

The background of the entire poster is a romantic scene. A woman with long, wavy red hair is leaning her head against a man's face. She has her eyes closed and a slight smile. The man is shirtless and has a beard; he is looking down at her. His hand is resting on her shoulder. In the upper right corner, a pair of eyes is visible, looking towards the viewer. The overall color palette is warm, with yellows, oranges, and reds.

ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*

*Extrasensory*  
PHOENIX AGENCY

DESIREE HOLT

## **Extrasensory**

Desiree Holt

*Book 2 in the Phoenix Agency series.*

Mia is skeptical about her precognitive skills, but her visions about Carpenter Techtronics are so vivid, she resorts to sending anonymous emails to the company. She's also having visions of a gorgeous man who arouses her so badly, she's satisfying herself just to get some relief. She's shocked when the man shows up in her office, sending her silent erotic messages.

Dan is helping his friend track down the person threatening his company. When he meets Mia, he has a hard time thinking about anything but indulging in off-the-charts sex with the intriguing woman—until bodies begin falling. As Mia's visions escalate, so does the explosive sex between her and Dan, as well as an unexpected emotional connection. When Mia is almost killed, Dan and his team must race to find the culprits before they can strike again—or put Mia down for good.

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Extrasensory

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# ***EXTRASENSORY***

**Desiree Holt**

## Dedication

With great love and affection to Marilyn Campbell, without whom the Phoenix Agency would never have come to life, and who inspired me to reach for the stars.

Extrasensory: adjective

(1) *clairvoyant*

(2) *residing beyond the ordinary senses*

~*Merriam Webster Dictionary*

## Chapter One

Where was the damn helicopter? They couldn't hold these bastards off much longer.

Dante "Dan" Romeo wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his camo shirt and slammed another magazine into his rifle. This wasn't the way it was supposed to turn out, although they always had to prepare for it. A sign over his desk back in Baltimore read, "Nothing in life is ever simple." In his business, Dan Romeo considered it a motto.

He was so sure their mission had been successful. Five days ago Drummond Laboratories had placed an emergency call to Phoenix, the agency in which Dan was the senior partner. Drummond's CEO, Hank Nolan, had been captured by guerillas in Mexico, the kidnap capital of the world. They'd snatched him right off the street in Acapulco where he'd been vacationing with his family.

The people from Drummond made sure Phoenix understood the feds could not be involved. The guerilla group had threatened to cut off Nolan's head if the feds were contacted. Cut their losses, so to speak. These kidnap-for-ransom groups were getting bolder every day, especially in Mexico.

Drummond didn't balk for an instant at the fee Dan quoted him.

So Dan had put the team together and using bribes, snitches and other sources of information, they'd found the location of the guerilla camp. They'd suited up and Mike D'Antoni, pilot extraordinaire and another of the partners, dropped them into the humid, insect-infested Mexican jungle. Where they were going was definitely not a vacation spot.

They hiked to the camp location in stealth mode, using the sounds of the jungle animals as cover for their movements as often as they could. Then they concealed themselves in the surrounding jungle. Watching. Waiting. Timing the guards. Identifying where Nolan was being held. Learning the rhythm of the camp. For Dan, a former Force Recon Marine, jobs like this were no different from the missions he'd led in Afghanistan and Iraq. The same methods applied.

At last, when they'd gathered sufficient information, the men put their plan together. Waiting until full dark and with the covertness they'd learned from years in the military, they made their way to the rear of the camp. Silently, the team working like a well-oiled piece of machinery, all the parts moving as designed, they took out the two guards in front of the shack where Nolan was being held. Then, moving swiftly, they backed out of the camp, half-carrying Nolan, until they reached the safety of the surrounding flora and fauna.

As soon as they were far enough away to use the satellite radio safely, Dan had called in for extraction and Mike radioed he was on his way to get them. The two men

set their coordinates and the team took off to meet the chopper. But Nolan had been tied up for two weeks and half-starved. In his deteriorated condition he had trouble keeping up, so they finally had to carry him. That delayed them and gave the kidnappers, when they realized their prize was gone, time to take off after the rescue team with AK-47s and other assorted weapons.

Now Dan and his group were pinned down at the extraction point and the guerillas were moving closer. Machine-gun bullets rained everywhere, punctuated by the screech of the howler monkeys and the squawking of tropical birds. Dan could only pray the kidnappers didn't have rocket-propelled grenades with them. That could take down not just the team but the helicopter too. Disaster didn't begin to describe what that outcome would be.

Then, at last, he heard the distinctive slap! slap! slap! of the helicopter blades and his comm unit crackled in his ear.

"I am above you and ready to extract," Mike said. "Looks like you need a little covering fire."

"No shit," Dan answered. "Get that ladder down and have the shotgun riders start peppering these bastards."

The chopper now hovered directly over them. Someone pitched the rope ladder from the open cabin door and it hung tantalizingly in the air. Two Phoenix men were balanced on the chopper skids, spraying the area around them with machine-gun fire. The occasional shrieks let everyone know that at least some of the bullets had found a target.

Dan hoisted Nolan onto the ladder and motioned for one of the guys in the cabin above just to pull the damn thing up. In seconds the man was inside the chopper and the ladder dropped again. Firing into the surrounding area as they climbed, aided by the gunners above them, each man scrambled up to the helo's cabin, then reached to help the one behind him.

Dan was last, as usual, holding to the ladder with one hand and his machine-gun with the other. He was gratified to hear more screams of pain as hands pulled him through the opening to safety.

"Go now," he shouted to Mike, who needed no urging to pull away and up. As they lifted into the sky, the two Phoenix gunners continued to fire until the chopper reached a safe altitude.

"Sorry to cut it so close, Danny boy," Mike yelled at him. "We had to wait for some other air traffic to clear. They didn't look like they wanted to invite us for afternoon cocktails."

"These damn thugs are getting better equipped all the time," Dan cursed. "We're having to run our asses off just to stay ahead of them."

He looked around him and studied the activity. The men were all checking their guns, making sure they had full clips just in case a surprise awaited them somewhere along the line. The medic on their team was attending to Hank Nolan, expertly starting



an IV even under the extreme conditions and then cleaning his wounds.

"Mostly malnutrition," he told Dan over the roar of the chopper's blades. "And shock. He'll be a long time forgetting this little trip."

Dan leaned back against the cabin wall, regulating his breathing, checking again to make sure everyone else was okay.

"You earned yourself a little downtime after this," Mike yelled from the cockpit. "Don't you think? A break from the office? Maybe a little R and R?"

Dan gave his partner a lopsided grin. He knew what that meant. Get your ass out of town and get some rest before taking on another mission. Give your body some rest. He had to agree that Mike was right. At forty-three years old, he was getting a little past the age for this kind of activity.

"Chase Carpenter invited me to come to San Antonio," he replied. "His company has created a sophisticated new robot that supposedly is undetectable and can do everything but sing and dance. He's having a big unveiling next Friday, with lots of military brass, top cops and international corporations. He thought it might be something the agency could use."

Mike grinned. "Knowing Chase it's a high ticket item. Do we get a discount for being friends?"

Dan laughed. "I'll ask him."

"You ought to take him up on it," Mike insisted. "And while you're there, you could see Mark and Faith." Mike chuckled. "And interrupt *his* vacation."

Mark Halloran was the newest partner in Phoenix. He and his wife, a best-selling author of political thrillers, were both telepaths, and that psychic ability had been the single reason for Mark's own rescue from terrorists in Peru. At the time he'd been a Delta Force team leader. A highly-placed defense department official, taking payoffs from the arms dealer Mark's team was sent to take out, had blown the whistle on the mission. Only Mark and one member of his team survived the ambush they walked into.

Joey Latrobe, whose brother was a Phoenix partner, had managed to hide himself from the terrorists even though he was seriously wounded. The details of his rescue were yet another story.

Mark had been held in the terrorist camp and his only communication with the outside world had been the telepathic messages he exchanged with Faith. Like a raging virago, she'd taken on Washington and the Pentagon and when no one else would help her, had turned to Phoenix, even going along on the rescue mission.

Dan had to smile now when he thought of her courage. It would be nice to see her again.

"Maybe I'll do that," he said. "But not before taking the world's longest shower and eating the biggest steak I can find."

\* \* \* \* \*

*No. I'm tired. That's all that's wrong.*

Mia Fleming put aside the art book lying open on her desk, closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. She'd just been staring at the photo of the Da Vinci painting too long, that was all. As art historian and assistant curator at the DeWitt Museum, she was immersed in research for the private collection due to arrive at the museum next month. Part of her job was to gather information for the brochures that were printed and the press kits they distributed. And as usual, she'd been overdoing it.

Shoving her long brown hair, the color of rich chocolates, back behind her ears, she pulled the book forward and began to study the page again. And there it was. Just as before. Shimmering in the center of the photo of the Da Vinci painting. An ugly rock that looked like a misshapen lump of clay, bumping along, wobbling back and forth, with a pair of hands reaching for it. Then nothing except the original picture, undisturbed.

*God, not again. Please, please, please. Choose someone else, okay?*

Why did she have to be the one these things happened to? Why did *she* have to have what her grandmother called a "special gift"? More like a curse than a blessing, she often said.

But she couldn't tear her eyes away from the book. The image on the page kept shifting, first the photo of the painting, now that stupid little rock with its jerky movements. Finally, the shadow hands reaching for it. Like a broken record, the vision continued to repeat itself over and over again, taunting her to find its hidden meaning.

Mia slammed the book shut and shoved it away from herself. It was just like always. How on earth was she supposed to figure out what the vision meant? A rock was a rock, right? Still, she'd learned to be extra cautious over the years. The images that came to her without warning and at the strangest times were not always easy to interpret. She'd been wrong more times than she'd been right because she'd misinterpreted what she'd seen. Or because the visions had come to her after the fact. She had no training in deciphering these things and certainly no place to go to find any.

When she was younger there was a desperation in her determination to find answers. Getting people to listen to her was a battle itself. Her parents had always considered her a strange child—aloof, shy but apparently making up weird stories to capture attention. They never believed her stories about "visions".

"Don't keep telling people those crazy stories," her mother said too often to count. "They'll think *you're* crazy. They'll think *we're* all crazy."

"The neighbors are all talking," her father admonished her. "I don't want them pointing fingers at our family."

They even sent her to a psychiatrist who was supposed to "deprogram" her. What a lot of fun that had been.

But still the visions continued to plague her. Too often the images had been too

vague or misleading and now she'd almost become a pariah. When she did get someone to listen and she had success, the media called it a fluke. The frustration of not being able to make people understand the things she saw and the rejection because of her "oddness" had finally caused her to isolate herself from everyone else.

When she finally escaped to the University of Michigan, she convinced her father to pay the extra money for a single dorm room, then she eventually moved into a studio apartment. She chose art history as her major, because she could lose herself in the richness of the creations of the artists and sculptors, the potters and temple rubbers. The orderliness of delineating art history gave her a personal discipline that allowed her to exert some measure of control over her existence.

The visions, for whatever reason, came less frequently while she was at school, all the way through her postgraduate studies. When they came, they were so fractured she made herself ignore them, even if the effort sometimes made her physically ill.

But finally she was finished with her studies, sporting her brand new PhD and the visions came roaring back. Not knowing how or when they'd appear, she isolated herself more and more except at work. She lived alone in her house, surrounded by the books and music she loved. It wasn't that she was antisocial or weak, just self-protective. It took strength to deal with the impact of her visions and the primarily negative responses she'd learned to live with.

Her life, for the most part, focused on her career with the museum. Her job suited her perfectly, since it allowed her to work alone the majority of the time. She was always on edge that a vision would explode from nowhere and being isolated allowed her to deal with them without distraction or embarrassment. During those instances when she had to meet with the museum curator, she found herself praying that she would not be disrupted by one of her visions. They came without warning and she didn't think Mr. Hunter would be too impressed by them. For someone who appreciated art, he was definitively black and white in his outlook.

Today, thank God, he was away on a trip and unlikely to wander into her office unannounced. Her newest vision had disrupted her work half a dozen times already this week. Just seconds each time. That was all. A brief flash. But it wouldn't go away and she had no idea what message she was supposed to read into it.

She'd almost begun to believe that whatever was causing this to happen to her had disappeared. She hadn't had one of what she'd taken to calling her "episodes" in months now and had almost begun to relax, thinking they'd gone away for good. Not so. Her stomach was doing the jitterbug as it always did at the beginning of one of her incidents and an aspirin-proof headache was already beginning to build behind her eyes.

And then, without warning, a sharp pain stabbed her head. She leaned back in her chair, eyes closed, willing whatever was after her to go away. Suddenly the headache eased and a sense of peaceful bliss stole over her. No, more than that. Erotic feelings were creeping through her body dampening her bikini panties and making her breasts ache inside the silken cups of her bra.

The image of the man that shimmered before her shook her, both because of its startling clarity and because he was so completely, devastatingly masculine. Tall and lean, his muscles rippled enticingly beneath his olive skin, he had black hair that touched the nape of his neck and black obsidian eyes. His face had a grimness that bespoke too much exposure to life's misery.

And he was nearly naked!

Clad only in tight knit boxers, she saw the strength of his thighs and the impressive bulge of an erection that made her mouth water.

*I want to fuck you.*

Shock vibrated through her. Had he actually said that or did she just imagine it? Imagine, of course. This wasn't real. She'd heard voices before but never like this. Never focused on her so personally. Never erotic! And why now was she having one of her rare visions where the image was as clear as if this man had really been in her presence? She was aware of every detail of it, awake and in a trance at the same time. Sensuality radiated from his body, reaching out to her like shimmering tentacles of heat.

*Did you hear me? I want to fuck you. Take off your clothes.*

An unfamiliar urgency gripped her and she had her blouse unbuttoned and half off before she snapped back to reality. She blinked her eyes, hard, and the image disappeared. Her hands were shaking and she was sweating. But more than that, the pulse in her womb throbbed with an insistent beat, demanding attention. Craving release.

*What the hell?*

She could barely catch her breath.

An unfamiliar bolt of lust speared through her, and her body was so hot she was sure she had a fever. She had a sense of actually watching herself, not being a part of this, even as she felt every throb, every sizzle, every electrified enhancement of her senses.

On legs not quite steady, she stumbled to her office door, closed and locked it. Her trembling body collapsed into her desk chair and with almost frantic haste she unzipped her slacks and splayed her legs. Something sizzling in the core of her was demanding satisfaction, craving release. Every sense she possessed, normal and psychic, was on high alert. Desperately she slid her hand under the silk of her panties until she found her very wet cunt. The tips of her fingers grazed across her clit and shock sizzled through her, intensifying the low thrum in her body.

Mia leaned her head back and started to close her eyes.

*Open your eyes.*

The voice was rough, commanding. Her eyes flew open.

*Watch me while you do that.*

Watch him? But as she fastened her gaze on him the boxers melted away and he stood before her in magnificent glory with an erection that defied description. Long and

thick, it jutted from a nest of black curls that seemed to glisten. Slowly he wrapped the long fingers of one hand around his erection and stroked in a languid movement from root to tip and back again.

*Don't close your eyes.*

Now she couldn't have closed them if she wanted to. As she rubbed her clit, letting the pleasure streak through her, he matched the strokes of his hand to the motion of hers. Fire danced in his dark eyes and every plane and angle of his face stood out in stark relief.

*You have no idea how much it turns me on to watch you like this. You have the most gorgeous cunt I've ever seen. Sweet, pink, glistening with your juices.*

The walls of her pussy were already quivering, anticipating the release that was spiraling through her so quickly. His words aroused her even more, lust spiking through her like shards of lightning.

*That's it. He increased the tempo of his hand. Rub harder. Work that little clit. God. I can just imagine the feel of my lips around that bundle of nerves. Do you know when it swells it turns a rich, deep rose color? I want to suck it into my mouth and nibble on it with my teeth.*

The throbbing inside her vagina was so strong it vibrated through her like the waves of a tuning fork. She was so close now, her cunt slick with her juices, pre-orgasmic shivers flexing the walls of her pussy. The head of his cock was darkened and a bead of liquid seeped through the slit.

*I want to see you slide your fingers inside your cunt, imagine it's my hand down there, my fingers fucking you.*

It took only a few more strokes before her climax gripped her, shaking her body, muscles clenching and unclenching. Faster, faster. She increased her movement and so did he, the broad head of his cock seeming to swell before her eyes.

*Now, he commanded.*

She pushed three fingers into her slick cunt and bucked against them, hunching and moaning as her cream flooded her hand. At the same time his big body tensed and ejaculate spurted from the slit on the head, spilling over onto his fingers. He held himself until the tension stole from his body as it did from hers.

*Next time take off all your clothes.*

*Next time?*

*Holy mother. What next time.*

Quiet at last but weak, Mia leaned back in the chair, waiting for her breathing to even out and some measure of strength to return to her body. Finally she blinked, the vision shimmered and disappeared.

What had just happened here? What had she just done? Masturbating in her office was never on her to-do list. And who in god's name was that delicious vision who had poked himself into her brain? In all the years since she'd first realized she had extrasensory abilities, she'd never had a vision like this one. Not even close. And

certainly not one who spoke to her. What was going on with her brain?

She reached into the drawer for her purse, took out her hand mirror and examined her face. Her eyes had an unusual slumberous look, her cheeks were flushed and somehow her hair had acquired a mussed appearance. She looked as if she'd, well, as if she'd just been...been...*fucked*. Well, that would never do. Not for proper Mia Fleming, museum staff member, who certainly never masturbated herself at her desk.

She wondered if somehow she'd fallen for a moment into an alternate universe.

Digging in her purse again, she found one of the wipes she habitually carried and dabbed her face, then wiped every trace of fluids from her hand.

Holy hell!

When she was sure she had herself under control again, her clothes properly rearranged and in place, she stacked everything in neat piles on her desk and put away her pen and magnifying glass. Okay, time to go home. Letting out a slow breath, she rose to her feet, making sure she was steady enough to walk out of the building to her car. She needed to get her visions under control—the one with more clarity so she could interpret it better, the other to disappear. She didn't need very sexy men showing up in her mind and destroying her control like that.

What she needed was a hot bath and a glass of wine. And a good night's sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The five people sitting in the darkened conference room stared at the big flat screen monitor hanging on the wall. The lean, sandy-haired man was doing his best to sit quietly but the rubber band he kept stretching betrayed his edginess. When he and his head design engineer had first discussed the project, they'd seen it as an almost unattainable challenge.

But as they'd begun developing it, trying different things, testing different components, their level of excitement had risen. Now an enormous amount of money had gone into this development—the most expensive project they'd developed yet. Today they'd find out if the investment was worth it.

The picture on the screen showed an adobe house, one story, sitting on a sandy lot surrounded by scraggly looking plants and a scattering of rocks. To one side was a rusted pickup, parked at the side of a dilapidated shed. There was absolutely nothing to relieve the depressing air of the place.

Suddenly one of the larger rocks, about six inches in height, began to move forward, its progress a series of jerks and bumps. The house was abruptly lit up with six infrared heat signatures. A thin wire emerged from the top of the rock, extending upward and the darkened room was alive with static-filled sound cackling from the speakers mounted in the corners.

*"Need to be prepared..."*

*"Guards posted at every exit..."*

*"New shipment due in tonight..."*

The rocklike figure continued to move forward until it was about ten feet from the house. A team of ten men, all in black, moved in silently from both sides of the screen and surrounded the house. The observers watched as, in silence, stealth-like, the team moved forward. They heard the sound of the front and back doors slamming open, echoing in the dark room. Then a series of shots. Fast. Not loud, more like the soft pops bullets made on guns with muzzle suppressors. The people directing the exercise had decided to use the silencers to make sure the robot could pick up the softer noise.

When the team emerged from the house they herded four other men in front of them who were covered in red. One of the men in black touched his lip mic.

"Perfect, boss. Just like you planned it. Did you get it all?"

The man at the center of the conference table in the darkened room picked up a tiny microphone in front of him and depressed a button. "Every bit of it. What about pictures?"

"Oscar was busy snapping away. The miniature camera eye works great. Mike said everything went directly to the laptop. He's sending the file to you right now."

"Good job. Bring your guys back so they can wash off all that paint you sprayed them with."

The man in black laughed. "I think they look kind of cute. A few paintballs never hurt anyone."

"You've had your fun. Give them a break."

"Okay. On our way."

Chase Carpenter put down the mic. He was a tall man, lean, with sandy hair and dark brown eyes. His ready smile had fooled too many people, to their chagrin, into thinking he was easily led. But those people never looked beyond that "gee whiz" façade. Every line of his body shouted *power* and his eyes always blazed with fierce concentration.

"Lights, please," he requested.

One of the other men got up and flicked the light switch.

"Well?" Chase looked at the other three people in the room. "Looked good to me."

Lucas Grant, his partner, nodded his head. "I agree. If Oscar's pictures look as good as everything else, we're set."

"Impressive demonstration." Ladd Tolbert, Chase's personal attorney as well as the legal representative for Carpenter Techtronics, put the pen he'd been fiddling with back in his pocket, stood up and stretched. "I have to say, I wasn't sure you could."

"As long as the numbers prove out, we'll be in great shape." Paul Harrison, the company's chief financial officer, only looked at things in terms of cost ratio and projected income. "But I have to admit, I'm impressed."

The man at the light switch, Stan Forbush, Carpenter's chief design engineer and the leader on the project, couldn't wipe the grin off his face. "All accolades gratefully

accepted." He turned to Chase. "I'd like to tinker a little more with the microphone, see if we can get a little better reception."

Lucas looked from one man to the other and shrugged, his thick muscles flexing beneath his shirt. He was dark to Chase's light, thick to the other man's lean body. Their personalities contrasted as much as their physical appearances. "Seems to me we're doing okay as it stands. We got all the heat signatures, placed the location of everyone in the house and picked up the conversation. If the pictures are clear we're good to go."

"You know me," Stan objected. "I'm always fine tuning."

"Like I said, that's fine with me," Lucas stressed. "Just as long as we're good to go next week for the press conference."

"We'll be all set," Chase assured him. "No one else has been able to miniaturize a robot this much and still get all the data needed. This will be a hot commodity, not just for the government but for police departments, corporations and private security agencies. The press conference will go off as planned."

"And then the bucks will roll in," Lucas predicted.

"I'm counting on it," Paul told him.

Chase's face sobered. "I want all security on this double and triple checked, Lucas. And biometric scans for the room where the prototype will be locked up. I invited Dan Romeo from Phoenix to the demonstration. He'll be here a couple of days early so he can go over everything with you."

Lucas' face darkened. "I can handle it. I don't need a nursemaid or a babysitter."

"And I'm not giving you one. But Phoenix designed the biometric system and installed it, so they should give it a final check. And if we need to beef up security, they can help us with it. We can't afford to take any chances."

"I'm telling you, it's all taken care of," his partner assured him. "We're tighter than Fort Knox."

"It never hurts to hedge your bets. Too much has gone into this to have it blow up in our faces at the last minute."

"Trust me." Lucas' voice had picked up just a tiny edge to it. "It's done."

Chase raised an eyebrow. "Do you have some reason for not wanting Dan to check things over?"

Lucas grinned. "Nope. Sorry for arguing. I'm just a little uptight too. And you're right. The more eyes on the prize, the better off we'll be."

Chase looked around the room. "All right, then. Stan, let's you and me meet in my office and go over whatever tinkering you think you want to do. Lucas, you're also going to check with marketing to make sure everything's set on their end, right?"

"Jesus, Chase." He blew out a breath and shoved his hands in his pockets. "You're my partner, not my mother. Relax, buddy. I said everything would be fine and it will be."

"This is the biggest thing we've done yet, the project that will bump our



competitors off the map,” Chase reminded him. “I’m entitled to be a little overprotective.”

“Chase, why don’t we go to your office first,” Ladd broke in, “and you can take that fine old bottle of cognac out from its hiding place. We can have a toast and enjoy the prospect of our success for just a few minutes.” He looked from one partner to the other. “And the two of you can stop sniping at each other.”

Chase allowed himself a small laugh. “You’re right. Sorry, Lucas. I’m being a horse’s ass. Let’s go get that drink.”

They filed out of the conference room, Lucas and Stan still deep in conversation.

“You’re the glue,” Ladd said in a quiet voice.

Chase gave him a sharp glance. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. The lynchpin. The one who holds it all together. This is the biggest thing this company has done yet. If you’re on edge, everyone else will be too.”

“I tell you, Ladd, I just have the strangest feeling. I can’t put my finger on it. Like something’s out of place but I can’t see it.”

“You’re also the chief worrier,” Ladd said with a chuckle. “Come on. Let’s go toast to the success of Carpenter Techtronics. We’ve all earned it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Carpenter Techtronics building was lit up as if it was the middle of the day. Teams always worked 24/7 in three shifts on the highly specialized electronic units that the company was famous for.

Standing at the elevator, Chase marveled at the success of the company bearing his name. Not so very long ago he’d quit his job at a large engineering design firm, cashed in his retirement fund and taken a chance on his own startup company. He began in an incubator building—a place created especially to nurture new businesses and provide them with assistance—with only Stan and two other employees.

Almost before he turned around Carpenter Techtronics had grown from a small boutique-type company to their current status as a leader in the world of specialized electronics. The expansion had taken a giant leap forward when Lucas Grant had joined the firm as a partner. Bringing with him a suitcase full of contacts and the ability to sell anything to anybody, he told Chase he was buying into a company that he saw on the verge of explosive growth. With the corporate and government contracts he’d negotiated for them, they’d had the capital to move to their present location and the reputation to attract the high dollar clients.

Sometimes Chase had to pinch himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

He knew he was obsessive about security but corporate espionage was the crime *du jour*, especially when the military, police departments and private agencies were hungry for the kind of electronics Carpenter was known for. The kind that could give them an edge in whatever war they were fighting. Carpenter was known for its security being

unbreachable and Chase had no intention of changing that now.

Once a prototype had sold, production cranked into high gear. The units were manufactured on four floors of the ten-story building. Then they were sent to packaging and shipping in the basement. And every step of the production was carefully watched over by security guards and by a member of the design team.

Now, thanks to his idea and Stan's genius at engineering design, Carpenter Techtronics was about to take a giant leap forward. He could feel the excitement hum throughout the building. Any time a new project was underway, the guards were doubled, just in case someone got itchy fingers or an outside source tried to breach the building. This time the project was so revolutionary security was even more important.

He thought about this as he biometrically unlocked the door to the vault where Oscar's prototype was stored.

He stopped now in front of the Plexiglas block where the robot was stored, resting from the earlier demonstration. The pictures the team had received from Oscar's miniature camera had incredible clarity. These were only of the exterior but they could detect any hidden sources of danger to a waiting team. And in a case where interior shots were needed, Oscar could be inserted into a building with no problem at all. The images the tiny camera could transmit to the computer might possibly save lives in a hostage situation or help prevent a mission from going south.

Chase stared at the small object for a long time, then left the room, locking the door after him using the special code.

Tomorrow he would double-check with Lucas on all the arrangements for the announcement and the reception following. Their division of labor worked very well for them. Chase was the engineer, the nuts and bolts man. Lucas was the glad-hander, something Chase felt uncomfortable doing. So far it had worked very well that way.

He checked his watch. His fiancée, Joy Rivers, was sure to be waiting for him in his office. Lately their quality time had been in short supply. As excited as she was for him about Oscar, the demands on his time had begun to wear thin with her and she hadn't been shy about letting him know it.

People were fooled by her appearance. Tiny, with long blonde hair and pale blue eyes, she looked like an angel made of spun sugar. But she had a core of steel that gave her strength and determination. The very thing that had drawn him to her in the first place. Joy knew what she wanted out of life and she was going to get it. And he, Chase, was going to give it to her.

*After the announcement I'll have more time. Maybe we'll go away for a long vacation, make some plans for the wedding. If I can just get past next Friday.*

The guard nodded to him as headed down the hall. "Good night, Mr. Carpenter."

"Keep a close eye on Oscar," Chase told him.

"Don't you worry," the guard grinned. "The little fellow's safe on my watch."

"We have a lot riding on him," Chase reminded him.

All the guards on all shifts had been briefed on the importance of the project.

"He's in good hands," the guard assured him.

*He'd better be. This is our crowning achievement.*

When he let himself back into his office, Joy was standing at the picture window overlooking downtown San Antonio. From this vantage point the lights and colorful attractions of the city's famed Riverwalk were clearly visible. Off to the left was the building where the movie, *Cloak and Dagger* with Dabney Coleman had been shot. When he'd first pointed it out to Joy, she'd insisted they rent the movie and surprisingly it had become one of her favorites. It wasn't along the lines of her usual tastes.

When the door opened she turned toward him, a smile on her face. "Put the baby to bed yourself?"

"You know me. I always need to check things with my own eyes."

She came over to him and slid her arms around his waist, tilting her head back to look up at him.

"How about going home and putting this baby to bed?" she teased.

Heat flashed through him. "That's the best idea I've heard all day. Let's get the hell out of here."

## Chapter Two

Mia turned the deadbolt on the front door and tossed her keys into the bowl on the hall table. Traffic had been a bitch and her headache was worse than ever. But home was a sanctuary, one she was always happy to be in.

The house itself, on San Antonio's northwest side, was an unexpected gift, left to her by her maternal grandmother at a time when she was searching for some direction in her life. She'd just received her doctorate and was casting about for the proper way to use it. She didn't want to go back to Florida where her entire life would be conducted under family scrutiny. Then like a bolt from the blue, someone on her thesis committee called to let her know about a position at the DeWitt Museum in San Antonio.

"You're perfect for it," the professor said. "Exactly the kind of person they're looking for. I'm sending a letter of recommendation right now, so call and set up your appointment."

It seemed like an omen. She interviewed for the job, was hired and took possession of the house, all within a week's time.

Located in the upscale suburb of Alamo Heights, the exterior of the building was a deep red brick that had faded to a soft rosy patina with age and weather. The interior, with its glistening hardwood floors, wide windows and soothing earth tones, provided just the respite she needed from the images that bombarded her and made her unsettled.

The ones that had taunted her earlier still lingered in her mind. Once again she cursed the precognitive abilities that had plagued her all her life. Ignoring them when she thought she might be able to help made her feel guilty. Trying to carry forward whatever message she deciphered often got her in hot water. It was a no-win situation.

And the one with the tall, dark, very sensual man? That had never happened before and she wasn't sure she wanted it to happen again.

*I want to fuck you.*

And just like before, her body responded instantly, fire streaking through her veins and her pulse ramping up to almost jackhammer intensity. Startled, Mia shook her head and blinked her eyes. She couldn't have this. She just could *not* have this strange man popping into her head and driving her to the brink of orgasm this way. Or any way.

Her head was pounding now, well past the bath and wine cure stage.

Aspirin. That's what she needed. She headed for the downstairs powder room where she usually kept a small bottle. But when she stood at the sink, looking in the mirror, the image of her face dissolved to be replaced, not by the man, thank goodness, but by the stupid little rock. Only this time it was surrounded by Plexiglas and the

hands were opening the door to the enclosure. And across the image, just a brief flash, a sign bearing the word “carpenter”.

Mia closed her eyes, squeezing them shut. When she opened them, only her own pinched face stared back at her. Opening the medicine cabinet, she found the bottle of aspirin, shook two into her hand and ran a cup of water to swallow them with. Replacing the cup, she rinsed her hands and face with cold water, blotting them with a hand towel, trying to wash away the vision.

And the memory of what she’d done in her office.

In the kitchen she fixed herself a cup of herbal raspberry tea and carried it into her den. Of all the rooms in the house, this one always served as her refuge. The walls lined with bookshelves filled to overflowing, the stereo system where she could play her favorite jazz and blues, the thick carpeting and the graceful oak desk always seemed to reach out welcoming arms to her.

Today she wasn’t sure any place could soothe her, as disturbed as her mind was. Her body, too. She needed to do something to get the erotic image out of her mind completely. Finishing her tea, she heated more water, dropped the tea bag in and left it to steep while she changed into a tank top and yoga pants. The rock. She’d focus on that stupid rock. Maybe find a way to figure out what that was all about. She hated it when the messages in what she saw were unclear. If only it were possible to turn off her brain, or whatever gremlins resided in it.

Sighing, she took her tea to her desk, booted up her laptop and did a search for “rocks”, “Plexiglas” and “carpenter” in any combination. Her efforts produced so many hits she wiped them out and tried to start again. It was always a laborious process, trying to figure out the meager clue that could mean absolutely anything. If only the pictures were more complete, more detailed.

*If only they would take up residence in someone else’s head.*

Finally, her eyes gritty and tired, her head still throbbing, she shut down the computer. She’d wait and try again tomorrow. Maybe she’d receive another clue by then that would help with her search. Or maybe, if she was lucky, the vision would disappear altogether.

The little clock on one of the shelves chimed eight o’clock and she realized she hadn’t eaten a thing since taking an early lunch. She rummaged through the refrigerator for sandwich fixings, finally settling for ham and cheese on rye and a Diet Coke. Sitting at the narrow rectangle that served as her kitchen table, a sort of antique she’d inherited with the house, she sorted idly through the mail, pushing the junk mail to the side to toss later on and separating the bills from mail she actually wanted to read.

Refilling her glass, she opened the newspaper that she’d picked up from her porch. She didn’t know why she even subscribed anymore. She seldom took the time to read it. Too often the things she read created disturbing images in her mind that tempted her to follow paths she knew would destroy her. How often had she simply placed her hand on an article and been shocked by images she couldn’t decipher?

But sometimes, like now, although the visions were vague they hit her with such force she couldn't turn away from them. Something very bad had happened, or was about to happen. Every nerve in her body was zinging her with that message, telling her it was somewhere in the newspaper. Whatever it took, she'd have to search for the answers, then use her normal method of warning. And hope someone listened.

Mia almost never read the business section, unless she was seeking information on a possible major donor to the museum. Today, however, her mind pushing her to seek clues, to skip nothing, she unfolded the section and smoothed it out to scan the headlines.

*Zap!*

A shock traveled from the newspaper to her brain. Her hand recoiled and she blinked. What the hell?

Gingerly she touched the newsprint again. This time the Plexiglas image flashed through her brain, with hands reaching for its contents. She studied the page, this time deliberately not touching it, her eyes traveling over each article. A new hybrid auto. No, not that. A hedge fund under investigation. Definitely not that.

Then, at the bottom, a tiny announcement of a new robotics development by a company called Carpenter Techtronics. The story continued inside. Holding the paper with her fingertips, she flipped to page three to read the rest of it. There wasn't much more. The reporter indicated that the company was holding back details until the press conference in one week. Chase Carpenter, the CEO, only mentioned that the invention would revolutionize the ability of the police and military to deal with criminals and the enemy.

Mia leaned back and raked her fingers through her hair, feeling the edges of the headache still gripping her skull.

Okay, so she had one or two tiny pieces of the puzzle. Maybe the gizmo looked like a rock. And now she understood what the "carpenter" sign meant. But she knew from past experience that wasn't nearly enough. She couldn't very well call up the company and ask them if their new little baby was designed to look like a rock. Oh and by the way, did it live in a plastic box? They'd either have her arrested or committed. But just touching the article gave her a sense of urgency.

All right. Back to the computer to do more research. But this time she'd focus on robotics and Carpenter Techtronics. There had to be some other thread for her to follow.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Baltimore sun, a rare commodity during this rainy season, blazed through the massive window in Dan Romeo's office, wrapping everything in a warm glow and cutting the sterile edge of the room's appearance. Like the offices of the other partners, one entire wall was filled with banks of monitors, feedback not only from the building's own security cameras but also from various jobs under contract.

The floor was a gleaming hardwood with an Americana woven rug in the center, the only hint of softness in the room. The furniture was all severe angles and rough material. The extreme neatness and precision of the room bespoke Romeo's years of training in the Marines. His big frame was still tough and lean and in top condition, his eyes hard and watchful. His only concession to civilian life, besides his clothing, was the length of his nearly black hair that now touched the collar of his pristine dress shirt.

There were no names on any of the doors on the floor of the building Phoenix owned and where they housed their offices. As an international security firm formed by lifelong friends—a SEAL, an Army Ranger, a member of a Special Ops team and one from an elite air team and now a former member of Delta Force—that did everything from teaching corporate executives survival skills and how to protect themselves from kidnapping, to tracking corporate espionage, to full-blown hostage negotiation, theirs was not a business that advertised except by word of mouth.

While Phoenix had highly trained and capable operatives, the low-profile organization had earned its reputation partly due to the fact they had their fingers on the pulse of everything everywhere at all times. And partly because they were known for their ability to handle any emergency while flying well under the radar.

They walked a high wire daily as they went about their jobs. Some of these jobs were even contracted with the US government. Long ago they had agreed to be on call for those times when a special job needed to get done and plausible deniability was paramount.

Eric "Rick" Latrobe, former SEAL, was as light as Romeo was dark and just as forbidding. The business they were in was dangerous and often life-threatening. Keeping in shape mentally and physically was a requirement. No one would have mistaken either of these men for soft.

Now Latrobe sat opposite Romeo, the morning paper on his lap folded over to the business section.

"I see your friend, Chase, is about to launch a new product," he commented. "Heady enough for all the major dailies to carry a blurb about it."

Romeo nodded. "He says this one will put them in a class by themselves."

Latrobe flicked a nail at the paper. "Going to the big press conference next week?"

Romeo pointed to his computer screen and grinned. "I guess I am. This is the third email he's sent me telling me he wants me there. I think he's a little nervous."

"If what he has is as good as he says, I'm not surprised. Are you going there early to check out security?"

"I told him I would." Romeo called up his calendar on the computer. "Anyway, Mike 'suggested' I might want to take some time off after Mexico." He laughed. "He's lucky I didn't pop him in the nose. He did everything but tell me I'm getting old for what we do."

"Age has nothing to do with it," Rick disagreed. "Mexico took a hell of a lot out of the entire team. You gave the men time off. Why do less for yourself?"

Dan leaned back in his chair. "Well, I've decided to take Chase up on the invitation. I'll be leaving Monday morning. Ed can fly me down there so I'll have four days to scope things out, see if we need to make any changes, although they should be airtight. After all, we trained his security people ourselves. Still, he sounds very jumpy about this project, for some reason."

Ed Romeo, Dan's brother, was the other pilot who flew their air equipment.

"Corporate espionage is the latest disease of the millennium," Rick pointed out. "I'd be nervous too, in his shoes. Send Justine the details and she'll plug it into the master schedule."

Justine Henry was their worth-her-weight-in-chocolate-kisses office manager. She didn't think it strange that she was told not to answer the phone, only pick up the messages from the machine. Or to burn all her transcription notes when they finished a case after giving them to Andy, their newly acquired tech, to wrap his secret codes around. She just did what she was told very competently, kept her mouth shut and kept track of the men and their equipment with terrifying efficiency. Her husband, a close friend of Dan's who had served with him in the Marines, was killed by an Improvised Explosive Device—IED—in Iraq. Now Phoenix was taking care of her and her two children.

Romeo swiveled in his chair to face his computer. "I might as well make use of my time now to pick up everything new about Carpenter Techtronics. I'll get Andy to run their staff through the Dragon. We haven't updated our files on them this year and I'd like to be prepared when I get there. Just in case."

The Dragon was the ultra-sophisticated computer system that as Rick once said could do everything but sing and dance. Andy, who had come to them through Mark Halloran's wife, played the machine like a violinist with a Stradivarius. If information on any subject in the world could be found Andy and the Dragon could find it.

Rick raised an eyebrow. "Expecting trouble?"

Dan grinned. "My friend, I'm *always* expecting trouble. You know that."

"Well, enjoy yourself. Have a margarita or two for me."

Rick grinned as he unfolded his long length from the chair. As he left the office, Dan was already tapping search parameters into the computer.

\* \* \* \* \*

The telephone conversation between the two conspirators was brief and tense. The closer the deadline loomed, the more uptight they became with each other. Being unable to meet in person put an additional strain on their situation. There was only so much you could do by telephone. You couldn't see the other person, judge their facial expressions and the nuances of their body movements.

They weren't exactly strangers to each other, nor was this their first project, but that made no difference. Regardless of the relationship, lack of trust was inherent in both



personalities.

"We have a very small window of opportunity here, you know. If we miss it, the chance is gone."

"Did you expect any less? He'd take the thing home to sleep with him if he could."

A sharp laugh echoed over the connection. "That would certainly make our job easier if he did."

"We knew this wouldn't be a cakewalk." The voice carried a note of irritation. "But with so much money riding on this, it's worth the effort." There was a short pause. "This is the big one, you know. The one that will set us up for life."

"I know, I know."

"Not getting cold feet are you?" Now the tone was one of suspicion.

"Not on your life." The voice was vehement, almost angry. "I don't even know why you always ask me that."

"Just checking."

"After all this time? I'm good to go. Quit worrying."

"Just do your part and we'll be fine. Like I said, we have a small window. Use it wisely. Don't screw it up."

"You don't need to worry about me." The voice was defensive. "Worry about yourself. *I'm* ready."

They both disconnected and, in their separate locations, dismantled the throwaway cell phones they were using. They would dispose of the phones and batteries separately and at widely separated locations. They couldn't afford to take any chances on being traced or overheard.

\* \* \* \* \*

At two o'clock in the morning Mia finally gave up her search and shut down her laptop. Her eyes were blurring and the eyestrain was exacerbating her headache.

Using normal search parameters and applying several search engines, she'd gotten as much as she could on Carpenter Techtronics, compiling a history of the company and a profile of its CEO. The information on robotics had been more difficult to collect because she didn't always understand what she was reading. She finally printed out the articles she thought she'd need and slid them into a folder.

Tomorrow she'd call someone she knew, an engineer she'd met at a book signing who, strangely enough, had an interest in parapsychology. They'd become friends, meeting for the occasional drink or dinner. She was gratified that, when she'd finally blurted out her secret to him, he didn't see her as a freak but as an interesting human being with unusual abilities.

Once she got to work in the morning she could also tap into the Lexis-Nexis system that the museum subscribed to—the vast, worldwide database of every piece of

knowledge in the world. That always provided more than her independent searches could dig up.

Swallowing two more aspirins, she pulled on a sleep shirt and crawled into bed. But before she could close her eyes she felt her psychic power grab her and the muscular god shimmered before her eyes.

"Go away," she shouted, pulling the covers over her head.

*Look at me.*

The voice was just as commanding as it had been earlier.

As if she'd lost all free will, Mia lowered the covers and looked at him. He was back in the stretch boxers but the impressive bulge at his fly showed that he was again fully aroused. She felt a gush of fluid in her pussy and squeezed her thighs together.

*I want to fuck you.*

"Go away," she repeated, but this time in a whisper.

