have been caught red-handed doing something they shouldn't have been doing.

Instead, he and his family had just long enough to dump their computer files. *God Bless Twyla and that instant kill command she'd added to the program.* Dylan closed his laptop and pulled a book from the library shelf, and managed to grab a seat on one of the settees. When the men burst into the room, assault weapons at the ready, he didn't have to feign his shocked fear.

"Hands in sight!" The order, barked, made everyone in the room jump.

"We don't have any money or jewelry," Pamela said quickly. Dylan hoped to hell the tremor in her voice was for show. He felt particularly violent toward anyone who frightened his wife. Of course, now was *not* the time for his warrior-self to emerge.

"Where is she?" the commando who seemed to be in charge asked. This one wore an insignia on the sleeve of his uniform identifying him as a Captain.

"Where is who?" Dylan asked.

"Alba Morel. She's a known terrorist and we have reason to believe she's here."

Dylan turned to look at his wife.

"Darling, you didn't tell me your sister had become a terrorist."

“That’s because she’s not. She’s an employee of the United States government.” Then Pamela turned and gave the man in charge a very frosty stare. “And I have no idea where she is at the moment.”

The officer obviously didn’t believe Pamela.

Two more men entered the library, Enfield L85A1 rifles at the ready. Dylan recognized the hardware and knew it to be the weapon of choice of the British Special Forces. Someone had pulled out all the stops to find Alba. And someone obviously tipped them off.

The captain marched over to the desk where Twyla sat, hands raised like the rest of them, a look of wide-eyed incredulity on her face. The captain pointed his rifle toward the ceiling and used his other hand to spin her laptop around. He stared at the screen for a long moment.

“So sue me. I like to play solitaire.” Twyla’s voice held just a note of defensiveness.

The officer didn’t look amused. He motioned for her to get up from the desk and sit with the rest of them in the middle of the room. The two settees faced each other by the fireplace and sat close enough together, Dylan imagined, so as to make guarding them there easier. A few moments later a very upset Mrs. Barton was ushered into the room by a third soldier. Twyla moved over, making room for the poor woman.

Dylan wondered where Patrick and Alba had gone. Nicholas had been looking for them when he’d spotted the sedans barreling down the lane and called out his warning.

He also wondered where Parsons disappeared to.

“Do you mind if we put our hands down? I’m getting a cramp.”

Dylan bit the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing. Twyla’s blond-haired blue-eyed vixen performance looked too contrived to believe, but clearly the soldiers didn’t have a problem taking her at face value.

“Keep them where we can see them,” the Captain ordered. Then he motioned for one of the men to accompany him. “You two stay here.” He said to the other men, “Keep your eye on them.”

Dylan could hear nothing, but imagined they searched the entire manor. Long minutes passed, but none of them said a word. Twyla slipped her arm around Mrs. Barton. The poor older woman was shaking like a leaf. Beside him, Pamela reached for his hand. The soldier closest to them frowned, but said nothing. At least the young man no longer aimed his rifle at them.

“Right, where are they?” The captain reentered the library, and he did not look like a happy man.

“Where are who?” Dylan asked.

“Not only is Ms. Morel missing, but so is Colonel Jamieson.”

“What makes you think that my sister was even here?” Pamela asked.

“We received a tip.”

“Oh, let me guess. An anonymous one, right?” Nicholas said.

Another soldier came into the library. “We checked the tunnel, sir. There’s no sign anyone’s been in there. Graves and Beckett are following it through just to be certain.”

Because the captain seemed as if he was about to lose what little of his cool he had left, Dylan decided they’d given Alba and Patrick—wherever the hell they’d gone—enough of a head start. This situation, unless disarmed, had the potential of going south very, *very* quickly. “Before you do anything rash, perhaps you’d better make a phone call. I’ve a number you can dial.”

* * * *

Patrick held up his hand and Alba froze, every sense she possessed alert, ready. They’d reached the edge of the woods, and had been walking parallel to the road and just within the cover of trees for

more than an hour. She didn't need to check her watch to know it was late afternoon.

The sun had been playing peek-a-boo through thickening clouds, and a definite sense of rain permeated the air.

Alba crouched down following Patrick's unspoken command, and silently moved so she could be beside him and looking at what snagged his attention.

A car had been pulled off the road, parked under a low hanging Yew.

Patrick looked at her with one eyebrow raised, and Alba shrugged. Cautiously, they moved closer to the stopped car, then, leaving the cover of the woods, ran toward it.

No keys in the ignition, but it appeared unlocked. A cell phone sat in a tiny slot in the console. Alba knew Patrick remained as attuned to the surroundings as she, and when he froze, cocked his head to the side as if listening, Alba did the same.

She heard whispers, then a soft feminine giggle, coming from the forest directly adjacent them. Two wide-trunked trees blocked her view and, she realized, the view from the road. She raised her hand and signaled that she would go and take a look.

Patrick nodded. *He knows I'm smaller and can move more silently.* How nice to work with someone who didn't have to go all he-man on her.

One of the downfalls of looking like a pixie was that sometimes the men in the Delta Force teams she found herself working with treated her like a brainless china doll. Well, she mentally amended, they did the *first* time they worked with her.

Alba pushed the unwanted thoughts away and focused on her objective. Once she reached the trees she crept around until she could peer on the other side.

The couple lay sprawled on a blanket about two hundred feet into the forest, completely naked.

Alba didn't allow herself to observe any more than absolutely necessary. The amorous pair appeared to be just getting started, and that suited her needs just fine.

She ran back to Patrick, and nodded. He pointed to the car and she understood his silent command. She opened the passenger side door and got in.

Patrick sat in the driver's seat, and reached under the steering column. It took him only moments to hotwire the car.

The engine ran smooth and quiet. They didn't close their doors until he'd driven the car a hundred or so yards down the road.

"Now what?" she asked.

"There's a town not far from here, Devizes. I happen to know someone who lives there whom we can trust absolutely. How are your feet holding up?"

Alba gave him a level look. "That question would imply I'm not done walking for the day, yet."

"You're not. We'll drive west of the town and leave the car at The Three Magpies, at Sells Green. They're quite happy to lend out their parking area to tourists who like to walk the locks. Then we'll hike to the center of town. I'd say within a couple of hours, you'll have some good food and a soft chair."

"Sounds good to me. I'll use our Romeo's cell phone to call Dylan."

"You'll reroute the call?"

"Of course. I have a relay number I can use that is about ninety-nine percent secure. Now I have a question. Are there any farms or houses between here and The Three Magpies—that would be a pub?"

"Yes, a very good one, and yes, several residences. Why?"

"We'll see. Just stop if I ask you to, please."

"Of course, darling." He picked up her hand and kissed it, then gave her his patented killer grin.

Alba understood his mood, for it matched hers perfectly. There was nothing quite so exhilarating as being in working mode.

Alba opened the glove box, rifling the small storage space, smiling when she pulled out a plain white kerchief and a pair of sunglasses. Further exploration of the backseat—Patrick cursed when she accidentally clipped him with her elbow whilst climbing into the back—netted her a hair clip and two bobby pins, and a somewhat worn man's baseball-style cap.

She climbed back into the front seat, then kept her eyes on the passing scenery. About two miles later she asked Patrick to pull over, which he did.

The road they traveled didn't seem to have much traffic, something for which Alba gave thanks. It was nearly supper time, and as she made her way back to the farm house that was her target, she hoped like hell the people who lived there didn't look outside.

It took her only a couple of minutes to remove three items from the clothesline. She took a moment to remember the look of the house. Later, when this was all over, she'd see to it these good people either got their clothing back, or some compensation for same.

"Go."

Patrick didn't say a word until they'd gone a half mile down the road.

"What in the name of..."

"We may be safe with whomever it is you trust, but we have to get there first and for that we have to look different." She shot him a grin. "I know the tenacity of the British Special Forces. They may have alerted the local constabulary about us. Until Dylan straightens out whatever the hell kind of misunderstanding those good soldiers have, we need to avoid being seen."

"Darling, you are one of the most uniquely beautiful women I have ever met. I doubt very much a few simple accoutrements are going to be able to disguise you."

She couldn't help but give him a wide smile. Then she leaned over the console and gave him a kiss. "Thank you. What wonderful compliment."

“You’re welcome. Do you want to change before we leave the car, or after?”

“After if there’s a bit of bush we can hide behind.”

She could tell Patrick ran the route they would walk through his memory.

“Yes, I believe there is.”

“Great.”

“You have faith your brother-in-law will be able to call off the authorities?”

“Yes, but I have no idea how long it will take him to do so. We discussed this possibility, that Thomas or whoever is working with him—and we have to assume that at least one someone here is—would use just such a trick to try and flush me out.”

“You’re good at this.”

Alba looked at him. “Yes. I’m going to miss it, in a way.”

“Miss it?”

“Mmm. You weren’t the only one set to retire.” Alba sat back and closed her eyes, hoping to use the last few minutes of rest to her advantage.

* * * *

If he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes he wouldn’t have believed it. She’d taken two shirts and a skirt from the clothesline at that farmhouse. The one shirt was a common men’s work shirt, and it just barely fit him. She messed his hair, set the cap she’d taken from the car on his head, and handed him the sunglasses.

Then she went to work on herself. He couldn’t keep track of what all she did, but when she finished she looked...different. Totally different, come to that. And she walked different and acted different. *She’s a chameleon.* Patrick reminded himself that the best intelligence agents had to be. It surprised him an assassin would have the same skill, but he guessed she would have to.

She trussed her hair atop her head and twisted the kerchief she'd taken from the car around the strands, the look somehow very European. She'd rolled the skirt down from the top, put it on, and used the trousers she had been wearing as a sort of padding beneath it.

"Mon cher, I know this walking is good for the bébé, but I hope we can rest soon, non?"

My God, she looks as well as sounds French. No wonder she had a high success rate—something Angie mentioned when she'd confirmed Alba's story.

Well, he wasn't without his talents, either. He hitched his hat low on his head, and nodded once.

"You bet, sweet pea. We're gonna find us a place where we can rest a spell."

Alba's eyes widened and she laughed. "That Texas drawl is perfect!"

He bent close and planted a noisy kiss on her lips. "So is your French. Come on, love, let's get going. We'll be at Martha's in a half hour."

"Martha. A former lover?"

Patrick didn't think he imagined the hint of jealousy he detected in her voice. He smiled, very pleased with the concept.

"Well, to be honest with you, Martha was my first love. And you know what they say. A man never forgets his first love."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye to see how that confession sat with her. Alba seemed to be working hard at affecting a nonchalant attitude, but Patrick could tell his words irked her, and more than a little.

"Is *that* what they say, mon cher?"

The woman might claim they had a long way to go until they settled everything between them. But he felt that right at that moment, as they worked to dodge British Special Forces operatives, the distance they had yet to travel toward each other wasn't as far as she

believed. And because he felt so pleased she had been jealous, he decided to come completely clean.

“Martha was my nanny from the time I was about two until I went away to Eton.”

Alba continued to walk with him, but turned her head just a little and gave him a good glare. “You will pay for that one, Milord.”

“Ouch.” He didn’t think he’d ever heard that honorarium said with such distain. He grinned, then laughed when she couldn’t hold out and her lips curved upwards in a smile of her own.

“Only a few more minutes, you can see the town ahead,” he said.

“It’s like we’re coming into the center of it,” Alba marveled.

“Because we’ve followed the locks,” Patrick said. “Are you going to call Dylan?”

“Yes. Perhaps if we stop for a minute, lean on the railing there, catch our breath.”

Patrick understood her meaning perfectly. As soon as she finished the call, she planned to drop the cell phone into the drink.

“It’s a shame I didn’t have time to grab some extra cash before we left the house,” he said. “If Dylan hasn’t straightened everything out and we have to stay hidden, we’re going to need some.”

Alba turned to smile at him as they leaned against the railing and looked down into the water of the full lock. She pulled the cell phone she’d borrowed out of one of the pockets in the purloined skirt. As she dialed, she yanked a small packet out of her other pocket and gave it to him.

Her smile spread as he examined the contents of the packet, and he certainly understood why. Inside it he found a passport and driver’s license—French issue—and two credit cards, both current, and all in the name of Marie Bordeaux.

Chapter 14

“Here’s a picture of Patrick taken at age six. Doesn’t he look so solemn and serious?”

Alba couldn’t help but smile. Martha Carmichael welcomed them with open arms, and when Patrick told the elderly woman that no one could know they were there, she’d simply looked at him for a long moment and then said, “It’s the intrigue of the family business. Caught your father once at a disadvantage, too, if memory serves.”

The remarkable woman immediately set about to make them comfortable. Tea came first, naturally. Then she began to put together a meal that remained a fond memory to Alba’s taste buds.

As after-dinner entertainment, much to Patrick’s embarrassment, Martha pulled out an enormous photo album filled with pictures of her favorite former charge.

“Of course, his Grandmother Jamieson, who ruled that roost, thought only solemn and serious would do for *the heir*. Can you imagine, that is how she always referred to Patrick. His poor mother didn’t stand a chance against the harridan. I kept the most diverting of games to times when I could be assured that old biddy wouldn’t interfere.”

Patrick nearly choked on his laughter. Clearly, he enjoyed hearing his paternal grandmother, the late dowager Countess of Avebury, being referred to as an old biddy.

“Himself knows I mean no disrespect to the Countess. She had been raised in a cold and austere family, I was told, so she didn’t

know any better. But a child ought to have a childhood, don't you agree? Duty and responsibility come soon enough."

"Yes, I agree," Alba said. "A child ought to be allowed to have a childhood."

It wasn't until she felt Patrick's hand caress her back that she realized her own emotions came close to the surface with her words.

Because his touch meant understanding, and compassion, and every good thing, Alba felt herself melt toward him just a little bit more.

Martha must have sensed the moment for she kept her eyes on her photographs as if looking for one in particular.

"I especially recall the picnics we used to have in the glen beyond the crofter's cottage," Patrick said.