*Let me see you. All of you.*

Her hands moved as if they had a mind of their own, tossing the covers away and pulling up her sleep shirt until she was naked from the waist down.

*You have a gorgeous pussy. Next time I'm going to eat you until you scream in pleasure.*

What? What? But how was that possible with someone who wasn't even real?

She knew she was imagining it, but a whispery breeze stole over her as if his fingers were actually touching her. All her senses were in an acute state of awareness, so the ghostly touch aroused her as if the man had been real.

No!

She shouted it in her head and squeezed her legs together again.

He smiled, a slow, sensuous expression that promised unbelievable pleasure. Then, just as before, he was gone.

Mia turned over and buried her face in the pillow, willing herself to sleep. But the sleep she fell into was far from restful. Her dreams were invaded by ugly rocks chasing her through the city, a mechanized voice repeating over and over, "It's all your fault."

And like a hologram above them, the erotic god of her visions.

## Chapter Three

Fridays were usually busy at the museum and this one was no exception. Three separate tours came through in the morning and, while the activities of a docent weren't really part of her job description, Mia was usually happy to pitch in when needed. She loved describing the exhibits and relating the history of the artists. To her it was like discussing old friends. But today it frustrated her, because it meant the morning was shot. It was noon before she could steal time to access the facility's main computer and log into Lexis-Nexis, the all-knowing database.

Her search yielded more information on the key people at Carpenter Techtronics and a hint at the type of robotics they developed. Many of the articles she found were too technical for her to understand but she was sure her friend could help her decode them. She printed out everything she found and tapped the edges of the paper to align them. She picked them up to slide them into the large envelope with her stash from the previous night but the moment her fingers gripped the pages, the picture of the rock zapped her brain. It flickered before her eyes, dancing across the printing on the page, fading in and out. She tried to hang onto the image but, as always, it disappeared before she had enough time to study it.

This time, however, something else was added. An unexpected feeling of dread sweeping over her, almost of panic and a strange voice drifting in the air, whispering, "Someone's going to be killed."

Mia looked around to make sure no one was in the room with her. No, the room was empty. She was alone. This wasn't the first time she'd heard a voice in her head, sending her a cryptic message, but she wondered if her senses had gotten screwed up by the visions of *that man*. She didn't know what else to call him. So what was someone trying to tell her now? Who would be killed? And who was the mysterious "someone"?

She pulled a tissue from the box on her desk and blotted the perspiration on her face. Uncapping the bottle of water she always kept handy, she drank deeply, trying to steady herself. She was smart enough and knowledgeable enough from her prior experiences, to know what the key message was now. Someone was probably going to steal something from Carpenter Techtronics and someone else would be killed when it happened. But who? And what kind of rock, robot or not, would be worth killing for?

She desperately wanted to warn the company, put them on the alert but her history of unfortunate episodes reminded her not to make a move until she had every bit of information she could get. She pulled up her telephone directory on her computer, picked up the phone and dialed Chad Richardson's number. Here was someone who didn't think she was a nut and who she was sure could help her decipher all the information she'd gathered.

At their chance meeting in a bookstore Mia had been stunned to learn that Chad, an engineer, would be interested in something so diametrically opposed to the field he was in. They'd gone for coffee that night and many times afterwards. It was a totally asexual friendship. Mia felt comfortable enough with him to confide in him about her precognition, knowing he wouldn't look at her as if she was a freak.

She could probe his mind on this new vision. Maybe he could even give her some clues as to the meaning of the vision. A long shot but...maybe.

"So," she said, pleasantries disposed of, "can I interest you in a margarita on the Riverwalk tonight? I know it's Friday but if you can get away early enough we can meet at Casa Rio by four."

"Is this a 'Gee, Chad, I was just thinking how great it would be to have a drink with you' call or a 'Hey, Chad, can I ply you with alcohol and pick your brain' invitation?"

Mia's laugh was nervous. "A little bit of both. Are you on?"

"Of course. I'm always interested to see why my favorite psychic needs me."

Her hand tightened on the phone. "I wish you wouldn't do that, Chad. You know how I feel about it."

His voice sobered. "I'm sorry. But remember, I'm one of the few who has ultimate faith in your abilities."

"And I thank you for that. So. Four o'clock?"

"See you then."

\* \* \* \* \*

Any day of the week the famous Riverwalk, the top tourist attraction in Texas, was crowded with an eclectic mixture of tourists and locals, sightseers and shoppers. The stone walkways on either side of the narrow, meandering San Antonio River passed in front of a colorful assortment of shops and restaurants and were always wall-to-wall people. On the weekends the crowds multiplied exponentially.

At Casa Rio Mia was lucky enough to snag the last empty table outside, under one of the trademark colorful umbrellas. She had deliberately chosen the meeting place for the noise factor. Here, with people chatting all around them, shouting back and forth, mariachi music punctuating the babble, her conversation with Chad would be difficult for anyone to overhear. The waitress brought the customary hot tortilla chips and took her drink order.

He arrived minutes after she did, looking as always slightly disheveled and windblown and gave her the obligatory hug and peck on the cheek. He made short work of the margarita she had waiting for him, ordered a second and sat back in his chair.

"Okay. Let's have it. You look like you're sitting on hot coals."

Mia knew she didn't have to play games with Chad. He understood her, believed in her precognitive powers and she'd known him long enough to trust him. To be able to

speaking freely with him.

"Here's what it is," she said and told him about her latest "episodes". "I've done all the research I can but I can't identify what this dumb rock is or understand the information I found on robotics. I'm hoping that's where you can help. I'd also like your take on Carpenter Techtronics."

"Okay, kiddo, I'm happy to do what I can," he told her. "But you know I've done a lot of studying on your abilities since we met and we've discussed it. Precognitive visions aren't always specific. You're getting a glimpse of a future event but because the visions are usually in bits and pieces they can be difficult to understand."

"I know, I know. 'If precognition is a glimpse of the true or real future, then the effects are witnessed before the causes and the causes have to be determined'." She sighed. "I've heard you say it and read it often enough."

"Okay." He swallowed half of his second drink and held out his hand. "Let's see what you've got."

Mia reached into her tote to take out the envelope. But as soon as her hand closed over it, her body froze. She was gripped by an image of a knife being plunged in, her vision blurred and her whole body trembled. Dropping her tote, she reached out for the table to steady herself.

"Mia?" Chad moved around the table to the chair next to her, looping his arm around her shoulders. "Are you with me?" He picked up a glass of water from the table and held it to her lips. "Come on, drink some of this. Just a swallow."

She shut her eyes tightly, willing the image to disappear. When she opened them, she was still seated at the table, the crowd eddying around her, loud voices piercing her consciousness. Everything normal. No gory images. Her face was covered with a fine sheen of perspiration and her throat was as dry as dust but there was no image of a knife or blood.

"Come on," Chad urged again. "Just take a sip, Mia. It'll help you calm yourself."

She took the water glass from Chad with a hand that was still shaking. "Thank you. I'm so sorry."

"Honey, you don't have to be sorry. I just worry when these things hit you." He reached down and picked up her tote. "Let me take the envelope out and look through it, okay? You need more water?"

She looked at the glass and realized she'd drained it. "Yes, please."

Chad moved back to his original seat across from her, signaled for the waitress to bring the water pitcher and pulled the sheets of paper from the envelope. He spread them fanlike on the table. "Give me a minute to look this stuff over, okay? You just drink your water and center yourself."

Mia forced herself to sit quietly, nibbling at the tortilla chips and sipping the fresh water. She'd pushed her margarita aside. Alcohol was the last thing she needed right now, feeling as shaky as she did, her insides like tapioca. The image of the knife being

thrust into someone had lodged a knot of fear in her stomach. The visions that predicted death always frightened her beyond belief and made her feel helpless. And the whispering voice drifted through her brain again.

*Someone's going to be killed.*

Chad took his time reading the printouts, finishing his margarita and ordering a glass of club soda with lime. He grinned when Mia raised her eyebrows.

"Time for a clear head."

At last he stacked the papers back in a neat file and sat looking at her. "Giving you a crash course in robotics would take more time than either you or I want to spend, so I won't even try. Let me just tell you this. The recent innovations in engineering have had huge impacts in medicine, criminal justice and the military. Everyone keeps trying to build a better mousetrap, as it were, and Carpenter Techtronics has been working to get out in front of everyone. Especially with their projects for the military."

"Is that what this rock is all about?"

Chad grinned at her. "Rumor has it, in the lower circles where I travel, that they've designed a miniaturized robot with a lot of new bells and whistles. Things that will help both the cops and the military in a multitude of situations. But there's a lockdown on the information, as you'd expect, so that's all anyone knows about it." He took a swallow of club soda. "This 'rock', as you call it, probably represents the robot, although why it shows up as a rock is beyond me. That's your department, honey."

Mia chewed on a thumbnail. "If I'm reading the images right, someone's going to try to steal it. But what if I'm wrong? What if I try to warn them and I just make a fool of myself like I've done so many other times? I can't just call up the company and say I think you've got a problem. They'll either ignore me or have me committed."

"Send an anonymous email like you've done before. At least it will catch someone's attention."

"But how will I know if they even receive it? I can't exactly ask them to acknowledge it. They'd know who sent it if I did. And what if they ignore it?" she cried. "The voice said they'd kill him."

*What if someone gets killed because I didn't warn them?*

"Then you still have the option to call them. Or, you can send the email to the newspaper at the same time. That usually gets some action."

"Oh, yeah, that's a really good idea. I can see the headlines. 'Kook at it again'."

She twisted her napkin in her fingers, wishing inspiration would hit her the way her images did.

Chad reached across the table and rested his hand on her arm. "Look. They have a big press conference slated for next week. I'm guessing it's to announce this newest techno-toy. Everyone's watching them like a hawk. If they take the message seriously there'll be some obvious activity and the media will report it. If not, you still have time to call, although I know that's your last resort."

Mia sighed and crumbled a tortilla chip. "I guess you're right. As usual."

"Mia, if this thing is what I think it is and someone's planning to steal it, whoever gets it could sell it to any one of our enemies for millions of dollars. That could be a disaster for the United States. It's worth making an effort to warn them."

"Okay. I hear you." She signaled for the check. "Thanks for taking the time to meet me. Go on. I don't want to screw up your entire Friday night."

"It's just a bunch of us having drinks at that new place at the other end of the Riverwalk." He raised an eyebrow. "Want to join us?"

"Thanks but I'll pass. I think I need some quiet time."

Chad gave her quick, affectionate squeeze. "Call me if you need me, okay?"

"I will."

\* \* \* \* \*

She decided she'd do it tonight, before she changed her mind. The image of the plunging knife hung in her mind and a bad feeling lingered. The sooner she did something, the quicker she got a warning out, the faster someone could take action. Chad was right. She had several options open to her. She just needed to use them one at a time.

She thought about using an internet café to send her message but she didn't trust their security. No matter how many layers she built over her identity, public computers were set up to retain information. She'd learned that the hard way. Her laptop was a possibility but she'd discovered because of the built-in security systems at the museum, her best bet was the computer at her desk. Harder to break into and harder to backtrack.

"Nice to see you, Dr. Fleming." The guard at the lobby desk slid the log book toward her so she could sign in. "Sorry you have to work on a Friday night."

She forced a smile. "Lots to do preparing for that new exhibit coming in."

"You work too hard," he chided. "I hope the museum properly appreciates you."

"As long as you do, Harry, that's all that counts." She winked at him as she headed for the elevators, trying to maintain a casual air.

The basement area where her office was located was lit only by the night security lights. To some people it might seem a frightening place but for Mia it offered a sense of security. The familiar surroundings balanced things much more terrifying than shadows.

Sitting at her desk, she turned on the little reading lamp, booted up the computer, then began the process of creating an anonymous identity for herself. Even if someone backtracked any part of it, they'd still have to get through the museum's firewall, which was one of the best around.

She nibbled on her thumbnail while she composed and discarded the message several times in her head. Finally she looked up Carpenter Techtronics' website to get

their email address. Lucky for her they were one of those companies that listed each executive's email separately. Flexing her fingers she began to type.

*Mr. Carpenter,*

*You don't know me so I know you'll be very skeptical of this note but I hope you will believe me. I have come into some information that leads me to believe that your latest robotic design is in danger of being stolen before your upcoming press conference. This is just to warn you that you need to make sure you have the best security in place.*

*A friend.*

Her finger hovered over the send button. Once it was gone, the deed was done. No calling it back. And there still lingered the remote chance she could be discovered. Then, resolutely she pressed the key and the message flew into cyberspace. Now to make sure he actually got it and paid attention to it. That it didn't sit on his computer all weekend. Even though it was Friday night, she was sure with the upcoming event there was a good chance Chase Carpenter would still be working.

She pulled a throwaway cell phone from her purse, found the Carpenter Techtronics phone number and dialed it. The receptionist and other office staff were most probably gone by now but if she was lucky, at least she'd get a security guard.

Sure enough, a bored male voice answered, telling her the offices were closed until Monday. Would she like to leave a message or call back?

Wrapping the bottom of her blouse over the speaker area on her telephone, she recited in an uninflected voice, "Tell Mr. Carpenter he has an urgent message on his computer and it can't wait until next week. It has to do with his new project."

She clicked off, then separated the battery from the phone itself. She'd toss them both on the way home, as she'd done many times before. She hoped she wouldn't have to deliver too many more messages. Cell phones were expensive and she seldom used them more than once. Maybe she should go back to using pay phones.

Locking her office, she took the elevator back to the lobby and signed out.

"Decided my brain was too worn out to think," she told Harry. "See you Monday."



## Chapter Four

When the call came from the guard, Chase was sitting in the hot tub on his condo terrace, splitting a bottle of chardonnay with his fiancée.

"Don't tell me you're leaving," she complained, as he climbed out onto the deck.

"Something important's come up. I have to go."

He'd barely dried off before throwing on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and shoving his feet into loafers. In seconds he was heading for the private elevator.

Joy, irritated at having their amorous evening interrupted, pulled her robe tightly around her and raced after him.

"But where are you going?" she protested, pushing her way into the elevator with him. "Chase? It's Friday night. What's going on?"

"Go back upstairs," he told her as they reached the garage level. He leaped into his expensive sports car, backed it out of its assigned space and lowered the window. "I'll call you."

"But —"

He shifted into drive and roared out of the garage, leaving her watching him with an angry expression on her face.

"I wasn't sure whether to bother you or not, Mr. Carpenter," the guard said when Chase strode into the building. "We get so many crank calls. But I know how you feel about this baby..."

"No, that's fine, George," Chase assured him. "You did the right thing. I'd rather be called out for nothing than have a disaster because we ignored it."

He jiggled his keys impatiently as the elevator rose to the tenth floor. The minute the doors opened he raced down the hall to his office, unlocked his door and hurried to his computer. As soon as he booted it up, the email icon began flashing. When he clicked on it, a message opened up.

He read it through twice, not quite sure he'd understood it correctly the first time. Even then he was stunned. His first inclination was to agree with George. Someone was playing a joke on him.

If so, however, it was not a very funny one. Carpenter Techtronics had dumped a lot of money into their latest creation. The little sophisticated robot could bring someone millions—strike that, billions—of dollars on the black market. And in the hands of the enemy, it could prove disastrous to his country, in more than one area.

He read it twice, then printed it out and saved it to an electronic folder. Looking at his watch, he realized it was close to eleven, which meant after one in the morning in

Baltimore but he needed to let Dan Romeo know about this. If Dan said not to worry, he'd go home, jump back in the tub with his very naked fiancée and pour another glass of wine. If not, he'd try to get Dan to come to Texas right away instead of next week.

Reluctantly he dialed the familiar number.

"You're lucky all I'm doing is reading reports and watching reruns of 24," Dan joked when he answered the phone.

"I'm hoping I can let you go right back to doing it," Chase answered. Then he told him about the phone call and read him the email. "So what do you think, Dan? Can I chalk this up to someone with a warped sense of humor?"

"It would be nice if we could," Dan replied in his deep voice. "But I think we can't afford to assume anything at this point." He was silent for a moment. "All right. Forward the message to me at the email address I'm going to give you. Then shut down your computer, lock your office and don't let anyone in. I'll call Ed to gas up the Gulfstream and be ready for wheels up at seven o'clock this morning. We should land in San Antonio about ten-thirty, give or take."

"I'll pick you up. Tell me where."

"No, I'll get my own wheels. I'll call you as soon as we land. Where will you be?"

"Probably right here," Chase sighed. "Going through every list I can find to see who might want to play a prank like this."

"And let's hope it's a prank."

"No kidding. If not we're in big, big trouble. The future of the company's riding on this."

"We'll get it taken care of, buddy. See you in a few hours."

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't unusual to see Chase Carpenter in his office early on a Saturday morning. He had a well-deserved reputation as a workaholic. What was puzzling was his refusal to let anyone into his office. Having seen his name in the sign-in book as they checked into the building, a few hardy souls knocked on the door to conduct some business with him, only to be turned away with a terse, "Later."

"The boss must have a big stick up his ass about something," he heard one of them murmur as they turned away.

He'd debated about calling the others—Lucas, Ladd, Stan, Paul—but then decided if it was a false alarm no one else needed to have their weekend disturbed. It was bad enough he had a pissed-off Joy waiting for him back at the condo, demanding answers and ready, he knew, to ream him a new one for running out the way he did. He did his best to soothe her with phone calls but he knew his own edginess made everything he said seem angry and impatient.

"I'll take care of myself," she snapped at the end of the last call. "If I'm not here when you get home, don't wait up for me."

Great. Just what he needed. He was barely engaged and already at odds with the woman he'd asked to marry him. He'd just have to grovel when he got home and hope that worked. Joy was smart and sharp and understood his business in a way few women did. Surely she'd accept the fact that everything else fell by the wayside when emergencies came up. Especially with the press conference next week.

Lately he'd begun to realize under that soft, feminine exterior was an unbending core of steel. She was a woman who planned to get what she wanted one way or another. He was still trying to decide if it made their relationship more intriguing or wearing when Dan Romeo knocked on his door at ten after eleven.

Chase yanked the door open and peered out of the doorway both ways, checking for curiosity seekers. "Come in," he told Dan and dragged him inside.

"You're a heart attack waiting to happen," Dan told him, looking at him critically after they'd shaken hands. "Come on. Let's see if this is really anything to worry about."

"I've been using my secretary's computer to go over employee lists, past and present and review the list of projects from the last two years. I guess I was hoping a name would jump out at me."

"Good. That gives us a start."

"Not so much. So far nothing rings a bell."

"But at least we have a list to begin with." Dan headed for Chase's desk. "Okay, let's see what we're dealing with. Then I'll tell you what the Dragon found out."

The Dragon, a super-sophisticated computer setup at Phoenix headquarters, ran on one-of-a-kind programs. There was very little it couldn't find out, decipher or decode. Dan liked to say you couldn't hide from the Dragon's fire.

Chase turned on his computer and waited for it to come to life, then clicked on the folder icon and opened the email. When the message filled the screen he stood back and let Dan sit down at the desk.

The email hadn't changed, although he didn't know why he expected it to. It still sat there blinking its warning. Chase leaned back against the credenza and watched while Dan manipulated the software codes, searching, searching, searching. At length he turned to Chase and said, "Well Andy, our new and wonderful geek, ran this through the Dragon and found the same thing."

As he was about to give the rundown on the email trace, the phone on the desk rang and a highly stressed Chase scooped up the receiver impatiently.

"What?" He listened to George, the security guard, on the other end, then turned to Dan. "Another call asking if we got the email."

"Is the person still on the line?"

"I think so."

Dan grabbed the receiver. "Can you transfer the call up here?" he asked. "I see. Okay. No, don't worry. I have other ways I can check it."

"What's the deal?" Chase had to force himself to stand still.

"No deal. The minute George put the call on hold, whoever it was hung up. Come on. I want to go talk to him about the voice. Then we'll need to get a dump of all your incoming calls. You still record them electronically on a computer, right?"

Chase nodded. "All the lines are hooked into a central system and the numbers automatically stored."

"Thank God you're an obsessive electronics nut." Dan grinned. "We might be able to trace this."

He was already heading for the elevator, Chase hot on his heels. "But what about the email? You said you had news about it?"

"As soon as we talk to George."

They had barely entered the elevator when Chase's cell rang. He frowned at the number displayed. "Yes, Joy. No, I can't leave now. No, I think it would be a waste of your time to come down here." He took a deep breath and softened his tone. "No, honey, I'm not mad at you. Just grumpy. Give me an hour and I'll call you back."

\* \* \* \* \*

Making the phone calls was always dangerous but necessary. She could never afford to have the emails ignored. At least Mia knew they couldn't be traced. But the call was necessary, just to make sure the message got through. Somehow she had to make them take her warning seriously. Hopefully the call would get through to Chase Carpenter. Now she had to see if they acted on it. Chad had convinced her that if they took it seriously there'd be activity of some kind and the media would sniff it out. She'd have to monitor the news.

Back at her house, she couldn't rid herself of a bad case of the jitters. Not even her herbal tea and a hot soak in the tub could sufficiently calm her nerves. Deep down she had a conviction that something evil was brewing. If what Chad told her was true, Carpenter Techtronics was sitting on a gold mine that every country and terrorist organization in the world would pay anything to possess.

She fretted about it all night, unable to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw either the hands grabbing for the rock or plunging the knife into a body. At dawn she finally dropped off, only to be awakened by some nightmare that she couldn't bring back but that left her sweat-soaked and trembling. Pulling herself out of bed, she trudged down to the kitchen to make herself some tea. She heated water in the microwave for tea, then took out a knife to cut herself a slice of pound cake.

At once the image of the hand thrusting with a knife gripped her again, paralyzing her. She dropped the knife she was holding onto the counter, the sharp edge of the blade catching her other hand as she did so. It wasn't until her accelerated heart rate slowed and her eyes began to focus again that she saw blood welling from the sharp cut

between her thumb and forefinger.

Hastily she yanked paper towels from the holder and pressed hard against the wound. Nausea bubbled up from her stomach, as much from the vision as from the trauma of the wound and she collapsed into one of the chairs at the table.

*Someone's going to be killed.*

The voice danced in her head again. She had to swallow three times before she didn't feel as if her throat was stuck together inside. God, please let them listen to her. They had to. Going to the police was certainly not an option, not with her spotty track record. She'd have to call them again, just for added insurance. Deliver the message and hang up quickly. And this time she'd use a pay phone.

Pulling a dishtowel from a drawer, she wrapped it around her hand and knotted the ends. She needed to make this second call before she lost her nerve. Better first aid could wait until after that.

Driving with an open wound on one hand wasn't the easiest thing to do but she managed it until she found a pay phone outside a convenience store without too many people around. Nervously she pulled out the slip of paper with the company's phone number on it, tugged the edge of her shirt over the mouthpiece and used a hankie she dug out of her pocket to hold the receiver.

The same man answered and she spat out her message as quickly as she could. But this time she nearly had a problem.

"Wait a minute," he drawled. "Let me just get a pen and write this down, okay? If it's important I don't want to mess it up."

No! She knew he had to be transferring her to someone. That was unacceptable. Get the message out as quickly as possible and hang up. That was her standard method. It occurred to her that with all his sophisticated electronics, Chase Carpenter might be able to triangulate the call and pinpoint her position. Maybe get someone there before she could leave.

She hung up the phone as if it burned her hand and hurried back to her car. Heart pounding and hands shaking, she drove home as fast as she could without drawing attention to herself. She was still trembling when she pulled into her garage and punched the button to close the door. Fully five minutes passed before she could move from the car into the house. And another fifteen before she felt steady enough to treat the wound on her hand.

It probably needed stitches but in her present state she didn't want to have to deal with an emergency room or urgent care clinic. Instead she cleaned the cut, put ointment on, used butterfly closures and wrapped the whole thing in gauze. Her hand felt as if someone was banging a drumstick on it, so she swallowed some aspirin.

What if they traced the number on the pay phone? Well, what about it? Anyone could have used it. She hadn't left any fingerprints. The location of the phone wouldn't necessarily indicate that the caller was from around there.

Damn! Why hadn't she driven across town? Well, too late to think about that now.

Finally she dragged herself upstairs and crawled into bed, pulling the covers over herself the way she wished she could escape from the world and hide in a little hole.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Damn it." Chase slammed his hand on the guard's desk.

"I tried, Mr. Carpenter. Honest. Whoever it was just hung up."

"Not your fault, George." Chase fisted his hands. "You did your best."

Dan had pulled out his cell phone and was speed dialing a number. "Could you tell if it was a man or a woman?" he asked while he waited for the call to go through.

George shook his head. "Sorry. The voice was muffled. And whispering. And spoke very quickly."

"Figures." Dan straightened and moved away from the desk to speak as his call connected. "Andy. Make yourself a gallon of coffee. I'm sending you an extremely large file of telephone records. I want you to pull off every incoming call to the main Carpenter Techtronics number yesterday and today and tell me where they came from." He recited the main Carpenter number and had Andy repeat it back to him.

Andy's laugh echoed back over the airwaves. He was rapidly getting used to his new boss and the ever-present crisis situations that involved the work he was given. "And you want it five minutes ago, right?"

"I see you know me so well already, my hardwired friend. All right. Call my cell the instant you get anything. Oh and Andy? See if any of the numbers match up geographically with what you got on the email trace." He snapped the phone shut and stuck it in his pocket.

"Are you ready to tell me now what you've got on that email?" Chase demanded, his body humming with tension.

"Yes." Dan took him by the arm. "As soon as we're back in your office."

Chase ground his teeth as they rode up in the elevator. He jogged down the hall, banged open the door to his office and strode inside.

"Now." He turned to Dan. "Give. Whatever it is."

Dan studied his face for a moment. "Do you make it a habit to visit art museums?"

Chase's jaw dropped. "What the hell does *that* mean?"

"You heard me. Do you spend a lot of time in art museums?"

"I guess I go to a benefit now and then with Joy. Why? What's that got to do with anything?"

Dan dropped his rangy frame into one of the armchairs. "Whoever sent that email is very clever. They know how to build enough layers to create anonymity." He grinned. "Except from the Dragon, of course. The Dragon can seek out anything." He paused. "The email came from someone at the DeWitt Museum."

Chase stared at him. "But that's absurd. What would anyone in a museum have to

do with techtronics? Especially sophisticated robotics.”

“You’ve got me. What about your partners. Any of them doing a weird dance with museum people?”

“No more than I do. We all give a chunk of change to the art world and hoist a glass of champagne when we have to. Jesus. An art museum? Why would someone there want to steal Oscar?”

All humor disappeared from Dan’s face. “I don’t know. But someone’s trying to warn you about this and doing their damndest to make sure you get the message. You think it might be a good idea for you to call your partners now and fill them in?”

Chase shook his head. “Not until we know more about who this is. They’ll want specific information. So do I.”

“Okay. Meanwhile I want to meet with your security people. I’m calling Troy to send in some reinforcements. I think we should beef things up.” Troy Arsenault, among his many other responsibilities with the agency, supervised the training and assignment of field agents, juggling schedules as new jobs came up. “And I want to get hold of the director of the museum.”

Chase’s eyes widened. “You think *he* might know something?”

Dan shook his head. “No. But I want access to all his computers. I want to find the right one before I confront whoever it is.” He stood up. “Okay. Here’s what we’ll do. I know you want to run around and pull someone’s hair out but you’ve got to let me do my job. I promise to keep you up to date. And I agree with you. Let’s not tell the others until we know who we’re dealing with.”

“You do realize the ramifications if someone steals Oscar, right?” Chase was pacing nervously, hands shoved in his pockets, a muscle jumping in his cheek.

“Trust me, Chase.” Dan’s voice was even, calming. “Oscar will be perfectly safe. It’s what I do for a living, remember?”

“Yeah, well.” He yanked a hand from one pocket and raked his fingers through his already disheveled hair. “Until you get back, you don’t mind if I keep Oscar company, do you?”

“I think you should go home and relax with your fiancée. Before I leave here, I’ll have four extra men surrounding Oscar, plus a television monitoring system. That’s in addition to the biometric system we set up for you. He’ll be perfectly safe for the weekend.”

“But —”

“Trust me on this, okay? This is what I do.”

Reluctantly Chase shut down his computer and locked his desk. “My future’s in your hands, Romeo. Just so you know that.”

“Got it. Now let’s go.”

As they headed for the elevator, Dan was already calling his office again and handing out orders.

## Chapter Five

Mia spent the weekend in a frenzy of anxiety. She left the envelope with the printout on Carpenter Techtronics on her kitchen counter, rubbing her hand over it frequently, hoping to call forth another image. But as if Fate was playing games with her, her mind remained blank. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to touch the kitchen knife repeatedly but again nothing resulted from it.

"Damn it," she screamed, kicking at a kitchen chair and shouting into the air. "When I want you to leave me alone, you drive me crazy. When I want your help, you leave me alone. No wonder people think I'm nuts. I must be for sure."

The cut on her hand didn't help either, throbbing most of the time and serving as a constant reminder of her frustration. She cleaned it and applied ointment twice more. Then, after rewrapping it, stuffed ice cubes in a plastic bag and held it over the wound until the cold hurt worse than the cut.

Her sleep, what she got of it, was broken and uneven. Images from past visions invaded her dreams, bombarding her senses and confusing her brain. She found herself waking frequently and afraid to let sleep return.

At least her mystery man hadn't made another appearance. Maybe her sense receptors had just been out of whack. Maybe her brain cells were getting fried. Maybe, maybe, maybe. She almost found herself waiting for him to materialize in front of her eyes, then mentally kicked herself for anticipating it.

*Pathetic, Mia. Get a real date.*

She was exhausted by the time Monday morning came around. Listlessly she dressed for work, picking up her newspapers before she left the house. She stuck them in the car with her briefcase, determined to wait until she got to her office to see if there was any new mention of Chase Techtronics or its possible new project. She stopped in the little employee kitchenette to get a cup of coffee. Then, settling herself at her desk, juggling everything with her good hand, she opened the paper to the business section and began scanning the articles.

"Looking for something special?"

She hadn't heard the man come in and his voice startled her so. When she looked up she jerked her hand so hard she knocked over her coffee. It spilled onto her desk and dripped onto her skirt.

It was him! The man from her visions. But who was he? And what was he doing in her office?

"I'm sorry." His voice was deep and rich, like warm, thick honey. "I didn't mean to startle you."



Mia closed her eyes and counted to ten, hoping he'd disappear.

"Miss Fleming?" She opened her eyes. He was still there. "Here, let me help you with that."

He grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on her desk and began mopping the liquid. Mia was frozen in place, unable to make herself move. How was this possible? How in the freakin' hell was this possible?

He stopped, his hands full of soggy tissues. "Are you okay? You seem a little...out of it?"

*Out of it?* Mia thought that was one way of putting it.

"W-Who are you?" She couldn't seem to stop looking at him. Was he real or another vision that had popped into her brain?

Like *that* man, he was well over six feet. Instead of the revealing boxers he wore a well-cut gray sports jacket and black slacks that looked as if they'd been custom-made for him. The lean body beneath the fabric was the same, though, what she could see of it, giving the impression it was all hard muscle. The same thick black hair now brushed the top of his black silk turtleneck. Dark eyes like onyx, fringed by thick lashes, were the centerpiece of a face with an olive complexion, high cheekbones and a classic nose.

And a hard look about his face that made a stone wall look soft.

Mia felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. Sexuality radiated from the man, an invisible heat that made her mouth dry and her pulse speed up.

*I want to fuck you.*

She dropped the files she'd been gathering out of the way, shock radiating through her. Had he really said that out loud or had she just imagined it? That damnable pulse at the core of her pussy was beating like a tom-tom and her skin felt too hot and too tight.

She'd have to get to the ladies' room and a sink full of water to repair the damage from the coffee. And cool down her blood. Luckily her computer sat on a side extension so the coffee didn't get to it.

Taking a deep breath she forced herself to look at him. "I'm fine, sorry, you just startled me."

He handed her a business card. It carried the symbol of the phoenix rising from the ashes and beneath the graphic his name—Dante "Dan" Romeo.

She set the card on the corner of her desk. "Give me a minute to clean up this mess, Mr. Romeo. Then you can tell me what you want."

"Here. I'll give you a hand."

Mia wasn't sure she could stand him touching her, and was very careful to avoid contact while they disposed of the debris. When she'd tossed the tissues and wet papers in the trash, she sat back down at her desk, trying to compose herself. But when she looked at him again an arrow of heat pierced through her. His presence filled the room with an overwhelming sense of power that made the air vibrate.

*Get real, Mia. You're not the type of person who falls in lust with a total stranger like this. Especially this type of man.*

*Oh, no?* her other self said. *What about the vision? What about what happened yesterday?*

She managed to pull herself together, trying to ignore the coffee stains on her gray skirt, checking to see that nothing had splashed on her tweed jacket, willing herself to keep it together. *Ha!*

"I don't recall having any appointments today." She hoped she sounded cool and professional. "May I help you?"

"You can if you're Mia Fleming." He was still looking at her strangely. "And, that is, if you're all right."

The timbre of the deep voice made her shiver and butterflies began a dance in her stomach. Impossible that he could be looking for her. She was used to strangers in the museum but not to having them rattle her like this. Besides, men like him never wandered into her corner of the museum. Or any corner, for that matter, except for special events. And they certainly never came deliberately looking for her.

*Unless they show up in one of my visions.*

Mia took a deep breath, centering herself and trying her best to focus. Breathing, however, was difficult. This man seemed to take up all the air in the room.

"I'm Dr. Fleming." She hoped her voice sounded at least close to normal. "Is there something I can do for you? If you want to discuss an exhibit or an event, Dr. Hunter is the person you want to see but I'm afraid you're out of luck. He's away until this evening."

*Oh, please. Could I sound any more self-deprecating? Why don't I hunch my shoulders and peer up at him like a mouse? Get a grip, Mia.*

He stood at the front of her desk, looming over her. "No. I don't think Dr. Hunter is the person I want."

She took another deep breath, unsettled by his nearness. "I'm sorry you wasted your time coming here when the director is gone but perhaps I can arrange a tour of the museum while you're here?"

"I thought I just said the director's not who I want." A ghost of a smile drifted over his chiseled mouth. Something about the way his facial muscles moved told her he wasn't a man who smiled a lot. "I would have suggested a cup of coffee but that seems to be a lethal weapon for you."

"I'm so sorry." *Don't get flustered, Mia.* "You just startled me." She looked at the business card. "What exactly is Phoenix?"

*"An agency that takes care of things for people."*

Okay, that sounded ominous. And the man himself made her nervous enough that her insides were quaking. "I don't think we have anything here that needs taking care of, so why are you here?"

Instead of answering her he inclined his head toward her bandaged hand. "I see

you injured yourself.”

She waved it off, even though she’d been swallowing Acetaminophen at an alarming rate to dull the pain. Surely she was just being a baby about it, right? It was just a stupid cut. “Household accident. I think I’m genetically clumsy.”

“Now, why do I have a hard time believing that?” He lowered himself into the chair opposite her desk with panther-like grace, his rangy body dwarfing it. His gaze took in every inch of her that he could see, giving her the feeling she was being x-rayed.

*I want to fuck you.*

Mia shook. Had he really said that? Of course not. His actual words were, “I understand you’re the art historian for the museum.”

She frowned. Okay, he wasn’t leaving right away. He didn’t want a tour. If he hadn’t stepped out of her vision, *what was this all about?* “Yes. I do the research for all the exhibits and provide the material for the media kits and the brochures. Are you in the art business?”

“No, I’m not.”

Silence settled over them and he watched her, as if waiting for her to say something else.

She cleared her throat. “As I said, I don’t think there’s anything with our art that needs fixing, or I would have known about it.”

“Actually, I have very little to do with art except to appreciate both its value and its beauty.”

*Like yours.*

Okay, this was getting too weird even for her. She attempted to pull the frayed edges of the situation together.

“Then I can’t imagine what you’d want with me. Are you sure you didn’t get lost here? I’d be happy to show you to the correct person.”

“No. You’re the one I want.”

More silence. The butterflies were fluttering harder in her stomach. This wasn’t about sex, despite the voice in her head. Unexplained disappointment surged through her. Something was wrong here and she couldn’t figure out what. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Well, that’s very flattering I’m sure but I have a great deal of work to do. Unless there’s something specific you want, I’ll have to be rude and ask you to leave.”

“Before I’ve even told you why I’m here?”

If he wasn’t here about art or the museum, then what... Mia tried to still the panic that slammed into her. Surely it couldn’t be the email. She was positive she’d covered her tracks. But his next words told her just how wrong she was.

“I understand you like to send anonymous emails,” he said at last.

*Thunk!* The butterflies were replaced by the Radio City Rockettes doing a tap dance.

How could he have traced her? She'd been so careful building her protection. And no one had ever been able to get through the museum's firewall before, giving her a sense of security when she sent her messages.

"In my job, yes. I exchange a lot of emails. And of course we use them for internal communications. But anonymous? I don't think so." She cleared her throat. "Why would you even think that?"

*Say it, she wanted to scream. At least I'll know I got through.*

He leaned forward in the chair, elbows resting on his knees, his eyes impaling her. "I think we can stop the cat and mouse game, Dr. Fleming. An email was sent Friday night to Carpenter Techtronics from your computer. I know it's yours because I've checked all the others. Does anyone use it but you?"

*Lie or tell the truth? Pretend ignorance or get it out in the open? Come on, Mia, don't be a weak sister. Show him what you're made of.*

She let out a slow breath. "No. I'm the one who sent the email."

"And also made two calls to make sure Mr. Carpenter got it?"

She nodded.

"Thank you for telling me the truth and saving us both a lot of time and unpleasantness."

"I'd like to know how you traced it back to me," she asked. Where had she made a mistake?

"With some very sophisticated equipment. Look," he told her, "I'm trying to be low-key here but if you have inside knowledge of something going on at his company, this would be a good time to tell me."

She wet her lips again. "I don't have knowledge. Exactly. At least, not the way you mean."

All trace of humor and courtesy disappeared from his face. "I don't really have time to play games here, Dr. Fleming. You obviously know something. Or are involved in it. If you won't tell me what you know, we may get to that unpleasantness I thought we were avoiding."

She needed a sign. Something that told her he'd believe her crazy story. And not consider her the culprit. Sometimes a simple touch gave her the signal she needed. Sometimes, although not always, she could "read" people this way and know if she was dealing with an enemy. "Would you do me a favor, Mr. Romeo? Shake hands with me?"

One eyebrow lifted. "Excuse me?"

"Just shake hands with me. Surely that won't create a problem." She waved her hands in the air. "It's not as if I have a gun or anything."

"Fine. If it will get me some answers." He leaned across the desk and stretched out a hand, his face still implacable.

Mia steeled herself for his touch. This was the dangerous part in more ways than

one. What if the image came back, right now, right here, sharp and vivid in her office? What if her body responded the way it had the day before? It would take all her skills to get a sense of the flesh and blood man without revealing more than she wanted to.

When she clasped his hand, a sense of heat spread through her body as it had the day before. But now there was something else. Something that overrode it. The most amazing feeling of warmth. A sense of safety. The image of the nearly naked man tried to intrude but she concentrated on banishing it. But there was no hostility. Nothing for her to fear. She could tell him the truth. He was safe. Built of granite but safe.

"Do you know anything about psychic abilities?" she asked. "About precognition?"

She waited for the skepticism and ridicule, bracing herself for a negative, derogatory reaction.

But he didn't recoil or make a face as most people did. Or stare at her as if she had two heads. And what he said caught her off guard. "As a matter of fact, I do. Are you saying you have precognitive powers?"

God, did that mean he somehow knew about her vision of him? No, not possible. Just not possible.

She bit her lower lip and nodded. "Most people think I'm some kind of a kook or a nut. I've tried to help the police before but sometimes I can't interpret the images clearly enough and I've made...mistakes."

"I can understand that. Your average bear has little knowledge of any kind of psychic powers. I think most people are even a little afraid of them."

She gave him a shaky smile. "You surprise me. I didn't think a man like you would take psychic abilities seriously."

He shifted in the chair, re-crossing his legs. "A man like me?"

"You look very pragmatic," she told him, hoping she wasn't putting her foot in her mouth. "Black and white. The hard evidence type. Parapsychology often requires taking things simply on faith."

He studied her again as he had before. "I own a...security company called Phoenix. One of my partners is a telepath. So is his wife. Their ability to communicate is the only thing that saved his life when he was captured in the Peruvian jungle." He paused. "Maybe I could tell you the story sometime."

Electricity crackled in the air between them and Mia wondered if Dan Romeo felt it as she did. He gave no indication, simply sat in his loose-jointed but alert way in the chair opposite her. At least the fever in her body seemed to have subsided to a controllable temperature. She could feel herself relaxing as relief stole over her. Not only had she been nearly shocked out of her senses by his appearance but she'd also been sure that he'd think what she had to say was nonsense. Instead, however, he was waiting to hear her explanation. She wet her lips. "It certainly sounds like something I'd like to hear."

Of course who knew if he'd be around longer than this meeting to tell her

anything?

*I'm going to fuck you.*

Mia clenched her hands into fists and dug her nails into her palms. She stared at Dan, trying to read something, anything, into his expression. But there was nothing to give him away. If he was somehow sending her thoughts he didn't show it. She had to get a grip here.

"Also, I happen to know the military has been experimenting with various Psi groups for years," he went on. "So while others might blow this off, I take you very seriously."

"Okay, that's good. But let me just give you a little thumbnail here to flesh out whatever you might know." She drew a breath and let it out. She didn't like feeling off kilter. At least in this subject she was in control. Most of the time.

"Precognitive experiences occur most often in dreams," she began. "But they can also occur in what's called spontaneous waking visions flashing through the mind. Some are also auditory but mine never have been."

He listened carefully, his expression attentive. "Go on."

"The difference between precognition and other Psi events like premonition is that precognition generally involves an explicit future event." *Like having sex with you.* She gave him a wry smile. "Providing you can decipher the bits and pieces of the visions. Premonition deals with the sense or feeling that something is going to happen but the event is non-specific. Like feeling someone is in danger but not knowing how or where."

"I can relate to that."

Her eyes widened. "You can? Don't tell me you have psychic abilities too. That would be too much of a coincidence."

He shook his head. "Not exactly. I was a Force Recon Marine. What you're talking about, at least with premonition, is kind of like the gut feelings I'd get when we were on a mission and something bad was about to happen."

She nodded. "Yes. A different type of internal sensing. Okay, then. If precognition is a glimpse of the true or real future, then the visions are events witnessed before the causes. It makes it difficult to get people to believe you don't really have advance knowledge or an ulterior motive."

"Which can lead to skeptics and questions from people like me," he guessed. "I'm assuming this all started with a precognitive vision, so why don't you tell me what it's all about? Chase Carpenter is a good friend of mine. I was coming here today to help him with security for his big announcement and demonstration on Friday anyway. When he got your email he called me, I jumped on our plane and arrived on the weekend."

"You have your own plane?" *Close your mouth, Mia. So do many of your donors.*

"It makes life easier." His eyes studied her. "So here I am. Your story, Dr. Fleming?"

"I'd feel better if you called me Mia."

*And maybe put your arms around me and held me against that very attractive body of yours.*

*Jesus, Mia. What is it with you? This is business. And he doesn't look like a man who has the word comfort in his vocabulary. Not to mention he's a total stranger and came here to investigate you.* Except, of course, for that very weird thing that happened the night before. And the voice that kept intruding into her head.

Watching him for any signs of doubt or disbelief, she gave him the short version of her personal history as it related to her gift. Then she launched into descriptions, in sequence, of the images relating to Carpenter and their new toy. Something, she couldn't say what, made her hold back the vision of the stabbing knife. Maybe he'd think it too absurd and discount everything else she had to say.

"I'm assuming someone's going to try to steal it. Whatever *it* is. I wanted to warn Mr. Carpenter so he'd be prepared for whatever might happen."

"Security is very tight around his little toy," Romeo told her. "And it's about to get even tighter. If anyone decides to try something they'll be in for a big surprise."

"I'm still shocked that you don't think I'm crazy," she told him. "Or making this up. Usually when people hear what I have to say, they run in the opposite direction."

"I know you're surprised but no. Nothing like that. I actually believe you're onto something we can't afford to discard."

She twisted her fingers together. "I have to be very careful of what my powers get me involved in because of the museum. Most people in this city don't know my history. If they thought a nut was part of the staff here, it could seriously affect our exhibits and contributions."

"Don't worry. No one will hear anything from me." He stood up. "I've got to call Chase, figure out how to ease him into this explanation. He's an engineer. If he can't see it he doesn't necessarily believe it."

"That could be a problem," she pointed out.

"I'll handle it. I also need to contact my office and make some additional security plans, based on what you've told me. I thought we were all set but I can't afford to take any chances. Not in this situation." He paused. "But I'd like to take you to lunch, if you're agreeable."

Lunch. With him. The man in her vision.

Mia hesitated, sensing things shifting around her. Normally her social engagements were limited to a few friends like Chad or the people she worked with to promote exhibits. Sometimes with donors but usually in a large group setting. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd been out on a date. Too many men had either shied away from her psi ability or treated her like some weird specimen. But of course, she mentally kicked herself, this certainly was not anything remotely related to a date.

She wet her lips. "Lunch?"

*God. Let's hear it for my social graces. Could I be any more tongue-tied?*

"I'd like to get more details about your visions and what prompts them," he explained. "Maybe if we go over everything piece by piece, we might pick up a clue as to who and what we should be on the alert for. I just thought we'd be much more relaxed over a meal."

Oh. So not a social event. Okay. Better. Considering what was brewing in her addled brain, the smartest thing would be to keep as much distance as possible between her and this man who sent shockwaves through her body. Make him interview her in her office, or someplace equally neutral.

"Is that a problem?" he asked when she didn't say anything. "You do eat lunch, right?" One corner of his mouth quirked up in a lazy smile.

Her blood heated as if she'd put a match to it. Warning bells were clanging loudly in her head. But what the heck. What could happen at lunch?

"That would be very nice," she heard herself saying and silently gave thanks that she kept a change of clothes at the office. Going to lunch wearing coffee stains wasn't high on her list of ways to make a good impression. "Thank you. What time?"

"Twelve-thirty?"

"I'll be waiting out front for you. And I'll be bringing someone I'd like you to meet."

She felt herself pale. "I don't think..."

His smile involved his entire mouth this time and her pulses began to throb erratically. Now she knew what a killer smile was.

"This person is definitely non-threatening. He has a psychic gift too. He's the partner I mentioned before. I just thought it might ease things a little and he could possibly be of some help."

She relaxed a tiny bit. "All right. I think."

"Oh and you might tell whoever you need to let know these things that you'll probably be out most of the afternoon."

She raised her eyebrows. "And where will I be instead of here?"

"Chase is going to want to question you himself and I'd like to make this as non-threatening as possible."

"Non-threatening?"

"Mia." His voice was even, casual but firm. "You've come up with the idea that someone's going to do some kind of harm to Carpenter Techtronics. I can't just ask you a few questions and walk away. I thought lunch would help to give you some time to prepare before we meet with him."

"I see." She shoved her hands into her skirt pockets so he wouldn't notice their trembling.

"So is twelve-thirty good for you?"



"Yes. That will be fine. I can get things organized in my office by then and leave a message with the director's secretary. He's still out of town so he won't miss me."

"Good. See you then."

Mia walked him to the elevator but when the doors closed shutting him in the car she stood staring at the wall for a long time. What was she getting herself into? No man had ever produced the incredible effect on her that Dan Romeo did. He was like an inexorable force sweeping her into deep waters. And then, of course, there was the damn dream, or vision, or whatever the hell it had been. How was she supposed to have a business relationship with him?

She hoped by lunchtime she'd gotten her senses and her hormones under control.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan sat in his rented SUV in front of the museum trying to gather his fractured thoughts together. The last thing he'd expected when he walked into Mia Fleming's office was the woman who greeted him. With a thick fall of sun-streaked hair and eyes like rare emeralds, she was a Botticelli come to life, the innocence of the Madonna blended with the unconscious charms of a courtesan. An image of which she seemed totally unaware.

And then there was her mouth, full lips that he'd like to devour and a body he'd give everything in his wallet to see naked in his bed.

*Well, that's very professional. Way to go, Dan. Break a few rules.*

He never, ever mixed business with pleasure. No matter how tempting the women involved in their cases were, his Marine training gave him the discipline to stick to his personal code. It appeared that he and the very appealing Dr. Fleming were about to be involved together in whatever this...thing...turned out to be. He just hoped he could manage to be around her without an erection that drew everyone's attention.

His partners, of course, would laugh themselves silly. During his downtime, Romeo lived up to his name in spades. Between cases his dance card was always filled with any number of willing women. Sex, he'd learned a long time ago, was a great stress-reliever and he had a lusty enjoyment of it.

But while he might revel in it, intensely and often, for him it was purely a physical activity. Emotion never played a part in it. He'd seen too many evil things in life, been to hell and back too many times, to let himself ever open up to a relationship. He'd also learned not to make pillow talk and run the risk of giving away secrets. For Mark and Faith it was a lot different. If he could have something like that...

*Can it, Romeo. Don't live up to your name.*

Yet with this woman he felt like a horny teenager with his first crush. He had no doubt she could probably pry the code to Fort Knox from him without even trying. He was glad he'd managed to get out of there without embarrassing himself and letting her see exactly how she affected him.

Jesus! What did he do now? He'd be seeing her every day until this situation was resolved. Maybe even in the evening, depending on how things went. Knowing how precognition worked, it would be to his advantage to keep her with him at all times, to be there whenever a vision hit her. Talk about a time bomb waiting to go off. He'd just have to take a lot of cold showers.

Meanwhile, he had to figure out how to explain to Chase where the information was coming from. Engineers and psychics might as well come from two different planets. Well, he had one ace in the hole he could play. Mark Halloran, his telepathic partner, lived in San Antonio and was currently between assignments. Mark, a former member of Delta Force, was about as no-nonsense as they came. He could help convince Chase that they weren't discussing black magic.

He opened his phone and hit speed dial.

"Dragon's Lair," Andy answered.

"I hope the Dragon's in a good mood, today," Dan told him, "because I have more work for him."

"Fire away. He's always hungry."

Dan gave him what little he had on Mia Fleming and asked him to do a full search on her, then call him with the details. He didn't have time to go back to hook up his laptop and download it.

"On it right now," Andy assured him.

The next person he called was Mark.

"What do you know about precognition?" he asked the moment Mark answered the phone.

"Well, hello to you too." Mark chuckled. "I gather urgency dictates an absence of pleasantries."

"Yeah, yeah. Hello. And hi to Faith. Okay. Precognition."

"Probably not nearly as much as Faith. You know, when we had that thing last year and she was having trouble managing her telepathic abilities, focusing them, she went to her aunt for help. She's learned a lot about parapsychology since then. Is that too much information or not enough?"

*That thing* had been Mark's imprisonment in a terrorist camp in Peru and his rescue by Phoenix. Faith's Aunt Vivi, who herself had psychic gifts, had introduced Faith to a small circle of friends who were part of The Lotus Circle, an ancient club revived recently by four women and now with people involved all over the world. They helped Faith harness her ability and learn how to direct it properly.

"She meets with Vivi and some of her friends on a regular basis. They discuss all types of parapsychology and ways to make it useful. I'll be willing to bet precognition is one of the areas they've been studying. I think she's even including some type of psychic gift in her next book. Why?"

Dan explained the situation in short, terse sentences. "So what I'm asking is, can

you meet us for lunch? And somehow before that get Faith to give you a short course on the basics, if she's around?"

Mark laughed. "You don't want much, do you?"

"I also want to take you to this meeting at Carpenter Techtronics," Dan told him, "so I have another reasonable head assuring them we aren't consulting with witch doctors. I need all the help I can get explaining how someone not planning to rob them knows about a crime that may or may not be committed."

"No problem. Faith's at home working on her next book. I'll bribe her with a cup of strawberry tea and get what I can from her before I leave to meet you. Anyway, I think she'll be glad to get me out from underfoot. She's trying to meet a looming deadline and I'm driving her nuts, if you'll pardon the pun. Are you picking me up or meeting me at the restaurant?"

"Meeting you at Carpenter's. I need to touch base with Chase and his people before lunch. Then we can ride together. See you in thirty."

Dan's next call was to Chase, who answered in the middle of the first ring.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Listen," Dan began, "I have some answers to our questions but they're not quite what you're expecting."

"I don't understand." Chase's voice was edgy. "Did you find the person sending the email or not? Do they know who's planning to steal Oscar? Are they the ones?"

"Not exactly. It's a little more complicated than that."

"Damn it, Dan," Chase exploded. "I want some straight answers. Too much is riding on this to play games."

"No games. I'm bringing someone to your office who can help me explain what's happening. We'll be there in half an hour. And Chase? I think now it's time to let your partners in on what's happening."

By the time Mark and Dan hooked up in the Carpenter lobby, Andy had called back with Mia's very interesting history, both professionally and psychically.

## **Chapter Six**

Six pairs of eyes studied Dan Romeo as he walked into the conference room. He noticed that Joy Rivers, although not a member of the executive team, had been included and was sitting next to Chase, a proprietary look on her face. Maybe it was just as well Chase had invited her, Dan thought. She had a sharp mind and a flair for analyzing situations. And everyone was aware of the amount of influence she had over Chase.

Dan introduced Mark to everyone and the two men poured coffee for themselves from the setup on the sideboard. Carrying their drinks, they took their places at the table.

"Thank you all for meeting with me," he started.

"I'm guessing you've discovered who sent the email," Chase said, fingers drumming nervously on the table.

"Have you called the police?" Ladd Tolbert, Mr. Practical Follow-the-Rules, was flipping a pen back and forth in his usual edgy manner, lines tightening around his mouth.

"Not yet. We really have nothing specific to give them at this point."

"Wait a minute," Lucas interrupted. "Chase tells me we got a threatening email and two calls. Isn't that enough to get the cops involved?"

Dan shook his head. "I think everyone needs to sit back a minute and let me tell you exactly what I found. Then we can make some decisions."

"Who sent the emails?" Lucas Grant demanded. He looked at Mark and Dan. "One of these people?"

"Why don't we hear what Dan has to say," Paul interrupted in a reasonable tone of voice. "I'm sure he didn't ask to meet with us for no good reason."

Watching their faces carefully, fully prepared for the disbelief, Dan related the details of the trace on the email, how he located Mia Fleming and her story. For a long moment no one said a word. Then Chase, running on nervous energy, jumped up and began to pace.

"That's a load of crap," he spat out. "I think she—and whoever—are planning something and this is just to get you running in circles. Psychic messages? Please. Gimme a break, Dan. I'd have thought better of you."

"And that's exactly why I brought Mark with me. You all know he just joined Phoenix as the fifth partner after a long stint in Delta Force. I think you need to hear what he has to say before you trash this idea."

In measured tones, his voice carefully uninflected, Mark told them about meeting

Faith Wilding in grade school. About how in high school they discovered they could communicate telepathically. About how their careers kept them apart physically but they were always connected mentally. Most of all, however, he told them about his capture by terrorists in Peru when his only link to the outside world was Faith.

"She was like a pit bull." Dan grinned. "She wouldn't give up until she figured out how to rescue him. Through her telepathic messages with Mark she learned about Joey Latrobe, my partner Rick's brother. And a member of Mark's mission team. He was nearly dead but managed to conceal himself, get to the extraction point and was picked up by the extraction team. Finding him led her to Phoenix."

"She convinced Phoenix to agree to rescue me," Mark continued. "Joey marked the map to show them where we'd been ambushed and they were able to pinpoint my exact position through the messages Faith and I managed to exchange. It was a struggle, because the terrorists also had a telepath, a strong one who did his best to block our communication."

"So you see," Dan wrapped up, "psychic phenomena does exist. It's not just some imaginary black magic. The military is continually experimenting with its uses to give them a better edge in covert operations. And there are several instances where the police have relied on psychics to help them solve cases where they were at a dead end."

"I asked Faith what she knew about precognition," Mark said, "and I'll give you the very short course she gave me."

For a long moment after he finished no one spoke. Finally Ladd said, "Aren't we reaching a little here? Someone sees a vision that isn't even exactly Oscar, thinks someone's going to steal him and sends us an anonymous email?"

"When I met Mia today I was very impressed," Dan told them. "This isn't some outrageous person with bizarre ideas. She's a college graduate with a doctorate in her field and is a well-respected, recognized art expert. I believe exactly what she said. Especially after talking with Mark. That she had a precognitive vision...actually more than one...involving Oscar. She sent the emails and made the calls to give you a heads-up that something might happen. And I don't think we can afford to discount anything here."

Chase listened closely to everything Dan said. "As you know, we did another test with Oscar the other day. What she's describing could very easily be shots from that operation. But those pictures have been locked up where no one can get at them except me. Either she's getting inside information from someone or..."

"Or she's the real thing?" Dan allowed himself a rare, tiny smile.

"Which I'm reserving judgment on." Chase doodled on the pad in front of him. "I hear everything you're saying but I want to meet her. Question her myself. Hear with my own ears what she has to say."

Dan nodded. "I can understand that. As long as you don't attack her. She's trying to help you, so don't treat her like the enemy."

Lucas cleared his throat. "You sound like you're her advocate, Dan. I thought you

were working for us."

"I am." Dan could feel a thin thread of anger rising through him and tamped it down. "That's why I want to make sure we get whatever information we can out of this woman without scaring her off."

"Well." Joy Rivers sat forward, flipping her blonde ponytail over her shoulder. "I for one don't trust her. I'll listen to what she has to say but I'm going to do my own checking too. I'm no slouch with a computer, you know. I want to know more about her." She looked at Chase and her face softened just a touch. "My first concern is for Chase and this project. We can't afford to be led off on any false trails."

"Fine." Dan rose from his chair and Mark stood with him. "I'm taking her to lunch first and I've asked Mark to join us. This may all turn out to be a scam so I want someone who has personal knowledge of psychic abilities to help me evaluate her."

"I want to listen to her story," Mark told them. "Ask her questions myself. Find out if she's for real. It won't be hard to discover."

Dan pulled out his BlackBerry and made some notes. "I called the office on the way over here and asked them to run a detailed check on her."

"Can you do it that fast?" asked Lucas.

"The Dragon can do anything. And what I got back didn't make me discount anything she said. Yeah, she's had some naysayers and sometimes things haven't turned out quite the way she predicted. But hell, follow any police investigation and see how many red herrings you chase."

"Fine." Ladd threw his pen down on the table. "Hold her hand, do whatever you have to. But we'll judge for ourselves whether she's hiding something that's putting this company at risk. If this is some kind of trick on her part, I'll have her in jail so fast her head will spin."

"Meanwhile," Dan told him, "an additional security team should be arriving in the lobby," he looked at his watch, "right about now. So if you'll excuse me, I'll meet them and give them their assignments. Chase, why don't you come with me. Then you can fill everyone else in."

He supposed he could have included them all but for whatever reason, Chase was the only one at the table he really trusted. The vibes he got from the others were probably nothing more than personal dislike, something he could get past, as he'd done many times before. Meanwhile, he'd play things as close to the vest as he could.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three times Mia lifted the phone to cancel her lunch date, each time replacing the receiver and cursing to herself that she hadn't gotten a cell phone number from him. Dan Romeo. How stupid was that? She'd been so mesmerized by him she'd just taken him at face value. What if he was trying to trap her in some way? Ridicule her? Make her the sacrificial lamb in whatever happened?

No. Not possible. That's why she'd made him shake hands with her, to see what images the contact created. And those images, those feelings, had projected safety and security. So the reason she was so nervous had to be the unbelievable attraction that had erupted between them. He was very good at concealing his feelings but she saw it in his eyes. He'd felt it too.

She hadn't been able to banish the memory of that vision from her brain, or the embarrassing masturbation session in her office. So completely out of character for her. Just looking at him had fed the wellspring of latent attraction that still smoldered within her. Even now she could feel the throbbing in her cunt, the tenderness of her clit, and the overwhelming dampness of her panties. She could hardly stand to feel the brush of the fabric of her blouse against her breasts they were still so sensitized. How on earth was she going to sit through lunch with this man? And another complete stranger on top of that?

Retreating from an active social life had its drawbacks. She hadn't had sex in so long she didn't even know if she'd remember what to do anymore. Maybe that was why she'd had that strange out-of-body experience the night before. But this was business. It had to be. It was important to concentrate on getting not just Dan Romeo but his clients to believe her, then figuring out who the person was she kept getting flash images of. And most of all, who the stabbing victim was.

And hope she didn't hear that commanding voice in her head again saying, *I want to fuck you.*

At twelve fifteen she shut down her computer, placed markers in the books she'd been using and headed for the ladies' room to make herself presentable. Quickly changing into her spare outfit, she stared at herself in the mirror under the harsh fluorescent lights and she wished that her face wasn't quite so unremarkable. That she knew how to dress with a little more style and flair. But years of trying to make herself invisible had accomplished their job.

From her childhood when her parents had berated her for making up stories to call attention to herself, to her teenage years when schoolmates teased her unkindly about "Crazy Mia's images", to adulthood and her battles to get police to listen to her, regretting all the times she'd been wrong, she'd learned to blend into the environment. Well, she'd certainly succeeded.

Now, suddenly, she wanted to turn from an ugly duckling to a swan. If previous relationships had traumatized her, why was she suddenly preening like a peacock for a man she'd just met, knowing what a mistake it would be to try to make something out of this?

*I can't let my emotions get in the way. Not just for myself but because they can color the images I receive. Dan Romeo is my link to stop whatever's being planned and that's all. That's it. Nothing else. I have to get it right this time, I just have to.*

Still, her hand shook slightly as she brushed out her hair and applied a pale lipstick. She was ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

The two people called each other on disposable phones, then slipped out of their offices and met at an innocuous coffee shop they'd used before. They found a corner booth that concealed them from most of the restaurant traffic, ordered their drinks and waved the waitress away.

"So. We know what's happening this afternoon," one of them said.

"Good to have access to that information," the other person agreed. "All right. "This woman who supposedly has 'visions' will be at the Carpenter Techtronics office. So what?"

A chuckle drifted in the air. "I can just imagine how that will go."

"This certainly came out of left field. Do you think she really knows anything?"

"Impossible." A shake of the head punctuated the word. "Besides, as far as I know, psychics have a bad track record in situations like this. She'll be laughed out of the building and Chase Carpenter will chew Dan Romeo a new one."

"I say it's a good thing for us they're doing this. She can't possibly know anything. The more they focus on her, the better for us. They won't pay attention to anything else."

"Let's hope you're right. If you're not, this could be a disaster. We've had things like this pop up at the last minute before, you know."

"Listen, she hasn't even met with them yet. We're getting a little ahead of ourselves here, don't you think?"

"If we're not, this could be a disaster. Could she really know something?"

A sharp laugh. "Don't be ridiculous. We've been extremely careful. Anyway, no one puts much stock in this kind of mumbo jumbo. Meanwhile, they'll be chasing their tails trying to decode her so-called visions and not looking in our direction at all. We have a foolproof plan. And this could almost be a welcome diversion."

"Don't be so sure. Everyone in the industry says Chase is so nervous about this whole thing he'd take the advice of a witch doctor."

"This isn't like you. Everything's in place, just the way we planned. Why are you so edgy?"

A shrug. "I don't know. What if this female somehow manages to throw a monkey wrench in things? What if Chase decides to change things around because of something she says?"

A dismissive wave of a hand cut the air. "Then we'll get rid of her. It's that simple."

An icy smile punctuated the next words. "I never realized how bloodthirsty you are. Killing someone means nothing to you, does it?"

Another shrug. "I see it as just waste disposal. I know what I want and I intend to have it. There's too much money involved here to let some little kook screw it up for us."



"And you don't think a dead body would cause some chaos? If you don't want to validate what she says, then don't make her a target."

"We won't leave a body. If she just disappears, we can start a rumor that she was lying all along and couldn't face the mess she was creating. Let them think she was afraid of being wrong again and went off someplace to hide."

"Maybe we're rushing this. This afternoon could be a bust and she'll be out of the picture."

"But if not, we have to act. We're down to the wire on this thing. There's no wiggle room at all."

"We'd have to do that very carefully. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that."

"If it does, I'll take care of it. Your hands will be clean. They'll never look at me."

"God, let's hope not."

The man watched his partner slide out of the booth and walk away, trying to still the slight edge of anxiety he felt. They'd done this many times before, always under the radar, always without leaving a trace. The spoils had given them a good life and full offshore bank accounts.

He thought about all the years of scrounging, clawing, wheeling and dealing. Climbing the ladder of social and financial success one painful rung at a time. All the crap they'd put up with. The roles they'd had to play.

And now this! This was the big score. After this one they could retire and never have to put up with the bullshit again. A lot was riding on this.

God, he hoped this woman, whoever she was, didn't somehow manage to fuck things up. Maybe his partner was right and she'd be a diversion. A red herring. That would be great, because as far as he could see, their plan was foolproof.

He finished the dregs of coffee in his cup and made a face. What he really needed was a shot of good bourbon.

He flipped open his cell phone, scrolled through the contact list and pressed one of the names. He might as well tell the buyers there may be a little hitch, just in case. Better to be bitched at than be killed for screwing up.

"Khalid?" he said when the person answered. "I believe we may have a tiny problem."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan was standing at the curb in front of the museum when Mia walked out the door. He was leaning against an SUV, another man equally as large and tough-looking standing next to him. Both had the same hard look on their faces. Power radiated from them in almost visible waves. For a moment her step faltered and she was ready to bolt back inside.

Then Dan stepped forward, smiled and took her elbow to lead her to the vehicle.

"Remember the friend I mentioned to you? This is Mark Halloran, the telepath I told you about."

Mia relaxed fractionally and shook Mark's hand. At the contact she relaxed even more. As with Dan, the feeling she got was warm and pleasant. No threatening images interfered or invaded her brain. She let Dan help her into the passenger's seat and buckled herself in. He raised his eyebrows at her change of outfit but made no comment, just grinned.

"We're not that far from downtown," he commented as he drove, "and I wanted to take you someplace nice. How does Ruth's Chris Steak House sound?"

"Expensive," she answered.

"No problem," he grinned. "This is on me, not Chase's expense account. And I wanted someplace that was quiet where you'd feel comfortable."

Quiet and comfortable definitely described the restaurant. Noted as much for its ambiance as its high prices, here thick carpets reduced footsteps to whispers and the wait staff took orders in hushed tones, all in the atmosphere softened by low power recessed lighting.

The hostess settled them in a high-backed booth and a waiter immediately handed them menus and took their drink orders. None of them ordered anything alcoholic.

"I never drink during work hours," Dan told her. He inclined his head at Mark. "And since I roped him into this, he's on the clock too."

"I usually don't drink anything stronger than wine," Mia told him. "But right now I don't want anything to interfere with any impressions I might get."

She was so nervous at lunch she dropped her fork three times, her face flaming with embarrassment. She had this itchy feeling that Dan Romeo could actually see into her mind and know about her vision of him. Stupid, but she couldn't wipe it away. What was the matter with her? They'd think she was some kind of ninny if she didn't pull herself together. If that happened, there was no way they'd take her seriously.

After they'd ordered their food and been served, Mark threw the first question at her. "Have you always had precognition? I mean, since you were a child?"

"Yes. I guess since I was about ten years old." She made a face. "My parents thought I was making up stories to call attention to myself. They were both very busy with their lives. My father's an attorney and my mother is a successful real estate agent. They didn't understand a child who was 'different'. Besides, I was wrong a lot of the time and they punished me for creating problems where there were none."

"What about when you were older?" This from Dan.

"I began to learn how to interpret the messages a little better but many of them confused me. So again, I was wrong more than I was right. It got so nobody wanted to trust anything I had to say. Even after the times I was proven right."

"Tell me a little bit about how you get these images or whatever they are," Dan prompted.

*As long as I can keep away from the image of you naked and the sound of your voice in my head.*

Mia explained about the images that could hit her at any time. Sometimes sharp, sometimes just flashes of color. Seldom clear enough to interpret so she had to do a great deal of research to identify what she was seeing.

"And it's so easy to be wrong." She pushed her plate away, no longer hungry. Managing with her bandaged hand was difficult anyway, even though the injury was to her left one and she was right-handed.

So yet again she described everything, beginning with the first image of the bouncing rock. What she was doing when the flashes of images hit her. What they looked like. And again, without quite knowing why, she held back the image of the dripping knife.

Dan narrowed his eyes, watching her, trying to keep the atmosphere relaxed. He waited until the waiter had brought their coffee before he spoke again, then he did so carefully. Mia was like a caged bird waiting to take flight at its first opportunity.

"I have a sense that there might be an image you're reluctant to share with us." He made his voice as low and controlled as possible. "Am I right?"

Mia started, almost dropping her coffee cup and banging her bad hand against the table. Did he know? Impossible. She bit her lip against the pain, then paled as she saw blood seeping through the bandage.

Dan gently took her hand in his. "I think you might have re-injured yourself pretty badly. This doesn't look good. I want to have a doctor look at this for you."

"It's all right." She blinked back tears. "I'll be fine."

"It has to do with what you're holding back, doesn't it," Dan guessed.

"Mia." Mark leaned across the table. "Whatever it is, we'll help you with it."

She clenched her right fist, forcing a calm she didn't feel and pushing the image of a naked Dan Romeo from her mind with deliberation. After all, it would be normal not to want to share visions of violence with two strangers. "I picked up a knife to cut something in my kitchen and I had an image of someone being stabbed."

"And you dropped the knife you were holding on your hand," Mark said.

Mia nodded.

"Any clue as to who was being stabbed? Or doing the stabbing?"

She shook her head, blinking back tears again as pain shot through her hand. *Jesus, Mia, get a grip here.* "No, none at all. That's what has me worried. And that's why I didn't want to say anything, maybe point you in the wrong direction. But Dan, a voice said, 'Someone's going to be killed.' I don't usually hear voices. Someone's going to be killed and I can't even tell you who."

"Right now we don't have *any* direction," Mark told her, "so whatever we get from you will be a starting point."

"Okay." Dan signaled for the check. "The first thing we need to do is get out of here

and get that hand looked at. No objections,” he insisted, when Mia tried to protest again. “Then, when that’s taken care, we’ll go meet with Chase Carpenter and his people. They’ll want to talk to you themselves.”

Mia fiddled with her napkin. “I’ve been through this before. They won’t believe me. They’ll —”

“Be professional and polite or I’m off the case,” Dan told her. “Trust me, Mia. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.” Exactly how the hell he was going to do that he didn’t know unless he handcuffed her to himself until this was over. And that brought up images that made his body react strongly. Like it or lump it, he was in a real pickle here.

“Psychic powers are difficult to harness if you don’t have someone to help you,” Mark pointed out, as they waited for the valet to bring the car. “Faith and I were very lucky. Actually, she was and I rode on her coattails.”

“What do you mean?”

Mark studied her pale face. “If you don’t mind, I’d like you to meet my wife and have her tell you about it herself. There is a group of people she met through her aunt who can help you understand and deal with this, as well as make you feel better about yourself.”

“That’s a great idea,” Dan agreed. “The sooner the better.”

Mark pulled out his cell phone. “I promised to bring home Chinese takeout tonight for the two of us. Why don’t I make it takeout for four?”

When Dan had Mia buckled into the passenger seat, he closed the door and turned to Mark. “Well?”

“I’m not the leading expert on this but I’d say she’s the real deal. This isn’t a performance with her.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go. You can be my wingman.”

He called Chase to tell him they’d be just a little late, then pulled out into traffic.

## Chapter Seven

Mia felt as if she'd fallen down a rabbit hole. No amount of protest could deter Dan from getting her hand attended to, or Mark from agreeing with him. She felt cosseted and protected by two big, tough yet gentle men, who took care of her as if she was a precious jewel. And layered on top of that was this *thing* that seemed to be going on with Dan. Every time she thought about the scene in her office the night before, she squirmed, hoping no one would notice.

"I didn't think you'd want to get thrown into the chaos of an emergency room," Dan told her, closing his cell phone. "This is a doctor Phoenix uses sometimes. He's good and discreet."

"Thank you." That was all she could say, since apparently he wasn't going to let her off without getting her hand checked. *He's like a steamroller*, she thought.

*I want to fuck you.*

She looked at him but he was staring straight ahead through the windshield.

In minutes they were at a small brick building and he was ushering Mia into the office through a back door. A man with the kindest eyes she'd ever seen unwrapped her hand and shook his head, then scolded her in a soft voice.

"You could have whacked off your thumb, young lady. You also ran the risk of developing a major infection."

Hardly any time seemed to pass before her hand was cleaned again, numbed, stitched and she'd received a strong shot of antibiotics. Dan held her uninjured hand the entire time in a gesture of assurance. But whatever was bubbling between them must be apparent to him, too, she thought, because every few minutes he looked at her with a strange expression on his face. She was torn between wanting to pull her hand away and never having him let go.

Mark just sat near them, smiling at her encouragingly.

*Where do you find men like this? How lucky their wives and girlfriends are.*

*Girlfriends! Did Dan have one? He's not wearing a wedding ring so probably no wife. Or did he just not wear a ring? Ohmigod, did I have an erotic vision, an...incident...with a married man?* She cringed at the thought.

Dan frowned. "The pain worse?" he asked.

"No, no. I'm fine. Really." *Not.*

When the doctor was finished stitching and bandaging, he gave her two small packets of pills.

"One's an antibiotic," he told her. "Take it every six hours. The other's for pain. Go easy with them. I gave you some pretty strong stuff but I think you'll need it. I want

you to take one now before you leave."

"I have a meeting to go to," she protested. "I can't have my brain fuzzy."

He looked at Dan who nodded agreement.

"All right. I'll inject a local anesthetic. But as soon as it starts to wear off, pop one of those pills, you hear?"

"I'll make sure," Dan assured him.

"I've been keeping ice on it," she said. "All weekend."

"Keep doing that when you get home. It will ease the swelling from the stitches." He looked at Dan and shook his head. "Take better care of your woman."

"She's not—"

"I'm not—"

They both spoke at the same time and Mark grinned. "I'll make sure of it."

Then they were back in the SUV heading for Carpenter Techtronics. While Dan called to say they were en route, Mia did her best to be calm.

"You'll only need me for this afternoon, right?" she asked anxiously.

"We'll see how it goes. But you may turn out to be the most intrinsic part of this puzzle, the only one who can provide us any clues."

"I do have a job to go to," she protested. "My boss has been gone and won't be back until tonight. But I guarantee he'll be looking for me tomorrow. He won't be happy if this disrupts my schedule." She chewed on her lip a moment. "He doesn't know anything about my...abilities, either."

"We may have to make arrangements, then."

"Arrangements?" She turned her face to stare at him. "What kind of arrangements?"

"If it turns out we need you for the next few days," Mark told her, "your boss will be told you've been drafted for a special assignment. A secret art project. One that came up suddenly."

Her jaw dropped. "And you think he'll buy that? You don't know Dr. Hunter."

Dan chuckled. "And Dr. Hunter doesn't know Phoenix."

"But what will you tell him? Who will he think you are?" She was stunned.

"If it turns out it's necessary, you just leave that to me. We'll keep your boss off your back. Right now your job can't take precedence. And Phoenix will more than compensate you and the museum for time lost."

"But this is so absurd! Am I shanghaied?" She tried to make a joke of it.

"In a manner of speaking." Dan reached across her to squeeze her right hand. "I decided that signing you on as a consultant would shortstop a lot of problems."

"What's even stranger is that you believe me." She was still amazed at the whole thing.

"If I hadn't met the Hallorans I might be a tougher sell. But tonight they'll tell you their story, which is just as over the top as yours. So consider me a convert."

"Why are you being so nice to me?" she asked curiously.

His face tightened and a dark flush stained his cheeks. "Do I act like the kind of person who eats children for breakfast or something?"

She felt a flush of embarrassment creep over her face. "No. I'm sorry. It's just that..." She held her hands up in a helpless gesture. How could she tell him she was used to being treated like a pariah or an oddity by everyone she met. Including her own family, whom she hadn't seen in ages.

"I have to take good care of my only resource." He bit off the words.

"Oh." She swallowed hard. She could tell she'd made him angry. "I'm sorry if I upset you. Thank you. I think."

She kept stealing glances at him as they drove through the streets of San Antonio. He was such a complex man, hard one minute, caring the next. She was sure, however, in a firefight or any other type of confrontation he'd be all business. No emotion. He was built and conditioned to get the job done.

Which was probably why Chase Carpenter had hired him to make sure the bumpy little rock, or whatever the hell she saw in her visions, was safe. There wasn't any indication that this man would ever accept failure.

She could almost feel the testosterone oozing from him, more than any man she'd ever met, which was probably why her hormones were leaping out of control. She knew there was no way he'd be interested in someone like her. When he did take a woman to bed, Mia was sure she'd be tall and lithe, with hair like a silk waterfall and a blemish-free body. She'd also know more about sex than Mia could even begin to imagine.

Men like Dan Romeo weren't attracted to mice or sparrows.

But mice and sparrows didn't have erotic visions where they lost control of themselves and masturbated at the command of a vision.

A tiny splash of an image seared her eyes, a scene from last night. Holy god, this was getting serious. She needed to figure out what to do about it. What if she accidentally blurted something out? Every minute she was with this man strung her nerves tighter. She sighed inwardly, wishing she'd kept her mouth shut, never sent the email and hidden under the covers until the images stopped bombarding her. Only she'd tried that before and it never worked.

When they pulled into Carpenter's underground garage, her body tightened up again and her nerves began to unravel. Dan took her right hand in his big warm one and held it during the ride up in the elevator. When the doors slid open, he squeezed it once, then dropped it and took one step away. Mia was grateful. She didn't want the strangers she was about to meet, skeptical ones at that, to think Dan Romeo was dragging some chippie he was involved with into a critical situation.

Nodding to the receptionist, he and Mark flashed their visitor's badges. He signed

Mia in, received a badge for her and led the way to the conference room, opening the door to the most unfriendly group of people she'd ever seen gathered around a conference table. Dan made the introductions then pulled out a chair for her. He and Mark sat on either side of her, twin pillars shielding her.

"Would you like some coffee, Dr. Fleming?" Chase asked.

She tried to decide if he was being coldly polite or if that was just his personality. "No, thank you. I think I've had my caffeine allotment for today. But a glass of water would be nice."

The man introduced as Ladd Tolbert, sitting at the end of the table, got up and poured one for her.

She sipped it slowly, wondering if she should say something, if Dan would open the discussion or if they'd suddenly begin peppering her with questions. Chase solved the problem by taking the lead.

"Dan explained about your...visions to us," he said.

"Yes. He told me he'd already met with you about them."

"You have to understand how unbelievable all this is to us, Dr. Fleming, We're pragmatic people here," he pointed out, "so something like psychic abilities is a little beyond either our understanding or acceptance."

"I appreciate that. This isn't the first time I've had that same reaction from people."

"I did some research on you while we were waiting," the woman next to Chase told her.

Joy Rivers, she remembered. Chase's fiancée.

*A real bitch if I ever saw one.*

"I'd be surprised if you hadn't," she said in a quiet voice. "I expect it of most people I become...involved with."

"I've had my office doing the same thing," Dan put in. "Why don't we compare notes."

Joy gave him a cold look. "Yes, let's. I discovered Miss Fleming has been making up these stories for years." She turned to Mia. "Since you were a child. Your parents took you to a child psychologist because they thought your behavior was outrageous. And your 'guesses', or whatever you call them, have been wrong as often as they've been right. The police refuse to let you consult anymore because you've made so many mistakes and you're considered a fake by many people. I understand groups have even demonstrated outside your home before."

Beneath the table, Mia clenched her right fist in her lap. Thank God those stories had been so hidden in the newspaper Dr. Hunter had never seen them. She had to assume they'd escaped the notice of any of the museum donors too, or she'd be out looking for a job.

"Is Joy correct?" Lucas asked. "Are your visions dismissed as so much bullshit?"

*Oh, God, this wasn't going well at all.* Well, she was used to defending herself. She



might be a sparrow but she was no shrinking violet.

"I've certainly read some images wrongly." She was proud of the steadiness in her voice. "This isn't an exact science. But I've been right many times too. And successfully helped in some investigations."

"You have a fifty-fifty track record, yet you want us to turn ourselves inside out because you think someone *might* steal something from the company." Joy reached for Chase's hand. "Chase is the most important thing in my life. I'll do what I have to in order to see him and his project protected. And that means not letting a charlatan skew the facts or bring down unfavorable publicity. Our reputation has to be spotless."

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Mia protested in a quiet voice. "I just wanted to warn you. That's all."

Lucas leaned forward. "How do we know this isn't some ploy to set things up so you and a partner can steal the prototype yourselves?"

"You have only my word for that." She sipped from her water again. "But if you've been doing your research, as you say, you'll know that's never happened before."

"There's always a first time," Joy said in a nasty tone.

"All right, let's stop." Dan held up his hands.

"You don't need to come to my rescue," Mia chided him. "I'm perfectly capable of holding my own."

*As long as this anesthetic doesn't wear off my hand. I can give as good as I get from these people.*

"This is no rescue," he told her. "This has to do with our agency's integrity. Chase, you hired me because we're friends and because you also know we're the best at what we do. You know my reputation. *Our reputation*. Everyone at this table is sitting on a tack, hoping nothing happens to screw up the major announcement at the end of this week. Dr. Fleming took a big chance trying to send a warning to you, knowing exactly what your reaction would be. At least do her the courtesy of listening to her."

"I'll be happy to answer any questions about psychic abilities too," Mark put in.

"Thank you both," Mia told them, "but I think I can handle this myself. They're my visions being called into question."

"I'd like to know how you knew about our...project in the first place," Lucas commented.

"The images I received were of a large stone bumping along on the ground," she told them. "A stone that had special capabilities."

"How did you know it had anything to do with Carpenter Techtronics?" Joy pursued.

Mia explained about the different visions and how she'd done a computer search to put them together. On and on it went, one question after another. She would not allow these people to rattle her, nor would she show any signs of the anger growing inside her. Instead, she was proud that through it all she never lost her composure.

Several times Dan tried to interrupt, as if to add his support, but she always shook her head at him. If these people saw her as weak, they'd never pay attention to what she had to say.

She couldn't deny being grateful, however, when Dan at last called a halt to everything. All the stress of the weekend, the long day, the wound on her hand were taking their toll on her.

"I think that's enough for now," Dan announced. "Dr. Fleming has answered your questions many times over. The important thing is in *my* research I've discovered many instances when she was able to help the police, including the FBI. So let's give her the benefit of the doubt here and figure out what we need to do. Maybe we'll have to rethink our security setup. And I'm calling the office to do a complete search on anyone and everyone who has access to Oscar, as well as anyone who might have a grudge against the company."

"When will you have all that?" Chase wanted to know.

"Tomorrow. I'll want to meet with all of you at eight o'clock in the morning. Meanwhile, Mark is going to take Dr. Fleming home and we're all going to take a look at that prize package and talk to the new men who've arrived."

Everyone shook Mia's hand as they moved toward the door but the hostility hadn't dispersed in the least. And because they all shook hands in rapid succession, she was unable to determine which one—or ones—produced a sickening feeling of dread inside her. She wanted to touch each of them again but was afraid to ask. And what if she got it wrong? What if it was just the repressed anger she was feeling?

She swallowed a sigh. Would she never learn her lesson?

\* \* \* \* \*

The conspirators were meeting again and their conversation was not a pleasant one.

"Someone's bound to see us if we keep doing this."

"Trust me. Right now I know where everyone is. But you're right. We need to go back to the throwaways."

"Why did you find it necessary to contact Khalid?"

Eyebrows were raised. "He called you?"

A nod. "And at a very inopportune time. I had to put him off, which along with your little bombshell, didn't make him too happy with us."

"I just thought he should know there may be a delay. If Carpenter decides to take this woman seriously, he may be persuaded to reschedule the big event. At least while Phoenix does their investigating. That means putting everything off and redoing the plans. Besides, surprisingly, it turns out Khalid puts more stock in this kind of stuff than we do."

"What do you mean?"

"He says in his country people with this gift are worshiped and revered. Rulers consult them and they are sought after by both the police and the military."

"He's yanking your chain."

"No, I don't think so. He's urging us to, as he says, neutralize her before she can create more trouble."

"Then we may need his help."

"To get rid of her? Yes. I agree with him. It's too risky to keep her around. Even if Chase Carpenter writes her off as a fake, Romeo's taking her too seriously. She's been introduced into the equation, now. All she has to do is somehow come up with something that points them in our direction and we're cooked. All this work, all this preparation for nothing."

"I don't know. She only showed up today. Let's wait and see what happens. If they blow her off, we have no worries."

"And if they don't? Khalid is nervous about her and if he's nervous, so am I." A shake of the head. "No. I say she needs to disappear before this goes any further."

"If we get rid of her, you don't think that will prompt some questions? Maybe create the opposite effect to what we want? You don't think they'll wonder why it was important to do away with her?"

"Yes, of course. But if we do it the right way, if we just make her disappear, maybe leave a note or something, she'll be out of our hair. They can kill themselves looking for her and we won't have to worry that she'll come up with any more of these crazy visions."