The fondness in his tone told Alba that he likely came to visit 'his first love', as he'd called her, on a regular basis. Seeing them together and knowing just a little more about his childhood certainly explained why the woman had been his first love.

"Yes, those are among some of my favorite memories, too," Martha said. Then she turned to Alba and said, "We used to make up adventures for Willy, the Wayward Wombat."

Patrick blinked, clearly surprised and, unless Alba missed her guess, touched that the elderly lady remembered that.

"Willy the Wayward Wombat?" Alba asked.

"Well you see, I thought it such a silly name for an animal to begin with," Patrick said. "When I studied about Australia and the creatures there, the wombat struck me as having been put at a disadvantage. First, it was a marsupial, which meant it had to carry its young around with it *everywhere*. At the time, as I recall, I'd begun feeling a bit hemmed in. Martha would bring me outdoors and give me the freedom to run and imagine, but otherwise I felt as if I was being carried around in a pouch. Then, of course, it was a night creature, and solitary."

"And your imaginary wombat wasn't any of those?"

“Oh, not at all. In fact, those adventures I made up were my first forays into fiction.”

Martha absolutely beamed at this admission. “Yes, I know. You’ll forgive me a bit of hubris for I’ve always thought our games helped you nurture your writer’s imagination.”

“That’s not hubris at all,” Patrick said. “I know they did.”

When it got to be around eight-thirty in the evening, Alba donned her pregnant Frenchwoman disguise, and made ready to take the short walk to one of the pubs. She’d tried to persuade Patrick to stay behind, but he would have none of it. She knew the issue wasn’t any lack of trust on his part. He told her flat out that things could go wrong, and if they did, Alba had a better chance of getting out of a mess with him by her side.

“There’s a public phone down in the market square,” Martha informed them.

She was still a bit miffed they wouldn’t use her telephone. But on this point, Alba agreed with Patrick. No way they would do anything that could bring undue scrutiny to the gracious woman.

“This time of year there are always tourists about in the evening,” Martha smiled. “You shouldn’t have any trouble.”

Alba waited until they left Martha’s house before she said, “Dylan should have gotten things straightened out by now.”

“*I’d* like to know how anyone knew you were at the Manor, although I have a sneaking suspicion I know the answer to that.”

Because he’d said the words with a bite, Alba knew who he had in mind—who happened to be the same person she believed responsible for the arrival of the soldiers. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“I’m the one who should be apologizing to you,” Patrick said. “You believed yourself safe under my roof, and you should have been.”

She could see his temper had been lit. She couldn’t blame him for it. Actually, she thought it an interesting experience, watching him

rein it in. “Nothing to do on that particular front until we get over this hurdle, first,”

The night turned clear and warm. All threat of rain seemed to have vanished with the sunset. The lights of Long Street, as they walked toward the Market Square, weren’t quite bright enough to completely obscure the stars.

Alba loved walking at night, but she’d be glad to complete this errand and climb into the comfy bed at Martha’s.

“Since Dylan said they were all going back to his townhouse in London,” she said as they neared their destination, “I’ll call him there after routing the call through the exchange in Paris, as I did before. Maybe after I speak with him we can just hire a car and drive back to Jamieson Hall for the night.”

“I would consider it a major miracle if he has been able to straighten out this bureaucratic snafu.” Patrick shook his head. “I’ve tried to put this away but I’m really not very happy that they moved on my home.”

“I know,” Alba said. “That they did surprised me, quite frankly. Considering who you are and what you do. The way I figure it, with Thomas missing, it won’t take long for the chain of command to figure out what happened. I’ve been thinking about my situation and I believe he moved on me in the first place because I asked to retire. When the upper brass compared my hours and the sanctioned assignments they’d passed on to me, they would have caught the discrepancy—and him.”

“Sneaky of him to get my boss involved to ask us to do his dirty work,” Patrick said. “Jonathan presented some pretty compelling evidence that Thomas forwarded to him. He had no way to know it had been fabricated. I think things work pretty much the same over here as they in the States. One government agency doesn’t necessarily share details with other government agencies. So he would not only *not* have any place to double-check the information, he wouldn’t even think to.”

“That pretty much sums it up,” Alba agreed. “We’d planned to do a roundabout search for the man, go at it from that angle. But the incursion into your home changed all that. Dylan is not without his contacts. I know him. He would have been pissed that anyone with an assault rifle came within firing distance of his wife. He’d have pulled out the big guns.”

They’d entered the square, and the public telephone stood in the opposite corner from them, the blue and glass booth standing half in dim light, half in shadows.

Alba felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end as she walked with Patrick across the open area of the large Market Square.

“I don’t like this,” he said quietly.

“Neither do I. We’re being watched.”

“Yes, I got that. Bugger it, I don’t even have a gun.”

“I do.”

“If you want to call that little peashooter in your pocket a gun.”

Alba knew they joked to keep the tension from choking them. Looking around the immediate area, there didn’t seem to be too many places for a squad of soldiers to hide. Even though it just approached nine on a lovely August evening, only a few souls joined them in the streets of Devizes. A young couple strolled hand in hand on the opposite side of the street, obviously lost in each other. Up ahead, two older women chattered and walked, making their way toward the pub. Behind them, two solitary figures seemed to be following the same path as she and Patrick. Probably not unusual, since she imagined that anyone out this time of night would be headed for crowds and a beer.

Yet her hair still stood on end, a sure sign that something was not right.

“Do we make the call and be in the crosshairs?”

“We’re already in the crosshairs. Make it,” Patrick said.

Alba reached into her left hand pocket and pulled out her charge card. Her right hand clutched her P32—not that it would do a hell of a

lot of good against an assault rifle. But Patrick was right. They were already being watched. They could carry on or go into the pub.

Neither of them would put civilians at risk, which they might be doing if they entered the busy bar.

They crossed the last little bit of distance and a man stepped out from the shadows beside the phone booth.

“That’s far enough. Step away from the woman, please, Milord.”

Alba froze in place, her eyes riveted to the Glock handgun pointed at her midsection. She felt Patrick’s shock, but could do nothing about it. He did step away, but only because of his anger, she guessed. He took a step toward their assailant, who countered by raising his gun and moving to his right, away from Patrick, more directly in front of her.

“Parsons! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“What you didn’t have the guts to do, Milord. Do you think I’m ignorant of the situation? I listened in to your conversations with Mr. Hargreaves. This woman is a terrorist, and yet instead of doing your duty and killing her, you’ve got her warming your bed. You are not one-half the man your grandfather was. Your Grandmother, God rest her, had certainly been right about that. Now stand aside, sir.”

Alba had two choices and only a split second to decide. She could fire her gun before Parsons discharged his. Or—

She spun out and up from her left leg, her movement fast and light, her right foot coming up and out as she left the ground, one solid kick, then a second with her left as she completed the spin and landed.

Her first kick disarmed the majordomo, the second connected solidly with his jaw.

By the time she rose from the crouch she’d landed in, Patrick was kneeling beside the unconscious man.

“Thank you for not shooting him,” he said.

“You’re welcome. Why don’t I make that call?”

* * * *

“It would seem there’s been a mistake.”

Patrick raised one eyebrow, and looked over at Alba. She shrugged her shoulders, looking lost in a fog of confusion. That told him how he decided to answer that particular understatement would be entirely up to him.

“You and I see things a bit differently, sir,” he said, turning his attention back to his boss. “A mistake is what happens when the waiter delivers the wrong entrée to your table. This is more than a mistake. It’s attempted murder.”

Jonathan Hargreaves looked more than a little uncomfortable, sitting on one of the Louis XIV chairs situated in the salon at Jamieson Hall. This room, uncomfortable as it was, Patrick used for unwelcome guests.

“I can only repeat what I told the Minister when he informed me of the matter of Porter Thomas’ perfidy. I acted in good faith on information I’d received from a man I had every reason to believe. I do apologize, Ms. Morel, for any inconvenience to you.”

Patrick was grateful Alba didn’t recount, for Jonathan’s benefit, his own duplicity in kidnapping her. She said only, “Thank you, Mr. Hargreaves. Frankly, I’m as shocked as you are by this turn of events. I didn’t know my boss had become a traitor.”

Jonathan gave Alba a grateful smile, and Patrick wondered that he didn’t recognize the bad cop, good cop tactic he and Alba automatically utilized, as if they’d been a team for years instead of only days.

“I suppose there’s still the matter of the man’s disappearance,” Jonathan ventured.

“I suppose so. I’m scheduled to be interviewed by phone by the assistant director tomorrow, although I don’t know that I can be of any help. Imagine my surprise, I come over to England to visit my family, and I’m suddenly immersed in international intrigue.”

“Yes, I imagine it must have been rather upsetting for you, my dear, to suddenly be treated as if you yourself were a fugitive from justice.”

Patrick watched as Jonathan Hargreaves responded to Alba’s appearance and her demeanor. She’d not donned one extra piece of clothing, nor changed so much as the color of her lipstick. She used no hair clips or pins to capture her long black hair. He was hard-pressed to say that she even moved a muscle, but somehow she *had* changed, and now appeared to be exuding the most delicate, feminine persona he’d ever seen.

My God, she’s amazing!

“And I feel so bad that we borrowed that man’s car and then lost his cell phone in the lock—”

“You’re not to be concerned about that at all. The auto has already been taken to a garage. It shall be made right, and we’ve already replaced Mr. Nesmith’s cellular device. Once we explained to him those items had been needed in a case of national security, he became most understanding. Everything has been smoothed over.”

“Oh, good. That is such a relief. Thank you, Mr. Hargreaves.”

“Jonathan, please.”

Patrick kept his mouth shut, waiting to see if Jonathan would realize he’d just been dismissed. He’d only ever known the man’s superiors to get away with that particular trick. And until this moment, he would have sworn he always kept control of any meeting, no matter where on the pay scale he sat in relation to whoever else attended.

But sure enough, he turned his attention back to Patrick, nodded, and got to his feet.

“By the way, Ms. Morel, I must say I’m certainly surprised this matter has come to the attention of the Minister of Defense.”

Alba gave Jonathan a very serious look. “My brother-in-law, Dylan Pearce, was very upset that men came into the room and aimed their rifles at his wife. You may know that Dylan’s family owns the

Carstairs Hotel chain. He spent a lot of his formative years here, and I believe his family is well-connected.

“Ah, yes, of course. That makes perfect sense. Well then, good day, Ms. Morel.”

Since Parsons was no longer a member of his household staff, Patrick got up to see the man out.

When he returned, Alba sat where he'd left her, and she looked...normal.

“Your boss seemed very rattled,” she said.

He held out his hand and when she took it, he pulled her to her feet. “I hate this room,” he said.

She followed him willingly, and when he headed toward the stairs she rightly guessed he wanted to take her to his bedroom. He liked her low, sultry laughter.

“I agree. I guess because he wasn't expecting to have the Minister of Defense call him on the carpet.”

Her smile looked every bit as sultry as her laugh sounded when she stretched up and kissed his lips lightly.

“I imagine you're right, and he wasn't expecting that. But I don't think that's the reason why.”

“No? Why, then?” Damnably hard to keep an easy-paced conversation going when what he really wanted to do was strip the woman bare and plunge balls deep into her.

They reached his bedroom door. He opened it, and waited for her to enter first. She did so, walking backward, and reached for the buttons of her blouse.

“He's rattled,” Alba said, “because somehow he's in this mess all the way up to his private school tie.”

Chapter 15

Porter Thomas ran a trembling hand through his hair and tried to quell his nerves. The room behind him stood in darkness, and even in the darkness he sought cover. Standing by the window of the flat that over the last two days came to define his existence, he looked out at the world through the gauzy curtain that enveloped him, wary, watchful.

The sun set and the lights of London came on, but better than most he knew what could be hiding just out of sight, in the shadows.

He'd believed himself clever, thought he'd managed a clean escape, that he'd just have to wait for his agency to realize he faced a threat, rely on them to eliminate that threat. They shouldn't have raised a red flag against him this soon.

Something had gone terribly wrong.

He should have been able to access some key web addresses to keep abreast of events. He possessed the login details for several agents, as well as one he'd set up months ago as a sort of back door access, in case of emergency.

None of them worked.

He'd then tried to access some of his own special information, things he'd hidden against that day when he might have to flee his own employer, the United States government.

The messages varied but the meaning remained the same. *Access denied* or *web page not available*, amounted to the same thing.

He'd been locked out.

He couldn't even get into his Swiss bank account, and *that* at least should have been secure.

Blocked, isolated. His first day here he'd gone to his London bank, and so had been able to withdraw a few thousand pounds. He'd only stopped on the way back to this flat for a quick meal, and to buy a weapon from a black market contact known to his agency. He spent nothing more.

Good thing, as it would appear he would not be able to get any more money for the time being.

He couldn't believe his employer lay at the root of all this trouble. Not even Uncle Sam could so quickly or efficiently lock down a Swiss account.

No, those who hunted him did this. Those elements of the criminal world, among whom he so recently numbered, had for whatever reason made him a target.

He turned a couple of people over to the Zoltanas who had important friends and family members in various cartels and organizations around the world.

The temperature in the flat had been set to cool but Thomas felt sweat snaking down his spine.

If his enemies had been able to access and block his information, could they also find him? He'd taken the precaution of wiping any reference to this address from the Internet before leaving New York, but he knew that nothing ever posted online could ever truly be wiped away.

All he could do was wait and watch. Weariness washed through him, and he wondered if he dared sleep. Perhaps he could manage a few minutes, sitting up here in this room. He had a weapon, at least, which provided some comfort.

He didn't think he could manage on his own for very long. He'd have to consider his options. He could send a message to his contact—perhaps the best way would be to find a library or an Internet café. If it turned out Porter was in deep shit now because of one of the commodities he'd provided the Zoltanas, the least they could do would be to provide him with a safe harbor of some sort.

Or, he could presume on a twenty-year friendship and call Jonathan Hargreaves. *Yes, I might just try that in the morning.* He'd rather turn to Jon in this emergency than a group of terrorists.