"Okay. Let's say we do this. We'd have to dispose of the body in a way it couldn't be found. And we have a very small window of opportunity. Like tonight."

"Like I said, Khalid can help. This is just as important to him and his friends. Or friendly enemies. He has contacts everywhere. Surely he can find us someone on the spur of the moment."

"Fine. I'll make the call. But it's going to be tricky."

"As if we haven't done this before. Remember Belgium?"

"Belgium worked because we were very low-key. There's too much interest and excitement developing around this whole thing. I don't like it. I just want to do what we planned, get the robot and get our money."

"And if they make adjustments to their security based on what she 'sees'?"

"If that happens, we can force a different adjustment that will allow us to accomplish our task. And here's how we'll do it."

Ten minutes later the two people walked out of the dingy diner, one still with misgivings, the other on the phone again but with a plan in place.

\* \* \* \* \*

The moment she stepped inside the Hallorans' home Mia felt a sense of peace, a wonderful counterbalance to the chill that had gripped her ever since leaving the Carpenter Techtronics building.

Faith Halloran was beautiful. Her rich dark chocolate hair fell in thick waves to just below her shoulders and her emerald eyes shone with mischief from a flawless, creamy complexion. Mia felt even more like a sparrow, or maybe a gray wren standing in the shadow of her brilliance. Like her husband, Faith was warm and gracious and made every effort to put her guests at ease. She stood on tiptoe to kiss Dan Romeo, who actually looked pleased at the gesture and the grim expression on his face softened.

"Too bad it's business that brings you here," she told him. "But you know how happy I always am to see you." She punched his arm lightly and grinned. "Even if you do send my husband on strange trips."

To Mark she gave an unrestrained hug and a kiss so intense and personal the others tactfully looked away. No question about the depth of love here, Mia thought.

"Whew!" She pressed her lips to his once last time. "Okay, I've got my fix. Why don't you guys go pick up the takeout while I take care of Mia. She looks like you've been beating her with rubber hoses."

Mark held up his hand. "I swear we only smacked her once or twice."

Faith chuckled and took Mia's hand. "They have a weird sense of humor. You look chilled. Come into the kitchen and I'll make you some wonderful tea. It can fix anything." She turned back to her husband. "*Mark.*"

"We're going, we're going."

Mia let herself be steered by the smiling, graceful woman into a room that radiated warmth. A charming ceramic lighthouse sat in the center of the round table and a whimsical border ran across the top of the wallpaper.

"Your home is beautiful." She drank in the riot of colors blended so skillfully.

"Thank you. We haven't lived here that long. When I was...trying to help Mark, the people who blew his mission also blew up our house."

Mia's jaw dropped. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Nope. Burned it to the ground. Thank God I wasn't in it. But Mark and I both loved the spot, so after we got married we decided to rebuild again right here."

She let her eyes drink in the room. "You've done a wonderful job, from what I can see."

"This is my get-away-from-it room," Faith told her. "The lighthouse comes from a store near the cabin in Maine that Phoenix owns. The border was painted by a friend of my aunt's to relax me when my telepathic communications get too intense for me."

"I can see how these things would help. They're even beginning to affect me."

"Now." Faith placed two steaming mugs of tea on the table and sat down across from Mia. "Lotus tea. A special blend from my aunt. Taste it. I promise you'll think it's magic."

Mia lifted the mug in two hands but the moment she touched it she felt unbearable heat race along her arms. The image of a fire out of control burned itself through her brain. She dropped the cup, gasping and squeezed her eyes shut but the image wouldn't disappear.

She sensed Faith rise from her chair and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Mia? Mia, what is it? What do you see?"

Mia tried to stretch her brain, to get a better definition of the image but then, like smoke, it was gone. She leaned back in her chair, her face covered with perspiration, her hands shaking so badly she had to grip them in her lap to steady herself.

"Deep breaths," Faith was saying. She mopped Mia's face with a cool cloth. "That's it. Nice slow breaths."

Mia drew in the deepest breath she could and let it out slowly. When she opened her eyes it was gone. The image, the sensation, everything, replaced by the familiar headache.

"Let me get you some fresh tea." Faith calmly cleared away the mess in front of Mia and replaced it with a new mug.

"I am so sorry. I broke your cup and made a huge mess."

"Not to worry." Faith handed her a towel. "You might want to blot your skirt, though."

Mia felt a hysterical laugh break free. "Wait until Dan sees this. He'll think I'm the biggest klutz on the planet. When we met this morning, I spilled coffee all over myself." She dabbed at the damp material.

Faith smiled at her. "From the way Dan was looking at you, I don't think anything could detract from what he sees."

"What?" Mia looked at her, shocked. "Oh, no. You've got it all wrong." The image from the day before suddenly blasted at her, Dan Romeo burning his magnificent nudity on her brain. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to dispel the vision. "We just met this morning. This is business. I'm not even sure he thinks I'm sane."

"If you say so." But Faith couldn't completely wipe away the smile. "What else can I do for you?"

"Could I bother you for some aspirin?" God, what an idiot she felt like. And on top of everything, her hand was throbbing again.

"Of course. And some ice for that hand, which looks a little swollen. Stitches?"

Mia nodded. "Another clumsy accident."

Faith handed her a plastic bag with ice cubes in it. "Just hold onto this. Then I want you to drink the tea. And tell me about the image you just saw."

Not the one of Dan, Mia reminded herself.

Faith was right about the tea, when Mia finally got to drink it. A few sips and a strange feeling of calm stole over her. She began to feel human for the first time since

Dan Romeo walked into her office.

"Tell me what just happened," Faith urged.

Mia related everything in as much detail as she could remember, including the burning sensation in her arms. "But remember, it was just seconds. That's what's so frustrating. I worry that I won't read the message properly and someone will really get hurt. Most of my life I've misinterpreted and made mistakes. People got hurt because of it, yet somehow I'm still driven to communicate what I see." She shook her head. "Or don't see."

"Actually..." Faith watched Mia over the rim of her own mug. "I'm hoping to introduce you to someone who can help you with this."

"Help me? What do you mean?"

"When Mark called me today after meeting you, one of the things he was very clear on—and worried about—was your inability to control your precognition. To manage it so you could decipher messages better. He knows how that can throw you into distress."

"That's always been a problem." Mia set her cup down. "It's why I've had so much trouble all my life. Getting people to take me seriously anymore is almost harder than reading the images."

"I'm part of something called The Lotus Circle," Faith told her, "a group of women who all have psychic powers and have learned to deal with them. Plus, they belong to a worldwide network that keeps in touch through the internet. I utilize their website a lot. If you're home alone and your powers are active but you're unsure of the message, you can write it down, go to this site and try to find someone to help you." She handed Mia her business card with a web address written on the back. "Just tuck this in your purse in case you need it."

Mia stared at her. "But that's unbelievable."

"They provide support for each other, both mental and spiritual and help each other learn to deal with their gifts."

Mia snorted. "I'd like to toss mine in the ocean."

"I felt that way once," Faith told her. "Mark was the only other person I could communicate with. And the whole thing scared me. But then I talked to Aunt Vivi and she gave me a whole new perspective on things."

"And they can do the same for me?" Mia asked, putting the card in her wallet. "Help me harness this...thing...that instead keeps harnessing me?"

Faith nodded. "At least give you hints to define what you see. Tomorrow morning I'll pick you up and take you to my aunt's house. Two or three other women will be there too, who also have precognitive powers. And we'll begin the process of learning to deal with your gift."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Nothing is simple but it won't be as complicated as you think. We have to move

quickly though. Chase's big deal is this Friday. If someone's going to steal his baby, we need to get more information from you as to how they plan to circumvent the system and make off with it."

"Is that really possible?"

"These women can do amazing things." Faith rose to carry the mugs to the sink as they heard the front door open. "Oh, good. The food's here. I'm starved, aren't you?"

## **Chapter Eight**

"We're agreed then, with the time limit we can't take any chances?" Khalid asked the caller.

"It has to be done tonight." How much plainer could it be said? "And we have a short space of only a few hours here."

"Your partner agrees with this? He was the one who thought we were rushing things."

"Khalid, right now she's an unknown quantity. Chase Carpenter and the others aren't buying into her so-called visions any too quickly but they're leaving the door open. Phoenix is investigating and we only have four days until our deadline." There was a pause. "Or have you changed your mind about wanting the device? You know there are others who would gladly step up and take your place."

"Yes," he said in a deadly soft voice. "But we both know that I can surpass anyone, which is why you struck your deal with me. Is that not correct?"

"Agreed. So can you help us?"

"Where is she now?" Khalid asked.

"At the home of Faith and Mark Halloran. But the best place to do it would be in the museum garage. Romeo will have to give her a ride back to get her car. Once he's out of the way, that's the time."

Khalid's disapproval of the rush job hummed over the phone connection. "I'll have to give you whoever is available. And he'll expect to be paid in cash."

"Half in front, the rest on completion. Just as long as he understands there must be no trace of her."

"I assure you I will get you the best I can within the limited time," Khalid snapped.

"Fine. When you contact him, give him this number to call me. Be sure to tell him if he screws me over he won't be around to collect the rest of his money."

Khalid almost smiled. "I'm sure that will inspire him to greater performance."

"Fine. I'll be waiting for his call."

\* \* \* \* \*

"The Hallorans are wonderful people," Mia said as she and Dan pulled away from the house.

"Yes, they are. And Faith's aunt and her friends will help you as much as they did Faith when she needed them."



She looked out the window and realized they were heading for the interstate. "I need to go back to the museum and get my car. I'll need it to get to work tomorrow."

"I have a call in to speak with Dr. Hunter first thing in the morning to get you sprung loose until this is over," he reminded her.

"But I'd still like to have my own transportation," she protested.

"Faith said she's picking you up in the morning and I don't want you driving by yourself at night. Especially after what happened."

"Did you check on everyone involved to make sure they're all right? I keep having this sick feeling I'm missing something."

Dan nodded. "I also called our team at Carpenter Techtronics. They'll double their patrols and make sure the entire floor where Oscar is held is completely secure. Anyway, that building would be hard to burn down."

"But someone could use a torch to get in or something," she insisted. The memory of the fire and the heat wouldn't leave her.

He squeezed her good hand, then dropped it as if realizing he might have been doing it too much. "We're on the lookout for everything. Trust me. This is what we do. But I still don't want you out at night alone."

Her laugh was shaky. "Surely you don't think someone will physically attack me."

"I don't leave anything to chance. Ah, here's our exit." He pulled off the highway and into the parking lot of a convenience store. Two men were sitting in an SUV identical to the one they were driving. One of them came over to speak to Dan, who held out his hand to Mia.

"This is Greg. Give him your keys, please. He's going to pick up your car and take it home for you. Hank, the big lug behind the wheel, will follow him and bring him back to the motel where they're staying. They're part of the morning security team."

"If you think this is all necessary." She dug in her purse for her keys and handed them over.

"Call me when you're all locked up tight," Dan told the man, who nodded.

They drove to Mia's through the quiet streets of North San Antonio, silence thick in the car. Suddenly she seemed to have run out of topics of conversation. She could feel Dan's electric presence beside her and the sensual heat that radiated from him like a living thing, and had no idea what to do about its grip on her. At last, thankfully, they pulled into her driveway.

He had just gotten out of the vehicle when his cell phone rang. He unclipped it from his belt and held it to his ear.

"Romeo."

Mia saw his face tighten and the lines deepen. His hand clenched the cell phone so tightly she thought he might break it in two.

"What is it?" She could feel anxiety bubbling up inside her.

"Change in plans." He got back into the SUV and backed out of her driveway.

"Wait. Where are we going? I have to get into my house."

"What you have to do is stay alive." His voice was grim.

"Excuse me?" She frowned at him.

He was speeding through the darkened streets, his hands gripping the steering wheel like steel talons.

"That was Hank. They went to get your car from the museum garage." He stopped as if the rest of the words were stuck in his mouth. "Greg got in, turned the key and the car exploded."

"Oh, my God." For a moment she thought she might throw up. "Is..."

"Yes. He's dead."

"This is my fault." She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth. "I should have been able to figure this out. In the kitchen with Faith, when I had that flash of heat..."

"Mia." Dan made an obvious effort to keep his voice even. "There's only so much you can interpret. No one expected this. You can't blame yourself for it. Whoever put the bomb in your car is responsible, not you. Do you understand me?"

"Yes but —"

"But nothing. And I'm counting on you to keep it together just a little longer so I can make some calls and then check out the scene. Can you do that for me?"

She swallowed past a lump in her throat the size of Rhode Island. "Yes. I can."

*I hope.*

"Good girl."

She said nothing after that. Dan had his cell phone open again and was speaking in low tones to whoever was on the other end. By the time he finished they were at the museum, pulling around to the covered parking in the rear. Two police cars, emergency lights flashing, were already there and uniformed officers were still stringing crime scene tape around the area. Two fire department vehicles had pulled up close to the garage and were spraying down the area.

A black van labeled SAPD Bomb Squad was in the garage a good distance away from the smoking mess that had been Mia's car.

Dan threw his vehicle into park so abruptly it rocked forward and he leaped out, leaving the door open. "Stay right here," he ordered Mia, as he ran toward Hank, who was leaning against a pillar looking sick.

Not that she could have moved anyway. She was immobilized with shock. Someone had actually tried to kill her. Blown up her car. She didn't know which nauseated her more, the knowledge that at this moment she could be a million pieces of ectoplasm or that an innocent man who was just doing his job had died in her place.

She watched Dan put his arm around Hank's shoulders and lead him away from

the scene. The anger on his face before he turned away was like a living thing. And Hank looked like he wanted to murder somebody. Anybody.

"Miss? Excuse me. You'll have to move the vehicle away from here."

Mia looked up at the policeman leaning in through the open door, then at the keys still in the ignition. She unbuckled her seat belt, ready to shift to the driver's side.

"She's fine." Mark had materialized from someplace and flashed his Phoenix credentials at the cop. He stuck his head in the car as soon as the cop moved away. "Stay right here. You're out of the way. Can I get you something, Mia? Water? Anything?"

She shook her head, rubbing her arms and trying to control the shivers racking her body. The whole scene had a nightmare quality. "This is my fault, Mark. I can't read the images well enough."

"Okay, let's put that to rest, please? This is *not* your fault. This is the work of someone very evil."

"But if I hadn't... If I didn't..."

Dan was back at the car, his face grim. He reached in and cupped her chin. His eyes were warm and reassuring, difficult she knew under these circumstances. "Listen to me. I'm so angry and upset about Greg I can hardly keep myself under control. But I'm damn glad you weren't the one in the car. We'll find this person, Mia. Don't take this on your shoulders."

"I'll try," she whispered, still shaking.

An ambulance had pulled in just behind them. Dan opened the passenger side door. "How about letting the EMT take a look at you?"

"No. Just...take care of what you need to. I'm okay."

But she wasn't and they both knew it. Only she wasn't about to make herself a burden when there were other more important things to attend to.

Mark assessed her with his gaze, frowning. "Wait just a sec."

Mia watched him jog to his car and return in a minute with a blanket, which he wrapped around her.

She smiled at him gratefully. "Thank you. I don't know why I feel so cold but I can't stop shivering."

"Shock. Your system's gone haywire." He checked his watch. "Hang on just a little longer, okay? Then we'll get you settled for the night and tomorrow Faith is hooking you up with Aunt Vivi. She'll be a big help to you."

"All right." *If I last that long.*

The air was heavy with the stench of burnt rubber and metal and the chemicals sprayed to coat the area. She was only glad that this had happened long after the museum closed for the day, so hers had been the only car around.

Through the windshield she saw a luxury sedan pull into the area, disgorging both

Chase and Joy. Chase immediately buttonholed Dan, who Mia could see was holding onto his temper by a very thin thread. Chase was ranting nonstop, pointing at Dan's SUV.

*At me. I'm sure he's pointing at me.*

She watched as Dan walked Chase to a corner of the garage that was free of people, while activity eddied around them. She knew how upset he was about Greg but got a strong impression he was still doing what he always did – attempting to establish an air of calm and keep the client under control.

Joy leaned against the car and stood with her arms folded across her chest, anger sharp in the lines of her body. In powder blue slacks and sweater, with her long, pale blonde ponytail, Mia thought the woman looked too angelic to be as caustic as she seemed. But she'd been hostile at the meeting and now rage simmered around her like a visible aura.

*Why is she angry with me? I'm the one who almost got killed and she didn't even know the man who died in my place. Does she think I blew up my own car to call attention to myself?*

Right now, however, she couldn't care about Joy's attitude or Chase's anger. They were the least of her worries. Someone wanted her dead and because of that, a man had died in her place. It took every bit of discipline she had not to throw up, then run away and hide.

She felt someone move into the seat next to her and jumped, startled, before she realized it was Mark.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to make you jump out of your skin. Here." He handed her a Styrofoam cup. "Coffee. It's hot and it's strong. I got it from the medics." He grinned. "If you won't let them check you over, at least get this into your system." His voice softened. "Mia, you've had a terrible shock. Give yourself a break, okay?"

He was right. The coffee was hot and bitter but it was just what she needed to give her system a jolt.

"Thank you." She gave Mark a weak smile. "I see Chase is upset."

"Only because he's finally decided maybe you're onto something after all. Otherwise why would someone try to take you out?" He shook his head. "I just wonder why whoever it is thought this would be a good idea. If they want us to ignore you, this isn't the way to go about it. Now you can bet every word out of your mouth will be checked and double checked and analyzed three times over."

"So what does Chase want?"

"He's demanding Dan come back to the company tonight and review every security procedure with him."

Mia bit her lip. Where would that leave her? Anyone could drive her home but unexpectedly, Dan had become her security blanket. "Is he going?"

Mark shook his head. "I am. Dan can't be every place at the same time and he needs to talk to the people here. See what they find out."

"Someone should take me home," she pointed out, "and get me out of everyone's way."

"We've got that covered. The police and the bomb squad will need your statement," he told her, "but Dan's convinced them to wait until tomorrow. After you're through at Aunt Vivi's in the morning, Dan will pick you up and take you downtown."

"I can just imagine how that will go," she said, her voice bitter. "I've been through this with the police before. Trust me. They'll listen to what I have to say and file it in the nutcase folder."

"Trust Dan, okay? He knows how to handle these things."

"He seems to know how to handle everything," she commented.

"Yes, ma'am," he grinned, trying to break the tension. "That's the truth. Dan is the man."

At that moment she saw another car pull into the area and a tall, thin man in gray slacks and a polo shirt climbed out.

"Oh, lord," she said. "Here comes trouble. I knew he'd be here sooner or later."

"Who is it?"

"Dr. Hunter. The museum director and my boss. He just got back in town tonight. Security must have called him."

She watched the man in angry conversation with one of the policemen. Then Dan left Chase with Joy and walked over to Dr. Hunter. Mia watched him pull out his Phoenix credentials and gesture at the hulking mess that had been Mia's car. They spoke for several minutes and Mia guessed Dan was telling him the story they'd cooked up. Finally he pointed toward the SUV Mia was sitting in.

In a moment, Hunter was headed in her direction using his familiar lanky stride.

"Are you okay to talk to him?" Mark asked.

"I'd better be."

"Dan's probably given him the special consultant story by now. Let's see what he has to say."

Mark opened the door, got out and introduced himself to Hunter.

The man bent down and peered inside the SUV at Mia. "Are you all right? I couldn't believe it when security told me what happened."

"Yes, I'm fine," she assured him, hoping he couldn't see the trembling in her hands.

"This must be some dangerous project they've asked you to consult on," he remarked. "I'm not sure it's safe to let you continue."

Mia wasn't sure if he was jealous that she'd been tapped or genuinely concerned for her safety. Hunter had a hard time giving up the spotlight to anyone on the staff. As far as he was concerned, *he* was the museum and the key person at all times.

"I promise you that Dr. Fleming will have the utmost security from here on in," Mark assured him. "None of us expected that she'd be the focus of an attack. After this,

we'll be prepared. Major international art thieves will do anything to get what they want, you know."

"International art thieves?" he repeated and his eyes gleamed. "I'm wondering if I might not be a more appropriate person for what you need."

"I think the museum needs your strong hand," Mark said smoothly. "Taking you away might not be such a good idea."

"It's all right, Dr. Hunter," Mia told him before he could think up any more objections. "Really. I'll be fine. And Tally can continue working on the brochure." Tally Shuman was her wonderful assistant.

Mark motioned to Dan to join them. "Dr. Hunter, I think you might want to have a further conversation with Dan Romeo, the man you just met. He's our senior partner and the man in charge of the project. He'll answer any questions you still have and also take care of getting this mess cleaned up."

Skillfully, he steered the man away from the vehicle and toward Dan, then climbed back inside next to Mia.

She shivered and Mark's forehead wrinkled with concern. "Are you still cold? Dummy me. I should have closed the door and turned on the heater."

"No, that's fine. It's not the weather." It was May and the temperature even this late was still in the seventies. "Listen, I know Dan probably needs you."

"Actually, I think your temporary ride is here."

Mia frowned at him. "My who?"

"Your taxi service."

The door next to her opened and Faith was there, leaning into the SUV and putting her arms around Mia and giving her a warming hug. "Come on. We're going to your house to pack. Dan called to send someone on ahead to make sure there aren't any booby traps waiting for you there."

"Wait. Wait just a minute." Mia's breath hitched. "This is all moving too fast for me. Pack?"

And then Dan was beside the SUV, reaching a hand in to help her out. "Listen. You can't stay at your house, Mia. It isn't safe."

She looked up at him. "Not safe?"

"Think about it. Before this morning I didn't even know you existed. Hardly anyone knows you're helping us or that you were the one that alerted us to Oscar's danger. I hate to say this but there's a leak somewhere. That's what I was talking to Chase about. A fact that's making him very unhappy."

"I didn't think anyone but you was even taking me seriously," she told him. "The reaction I got today in that conference room is more the norm."

"Someone is and it's apparent they aren't taking any chances. The big event is this Friday and if someone is planning to steal Oscar, they don't want you around to come up with any clues."

"But I hardly know anything," she cried.

"Yet," Dan pointed out. "If whoever blew up your car is hiding around here watching, he already knows he missed his target. You need to be someplace safe."

"Safe. Right." She drew in a deep breath and blew it out. "And where would that be?"

"I wanted you to stay with us," Faith told her, "but Mark thinks that would make us a target too and he may be right. It's no secret where we live."

"So then where can I go?"

"With me." Dan's face was carefully expressionless. "I called the hotel where I'm staying and had them change me to a two-bedroom suite. It's quiet and out of the way and at least I can keep an eye on you. One of my men is on the way there to move my things and put some security measures in place in the suite."

Mia looked at each of them. "Dan, I can't stay with you. It isn't... It isn't..."

"Proper?" He snorted. "I think at the moment propriety is the least of our problems. I'd stash you at the cabin in Maine if I thought you'd go along with it." He held up his hand as she opened her mouth to protest. "I know. I know. You have to be here. So this is the next best option." His face softened, an obviously unfamiliar expression. "Please. Just go along with this. You and I both know you'll have more visions. We also know that until these people are caught, you've got a big bull's-eye painted on your back. So let's just do it, okay?"

She sighed. "All right. What choice do I have?"

"You're all set." Faith snapped her cell phone shut. "That was Dan's agent calling me with an all clear at your house. We'll go pack your bags and I'll take you to the hotel. Someone will stay with you there until Dan gets back."

"My God, how many men does he have working for him? Are they all on this case?"

Faith laughed. "The number is a mysterious unknown. From what Mark said, Dan and the others train them, keep them on salary and call them in when they're needed. If this continues to escalate, you'll see the other three partners here too." She led a still stunned Mia to her car. When they were buckled in, Faith turned to her. "Dan and his partners helped me get Mark out of the worst situation of his life. I'd trust them to do anything."

Mia stared out the window at the huge mass of people now gathered in the garage, as Faith headed toward the street. She wondered about the man who'd died in her place and again nausea rose in her throat.

## Chapter Nine

"I can't believe what an idiot you sent me."

The caller was in his car, speeding along the Interstate, doing his best to keep his anger under control.

He could imagine Khalid leaning back in the leather chair in his den, white silk shirt open at the throat against his dark skin, tailored slacks freshly creased, booted feet propped up on his desk. Smoke from a thin cigar would be curling into the air in a lazy pattern. With all the rules these days and his family's fetishes, the caller knew the den was the only place the man could indulge his vice. Arrogance would be evident in every line of his body.

"You were the ones who gave him the instructions," Khalid said. "Perhaps you didn't make yourselves clear enough."

"We were clear all right. There just seems to be a difference of opinion in what 'disappear completely' means."

"She had to be removed," Khalid insisted. "She was a danger to all of us. And this project."

"So you say."

"And your partner," Khalid pointed out. "We agreed completely on that point, even though for different reasons."

"In any event," the caller said, agitated, "a very stupid mistake has been made. I told you something like this could call attention to places and things best left unnoticed and may very well put our plan in jeopardy. I stressed we needed someone who could do this quickly and quietly."

"What can I say?" The shrug was implied. "Good help is hard to get these days. You knew the time frame gave us few choices. Apparently he misunderstood your instructions. Now you must get rid of him. Deal with the mess and clean it up."

*Bastard, the caller thought. Your man screwed up and you want to wash your hands of it. If things go wrong, you can hop on your plane and leave us holding the bag. That's bullshit.*

"It was supposed to be a simple job." The caller was trying very hard to hang onto his patience. "Get rid of the girl. Quietly. Just grab her. Make her disappear. Did your...employee think blowing up her car would go unnoticed? Be charged off as an accident?"

"I told you." Khalid was annoyed now. "The man made a simple mistake."

*Mistake didn't begin to describe what had happened, he thought. He'd already had this fight with his partner. He hadn't wanted to do this in the first place. When he'd said they needed to neutralize Mia Fleming, he meant figure out how to discredit her so she*



wouldn't be a factor. Making her disappear was an acceptable choice, made reluctantly. He hadn't meant killing her — at least not in so public a fashion.

He still didn't perceive her as any real threat. He didn't even believe in her so-called abilities. The problem was, apparently Dan Romeo did, as did Khalid and that was creating obstacles he'd rather not have to deal with. The bombing was too extreme and was a major error. Now a member of Romeo's team had been killed. A bad omen, he was sure. And that one reckless act could draw a great deal more unwanted attention. Even put their plan in jeopardy.

"Surely you don't think Dan Romeo will simply ignore that the dead man was one of his agents."

"He can look but he won't find anything." Khalid sounded self-assured. Arrogant.

"Meanwhile the woman is still a problem." Silence hummed across the connection. "You and Romeo seem to really believe in these so-called visions. I don't but what if she somehow comes up with something? Some little thing that they decide points to us?"

"Then figure out a way to defuse her influence. Shift attention away from her. And in a way that would send them off on a wild goose chase."

"All right. We have a plan that we can activate." He made a rude noise. "And this one we'll handle ourselves."

"Meanwhile you'd better clean up this problem as quickly as possible. Without leaving any tracks back to any of us. There's far too much money involved here for another mistake of any kind." The hissing sound of cigar smoke being exhaled drifted across the connection. "So what's your plan?"

"Compromising the security system without actually committing the theft would have them running in circles. And allow us to get what we need."

"Really. Exactly how do you plan to do that?"

The voice took on a soft, evil tone. "I think we've come up with just the answer."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mia had the hysterical urge to laugh when she saw the Phoenix agent that Dan had sent standing in front of her house, leaning against a black SUV. Like every other agent she'd met in this very long day, he was wearing a black jacket, gray slacks and white shirt.

"Do they all come out of a Play-Doh factory?" she asked Faith. "Same vehicles. Same outfits."

Faith grinned back, pleased to note Mia was still holding onto her sense of humor. "Phoenix likes it that way. Anonymity works best for them. People can't tell one from another."

Mia started to get out of the car but her face sobered and she held back. "Do you know this man? How do we really know he's from Phoenix?"

"I'll vouch for him." Faith was already out of the car and on the sidewalk. "Nice to see you again, Drew."

"Hello, Mrs. Halloran." Drew shook her hand. "And nice to meet you, Dr. Fleming. I've checked everything out and we're good to go in. But we need to be as quick as we can, please. Mr. Romeo doesn't want to give someone the chance to hang around and check you out."

Mia swiveled her head back and forth. "What if someone's already here? Hiding someplace?"

"We've got it covered. Just hurry, if you can."

Mia stood in her bedroom, adrenaline draining from her system, suddenly unable to do anything. She was so dazed by the sequence of events and the situation she had trouble collecting her thoughts. Having so little control over her life at the moment made her very uncomfortable. Thank God she had Faith with her, gently prodding, asking did she need this or that.

"I don't even know how long this will last," she said in a plaintive tone, holding her hands out in a helpless gesture. "This is *so* not like me."

"Don't worry about it. I had the same problem when Mark was captured. It's the shock that does it and you've had more than your share today. Look." Faith sat her down on the edge of the bed. "Chase's big deal is this Friday. Win, lose or draw, whatever happens will be over by then. Let's just make sure you're safe from here on out."

"I only hope your aunt can help me get a handle on what I'm seeing. It's been such a struggle all my life and I was afraid to seek out strangers for help. I just don't want anyone else to get hurt or Chase Carpenter's project to get stolen." She let out a slow breath and gave Faith a shaky smile, feeling her nerves settling. "I'm better now. Thanks."

Focused on what she needed to do, Mia stuffed a suitcase with everything she expected to need for the rest of the week. Apparently she'd be away from home until this whole thing was over. In the den she collected her laptop and its case, with her working flash drives zipped into a pocket. As an afterthought, she added two books sitting on a side table. Not that she expected to have the time or inclination to do much reading.

When she opened her front door, Dan was outside in the driveway talking to Drew. Even though he adopted a casual pose, hands shoved in his pockets, there was an air of alertness about him. Both men turned at the sound of the door opening and Dan came forward to take her suitcase and laptop.

"All set?" he asked.

"As much as I can be." She gave him a weak smile. "I thought you were going to meet me at the hotel."

"I handed everything at the parking garage over to Mark." He smiled at Faith. Sorry. He'll be a little late tonight."

"No problem. I'm used to it."

"Thanks for doing this, Faith. I really appreciate it."

"Any time. You know that."

"Drew's going to follow you home," he told her, "just to be on the safe side. Right now I don't know who's in danger and who isn't. I'd rather you not be alone while Mark's off meeting with Chase. I'll call you in the morning and we can make arrangements for you to collect Mia and take her to your aunt's."

In what seemed like seconds, Mia was belted into Dan's SUV and they were speeding away from her house. Inside she felt shaky and she was sure it had nothing to do with the day's events. Being this close to Dan Romeo, in a confined space, could be dangerous to her hormones. She felt her body responding to their proximity in a way it hadn't with any other man and the most intimate gesture he'd made so far was to squeeze her hand.

*Except in my vision. If a man in the flesh has never caused me to do what I did in my office, how is it that this man was able to in my...whatever it was.*

Then she mentally smacked herself.

*Quit daydreaming, you idiot. He's just doing a job. Taking care of, what was it he'd called her? An asset. Yes, that was it. I'm nothing more than an asset. After Friday he'll be gone and that will be that. Probably off to someone as gorgeous as Faith Halloran.*

She straightened her spine. At least she'd held up under all the pressures of the day and hadn't lost her cool. She'd certainly given as good as she got in the conference room. Being an art historian didn't put her in a lot of challenging situations but she wasn't a pushover, either. Once she got a handle on these visions, she'd feel more in control of the situation. And not a liability to Dan or the other men from Phoenix.

"Where are we going?" she asked finally, just to break the silence.

He named a new luxury hotel on the city's northwest side. "I chose it because it's quiet and away from the noise of the city. I try to do that whenever possible. Staying downtown doesn't always work for me."

"I'm putting you to a lot of trouble." She felt the need to apologize.

"Not at all. A room's a room. Besides." He slid a half-smile at her. "This will go on Chase's expense account and he can afford it."

"Can you tell me what happened at the garage after I left? Everyone looked so angry."

Dan grunted. "There was a lot of testosterone flying around, for sure. But Chase has a hair trigger reaction to everything, no matter what it is. I don't think Joy settles him down either but that's just an off-the-cuff impression. Mark will calm him down. And I think tomorrow we'll have a better report so let's wait until then to go over the details."

"And Dr. Hunter?"

"Mark actually managed to make him think all this excitement would be good publicity for the museum. Plus, he intimated that Phoenix would be making a

contribution to the acquisitions fund.” He chuckled. “Anyway, Hunter thinks it’s also good PR for you to be involved in a high profile case as long as you’re safe.” He slid a narrow glance at her. “The guy was really concerned about you.”

“He’s very good to work for but that’s all there is between us, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He was silent for a moment. “I didn’t think to ask before but *is* there someone you’re...ah...in a relationship with? Someone we should notify?”

Mia gave an unladylike snort. “First of all, if there was someone, what kind of person wouldn’t have shown up to see if I’m dead or alive? But to answer your question, no. My ‘peculiarities’ don’t make me particularly attractive date material. I get the curiosity seekers mostly. You know, the ones who want to know what it’s like to have sex with a freak.”

Dan cleared his throat, “Listen, Mia, I—”

“It’s okay. I’ve lived with it for so long it doesn’t even bother me anymore.”

*Except I wouldn’t mind finding out what’s behind your tough exterior, Dan Romeo.*

“Tell me a little more about the visions you get,” Dan prodded, maneuvering through the dark streets.

“They come to me in bits and pieces. Sometimes I get a clear image but mostly it’s just fragments. Like a puzzle that I can’t quite put together.”

“That must be very frustrating for you.”

She sighed and pushed her hair away from her face. “You have no idea. You know, I’ve had people write me nasty letters before. Sometimes even gather in front of my house and taunt me when my name’s been in the paper. Although they really must have to search to find those articles. But until this afternoon no one’s ever tried to kill me.”

“That means someone’s scared you’ll turn us onto something. And it doesn’t necessarily have to be anyone who believes in your visions. Just someone who thinks *we* will.” He reached over and squeezed her arm. “There’s always a positive side to things. This is a good sign that your visions are being taken seriously by whoever’s conjuring something up.”

“If only people didn’t have to get hurt or killed to accomplish that,” she said, her voice sad.

“We’re going to do our best to make sure it doesn’t happen again. You have my word on that.”

She recognized the hotel Dan had chosen as soon as they turned onto the street. A few months ago a museum patron had thrown a cocktail party there which required her attendance. The décor reminded her of European hotels she’d seen on research trips— understated elegance, guaranteed privacy, every convenience possible for the comfort of the guests. Exactly the kind of place she’d have picked for Dan Romeo to stay in.

Dan parked in the three-story garage rather than turning the car over to the valet. In

what seemed like seconds they were in the lobby, he'd picked up the new key cards from the front desk and had them both up in his new quarters.

Mia looked at the three rooms in the suite and thought them big enough to serve as a small apartment. Yet knowing she'd be sleeping within its confines with Dan, its dimensions suddenly shrank.

"How's the hand?" he asked.

"Not too bad." And surprisingly, she was telling the truth. "I took some aspirin at the Hallorans' when we got there, so I'm good to go for the moment."

"Then I think it wouldn't hurt for you to have a drink before you go to bed," he told her. "Let's see what the minibar has to offer."

"I don't usually drink," she protested. "I mean, I mostly stick to wine." She forced a chuckle. "I'm a cheap drunk and I don't like to lose control."

He smiled at her. "Let's call this one for medicinal purposes, okay? You've had a lot of shocks today. Your system needs to settle down. And I promise not to let you get out of control."

"Mr. Romeo," she began. God, that sounded so formal, especially after...

He turned toward her, holding two tiny liquor bottles. "Since we'll be virtually sleeping together, I think Dan and Mia would do a lot better, don't you?"

Mia could feel the blush creeping all the way up from her toes. "I don't think..."

He winked at her, an unusually informal type of gesture from him. "A joke, Mia. I think you could use a little levity right now. Anyway, I think this is the smartest thing to do. Once all this hits the newspapers tomorrow, it will be the best way to protect you. I don't want anyone else taking a shot at you."

"Oh, my God. The newspapers. The television." She dropped into an armchair. "Oh, hell. The circus is about to come to town. Dr. Hunter will have a fit."

"Not at all. I told you, Mark's got it handled. And if there is a problem, we'll take care of it. After all, we got you into this."

She shook her head. "No, I got myself into it with my aggravating conscience and that stupid email."

"Not to worry, anyway. I have a team coming from my office that's second to none in handling this type of thing. We have clients who don't even want people to know their names, so we've got a lot of experience. Leave it to us." He handed her the tumbler with brandy in it.

Their fingers grazed against each other and a spike of heat so intense it felt like fire scorching her skin shot up her arm and into her body. Stunned, she nearly dropped the glass.

Dan's forehead creased in a worried frown. "Another image?"

She shook her head and took a larger swallow of the brandy than she intended. The sharp bite of the alcohol made her throat burn and her eyes water.

"Easy." He put his hand over hers, moving the glass away from her mouth. "This is supposed to be sipped. Are you all right?"

*No, I'm not. How can I tell you what I felt was the most intense sexual charge you can imagine?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan studied the young woman across from him. When he'd first discovered the warning email had come from the DeWitt Art Museum, he'd expected to meet a person he'd already stereotyped in his mind—tall, thin, sallow complexion, hostile attitude. Mia Fleming was none of these and her appearance had been a great shock to his system.

More than that was the unexpected effect she had on him. Dan didn't lead the kind of life conducive to lasting relationships. He'd tried it once when he was still a Force Recon Marine and disaster was too mild a word for what resulted. Since then his relationships had been sexually fulfilling but transient. And emotionally bare. He never made promises because he had no plans to keep them. And the women he spent time with accepted him for what he was.

But here he was, confoundingly attracted to a woman whose safety was now in his care. Of course, he could have assigned anyone to watch her. He had perfect confidence in all of his men. Yet like a man who keeps hitting his sore thumb with a hammer, he maneuvered to keep her by his side.

*Watch it, Dan. Trouble's stalking you.*

This arrangement in the hotel, his own stupid idea, was fraught with danger. He thought about handcuffing himself to his bed so he'd behave himself, then swallowed a laugh. What a sight that would be. Besides, wasn't he famous for his self-control?

He watched her as they discussed the plans for the following day, intelligent eyes absorbing everything he said. Hope flashing at the prospect of meeting Faith's aunt. Resigned dread at the media madness. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and keep her safe from everything.

And if that ungodly flash of heat between them before was any indication, she wouldn't offer any resistance.

Sighing, he finished the last of his drink and stood up. "Let's take a look at that hand before you go to bed and make sure it's doing all right. I've got a first-aid kit in my bathroom."

He sat her on the edge of the tub, carefully unwrapped the gauze bandage and checked for swelling or blood seepage. To his experienced eye the wound looked to be doing all right.

"I know the doctor gave you pain pills," he told her, "but after the brandy you drank I wouldn't recommend taking anything stronger than aspirin." He shook two into his palm and handed them to her with a glass of water.

They both stood up at the same time and suddenly their bodies were touching, crowded into the narrow space between the counter and the tub. Later he might try to recall who made the first move but now all that mattered was the look in her eyes, the fresh scent of her skin and the warmth of her soft body pressed close to his. In seconds his lips were on hers, his hands gripping her shoulders, his tongue sweeping into the dark, wet cavern of her mouth.

Mia, shocked by the contact, was held in place by the electricity of it and the feel of his warm, hard body against hers. Unfamiliar surges of heat flooded her, arousing a body that had relegated sex to an unused corner of her life. His big yet gentle hands caressed her back, kneading her muscles, while his head slanted this way and that to give him better access to her mouth.

Mia clung to him as if she'd disappear in the air without the anchor of his body. Experimentally she slipped her small tongue into his mouth and his grip on her tightened. She wanted to melt into him, wrap him around her small self and block out the rest of the world.

She had no idea how much time passed. It could have been minutes or even hours, when Dan finally lifted his head. Her lips suddenly felt bereft with the absence of his mouth on hers. She was dazed, her eyes unfocused, her breath escaping her in a ragged pattern. She was sure she'd never get her heart rate under control again.

He studied her face with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

"Mia," he began.

"If you apologize I will kick you in a place that will hurt very much," she threatened, striving for some kind of control herself.

He actually smiled. "I won't apologize because I'm not sorry. But this is a strange situation."

"No kidding." She realized he still held her in his grip, albeit a more relaxed one. She had no intention of moving.

"What I mean is..." He stopped. "Shit. You're part of a case I'm in charge of. A vital part."

"And you never become involved with people who are part of a case or mission," she finished for him.

"It's more than that. Forget for a moment that Romeo's Rule is never to mix business with pleasure." He brushed her hair back from her forehead. "You've become a target in a cat and mouse game. You're probably the only person who can give us any kind of indication as to what might happen to Oscar—if, in fact, something does happen. Someone is certainly taking you seriously. Your car's been blown up, you've been yanked from the comfort of your home and you're still in danger. Any one of these reasons would be good enough to say this should not happen."

Mia sighed and forced herself to step away from him. "Yes, I can see where that

would create a lot of problems. I guess I'm the one who should apologize."

"No." He snapped out the word, then took her by her uninjured hand. "Come here. The bathroom is no place for a rational discussion."

He led her back into the suite's living room and sat her down in one of the chairs. When she looked up he was standing in front of her with his arms folded across his chest. She could easily see the Force Recon Marine in every line of his body and the steely look in his eyes.

"No lectures, please. Okay? I'm just too weary for it."

He softened his stance then knelt in front of her. "No lectures," he agreed. "But help me out a little here, Mia. Something clicked between us the minute I walked into your office. Don't try to lie about it, because I know we both felt it. To tell the truth, I don't know which one of us was more shocked. Maybe still is."

She nodded, waiting for the rest. Wondering if he'd had a vision, too. Vibrating with a combination of anticipation and anxiety.

"I haven't... I don't..."

She almost laughed to see this tough warrior fumbling for words.

"Okay, I'll say it for you. You don't have relationships because it distracts you from your work. You take your sex where you find it and you don't find it on your cases. So it would be best for both of us if we forget what just happened."

He burst out laughing, the sound breaking the tension. Then he sat down cross-legged at her feet. "You are definitely something. And a lot more than I would have taken you for." He took her hands gently in his. "You're right on the money in everything you said except for one thing."

"And that is?"

"This isn't casual and I don't want to forget what just happened. But I don't want to put you in a position where your credentials are compromised because we're..." He fumbled for the right word.

"Sleeping together?"

"Having a relationship."

"Which you don't have," she reminded him.