He left his post by the window and pulled one of the chairs from the dinette table over to the armchair to use as a footstool. He dare not go completely to sleep, but he could sit here and doze. He could wait out the night hours.

And in the morning he'd call his good friend Jonathan Hargreaves.

* * * *

Patrick kicked the bedroom door closed with his foot, never taking his eyes off her as he slowly walked toward her.

"That's what I thought, too. That Jon is somehow involved in this mess. But do you know what?"

Alba felt her smile become sultry as she reacted to the heat in Patrick's eyes. "No, what?"

"I don't want to think about my boss right now. I don't want to think about your boss, either, or the mess that both of our lives have become."

"No? What would you rather be thinking about?"

"You. Or more specifically at this moment, how warm and wet and wonderful you feel around my cock."

"Warm, wet, wonderful. Are you referring to my mouth, or my pussy?"

Could that that her, daring to tease in the most sexually explicit way? Alba wanted to laugh with joy. Only this man had ever been able to reach her, to free her from the specters of her past.

She would do anything for him, give anything he asked.

When the time came, and he wanted it, she would even give him his freedom.

"Either. Both. It's you, Alba. All of you. Let me show you."

“No.” She stepped toward him. Her left hand reached up, caressed his cheek while her right reached for the buttons on his shirt. “No, let me show you. You can’t know...you can’t understand.”

“I can, and I do. Say it, sweetheart. The words won’t kill you.”

Trust Patrick to inject just enough humor to take the edge off, to stop her throat from clogging with her tears. She felt the corner of her mouth tug up into a smile that copied his, she believed, almost exactly.

Her hand stilled. “I love you.” Never before had she felt the same words build her up and tear her down at the same time. She did love Patrick Jamieson with every fiber of her being.

“*My Alba*. Now and forever.” The love she saw in his eyes told her he didn’t expect to hear those last three words from her.

She realized she’d lied to herself. She could give him anything but that lifetime commitment. Not yet.

But she could give him pleasure. She could give him all that she had in her to give. Stretching up, she laid her lips on his, her tongue stroking until he opened, took her in. Hot and wet, his flavor filled her. His tongue mated with hers, a perfect duet. One hand cupped the back of his head, holding him close. The other opened his shirt.

His chest, all heated flesh and hard muscle, felt wonderful to her. A smattering of hair covered his pecs, then formed a thin line down toward his groin. She lost herself in the silky feel of it as her fingers splayed through the fine strands. Need filled her, and she weaned her lips from his.

She lavished kisses and licks on his neck, working down his chest until she found a male nipple, pebble hard and reaching out for her attention.

He flexed his hips as she suckled him, and Alba nearly smiled. She didn’t know a man could be turned on this way. His groan told her he was turned on. His hands, possessiveness in their touch, wrapped around her, and urged her down.

Fingers worked feverishly to unbuckle, unhook and unzip. As she dropped to her knees, his trousers and boxers dropped to the floor.

Alba muzzled her face in his groin, inhaling deeply his rich, male scent. Eyes closed, she knew she would know this man anywhere, his individual bouquet indentifying him as uniquely Patrick.

Mine.

No, she dared not say it aloud, but deep inside her soul she could mark the truth. *Her man, now and forever.*

“Oh, God,” his words, whispered to the point of desperation, thrilled her. His hands trembled as he bent over her, as he ran them over her head and across his shoulders.

She loved him and she longed to worship that love.

She slid her tongue, one slow, soft lap from the base of his cock to the tip. His salty flavor filled a need in her, a need she knew would never truly be sated.

Patrick inhaled a quivery breath and his cock pulsed, growing just a bit harder. His desire fired her, fuelled her. She lapped at him again, then played her tongue against his scrotum, back and forth. She felt his sac engorge, harden. Working her tongue up his shaft once more, she took him fully into her mouth.

Hot and hard, she stretched to hold him all. Her head moved down, taking him deep. When the head of his cock nudged the back of her throat, she pulled up, just a little. Swirling her tongue along his shaft, she sucked and tasted. Her left hand came up, thumb and forefinger encircling him at the base while her right hand cupped his balls, squeezing gently.

Up and down she moved, sucking him, loving him as she had no other man. His cock hardened even more, his low-throated sounds of pleasure told her he more than enjoyed her attentions. Up and down, sleekly soothing and soothingly sexy, she laved and loved and tasted his growing passion.

“Sweetheart...I’m close to coming.”

She'd never drank from him, never taken his gift inside her in this way. She needed to do that, to give that, more than she needed her next breath.

"Alba."

She felt him shake with his control. She lifted her mouth from him and said, "Please, Patrick. Give it to me."

She took him deep again, felt the shiver of his surrender. Deeply, steady, she drew on him, her desire fierce. She gave him no quarter, just release.

Steam after stream of his seed became hers, and she gulped the fluid greedily. When his knees trembled she held him fast, held him steady in that state of raw pleasure, swallow after loving swallow.

"Oh, God," he said, the words sounding spent.

She released him but kept her arms around him. Her cheek rested on his abdomen, and she caressed him with it, back and forth, feeling kittenish.

"You took me apart and put me back together again just now."

His hands smoothed her, no longer shaky, just firm, loving.

"My turn," he said.

When he urged her up, she rose. His hands made fast work of her clothing, stripping the garments from her and leaving them where they fell. He kicked free of his pants, then lifted her in his arms.

"My turn," he said again, and carried her to his bed.

He laid her on her back, spread her legs. His gaze met hers, one heated look that promised pleasure. Then he buried his head between her legs.

Mouth open, he lapped and caressed, his hot breath and delving tongue igniting her fires. There was nothing coy or teasing in his loving. He took and gave everything, fast and furious, driving her higher and then higher still.

She reached for him, felt her fingers tangle in his hair, held him fast against her pussy as she tilted her hips higher. Arousal surged,

higher, tighter, and she wondered that she didn't simply explode from the pleasure he forced on her.

Then it burst, the orgasm a flood of rapture, and she screamed. He moaned against her wet sensitive flesh, and the spasms increased, wave after wave of unrelenting bliss.

Ebbing, she whimpered, then groaned when Patrick surged up her body and buried his cock inside her.

"Taste," he commanded as he brought his mouth to hers.

She tasted herself on his lips, the flavor of them both combining, becoming something greater and more. She tilted her hips to receive his pounding cock, the battering of her cervix a painful pleasure that fuelled a second orgasm.

Alba wrapped around him, arms and legs, as her tunnel convulsed around his cock and he filled her with his hot sperm. On and on it went, and she knew that no matter what happened in the future she would never truly feel alone again.

* * * *

The images chased her from sleep, phantom pictures of a crashing sea and a drowning man and a song so sweet, so alluring, that none could resist.

She blinked her eyes, one hand reaching out to the bed beside her. The sheets felt warm to the touch, but empty. Turning her head to the left, she saw him, his nude body silhouetted against the window. Moonlight bathed him, made him ethereal. He seemed absorbed in either the night, or his thoughts.

"Patrick?"

"I'm here."

He returned to her immediately, his steps light as he came back to her, to the bed. He pulled her close and covered them both.

"I'm here, sweetheart," he said again.

"What's wrong?"

“Nothing. I’ve figured it all out, and absolutely nothing is wrong.”

She didn’t understand his cryptic statement, but she didn’t have long to wait.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said into her hair, kissing her there. “It doesn’t matter what you do, what you’ve done. I love you, and I finally realize that I have to love all of you just as you are.

“I’ve made choices in my life,” he said quietly, “choices about what I do and how I do it. And I’ve been free to make those choices because there have always been others who took up the parts that I didn’t want to do. That’s what you’ve done. How can I hold that against you?”

She had no answer for him, but apparently he expected none. He turned, rose above her. In the moon washed room, she could see his expression. For the first time, looking at her, his expression was clear. Peaceful.

“I love you, everything that you are, just as you are. We’ve both made choices, and given to our countries in ways that have been uniquely our own. Your service has been no less admirable than mine. I am sorry about Gareth, but only because I know in my heart his fate came as a consequence of *his* choices, choices that I’ll never truly know about. I *do* know that you would only do what was right, and just. I know that, because the moment you learned for certain your boss had gone rogue, you left.”

Complete acceptance had been the one thing Alba needed most, and it had been the one thing she’d believed could never be hers.

And here it was, being given to her, by the only man who really mattered. It seemed only fitting that she give back to him in equal measure.

“I love you, Patrick. Now and forever.”

Chapter 16

Despite the fact that they still hadn't made any progress locating Porter Thomas, and he faced the unhappy prospect of having to replace the family's longtime majordomo, Patrick's mood felt lighter than it had in more than two years.

He'd meant every word he'd said to Alba last night. It didn't matter what she'd done, because he knew that the work she'd engaged in had been on the side of the angels. He could accept the whole of her, because in the end what mattered most was who they were, to and with each other.

She'd served her country with honor and integrity and although her service differed from his, they'd been on the same side, essentially battling the same foe, and for all intents and purposes performing the same job.

The differences between them really were just shades of grey.

How could he blame Alba for her part in Gareth's death? His best friend obviously stepped wrong. That harsh reality Patrick must accept. He felt guilty, for he'd failed to see the signs. Whatever happened with Gareth, Patrick could take comfort the man's parents would never know. To them their son would always be a patriot.

He maneuvered his Jaguar through early morning London traffic, heading for the Pierce townhouse. He and Alba would be joining the rest of her family and someone Dylan called in to help—a private detective, of all things.

They passed Hyde Park, its greenery in the midst of upscale urbanity always making him smile.

“In Regency times, my great-grandparents kept a house in town, of course,” he said to Alba as he negotiated the traffic. “They often would spend the spring and some of the summer here. Great-Grandfather would go to his club and perform his secret duties for crown and country, of course. And Great-Grandmother Jamieson was one of those grande dames of society, attending a different party or theatre performance every night during the season.”

“Back in university days I discovered a fondness for Regency-era romance novels. Tell me, from your knowledge of research and family history, was it anything like they portrayed those times to be?”

Patrick laughed. “Is this where you discover I’m less than a man because I’ve actually read some of those novels myself and so can answer you?”

“I don’t think reading romance novels would make you less of a man. I think if more men wanted to know what their women fantasized about, they’d read them too, and reap untold benefits when they applied that knowledge to their relationships.”

“Believe it or not, that *is* why I read them, in a manner of speaking. So I would know what women reading books of that era liked, since my novels take place in the same historical period. My publisher thought the experience might make my novels more female-friendly.”

“*The Lassiter Affair*. That was the first book you wrote after that research, right?”

“You’ve read my books?” Patrick knew he sounded surprised, but it honestly never occurred to him that she may have done.

“I have every one of them.”

An incredible feeling of accomplishment swept him. He’d never considered broaching this topic, but now that they had, the author in him couldn’t resist asking one question. “And?” He trusted she would understand what he asked.

“You need me to tell you you’re an incredibly talented writer? That your characters seem to be living, breathing, *real* people? That

your prose is nearly lyrical in its poetry? That your plots are brilliant and keep me turning the pages until I'm done?"

"Yes, I do. Writers—every last one of us, regardless of our accomplishments, acclaims, or the size of our advances—are neurotic. So yes, I needed you to tell me all that. Thank you."

"Neurotic, is it? And how often will I need to tell you all those things that you should know without a doubt are so?"

"Oh, no more than once or twice a day, I promise," he said, biting back his smile.

"Wonderful."

Patrick laughed, loving the banter between himself and his quick-witted love. "I never did answer your original question. The answer is that in some ways, the best regency novels get it right. The times were not, however, particularly friendly, on the surface of things, to women. I say on the surface of things because I know from family stories that it was Great-Grandmother who ruled the family, not the Earl. And when she chose a wife for her son—my grandfather—she chose a woman who'd been cast in her own image."

"But your mother is different, isn't she?"

"Oh, indeed she is. It's why my grandmother got away with running roughshod over her all those years. Or so I thought. The truth is that Mother was very happy simply being my father's wife, and could have cared less about the household duties or trappings of nobility. I unfortunately more often than not became the battleground between them. I had Martha, and so it stung a little less that my mother didn't fight harder for me." He'd been bitter as a young man over the way his mother seemed to not care about him. Eventually he'd changed his mind. And he couldn't now, in thinking about Alba's very different and much crueler childhood, find much energy to revisit that bitterness. His mother loved him, in her way. She'd just loved her husband more.

"I liked your Martha very much," Alba said. "And I could tell that you've been by to see her on a regular basis. You both seemed so comfortable with each other."

Patrick nodded, unsurprised by Alba's insight. "Yes, in many ways she became my mother when I was growing up. I'm grateful for her."

"I can see that you are."

The Pierce townhouse was a grand structure not that far, really, from Grosvenor Square. Patrick made himself familiar with history of the city, and it took him only a few moments to recall whose property this had been in the eighteen-fifties—the Duke of Carver, who had in fact been a close friend of his Great-Grandfather Jamieson.

Dylan opened the door when they rang, and Patrick recalled the man sent his staff away on vacation.

"So who's cooking?" Alba asked when she gave her brother-in-law a hug.

"We've been living on take-away, although among us Nicholas is probably the best cook," Dylan said. "Come on in. We're meeting in the dining room around a stack of pizza boxes that have just been delivered."

Having been raised on five-star cuisine and multi-course meals as a matter of everyday living, Patrick particularly loved Americans' fondness for fast-food. He nodded to everyone in general, grabbed a slice of pie from an open box, and made himself comfortable on a chair beside Twyla Coultrain.

Of course he noticed the stranger amongst them. When Dylan came into the dining room, Patrick said, "Is Carver sitting on a branch in your family tree?"

Dylan laughed. "No. Apparently, the last Duke of Carver loved to gamble and owed my grandfather Carstairs a great deal of money, and this townhouse happened to be the only piece of his property that wasn't entailed, as it came to the man through his wife's family."

That particular Duke died ‘without issue’ and the title reverted to the monarchy in the early nineteen-hundreds.