He ignored her as he continued talking. "I don't want to take advantage of you while you're in a vulnerable state emotionally. I'd hate myself for a long time."

She was rapidly losing patience. "Damn it, Dan. Do I look like a shrinking violet? Like someone who can be pushed around? I've had to be tough to deal with this stupid 'gift' and to be able to build a life for myself. I could easily have looked at you just now and told you you'd gotten your signals wrong and to back off. But I didn't do that, did I?"

Again thoughts of the erotic vision she'd had slammed into her and a flash of excitement sizzled through her. She looked up at Dan and saw answering heat in his eyes. Saw resistance falling away. As was hers.



"Mia..."

She sucked in her breath. "I know." And she did. Everything was different with this man. All her natural shields were down, her defenses nonexistent.

"This isn't the time...I don't want to..."

"O-Okay." *Should have known. He'll find an excuse. Get over it. Back to dull Mia.*

"The hell with it." He cupped her face with his hands and his warm mouth pressed down on hers, gently at first, then with more urgency. He tasted her lips, licking the edges, nibbling at them before probing the seam with his tongue.

Mia clung to his wrists, anchoring herself, the pain in her hand forgotten. She'd always considered herself slightly repressed sexually but Dan pressed a switch inside her that opened a door. She opened her mouth eagerly for him, accepting his tongue inside. Exulting when it fluttered and explored. Meeting it with her own.

He prolonged the kiss, tasting every bit of her, wooing her with his mouth before finally lifting his head.

"I don't usually do this." His voice was even but his eyes were heated.

"H-Have sex?" She laughed nervously.

"With someone I've just met whom I respect. Especially in the middle of a mission."

Mia's body tightened, rejection already sweeping over her. "I understand. It's all right."

"No." His mouth was touching hers when he almost shouted the word. "This is different. I don't know...I can't explain...If you want me to stop, now is the time to tell me."

"Don't stop," she whispered.

He swept her up in his arms and carried her into one of the bedrooms. Setting her on her feet, he tossed back the covers on the bed and snapped on the bedside lamp. Reaching into his pants pocket he took out his cell phone and set it on the nightstand before turning back to her.

"I can't wait to see you naked." His voice was hoarse with need.

She began to unbutton her jacket but he brushed her hands away.

"Let me. Please."

He peeled off each layer of clothing as if he was unwrapping a Christmas package. Mia stood there, trembling at his touch, watching his eyes travel over each part of her body as he bared it to his gaze. His hands cupped her breasts with an almost reverent touch, the thumbs brushing back and forth over nipples that hardened into peaks. Slivers of lightning flashed through her body, igniting her pulse. A throbbing began deep inside her cunt, radiating outward until she was sure Dan could feel it, also.

He paused long enough to remove his jacket, tie and shirt before stepping close to her again. His body was just as she remembered it, taut and muscular and golden. Surely he was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen. Tanned, olive skin covered

hard, sculptured muscle. Crisp, curly black hair lay across his chest, arrowing down a very flat abdomen to the most enormous erection she had ever seen. Only a long, thin scar that ran from his collarbone to his abdomen marred his beauty—but in Mia's opinion it only added to his sex appeal.

She sifted her fingers through the soft dark curls on his chest and scraped her nails over his nipples. He rewarded her with a hissing intake of breath. She'd never been an aggressive lover, barely able to respond because her partners never came to her as if they really desired her as a woman.

But Dan made her feel as if she was all the desirable women in the world rolled into one. He trailed kisses down the column of her neck, nibbled at her ear, licked the upper swell of her breasts before taking one nipple into his mouth. She felt the pull clear down to the center of her pussy, to the clenching of her womb.

She felt more alive than she'd ever been. Every sense she had was on high alert, electrified just by this man's touch. By his presence. His scent was sharp in her nostrils, his skin alive beneath her fingers. Every place his body touched hers, her nerves fired like tiny rockets. Even their breathing was sharp and clear, the rushing of air in and out of their lungs. She had the strangest feeling she'd stepped into one of her own visions. Only there was nothing fractured about this one.

Dan slid his hands around to her back, pulling her tightly against him so her breasts were pressed against that hard wall of chest. Her skin was so sensitive now that she could almost feel every individual curl in that mat of hair.

He was kissing her again, plunging his tongue inside her mouth, barely giving her air to breathe. Somehow her slacks and panties disappeared and he lowered her to the bed, splaying her legs, his eyes glued to the wet folds of her cunt. Mia knew she should feel embarrassed. She wasn't used to having men look at her this way. But somehow with Dan Romeo there didn't seem to be any self-consciousness.

He leaned over her, running his hands from her shoulders down the length of her arms to her fingertips, his touch firm and light at the same time. His fingers danced along her waist, cupped her breasts then traveled over her tummy to the neat line of hair defining her wet labia.

Pulling back, he made quick work of his slacks and boxers, kicking his shoes and socks to the side. Mia's eyes widened when she saw him fully naked before her. Nothing in the vision could have prepared her for the reality of the man. His cock was proud and erect, the tiny bead of fluid on its broad head gleaming in the lamplight. His sac hung heavy against his muscular thighs. A Roman god, Mia thought, her breath catching in her throat as her eyes took him in.

"I want to taste you." His voice was thick with hunger. "No, I *have* to taste you."

He arranged her on the bed so he was between her thighs, placing a pillow beneath her hips to raise her to him. When his fingers opened her labia he took a moment to drink in the sight of her again before bending and lapping the length of her slit.

Mia's heartbeat stuttered before shifting into overdrive. His tongue was magic,

caressing every inch of her throbbing cunt, rasping against her clit again and again. The image invoked a thick cloud of lust that enveloped her like a quilt. Only now she didn't have to bring herself to climax; the Roman god was doing it for her. Her skin felt as if the top layer had been sandpapered away so that every touch was so sharp and distinct. Was it possible to have sexual sensory overload?

The spasms began deep inside her, rocketing into the walls of her pussy, burning through her, blanking out everything except the voluptuous sensation of pulse and beat. When he suddenly withdrew she cried out, hung on the precipice of fulfillment. She opened her eyes to see him dragging his pants from the floor, yanking out his wallet and fishing inside. The sound of crinkling foil told her what he was doing. She heard his labored breathing as he sheathed himself, then he was back, the head of his penis poised at the entrance to her hot channel.

"Please," she urged, in a tight voice, eyes closed. God, she just wanted him inside her. Now.

With one hard thrust he was inside her, the thickness of his cock stretching her walls and setting off every tiny bundle of nerves. She opened her eyes again to see his taut face just inches from hers and a passion burning in his eyes brighter than any candle flame. He lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers, invading her with his tongue. The taste of her own flavor was so erotic, so exciting, her body blazed in reaction. She clutched at his shoulders, scored his back with her fingernails, wrapped her legs around him silently asking for more. Deeper.

Slowly, steadily, he moved his hips, rooting deep, his tongue mimicking the movement of his body. Mia could think of nothing but this man, this place, and the pulse racing through her. As he increased his pace he murmured into her mouth, erotic words, things he wanted to do to her. Every word, every groan, only drove her higher.

She felt his incredible control in the tension of his body as he waited for her to peak, for the tight spiral of need to finish unwinding.

"Dan!" she screamed, as it crashed over her.

And he let himself go.

The spasms seemed to go on forever, bodies convulsing together, her pussy grabbing his cock with an iron grip. She felt the hot spurt of his cum inside the latex, heating her through the thin barrier, and knew this was beyond anything she'd ever experienced before.

When the pulses finally ebbed, slowed to aftershocks, then faded to nothingness, Dan collapsed forward, barely keeping his weight from crushing her. The only sound in the room was their labored breathing as they drew air into oxygen-deprived lungs, and the slamming of their hearts, which Mia was sure echoed off the walls of the room. Everything sounded so acutely loud, as if someone had turned up the volume in her ears.

When his breathing slowed to a manageable rate, Dan pressed light kisses everywhere on her face, telling her better than words could that this hadn't just been a

quick fuck to him. That *she* was more than that.

He withdrew slowly, took time to dispose of the condom before sliding beneath the covers, taking her with him. He tucked her head under his chin, cradling her with muscular arms that offered comfort, protection and...affection.

Affection?

Mia snuggled back against him, feeling replete and not even aware of her injured hand.

"Sleep," he urged her in that warm molasses voice of his. "You'll need it."

They were both highly aware that tomorrow was Tuesday. Only three days remained to find out who was behind this and stop them.

## Chapter Ten

Nate Wilson believed life had been very unfair to him. He'd started out twenty-five years ago in the Army full of piss and vinegar. In short order his commanding officer had discovered Nate's aptitude with explosives and made good use of him. He blew up bridges, roads, enemy strongholds, whatever was required of him.

Then he got careless, waiting too long to haul ass from some charges he set up. A blown knee and a back injury earned him a medical discharge and a lot of pain.

Unwilling to sit around feeling sorry for himself, despite his injuries he'd talked himself into a job with the San Antonio Police Department bomb squad. He didn't have to be agile, just clever with his hands.

Then Fate stepped in again. A bomb with a hair trigger went off as he was disarming it and blew off two fingers of one hand and blinded him in one eye. That ended his police career and his marriage. It also increased his pain quotient and he quickly became addicted to Vicodin and Oxycodone. Needing to feed his habit, he put out the word here and there and soon a third career was born. If you wanted someone or something blown up, Nate was the man for it.

He'd been making himself a nice little living and keeping up his supply of drugs when the job for Mia Fleming came down. And everything came to a screeching halt.

"You told me to make her disappear." He snapped the words off angrily. "Well, nothing makes a person disappear more than a bomb, right?"

"Disappear as in take her away. Kill her someplace else so people would think she'd left on her own. Are you an idiot?" The caller's rage vibrated through the connection.

"Let's not start with the name-calling. You needed a job done in a hurry and it seemed to me you weren't too fussy about how it got done. I did it. I want my money."

"You do realize that you killed a man from the Phoenix Agency, right? Dan Romeo won't take very kindly to that."

"Fuck Dan Romeo," he nearly shouted. "How the hell was I supposed to know someone else would be driving her car?" He held the receiver away from his head to tone down the voice shouting into his ear.

"That's what you got paid for." The caller was nearly incoherent with fury. "It would have been bad enough if she'd been in the car. Maybe we could have tried to pass it off as one of those nuts always stalking her. But now, besides the cops who were all over the place last night, Phoenix will be on your ass until hell freezes over."

"Fine." Nate pulled a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead. This was not going well at all. "Then I want the rest of my money

and I'll get out of town. But now I need more than the original amount. Give me enough to stay gone so they'll never find me and I won't need to look for more work."

There was a long pause. "And exactly how much are we talking about?"

"Half a million."

"Are you crazy?" the caller exploded. "No way. You fucked up what should have been a simple job and now you want to hold us up like this? No way in hell."

"Don't give me grief," he ordered. "I know you can get your hands on that kind of money. I know all about your secret stash. So pay up or I'll be talking to the cops instead."

He waited out the silence while his caller mulled over all the possibilities.

"Fine," the answer came back. "Tell me where to send it and I'll wire it."

Nate snorted. "You think I'd fall for that? Then I really *would* be an idiot. I want cold hard cash. And I want it right now."

The caller sighed. "All right. I'll get it ready."

"Good. Give me your address. I'll come by and get it."

"Are you crazy?" The rage rolled through the phone connection again. "I don't want you anywhere near here. Let me think a minute."

"Yeah, well, think fast. I wanna get going."

Another pause. "All right. Let me think."

"Meet me at the airport," he said. "You know where the cell phone lot is, right?"

"You don't think that's a little public? The idea is for us not to be seen together."

"There are cars in and out of there all the time so no one will pay any attention to us. You can get in and out before anyone even knows you're there. Then I can hit the interstate or get on a plane and go wherever I want to."

"All right. Fine. But I don't ever want to see you or hear from you or about you again. Otherwise you really will disappear."

"Thirty minutes," Nate said and disconnected the call.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe Harmon had been working at San Antonio International Airport for ten years. When an on-the-job injury had sidelined him from the Kendall County Sheriff's Department, a friend had referred him to airport security and he'd settled very comfortably into a position as a guard. The hours were much better than when he was a sheriff's deputy, the work was much easier and since his wife had died, it proved a good way to fill up his nights. People thought he was crazy but everyone was always happy to let him have all the night shifts he wanted.

He wondered frequently who all the people were coming and going at the airport at three o'clock in the morning. The crowds simply amazed him. Why would anyone want to travel at that ungodly hour? His shift started at midnight and things seemed to get

progressively busier rather than slower.

In his airport-issued golf cart Joe patrolled the open places around the terminal. That included the drive-up areas and the parking garages. His job was to make sure there was no mischief afoot and that people didn't keep their cars past the allotted time at the passenger pickup areas. The cell phone lot was one of the many areas he was responsible for. Here people could wait for arriving passengers who would then call on their cell phones when they arrived. It was a good system and for the most part worked pretty well. Joe usually just had to do a quick drive-through and move along.

It was very unusual for a car to be in that lot for more than fifteen or twenty minutes. People usually timed their arrival so they'd have a short wait. Whoever they were picking up would call them on their cell phone—hence the name of the lot—and by the time they got to the pickup area their passenger would be waiting with luggage in hand.

So when he realized the banged-up Toyota Corolla was still parked in the same place more than an hour after he first spotted it, he became suspicious. Normally he wouldn't even have noticed. He basically just counted cars and went on his way. But when he pulled up behind the car he noticed the man inside appeared to be asleep. In the best of circumstances, which this was not, a parking lot wasn't a great place to take a nap.

Unsnapping the flap on his airport-issued sidearm, he climbed out of the golf cart, walked easily over to the car and rapped on the driver's side window.

"Hey, buddy. You okay?" When he received no response, he banged harder on the glass. "Buddy? You all right in there? Time to wake up."

He turned on his flashlight and shone it into the interior. That's when he saw the blood.

"Holy Mother of God."

He backed away, grabbed his radio and called the main security office.

"Hey, Sheila," he told the dispatcher. "Get the boss down to the cell phone lot pronto. And tell him to call the cops. I got a dead guy here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mia felt as if she was swimming up from the bottom of a deep pool of water. She needed to wake up or she would drown. She swam and swam but she couldn't reach the surface. Just as the last of her breath disappeared an explosion rocked the water and a gun came tumbling down to her.

She sat up in bed, dragging air into her lungs, perspiration covering her body. She closed her eyes, trying to bring the image back and there it was. The gun tumbling out of the ball of fire into the water.

She flailed at the air with her arms, screaming when something clamped down on them.

"No! No! Let me go."

"Mia?" A deep, slow voice rolled into the dream. "Honey. It's all right."

"No!" Desperation clawed at her.

"Mia. You're dreaming. It's okay."

Warm hands stroked her, soothed her. Eased her. The same voice coaxed her out of the nightmare. She forced her eyes open, consciousness coming slowly.

"What is it, Mia?" He smoothed his hand down her arm and pressed a kiss to her forehead. She realized he had pulled her against the hard wall of his chest, protecting her from whatever demon was chasing her.

"Someone's been shot." She wiped her forehead with the sheet. "I don't know who but it's someone connected with the explosion. Oh, Dan. God!" She leaned into him, shivering.

"All right." He continued to stroke her as one might a wild animal. And truly, that was almost what she felt like. "Tell me exactly what you saw."

He pulled her upright and plumped the pillows behind them, leaning her back with him against the headboard. His arms circled protectively around her. "Would you like a cold drink? Some hot tea?"

"No." She shook her head vehemently. The after-image was still burned into her brain and she needed to get the details out. "Okay." She pulled in a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Here's what I saw, everything I can remember." She described it all to him—the water, the feeling of drowning, the explosion and the gun.

"Could you get any sense of who was doing the shooting?" he prodded gently. "Or who was being shot?"

She shook her head again. "No. I didn't even see a hand to tell if it was male or female. But I know it's somehow connected to the bomb in my car. Whoever planted it is going to try a gun next. On me or someone connected to the project." She smacked a hand against her forehead in frustration. "Or maybe that person will be shot."

"Okay, honey." Dan's voice was low and soothing. "Let's first make sure all our principles are covered. We need to find out where they are right now and check if anyone's in trouble."

He reached over for his cell phone and flipped it open. In rapid succession he called Chase's penthouse, Lucas' home, Paul Harrison's townhouse, Ladd Tolbert's condo and Stan Forbush's bungalow. From Dan's end of the conversation she guessed they all bitched and cursed at being awakened but at least she knew they were all alive and well.

Next Dan began contacting his team and making assignments, still keeping one arm around her, holding her firmly against him.

"No one," he kept repeating as he connected on each call, "is to be left unguarded. They can raise as much stink as they want to but that's an order. If anyone gives you too much of a problem, call me. And I want everyone in the Carpenter Techtronics



conference room at nine o'clock."

His last call was to Rick Latrobe, back in the Phoenix office after some downtime following his high security mission in Morocco. He held the phone so Mia could hear both sides of the conversation.

"You were going to get with Andy and do some research on Carpenter Techtronics and the key players," he reminded him. "Get anything I need to know?"

"This and that," Rick told him. "If I'd known you were going to call me in the middle of the night about it I'd have brought the stuff home with me."

"Never mind. Pack it all up and bring it with you to Texas. I need you here. This case is taking some unusual twists. Mark's on board for several reasons, and I need you here too. How's everything at the office?"

"Surprisingly quiet for the moment. Nothing going on that requires any senior attention. God must be smiling on us."

"No," Dan contradicted, "he saved all his wrath for this gig. Just get your ass here five minutes ago."

"No problem. I'll wake Ed and tell him to get the plane ready. It's a good thing you sent it back."

"I'll call Mark and ask him to pick you up at the private hangar," Dan told him. "We'll worry about getting you a vehicle later. I want him to bring you directly to the meeting at Carpenter Techtronics. It's set for nine this morning, so get Ed's rear end moving. You need wheels up ASAP. Oh and have Mike bring the chopper and sit on it at the hangar."

"That's a lot of air power," Rick pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. I just have a funny feeling we may need it." He snapped the phone shut and dropped it onto the small table.

"Now," he said to Mia, giving her a brief kiss, "everything's in place so you don't have to worry. So let's go over this in detail once more, okay?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The cell phone lot of the airport had been roped off with crime scene tape. The head of the night security shift had taken a look in the car and put in another call to the San Antonio Police Department. This would require more than a cruiser and two patrol cops. Shortly the patrol car that had originally been dispatched arrived along with two detectives in an unmarked car and the crime scene unit. Now the driver's door of the Toyota had been popped open, pictures taken from every angle and the body removed.

Detective Steve Aragon took a good look at the man with the two bullet holes in his head. "I know this guy." He turned to his partner. "So do you."

His partner walked around the body that was being zipped into a body bag and stopped the zipper as it reached the man's neck. "Hold it a minute." He had them pull the zipper back down and reached for one of the man's hands. "You're right."

"It's Nate Wilson, isn't it?" Aragon asked.

"Sure is. Who the hell shot him? And why here?"

"You got me. But he must have really pissed someone off. This is an execution-style hit." He nodded to the men from the medical examiner's office. "Okay. You can take him away now."

He turned around as a van pulled up with the call letters of one of the television stations on it. "Mud suckers," he commented under his breath.

"They must sit on a police scanner," Aragon muttered.

"So who gets to talk to them, you or me?"

"I'll do it. How much do you think they'd want to know about an asshole like Wilson?"

"Enough to give them a hot sound byte. Go on." He nodded at the reporter holding a microphone and talking to her cameraman. "Miss Twinkletoes is waiting."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan watched Mia choke down part of the breakfast he'd ordered for her before finally moving her plate away. She'd have stuck with coffee and dry toast if he'd let her but she already looked as if she'd pass out any minute. The strain was taking a heavy physical toll on her body and he wanted to get as much sustenance into her as possible.

"Okay, I think we've stoked the furnace." He refilled her coffee cup. "I just wanted to get enough protein into you before we start out today. We've got a full schedule and you need your strength. How's your hand?" He'd rebandaged it as soon as she got out of the shower.

"Much better. You saw that it's healing nicely. As long as the aspirin doesn't run out I'll be fine."

"You probably should take one of the pills the doc gave you." Dan reached for the little vial he'd set on his nightstand.

"No, please. I have a high tolerance for pain and I don't want to be fuzzyheaded today."

Dan frowned. "I wonder if we should have the doctor take another look at it."

"I'm fine," she insisted. "Really. This is the last thing you need to worry about."

He reached across the table and took her good hand in one of his. "Honey, put this in your memory bank. You've gone from being an interesting addition to this case to someone very special to me in a tiny amount of time. I worry about the people I...care about. So deal with it, all right?"

She gave him a tiny smile. "All right."

He took a long look at her. Since she wasn't going into work, she was dressed more casually in navy slacks and a light green cotton sweater. A matching scarf held her hair in a ponytail and diamond studs winked at her ears. In the early morning light and

without her professional camouflage Dan thought she looked very young and vulnerable.

Damn it. For a man who could maintain rigid discipline in the most horrific and tense situations, he hadn't done very well at keeping a lid on his feelings for the intriguing Dr. Fleming. In less than twenty-four hours he was in water up to his neck. He couldn't help wondering if she'd been visited by some image the night before they met, also. Maybe tonight he'd get up the guts to ask her.

After he made slow, erotic love to her again, of course. He didn't intend to neglect what was a case with escalating danger but he also was firm in his decision to give his full attention to Dr. Mia Fleming and whatever this was that had exploded between them.

They were finishing their coffee when Dan flicked on the television and turned to a local news channel. Before they left the hotel he wanted to know what kind of media feeding frenzy they might run into. It was highly unlikely that anyone had ferreted out where he was staying and that Mia was with him but he wanted to be prepared if he had to sneak her out some way.

The car bombing was a major story, as much because it had happened at the museum as because of whose car it was. Just as they feared, someone had dug up Mia's history and plastered it all over the screen for everyone to hear.

"The newspapers probably have it too," Mia told him, looking even paler if possible. "I don't care how much magic you think your partner can work, Dr. Hunter and the board will have a cow over this. I can probably kiss my job goodbye."

"A sizable contribution can make a lot of things go away, you know," Dan reminded her.

Mia shook her head. "I wouldn't let you spend the kind of money that would take." She sighed. "Who knows. Maybe this is a sign for me that it's time to make a change."

"I'd say when this all blows over, Hunter won't want to part with you. You have a very impressive history."

"You checked me out." She grinned at him.

"Of course. Would you have expected less?" He filled his water glass. "At least the vultures have no idea where you're staying. I've got a man staking out your house. He'll get rid of everyone who shows up there."

Dan had picked up his cell phone again and was getting ready to call Faith about the arrangements to pick up Mia when something the television reporter was saying caught his ear.

"Story is a sad case of a man who took a wrong turn with his life. A former demolitions expert with the Army and at one time a member of the SAPD bomb squad, in recent years Nate Wilson had become a bomber for hire. Last night one of his customers paid him off, not in cash but with two bullets to the brain. Police report..."

Dan had his cell phone open and hit the speed dial for the Hallorans.

"Have you got your television on?" he asked when Mark answered.

"Yeah, we just saw the report too," Mark told him. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That it's too much of a coincidence to have a bomber for hire knocked off the day after Mia's car is blown up?"

Dan was watching Mia as he spoke. *The dream*, she mouthed at him and he nodded his head.

"The kill looked professional," Mark went on, "according to the news report. But I'd say it was idiotic to leave the body where it could be found so easily."

"Maybe their plans were interrupted."

"I'll call my contact at the SAPD," Mark told him, "and find out what I can before I have to leave to fetch Rick."

"When I see you I'll tell you about Mia's latest vision. I'm damn sure that's what it was about. That means everything's tied together, because I don't think she'd be having unrelated episodes, do you?"

"Doesn't sound like it but that's not really my territory. Aunt Vivi could give you a better answer."

"What about getting Mia over there? I sure don't want the media on her tail." He was watching Mia as he spoke. Her hand still worried him. She sat quietly but had the injured hand cradled unconsciously in the other one. If she wouldn't take the pain pills, he'd at least keep a supply of aspirin handy. And make sure she kept taking the antibiotics.

"Faith's leaving here in a few minutes to pick Mia up," Mark told him. "I checked with all our guys and as far as we can tell, no one knows she's staying there with you. Let's not take any chances, though."

They mapped out a brief plan for the handoff and Dan clicked the phone shut and turned back to Mia.

"I saw it," she told him.

He nodded. "You heard me mention it to Mark. The image was too coincidental with what happened not to be some kind of clue. When you meet with Faith's aunt and whoever else she has at her house this morning, I want you to give them every single detail and see if they can help you define it more. Also, ask them if precogs ever have unrelated episodes. Let's make sure we're only dealing with one disaster here."

"All right." She gave him a tiny smile. "I'm all right, Dan. Truly. The flashes take something out of me physically and it's been an exhausting twenty-four hours but I'm really fine."

"You've got a lot of guts," he said, admiring her strength.

"Sometimes that's the only choice we have," she told him.

"All right, Faith's on her way over to the hotel. Mark says we're still under the radar but here's what we'll do anyway."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, you certainly disposed of him. But don't you think it was pretty stupid to leave him like that to be found?"

"I see. Did you want me to call a cab at that hour? And leave a record of it? You were supposed to meet me, remember?"

"I told you I got tied up. Why didn't you pick a better place to meet him, where the body could be concealed? Jesus. Can't you do anything right?"

"Next time you can do the deed and I can do the bitching. How does that sound?"

"No matter. It had to be done. He was collateral damage. We couldn't allow him to go to the police. What did you do with the gun?"

"Ditched it where no one will ever find it. Don't worry."

"I *am* worried. You left a body in plain sight. You know Romeo has to be as pissed as hell that his man got killed. Now security around Oscar will be tighter than ever." There was a sound of disgust. "And God, what a stupid name that is for a sophisticated piece of equipment."

"Well, there's nothing for it now but to move forward with Plan B. And we do have one, remember?"

"All right. Let's put it in motion. And still find a way to get rid of that interfering bitch."

"Trust me. It'll happen."

"The police are probably going to link the murder to the car bomb."

"So what? There's nothing that leads back to us. Relax. By the weekend it will all be over."

"I think this morning would be the most feasible time to put our plan in action."

"Someone will see you go in."

"Maybe. But they won't know it's me."

"They'll panic and reprogram the security around the robot right away."

"Yes but by that time it won't matter. We'll have what we want."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rick Latrobe shook hands with Mark and climbed into the big SUV. He tossed his duffle bag in the backseat but kept his briefcase with him. As Mark wheeled out of the airport, Rick unzipped the leather case and pulled out a file.

"Profiles of the key players in this little drama," he said.

"Why are we just now checking out our clients?" Mark asked. "I thought that was always a requirement before taking on a case."

Rick shuffled the papers, putting them in the order he wanted. "Dan was initially only coming here as an observer because he and Chase are friends. Then the call came

about the threat and he just hot-footed it over here." He shook his head. "But you're right. Protocol always demands a full background check so we don't get into something we can't get out of. Even if it's someone's mother. So. Let's start with the star of the show."

"You checked out Chase?"

"Just because he's a client and a friend of Dan's doesn't mean he gets a pass. Okay, here's what we got. He started the company in a business incubator. You know, one of those things where they provide office space, secretarial help, shared equipment, etc. Until you get the business off the ground."

"So how did he do that?" Mark wanted to know. "He had to be among hordes of people doing the same thing."

"Designed some kind of revolutionary GPS unit, got lucky when someone introduced him to the right government people and that first contract was his springboard. He met Lucas, the man with the smooth mouth, at a seminar and after that it was a fast ride on a roller coaster."

"Lucky. Otherwise he'd still be sitting at his workbench tinkering on his next project, I guess. How about a rundown on his sweet little fiancée. She sure looks like an angel but I wouldn't want to get on her bad side."

They were out of the airport now and heading west on Interstate 10.

"My, my." Rick chuckled. "Feeling a little edgy about her?"

Mark shrugged. "My wife says I have a natural antagonism toward all women except her. Maybe she's right."

Rick slid him a curious glance. "Does that include our little psychic?"

"No, strangely enough. But maybe because Faith gets good vibes from her."

"Well, okay." Rick pulled out a sheet of paper. "You've got good instincts so let's see what's what with her."

Joy Rivers' background gave them little to work with. Born in Colorado. Went to George Washington University where she majored in political science. Good grades, no blemishes on her record, academic or personal.

"How did Chase meet her?" Mark wanted to know.

"She was a senator's aide. Lucas introduced them at a party in DC. He'd just joined Carpenter Techtronics as a partner and it was his job to hustle government and corporate contracts. He insisted Chase had to make a few appearances in the capital."

"You said she *was* a senator's aide. What's she doing now?"

"Living off Chase, as far as we can tell." Rick's voice had a slightly disapproving tone. "According to Dan, where women are concerned, Chase knows more about engineering but I guess it's his choice. She's supposed to be looking into opportunities in Texas since she and Chase got engaged and she moved here." He shrugged. "Who knows. The rap on her in Washington is she's as tough as nails and can be a real bitch but knows her job. I think she's helped a lot with the contacts on this project. Getting

the right people to Friday's festivities."

Mark grinned. "Nice to know my instincts are correct. However, she seems to be completely dedicated to Chase and committed to helping him make Oscar succeed. So her personality is immaterial to me."

Lucas Grant, Rick went on, was a University of Alabama graduate who'd worked for a number of public relations firms before hooking up with Chase. "Our boy has great technology ideas and a great head for business but no skills when it comes to schmoozing and soliciting. Chase met Lucas through mutual friends and offered him a small piece of the Carpenter Technology pie to come on board."

"Personal life?"

"A lot of it. Hot and cold running women. But I guess as long as he does his job no one cares."

Ladd Tolbert, according to the report, was the poster child for dull. Harvard Law graduate, stick-to-the-letter-of-the-law kind of guy. But a demon when it came to writing contracts and enforcing them.

Paul Harrison, the numbers man, who they hadn't met yet, was an unknown quantity. "He's received both a business management and an accounting degree from Stanford University and lives for his numbers. No personal life that we've been able to find except for the very occasional date. He's the one who balances risk with revenue and he's very good at it."

"How come we haven't seen him yet?"

"He stays in his office and counts the money," Rick said, a tiny grin on his face. "Apparently his social skills leave a lot to be desired."

"I guess as long as he's got his hand on the pulse of the bank account, that's all that matters."

"And finally Stan Forbush, the head of the geek squad. Two engineering degrees from the University of Michigan. A loner. Parents still lived in Idaho and he saw them twice a year. No social life to speak of.

"The guy lives with his computers," Rick said, shoving the papers back in the folder. "Some people say he never even goes home. His designs are his children."

"Well, he produced Oscar, which will make Carpenter Techtronics king of the heap after this Friday. So I guess we can't complain too much about his personal habits. They just seem to grow antisocials around here."

They exited the interstate onto the access road and a minute later Mark turned into the entrance to the tall building that housed their client's offices. Ignoring the visitors' parking, Mark pulled around back to the employees parking garage.

"I want to leave the report on Chase until we can discuss him with Dan first, if that's okay with you," Rick said.

"No problem," Mark agreed. "It's his friend."

"Do I get to meet Mia Fleming now?"

"After the meeting with the main players. She's...on an errand with Faith first. Meanwhile, I have some very interesting news about a body that was found at the airport this morning."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan was sure the media had not ferreted out where he was staying, or the fact that Mia was with him but he wasn't taking any chance. Per his instructions, Mia had ridden in the elevator to the second floor and taken the bridge over to the parking garage. He'd picked her up and driven to the third floor, circling twice to make sure no one was tagging them. When he was sure they were clear and no media were sniffing them out, he backed into a fortunately vacant space and waited until Faith pulled up in front of him.

"This feels like real cloak and dagger stuff," Mia tried to joke, unbuckling her seat belt and grabbing her purse.

"Honey, we just don't want to take any chances," Dan reminded her. "I'm not so much worried about anyone attacking you here as I am the media descending on you. Those reporters can ferret out anything. I've set up some security just in case the reporters get wind of things and descend on you there. I didn't want to tell you and get you upset but one of my men called and said it's crazy over there. I had to send extra help."

Mia stared at him. "I hate that you're wasting resources on me when you have killers to catch."

"And I want to make sure you don't become one of their victims." He looked for a moment as if he might be going to kiss her. Instead he backed away a little and settled for simply grazing her cheek softly with the knuckles of his hand. "Go on, now. Get into Faith's car. I'll see you later."

When Mia had made the switch and was settled in the passenger seat next to Faith, she locked her fingers together so the other woman wouldn't see them tremble.

Faith glanced at her as she headed down the exit ramp. "Are you hanging in there okay? Last night was pretty freaky."

"Dan's just worried about the media getting onto me." She gave a short, bitter laugh. "They never leave me alone, you know. I'm San Antonio's resident freak. I'm just so sorry it's making all this trouble for everyone else."

Faith dismissed Mia's concerns with a wave of her hand. "Phoenix will take care of it. This is just nuisance stuff to them. Most of the things they do require absolute secrecy, or at least a good cover story, so they're used to it. They do it all the time. By the way, how's the hand this morning?"

"Much better. Thank you. The doctor said the stitches would dissolve and Dan dressed and bandaged the cut again after I showered. I'll be fine." She sighed. "Just one more problem I'm throwing into the mix."



"Forget about that. Phoenix lives for challenges." She looked over at Mia again. "I'm guessing your gift has made a lot of problems for you personally."

"Part of it is not knowing how to harness it, how to fully interpret the images and visions. I flounder around a lot." She gnawed at her lower lip. "I should have learned my lesson the first time I went to the police. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have kept my mouth shut."

"It is a challenge," Faith agreed. She turned onto a pleasant, tree-lined street of bungalow-style houses. "But I don't think you'd have done anything differently. Like me, I think you're driven by your gift."

"Oh but I understood that you only communicated with Mark."

"That's true. But think what an advantage it is when he's in a hot spot and using any normal type of communications could put his life in danger." She pulled up to the curb in front of a well-kept house with a wide porch and colorful flower beds. "We're here. Ready?"

Mia didn't move. "Faith, I appreciate all you're doing but I'm not so sure about this."

Faith turned to look at Mia. "No one bites, Mia. I promise. The Lotus Circle is a very non-threatening situation. You take what you want. And you'll get the kind of guidance you need to settle your mind."

Mia looked at her then smiled. "You're right. And I really appreciate this. I apologize for not thanking you for setting this up."

"No problem. Come on, now. Aunt Vivi's probably peeking out the window at us."

Mia thought she must have been, indeed, because the front door opened as soon as the two of them stepped onto the porch. She was instantly enveloped in a warm hug.

"You're Mia. I'm so glad to meet you. Come in, come in. Oh, Faith, sweetheart, you're looking better than ever. How's the new book coming?"

"Fine, Aunt Vivi." Faith was laughing.

Vivi Deland passed out hugs like cookies, then shooed them both into the kitchen. Two women were already seated at the round table, smiling expectantly. The kitchen was filled with bright colors and mystical items like sun catchers. A fanciful row of ceramic cats lined the windowsill.

Although the room had a welcoming environment that was almost alive, Mia hung back at the sight of the other women. But Vivi put her arm around her and gently urged her forward.

"Mia, this is Ellie and Susannah. They're members of The Lotus Circle and good friends of mine, who both have precognitive powers. They've struggled with them just like you have. When we met at various workshops and discovered we all had some type of psychic gift, we formed our own little group to help each other harness and refine and understand our abilities."

"We link ourselves to others throughout the world via the internet," Ellie told her,

"We exchange information and broaden our base of assistance."

In the flurry of conversation, Mia found herself seated at the table, a hot cup of lotus tea in front of her. She couldn't help smiling. Vivi made the atmosphere so warm and pleasant. They might have been a group of women discussing the latest best-seller.

"Now," Vivi said, when they were all settled. "Why don't you just give us a history of the visions, what form they take and what your accuracy rating is. We'll go from there."

Sipping at the wonderful tea and nibbling on poppy seed cookies, Mia felt herself relax. More at ease than she'd expected to be, she gave them her entire history. It was hard for her to tell them about her family's reaction, or the many disasters with the police. And of course dealing with the press was a nightmare.

"All right." Susannah took one of her hands. "Defining the images is very difficult and very often you can receive mixed signals. But we're going to give you some hints to help you figure them out."

"Precognitive information comes in many forms." Ellie picked up the thread. "Dreams at night, daydreams, flashes. Even hunches and so-called gut feelings. Sometimes in foreseeing an event, all the different forms are at work. First you have to be aware that there are these various forms. Then, rather than just wait for them to happen, be on the lookout for them."

"Usage sharpens the talent," Susannah said. "The key is not to be afraid of it."

"Like I am," Mia said shyly.

Ellie reached over and touched her hand. "Like we all were in the beginning."

"The main point," Susannah continued, "is to use it, not try to block it." Her face sobered. "Even if it's predicting unhappy or unpleasant events."

"There's no quick fix for this but we're going to show you how to do certain mental exercises. You can't actually control the power but you *can* learn to rewind the image. Meditate. Clear your mind. Then try to bring the vision back to you in greater detail. Clearing the mind of all extraneous thoughts is very important. When the mind is clear, something will act as a trigger for the image.

"So it takes a little extra work, Mia. But you can learn to do it. Learn to pick out surface patterns and discard the rest. Concentrate on your other senses and they will help you to connect the visions."

By the time they'd talked her through two meditation sessions, to clear her mind and focus on one of the visions she'd had, Mia was exhausted emotionally and mentally.

"I think that's enough for today," Vivi said at last, noting Mia's pale face. "Just remember it's important to keep your mind as clear as possible so when the visions come to you they'll be sharper and more defined. And we're here whenever you need help." She pressed a folded piece of paper in Mia's hand. "Our telephone numbers. Call us any time. We're also in contact with people all over the world who have special

gifts." She grinned. "Computers are a wonderful thing."

"So if we don't have the answer," Ellie added, "someone else might."

"We need to get going," Faith told them, pushing back from the table. "I have to deliver Mia to the meeting at Carpenter Techtronics and somehow manage to avoid the media while we're doing it."

"Do you think we can do that?" Mia's forehead creased in a worried frown.

"If we follow Mark's instructions, I think we'll be fine."

"Remember, Mia," Aunt Vivi told her. "We're here if you need us. Call any time." She hugged both Mia and Faith.

"Thank you," Mia said softly. "Thank you more than you know."

## **Chapter Eleven**

Once again the atmosphere in the Carpenter Techtronics conference room was hostile and edgy. Except for Ladd Tolbert, who was always a quiet presence, Dan thought everyone at the table looked like candidates for caffeine rehab.

Chase, dressed in hastily donned jeans and Carpenter t-shirt was pacing as usual. His hair was ruffled from raking his fingers through it and a muscle jumped constantly in his cheek. Jittery would have been too mild an adjective.

Lady Joy, as Dan had taken to calling her, was perfectly put together in a hot pink pantsuit, not a hair or smidgen of makeup out of place. But in contrast to her angelic appearance, her entire contribution so far had been to repeat frequently, "Oh, Chase, for Christ's sake, sit down. You're making me dizzy."

Ladd, dressed in his customary three-piece dark gray suit, sat at one end of the table trying to calm Lucas, who was ranting and raving about media coverage, loss of contracts and why the hell did Dan wake them up at some god-awful hour to find out if they were alive or dead?

"Please don't tell me your little psycho told you someone was after us." Ladd twisted his lips in a grimace. "Enough is enough."

Dan thanked his Marine training for allowing him to hold onto his temper. "As it turns out, fortunately none of you were shot. But a body's turned up that may be connected to the car bombing."

Chase stopped his pacing. "What do you mean? Whose body? What does he have to do with us?"

"I'm going to let Mark give you all the details as soon as he gets here. He talked to his contact at the SAPD and got all the information they had. But make no mistake. Mia got a clear message and I'd have been remiss if I didn't check on everyone's safety."

"Are we supposed to wait around all day for Mark?" Joy demanded. "Exactly when will he be here?"

"Right now." Mark walked into the room accompanied by another man and moved to one side of the table. "This is Rick Latrobe," he said and the man with him gave a brief nod. "Another one of the Phoenix partners. He'll be participating in the process too."

"I'm glad to see you're bringing in more help," Lucas said. "Oscar's well-being is primary. And we can't have people running around trying to steal him or disrupt Friday's presentation in any other way. We have big bucks riding on this."

"What's this rumor about a body?" Ladd asked. "And what does it have to do with us?"

"It's no rumor," Mark answered. He gave them a concise report on Nate Wilson, his history and the discovery of his body. "The police are convinced someone hired him to blow up Mia's car, preferably with her in it. Someone who doesn't want any more of her visions involved in this situation."

"It seems a somewhat stupid thing to do," Dan commented. "If everyone looks at her visions with such skepticism, putting her in the spotlight like this defeats the purpose of negating her."

"Maybe she blew it up herself," Joy put in, hate glittering in her eyes. "You know, to convince us someone believes her and wants her out of the way. For all we know, she's doing this to get publicity for herself." She flipped her ponytail. "Just the kind Chase needs the least."

For the hundredth time Dan asked himself what it was that Chase saw in this woman. They were such complete opposites—the engineer who thought pressing his pants was dressing up and the blonde angel with the she-devil personality who had her evil eye cast on the top rung of Chase's money ladder. *She must be some dynamo in bed.* Hell, a woman like her would have to be to keep any sane man interested.

"Don't you think that would be carrying things a little too far, Miss Rivers?" Dan couldn't keep the hint of sarcasm out of his voice. "And I hardly think Mia Fleming would blow up her car with someone in it just to give validity to what she says. Whatever you may think of her, she's not a killer. She's very upset that someone was murdered in her place."

"I still can't believe anyone really takes her mumbo jumbo that seriously," Joy continued, her voice disdainful. "I work with facts and the fact is, Oscar is safe and sound. No one's tried to sneak him out of here. End of discussion, so let's cut out all this bullshit and get on with business."

Dan waited a long moment before answering, forcing a calm and quiet into his voice that he was far from feeling. "Apparently someone does take her seriously, someone who either believes in psychic abilities or doesn't want to take the chance that others do. Especially if they're involved with Carpenter Techtronics and, I hate to say it but we can't discount the possibility it's someone involved with this company."

"That's ridiculous." Chase's voice was raspy. "I'd say it's much more likely to be someone outside the company. If Oscar disappears before Friday, everyone here will be in bad shape because Carpenter Techtronics will take a big hit. We've got a lot invested in this project. No one's going to jeopardize that."

"I think someone *wants* you to think a Carpenter employee is involved," Lucas interjected. "The whole thing is just too obvious. Too staged. Don't you think we'd be smart enough to be a little more subtle about it?"