“I knew there had to be a reason so many of your hotels had casinos in them,” Pamela said.

“They’re *our* hotels, love,” Dylan reminded her.

“This is a typical exchange,” Alba said, sitting down next to Patrick. “Dylan keeps trying to lure P. J. over to the dark side of being a kajillionaire’s wife, and she keeps trying to be the simple art conservator who lived in a small, dingy flat in Paris.”

“The flat wasn’t *that* small or dingy,” Pamela said, turning her attention to Alba.

Patrick looked at Dylan. “I’ll take this scene as a forewarning. It will be interesting to see Alba’s reaction the first time someone addresses her as ‘My Lady’.”

“Good luck with that,” Dylan said quite seriously. Then he said, “Patrick, this is Terry Miller, a friend of mine. Formerly of Scotland Yard, Terry is a licensed private detective and has, in the past, proved a life saver. Literally.”

“Milord,” Terry greeted him with an air of reserve.

Patrick nodded to the man. “Just Patrick. But not Paddy. I’ll have to hurt you if you call me Paddy.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The man didn’t seem very friendly, until he turned his attention to Alba. His smile, as he gazed at Patrick’s woman, seemed far more than a little friendly and Patrick found himself wondering if he faced another honorary brother, or a rival.

“Terry’s only just arrived, and I asked him to keep his report until we were all here. Saves repeating.” Dylan’s smile told Patrick he found Terry’s demeanor amusing.

If he wasn’t so confident in his relationship with Alba, he’d begin to worry.

“Well, good. I hope you’ve had some success. Between trekking across country to avoid being picked up by Special Forces, and then

having to deal with an armed Parsons, I'm afraid we've not had much time to follow the trail."

"I'll come straight to the point, then. I've found Porter Thomas' bolt hole."

* * * *

The message was waiting for him the next morning, and Thomas sat for several minutes trying to decide if he should open the email or not. He simply wasn't as techno-savvy as some of the people he had working under him. It had never been an issue before but now he wondered if opening this missive would tell *them* how to find him.

He managed to connect to the Internet using a satellite hookup, and he *should* be safe, because he'd routed his link through one of the another agency's blind addresses, this one in Brazil. But Porter came to the shocking realization that cut off, alone and isolated, paranoia had blossomed and was taking over his thoughts.

Shaking his head and mentally crossing his fingers, he opened the document and read.

"Key in your post box is to box seven-two-seven at Fillgate Postal Station. There find assistance."

Porter wrote down the details, then deleted the email. He searched for information on the Fillgate Postal Station, found its location. The address put it several miles away on the other side of London. He quickly penned the directions then turned off the computer.

Apparently, his contact decided to help him. Could he trust that help? He'd trusted the unknown person or persons enough over the last couple of years to go into business for himself and he'd made a lot of money. He knew if he got caught, he'd be charged with treason, but it hadn't been like that, he hadn't betrayed his country. He'd made certain that he never turned over to the Zoltanas anyone with American national security information. They'd all been men – and one woman – who'd been born in the Middle East.

He'd trusted this contact enough to flee from his home in New York to here.

Porter closed his eyes. All he wanted to do was get his ass out of Europe, to take on the new identity he'd set up for himself and the funds he'd locked away and go retire someplace warm and tropical.

He'd trust his contact.

While he made his way to the Fillgate Postal Station, he'd try to decide whether or not he would call Jonathan.

He'd been so certain in the dark of night that he could turn to the man, give him a story about fleeing for his life because compatriots of Alba Morel tried to kill him.

That had possibilities.

He only took a little time to splash some water on his face. Then he headed out, down the two flights of stairs. In the lobby of the building, he paused before the post boxes only long enough to open his.

A single small envelope sat on the dusty metal bottom of the receptacle. He scooped it and closed the box, waiting until he left the building and walked a block down the street before opening the envelope.

It contained no note, only a strange looking key.

Porter walked at a steady pace, keeping himself alert to his surroundings. He stopped at a small café and stayed just long enough to have a cup of coffee. He could see the street from where he sat and he watched the people going past and reassured himself he hadn't been followed.

The coffee revived him. He'd not thought to have the brew stocked in his flat. *Know better next time.* He shook his head at the thought. He didn't think he would be doing anything like this again anytime soon.

He resumed his walk, then took the tube and felt more and more confident, with each mile traveled, that no one followed him. That he was safe.

He'd been expecting a large postal station, one with lots of people, lots of traffic, so he could go in, unnoticed, and retrieve whatever his contact left him.

Instead, it was rather small outlet, with only one employee behind the counter and only two people lined up waiting for service. He scanned the wall and quickly found box seven-two-seven.

The best thing to do would be to simply act as if he belonged there. Moving quickly, Thomas inserted the key, opened the box. He took out the manila envelope, slipped it into his inside jacket pocket, closed and locked the box, then turned and left the building.

He didn't stop until he'd walked several blocks, and only then when he'd made certain that no one seemed to be paying him any attention. Taking advantage of a somewhat rickety looking bench, he sat and opened the packet.

A British passport, with his photograph and in the name of Roderick Clements, was accompanied by a first-class ticket to Varadero, Cuba and a bankbook showing a balance of five hundred thousand pounds. At the back of the book a bank card had been taped, and the word 'starling' penned in bold, black ink.

Thomas felt elation course through his body. Here in his hands lay everything he needed to escape, to go where he'd longed to go in the first place. Even the destination would be perfect. Friendly relations didn't exist between Cuba and the United States; he'd be safe from extradition there.

The flight would depart the day after tomorrow, at six in the morning.

Thomas felt weak with relief. Everything would be all right now. He looked around, but could see no one looking his way, or paying attention to him.

He didn't need to check his watch to know it was nearly lunchtime. He'd stop off at that pub just across the street and down from his flat. He hadn't eaten a decent meal since he'd arrived from

New York. Now that everything was settled, his appetite returned and he was starving.

One thing he knew for certain, and now that he had a plan, he could be honest with himself. He would do well *not* to contact Jonathan Hargreaves. The man was so boringly by-the-book, that if an alert had been issued on him, Hargreaves would without hesitation have him arrested.

No, it would be better to keep to himself. Eat, sleep, then get on that plane the day after tomorrow.

He only needed to stay hidden until then.

Chapter 17

“Once we located him, I took the liberty of assigning one of my best people to watch him,” Terry Miller said. “That was yesterday. He’s not set a foot outside the flat until this morning. Then he came out and went clear across the city to a postal station. My man reports Thomas spent less than two minutes inside.”

“Did he meet with anyone there?” Alba asked. As far as she knew, Thomas hadn’t spent a great deal of time in England. That wasn’t unusual. Aside from the flat in Paris, she herself had a safe place in Istanbul, a city she’d only ever been in once. But lack of familiarity did bring with it certain disadvantages. To go to some place as mundane—and specific—as a particular post office, suggested he had gone there to meet someone.

“My man says no, though he himself didn’t go inside. When Thomas came out, he had a packet. Harry couldn’t see everything but thought one of the items in that packet was a British passport.”

Alba looked around the table. The pizza had been devoured down to the last piece, and they each had either a cup of tea or a cup of coffee. Since P. J. made the coffee, Alba chose the tea. She loved her sister, but knew full well she couldn’t make good coffee.

Twyla and Nicholas sat close together, holding hands, their attention not as focused, Alba thought, as it might be. They’d only been married a few months. She guessed they considered themselves still on their honeymoon.

“Did anyone inside the outlet remember seeing him there, if he met with anyone?” Patrick asked.

“My man didn’t have time to question anyone. He quite rightly elected to stay with Thomas.”

“Maybe you should send someone to that outlet to ask?” Alba suggested. She bit back her smile. Terry’s attitude toward Patrick seemed particularly frosty. She’d only ever met the detective on one occasion before. She couldn’t imagine what lay at the root of his hostility, unless Dylan or Nicholas told him about her having been kidnapped.

“You’re thinking he may have help?” Terry asked.

“I’m pretty sure he does. Where is he now?” Alba asked

“Harry thought he was on his way back to his flat. He’ll let me know when he gets there.”

“Do we know what his status is with your government?” Patrick asked Dylan.

“According to my sources, they are aware he’s left the country on an unscheduled trip, and though they aren’t altogether certain why, suspicions have been raised. Questions are being asked, though, and it’s only a matter of time before they figure things out.”

“I’m working on trying to pin down a transaction between him and one of his ‘customers’,” Twyla said. “When I have that, the NSA will receive an anonymous tip.”

“So we’re still in need of proof that he’s gone rogue,” Alba said.

“Yes. Since there never had been an official alert targeting you,” Dylan told her, “it was simple enough to have *that* matter cleared up and the British Special Forces called off. In fact, Mr. Northrop is a little aggrieved that action had been taken based on what he calls ‘flimsy evidence’.”

Patrick laughed. “So you did go and see the Minister of Defense. My boss wondered about that.”

“They pointed their guns at my wife *and* they were hunting my sister,” Dylan said as another man might say the sun shone. “You bet your ass I went to see the Minister of Defense.”

“The best evidence we could get would be for Thomas to confess,” Alba said. She had an idea of the quickest way to make that happen and figured the testosterone producers in the room would protest her plan.

“Since you’re not going anywhere near him, I don’t know how we can make that come about,” Patrick said.

Dylan, Nicholas and Terry nodded in agreement. Alba glanced at her sisters and knew her expression didn’t look any more pleased than theirs did.

“Did it slip your mind that I’m a professional intelligence operative?”

“Not at all. But you’re also the woman I love and there is no way in hell I want you in the same room with the man who conspired to have you killed,” Patrick said.

“And if you think either of us is going to let you stick your pretty neck out, you can think again,” Nicholas said.

Alba tried not to laugh because his macho declaration was followed by a sound that told her Twyla elbowed him in the ribs.

“I can take care of myself, you know.” Alba really didn’t know what to think of this display of machismo. She’d spent her entire life, up until this point, looking after herself. From the time she turned eleven, there had just been her and her sisters. The last time she’d been in a bad jam—years ago, before graduation when she thought she might become a jewelry designer—Twyla came to her aid.

She’d been grateful at the time, and had understood that’s what family did.

Now she not only had family times two, but a lover who seemed determined to protect her, whether she needed it or not.

“Isn’t that what you thought the last time you were under my roof and decided to head out on your own in the middle of the night?”

Dylan would have to bring that up. Time to demonstrate to the males in the room how reasonable she could be.

“I’m not suggesting that I go off on my own. We need to devise a well thought out plan, using our best tool—me. You all know I’m right. I’ll confront him where he feels safest—in his burrow. He won’t have had time to wire it for any extra security, so you big he-men types can be outside the door. And I’ll go in armed. In fact, I’ll go in pointing a weapon at him.”

P. J. and Twyla both wore pleased grins as the men traded looks and seemed to be trying to come up with a reason to scotch her plan.

“She’s right,” Terry said, “if your object is to end this as quickly as possible. Otherwise we could likely keep him under surveillance until Twyla uncovers evidence and sends it on, but who knows how long it will take the bureaucratic wheels to turn?”

“Damn it,” Nicholas scowled. “You’ll be wired and we will be right out that door,” he said.

“Trust me, I have no desire to die a hero. I wouldn’t dream of doing this without all of you there, covering my ass.”

“We’ll find the schematics of his flat, and we’ll put it together to be as seamless as possible,” Patrick said. He turned so that he faced Alba straight on. “You get yourself shot and I’m going to be extremely pissed at you.”

Alba reached up, stroked his face. More than a warning, his words sounded like a declaration of love, and of his faith in her.

“Trust me,” she said, “my getting shot is not on the agenda.”

* * * *

What was it about British pub fare that tasted so good? Porter Thomas lifted a fork full of shepherd’s pie and closed his mouth over it, relishing the rich flavor and meaty texture. He’d stopped in for the first time yesterday on his way back from the post office. It only seemed fitting to be back for lunch today since the place was literally just down the street from his flat. In fact, he could see his building from where he sat.

The place seemed busier today, but then it was the lunch hour. He'd had to forgo a table in favor of sitting at the bar. Not a problem, he only planned to eat and then return to his flat. If he'd known the food had been this good, he'd have been over for a hot meal on his first day in London, instead of languishing in fear in the dark.

Foolish to go without fuelling the body. Sating his hunger also seemed to ease his anxiety and help him to think more clearly.

He only needed to stay hidden in that flat another few hours. He could do that. The photo of him on the passport showed him clean shaven. So the moustache he'd been working on growing to replace the false one he'd worn here needed to go. He wanted no one to take even a slight second look at him at Heathrow. He'd work on exuding a holiday joie de vivre, too.

Thomas frowned. He didn't have much in his luggage suitable for Caribbean climes. No shorts, not even a swimsuit. He hoped some overachieving security guard didn't throw up a red flag when he went through his suitcase.

Put it away. He'd be better off imagining his new life, the expatriate American living in a small Cuban village. He imagined with the kind of money he'd have at his disposal he'd seem like a millionaire to the locals. He'd be able to get himself a villa, with a staff.

He'd be living like a king in his own tropical paradise.

"Don't look my way."

Thomas froze, the familiar voice coming from the man who'd just fit himself against the bar beside him sending shivers down his spine.

"How did you find me?" Thomas asked without looking away from his plate.

"It wasn't easy, old friend. We have a pipeline into a local sleeper cell. I've been monitoring the reports for the last couple of days."

"I see."

Jonathan Hargreaves chuckled, but it seemed devoid of humor. "I doubt it very much."

Thomas chanced a slight glance from his peripheral vision as he continued to eat his shepherd's pie.

"The chap at the table three back from the door on the left. The blond one? He's been following you. And he's one of them."

"One of...them?"

"The group that is planning to kill you. They picked up a contract on you. And while you sit here eating your lunch, they are even now planning to ambush you back at your flat. Take a look out the window. See that car in front of your building?"