"We're not passing up any options," Dan told him. "That's one of the reasons Rick is here. We'll be communicating with our home office as we work through all possibilities but we have to look at all Carpenter employees, at least to eliminate them."

"You might try checking out our enemies too," Chase pointed out. "We certainly

have enough of them. There are plenty of people who are envious of our success. People who don't want Oscar to succeed."

"People who'd be happy to take down Carpenter Techtronics," Joy added. "I think you'd better start looking there first. I may not be a partner in this company but I have just as much a vested interest. Chase tells me you people are the best at what you do. Maybe you should start doing it."

Rick tensed. "I think you'll be more than satisfied with our investigation, Miss Rivers. I understand research was a big part of your job as a senatorial aide. Well, that's what we do to find the answers. Research."

"How do you know so much about me?"

He opened his briefcase and reached inside to pull out the folder he stashed there. "I know about *all* of you. Client profiles are part of our business procedures."

Chase's face turned an unpleasant shade of red and anger flashed on the faces of the others.

"Dan?" Chase's voice hinted at a sense of betrayal. "I thought we were friends, buddy. Now you've got your agency investigating my people and accusing us of crimes?"

"I'll answer that," Rick said. "Chase, we do this with everyone, even members of our own family. We don't want any surprises coming out of the closet. It's for your own protection as well as ours." He snapped his briefcase shut. "Of course, if you're unsatisfied with the way we work, you're free to pay our expenses to date and we'll leave you to it."

"No. Hey, wait a sec." Chase was pacing again. He stopped in front of Dan. "We're all just a little over the top here. The contracts riding on Oscar will put us in clover for years to come. Plus establish us in an elite cadre of electronics companies."

"Wait a minute," Joy interrupted. "Where's Stan? Why isn't Oscar's daddy at this meeting?"

"I'll check." Lucas picked up the phone on the sideboard and punched in three numbers. He stood there, jingling the change in his pocket, waiting for an answer. Irritated, he hung up and dialed again. Finally he banged the receiver back into the cradle. "He's not answering. I'm calling Security to get him out of his office and haul his ass up here. He needs to know what's going on too."

"Is anyone doing anything about the media circus out front?" Ladd asked while they waited. "Our men are having a tough time holding them off."

"As soon as we're finished with this meeting," Dan told him, "I'm taking two of our men from the team working inside the building right now and we'll get it taken care of. Meanwhile we need to discuss the plan for the next three days."

The door opened and everyone looked at it expectantly, thinking it was Stan. But instead Faith and Mia entered. They quietly went to a corner of the room and sat down away from the conference table.

"What's *she* doing here?" Joy snapped. "We already have enough trouble with the media because of her. Can you imagine what they'll say if they see her here again?"

"No one saw us come in," Faith said quietly. "I had Mia duck down in the car and we came in through the private parking garage."

At that moment the phone in the conference room rang. Ladd picked it up, murmured a few words, then turned with a shocked look on his face.

"That was Security. You aren't going to believe this. Stan's dead. Someone's killed him."

"He was stabbed, wasn't he?" Mia asked in a shaky voice.

"Yes." Ladd frowned. "How did you know that?"

But Mia never answered him. She simply folded over in the chair and slid to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The chaos was giving Dan a headache. Normally a man in complete control of everything, it frustrated him that the situation seemed to be slipping out of his grasp. Somehow word of Stan's grisly demise had spread throughout the building. Every floor was alive with gossip and his Phoenix staff was being bombarded with questions. Containing them was almost an impossibility. He thanked God for Mark and Rick, who began assigning available Phoenix personnel to each floor for containment purposes.

And especially Faith, God bless her, who took charge of Mia. She'd had the good sense to shoo him away, when all he'd really wanted to do was to stay with Mia. Faith reminded him that he needed to get the hell down to Stan's office to take control of the situation and any crucial evidence that might be found.

"She'll be fine," Faith assured him. "Go. I can handle this."

When he left she had Mia stretched out on the floor, her feet propped up on the rung of a chair. She'd grabbed the pitcher of water from the sideboard and a cloth and was bathing Mia's face. He paused one more time but Faith shouted, "Go. You're needed."

He nodded once, then forced himself to leave before he couldn't. He followed the sound of pounding feet down the hallway and around a corner to where Stan's office was located. The security guard who'd found him was stationed at the door to the inner office. Rick had made himself a human barricade, not allowing anyone into the room.

"We've called the police," he kept repeating. "You can look but don't come in. We have to preserve all the evidence."

He stood aside when Dan arrived and showed him the bloody sight inside. And bloody was definitely the word for it. Someone had stuck a fourteen-inch carving knife in Stan Forbush's chest, cut off his thumb and gouged out an eyeball, then replanted the knife in his body. Dan had seen a lot of horrors in his years in the Marines and in many of the missions he'd been on for Phoenix, but he felt his stomach roil at the scene before

him.

Stan had bled profusely. His desk was literally covered with it and it had spurted and dripped everywhere around him.

"Jesus Christ." Ladd peered between Rick and Dan. "Somebody really butchered the poor bastard."

Dan had finally managed to herd everyone back out into the hallway. He closed the door to Stan's office. "No one needs to go in there. We'll wait right here for the police."

Meanwhile, Mark had pulled out his cell and called his contact at the SAPD. He looked grim when he snapped the phone shut. "They'll be here in fifteen minutes," he told everyone. "Crime scene unit, the works. Captain Alan Holcomb, head of the major crimes unit is a friend of mine. He's coming himself because Carpenter Techtronics is such a high profile entity. So that means no one goes into this office and no one touches anything until they get here."

"Has anyone thought about why Stan's thumb and eyeball were taken?" Chase asked.

Everyone stared at each other with blank looks.

Then Lucas snapped his fingers. "Jesus Christ. Of course. The biometrics."

"Someone may have already tried to use them," Chase said, already moving down the hall. They could hear him cursing as he ran.

Lucas raced behind him with Rick right on their heels.

"We set up three layers of security around Oscar," Dan told Mark. "The first two only require being authenticated by the guards. But to get into the clean room where Oscar's stored, we have a biometric identification system that I set up for us for previous projects. That one requires a thumb print and a retinal scan."

Mark stared at him. "You think someone's going to try using Stan's physical ID to get into the room? But we have guards down there. How would anyone get past them?"

"The body was discovered shortly after nine. We don't know yet what time the kill took place. Whoever it was would have had to move quickly. People start coming to work here at eight."

But before Mark could say anything else, Rick was back, grim-faced. He motioned to his partner.

"You'd better come see this, Dan."

Any time Rick used his full given name, Dan knew it meant serious trouble.

"Stay here and keep people away from the crime scene," he told Mark. "I'll be right back."

The Phoenix security guards at both the inner and middle entrances were sprawled on the floor, the doors to the two rooms standing wide open. Chase was already in the "clean" room, removing Oscar from his cage.

Rick knelt beside one of the guards, checking him over. "Strong pulse," he said, his



finger on the man's carotid artery, "and no sign of a wound that I can see. Not even a knot on the head."

"I don't see how one person could disable four guards at the same time," Dan remarked. "These guys are too well trained."

Rick used a pen from his pocket to lift an empty coffee cup lying on the floor beside one of the men. "Where did this come from?"

"The cafeteria brings coffee twice to each shift change," Dan told him. "Chase set that up when we brought the team in." He looked around and spotted three more cups at various spots they'd rolled to.

"So someone posing as a cafeteria employee brought them drugged coffee?" Rick frowned.

"Has to be." A muscle jumped in Dan's cheek. "It's the only answer. It provided a very small window of opportunity to get in, switch the robot and get out."

"Why switch? Why not just take it?"

"Because I think the plan depends on our not believing the robot was actually stolen. That's why Chase is running a demonstration. If this is the real Oscar, it means we disrupted the operation in time."

"Well," Rick sighed, "we can try to get one of our men to ID someone but I think it's a waste of time. This wouldn't be anyone who could be recognized. Too chancy."

He reached into an inside jacket pocket, pulled out three baggies and sealed the cups in them.

"Never leave home without them." He grinned at Dan's questioning look.

Chase was heading past them, Oscar cradled in his arms, Lucas right beside him.

"I'm going to run another test, just to be sure someone didn't leave me with a very good but useless replica."

"Let's do it in the lab," Lucas suggested. "We don't have time to take it off the corporate campus again and it will give us a good test of Oscar's ability to penetrate metal. I'll call the team leader and get everyone going." He had his cell phone out and was already talking in it as he ran down the hall.

"Find who did this," Chase said to Dan in an angry voice, then took off after Lucas.

The men on the floor were beginning to come around. As they pulled themselves to sitting positions and realized what happened, the expressions on their faces alternated between humiliation and terror at the reaction of their boss.

"This is our fault," Dan told them. "Not yours. We didn't expect drugged coffee, so I'll take the fall this time. But we *are* expected to be alert at all times. Keep the security tightly in place. Keep that in mind from now on."

"Mr. Romeo, I..." one of the men began.

"I have to get back to the conference room. The police will be here any minute." He turned to Rick. "You get every scrap of information from them you can. Once Oscar's

back in place, their lives will depend on how well they guard him. I don't care if they never have another cup of coffee."

"Got it," Rick told him and turned back to the men.

Dan stopped in the hall and speed-dialed Andy.

"You have reached the Dragonslayer," was the greeting he heard.

"Well, get busy slaying him. I want you to do a search for any company going head to head with Carpenter Techtronics. Anyone who might be arrogant enough or desperate enough to buy off a company employee for a little industrial espionage."

"And you need this yesterday, I'm guessing."

"Sooner than that. Before someone else gets killed." He hung up before Andy could pepper him with questions.

As Dan reached the reception area the elevator doors opened and four men and three woman in suits emerged, followed by a photographer and two people in crime scene coveralls.

"I'm Captain Holcomb," one of the men said. He was short and stocky, with short, graying brown hair. His dark brown eyes, however, were shrewd and he gave an impression of great power. "And you are?"

"Dan Romeo. CEO of Phoenix Agency."

The men shook hands. The captain's grip was strong and just as no-nonsense as his appearance.

"I expected to see Mark here," the captain said.

"He's guarding the crime scene. Too many sightseers. We have another one of our partners here, also," Dan told him. "Rick Latrobe. We had an incident in the area where the robot is kept and he's holding down the fort there."

"An incident?" Holcomb's eyebrows rose.

"Someone's made some careful plans to steal that new toy. We think we short-stopped it in time but Chase is running a test just to be sure. You'll be able to watch them run it as soon as you do what you need to here."

Holcomb grunted. "As soon as the media get wind of this, you'll have another problem. I left plenty of uniforms downstairs, just in case but we need to get things under control here right this minute."

They'd reached the conference room now and Dan showed them inside. Faith had obviously revived Mia, gotten her some tea from somewhere and now the two of them were sitting quietly in a corner. Mia still looked pale and her hands trembled just the slightest bit. Ladd and Joy were waiting with angry impatience, while one of the Phoenix security men stood by as a silent sentinel.

A lanky blond-haired man in khakis and polo shirt whose face Dan had never seen before stepped forward.

"Paul Harrison," he explained, shaking hands with both Dan and Holcomb. "The

company's money overseer. I usually hide out in my office. However, when I heard what happened to Stan, thought I should introduce myself and see if there's anything I can do to help."

Ladd moved up next to him. "Ladd Tolbert," he told Holcomb. "Attorney for Carpenter Techtronics as well as Chase's personal legal representative."

Holcomb glanced over at Joy, sitting in her chair as if she was holding court. "And you would be?"

"Joy Rivers." Her chin lifted slightly. "Mr. Carpenter's fiancée."

Holcomb looked at where Mia and Faith were sitting and a sour look washed over his face. "Well, Miss Fleming, we meet again."

"Captain." She nodded at him, her own face a mask.

Everyone in the room felt the tension erupt between them.

Holcomb turned to Dan. "What's she doing here?" he snapped.

"She's been a big help to us," Dan told him in a firm tone. "She actually sent the first warnings that there might be a theft. And by the way, I'm sure you know it's *Dr. Fleming*."

"She did, huh?" Holcomb turned to her again. "A word of advice, *Dr. Fleming*. Don't muddy my case with your hocus pocus this time. Leave things to the professionals."

"As you can tell," she told Dan in a bitter voice, "Captain Holcomb and I are acquainted."

"Let me handle this," he said quietly and turned to the policeman. "Captain, I don't know your history with *Dr. Fleming* but someone took her involvement with this particular situation seriously enough to try to kill her. I know you're aware of the car bombing. It was her car that was destroyed. So there are obviously people out there—and this time someone connected to this case—who think she can provide information they don't want getting out."

"Think what you like." Holcomb's voice held an edge of anger. "I work with facts."

He turned away from Dan and introduced the people with him as the detectives on his squad.

"I've brought all seasoned people with me," he assured them. "Including the Crime Scene Unit right behind me here. I know the attention a high profile case like this will draw." He paused and looked at each person in turn. "First thing we've got to do is hit everyone in this building before anyone has a chance to slip away." He motioned to his people. "I want each floor locked down and people sequestered in a single room on their floor. They won't like it but it has to be done. No matter how much they complain, don't let them leave until I say so."

"I have more men here who can help you," Dan told him. "We just had extra men flown in last night and they've been containing the population of each floor. Just tell them what you want them to do."

Holcomb nodded his head once. "Thanks. I'll take that help. Detective Solomon here," he pointed to the man, "will be your contact. Round up your people and let's get started."

He took a pair of latex gloves from his pocket, pulled them on and motioned to the CSU. "All right. Someone point us toward the office where the body is. Let's see what we've got."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark greeted Holcomb, giving him what information he had and headed back to the conference room. So did Rick, having thoroughly chewed out his men and pried every scrap of information out of their brains. They short-stopped all questions until Dan walked back in.

"Holcomb's doing his job and the demonstration will be ready to go in ten minutes, according to Chase."

"Where is Chase?" Joy demanded.

"Setting up another run-through for Oscar. He wants to make sure the robot didn't get switched while the guards were down."

"What?" She looked at him, astonished. "What guards? The ones watching Oscar?"

"Yes." He swallowed his impatience. Joy Rivers pushed every one of his buttons. "I'll let Chase tell you himself as soon as he gets back up here. Captain Holcomb has the crime scene well in hand, so meanwhile we all need to stay as calm as possible. And hope none of this has leaked to the media. The car bombing was bad enough."

Ladd, showing the first signs of strain took out a snowy handkerchief and mopped the fine sheen of perspiration on his forehead. "Jesus, the media. I thought it was bad before. They'll storm the building."

Mark shook his head. "Holcomb knows that. He told me he's already dispatched cruisers to set up barricades and move people away from the building."

Joy, looking only the slightest bit pale, commented, "Between the murder and the psycho we'll be the hit of the tabloids and the six o'clock news."

Dan's famous control frayed. "Mia Fleming is a psychic, not a psycho, Miss Rivers. If you can't refer to her appropriately, don't refer to her at all." He turned to Ladd. "Since Chase isn't here, can you explain to Miss Rivers the importance of not making irresponsible remarks?"

Something flashed in her eyes, something Dan couldn't quite define. Anger? Resentment? But she managed to sound contrite when she spoke. "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so worried for Chase. None of this is doing him or the company any good. Please forgive me for anything I've said that's inappropriate."

Ladd gave her a tight smile. "She's just a little anxious like the rest of us. With the big day coming up this Friday and everything focused on that, she and Chase decided to ditch the arrangements for a big wedding. They have plans to get married as soon as

they get past the weekend. It'll be just a small ceremony but I know they'd like you to be there, Dan." He put away his handkerchief. "Then they're off for two weeks to a private island."

"Of course you're invited," Joy said in a clipped voice. "But I'm sure you're much too busy to bother with something like that."

*In other words, don't bother showing up.*

Dan frowned at her. "But won't there be a lot of follow-up? Contracts to complete? Others to negotiate? Production schedules to set up?"

"Lucas takes care of the schmoozing, Paul does the financials and I handle the contracts." His eyes suddenly looked sad. "Stan would have set up production. I guess we'll have to rethink that now."

"All right." Dan looked around the room at everyone. "Here's the situation."

He explained in concise sentences what had happened and informed them Chase and Lucas were at that moment setting up to test Oscar again.

"So you think the coffee was doctored?" Ladd asked.

"It's the only answer. Rick gave the cups to Holcomb and he had someone run them to the SAPD lab with an order for urgency."

"It wasn't one of our people," Joy snapped at once.

"This time I have to agree with you," Dan told her. "Too much chance of being recognized. That means someone, somehow, got into the building, got a cafeteria worker's uniform and managed to get four drugged cups of coffee up here without anyone stopping them. An outside person could do that but not without a lot of extra planning."

"Are you saying it's one of our people?" Joy's tone was defensive.

"I'm saying we have to look at all possibilities."

"And we're already doing that," Holcomb told them, walking back into the room. "Mark, can you reach Chase and ask him how soon they'll be ready to start?"

"Better for Dan to do it. He's in charge here."

Dan picked up the conference room phone and punched in three numbers. When someone answered on the other end, he spoke quietly, nodded and hung up. "Ten minutes."

In exactly ten minutes Chase jogged into the conference room, out of breath. "Okay. We're good to go."

Joy rose and went to put her arms around him. "Come and sit down, baby. You'll have a stroke if you don't get control of yourself."

"I know, I know. But Jesus, Joy. You know what's at stake here."

"And everything will be fine. Come on. Sit down with me." She looped her arm through his and guided him to a chair beside her at the table.

Lucas came in, lowered the lights and turned on the flat screen monitor. "Seats,

everyone."

Holcomb, Dan, Mark and Rick chose to stand against the far wall while the others sat. In a moment, a picture appeared on the screen.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well." Chase blew out the breath he'd been holding. "At least we know we got to Oscar before anyone else did. He's working just fine."

"I'd say you all were on top of things before they had time to put the rest of their plan into play," Holcomb told them. "Good work, everyone. And by the way, that was a hell of an impressive demonstration. I want to make sure our chief is here Friday for the big festivities."

"He's on the guest list," Lucas assured him. "I hope he'll be one of our first customers."

Chase pushed back his chair. "I'd better get Oscar back in his cage right away."

Lucas put a hand on his shoulder. "Sit for a few minutes. Joy's right. You're strung as tight as a high wire. I'll get Oscar settled and be sure he's locked up properly."

"I can promise you our men will be guarding him better than their own mothers," Dan assured him. "They don't like being taken advantage of the way they were. It makes them cranky and twice as vigilant."

"I certainly hope so," Joy snapped. Then she leaned over and brushed a lock of hair from Chase's forehead. "Lucas is right, sweetie. Just let him take care of things. Take a deep breath, okay?"

Chase slumped back in his chair. "Fine. But I want a look at Oscar after he's in place."

"No problem. We'll do that later."

"I think one of our men should go with you, Lucas," Dan suggested. "Someone with a nasty agenda is still roaming around."

"I'll be fine." He lifted his shirt to show the gun at the small of his back. "I've been carrying it since the car bombing."

"I'm going back to Forbush's office," Holcomb told them. "I'd appreciate it if you'd all stay here until I get back." He turned to Dan. "Except you. I think it would help if you were with me." Lastly he looked at Mia. "And nothing from you, you hear?"

She simply looked back at him without saying a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later the crime scene people were still at work in Stan's office. Holcomb's detectives and the Phoenix people were working their way from floor to floor, questioning everyone from the company security people to the janitorial service. Each floor was in lockdown, which didn't make anyone very happy.

The person who got the gold star for the day, as far as Dan was concerned, was the Carpenter Techtronics receptionist who fielded the hundreds of calls without turning a hair. He wondered what it would take to hire her away, since Phoenix was about to lose their own wonderful person to her husband's relocation.

"I'm surprised you don't have the cleaning service come in at night when no one's working," Holcomb remarked, his eyes fixed on Chase. "That seems more logical to me. No disturbances."

"We do. But Stan's so damn secretive about his work and so nervous about someone getting into his stuff he won't let them into his area except during the day. Then he can put things away and keep an eye on them. He was always here much later than the rest of us, anyway. I think he worried about being attacked."

"Apparently with good reason," Mark said in a dry voice.

"I'd like to see the body." Mia had been sitting quietly in the corner, drinking coffee Faith had poured for her. Some color had finally returned to her face.

"Ah, yes. Dr. Fleming." Holcomb stared at her, his face impassive. "I thought we'd be having a conversation about that."

Almost casually Dan moved to position himself next to Mia. The protective warrior in place.

*Do you feel the connection, Dan? I do. It's there and it scares me, that we bonded so quickly. You're a lone wolf, with the power to hurt me. But what can I do? I've already lost my heart to you. And here you are, taking care of me in a way no one ever has before.*

She shifted in her chair to move closer to him and saw Holcomb narrow his eyes suspiciously.

"I'm gathering your relationship with Dr. Fleming is somewhat adversarial?" Dan asked, his voice carefully uninflected.

"Captain Holcomb and I have a less than...beneficial relationship," Mia said, tension radiating from her body.

*Stay with me, Dan. I need your strength this time.*

Holcomb turned his gaze to her. "You led us a merry chase one too many times, Dr. Fleming." His mouth was set in a grim line, his eyes cold. "Wasted time and resources."

"But I've helped you a lot too," she protested. "And I've always been up front that my visions aren't a hundred percent."

"That's a fact," he grunted.

"But they're hints that can't be ignored."

Dan squeezed her shoulder. "In my opinion, I don't think we can discount her input. If she wasn't heading in the right direction in this instance, no one would have tried to kill her by blowing up her car. Then whoever it was went to enough trouble to get rid of the bomber, trying to tie up any loose ends. That definitely means she's making someone nervous."

"We haven't proved yet that Nate Wilson was the bomber," Holcomb objected.

"Come on, Captain," Dan protested. "You don't think it's all a little too coincidental? And her having a vision of someone getting shot about the same time he was taking two taps to the head?"

"I'm still not willing to let her compromise a crime scene," Holcomb bit back.

"Please," she begged. "I won't disturb anything. I know what to do. If I can just touch him I might be able to help you."

"Mia, that's a pretty gruesome scene," Mark put in. "I don't know if you want to subject yourself to that."

"I can handle it." She set her jaw in a stubborn line.

"Let me think about it. We have other things to take care of first. Like who would have access to Forbush's office without being detected or seeming out of place?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Detective Steve Aragon and his partner, Cliff Wallace, had taken a crime scene tech with them to Nate Wilson's apartment. Their orders were to go through it from corner-to-corner and wall-to-wall.

The building itself was on the edge of South San Antonio and had seen its best days before either man had been born. The superintendent who lived on the premises was vocally unhappy about being awakened to unlock doors for them.

Aragon shrugged. "We can break them down if you'd rather." He looked at his partner. "Let's see, Cliff. What do you figure a new door costs these days?"

"All right, all right," the super grumbled. "God, a man can't even get a decent night's sleep these days."

But when he opened the door to join them on the walkway, the two detectives could see a chunky brunette in a flowered robe leaning against a doorway. She was holding a glass of something and watching them with avid interest.

*Yeah, right. A decent night's sleep.* Aragon snorted.

Besides the fact that it could use a good cleaning crew to scrape away the filth, the apartment was a sad commentary on the life of the man who'd lived in it. Cheap, used furniture. A small television set. Pantry cupboards filled with as much cheap booze as food. A stack of mail, some unopened, lay on the scarred table in the kitchenette. Wallace dumped it in a plastic baggie to take with them.

Going through the piles of dirty laundry — a task they flipped a coin for — yielded an assortment of scraps of paper and notes on cocktail napkins. Again, they bagged it all to take with them.

"No telephone," Cliff pointed out.

"People like him would rather operate by cell phone. Less traceable, especially if they use throwaways. They can keep changing numbers."

"I saw a receipt from Wal-Mart in with all this junk. That's probably where he got



them."

"We'll have to see if Wal-Mart can give us the numbers, then get a warrant to dump the calls. Not too likely, though. I hate these disposables."

"The lab already has the one we found in his jacket. They can scroll through it and see if they can find calls in or out. The dumb son-of-a-bitch who shot him somehow didn't think to take it."

"We'll be lucky if we get anything usable," Aragon said. "Nate was sly and crafty. He probably erased any trace of calls as soon as they were completed."

"Yeah," his partner agreed, "but at this point we gotta try anything."

"We've got uniforms doing a canvass on the street and the other apartments. Also at the airport. Maybe we'll get lucky and someone saw something. Or remembers who he was with lately."

"Maybe. All right," Cliff said. "I think we're done here." He looked at the tech. "Get all the pictures you need?"

"Yup. They'll make a nice addition to my collection. Places I wouldn't be caught dead in."

All three men laughed, although not with much humor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan announced they'd be reprogramming the biometric ID system at once and asked for a quiet place to work.

"We've proven that Oscar's security wasn't breached," Ladd pointed out. "Is it still necessary to change the system? Can't we just eliminate Stan from the program?"

"No." Dan had his cell phone out and was already punching in numbers. "We set the system up a particular way. In order not to compromise it and allow someone to hack in and replace one set of biometrics with another, you have to take down the whole system to reprogram it."

"Leaving Oscar vulnerable during that time," Joy pointed out, her attitude back in place. "Keep in mind that it's Chase's neck on the line here."

Dan had never wanted to strangle a woman as much as he did this one. "Hardly. Oscar is tightly guarded and in a locked case. My men watched Lucas replace him personally. Whoever has that thumb and eyeball lost the only opportunity to use it. But I'm still not taking any chances."

He turned to speak into his phone again.

"I guess Dan's right," Ladd told Rick. "What a mess, though."

Dan disconnected his call. "We'll be starting on it in a few moments. While we're doing this, no one except my men goes near Oscar. Are we clear on that?"

"Surely you don't think one of us is involved," Joy snapped.

"You asked the same question earlier, Miss Rivers and I believe I answered it then."

However, if you need me to repeat what I said, we can't write anyone off yet. That includes you and every other member of Carpenter Techtronics who has daily access to this building." Dan kept his tone level. "The first thing we have to do is eliminate everyone from Carpenter so we can focus on other possibilities."

Holcomb had stepped out into the reception area for a discussion with two of his detectives. They reported there had been no extraneous people on the executive floor since midnight except the janitorial service. Each of them had been questioned thoroughly. They'd even been luminoled for possible traces of blood on their hands or clothing. The techs had found nothing.

"No one could have left either," Chase pointed out. "You had someone checking the elevators right away and the fire doors sound an alarm when they're opened."

"What about someone coming in from outside?" Holcomb asked.

Lucas shook his head. "Those exit doors were locked from the outside. We can release them electronically in case of emergency but if someone tries to open one otherwise, an alarm goes off."

"So." Holcomb looked around the room. "No one out, no one in. That doesn't leave a lot of choices."

"Whoever it was could have slipped into the elevator when no one was paying attention and be long gone now," Joy pointed out.

Holcomb said nothing, just pulled out his little notebook and resumed his questioning with dogged determination. Did Stan have enemies? Did he get along with the other members of the staff? Was industrial espionage a possibility?

"As soon as CSU is finished in there, we'll need someone to tell us if anything was taken."

"You mean besides his thumb and eyeball?" Joy shuddered.

"I vouch for everyone on my staff," Chase exploded. "They're all carefully vetted. And the people around this table shouldn't even be on any suspect list. For anything."

"We have to explore every possibility," Holcomb said quietly.

And on and on and on. At one point Lucas called the cafeteria to order sandwiches and drinks sent up.

"We'll get them up as quickly as we can," the cafeteria manager told him in a harried voice. "They won't let anyone leave the building so we gotta feed the whole staff."

Lucas made appropriately sympathetic noises. "Just do the best you can."

Rick took his laptop into Chase's office where he linked it to the Dragon back at Phoenix headquarters. Then he began the process of reprogramming the biometric ID system. He entered each of the principals one at a time, registering fingerprints and retinal scans. In less than an hour he was done.

While they were waiting for the food to be delivered and for their turn to be scanned, Chase flipped on the big plasma television on the wall to catch the newscast.

"Well, shit," Lucas said, looking at the screen.

A reporter from one of the local channels was doing a standup in front of their building, with a jumble of cars, vans and televisions units spread out behind her. Massed in and around them were enough people that the street was thoroughly clogged. Uniformed patrolmen were working overtime to keep people behind the barriers.

"And this reporter has learned that not only was the body found this morning that of the notorious bomber-for-hire Nate Wilson but he also may have been the one responsible for blowing up Mia Fleming's car at the art museum. Rumor has it that Ms. Fleming predicted Wilson's murder and also that of Carpenter Techtronics' engineer Stan Forbush. Dr. Fleming's reputation is viewed with skepticism by the local police. What will they make of her predictions now? Back after this announcement."

"Fuck." Chase picked up a coffee cup and threw it against the wall, the splinters falling soundlessly to the carpet.

"She's going to be a real problem, Chase." Joy looped her arms through his and tried to pull him aside. "I knew it was a mistake to bring her in here." She turned to Dan, eyes blazing now. "What kind of company do you run that you use this kind of lunatic? All it's doing is make us look like a laughingstock. Think of our reputation."

Dan took a moment before answering her. "Miss Rivers. Chase and I have known each other for a long time. He knows what kind of company Phoenix is or he never would have called me to begin with. We're the best there is. And psychics with varying types of gifts have long been known to be helpful in many investigations. Even the military is experimenting with using them."

"I don't want her here."

The devil beneath the angel was flowing red. Dan had seldom seen such animosity except in war. While he searched for the right words to defuse the situation, Chase stepped in.

"Honey." He dropped a kiss on Joy's forehead. "Just chill, okay? Dan knows what he's doing. I appreciate how you feel and God knows without you I don't think I'd have made it these last weeks. But Mia has definitely been a help. Without her we wouldn't even know there is a problem and wouldn't be preparing ourselves. So let's not write her off if we don't have to."

The food arrived at that moment, for which Dan heaved a sigh of relief, but almost no one had any appetite.

The CSU stopped at the door to tell them they could get into the office if they walked carefully. Holcomb and Rick took Chase and Lucas to see if anything had been removed. After checking drawers and cabinets and Stan's computer, they both agreed nothing looked disturbed.

"Stan was a fanatic about his stuff," Chase said. "If someone had so much as turned on his monitor or 'borrowed' any of the binders on the bookshelf we'd know it."

Faith sat quietly with Mia, watching the proceedings, catching Mark's eye now and

then. At one point Joy stood up from the table and announced she'd had enough and was leaving. Chase rose also, speaking to her in a low voice, rubbing her arms, stroking her chin, turning her into him and away from the others in the room.

At length she settled down, dropping into her seat with an irritated expression on her face, attempting to ignore everyone. Once again Dan thought to himself what a strange relationship it was between those two.

"If you will just let me into the office," Mia tried again during a temporary halt in the questioning, "I might be able to get an image of something."

Holcomb gnawed on his moustache for a moment. "Dr. Fleming. You seem pretty positive that this time you're on the right track. I'd hate to shut you down if this is one of the times you can really help us. Will you try something for me first?"

Mia looked at him suspiciously. "What?"

He pulled an envelope from his pocket and removed six photos from it. "Come sit over her next to me, please."

She turned to Dan, her eyes questioning.

"Go on," he whispered. "Play his game."

She settled herself in the indicated chair, hands folded.

"I've been told that true precognitives can tell something just from touching photos," Holcomb said. "Has that happened to you before?"

"Yes but—"

"Then let's do a little test here, okay? No offense but I don't want to get burned again. Not with all that media waiting outside to chew us up."

"Fine." She lifted a hand and tucked a strand of hair behind one ear. "Let's do it."

In the end, Dan had to work hard not to laugh. Every photo Holcomb pulled out was a fake, a setup for a Homeland Security disaster drill. And his little psychic nailed them all.

"Are we through with show and tell, Captain?" She had a hard time keeping the smug tone from her voice. "Are you satisfied with my responses?"

He sighed. "I guess taking you to the crime scene can't be any more futile than anything else we're doing."

"I'll go with her." Dan held out his hand for her.

Holcomb's eyebrows lifted but he made no comment. "The rest of you stay here with the detectives. We're not done yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

To Mia the day already felt as if it had been a week long. From Nate Wilson's killing, to finding Stan's body, to Joy's outburst, to the grueling session with the police and Chase bouncing off the walls, it had been an unending nightmare. Mia had spent most of the day sitting quietly in her chair in one corner of the conference room,

recovered from her fainting spell thanks to Faith. But she was exhausted from the effort of trying to recapture the vision of the knife as she'd first seen it.

Getting into the crime scene had been a battle but finally Dan escorted her into Stan's office.

"They normally would have taken the body by this time," Holcomb said. "But you're in luck. CSU took much longer to process everything than usual and they didn't want the body moved until they were finished. So if you follow my rules, I'll let you have a minute in there."

"Thank you so much, Captain." She made her voice as neutral as possible. No way would she let him bait her until she'd done what she needed to. "I appreciate it."

She stood patiently as Dan bent and tied plastic shields over her shoes and gave her a pair of latex gloves to put on.

"Watch the numbered markers," he told her. "They indicate places CSU has marked to photograph and they may not be finished."

Holcomb stayed in the doorway with Dan and watched her.

She nodded and made her way gingerly to Stan's body slumped in his desk chair. The scene was every bit as gruesome as Dan had described but no worse than some she'd seen in the past.

Forcing herself to ignore the smell of death and the copious amount of blood covering Stan Forbush's body, she took a steadying breath and reached out toward the dead man. The moment she placed her hand on Stan's arm the vision flooded her brain again. She saw the hand stabbing the knife in a downward motion, not once, but twice. Remembering what Ellie had told her, she concentrated on blanking out everything around her and focusing on each detail in the image, trying to retain it as long as possible.

"Gloves," she said suddenly. "Whoever did it wore gloves."

"What kind of gloves?" Dan prompted. "What color?"

She pressed her hands to her temples. "Dark. Some dark color. And heavy. Thick." Then it was gone.

No, she told them, she didn't know if it was a man or a woman. No, she didn't see anything else. She reached out her hand once more, to see if she could sharpen the vision. Suddenly she recoiled, as she was hit by a picture of spurting blood and an arm, making a chopping movement. A feeling of shock surrounded her.

"What is it?" Dan asked. "Something else?"

"He was surprised," she answered slowly. "Either he didn't expect the person in his office or whoever it was wore some kind of disguise. And he definitely wasn't expecting the knife."

"Why didn't he yell?" Holcomb asked.

Mia closed her eyes and concentrated again, then opened them. "The first stab was to his throat and severed his vocal chords." She felt the blood drain from her face and

had to grip the edge of the desk to keep from fainting again. "He was alive when they cut off his thumb and gouged out his eyeball."

Holcomb and Dan both looked sick.

"Are you telling me the truth?" Holcomb asked. "You know you've missed the mark before, Dr. Fleming and this is pretty bizarre."

"Does this sound like something a person would make up?" she snapped at him. "I'm not wrong this time. The vision wasn't fuzzy. I swear to you, that's what I saw happen."

"But you can't tell us who it was," he pushed.

"No." She shook her head. "I wish I could. But the vision is sharper each time. If I keep working at it, concentrating on it, maybe it will come to me." She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I don't have as much control over it as I'd like. But I've had...some instruction in how to deal with it recently. So we'll see." She looked at Dan, feeling completely drained. "Is there any chance I could leave now?"

He glanced at Holcomb.

"Yeah, she can go. But you stay. Working with these people is like herding stray cats. They're your clients. You keep 'em in line."

"Fine. Just give me a minute here." Dan took Mia's arm as she backed out of the room. "Faith will take you back to the hotel," he said quietly. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." *I think*. When he touched her the spike of electricity stabbed through her again. She wondered which was more dangerous—the situation or the man? "I just hate bothering Faith so much."

He grinned at her, a smile that warmed her entire body and chased away the chill that had gripped her. "Maybe she'll put you in her next book."

## Chapter Twelve

Chase had turned on the television again, regretting it almost at once. Someone had put together an attention-getting story, leading off with shots of Mia's bombed car, followed by the latest details of Nate Wilson's murder. Then came a shot of the Carpenter Techtronics building and the news of Stan Forbush's death. They closed the piece with a file head shot of Mia and a nasty recap of her history with the SAPD.

"That's it," Dan said. "Mia, you're out of here. Now." He turned to Faith. "Can I ask you for one more thing today?"

"Of course," she smiled. "I'm more than happy to get Mia away from here. But leaving isn't going to be that easy."

"Even if we get out, they'll follow me," Mia said. "These people are like vultures. You just have no idea what it's like."

Mark turned to Holcomb, who radioed down to the cops he had outside trying to keep the media and the public at bay.

"It's just getting worse," he told them when he clicked off the radio. "There's more media and curiosity-seekers than we had when the mayor announced he was resigning. They're watching every vehicle that leaves here."

"When do *we* get to leave?" Chase asked. "I'd really like to go home and have a drink. And I know Joy wants to get out of here. Badly."

*Tell me about it,* Dan thought to himself.

"We all do," was what he said instead. "But we need to do it in some kind of order. Let's wait until all the other floors are empty. Then we'll send you out one at a time with a trail car to make sure no one's on your tail. And just to be safe, don't go straight home. Spend a few minutes on the 410 Loop. With all that traffic, if anyone's behind you, you'll lose them there."

"They can't follow us all," Joy said. "Not unless they have an army out there. Do you think that's possible?"

"Anything is possible," Dan told her. "However, I'm just being cautious. They'll be concentrating their efforts on Mia. She's their hot button. What I'd like to know is who leaked all the details they've been putting out on the air? Especially about Stan's death."

Holcomb made a face. "They can sniff out a stale bagel but face it. Their information could come from anywhere. They all have police scanners. Detective Aragon said a television van arrived at the airport this morning not five minutes after he did."

Rick and Mark looked at each other.

"This isn't rocket science," Rick said. "It was easier smuggling people out of Afghanistan."

"I could just hunker down in the car again," Mia suggested.

Mark shook his head. "Someone might recognize Faith's car. Okay, here's what we'll do. Rick, you need wheels anyway. Is Grace Donnelly still supplying our vehicles?"

Dan nodded and a slow smile softened the grim look on his face. "I see where you're going with this. I'll get her on the phone." He pulled out his cell and speed dialed a number.

While they waited, Holcomb took another call from the detectives investigating Nate Wilson's death and gave everyone an update.

"So right now," he concluded, "our best bet is to hope the perp left something on the cell phone he had with him. Or that someone, somehow, saw him with whoever it was he met at that lot."

"Isn't that a long shot?" Ladd asked.

"You'd be amazed how often long shots pay off."

They'd been releasing Carpenter employees one floor at a time, as their questioning was complete. They were all told if approached by any reporters to say nothing, just refer them back to either Lucas Grant or Ladd Tolbert. Uniforms cleared the way for them out of the garage. They did their best to hold back the media lying in wait and make sure none of the cars were followed but it was hit or miss at best. All they could do was hope.

"Maybe it'll put a little excitement in their lives," Lucas joked but no one smiled.

"I don't think they'll find it quite so exciting if they get trapped by reporters," Rick said in a cold voice.

Fifteen minutes later Holcomb got a call on his radio from one of his men at the barricades and told Dan, "Your driver is on the way up."

"Thanks. We're ready."

The elevator dinged as the door opened and a trim woman in green slacks, a uniform shirt and a ball cap that said Private Car Service on it emerged. She hugged each of the Phoenix men in turn, then looked up at Dan.

"Okay, papa bear. What's up?"

Dan turned to the others. "Here's the way we'll do it."

And he laid out the plan for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

The process was nerve-racking mostly because working with amateurs was always fraught with danger and anything could go wrong. Dan walked to a corner of the conference room to make a call on his cell phone, speaking in low tones. Then he turned back to the others.

"Time to get moving."



They started off with Joy and Chase.

"I want to get rid of the troublemaker first," Dan told Mark and Rick in a quiet voice.

As soon as Holcomb received word that Chase's car had left the private section of the garage, they sent Lucas down in the elevator.

"People tried to chase the car on foot," Holcomb said, "but no one seems to be riding their tail."

Lucas' job was to roll down his window as he pulled out of the garage, tell whoever tried to question him no comment but if they'd just back off, Carpenter Techtronics would have a statement in the morning. And assure them that yes, Friday's announcement and demonstration was still on. They'd be holding a very short press conference in the building's rotunda tomorrow morning.

Ladd and Faith left at the same time. The cops directed them to turn down the side street next to the building, where they had barricades ready to pull into place to block the road. After a long day of the chaos around them, the cops were pretty much turning a deaf ear to all the yelling and screaming.

Dan slipped the key card for the hotel suite into Mia's small hand. "I'll get another one from the desk. Do it just like we said."

"What about the news helicopters?" she asked. "They'll be keeping an eye on things."

Mark and Rick grinned at each other. "Don't you worry a minute about them. We've got it covered."

Wearing the clothes she exchanged with Grace, Mia took the elevator down with Rick, who gave her a reassuring smile. "It really will be okay," he told her.

"If you say so."

They exited at garage level and Rick directed her to the black SUV Grace had delivered. Mia climbed into the driver's seat, waited until Rick was buckled in, then backed out into the street.

"There's someone," she heard a voice yell but the police were hauling the barricades across the street again.

"Never mind," she heard a man shout. "The copter will pick them up. We'll see if it's her or the other woman."

At that moment, Rick's phone rang and he spoke briefly before hanging up.

"Dan and Grace are out. They just pulled out into the street in Dan's car. When the media tried to stop them they were mighty disappointed that the woman in your clothes is Miss Grace Donnelly of the Private Car Service. They aren't too happy with the fact that they've been snookered. Dan said he'd meet you back at the hotel but to go ahead and eat without him. He has some things to do."

"Rick, did you hear what that man shouted? The news helicopters are chasing us, so what good did it do to go through this whole charade?"

"Just hang on, honey. It bought us some time and I promise you. They'll be out of our hair in a minute."

Mia kept driving, eyes straight ahead. When she heard the whapping sound of the helicopter rotors overhead her hands tightened on the steering wheel.

"Just hold on," Rick told her again.

Suddenly she heard another sound overhead. Glancing in the rearview mirror she saw the biggest, blackest helicopter she'd ever seen doing an aerial dance with all of the news choppers. No matter which way any of them turned, the pilot in the black bird was in their face.

"Thank you, Mike," Rick breathed.

"One of yours," Mia guessed.

"Our ace flyboy. Dan's brother also flies for us but Mike's the king of the chopper. When Dan called me to come out here, he said to roust out Mike and have him bring the big bird in case we needed it. It's a good thing we did."

Mia shook her head. "I feel like I'm in a spy movie."

"Honey, you aren't all that far wrong."

\* \* \* \* \*

For the killers everything was falling into place even better than they'd hoped. The escalating chaos only worked in their favor. In a situation like this there was safety in numbers. The longer the list of suspects, the less likely the spotlight was to shine on them.