Thomas did look, and he did see. And as he watched, a rough looking man got out of the car and conferred with another, a man Thomas recognized, though he couldn't place from where.

"I have to get out of here."

"And go where? Hold steady, I'm not about to let one of my friends be fodder for those sodding terrorist bastards."

Hargreaves moved, and Thomas felt something fall into his pocket.

"There's a blue Ford Fiesta out back. That's the key to it. On the passenger seat is a map with a route marked, and another key, this one to a farmhouse just outside of London. There's a cell phone, too, and I packed a bag, threw in a few clothes and things, just enough for a couple of days. I'll give you a call tomorrow or the next day with plans to get you to a better safe house."

Thomas almost opened his mouth to tell Jonathan not to bother, that by this time tomorrow he'd be on his way to Cuba, but then he changed his mind. And he thanked God he'd decided to keep the documents he'd received the day before on his person. He'd go to Jonathan's country house, and stay the night. And he'd leave early in the morning, getting to the airport just in time.

"I don't know what to say."

"You should have let me know when you arrived, I'd have taken you in immediately. But I can understand your caution. Men like you

and I cannot afford to take chances or to trust any but ourselves. We hold the lives of others in our hands, we know what can go wrong.”

“It was not only that consideration,” Thomas lied easily. “There was a target on my back. I didn’t want to put you in danger.”

“I understand completely. You can exit out through the kitchen, into the alley. The car is on the cross street to your left.”

“What about that one,” Thomas said, nodding to the man who apparently had been following him.

“He’ll think you’re off to the loo, and by the time he realizes you’re not, you’ll be well and truly gone. He’d never find you in the traffic.”

Thomas saw the bathrooms were indeed down the same small hall that led to the kitchen. “I don’t know how to thank you,” he said.

“You would do the same for me, and may have to some day. Now, go.”

Thomas didn’t waste another moment. He got up from his seat, made a show of looking around, then headed in the direction of the bathrooms.

The man Jonathan pointed out lifted his head and watched until he entered the hallway. Then he returned his attention to his own lunch.

He didn’t run, but walked with purpose toward the kitchen, then into it.

“Here, now, you can’t be coming in here!”

“Terribly sorry. I’m just passing through.” Thomas hoped his accent held up and guessed it did when he heard a muttered “bloody Nabob” as he pushed open the door in the rear of the pub.

The car sat exactly where Jonathan said it would be. Thomas got behind the wheel. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d driven on the left side of the car and the road. The engine started easily and he let it idle while he took a cursory look at the directions Jon left. The route seemed straightforward; he need only get onto the A30 that would take him west of the city. Looking at the map, he realized the

destination Jon gave him would take him out toward Heathrow, which would be all for the better.

Putting the map aside, he put the car in gear and set off, then turned left at the next intersection. He felt grateful he didn't have to pass in front of the building he'd called home the last couple of days on his way out of the city. Those who pursued him couldn't know he had a car.

He was going to get away clean.

Chapter 18

Alba checked her watch as Patrick pulled the car into the empty spot by the curb. They'd decided to park about three blocks away and on a different street from Thomas's flat. Dylan's black Mercedes took up space nearly right in front of the building. Thomas wouldn't recognize Dylan, Pam or Nicholas, and likely wouldn't give them a second glance if he saw them. Pam entered the pub to keep an eye on the man.

"He's still having lunch," Patrick said as he tapped the button on his Blue Tooth, ending the quick conversation he'd had with Nicholas. "I'm a bit concerned he might see you from that pub since Pam reports he can likely see his building from the bar, so Nicholas will meet us on the corner. Between us, we can get you across the street. I want you safely tucked away in Dylan's car with all of us close at hand when that bastard comes out of the pub and heads back to slide under his rock."

"Did Nicholas say if the microphone I'm wearing was working?"

"Yes, he said loud and clear."

Patrick got out of the car and came around to the passenger side. Alba smiled at the way he insisted on practicing old-world courtesies like opening the car door for her.

When her cell phone rang, she pulled it out of her jeans pocket. She looked at the number. "Twyla," she announced. They had time so she leaned against the car to take the call.

“Hey, little sister,” Alba greeted. She heard Patrick chuckle and knew he’d finally caught onto the fact that each of them called the others “little” sister.

“I’ve made some progress following the money trail. I found an account I’m certain is Thomas’s. He made it easy by accessing some cash the day he left New York from an ATM at Kennedy. There’s a transfer between accounts and though he tried to hide it, I think I’ve found his source. The trail took me to Canada, then Switzerland, but it ends up back in England. London, in fact. And the deposits into this account also originate here in London. So I’d say the guess you and Patrick made could be proving out.”

“But it’s not enough to use as evidence against either one of them yet, is it?”

“Well, the IRS will likely be very interested in the fact that Thomas has over a quarter of a million dollars of unreported income,” Twyla said. “And that’s just what I’ve found so far. I suspect he has other accounts, probably also offshore.”

“Okay. We’ll hold that in reserve if we find nothing else. Aside from the tax violations, the existence of that kind of money will certainly raise a lot of red flags, at any rate.”

“I’ll keep digging. You be careful, little sister.”

“I will.”

Alba tucked the phone away, then turned to tell Patrick what her sister reported. A blue Ford Fiesta passed them just at that moment, and Alba got a good look at the driver.

“Damn it, that’s him! That’s Thomas!”

“Get back in the car!” Patrick jogged back to the driver’s side and slid behind the wheel. In moments he pulled out in traffic, cutting off a Peugeot amidst a flurry of horn blasts.

“Don’t lose him,” Alba said.

“Don’t worry,” Patrick replied.

Alba’s cell phone rang. She fished it out of her pocket.

“What the hell’s going on?” Dylan didn’t sound happy.

“He’s in a blue Ford Fiesta, heading west.”

“Hang on.” Her brother-in-law pulled the phone away from his mouth. She heard him shout to Nicholas, and knew he and Terry were likely hotfooting it to the pub to check in with Pam and Henry.

“I’m keeping him in sight, but I don’t want to spook him. Do you think he saw you?” Patrick asked.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“He’s headed for the bloody expressway.”

Dylan came back on the line, cursing like a sailor. “Yeah, he’s gone. Must have lit out the back. Nicholas is taking my car and following you. He’s got ears on you, little sister. All you need to do is keep talking, and he’ll follow. Terry, Pam and I are going to go and have a look-see in that flat of his, see if we find any clues as to where he’s heading. At this point it looks as if he got spooked.”

Alba closed the cell phone and set it in the console. She took a moment to fasten her seat belt. Patrick wove in and out of afternoon traffic with a skill that kept her heart in her throat.

“I hope he doesn’t see us,” she said. “He’s more than a little proficient behind the wheel.”

“I remember Jonathan telling me he worked in the field before being promoted. Tactical driving, wasn’t it?”

“His specialty, *and* he’s a crack shot.”

“Deadly combination,” Patrick agreed. “If he’s staying in the city we shouldn’t have a problem.” Then, louder, he said, “He’s heading in the direction of Heathrow.”

“Do you think he has a flight?”

“God, I hope not. I don’t want to have to try and hunt him down in the airport,” Patrick said.

It soon became apparent Thomas wasn’t heading for the airport. London was surrounded by a series of roads that formed a ring around the inner city, reminiscent in Alba’s mind to the beltway that surrounded Washington D.C.

“Is he driving us in circles, then?” Alba wondered if Thomas had seen them and was trying to lose them, but she thought that if he wanted to lose them, he would. Patrick kept calling out the names of turn-offs and cross-streets they passed.

And then ahead of them, Porter got off the busy highway, taking a westbound exit.

“Well, bugger it, he’s heading for the countryside.”

For several miles at least plenty of cars seemed to be making an exodus from the city, and Patrick did a good job of following Thomas without getting too close. Alba felt pretty certain that so far the man had no idea they followed him.

And then the traffic thinned.

Patrick tried to slow down, to pull back, but it soon became apparent that Thomas spotted them.

“There he goes.” Patrick stepped on the gas as Thomas’s car sped ahead of them.

Alba’s cell phone rang.

“I’m stuck in a damn traffic jam,” Nicholas sounded thoroughly disgusted. “Keep talking so I know where you are. I’ll get there eventually. Damn it all to hell!”

“We’re on our own.” Alba set the phone back in the console. She sat back and tried to relax as Patrick continued to accelerate. They’d let Thomas get a fair distance ahead in their bid not to spook him, which meant that despite the fact Patrick’s Jag could outperform the other car, they had a lot of ground to eat up first.

“Hell.” Patrick downshifted to slow the car quickly when an old-looking truck pulled onto the road ahead of them. His car responded beautifully, and Alba grinned when the driver of the truck gave them a blast of his horn and shook his fist out the window as they passed. She looked in her rearview mirror and saw the truck turn off into a private lane and wondered if he intended to call the police and report them for reckless driving.

“What the hell!”

She jerked her attention back to the road. Up ahead, smoky haze seemed to surround Thomas's car. It took her a moment to realize what the man had done.

"Get down!"

He'd spun his vehicle in a complete circle and now charged right at them. She heard the first two pings and realized Thomas was firing on them.

The car jolted, a loud bang exploded and Patrick swore. "Hang on!"

Patrick clearly lost control of the car as he tried to compensate for the blown tire. She closed her eyes, her stomach lurching as the vehicle swerved left, then right.

The screech of brakes made Alba open one eye in time to see the tree racing directly for them. She didn't have time to scream before they hit it with a bone jarring impact that pitched her forward toward the exploding airbag.

* * * *

Alba's ears rang with the shock of smashed metal and glass. She blinked, disoriented, tried to take in her surroundings. Reality came rushing back with a pounding in her head. She felt something wet and sticky just above her right eye and put her hand up to investigate.

Her fingers came back covered with blood.

Beside her a low groan brought her head around too fast. The sickening wave of dizziness passed quickly.

"Patrick!" He lay slumped over in his seat, pieces of white plastic draping him. He, too, seemed to have taken a hit on the head, though it barely bled.

"You! I should have known when you disappeared that you'd be trouble for me. Get out of the car, Ms. Morel, now!"

Alba whipped her head around to her left. Thomas stood about five feet away from her, a handgun held in a competent two-handed grip and pointed straight at her.

"I...I..." she thought to present herself as being injured worse than she was as her mind scrambled for options.

From somewhere inside the car her cell phone began to ring, though she didn't know where, precisely, it had ended up in the crash.

"Get out of the car now or I'll put a bullet in his head." Thomas changed the angle of his aim just slightly, and Alba knew he would pull the trigger without even flinching.

"Don't shoot him! He's just a guy I hired to follow you. I'm getting out." Time had run out. She looked down, grateful her blouse hadn't torn and that the small shiny piece of technology still pinned to her bra remained out of sight.

She only prayed the device still worked.

"Slowly, and don't try anything."

"Try anything? I'll be lucky if I can walk."

The driver's side front sustained the worst damage from hitting the tree but she wasn't sure if her door would work. After a couple of false starts, Alba was able to force the door open. She tried to get out but couldn't move. It took her a moment to remember the seat belt. She unfastened it, then used the frame of the car to pull herself out. She immediately fell to her knees and nearly threw up.

"Get up. We're going to my car. You're going to get in and drive where I tell you to drive, Ms. Morel."

Alba struggled to her feet, pleased the nausea and fuzziness seemed to be passing. Her legs held her. *Thank God nothing's broken.* However, she saw no need to paint a rosy picture for Thomas. "I don't feel well. I might not be a safe driver," she said, keeping her voice shaky. For effect, she reached up and gently touched her forehead, making sure his attention was drawn to her wound.

"You'd better be a safe driver, my dear, or you'll very soon be a dead one."

She kept her eye on him as she walked toward his car, terrified that he would turn and shoot Patrick just because he was a mean son-of-a-bitch.

But he didn't and whether it was because he didn't know Patrick, or was in such a hurry, Alba couldn't be certain. When she got behind the wheel of his Ford and he got in beside her, she felt an enormous sense of relief. Patrick was hurt, but alive and she needed to believe Nicholas would reach him soon.

She also needed to believe the transmitter she wore still worked. If it didn't, she feared she was about to break the only promise she'd ever given the man she loved. She'd take the first opening she got, even if it meant risking her life.

This bastard would pay for what he'd done.

* * * *

"I am not going to any buggering hospital!" Patrick held the ice pack the emergency med tech gave him against the newly applied bandage on the cut on his head.

A tow truck arrived on the heels of the ambulance, and would take the Jag to a garage, though Patrick thought the vehicle ruined beyond repair.

Inspector Davidson with New Scotland Yard had already taken his report, Nicholas just arrived, and Dylan was on his way with some information he'd gleaned from Thomas's flat.

Alba had been gone from him for twenty minutes. He didn't even know how badly she'd been hurt, though he did know through Nicholas she could talk and drive.

Patrick shot a look over at the man, bent over a notebook, pressing his Bluetooth close, listening and writing.

Listening to Alba and Porter Thomas as they drove only God knew where.

“If you refuse further treatment, we’ll need you to sign a release, Colonel,” the medic said.

“Fine, I’ll sign your sodding release. And then please go away.”

“This is your show,” Davidson said once the medic walked away to pack up his supplies. “I have no problem letting you walk around with a hole in your head, Colonel. What do you need us to do?”

“Stand by, mostly, until we know where they’re going.”

Patrick looked over at the sound of an approaching car, appreciating Dylan’s control of the BMW when he brought it to a rapid stop without hitting either the stopped police car or his own Mercedes.

Bolting from the car, he stopped for one brief moment to confer with Nicholas. When that man nodded, Dylan called out, “We know where they’re going.”

Patrick wasted no time. He jogged toward Dylan, even though that action felt as if it pulverized his brain.

“Where?” he asked as he got in the passenger side of the Beemer. Nicholas climbed into the back.

Davidson hung by the open door, preventing its closure until Dylan gave the Inspector directions. The instant the door closed, Dylan stepped on the gas, speeding them toward the west.

“You look like hell.”

“Strange coincidence,” Patrick said. “Where are we headed?” He fastened his seatbelt.

“A farmhouse about forty miles west of here. Secluded, large stand of trees to the north, nearest neighbor a good two miles away.”

“That sounds like a hell of a lot of information for a reputedly smart man to leave behind,” Patrick said.

“Yeah,” Dylan agreed, sounding as unhappy as Patrick felt. “This entire situation stinks worse than three-day-old hamburger.”

Patrick wasn’t certain he’d ever encountered that particular aroma. He did know, however, that his instincts told him unless they took

great care and were very lucky this mess was going to blow up in all their faces.

Chapter 19

He forgot how exhilarating it felt to anticipate looking down the sight of his rifle at a human target.

Too many years stuck inside behind a desk softened him; his uncle Yusuf had been right about that. It didn't matter that the service he'd provided had been vital. His mother's people valued frontline action, kill or be killed.

His mother's people. *His* people.

His father tried to poison his mind against the righteousness of a cause that went back more than centuries, to a place in time more ancient than even the beginnings of society in this Godforsaken, immoral country.

His father failed in that, though it amused him to allow the old man to think otherwise.

When his father won the right, through the courts not only of England but Afghanistan, to bring him to this damp, inhospitable country, his uncle took him aside, and had given him a mission.

"This is a sign from God," he said. "You can do us much good there, walking as one of them. You can help us as no one ever has. It is much to ask, I know, to live not as a man, but an infidel."

So he'd masked his true heart, and done his best to serve his people clandestinely.

But he missed this. He missed taking direct action, claiming direct victory. How he recalled the hunting expeditions he went on while yet an adolescent.

He'd killed his first man—a westerner—at the tender age of ten. He could still feel the incredible joy that flooded him as his family hailed him a hero. From that moment on he'd been considered a man. He'd continued to be a man until he'd been forced to leave.

Jonathan Hargreaves shook off the memories, pulled his thoughts back to the present, to the waiting.

He'd only been in place a few minutes. He'd mapped out a longer route for Thomas to follow so that he could be assured of arriving here first, but he knew the man would be along soon.

This house was owned by his people, that fact hidden behind so many layers of false corporations and individuals, it could never be traced. He'd used it from time to time to come and practice his marksmanship, or when the weight of the pretense he bore each day grew too heavy and he needed respite from the public face he wore.

Jonathan envisioned the next few minutes. The moment the American stepped out of the car, he'd be dead. He could freely admit he'd get a certain amount of personal satisfaction from this kill. Having to pretend to be Porter Thomas' friend had been particularly onerous. When he'd caught the signs of restlessness in the man, of discontent, he'd not hesitated to turn him. It certainly hadn't taken much persuasion to get Thomas to betray his country.

Now Jonathan would end him.

From this distance, with his beloved fifty-caliber Rangemaster, he couldn't miss. Jonathan ran his hand tenderly over the butt of the weapon. He'd kept it well maintained and faithfully practiced with it to keep his skills honed.

As Jonathan waited, as the time grew close, years melted away for him and he once more became that young boy eager to please the only family he'd ever loved, the men of the Hasmiri Ka'dil, his mother's family. His uncle Yusuf, head of the family after the death of the grandfather Jonathan had never met, was also the leader of one of the strongest, most active cells of the group the west referred to as The Zoltanas.

His uncle sanctioned this kill. “The American has served his purpose,” he said, “and we are grateful that you led him to us. But the time has come for him to die. If he is caught, though he does not know who his handler has been, the threads we have spent all these many years weaving together may come unraveled.”

Jonathan relished this chance to prove yet again *his* loyalty remained steadfast.

It would be a pleasure to kill a man like Thomas, a man who considered his patriotism and loyalty nothing more than assets to be traded for money.

He heard the sound of an approaching car and felt his heart trip with excitement.

Jonathan settled into position, pushed mundane thoughts from his mind, and focused on his mission and his target. He steadied his breathing, set aside the veneer of the western, British civil servant and took on the persona closest to his heart—they called him Hamir Kahli after his grandfather, and it immediately became a name he bore proudly.

And in that name, for that cause, he sighted down the scope of the rifle and watched the blue Ford Fiesta approach the farmhouse. The car came to a stop close to the building, but the driver’s door didn’t immediately open.

Instead the door on the passenger side did. Thomas stepped out, gun drawn and aimed at whoever sat motionless behind the wheel.

After a moment, the driver’s side door opened and Alba Morel got out of the car. Jonathan eased his finger away from the trigger, using the sighting scope to watch the unexpected scene. The woman looked injured, but not badly so. He saw fight in every line of her stance. Jonathan wished he could see her eyes. He’d bet they blazed with fury.

He considered for one moment making two kills. There was no reason to hold back. In principle, the Morel woman was as much an enemy of his people as any other western agent. More than some,

truthfully, as she'd proven herself to be extraordinarily competent in her assignments.

Yet he could not help but admire her dedication, her loyalty, her *integrity*. She was everything Porter Thomas was not.

For that reason alone, she deserved to live.

Jonathan shook his head. Uncle Yusuf would say he had become soft, living in the west. Uncle *had* said that as a matter of fact, the last time they'd met, hiding in plain sight at an Embassy reception. Jonathan closed his eyes for a moment, reining in his emotions, exerting his will, the will of a soldier of Hasmiri Ka'dil.

Calmer, more in control, he opened his eyes and sighted down the barrel of his rifle.

* * * *

"You're just full of surprises," Alba said as she turned to face Porter Thomas. A shiver wracked her spine. She felt as if someone watched her. Carefully, she glanced around, trying to take in the view, assess the possibilities. Ever mindful of the transmitter she wore, she said, "I never would have figured you for the type to go for a solitary farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, practically surrounded by forest."

"You don't know me at all, Ms. Morel. The fact that I'm holding a gun on you at the moment should be proof of that."

"No, the fact you're holding a gun on me just means you're a bottom-feeding, scumbag traitor."

"I never knew you could be such a mouthy bitch. I don't like it."

He raised his gun and aimed it at her face. "Now shut up and get in the house. Here's the key."

Alba didn't have many options. She promised Patrick she wouldn't do anything stupid. The weight of the P32 strapped to her ankle reminded her she wasn't completely helpless. She'd spent enough time practicing with the weapon, drilling through various

scenarios, that she felt confident that if necessary, she could draw, fire, and hit him.

But she didn't want to kill the bastard. She'd much rather see him spend the rest of his life rotting in some prison.

Unless, of course, the jury gave him the ultimate punishment—which, considering the charge would be treason—they just might.

Alba took the key off the roof of the car, then moved cautiously, keeping Thomas and the gun in her peripheral vision as she walked toward the house. The sense of being watched made her skin feel as if thousands of ants crawled all over her, and it was all she could do not to rub her arms.

Any move she made might gain her a bullet in the back of the head.

The house had been made of brick, likely early in the last century. The front door, solid wood, contained no window, no way to see out except from the small multi-paned windows on either side of it, several feet away.

The windows appeared grimy from lack of washing and no curtains appeared to be hung inside to give aesthetic appeal or to provide cover.

Alba stopped when she reached the door.

"Open it."

She felt the nudge of the gun against her back and squelched the urge to turn on him and knock the weapon from his grip. Too risky, and if she did want him to spend time in jail, then she'd better get him talking more than he had so far.

She unlocked, then opened the door, stepped inside. The air smelled stale and heavy, as if the house had been closed up for a long time. To call the single sofa and two chairs shabby would be painting them with a glamorous brush. The floor, unfinished pine planks, warped near the side windows. Those windows were also bare, though less dirty, and looked out to the forest on the north side of the house.

“I love what you’ve done with the place.”

“It’s not much but I call it...not much.”

Alba didn’t know if Thomas had been aware of the low-key investigation being conducted on him before he’d fled London. She decided to play for her listening audience. “Just what the hell do you plan to do now? I hate to break it to you, but if I knew enough to be looking for you here in England, then others will soon follow.”

“Then how lucky for me that I ran into you. I don’t imagine anyone is going to try anything funny with you as my personal body armor. We’re going to be here a few hours. Let’s see what we have.”

He used his gun as a pointer and Alba dutifully walked through to the next room. It seemed to have been a dining room at one time, but now was empty of furniture. Beyond it lay the kitchen.

Here at least were signs of relatively recent occupation. An electric range and a small, old-fashioned refrigerator took up the wall opposite the dining room. A single sink sat under a window, and though it didn’t shine, it was free of dishes and grime.

The fridge hummed, a sign the electricity worked. Alba shivered. She hoped she wasn’t still here when night fell.

“Open the fridge.”

“Your first time here too, then.”

He grunted in response. Not much information, but something. “So how did you know of this place? It’s not an agency safe house.”

“I have my sources.”

He moved her so he could look into the fridge. No food awaited on the shelves. He pointed to the cupboards, and she opened them, one at a time. A few cans of pasta and soups had been left behind, likely by whoever had helped Thomas. Judging by the looks of them, they hadn’t been there very long.

She had a pretty good idea how they could find out the identity of Thomas’ ‘source’. Of course, she needed to get herself out of this situation first. To do that she needed the man to lower his guard. The best way to do that would be to goad him.

She made her tone as scathing as possible. “‘I have my sources’,” she said that with a sneer. “Do you think those words make you sound important? You’re not important, you’re just a slimy traitor.”

“No, I’m an American. I love the perks of living in the west. Not that I could afford many of them. The criminals and the ones who are out to destroy us, now they had plenty of money to buy whatever the hell they wanted.”

“Money? You sold your country out for *money*?”

“Oh, please, don’t be so fucking dramatic. I didn’t *sell out* my country. I simply saw to it a few...what did you call me? Oh, yes, bottom-feeding scumbags got sent back home where they belonged. Their cooperation, their information, certainly didn’t qualify them for living the life of luxury they would have enjoyed staying in the States. Besides, they were mostly ragheads. Who gives a shit about them?”

Alba thought of Patel Khalid, rescued by a Delta Force Team, but not before suffering almost unspeakable torture.

“I give a shit. You used me, you son of a bitch. You used me to sell out your country, to sell people to their torturers, to their executioners.”

“You, Ms. Morel, are simply a tool, and nothing more. Whether mine, or the government’s, you have ever only been just a disposable tool. Heavy emphasis on the word *disposable*. Back to the front room. We might as well be comfortable. As I said, we’ll be here for a while.”

Alba moved ahead of him, his words hitting a little too close to home. “Well, I might be comfortable. But your arm is going to get tired holding that gun on me.”

“I need you alive, but that doesn’t mean I must leave you uninjured. If you don’t shut up, I’ll shoot you in the knee.”

Alba turned, her temper slipping away from her. She took one half-step forward, watched with some detachment as the man who’d been her boss for the last five years raised his gun and knew by the look in his eyes he was going to fire.

The side window exploded and Alba screamed, throwing her arms over her head and her body to the floor as something warm and wet showered over her.

* * * *

He'd rushed the shot because of the Mercedes that came speeding down the road, then turned into the laneway. But rushed or no, he'd been successful. Quickly, he began to break down his weapon, placing it in the case. One eye watched as the car doors flew open and three men emerged. He recognized Patrick, noted the fear lacing his voice as he called the woman's name. Obviously they'd heard the shot. Couldn't be helped. He could report to his uncle that the American was dead.

He'd been keeping track of time, pleased when he began to walk North less than two minutes after the kill. It would take him only three minutes to arrive at his motorcycle. He didn't worry about anyone from the Mercedes coming after him, or even thinking to call Scotland Yard to have roadblocks put up in the area.

They'd be too busy dealing with the mess he'd left for them.

Chapter 20

The explosion of the gunshot jolted Patrick's heart.

Beside him and behind the wheel of the car, Dylan swore, both feet hitting the brakes, making the vehicle fishtail as it came to a stop at the end of the lane, next to the Fiesta and close to the house.

Patrick leapt out of the car before the wheels stopped rolling.

"Alba!"

"Sniper! In the woods!"

He didn't care, he only wanted to run to his woman. Nicholas tackled him and pulled him to the ground before he'd taken three steps.

"Are you shot?" Patrick knew they'd have to shout for her to hear them.

"I...I don't think so. No. No, I'm not. But Thomas. Oh, God."

"Are you away from the window, little sister?" Nicholas asked.

"Yes. I'm on the floor behind the front door. The window the sniper fired through is on the north side of the house."

"Fucking let me go!" Patrick wanted to pound his fist into Nicholas' face, but his hands were trapped under him with the weight of the other man holding him down.

"In a minute, Milord. My life won't be worth shit if I let you get killed." Nicholas said.

The man was very strong, something Nicholas demonstrated to him the moment they first met back in his crofter's cottage. Thinking of that moment, he said, "I thought you *wanted* me dead."

"Yeah, but that was before you became family."

"Then you understand I have to get to her. Now."

“I know. Dylan?”

“Yeah, on three.”

Patrick understood then they *were* going to let him go to Alba, they just wanted to do what they could to protect him first. He was used to working alone, hadn’t considered that he and these two men formed a team. Of course, that hadn’t been an issue when Alba sat next to him. He’d clicked with her right from the first moment, felt as if they’d been a team forever.

“You ready?” Nicholas asked.

“Not until you get your fat ass off of me.”

“Oh yeah, sorry.”

Patrick focused on what he needed to do—sprint to the house, a good thirty feet from where he now crouched behind the Mercedes, and without getting himself killed. Dylan slid out the passenger side of the car and hovered near the trunk, Nicholas squatted beside him near the front fender. Both men held guns—something he hadn’t noticed until now.

“Yes, I’m ready. On three, then.”

Nicholas counted it down. When the other two men braved the open and began to fire their handguns, Patrick ran hard and fast for the house. He hit the door, the solid wood rattling his bones. His hand grappled with the handle until the portal opened, and he fell inside, hitting the floor, then rolling into a crouch.

Alba faced the shattered window, two hands clutching that pea shooter of hers, aimed and clearly ready to fire.