At the beginning of their planning they'd stocked up on disposable cell phones, programming them and making a list of their numbers. They'd used them in order, disposing of them after each use—the battery in one place, the phone in another. Now, later in the evening, after watching the final news broadcast of the day, they were having a brief conversation.

"Taking Forbush's thumb and eyeball was a brilliant idea."

"Thanks. I knew it would get those assholes wrapped up in the biometrics. Send them off on a false lead."

A sharp laugh almost like a bark snapped across the connection. "You talking about the security consultants?"

"A fancy term. They're just mercenaries with expensive, custom-tailored suits and more hardware than brains."

"Don't take them too lightly. Phoenix has a tough reputation."

"Fuck 'em. We're smarter than they are."

"I'm just saying, don't let your ego screw this up. Is everything else on track?"

"No problem. Khalid knows the first payment is due on Thursday or no deal."

"You have a backup list in case he wimps out, right?"

"Are you kidding? Everyone in the world would like Oscar. But don't worry about Khalid. He's solid. He's practically drooling over the power it will give him."

"Well, you can pat yourself on the back for this one. He was your contact and you worked him from the get-go."

"I'm still worried about the Fleming bitch. I understand the cops are now actually including her in the investigation. I thought they wrote her off."

"Apparently something happened, because suddenly they seem to be paying attention to what she's saying."

"Like I've said over and over, it isn't that I believe in that stuff. But we can't take any chances here. I told you we need to get rid of her and we do."

"Well, so far all we've done is make people take another look at her."

"So? What if she has another one of these crazy visions and comes up with something that could point to us? Something they decide to follow through on. Better dead than alive and talking."

"Don't be stupid. She's had a long-standing adversarial relationship with the cops. They may look like they're including her but I think it's just to keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't mess up their investigation."

"I'm not stupid and you sound like an idiot. I'm telling you, we can't take any chances."

"I'm still not sure killing her would be the solution."

"Getting squeamish? This project is far too big to discount anything. Besides, if we do this right, we can point the finger in another direction and have the cops chasing their tails. They'll miss the mark completely."

"Yeah? Exactly how would we do that? The cops and Phoenix have got her locked up tighter than Fort Knox."

There was a pause. "I've been doing some thinking. There may be a way to smoke her out and point the finger in a totally different direction."

"And exactly how would we do that, smartass?"

"All these nuts on the lunatic fringe? They may just work to our advantage. The ones always demonstrating against her."

"Be careful you don't get us into something you can't control. I don't want to be the person who pisses off Khalid. He's not a very forgiving person."

"Leave it to me. Money fixes everything."

"All right. We'd better sign off now. Don't forget to ditch the phone."

"Please. I lost my patience, not my brain."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was nearly midnight by the time Dan returned to the hotel. Rick had called to let him know he'd delivered Mia safely and was checking himself into a different hotel.

The team members always split up when more than one of them was in a location. That way no one could pinpoint them in one place and make them a single target. Mike was staying out near the airport with Ed so they could keep an eye on their equipment and be ready to move if needed, like this afternoon.

When Dan let himself into the suite he expected to find the living room dark and Mia asleep. Hopefully in his bed. But one of the lamps was on and she was curled up on the couch, her laptop braced on her knees, the television on low volume. A tray with covered plates sat on the round table by the window.

For a moment he just stood and looked at her. She was wrapped in a pale green robe, thick chocolate-colored hair curling softly around her face and looking so vulnerable and fragile he wanted to wrap her in cotton wool and pack her away. He wondered if she had regrets about last night. Second thoughts. He certainly hoped not, because all he could think about was making sure she never got away from him. How the hell had he fallen so hard so fast?

She looked up as she heard the door close.

"Hi!" She smiled up at him. "I didn't know what time you'd get here or if you'd eaten, so I got some sandwiches sent up. I took a chance on what you might like. Oh and there's three kinds of beer in the fridge."

Dan just stared at her.

"Was that okay?" she asked, a nervous edge creeping into her voice. "I wasn't sure..."

"Okay doesn't begin to describe it. You're exhausted, you've been through hell, you've got a cut on your hand that has to be killing you and you're worried about my welfare? I'm just amazed that some man hasn't locked you up already to keep every other male of the species away from you."

"Oh, well." She shrugged, blushing. "Most men think I'm kind of a kook. You know, the precognition thing and all. They either want to dissect me or run away from me. Or treat me like I'm not even there."

"Then I have to say," he said in a very soft voice, "that most men are incredibly stupid. And I'm one lucky son of a bitch."

It amazed him that she actually blushed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a woman blush like that. Of course, the women he chose to spend his recreational time with had long ago passed the stage of being able to blush about anything.

"I thought for sure you'd be asleep," he told her, shedding his jacket and tossing it onto a chair. "Rick called and said he'd gotten you locked down tight."

She nodded. "Yes. He made sure I got to the suite just fine and even ordered some food for me." She smiled, a tiny upturn of the corners of her mouth. "And I actually ate. I couldn't believe I was hungry."

"Stress burns up a lot of energy." He bent to press a kiss on her mouth, tasting her lips with his tongue for just a brief moment before he gestured toward the laptop.

"Special project?"

"You might say. I'm on the website Faith's aunt told me about, doing a search for precognition and precognitive interpretations. Extrasensory perceptions, as it were. It's a little awkward with my bad hand but the two finger method works pretty well." She pointed at the screen. "There are people here who have had some experience studying it, as well as others who want to record their visions for others to see. Maybe help with interpretation."

"That's a terrific resource. Find anything yet?"

She shook her head. "Bits and pieces, that's all. The website is fairly new so there isn't as much on it yet as there will be eventually." She closed down the computer and looked up at him, anxiety plain on her face. "I...need to tell you something but I want to make sure you eat, okay?"

"Another vision?" he guessed.

"Yes, but not a gory one, thank goodness. Come on, let's sit down and I'll tell you what I remember." She put her laptop aside and moved to the table.

He got a beer for himself from the fridge and a bottle of water for her, then pulled a chair up next to her. "Okay. Let's have it."

"This one was just numbers."

Dan raised his eyebrows. "Numbers?"

"Yes. I never can tell exactly what form the vision will take. Sometimes it's an image, sometimes a flash of color. Sometimes numbers. That's what I saw tonight. First like those children's building blocks. They were tumbling around in space as if trying to find the right order."

Dan took a swallow of his beer, trying to release the tension in his body. "What were the numbers?"

"One, five and seven. Do they mean anything to you?"

He frowned, bit into a sandwich, chewed and swallowed thoughtfully. "No. Could it be an address? Is there one that comes to mind?"

She shook her head. "No. I tried doing what Faith's aunt and the other women at her house told me to do. I forced everything else from my mind and tried to focus just on my vision. To see if there was anything around the edges I was missing, or if I could sense anything else." She shrugged. "But it didn't work."

"Don't force it," Dan told her. "It'll come."

"But we have so little time left. And I still have the feeling Oscar is in great danger."

"You know Chase ran another demonstration and everything checked out."

"I know. I just... Maybe your magic computer could try running number combinations for a location in San Antonio."

Dan grinned at her. "Good thought. Let me get Andy on it right away."

He speed dialed a number on his cell phone while Mia sat sipping at her water.

"Do you ever sleep?" Andy wanted to know when he answered. "Maybe you don't know that the rest of us like to do that once in a while."

"Keeps you on your toes," Dan told him. "Sorry about this but it's really important." He gave him an outline of what he wanted. "And not just addresses. Anything those numbers could indicate in any possible combination. Oh and factor in baby toys."

"Baby toys?" Andy sounded as if he thought his boss had lost his mind.

"Just do it, okay? I'll have my cell on, so if you get something, call no matter what time it is."

"Just like always." He clicked off.

"I'm sorry I can't give you any more details," Mia told him, twisting the bottle in her hands. "No matter what I did, I couldn't call up anything else."

"I think you're trying too hard," he told her.

"We only have three days before Chase's big deal," she reminded him, "and I have this sick feeling in my stomach that we're already too late to stop what's happening."

"Impossible." Dan finished off half the sandwich. "We've taken every precaution. Oscar has more guards in place than the president. No one can get near him. And the new biometric program is up and running."

She hit her thigh with her small, clenched fist, frustration plain on her face. "I'm missing something. I just know I am. Whoever did this would know, wouldn't they, that redoing that program would be the first thing on your list? So what would they gain by taking Stan's...body parts?"

"That baffles me too. However, it's possible they thought they could get in there before I had time to do a brand new setup." He took another swallow of his beer. "Actually, with that coffee trick, I think they expected to use Stan's thumb and eye to get in there and be out before anything was discovered."

"If you hadn't had that meeting this morning, they easily might have done it."

Dan nodded. "No one would have come looking for Stan for a while. We screwed up their schedule."

She took a small sip of her water. "Well, that at least eliminates everyone who was in the conference room."

"But it opens up a wider list of suspects that without the Dragon's capabilities, we'd never be able to handle." He put the metal cover back on his plate, tossed the empty beer bottle in the trash and stood up. "I'd say you need to give the brain a rest or you'll make yourself sick. Don't push it, Mia. It will come to you."

She sighed. "I guess you're right. But I'm still going to do the mental exercises first thing like those women told me to. Maybe something will pop up."

She stood also, nearly bumping into Dan as she rose. They were so close they could feel each other breathe, suddenly caught up in the heat that blossomed between them.

Dan moved automatically, reaching for her and pulling her into his arms. The kisses

they'd shared the night before weren't even in the same category with this one. Someone had lit a match to them and the fire burned high and bright. The kiss started out slow and soft, his lips molding to hers. Dan felt himself harden almost painfully, his erection popping up with a mind of its own.

He couldn't get enough of touching her, tasting her. He wanted to run his mouth over every inch of her skin, then start all over again in case he missed a spot. His hands cupped her bottom, pulling her tightly against him so she could feel the sign of his arousal, of his need for her. No, not just a need. *Wanting* her, just as he had from the moment he'd laid eyes on her.

*Jesus, the famous tight-ass Dan Romeo had finally bit the dust.*

But Mia wasn't like any other woman he'd ever known. She was bright, courageous and as sexy as hell, even if she didn't think so. He'd broken his number one rule—never get involved with someone in a case. And he didn't even think twice about it anymore.

When he lifted his mouth from hers, they were both gasping for breath.

"I want you," he breathed.

Mia put her hands on his chest, her eyes still glued to his.

"I have to tell you something, before this goes any further."

*Oh, Jesus. Is there someone else? Has she decided this is all a mistake?*

He was nearly ready to tell her to shut up, but he pulled in his control and found a smile somewhere.

"But I want to touch you when I do," she told him almost shyly.

She unbuttoned his shirt and slid her small hands inside against the hard wall of his chest. Her delicate fingers brushed against the pelt of fine fur on his skin, rubbing back and forth. She felt him humming with pleasure. When her fingernails found and raked lightly against his hard nipples, he grabbed her wrists.

He closed a hand around one wrist. "Honey, you'd better either stop what you're doing or talk fast. Otherwise in two seconds I'll have you naked and on your back."

She smiled, an expression so soft and welcoming he all but fell into it. "That sounds like a great idea, but first I want you to hear what I have to say. You might think I'm too crazy to have in your bed."

"As long as you're not telling me you think last night was a mistake I can take whatever you're dishing out."

She looked at the couch. "Let's sit down for a minute." She turned away from him after they sat, too embarrassed to look at him while she talked. He'd been fine with her visions so far, but none of them had been about him.

He reached over and took her hand. "Honey, it can't be that bad."

"Just listen, please?" She chewed on her bottom lip. "I...saw you before you came to my office yesterday?"

"Saw me?" He frowned. "Saw me? Where? I'd barely gotten here." What the hell

was she talking about?

She squirmed, and would have pulled her hand away if he hadn't tightened his hold on it.

"No. I mean I *saw* you. In a vision."

For a moment he was startled. "You had a vision about *me*?"

"Uh-huh."

"Mia, you know I'm good with your visions. What could be so bad about this one? Did I kill someone?"

Again that nervous giggle. "No. you were...naked."

Naked. Well. That put a different spin on things.

"I'll admit I'm a little stunned. Still. Did I do something to embarrass you?"

"No." She shook her head. "I did something."

He moved his other hand to the nape of her neck and slowly massaged the muscles. "Honey, just get it out, okay? It's no big deal."

Dan could barely catch his breath listening to her. And when she finally got out the details, he realized it was a very big deal after all. Not only did her visions not deter him, he was affected on some very deep level that she'd had one involving him. That it had aroused her enough to do what she'd done. The image of her watching a vision of him naked and masturbating in front of him made him so instantly rock-hard he was almost in pain.

When she told him she kept hearing his voice, he dropped her hand, cupped her chin and turned her face toward his.

"I've come to believe in fate, Mia. And I think that's what this is. And now I can say this to you, not as some kind of image but as the real thing." He brushed his thumb against her cheek. "So what did I say?"

She blushed again. "You said...*I want to fuck you.*"

"Well." He brushed his lips against hers. "I obviously knew what I was talking about."

Heart thundering against his ribs, he lifted her in his arms and headed for the bedroom. No woman had ever affected him this way. And he'd had his fair share of them. The instant connection between them almost vibrated in the air, and every sensation, every feeling was enhanced a hundred times. Something beyond the ordinary was at work here. Otherwise how did he explain this urgency he always felt with her, even in the midst of a critical situation?

The hotel had turned down his covers and he deposited Mia on the crisp sheets, being careful of her injured hand. He couldn't take his eyes off her as he stripped off his clothes with swift efficiency, his throbbing erection proof of what he was feeling. Yanking his wallet from his trousers, he extracted a condom and put it on the nightstand.



"Do you carry a supply of those with you?" She giggled nervously.

"Only an emergency stash. But tomorrow I'm buying the giant size box, just so we don't run out."

He unwrapped her from her robe and lifted the flimsy cotton of her sleep shirt over her head. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of her completely nude. She was a vision. A living representation of everything he ever wanted in a woman. Last night he hadn't taken the time to fully appreciate what he was looking at. Now he did.

Her breasts were round and full, with rose nipples surrounded by deeper rose areolas. Her stomach had just the slightest swell to it, tempting him to bend down and place an open-mouthed kiss on it. She shifted under him, hips moving, and a soft hum emerged from her throat. Graceful legs tapered upward to flaring hips, the juncture covered with soft, rich chocolate curls, her labia just barely peeking out. He clenched and unclenched his hands, every part of her so tempting he didn't know where to start first.

He covered her mouth with his, pressing the rough silk of his lips against the smooth satin of hers. His tongue probed into the wet cavern of her mouth, tasting every inch of her. Her arms reached up and pulled him toward her and then he was lying beside her, his hand touching her everywhere.

"You are such a treasure," he whispered. "A gift. God, Mia, I've lived a life you can't even begin to imagine. What did I ever do to deserve you?"

And then the time for talking was over. Tonight they took the time to explore each other's bodies, touching and tasting everywhere. Rough skin pressed against smooth, small hands caressed large body parts, while long, lean fingers explored narrow channels, hot and wet. Large hands cupped firm breasts while small fingers scraped flat nipples.

The quiet of the room was filled with the sounds of flesh against flesh, rasping breaths and at last, at the moment of incredible fulfillment, sounds of exultation. And then only labored breathing, as hearts slowed their thundering beats and bodies became boneless.

He stroked her body, caressing every part of her as they talked and just like that they were both aroused again. Despite the exhaustion of the day, sleep was the last thing on their minds.

He moved his mouth over her, taking time to savor each place. She tasted like seven kinds of sin and felt even better. His mouth followed the line of her jaw, kissed the soft underside of her chin, traveled slowly down the column of her neck nibbling and kissing. The length of her naked body pressed against him seared him every place they touched. He kept remembering her description of the image of himself naked before her, hearing the description of how she'd pleased herself, and the eroticism of it was an incredible aphrodisiac.

Her good hand traveled along his shoulder, his arm, slid between them to brush the mat of hair on his chest and scrape his flat nipples. One of her legs was wedged

between both of his, and as he tasted her and touched her she rubbed her thigh against the steel length of his cock and the swollen sac of his balls.

*I want to fuck you.*

The words rattled around in his head almost as if he heard himself saying it to her.

Her breasts fell warm and full in his palm, her nipples like hardened blooming buds in his mouth. He pulled on them and she cried out, her fingers woven into his hair as her hands pressed him more tightly against her. When he dragged his teeth lightly over their surface her cries turned to delighted moans, vibrating in her throat.

Very slowly he moved his mouth down to her tummy, pausing long enough to taste the sweetness of her navel, before reaching the wetness of her pussy. Taking a moment to inhale her intoxicating scent he nipped at the darkened bud of her clitoris, rewarded with her cries of pleasure, her thrust of her body against him.

He kissed the delicate crease where hip and thigh joined, allowed himself a moment to whisper his mouth over her inner thighs before returning to her hot, glistening wetness. Feasting on her, he lapped her cream, drawing her essence into his mouth. Into his soul.

"I want to touch you, too," she moaned, trying to move and give herself the opportunity.

"Next time," he promised in a harsh voice. "Tonight I get to do all the tasting."

He moved her body this way and that, opening her to him so there wasn't an inch he didn't see. He was always careful not to accidentally bump her hand, but he wasn't going to miss one place on her body, from the hot crevice of her buttocks to the grasp of her cunt when he pressed his tongue inside.

Soon she was begging, almost sobbing, bucking against him to urge him with her movements to take her. Now. Right now.

Reaching for the condom, he ripped open the foil with his teeth, sheathed himself one-handed, and lifting her to him plunged inside with one swift movement.

Dan closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, reaching for his eroding control. Jesus, she was so hot and wet and tight. His cock pulsed and his balls ached with the need to explode inside her. Slow, he told himself. Tonight keep it slow.

But his body had other ideas, especially when Mia wound her legs around him and locked her ankles in place, pressing against the small of his back. He was lost then, swept up in a need so great it drove into him like a hot spike. Before he even realized it he was pounding into her, the head of his cock bumping her womb, scraping over the bundles of nerves in the tight little channel with each thrust forward and back.

He bent his head to capture her mouth again, his tongue mimicking the actions of his cock, the flavor of her driving him hotter and higher. The familiar tingling and tightening raced down his spine and into his balls and when Mia screamed, "Now! Please!" and pulsed around him, he let go.

They flew, cartwheeling over a precipice, clinging together as he pounded into her again and again, then holding himself rigid as his cock pulsed and spurted. Mia convulsed around him, the walls of her pussy grasping him and pulling at him until she'd wrung the last drop from him.

When he could move, he rolled off the bed to dispose of the condom, but he was back in seconds, holding a glass of water and two aspirin. She looked up at him from where she lay, spent and flushed on the sheets and smiled at him.

"I think that was better medicine than any pills."

"I hope so, but make me feel better and take these, okay? Just in case? And the antibiotic."

Obediently she raised herself up to take the water and the pills. When she was finished he slipped back under the covers with her and cradled her against him. He was astounded at the force of the connection between them. *More than sex*, he thought to himself. Much more. *Romeo, you are so screwed*. But this had been coming since he walked into her office two short days ago. Two days? Could you fall in love in such a brief time?

He wasn't normally a man given to acting on impulse. But in the Marines and with Phoenix he'd had to learn to trust his gut instincts. Now they were telling him this was the right thing for both of them. They could wait two years instead of two days but all that would accomplish was wasting time.

As if she could hear what he was thinking, Mia reached up to brush his cheek. "No obligations here, Dan. I know the way you are, the way you live your life. I can sense the way you've shut yourself off from relationships. I'm not a ten-pound load you'll have to carry around with you."

He brushed his lips against hers, then licked the seam with a light caress. "That may be the way I've always been. And I may, like the rest of my partners, have set firm rules for how and where we find our relationships. But life changes and I'm not about to walk away from this awesome thing between us because of some inflexible rules."

"I don't want to compromise this investigation," she insisted. "Or give the impression that it's affected adversely because of us."

He stroked her back, running his fingers the length of her spine, smoothing his hand across her bottom. "I'm a professional, Mia. My partners know that. And it's my job to assure my clients of that fact. Nothing is going to affect how I do my job." He ducked his head and kissed her forehead. "In fact, for this particular case, I probably can't do it without you."

But she had one more point to make. "When this case is over and you leave, I don't want you to think —"

"What I think is I won't be leaving at all."

She looked up, eyes wide. "What?"

"Maybe I'm rushing things but I hope not. I mean it's only been a couple of days for

us. But I was thinking driving back here tonight. Mark lives here and it's no problem as far as his work is concerned. He's hooked into our system and goes where he has to. When we need him we just send the plane for him and he's on his way."

"But —"

He touched his finger to her lips. "I know you love your home here. We could live there if that's what you want. I have a house in Virginia too. We could split our time. Although..."

"Although what?"

"If you want to keep your job at the museum, that's fine. But I personally think you could do a lot better with consulting work. In fact." He stopped and grinned at her. "I have an idea but I think I'll wait until we're finished here to talk to you about it. Okay?"

She measured her words very carefully. "What exactly are we talking about here?"

"You'll probably think I'm crazy or that I'm rushing you. And maybe I am. But I want a future with you, Mia. Uh-uh-uh," he said, when she opened her mouth. "I'm not saying you have to give me your answer now. I know two days is practically no time to make this kind of decision."

*Okay, I really am crazy. But suddenly I can't imagine life without this woman. I've waited a long time for someone like her. I can't let it get away.*

"But, Dan—" she began again.

He pressed two fingers against her lips. "I'm saying I'll still be sticking around when we wrap this up. I want you to have time to think about it. Get to know me. Be sure of your answer. I don't want to do this when you're vulnerable."

"I'm not an impulsive person, either," she told him. "But...there was the vision. And when you walked into my office, I felt a connection that nearly blew my mind. Instant psychic connection can be a lot more valuable than years of getting to know each other. That link either means it's right or it's wrong. And it's very rare."

"So you're saying..."

"That despite the fact we've known each other less than a week. Despite the critical situation we're in. Despite everything, that connection's there and it's been growing stronger every minute." A tremulous smile curved her lips. "To hear you say you feel the same way make my heart stutter." She threw herself on top of him and hugged him, feathering kisses over his face. "So yes, I want that, too."

"Mia, are you absolutely sure? I've lived alone a long time. And you know the kind of business I'm in, the times I'll have to be gone..."

"I'm not stupid, Dan. Of course I know. But Faith and Mark have made it work. I believe there are people who are fated to be together. You and I are two of them." She sat up. "But yes, we should wait until this case is over before we say anything. Except maybe to Mark and Faith. It might color the way people look at things."

"I agree. And I want to talk to my partners." He fixed his gaze on her. "But no changing your mind."

She laughed, a light sound that softened his harsh edges. “Not at all. You’re stuck with me.”

## **Chapter Thirteen**

The plan had been for them to shower and dress quickly in the morning, but as Mia adjusted the spray to a fine mist the shower door slid back and Dan stepped into the enclosure next to her.

"I thought we were in a hurry," she teased.

"Trust me. I can be quick." He took one of her hands and wrapped her fingers around his cock. "But I think I'm in urgent need of attention." He grinned. "You wouldn't want me to spend the day in pain, would you?"

"Heavens. Anything but that." She took the small bottle of shower gel the hotel provided and poured some into her hands. When she'd worked up a good lather she began to rub it into the curls on his chest. "Let me see if I can fix your problem."

"I think you have just the right touch." He bent his head and took her mouth with his.

Despite the cooling mist of the shower his mouth was hot and predatory, hungry and seeking. Lust shot through Mia, her nipples stiffening into almost painful points and a hard, insistent throbbing kicking up in her cunt. His tongue dueled with hers before dancing to every surface inside her mouth, his big hands holding her in place. With each stroke of his tongue her arousal spiked higher, the walls of her pussy fluttering with need, all of the nerves in her body sparking. She was drowning in sensation, all five of her senses in total overdrive.

God, this man apparently only had to touch her and she was fully aroused.

Pinching his nipples she rubbed herself against him, loving the feel of his hard, muscular body against hers. Her hands traveled down the flat plane of his stomach to touch his cock again, swollen and thick as it jutted from the surrounding curls. One hand slipped between his thighs to cup his sac, drawing a hiss of breath from him.

"You've taken care of me," she told him. "Now it's my turn."

Heedless of the water streaming over her, she dropped to her knees, rinsed the soap from his erection and took him into her mouth. A groan rumbled up from his chest and his hands dropped to her shoulders. Mia set up a rhythm, stretching her mouth to accommodate his length and width. His cock was as hard and powerful as the rest of him and the sense of it inside her mouth thrilled her.

She wrapped her fingers around the thick root and timed its up and down slide with the movement of her mouth. Her other hand gently squeezed his sac, rubbing her fingers over his balls. She was bolder with this man than she'd ever been in her life but somehow he breached all her inhibitions, reached into her sensory nature that had been hiding deep inside her, and made her revel in every act. Every touch.

As he hardened even more in her mouth she wrapped her tongue around his length, squeezing it between his shaft and her cheeks.

"Enough." The word burst from him in a tortured sound.

Mia stopped, frozen. Was she doing it wrong? Did he not like it? She looked up at him through the streams of water.

"I want to come inside you," he rasped. "Not in your mouth. Not this time. I want inside you." His voice took on a husky tone. "I want to fuck you."

The phrase, which had been bouncing around in her head since her vision, stabbed into her and she nearly doubled over with its erotic punch. Dan lifted her to her feet and held onto her with one hand while he reached outside the shower to grab the condom he'd left on the vanity.

Instantly sheathed, he ordered in a thick voice, "Spread your legs."

Mia widened her stance and he lifted her in his powerful hands, lowering her onto his cock.

"Wrap your legs around me," he told her. "And hold on tight."

Leaning her against the wall of the shower, he moved one hand between them, found her clitoris and worked it with his thumb. It took only a few strokes before she felt the orgasm rising and unwinding inside her. She wound her arms around Dan's neck and held on tightly while he pounded into her. "Love you," he ground out in her ear. "Love you. Jesus."

And that quickly they exploded together, shaking with the force of a climax that was intense and gripping. And Mia held on tightly, just as he'd told her to, unable to do anything else as her body shook with the force of the spasms.

They were both gasping when he kissed her once more, an easier, gentler touch this time, and moved so her legs could slide to the floor.

"I hope I have the strength to get dressed," he chuckled, kissing her forehead.

*I hope you don't regret any of this as soon as you're dressed for the day.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Two more days," Mia mused, her forehead wrinkled in thought. They had finally managed to get dressed and had just finished breakfast. She was drinking a second cup of coffee, trying to pull herself together. Pushing from her mind the intruding thoughts that maybe none of this was real. That in the light of a second day Dan Romeo would think he'd made a big mistake and back away. The situation at Carpenter was a safer topic. "Counting today. That's not much time to find out who's behind all of this. And I can't seem to make sense out of the jumble of visions."

"Remember what you said last night about the instructions from Faith's aunt and The Lotus Circle," Dan reminded her. "Meditate and focus. Blank your mind of everything else. Something is reaching out to you just at the edge of your consciousness. It'll come."

"I called Faith while you finished dressing." She looked across the table at him, trying to read his face. Was he sorry he'd let his guard down? Made himself vulnerable to her? She wished she knew more about him besides the fact that he was an amazing lover and had strong protective instincts. She hoped he wouldn't take that as an opportunity to push her off onto the Hallorans. Erect a barrier between them. "She said she gets up early so I didn't think she'd mind if I called now. I told her about the latest vision and asked her if she could call her aunt and see if the women I met could help me figure it out."

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his, squeezing her fingers. Just a small, reassuring touch but it settled the butterflies in her stomach.

"What did she say?"

"That she'd do it right away. I'm hoping to hear back from her soon." She set her cup down. "I just keep thinking how little time is left."

"We've had tighter schedules than this," Dan told her. "We'll make it. Anyway, Oscar's safe, which is at the top of the list. Chase felt a lot more secure after that second demonstration. So whatever else is going to happen we're prepared for it. This is all just so much warfare of one kind or another."

"They—whatever they are—must be pretty desperate to go around killing people without blinking an eye," she pointed out.

"You'd be surprised at how little provocation it takes for some people to kill," he told her. "Or how easily they shrug it off. Whatever it takes to succeed. I'm more concerned with their focus on you." His eyes suddenly got the movement of her hands and he looked down at the table. "What are you doing?"

Mia had a thick pad of paper in front of her. Forehead creased in concentration, she was writing numbers in different combinations, using one, five and seven. They were written in strings, in square boxes, on things that looked like boxes.

"Sometimes after a vision that deals with numbers, if I try to play around with them something jogs my memory or gives me a clue."

Dan leaned down and placed a light kiss on her lips. "Honey, we've got the Dragon working on it. If that piece of machinery doesn't come up with something it isn't there to find."

"But the human element can often work better, you know. It might be something stuck in my head that this situation has triggered to give me some kind of clue."

He cupped her chin and turned her face again to look at him. "Nobody believes in your ability to help us more than I do. But I don't want you making yourself sick over this." He scanned her face. "Something else is eating at you. What is it? No secrets allowed here."

She put her pen down and leaned back in her chair. "You know..." She stopped, took a deep breath and started again. "About...us. Everything." She waved a hand in the air.



"What about us, Mia?" His voice was edgy. "Are you regretting what's happening? It sure didn't seem that way in the shower."

Her eyes widened. "*Me* regret? I wasn't sure... That is, if *you've* changed your mind... I mean, I know your life isn't..."

For a moment the muscles in his face tightened. Then he forcibly relaxed them. "Going to be much without you in it now," he finished for her. "Pay attention here. This isn't just some temporary roll in the hay for me, Mia. I meant everything I've said. And I'm hoping you did too. Why would you think differently? Have I done anything to make you feel that way?"

His brown eyes had darkened almost to black.

"No." Mia dipped her head. How to tell him that while she might be at the top of her game professionally, in personal situations she was a ragged novice. And this situation with him was just too important. "I was afraid when we weren't in bed together you might have second thoughts. About, you know, everything."

"Sweetheart, listen to me." He put his hands beneath her elbows and lifted her from the chair. "I don't say anything I don't mean. Ever. Just like your visions come out of nowhere and rattle your life, that's how I feel about what's happened with us. Like you said, sometimes Fate just means things to happen. I think this is one of those times. So let's get through this case and then plan the rest of our lives together, okay?"

"Okay." She gave him a small grin.

He brushed a kiss over her lips. "I love you, Mia. It may have happened quickly but it doesn't make it any less solid."

She had truly been worried that he'd only been carried away by the moment. Not many men wanted a permanent relationship with a woman who had powers they didn't understand. The fact that the words sounded so difficult to say only made them more special to Mia. This wasn't a man given to expressing emotion easily. Her heart expanded.

"I love you too," she whispered.

"Good. Get any other thoughts out of your mind." He gave her one last light kiss. "If we've got that settled I want to call Andy and see what the Dragon has coughed up."

But before he could do that his cell phone rang.

"Mr. Romeo, this is Frank Petrino, at Dr. Fleming's house."

"Yes, Frank?"

"We, uh, have a little situation here. Besides the media, I mean."

While he was talking Mia's phone rang and she dug it out of her purse.

"Mia, honey?" The woman's voice on the other end sounded distraught. "This is Mrs. Goodman."

Her neighbor two doors down. One of the few people on her street she felt comfortable with.

"Oh, yes, how are you?" Mia frowned. Why was the woman calling her? And why did she sound do upset?

"Honey, those people are back. You know the ones with that woman?"

*The woman whose child I couldn't find.* Mia closed her eyes and swallowed.

"Yes, I remember. Is she causing a problem?"

"Oh, Mia, she's got a bunch of people with her yelling and screaming. There's some man at your house trying to make them go away. But Neil, you know how he gets..." Her voice trailed off.

Mia bit her lip in impatience. "Yes? Did Neil talk to them?"

"He tried but one of them pushed him and..."

*Oh, dear God.*

"Mrs. Goodman, is Neil all right?"

"He-He fell and hit his head. I think he's okay but can you come and talk to them? All she wants is to yell at you. I know that. After she gets that out of her system she goes away, just like always."

Mia could hear Dan carrying on a conversation in low tones next to her. She was sure it had to be with the guard he'd left at her house. He'd pitch a fit at what she was going to do but she really had no choice. It was bad enough that she was a target of this venom but having her neighbor hurt was unacceptable.

"I'll be there within thirty minutes. Just stay in the house and don't let Neil go out again, okay?"

"Oh, thank you, dear." Her relief almost crawled through the connection. "I hate to bother you with all the trouble you're having now..."

"It's all right. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

She clicked off her phone and turned to Dan, who looked at her face and shook his head, a stubborn look on his face.

"I'm guessing that call is about what happened at your house and what you want to do. The answer is no. Under no circumstances. Absolutely not. How many ways can I say it?"

"It isn't as bad as it sounds," she told him. "The same group of people has done this a lot of times. It hardly ever even makes the papers. There's a woman who asked me to help the police find her child but by the time she came to me it was already too late. The visions I had were of her child already dead and she blamed me."

"A perfect reason why you should stay away from her," Dan insisted.

"All she wants is to yell at me for a few minutes, have her friends yell at me and she'll go away." She touched his arm. "Please, Dan. This woman has never dealt with her grief. If yelling at me makes her feel better, it's the least I can do."

"Mia." He was in full Phoenix mode now, his face like granite, his eyes hard.

"And my poor neighbor got shoved down on the sidewalk trying to break them up."

That's never happened before, so this time they must be even more agitated. I have to get them away from the people who live there before anyone else gets hurt."

"What about when *you* get hurt?" he demanded. "Do you think I'm the least bit willing to risk your life? We've got you staying here so the idiots and the media can't find you. Now you want to put yourself in their line of sight?"

"Call your man back and have him get backup from the local substation," she suggested. "They've done it before. They'll keep everyone back from the house and you can stand right there beside me while I calm them down. Carol Denoyer just wants another chance to act out her grief. Please," she begged. "I really have to do this. If you don't take me, I'll find a way to go myself. Don't you think you'd rather be in control of the situation yourself?"

"Jesus Christ on a crutch." He ran his hand over his head. "All right. But give me a few minutes to make arrangements. And you do exactly as I say. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. And thank you." She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

In less than five minutes he'd made the calls he needed to, assured himself he'd done what he could to keep things under control and they were rolling out of the garage.

"Don't go down my street," she told him, as they reached her intersection. They could hear loud voices all the way to the corner. "We'll go in through the back."

"Okay. Tell me where to go."

She directed him to the street parallel to hers. A nature preserve ran the length of the block, leaving minuscule backyards but a thick covering of trees. Dan parked the car and he called someone on his cell to let them know where they were. They made their way through the trees to her back porch where Lloyd Wells, the other Phoenix man stationed at her house, was waiting for them. He took Mia's keys from her, unlocked the door and hustled them inside.

Through the windows they could hear voices shouting at the house, some of them screaming loudly, calling her names.

Dan looked at her and shook his head. "This is such a bad idea."

"Please," she begged again. "You promised."

"We called the substation like Dr. Fleming suggested and they sent two cops who set up barricades and stationed themselves in front of them," Lloyd told him. "There's one woman who appears to be the ringleader. Frank's been waving all the neighbors away whenever they came out and assuring them it would be over soon."

"Okay." Dan turned to Mia. "We'll open the door with Lloyd on one side of you and me on the other. Do *not* go out on the porch. Say your piece from the door, do what you have to and we're out of here." He looked at Lloyd. "I called Mike to fly air cover, just in case. He should be here in a minute. As soon as he arrives, we'll do this."

Mia's eyes widened. "You think I need a *helicopter* to protect me?"

"Honey, someone involved in this mess wants you dead. I'd call in the entire

Marine Corps if I thought it would help.”

Soon they heard the distinctive sound of the chopper’s rotors and the miniature radio Dan carried in his pocket crackled.

“D’Antoni.” The voice sounded sharp and clear. “I’m in place.”

“All right,” Dan told him. “We’re opening the door now. Look sharp.”

Mia had to swallow a couple of times to get enough saliva in her mouth to speak. As often as this had happened, it was impossible to completely conquer her fear. Especially now. She nodded at Dan, pulled the front door open and stood in the frame, one man on either side of her.

“It’s her, it’s her!” a woman screeched. “She killed my child!”

“Hello, Carol.” She had to shout to be heard. “I’m here to talk to you if you can calm everyone down.”

“Her little boy died because of you,” a man hollered.

“I can’t speak to you unless you all stop shouting,” she yelled back, hands up.

Despite her appearance of bravado she was shaking. She was glad Dan was holding her tightly against him, infusing her with his warmth and his strength.

The uniforms and Frank managed to quiet the crowd. Carol Denoyer stepped as close to the barricade as they’d allow her.

“My child is dead and you’re the reason,” she insisted. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Carol, we’ve had this conversation before. If I could do something I would. If any of you had come to me earlier, I might have been able to help find him. *Might* have. I’ve told you before, this isn’t an exact science.” She stopped and drew a breath. “I was the one who found his body with the police. That scene will haunt me forever, so please don’t think I’m cold and heartless. If I could change things I would.”

“I’ll never forgive you,” the woman cried.

“I can hardly forgive myself. But please, don’t hurt my neighbors. They have nothing to do with this. Please go home. Carol, let your friends help you.”

She stood there for perhaps another five minutes, letting Carol vent her anguish, supported by the people with her. One man finally apologized for hurting Neil Goodman and the others began to murmur agreement, embarrassment in their voices.

“We’re sorry,” the man said again. “We just wanted to let you know how your mistakes have hurt someone.”

“I know and I’m sorry.” Mia clenched her fists tightly to maintain her calm, digging her nails into the palms of her hands. “But please go home. This isn’t doing anyone any good.”

Then the woman broke down in tears, her friends led her away and it was all over.

Dan slammed the front door shut and pulled Mia into his arms.

“You did a very brave thing,” he murmured in her ear. “That took a lot of guts.”

"It tears me apart when I can't make my visions work," she sobbed. "Or when I misinterpret the information. That was my first case with Captain Holcomb. I don't blame him for thinking I'm a fake or a kook."

Dan stroked her hair and her back. "Nothing is ever perfect, sweetheart. All we can do is the best we can."

He noticed Lloyd's eyebrows rise slightly as he watched Dan with Mia but he kept his face carefully schooled and said nothing. The Phoenix men were well trained for all occasions.

"I'm better," Mia said after a few moments, pulling back and wiping her face with her hands.

"Doesn't it seem strange that she showed up at this particular time?" he asked. "Almost as if someone suggested this would be a good time to strike."

Mia shook her head. "She's done this about a half dozen times. Maybe the media coverage triggered it." She swallowed hard and leaned into Dan. "I always feel as if my home has been violated afterwards but it's the least I can do for her."

"Then let's get out of here." He nodded to Lloyd, who led the way to the back door.

They had just stepped out onto the porch, Lloyd first, then Mia, with Dan behind her. She caught her heel on the doorsill and lurched forward to grab Lloyd's hand for balance just as a *thunk!* sounded in the air. Mia stumbled and fell back into Dan's arms.

"Gun!" Lloyd hollered, crouched and began scanning the yard with his own gun in his hand. In seconds he was off and running, crouching low, heading into the trees where the shot had come from.

"Be careful," Dan shouted to him, then turned back to the woman in his arms. "Mia? Sweetheart? Oh, Christ!"

Her entire front was covered with blood, the red liquid still seeping from her body. Dan kicked the back door open and carried her inside. Laying her on the floor in the hallway he yanked off his jacket and used it to make a pressure bandage, tying it in place with the sleeves.

He grabbed his radio. "Mike? Get your ass down here now."

But Mike was already landing the chopper in the backyard. Frank had run around from the front to see what was going on.

"The police have got almost everyone cleared out." He looked at Mia. "Oh, sweet Jesus."

Dan pressed his fingers against the hollow of her throat and felt a faint but thready pulse.

Feet pounded on the porch, then the back door opened. "I'd need an army to find whoever it was," Lloyd told him.

"Son of a bitch," Dan swore.

"Mike's down," Lloyd told him. "Come on. We'll cover you. That was a silenced rifle and he could still be out there, high up in a tree waiting to pick us off one at a

time.”

Mike had set down as close to the house as he could. Trying not to jostle Mia, Frank held her while Dan climbed into the cabin, then placed her gently in his boss’s lap.

“I’ll get some of the cops to help me check out those woods,” he told Dan. “That’s where the shot came from. One of the guys from the substation called his commander for the SWAT team. But it’s dicey if he’s still there by the time we get enough people to help. And he could still easily pick us off.”

“Do what you need to,” Dan told him, his eyes never leaving Mia’s still form. His heart was racing so fast he felt as if someone had given him a triple shot of adrenaline. But he knew in this case it was fear.

Mike was lifting off almost before the door was closed. He handed a set of headphones to Dan.

“St. Luke’s has a helipad,” he told him through the communications system. “I radioed in as soon as Frank got hold of me.”

“I need to get hold of Mark and Rick,” Dan said.

“Already done. Mark’s headed to Carpenter Techtronics to put a lid on things there and make sure everyone’s okay. Rick’s on his way to Mia’s house to get a situation assessment. Then he’ll get with you.”

Dan held Mia as carefully as possible, his fingers on the pulse at her neck the entire time.

The moment they set down at St. Luke’s, glass doors to the roof swung open and a full trauma crew rushed out, rolling a gurney and carrying equipment. In seconds they had Mia on the gurney, an IV drip started, a blood pressure cuff attached and were rushing back through the doors.

“You want me to hang around?” Mike asked, as Dan jumped to the rooftop.

“No. Check in with Rick and see what you can do to help that mess at Mia’s. You may be able to spot something from the air, if he’s still around.” He groaned in frustration. “Damn it, I should have had you do that first.”

“No,” Mike argued. “Getting her to the hospital was the top priority. An ambulance would have taken far too long with a wound like that.”

*A wound like that.* Dan thought his racing heart would freeze up and stop beating.

“Make damn sure no one gets in the house,” he told Mike, his eyes never leaving the doors where the emergency team had taken Mia. “I may have to go outside to use my cell here but I’ll get with everyone as soon as I can.”

Mike gave him a long look. “She’ll be fine, Dan.”

Dan nodded and took off for the hospital doors at a run.

## Chapter Fourteen

The two people sat in a parked car inside the Rivercenter garage in downtown San Antonio.

"Once again we've managed to hire an incompetent. I can feel Khalid's wrath now."

"Our man winged her enough to put her out of commission, keep her the hell out of our way and maybe distract Romeo at the same time. That will more than accomplish our objective."

"The objective was to get rid of her permanently. Why the hell can't we find someone to do that? I thought this guy was a professional."

"He is. He said she moved just as he squeezed the trigger."