She looked cool and professional despite being covered in blood and gore. Patrick spared only a glance at what was left of Porter Thomas. Then his attention centered on his woman.

“You’re not looking your usual polished self, darling,” he said.

“What can I say? I’m having a bad hair day.” Her voice carried a slight tremor. He could hardly blame her for that.

Patrick scooted over beside her. “You’re all right?”

“Can’t say I’m thrilled to have witnessed what happened to Thomas, let alone be wearing some of it. But I’m not hurt, other than a knock on the head from your incredibly bad driving.”

He heard it in her voice, the bare threads of her composure. He leaned back against the wall and allowed himself two seconds to rejoice that she hadn’t been shot, that she hadn’t been seriously injured.

“I’m only a bad driver when some asshole’s shooting out my tires,” Patrick said, his eyes still closed.

“Well, that’s all right, then.” Alba took a deep breath, then, “I think he’s gone,” she said softly. “He only took the one shot. Sniper could have taken me out, too, but he didn’t. Just Thomas.”

“An assassination, then.” Patrick said.

“Yes. I think his handler obviously decided he’d become a liability.”

“Probably. I hope Inspector Davidson has called in some roadblocks. Otherwise we don’t have a hope in hell of figuring out who his handler was.”

The sound of the police siren eased Patrick’s tension. He opened his eyes and looked over at his woman. Alba sighed, lowered her gun, then rested her head against the wall.

“The Cavalry is here,” she said.

“This is England, I’ll remind you.”

“What, you didn’t have Cavalry?”

“Of course we did. On horseback, carrying sabers.” He copied her pose and rested his head against the wall. “Not so much after the Boer War, mind you. One of my ancestors was a Cavalry officer in South Africa. Of course, that was in the day when you didn’t need anything but money to buy the rank.”

“You British were definitely ahead of your time.”

“I think we’re clear!” Dylan said.

The sound of footsteps told Patrick they were about to have company. “Mind the crime scene!” he called out.

The door opened, followed by some ripe, low-spoken curses. Patrick turned to watch as Nicholas and Dylan stepped into the room, and like Patrick, spared only a glance for the body on the floor, instead turning their attention to Alba.

“Holy shit, little sister,” Nicholas said.

“Shit’s about the only thing I’m not wearing,” she replied.

There had never been any doubt in Patrick’s mind, but that last comment sealed it beyond the shadow of any doubt.

“You do realize that you’re going to have to marry me, don’t you, sweetheart?” he said.

“The idea did occur to me, yes.”

When she turned and looked at him, he thought he’d never seen a more beautiful woman, or a more beautiful smile, in all his life.

* * * *

Dylan insisted on taking her and Patrick to the hospital. She’d never seen this implacable side of her brother-in-law before, though she had suspected it existed. Fortunately they were both all right, although the doctor did insist on their being in the company of others overnight, as they both sustained mild concussions.

Alba insisted on showering and donning scrubs before leaving the hospital. She threw out the clothes she’d worn. No way had she wanted either of her sisters to see those.

There was no question but that they stay in London at the Pierce townhouse overnight. Neither of them felt up to the drive to Wiltshire. Her sisters fussed over them from the moment they stepped foot in the house. As much as she loved both Pam and Twyla, Alba was happy to shut the door on them and just be alone with Patrick.

“Come here,” he said.

Alba gladly stepped out of her slippers and her nightshirt and slid into the queen-sized bed beside him. Patrick gathered her close and she couldn’t help but sigh when she rested her head on his shoulder.

The heat of his flesh against hers immediately eased the remainder of the tension she hadn't realized she carried. Her body ached from the day's traumas. Here, alone and naked in bed with the man she loved, she could finally put all that behind her.

"It's been a hell of a day," Patrick said, proving he was on the same wavelength. He caressed his hands up and down her back in a way that soothed rather than aroused.

"It has. How's your head?" she asked. She nuzzled her face against his chest and inhaled him. Sighing, she relished the scent of him, something she'd missed all through their years apart.

"Hard, apparently. How's yours?" he countered.

She couldn't help it. She laughed, even though that action increased the slight pounding behind her eyes.

"We do sound married," Patrick said. "I'll be very glad when we finally are."

"Even though?" Alba asked. She knew she didn't have to elaborate.

"Yes, even though. It doesn't matter, sweetheart. It simply doesn't."

She could have sworn, for one heartbeat of time, that she stood in a cave deep underground, a cave lit by supernatural light. Three women, dressed in ancient garb, raised their arms and voices in joyous song, the most lyrical and compelling music she'd ever heard. And then she blinked and the image disappeared. She lay in bed alone with her love. A great sense of freedom filled her.

She would have to share that moment with her sisters, as well as the certain knowledge she'd just been given, that Patrick's acceptance of her—along with similar acts of faith by Dylan and Nicholas—had shattered some sort of ancient curse.

Alba felt her smile spread. She stretched up and gave Patrick a gentle kiss. "Tomorrow is going to be a very interesting day, I think."

* * * *

“Do you *know* whose house this is?” Patrick asked as Alba pulled up to the curb.

“Of course I know whose house this is.” She hadn’t told Patrick their destination, but it didn’t surprise her he recognized the house.

He said nothing more, just shot her small curiosity-filled glances as he followed her as she made her way to the steps and up to the front door.

The door opened for them before she could ring the bell. “Ms. Morel, Colonel Jamieson, do come in. He’s expecting you.”

The butler led them through the entrance corridor and down the hall to a home office. The door stood open, and Alba paused on the threshold until the man sitting behind the desk looked up.

“Well there you are, and all in one piece, the both of you, praise God. Come in, come in.”

“Hello, Uncle William. How are you?”

“The Minister of Defense is your uncle?” Patrick asked, clearly stunned.

Alba grinned at him. “Surprised?”

“An understatement.”

“You remember I told you my father died before I’d been born, and hadn’t, in fact, even known I’d been conceived? Well, the year I graduated college and went to work for the government, I found Uncle William—or rather, he found me, when he finally came into possession of some of his late brother’s things and went through them.”

“Ah. I do recall, Minister, that your younger brother died in a car accident in the United States some time ago,” Patrick said.

Alba sat in one of the chairs opposite the large desk and Patrick took the other.

“It took me a long time to put together Ronnie’s last year. I had to wait until mother died, because any mention of him hurt her terribly. At any rate, it was a stroke of luck that I found Alba. Of course, she

had just set out on her career, and I had begun to come into some political power of my own so we decided to keep our relationship private—just in the family.”

“You said earlier you had contacts here,” Patrick recalled. He shook his head and smiled. “But I had no idea they were so well placed.”

“Patrick and I are going to be married,” Alba told her uncle.

“Wonderful! Congratulations to you both.” He looked from one to the other of them, clearly pleased. “You know, I half thought of introducing you to Jonathan the last time you came to visit. You’ll be living here, I presume?”

“Yes, in Wiltshire. I’d planned to retire before all this misadventure, anyway.”

William shot Patrick a smile and said, “And of course, you’re officially retired at the end of the year.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Not the sort of work for a married man.” He sat back, and Alba thought he looked very pleased with himself. “Mildred and I will finally get a chance to spend some time with you, my dear. She will be thrilled to hear the news.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice, “I hope you like shopping, as Mildred is quite dedicated to the pastime. And you should also be warned that she’ll want to lend a hand, arranging your wedding.”

“I’d like that, Uncle William.”

“Now, I know you had a specific reason for coming here today, and in view of the events of yesterday I don’t think it was only to share your good news with me. I’ve asked Philip to bring us some tea,” William Northrop said. “After he serves, you can tell me what it is you’d like me to do.”

* * * *

“Bloody brilliant,” Patrick said later as they headed back to the car. “You are bloody brilliant. I *never* would have thought of that.”

“Thank you,” Alba said. “Uncle William seemed to think we’d have our answer within just a few hours.”

“And you think you know what that answer is going to be, don’t you?” Patrick asked.

“Yes, I do. And so do you.”

“Yes, damn it. That would give us one more thing in common, wouldn’t it?”

“It would indeed.” She gave the car keys to Patrick, and gratefully climbed into the passenger side. “You drive. Lunch, and then maybe we’ll have that answer.”

“Lunch it is. And while we’re at lunch, I’ll make a call, see if I can get us in for an appointment.”

“All right. For around three? That would give us two hours to get to Gatwick.”

Patrick started the car then turned to her. “Three it is. Of course I’ll come with you....but *why* are we going to Scotland?”

Alba held back her smile. “There’s something I need to do, and the only place I can do it is in Scotland. At an old Scottish Keep that’s recently been refurbished, in fact, about a half-hour northwest of Ullapool.”

“I guess I’ll just have to wait until then to satisfy my curiosity.”

Alba smiled. Patrick wasn’t used to others arranging things, or being kept in the dark. She’d bet there would be times over the years when she’d be able to do both and she looked forward to it. In the meantime, she had no intention of taking his not so subtle hint and satisfying his curiosity. “Yes, darling, I guess you will,” she said.

* * * *

“Patrick, Ms. Morel. I can’t tell you how delighted I am that you’re both all right.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Jonathan rose to his feet the moment they entered his office. *Old-world manners*. Patrick wondered how a man could wear a duplicitous face for so many years, even to the point of showing old-world manners toward women.

“A harrowing incident for you yesterday, Ms. Morel.” Jonathan said.

“Yes, Mr. Hargreaves, it certainly was. But I am very grateful to be alive.”

“Indeed.” He took his seat only after Alba sat.

Patrick sat down beside her, and took her hand in his.

“The sniper could easily have killed me,” she continued on. Patrick heard the note of sincerity in her voice and understood her sentiment. “But he didn’t. I guess I’m going to spend the rest of my life wondering about that. Wondering why a man who surely must consider me his enemy allowed me to live. And I’ll also always be thankful that he did.”

Patrick watched the emotions cross Jonathan Hargreaves’s face. Now that he looked, now that he knew, everything seemed so obvious to him.

“I happen to believe we should live each day with an attitude of gratitude. As for the why of it, perhaps, my dear, you should just consider it a gift, and leave it at that. Some questions truly are best left unanswered.”

“Perhaps. But when one is given a gift, it should be returned. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, I suppose.” Hargreaves seemed confused, and more than a little suspicious. He didn’t know, of course, that four heavily armed British Special Forces officers waited just outside his office door.

Patrick decided the time had come to end it. He opened the large envelop he’d brought with him and laid a series of photographs out on Jonathan’s desk.

“The Minister was kind enough to call for the surveillance video taken from the Telesat4 defense satellite. These images, made from those surveillance videos, were captured over a period of the last six months, and include yesterday. They clearly show the same property just west of London, the property where, yesterday afternoon, Porter Thomas was shot to death by a sniper, hiding in the trees on the north side of the house.”

Patrick watched as Jonathan looked at the photos, as the realization dawned that he had been photographed visiting the farmhouse, practicing with his rifle. And then again yesterday, just under cover of the trees, rifle at hand and aimed at his target.

“The Minister has promised to have you secured in a secret location in return for your cooperation. Though you will remain in prison for the rest of your life, that doesn’t have to be as dismal a prospect as it could be.”

“No,” Jonathan said slowly. “The future doesn’t have to be dismal at all.”

Patrick got to his feet and held out a hand to Alba. He wanted to say something more to the man he’d known and worked with for more than two decades. Only he found there really wasn’t anything more to say.

The door opened and two of the four armed soldiers entered.

“Thank you,” Jonathan said just as Patrick and Alba reached the door.

Patrick turned and knew one eye-brow was raised in question.

“Thank you for being the one to confront me. The one to end it. You’ve always behaved in a most professional manner, and I’m grateful to you for that. Good-bye, Lord Jamieson.”

Patrick felt the moment turn surreal, and found he didn’t even have it in him to say good-bye.

Alba squeezed his hand, and her support and understanding would be more than enough comfort to get him through these next trying

months, when Jonathan Hargreaves would be brought before a special military court-martial, and he did his duty in testifying.

As they reached the elevator, a single gunshot rang out and Patrick knew why Jonathan's good-bye had sounded like such a final one.

Chapter 21

They'd taken a regular flight from London to Inverness, and then were met by Air Marshal Thornton Fergusson and a Merlin HC3 helicopter. The Air Marshal, a rank equivalent to General in the United States, flew the chopper himself, with a Lieutenant Sparks as his copilot.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Patrick said in Alba's ear when he saw the Merlin.

"Not much longer," she promised.

They strapped themselves in and donned the headsets that allowed them to communicate with the Air Marshal.

"You're expected at the Keep. I'm afraid we can give you only forty-five minutes once we're on the ground. The Lieutenant and I are supposed to be on another mission, and that's the timeline we have to return to base."

"Thank you, Air Marshal. I appreciate the ride," Alba said.

"When the Minister of Defense asks for a personal favor, a smart man says yes." He smiled to let her know he really didn't mind providing that personal favor.

It took them only eight minutes to reach Claymore Keep. As the helicopter approached the site, Alba looked out the small window next to her. She could see the Keep was in the midst of renovations. New stones blended in with the old, the owner's attempt, she thought, at realism. Flowers bloomed in the gardens around the main building inside the stone wall that surrounded the medieval castle-like complex. Situated on a point of land overlooking fields and ocean,

Alba imagined that in its day Claymore Keep had been an integral part of Scottish defense.

The helicopter landed gracefully, and she and Patrick exited the craft.

“Come on,” she said as she took his hand and led him toward the enclosure. The stone wall had an opening cut into it, and Alba wondered if there would eventually be a gate of some sort installed. Ahead of them stood the Keep itself, with about fifteen stone steps leading up to the door.

That door opened and a man came out to wait for them at the top of the steps. A gentle breeze caught his too-long dark hair, ruffling it but moving it off his tanned face, so that his expression—guarded—stood straight out for them to see.

Patrick’s steps faltered, and then he stopped.

“Mother of God.”

“Go on. Go see your friend, love.”

He turned, looked at her with eyes that held a thousand questions. Then he spun back toward the man he’d called best friend for most of his life, and one he’d mourned as dead for the past nearly two years.

Patrick wasted not another second. Breaking into a jog, taking the steps two at a time, he didn’t stop until he’d thrown his arms around Gareth Willoughby.

“My God, my God.”

Alba could hear him from where she stood. She didn’t move, giving him some privacy while he wrestled with the reality of his best friend, alive.

When he turned, she could see the tears in his eyes and knew they were tears of joy. And when he motioned for her to come to him, she smiled, and headed toward the still embracing men.

“Are you the one, then?” Gareth Willoughby asked her.

“The one?” Patrick looked from Gareth to Alba.

She thought it high time to answer all the questions he hadn’t asked, and knew that she could *because* he hadn’t asked.

“Gareth means, am I the sharpshooter who helped him fake his own death, and the answer is yes.”

“Helped him—”

“They told me they were bringing in one of the best extraction experts in the world. I vaguely recall where I was when that dart hit me. Hell of a shot.”

“Extraction expert,” Patrick said the words slowly.

She could see he was having a bit of trouble putting it together. She could hardly blame him. He’d just received one hell of a shock.

“I *am* a sharpshooter, but I’m not an assassin. I’ve never killed anyone. I would just go in with a delta team—usually—then use my specially designed rifle to deliver a tranquilizer dart to temporarily incapacitate the target. Mostly, my targets were people our government wanted to arrest or question. Gareth was only the second person I targeted to pull out of an undercover op gone bad.”

“I know you don’t have much time,” Gareth said. “And we can’t have a repeat visit until it’s safe for me to come back amongst the living. Basically, what happened was that my cover was blown, and more than that, the insurgents not only knew my identity, they knew where I lived. Make no mistake, they have agents in Great Britain, more than we’re comfortable admitting. If they couldn’t get to me they would have gone after Mum and Dad—even my sister Ginny, and she was just married and with a small baby. But if they thought they’d killed me, my family would be left alone. I couldn’t let them hurt my family.”

Alba sensed someone watching them. Just inside the still open door a tall, red-haired woman watched them silently. Alba looked into her eyes and knew this woman was part of Gareth’s security team, and likely much more than that to the man.

Gareth seemed to sense the woman’s presence, too. He turned and gestured, and she joined them.

“This is Marissa. She’s my...bodyguard.”

Patrick raised his one eyebrow and Gareth laughed. “Yes, you said I would one day eat my words.” To the rest of them he said, “I’m afraid I used to be a horrible male chauvinist, was one all the years of my youth—actually until very recent events. When fate kicks you it kicks hard, for here I stand, owing my life to two women.”

“Well I’m marrying this one,” Patrick said as he put his arm around Alba.

Alba resisted the urge to give him an elbow in the ribs. Instead she simply smiled.

Gareth considered first Patrick, and then her. Then his eyes widened. “My God, I didn’t make the connection! Is she the one you met just before I took that last assignment? The woman you left in the Caribbean?”

“She is.”

Gareth led them inside the Keep, to the dining room just off the entrance hall. Marissa brewed some tea, which she poured out of respect, Alba felt sure, of Gareth’s need to focus on his friend. That need seemed mutual as they didn’t have very long. The men nearly tripped over each other’s sentences, trying to cram two years of their lives into a few short minutes.

“I’m ripped it had to be this way for Mom and Dad,” Gareth said. “Only keeping them safe could have made me make this choice. Hopefully, the day isn’t that far off when I can let them know I’m alive.”

“I see them regularly. I won’t lie to you, it was hard on them. But they have Ginny’s boy, and that’s helped. And you don’t have to worry. I’ll continue to look after them until you do come back from the dead.”

“I know you will, mate.”

Patrick told Gareth about Hargreaves, and while they agreed he’d likely been the one responsible for Gareth’s plight in the first place, they also agreed they couldn’t afford to take the chance that someone else hadn’t been involved.

"I'm sorry it couldn't have been a longer visit," Alba said to Patrick as they walked back to the helicopter.

"Me, too."

She thought it odd he didn't have more than that to say. But when they strapped into the chopper and it lifted off, he reached for her. His arms felt solid and strong around her as he simply clamped on to her, his actions more eloquent than a thousand words could ever be.

* * * *

Patrick surprised her by booking the Carstairs London's Penthouse suite for the night. He'd been mostly quiet since they'd left Gareth. Alba wondered what he thought, how he felt. She'd never done anything so hard in all her life than to give the man she loved the space he apparently needed to deal with the afternoon's revelations.

She'd seen him speak for a moment with Dylan when they'd stopped at the townhouse to gather some of their things.

Now she knew why he'd wanted to talk to her brother-in-law. He'd been arranging this.

"This is nice." Alba had been in the suite once, of course, but to attend a small cocktail party. She'd never stayed overnight, or really indulged in the luxury the accommodation offered.

She'd never stayed in any of her brother-in-law's fancy hotels, come to that.

"I wanted it to be just the two of us tonight. No family, no staff. Just you, and me, and what we become when we're together." He came to her then and cupped her face in his hands. "*My Alba*. I fell in love with you the first moment I laid eyes on you in that tropical paradise. I never stopped loving you, and I know I never will."

The emotion in his eyes filled her heart. The heat she saw there seared her soul and made her want to give him anything. Everything.

"I never stopped loving you either, Patrick, even when I thought you'd rejected me. You're a part of me, Patrick Jamieson."

“We’re a part of each other.”

His mouth took hers, his lips infinitely gentle, nearly reverent in the way they sipped and tasted her. She felt his hands tremble as they caressed down her neck, her back and she wondered why.

She eased her lips from his and used a finger to caress his face, his lips, as she let her eyes ask.

“I’m sorry. I hurt you. I’ve hurt you in so many ways and I don’t—” Patrick swallowed hard, clearly having trouble forming the words.

“Shh. No. No, my love. We had to travel that path to get here. No regrets. We love each other. We belong to each other. Nothing that came before matters.” How could she be so blessed to be loved by such a man? Yet everything she’d just said came from her heart. She believed with everything inside her that they’d gone through everything they had in order to finally be together in the end.

“You’re more generous than I deserve.”

“Oh, darling, you are exactly what *I* deserve and I’m going to spend the rest of my life enjoying you.”

“Are you, now?”

Her bold claim chased the shadows from his eyes. Now delight and laughter sparkled there. And love. So much love that Alba wondered if she could ever hold it all.

“Did you know,” Patrick said as he bent close to nibble her ear, “that there is a very large Jacuzzi in this suite?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I’ve never made love in a Jacuzzi. If we like it, we’ll have one installed in Jamieson Hall.”

Alba twined her arms around his neck. “Then we should definitely find out if we like it.”

They undressed each other, searing kisses and lingering caresses prolonging their actions. Alba loved the texture of Patrick’s chest, the firm muscle and supple flesh, the heat of him, and the scent of him.

Closing her eyes she inhaled him, knowing she'd recognize him among hundreds by his masculine fragrance alone.

When his shirt came off, and her breasts bared, she rubbed herself against him, the abrasion of his chest hair bringing her nipples to aching, needy points.

"I love the flavor of you," he whispered, just before his mouth captured one nipple.

Hot and wet, his lips closed over the tiny bud. He suckled deeply and Alba moaned, the pull from her breast to her womb sending waves of thrilling arousal through her. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing her breast to his mouth, showing him she was greedy for more.

He lifted her, carried her, and she didn't care where he would take her. It was enough to be in his arms. She'd go anywhere. When he sat, she straddled him. When he turned, and then slid down into the hot, frothy water, she gasped.

"I called ahead," he whispered. "They ran the bath for us while we checked in." Holding her tight, wrapped in his arms, his mouth plundered hers, his tongue stroking and sliding and tasting her.

Arousal climbed, tiny tingles of excitement that drove her to move against him, to feel the hardness of his cock against her pussy. Her hips undulated back and forth, the heat of his rigid flesh hotter than the water that surrounded them and more wonderful against her flesh than the finest silk.

"I need you inside me," she said, recognizing the truth of those words. She would never have enough of him, and when he lifted her and then brought her down over the tip of his penis, she took him into her body, welcomed him home.

"You feel so damn good around my cock," Patrick said, his breathing ragged.

"Your cock feels pretty damn good in my pussy," she said. With slow, sinuous movements she raised herself, then lowered onto him again, a steady in and out fucking motion that stoked the fire of her

arousal. The head of his cock, rubbing back and forth against the wall of her tunnel stroked her G spot. Beyond thrilling, Alba closed her eyes, shivered in pleasure, and took more.

“God, you’re so beautiful riding me this way. Like a Greek goddess, wet and naked and loving me.”

Alba smiled, the slight hitch in Patrick’s words a very pleasing sound. His gaze rested on where his cock impaled her. “A Greek goddess?” she asked.

“Yes, you’ve been a Siren to me since I first touched you, calling to me no matter where I happened to be or what I was doing. I couldn’t get you out of my thoughts or off my mind. You came to me nearly every night in my dreams, and I hungered for you. Now, here you are.”

The beauty of his words, the wonder of his love transported her to another time and another place. *An image shimmered, the scene instantly familiar to her, and for a heartbeat of time she understood. Ligeia, calling to her mate.* Then Alba blinked, and focused, and became lost in his gaze.

“Mine,” he said. “That life time, this one. Only mine, and my only.” And then he took control of their love making.

His hands bracketed her hips and he lifted himself into her, a hard, deep invasion that claimed her, marked her, made her his. No other man would ever stir her, and no other man would ever have her. Alba knew in that moment to make up for all she suffered as a child, the fates balanced the scales by giving him to her.

With that certain knowledge, her orgasm exploded.

He wrapped her tighter, brought his mouth to hers and plundered, his tongue seeming to devour her. He commanded and she opened, gave him everything. Over and over the spasms rocked her. She cried out when he stiffened, when he held her down onto him. She felt his cock quiver, felt the release of hot seed into her welcoming body, and rejoiced that her name on his lips sounded like a prayer as he emptied himself inside of her.

For long moments she rested, her head on his shoulder, her breathing shallow and fast. He stroked his hands up and down her back, his caress loving and caring.

When he reached out and then brought the soap to her, the silky, lightly floral bubbles soothed even more, and she moaned in pleasure.

"I like the feel of you, sleek and wet under my hands. We'll bathe each other, then move this party to the bed."

"What a wonderful idea."

* * * *

"I have to go to Washington for a week," she said later as they cuddled in the king-sized bed.

"For your debrief," Patrick acknowledged. He vowed it would be the only time she would ever be away from him again. "I want to go with you, to D.C. I want to drop you at the door then pick you up again when you're done."

"Yes, I'd like that. What about you? Any special procedures to be followed in your retirement?"

"Hargreaves's taking his own life the way he did raised a lot of questions. The Minister is more concerned with who he had been connected to than anything else. But I won't be participating in that. I had been slated to resign at the end of the year. I've asked for, and been given permission, to move that up. When we leave for the States next week, I'll just be an author. And an Earl." He pulled her close, kissed the top of her head. "And after D.C., do you want to go to New York? You have an apartment there. You'll want to pack your things, maybe say some good-byes."

"Saying good-bye won't take long. And we can just grab my clothes and have someone do the rest of it. I want to come home. Back to Wiltshire, I want to start our life together." Alba laughed, then pulled back a bit, looked into his eyes.

"I guess *that* wasn't very sophisticated of me, was it?"

“You have to promise me you’ll *never* become sophisticated. I’m anxious for our life together to begin, too, love.”

He laid her flat, looked into her eyes. “My Alba. You’ll be my wife, my countess, and the mother of my children. Just as you already are my best friend, and my only love.”

He had never seen anything as beautiful as her smile, and never felt anything as perfect as the life he envisioned for them both.

“Yes. Yes to all of it. For this lifetime, and all the lifetimes yet to come.”

Patrick felt it then, and could see by the look in her eyes, she felt it too: the glide of destiny moving into place. He knew with an almost otherworldly certainty they would be blessed for all of this lifetime.

And all the lifetimes yet to come.

THE END

www.morganashbury.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan has been a writer since she was first able to pick up a pen. In the beginning it was a hobby, a way to create a world of her own, and who could resist the allure of that? Then as she grew and matured, life got in the way, as life often does. She got married and had three children, and worked in the field of accounting, for that was the practical thing to do and the children did need to be fed. And all the time she was being practical, she would squirrel herself away on quiet Sunday afternoons, and write.

Most children are raised knowing the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. Morgan's children also learned the Paper Rule: thou shalt not throw out any paper that has thy mother's words upon it.

Believing in tradition, Morgan ensured that her children's children learned this rule, too.

Life threw Morgan a curve when, in 2002, she underwent emergency triple by-pass surgery. Second chances are to be cherished, and with the encouragement and support of her husband, Morgan decided to use hers to do what she'd always dreamed of doing: writing full time. "I can't tell you how much I love what I do. I am truly blessed."

Morgan has always loved writing romance. It is the one genre that can incorporate every other genre within its pulsating heart. Romance showcases all that human kind can aspire to be. And, she admits, she's a sucker for a happy ending.

Morgan's favorite hobbies are reading, cooking, and traveling – though she would rather you didn't mention that last one to her

husband. She has too much fun teasing him about having become a “Traveling Fool” of late.

Morgan lives in Southwestern Ontario with a cat that has an attitude, a dog that has no dignity, and her husband of thirty-eight years, David.

Also by Morgan Ashbury

Song of the Sirens 1: *The Enchantress*

Song of the Sirens 2: *The Seductress*

Magic and Love 1: *The Prince and the Single Mom*

Magic and Love 2: *The Princess and the Bodyguard*

Magic and Love 3: *A Prince for Sophie*

Lily in Bloom

Made for Each Other

Beau and the Lady Beast

The Lady Makes Three

Wanton Wager

Reckless and Brazen 1: *Reckless Abandon*

Reckless and Brazen 2: *Brazen Seduction*

Cowboy Cravings

Available at

BOOKSTRAND.COM



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com