"You'd think considering what he's getting out of it and what his reputation is, he'd have been able to compensate for that."

"One good thing, though. It might also send the cops running off in the wrong direction. They might finally decide it's someone who had a grudge against her personally. That all this has nothing to do with Oscar and her weird visions."

"Yeah? What about Stan? They didn't even know each other. And supposedly she got some kind of vision from touching him."

"Let's hope this will all be just a confusing puzzle to the cops and they'll be chasing their tails."

"Do you think we'll get another chance at her?"

The laugh was filled with contempt. "Are you out of your mind? She'll have more guards around her now than Fort Knox."

"Well, we only need to buy time until Friday. Then we're golden. But having her completely out of the way would make me feel a lot better."

"If that shot did the damage our guy said it did, she won't be relating visions to anyone until long past the danger point. She still may not recover from this."

"Let's hope." A pause. "And when Friday arrives?"

"We'll handle that like everything else. And play our parts beautifully. Is your call with Khalid set up? Are you ready with the arrangements for the money?"

"Yes. Three o'clock tomorrow. I'm all set. He'll transfer the amount we agreed upon, I'll monitor it on my laptop and when the money's in place we'll proceed."

A humorless laugh echoed in the car. "It's all going in the joint account, right? You wouldn't be trying to screw me out of some of the money, would you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. After all this time you still don't trust me?"

"Lack of trust is what keeps us honest."

A shrug. "The money will all be there. You can check it from your own computer when you get home."

"And you're absolutely sure this is going to work and we'll be able to pull it off."

Another short laugh. "It's either that, or prison or a coffin. The choice seems obvious."

"All right. We'll check in with each other in the morning, then go forward. I'd better get out of here now. And you'd better call our shooter and tell him to make himself scarce."

The car door slammed, then footsteps echoed on the concrete. Finally a car started in the distance.

\* \* \* \* \*

To Dan it felt as if a year had passed before anyone came out to talk to him, although in reality it was just a few short minutes. He knew he should step outside the building long enough to make his phone calls but his feet seemed glued to the floor outside the trauma room where Mia was being treated. He had to argue his status with hospital personnel but they finally allowed him to sign all the forms allowing them to treat her. Then he just waited, wondering if he'd survive if Mia didn't.

Finally a man in scrubs came out and introduced himself as the surgeon, Dr. Cardoza.

"We're prepping her for surgery right now and I have an OR ready," he reported. "She lost a great deal of blood so we had to pump some into her before taking her upstairs. The bullet itself appears to have done extensive damage. It doesn't look like any handgun wound to me."

"It wasn't. More like a long range rifle." Dan was having trouble keeping himself in control. "Any fragments you can recover would be a help."

"How well are you acquainted with the young lady?" Cardoza asked.

"She's my fiancée." Dan had stood in a similar spot many times when one of his men had been hurt, often in far more primitive facilities. He had never been as frightened as he was now. "Is there a problem I should know about?"

"Are you aware she has a heart murmur?"

Dan's breath caught but he had long ago schooled himself not to show a reaction to anything. "No, I wasn't. Is it a danger during surgery?"

"Not if it's what we call an 'innocent' murmur."

The look on Dan's face must have spoken volumes, because the doctor went on to explain in greater detail. "An 'innocent murmur' is nothing more than an occasional irregular blip in the flow of blood. However, if the murmur is caused by actual cardiac damage, that makes a difference."



Dan shoved his clenched fists into his pockets. "Can't you tell ahead of time?"

"Normally we'd do a heart catheterization. That would give us our answers. But we can't afford to wait with Dr. Fleming, nor can we do any invasive procedures in the shape she's in. I just wanted you to be aware of the situation. Also, since this is a bullet wound, you know we have to report it to the police."

"Ask for Captain Holcomb. He's already working two cases for us and this is probably connected. Don't let them slough you off to someone else." He pulled out a business card and handed it to Cardoza. "Give this to whoever is going to make the call."

The doctor studied the card, then looked back at Dan. "All right. I'll give it to the head trauma nurse. If she has questions she'll come find you."

"Be sure to take good care of her," Dan said, his face set in a grim expression.

Cardoza's eyes narrowed as he heard the implied warning. "I take very good care of *all* my patients, Mr. Romeo."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply —"

"Of course you did." He smiled. "Relatives give me the same message all the time. Go get yourself a cup of coffee. The surgical waiting room is on the second floor."

"Can I ride up in the elevator with her?"

Cardoza looked over his shoulder, seeing the gurney being wheeled out into the hall. "All right. Just don't jostle anything."

Dan gripped Mia's hand tightly as the gurney was pushed toward the elevator. She looked even paler than before. Fear squeezed his heart and he made a deliberate effort to push it away. He couldn't lose her, not when he'd just found her. He'd use all his internal resources to be strong for her.

Just before they wheeled her through the doors to the operating suite, he leaned down and placed a kiss on her ice-cold lips. "I love you, sweetheart. Remember that. I love you and I'll be here waiting for you."

Then she was gone, into the hands of strangers and he was left standing in the hallway feeling as if he'd lost everything in the world.

"Dan?"

The soft voice sounded behind him. He turned to see Faith standing there, her eyes filled with sympathy.

"Mark thought you might like some company."

"Thanks." He hugged her. "Although I hate to take you away from your writing. I know you've got a tough deadline looming."

She squeezed his arm. "This is more important to me. How about a cup of coffee?" She held up the bag she was holding. "I made a quick Starbucks stop."

"It'll probably taste like mud to me right now but thanks anyway."

"Come on." She tugged at his arm. "Let's go sit in the waiting room. I'm sure it's

going to be a long while before you hear anything.”

“I should go call everyone but I can’t use the phone inside and I’m afraid to go out of the building. Stupid, huh?”

“Not at all. Just sit down a minute. Mark gave me a bunch of messages for you.”

Dan moved closer but he was too jittery to sit. Iceman Romeo, having a case of the nerves. He would have laughed at himself if the situation wasn’t so serious.

“It’s my fault, you know,” he told her.

Faith raised an eyebrow. “That Mia got shot? Exactly how is that possible? Did you pull the trigger?”

“I never should have let her talk me into taking her to the house. Especially when we saw that mob. I should have driven like hell in the opposite direction.”

“Dan, no one expected this. When I talked to Mark he said the guys told him that woman has done this before. She shows up at Mia’s all the time. There’s never been any violence before. There’s no way you could have predicted this.”

“But damn it. I should have protected her better.” Pain contorted his face.

Faith cocked her head. “Am I detecting a little something more than just normal security concerns here?”

Dan gave her a halfhearted smile. “You might say.”

“She’s a lovely person, Dan. Just from the time I’ve spent with her—and certainly not under the best circumstances—I know she’s very special.”

“Yes, she is. Very.” He rubbed a hand across his face, feeling the beginning of a five o’clock shadow. *I probably look like a bum but who cares?* “Listen, I know this will sound stupid, especially coming from me. But the minute I walked into her office I felt a strong connection to her. As if I’d known her forever.”

“Well.” Faith smiled. “Far be it from me to argue with feelings like that. You know my thoughts on psychic connections.” She pulled a little notepad from her purse. “All right, back to business. Aunt Vivi called her two friends who met with Mia, the ones who are also precognitive. They had told her to let them know if she needed help. They’re both internet savvy and connect with other Lotus Circle members who have the same powers.”

“Mia’s already tried going through the website your aunt told her about. She said she got some stuff but the database is far from extensive enough yet.”

“I know,” Faith agreed. “That’s why they’re going out beyond that, to other sites and other people. Maybe they can find reports of similar visions and what they meant. At least it might give us a guide to follow.”

“Thanks, Faith. I really appreciate you doing that. I know how upset Mia is that she can’t pull out any more information. She was really stressed out last night.”

“No problem.” She flipped a page. “Next. Mark is at Carpenter holding everyone’s hand and assuring them that things will be fine. He’s also on the horn to Andy to see what the Dragon’s found so far.”

"Good, good. We need every piece of information we can get."

"But even if we don't find Stan's killer before Friday," she pointed out, "the demonstration and presentation can go off as scheduled. Mark put out the word and has Phoenix prepared to provide whatever manpower is needed to ensure that. He's trying to make everyone at Carpenter focus on what they need to be doing for Friday. Chase has finally gotten his act together and Lucas and Joy are refining the details for the event."

"Do they know Mia's been shot?"

Faith nodded. "Yes. It's sort of hard to hide since it's all over the news. Chase is really freaked and Joy, of course, is saying Mia's responsible somehow for all this trouble."

"Nice. I wonder if she chews nails for breakfast?" He began pacing again. "What else?"

"Mark met up with Captain Holcomb at Carpenter Techtronics. As soon as Mark told him what happened, Holcomb headed to Mia's to check the scene out himself. He also got on the horn and sent one of his top men, a Lieutenant Santos, out there to take charge. He's working with Rick. They both agree the timing on this thing is very strange."

Dan stopped pacing and was suddenly very still. "I think so too. Have we heard from Santos yet? What does he say?"

"That they've had disturbances at her house before, according to the cops who cover that area. Usually it's this same woman, who still blames Mia for her son's death. But there's never been any kind of violence. Certainly not shooting."

"I think today's episode was arranged to cover up the shooting."

Faith frowned. "I don't understand."

"I have a nasty feeling that someone got paid to set this up. To tell this woman, who I'm sure doesn't need much urging, that this would be a good time to do her thing again. They had to get Mia out in the open where they could get at her again, then they hired the shooter. That shot came from the trees in the back, not from the crowd."

Faith raised an eyebrow. "But for what purpose? Killing Mia isn't going to stop the work on the case."

"I know and that's what baffles me. Sure, her email is what set off this whole chain of events. But I'm having to fight to get people to take her seriously."

"Maybe that's it," Faith pointed out. "Think about it. If she hadn't forced the email issue to begin with, whoever is planning—or was planning—to steal the robot, would have pulled off their plan and gotten away with it. And Carpenter Techtronics would have fallen on their face at their big shindig on Friday."

"So it's someone trying to steal this advanced piece of technology for themselves and sell it on the black market. That's what I thought when I first got into this."

"Mia is a wild card," Faith pointed out. "They want to make sure she's out of

commission until they pull this off. To them she's merely collateral damage."

"Not to me she isn't," he said through gritted teeth. "Not to me."

He resumed his pacing while Faith sat quietly watching him. At one point he picked up the coffee she'd brought for him, drank from it and made a face at the taste of the now-cold liquid.

Time ticked past. Other people came into the waiting area, huddling in groups as they waited for their own information. Every time someone came to the door Dan tensed, the rawness of his nerves almost visible.

Faith went outside to call Aunt Vivi and came back with an update. "They've been checking with other people, matching visions and interpretations. It's possible the numbers and the blocks have something to do with movement. A machine that moves. Or a car, a truck. Something like that. Think of license plates. Or a parking slot. They'll keep working on it. They're busy emailing other members of the Circle to see what else they can match up to."

"I guess I never realized just how many people have psychic gifts. Or how they battle with refining their ability to use them."

"You'd be amazed. Listen, one of them has a nephew in Wisconsin who's also a precog. He's been trying different things to help him with his own visions. He definitely thinks it's a machine that moves and has a number on it. Not much help, I know."

"I'll take anything. And thank them for helping."

Finally Dan stopped wearing a rut in the floor and went to stand by the window, hands in his pockets, body rigid. "That's got to be what's behind this attack," he said, as if there hadn't been a lull in their conversation. "She was the original trigger and they're afraid she'll come up with something again."

"Or they want to use her death as a red herring and send us off on a hundred false trails." Rick Latrobe walked into the waiting area and clapped Dan on the shoulder. "Any word?"

Dan shook his head. "Not yet."

"This hospital has a great reputation as a trauma center," Faith assured him. "She's in good hands here."

"What's happening at the house? Are you sure you should have left?"

Rick made a face. "Please. I'll chalk that question up to a temporary brain fart. And everything at Mia's is under control. Chuck Santos really knows his stuff."

"Oh, yeah?"

"He brought a shitload of cops with him. Within thirty minutes he had names taken, people interviewed and the crowd dispersed. Then he set the crime scene unit to work looking for evidence of our shooter."

"And? Come on. Spit out," Dan said impatiently.

"Interesting choice of gun our fellow used. A Longbow T-76. It uses .338 ammunition with a range of fifteen hundred yards. It's lightweight, easy to pack up and

move away with. It's also highly accurate."

"And very expensive," Dan added. "Whoever is funding this doesn't mind spending money. They didn't get that gun at Wal-Mart. We know this because?"

"He was set up in the woods behind the next door neighbor," Rick went on, "and we got lucky. Apparently he had to get the hell out of there before finding his shell. It was hidden pretty well, under a bunch of dead oak leaves but the CSU guys found it. Santos asked Mike to fly it to the SAPD lab so he could get it there in a hurry."

"Who did you leave at the house?"

"Frank, Lloyd and two SAPD cops. I called Andy—who by the way is probably going to ask for a huge raise after this—and asked him to trace every Longbow T-76 that's been sold in all of North America in the past year." He studied Dan. "How about some coffee?"

"I tried that," Faith told him. "By the time he got to it even Mark wouldn't drink it and he'll drink just about anything."

"I want every resource we have on this," Dan said. "I don't care who we have to pull from where. This is a top priority."

Rick and Faith exchanged glances.

"Am I missing something here, sport?" Rick asked, his tone mild. When Dan didn't answer, he looked at Faith again. "Oh. Well, okay. Whatever. You're a big boy, so I assume you know what you're doing."

Dan opened his mouth to say something but at that moment Dr. Cardoza came to the door and called his name. His face gave nothing away as he beckoned to Dan. Rick and Faith joined him as they walked out into the hall. Dan felt his stomach cramp as he waited for the doctor to speak.

"She's alive, I'll tell you that first," Cardoza said, noting the look on Dan's face. He held up a plastic baggie, which Rick took. "A very high-powered rifle. Shattered the collarbone, shredded the muscle in the shoulder and splintered two ribs. We're damn lucky he didn't puncture a lung. We repaired everything but she'll face a very long rehab with that shoulder. And we still have to guard against infection and a number of other things." He shook his head. "If she'd been hit on the other side she'd be dead, so you can thank God for small miracles or someone's bad aim."

"What about the heart murmur?" Dan asked, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Not a problem. It turned out to be what I told you we call an 'innocent murmur'. There's no actual damage to the heart. We had a cardiologist on hand but she did just fine in surgery, considering the situation. We're going to put her in ICU for at least a couple of days so we can monitor her better. The next forty-eight hours could still be touch-and-go."

Dan drew his first full breath in what seemed like hours. "Listen, Dr Cardoza, I don't mean to throw my weight around but her life is still in danger from outside sources. I know ICU has its rules but I'll be putting guards at the entrance to her area

and someone will be sitting with her at all times. Can you make sure that's not a problem?"

Cardoza frowned. "Is this a special case of some kind? I guess I could assume so considering the wound." He looked very tired and anxious to have the situation resolved.

Dan did something he usually hated doing and saved for special occasions. He took out the business card he carried from the president of the United States, with a note scrawled on the back. Cardoza's eyebrows nearly disappeared in his hairline. "I believe we can set Dr. Fleming up in a private room with everything she'd get in ICU. I warn you, though, it will be expensive."

"Cost doesn't matter. Just do it." He shook the doctor's hand. "I appreciate it very much, your doing this."

"My staff will think I'm crazy but I'll take care of it."

"Can I see her now?"

"She's in Recovery at the moment. Give us an hour to get things set up and then she'll be in her room. Check with the surgical desk in about fifteen minutes and they'll be able to give you her room number."

"Any idea how long she'll be here?" Dan wanted to get her away from here as fast as possible.

"She's pretty weak," he answered. "We had to replace a lot of blood and do a lot of digging around in the injured area. We'll see how she does in a day or two but I'd say at least a week."

Dan held out his hand. "Thank you, Doctor."

Cardoza shook hands with him and headed back toward the surgical suite.

"Good news, right?" Faith said, smiling. "She'll be fine?"

Dan's face was like granite as he gave Faith the report. "I'm going to find the son of a bitch that did this and kill him one inch at a time."

"Okay," Rick said. "I'll help you. With great pleasure. But first we have business to attend to."

"I'm not leaving here until I see her." Dan's tone of voice left no room for argument. "That's final. And I need to find out what room she'll be in."

Rick knew that meant harassing whoever was in charge until he got his information. He let him go off on his own to handle it and sat down with Faith.

"He needs to do something to work off that tension," he told her. "Pestering the hospital personnel is as good an outlet as any, I guess."

"Dan will get his head on straight as soon as he sees Mia," she commented. "Then he'll get back to business."

Rick glanced at Faith. "Like I mentioned before, I take it there's something a little more than consulting going on there? I mean, he's always been such a loner and he's

known Mia less than a week."

"Relax." Faith smiled at him. "Mark always said if Dan ever finally found someone, it wouldn't be any ordinary type of woman. It also wouldn't be one of these long, drawn-out things. That's just the way he is. And they do seem connected on some level, which I believe they are. But of course I would."

Rick grinned back. "Yes, you would."

"Room two forty," Dan told them, striding back into the waiting room. "I'm going outside to make some calls in the meantime. Rick, I need you with me. Faith, are you...?"

"I'm here for the duration," she told him. She opened her tote bag and pulled out her little netbook. "Maybe I'll have better luck with my characters in a different setting. You guys go do what you need to do."

She booted up on her little machine and settled down to write.

"Something smells here," Dan said, as he and Rick took the elevator downstairs. "Someone planted a sniper in those trees and it wasn't any distraught mother. And now that I take a step back, Stan's killing was just a little too public. If they really wanted his biometrics, they'd have found a way to kill him off premises and dump his body so we couldn't find him. At least not before Friday. Someone's yanking our chain and I intend to find out who. And damn soon."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Speaking of Stan Forbush, anything back on him yet?" Dan asked Rick when they reached the parking lot.

"Not much. Holcomb said they're going through everything in his office and his home, looking for something a little bit off. Nothing's turned up yet. The guy looks as if he was exactly what he appeared to be, just a dedicated nerd who lived for his designs. Oscar was Chase's brainchild but Stan made it happen. By the way, he got the call from the hospital about Mia and told them to give anything they recovered of the bullet to you."

"I'm telling you, my neck itches on that one. I think the whole thing with his death was staged."

"But to what purpose?" Rick frowned. "All it did was get the cops and us crawling all over the place and up everyone's backside. Shine a spotlight on everyone."

Dan pulled out his cell phone and speed dialed a number. "I don't know. I just feel like we're missing something. Well, the cops can keep doing their thing but we're not hanging around anymore waiting to see what turns up. Mark?" he spoke into his phone. "How's everything there?"

"About like you'd expect," Mark told him. "Cops are still poking around asking the wrong questions and driving everyone nuts."

"Okay. Rick's here at the hospital with me. We'll be leaving in about an hour. Go

through the ID system again and see if there's anything we missed, any glitch where Stan's...parts might be valuable. Then go through his office yourself. I think this is all a dead-end, set up to throw us off the track but do it anyway. Meet us back at my hotel in ninety minutes." He clicked off.

"I agree with you," Rick told him. "I think Forbush's death is a red herring."

"Yeah but why? What's it supposed to lead us away *from*?" He punched speed dial on his phone again. "Mark? One more thing. Get the latest list of the people coming to this shindig on Friday. Email it from your BlackBerry to Andy. Ask him to check out everything about them including what kind of toothpaste they use. We'll call him from the hotel."

Rick frowned. "You think there's a ringer in that group?"

"I think there's a ringer somewhere but I can't figure out where. And Mia's in no shape to help us put the pieces of the puzzle together."

"Someone apparently wanted to make sure she wouldn't be around to help us with anything."

"Maybe this, maybe that." Dan rubbed his hand over his face. "We have plenty of questions and almost no answers. The only thing we know for sure is that Oscar is safe. Thank God for that." He thought for a moment, then flipped open his phone again and punched in some numbers.

"Most exalted nerd in the universe and master of the famed Dragon," Andy said when he answered the phone.

"Your title gets bigger every time I call you," Dan told him.

"That's instead of the raise I keep expecting."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Listen, Mark's going to email you a list and some instructions in a little bit. In the meantime I want you to write down these names." He rattled off the key people at Carpenter Techtronics.

"I already did a search on them," Andy reminded them.

"This time I want you to dig deeper. Check out their bank accounts. See if they have any hidden secrets anywhere."

"You mean you want me to hack into forbidden databases and provide you with code-protected information," Andy joked.

"Okay, you've had your laugh for the day. Just do it. I'll call you when I get back to the hotel."

"You think one of our golden stars is involved?" Rick asked, eyebrows raised.

"I think we need to take another close look at them. Nothing else is turning up. It's got to be someone inside but I'll be damned if I can figure out who."

He checked with Holcomb and gave him a report on Mia's condition and spoke with Lieutenant Santos at Mia's house.

"I called the head of our security teams as soon as Mia went into surgery," he told



Rick. "Mike is picking up four men and flying them here to guard her in two-man shifts. Just in case. They should be here any minute now."

His calls completed for the moment, he headed back inside, Rick close on his heels.

"I should be able to see her by now," he told his friend. "I just need to look at her for myself. Then, as soon as the security team gets here, we're on the way."

He paused in the doorway of Mia's room, gathering himself before he walked in. He'd seen his men wounded badly in action, seen friends injured, shot, knifed. But nothing gave him the punch to the gut that seeing Mia like this did.

She looked so small in the hospital bed and so pale against the white sheets. Machines beeped and whirred, monitoring her vital signs, pumping life-giving fluids into her system, feeding her oxygen. A morphine drip dulled the pain. One arm had been slipped into the sleeve of a hospital gown. The other lay on the covers, a bulky bandage covering her entire shoulder area and part of her chest.

He felt as if a giant fist was squeezing his heart and a fear greater than any he'd ever known gripped him. The most dangerous missions, the imminent threat of his own death, the feeling of dread when a mission felt like it was going south—none of that could compare to the sheer terror at the thought of losing Mia.

For so many years—as a Marine and then as the head of Phoenix—he'd held himself emotionally aloof. All of his energies had been focused on getting the job done. He was firmly convinced that a woman in his life would soften his edge, distort his focus.

And then he walked into that museum office and he hadn't been the same since. Now, when he'd barely opened his heart and gathered Mia in, he stood in great danger of losing her.

He forced his feet forward to the side of the bed. The nurse adjusting the apparatus smiled at him and stepped aside. He took Mia's small hand in his and squeezed it gently.

"I love you, Mia. Get well for me. I'm going to get the people who did this and that's a promise." He leaned over, careful not to jar or jostle or dislodge anything and kissed her lips. They were so cold it frightened him.

"She's still coming out from the anesthetic," the nurse told him, sensing his worry. "But all her vitals are good. I'm sure the doctor told you that the next forty-eight hours are critical but I have a feeling she'll do just fine."

"Take good care of her," Dan said fiercely.

"The best," she told him.

Faith was standing in the doorway. "I got something to eat while she was still in recovery. I'm good for the night."

"Your husband will have my head," Dan told her.

"I'm hoping you'll keep him too busy to notice." She grinned and moved into the room. "Oh, by the way." She crooked a finger at Dan. When he was close to her she

opened her purse two inches and pointed at her little Kahr P 9mm nestled there. "Sssh. It was Mark's idea. I never leave home without it."

Dan almost laughed at that. He was about to comment when Rick said, "The guys are here."

Dan shook hands with two men in gray slacks, white shirts and blazers with the Phoenix logo on the pockets, giving them a full briefing. Each of them also carried a handgun concealed beneath the blazer. Dan had hunted up the hospital administrator earlier and cleared it all with him.

He was reluctant to leave, nagged by a feeling that if he was gone the lifeline that connected him with Mia would snap.

"She'll be okay, Dan," Faith told him. "Really. You need to go out and find out who's doing this."

He kissed Mia one last time, then nodded at Rick. "Let's go."

## Chapter Fifteen

The three men sat around the table in Dan's hotel suite, computer printouts stacked around them with more spitting out of the printer Dan had set up with his laptop. More paper sat on the floor around them, discarded. Andy had been as good as his word. Better, even, digging through databases Dan and the others had never even heard of and probably didn't want to.

"So what have we got?" Dan pulled his pad of paper closer to him to look at the list he'd been making. "One. Mia's visions of Oscar disappearing, of a knife being wielded killing someone, of the bombing and of numbers and blocks. Two. Her car gets bombed, the bomber gets killed and she gets shot by a sniper after a demonstration at her house. Which we all agree someone was paid to stage."

"And using a woman who has real grief to do it," Mark put in. "So someone with no conscience."

"Three. Stan Forbush's death and the killer making off with his eye and finger. But that's a puzzle because the killer never had a chance to use them to get at Oscar, although someone knocked out the guards. They wanted us to think the theft had occurred. Why? What did they hope to accomplish?"

"Four," Rick put in. "A sniper using a Longbow T-76 rifle, not necessarily a common choice. And who in our little party would know someone like that? Be able to convince them to do this?"

"Andy's digging into everyone involved with this," Dan went on. "Including the entire list of Carpenter employees. Plus companies that might want to sabotage Carpenter. But basically, after three days, we real smart guys have no leads whatsoever. What a pile of garbage."

"Okay." Rick leaned back in his chair, stretching his cramped muscles. "I concentrated on the States first, although the shooter could have come from anywhere. But more than fifty Longbow T-76 sniper rifles have been sold in the past six months. That's a shitload of people to track down."

Dan looked at the sheet with the list of names and addresses. "Well, they're certainly all over the place. We'll need an army to go after them. I think we need to give this list to Holcomb and let him use his resources for this."

Mark nodded. "I'll give him a call and fax it to him. He'll be pissed at us if we don't follow procedure on it, anyway."

But when he reached Holcomb's office, all he could do was leave a message. "He's out," he reported to Dan and Rick. "They said he'd be back in about half an hour but then he's got some kind of meeting going on."

"I hope it has to do with finding out who shot Mia," Dan said, his voice tight.

"Holcomb knows his job," Rick reminded them. "He won't let anything slip through the cracks, regardless of his personal feelings."

"Andy's done a yeoman's job digging into things," Rick commented, studying another sheet of paper. "I never realized exactly how many companies are working on the same kinds of things as Carpenter. Or that they'd stoop to whatever means to steal or sabotage a project. There are at least ten cases listed here where people have gone to prison for just that kind of thing."

"Makes it hard for the government to decide who they can trust when they open up for bids." Dan drew a red line beneath five different company names on the list he was working on. "These are the most likely ones to check into first. They're hurting for big projects, they have contracts on the line and they aren't above playing dirty." He slid the paper over to Mark. "Call Andy and tell him we want to know if he and the Dragon can find any connection between the people at these companies and anyone at Carpenter."

"Isn't that kind of a long shot?"

"Right now everything's a long shot." Dan rubbed his hand along the back of his neck. "The next thing we've got to do is plow through all the data he sent on the key people at Carpenter. By the way, how are they doing over there?"

"I left our people in place and told them to report to me every two hours. Chase happened to flip on the television and there was the report of Mia's shooting. That's what happens when you have media camped out everywhere."

"What was his reaction?"

"He's worried how all of this is going to affect his big event on Friday. If people will still show up if they think a killer's running around loose. And Joy, of course, hanging onto Chase like a prize in a cereal box, asked if we had this many people killed on all of our cases."

"Nice. Such a sweet person." Dan's mouth twisted in a grimace. "Although I guess I know how she feels."

"Otherwise I managed to get them focused on the details for Friday. Plus I reminded Chase he needs to supervise the other projects they have in process, since Stan isn't available any longer." He picked up his cell phone and punched a speed dial number.

"I'm still bothered by that." Rich had finished his calls and returned to the table.

Dan raised an eyebrow. "By Stan's death?"

"Yeah. Whoever did it had to know we'd immediately shut down the biometric system and reprogram it. They had too small a window of opportunity to be able to do anything."

"I wish Mia was here. This would be a good time for one of her visions." His face tightened at the thought of Mia's situation.

"How is she?" Rick asked.

"I just called her room half an hour ago and talked to Faith. So far she's holding her own." He pounded his fist on the table. "Damn it. Has Andy come up with anything regarding those numbers and toys?"

"Working on it," Rick said. "Fortunately the Dragon can run several programs simultaneously."

"Check with him again." He pushed back from the table. "Sorry, guys but I've got to go to the hospital. I won't be long. I just want to...check on her myself."

"No problem. We've got things covered here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mia was in a warm, dark place, formless, yards and yards of soft velvet cocooning her. Then a faint beam of light pierced the darkness, the air shimmered and Dan was standing before her, gloriously naked. A golden light flickered behind him, outlining him in its glow. "I want you." He stretched out a hand to her, lust flaring in his eyes.

Mia took his hand, its warmth and strength infusing her, and let him draw her forward.

"I want you, too," she whispered.

"You don't know just how much I love fucking you. Feeling my cock in your tight little pussy."

Heat skittered through her and liquid flooded her cunt. His strong, muscular arms cocooned her against his lean, hard body, the thickness of his cock branding itself against the soft skin of her belly. His hands reached out and cupped her breasts, tugging gently to draw her closer. He dropped his eyes to fasten on the rhythm of his thumbs as they brushed back and forth against her swollen, throbbing nipples. When he lowered his mouth and took one hardened tip inside she whimpered softly.

One hand slid to her ass, the fingers dancing over her skin to the hot crevice between the cheeks. Mia had to lock her knees to keep herself upright. His scent wrapped itself around her and all of her nerve endings sizzled.

That marauding finger played up and down the cleft of her buttocks, each time moving closer to her hot, tiny opening. Mia clung to him with one hand but let the other drift lower through the fine hair on his chest, scraping across his flat nipples, drawing an involuntary gasp from him. Then down, down past his hard, flat abdomen, to find the heat of his erection. When she closed her slim fingers around it he groaned and shut his eyes, his face flushed as she stroked up and down, up and down.

"Better quit that," he rasped, "or I'll get to the end before you do."

"But I like it," she protested in a low voice.

She couldn't stop herself from rubbing her thumb across the velvety head, spreading the thick bead of liquid from the slit over the baby-soft skin. Her hand moved

lower then, finding the soft sac that held his balls, rubbing them with her fingers before shifting to stroke his heated cock again.

Dan suddenly moved his hands, brushing hers away, and dropped to his knees in front of her, stroking the soft nest of curls between her thighs. Carefully he pried open her lips, like opening a flower, and placed a kiss directly on her clit. His tongue flicked back and forth over the bundle of nerves, drawing a whimper from her. Anchoring her in place with one hand, he stole the other around to stroke through the cheeks of her ass to find that tiny opening. He stabbed at her clit over and over before finally taking it between his teeth. As he bit down gently on it, one finger breached her rear opening and a climax shuddered through her.

Dan held her in place while she shook with the tremors, the walls of her cunt clenching and shivering, his low voice murmuring soft, erotic words to her. But if she thought he would fuck her then she was wrong. Keeping the one finger in place in her anus, he thrust two into her now drenched pussy, resting his thumb on her clit. His eyes lifted to watch her as he set up a dual tempo, the finger in her rear pushing inside just a little farther each time. Mia couldn't stop herself from rocking back and forth on the twin impalements, spikes of lust spearing through her body. Her clit was so sensitive now that each soft stroke over its tip sent waves of heat through her, stirring the coil of lust deep inside her.

Dan was relentless, driving her over and over until she came again. Only then, when she was barely standing, did he rise to his feet. From somewhere a condom appeared and he rolled it in place. Then, balancing her with his hands, he carefully lowered her onto his cock. Spinning around he pressed her against a swath of black velvet that had suddenly coalesced into a wall. His hips pumped, each time driving into her a little harder, his thick cock stretching her walls and she arched and squirmed and whimpered with mindless passion.

Biting gently on her lower lip, he increased his rhythm. As the pace picked up he buried his face against her neck, his hot breath like a dry wind against her skin. Mia strained against him, her legs wrapped around him as she pushed herself into each thrust.

His body tightened just as hers did and in a blinding rush of pleasure they climaxed together, his semen spurting hot inside its latex sheath, her pussy clutching him like a wet glove, milking him. His mouth slid across her cheek to take hers in a grinding kiss, his tongue mimicking what he was doing to her with his cock.

When it was over she hung against him limply, struggling for breath, inhaling the scent of his musky, sweat-slicked skin. An unfamiliar feeling of satisfaction blossomed in her, a sense of being home. Of being safe.

She wanted to stay here forever because somewhere in a tiny sliver of her brain, a thread of panic unwound and told her outside this cocoon was danger and pain. She closed her eyes and sank deeper into the velvet.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the way to the hospital, Dan called Captain Holcomb. He tracked him down in a meeting in his conference room.

"Your ears must be burning," Holcomb said in his gruff voice.

"Oh? Is that good or bad?"

"I was just about to call you, so you saved me the trouble. I got Mark's message. I've put together a task force to concentrate on the three cases that are tied together — Nate Wilson, Stan Forbush and your girl." He paused. "How is she doing?"

"Hanging in there. Thanks for asking."

Holcomb cleared his throat. "Mark left a message that he had some information on the sniper rifle used and your guys have been a help to us. So I was wondering if you'd like to have Mark come sit in on this meeting. We're just getting started and we'll be at it for a while."

"I appreciate it. And yes, I'll get him down there."

"Listen, you folks helped us corral everyone at that demonstration before they scattered, so I wanted to mention this to you. We've got the feeling that someone paid to have the Denoyer woman do her thing yesterday. Not that she needed much urging."

Dan gripped the wheel. "I said exactly the same thing to Mark and Rick. Like someone called her and said this might be a good time to confront Mia again?"

"Uh-huh. Anyway, what do you say? About Mark?"

"I say thank you very much. I'll call Mark and tell him to get going right now. And he'll bring the list of rifle owners with him that our office pulled up. It's pretty long and we confined it just to sales in the last six months. Whoever this is could have owned it for quite a while."

"Let's see what we get on a first cast with this," Holcomb said. "If nothing turns up we'll go back further. Also, we checked with Wal-Mart. Nate's phone came from there but it was obviously a cash deal. No credit card receipt. And no records on disposables."

"Well, hell. Did we really expect anything more?" Dan sighed. "Thanks very much."

"No problem. That's what the city pays us for. So I'll look for Mark." He cleared his throat. "Hope your girl's okay."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You have to disappear."

John Grant listened to the voice on the other end of the phone connection and smiled. "That's what I do best."

"I mean *really* disappear. They'll be hunting everyone who owns one of those fancy rifles you use and you can be sure your name will come up."

Grant laughed, an unpleasant sound. "Amateurs. They'll never be able to find me."

"Do *not* mistake these men for amateurs," the voice snapped. "They're all former military and they can track a gnat through a jungle. Write them off and it could be the last thing you do."

"Calm down. They won't find me, that's all I'm telling you. They never have before, have they? I'm on my way to my destination right now. And the way I'm traveling, even my own mother wouldn't recognize me. If she wanted to, that is."

"Just be sure your ass is covered."

"My ass is always covered." A hint of laughter entered his voice. "Except, of course, in Argentina..."

"Shut up. This is important. We can't afford a screwup now."

"What about my money?"

"Oh, you want to get paid for a job you didn't do?"

"Do not pull that shit on me. She turned at the last second or she'd be spread all over her porch right now. I got the next best thing out of it. She won't be having any visions or whatever she calls them for a long time. I get paid or you'll be my next job. And I'll be doing it for free."

The voice was bitter. "Don't worry. It's being taken care of. We have to move the money through a lot of places so it can't be traced but you'll have it tomorrow. I'll call you as soon as it's done."

"Use one of the other numbers I gave you. I'm ditching this phone as soon as we're through talking."

"Fine. Meanwhile, just get the hell out of Texas."

Grant snapped the phone shut and banged it on the steering wheel. He'd begun to hate doing business with these people. If the money they offered wasn't so good he'd have walked away from them a long time ago. Regardless of any former relationships.

He separated the battery from the phone, pulled into a rest area and tossed it into a trash can. Then he slipped the SIM card into his pocket. The now useless phone itself he'd get rid of in the next state.

Let them try to put that together, he thought smugly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mia didn't know where she was, except it was very dark and cold and she was floating in space. She thought everything should feel soft but instead there was enormous pain. When she tried to breathe the pain grew worse.

*I must be dying. Dan, I'm so sorry.*

She felt tears streaking her cheeks. Dan. She wanted him so badly.

Baby blocks suddenly came tumbling at her and she tried to duck, to get out of their way. But moving hurt and then the blocks crashed into her, sharp edges piercing her



skin. She wanted to scream, with the pain but no sound came out of her mouth.

Here came the blocks again, only this time they were floating on water and babies were steering them. They came close to her but the babies laughed and laughed and steered away from her.

*I have to tell Dan. There's something here. Oh, Dan. I'll never see you again.*

She tried desperately to push her way out of the thick blackness surrounding her but the pain was too intense. All she could do was lie in its cocoon and cry silent tears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Faith looked up as Dan came into the room.

"I think she's doing better. The nurses seem pleased with her vitals and the readings on the machines apparently are pleasing everyone."

Dan moved to the side of the bed. Faith pushed her chair back to give him room.

"Has the doctor been in?" he asked.

"Four or five times." She swallowed a smile. "I think you put the fear of God into him."

"Good. Anything to make sure he keeps on top of this." His voice was taut and grim. He picked up Mia's hand, still as cold as the rest of her and tried to warm it with his own.

"She seems restless," Faith told him. "As if she's trying to wake up. But they're keeping her heavily sedated because of the pain. Doctor Cardoza said it will be at least two days before they'll even think of cutting back on the meds."

"Did she wake up at all?" Dan felt a thread of fear weaving through him.

"Oh, yes. They wouldn't have moved her from recovery if she hadn't. But then she was right back out again."

"She looks agitated," he commented, smoothing the hair back from her forehead. "Like she's struggling with something. Is that good for her?"

"She just started doing that. Let me go tell the nurse and give you some time alone with her."

Mia was dwarfed by the bed, by the massive amount of bandages, by the machines that sent out messages letting people know she was still alive. Lines creased her forehead and her head moved slightly back and forth, as if she was in some distress.

Dan kept stroking her, as if his touch could settle her. "I love you, Mia. You are my life, do you know that? You walked right in when I least expected it and now I don't know how I'd live without you."

He bent down and pressed his mouth to hers, careful not to touch any of the bandages or jostle her at all. He could have sworn he felt an answering pressure and for a moment his heart skipped a beat. He tried again and this time her mouth moved under his.

"Dan?"

The word was a breath, so soft he barely heard it. He leaned closer, wondering if he imagined it. "Mia? Sweetheart, it's me. What is it?"

He saw her lips move but no sound came out. The lines in her forehead deepened and she tried to thrash her head back and forth again. Dan panicked and pressed the call button for the nurse. But she was already there, Faith right behind her.

"I think she's trying to say something," Dan said. "She's moving around. I'm afraid she'll hurt herself."

"Let's see what's going on here," the nurse said, gently moving him out of the way. She checked all the machines, then opened Mia's eyelids and checked them with a tiny penlight. Felt her pulsed and timed it.

"Well?" Dan couldn't contain his impatience. "What's happening? Is she all right?"

"Her pulse is a little rapid and her heart rate is slightly elevated. I think she's trying to wake up." She studied his face. "If she does wake up the pain will be enormous but I'll be ready to up the morphine drip. However, there seems to be some inner urgency so maybe we should try to help her and see what happens. Are you staying?"

"You bet I am," Dan told her.

The nurse stepped aside so he could move next to Mia again.

"It's way early for her to be fully conscious but she's struggling with something. Try talking to her. See what happens. And touch her. Maybe that will soothe her."

He placed one hand against her cheek, stroking it lightly, his other hand holding hers lying on the covers. "Sweetheart, I'm here. Do you want to talk to me? I'm not going anywhere until we get it right, okay? Just take it easy."

He kept caressing her and placing light kisses on her lips and cheeks. He felt her breath against his skin, so light he was afraid at first she wasn't breathing at all. But the machines whirred and beeped and she continued her attempt to move.

He pressed his mouth to hers again and said, "I'm here, sweetheart. I'm right here."

Again he felt her lips move against his, her mouth forming his name.

"Tell me, honey. Whatever it is, I'm here listening."

Mia was frustrated. No matter how she tried, she couldn't find her way out of the blackness. It wrapped around her like thick material, yet when she touched it, it disintegrated beneath her fingers. She would reach out to push it away and another wave of blackness would grab her.

A tiny pinprick of light disturbed her, like a spark at the end of a tunnel. The spark turned into Dan's face, then faded again and the blocks with the numbers, bouncing on the water, began coming at her in waves.

Dan. She concentrated on finding his face again. She had something important to tell him. Why couldn't she get rid of this blackness? Was she dead already? She

concentrated as hard as she could, trying to move but pain knifed through her, stealing her breath.

Was that really Dan or was she imagining it?

*Dan! Don't leave me! Stay with me!*

She had something important to tell him, if she could just figure it out. She had to get to Dan. She reached up, pulling on the blackness, grasping it in her hand. Gathering every bit of strength she could, gritting her teeth against the pain, she opened her mouth to scream.

*Dan!*

"She said my name." Dan put his face next to Mia's again, his fingertips on her mouth. "I heard her say it."

With what must have been superhuman effort, she reached her right hand up to grab his lapel.

"Look. Look at this." His voice was filled with hope. "She must be waking up. She's grabbing onto me."

"Dan." Mia's voice was barely audible but what they heard sounded like a rusty saw dragging across metal.

"See, I told you." He kissed her mouth. "I'm here, sweetheart. I'm right here."

"Blocks," she rasped. "Water. Moving."

Dan slid a glance at Faith. "Could she be having a vision under all that medication?"

"It's possible. It's not unheard of, although I don't know as much about it as some of the other women in the Circle." She had a look of amazement on her face. "I can't imagine the strength it took for her to do this."

Mia wouldn't release her death grip on his jacket. Her lips moved although her face was contorted with pain. "Blocks," she repeated. "Water. Floating. Numbers."

"Should I call Aunt Vivi and have her get someone over here?" Faith wanted to know.

"No." He shook his head. "I don't want any more people here except us right now. I heard what she said." He kissed Mia and uncurled her fingers from his jacket. "I hear you, sweetheart. The numbers. That's what you mean, right? The baby blocks and the numbers. You saw water and the numbers moving over it."

She lay back exhausted, her face covered with perspiration. "Hurts," she managed to get out.

Then the machines began to go crazy and her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Faith!" Dan hollered.

"I'll get the nurse again," Faith said, already on her feet.

But the nurses were already there, along with two men Dan assumed were a

resident and an intern. When he saw them rolling in a crash cart, Dan nearly stopped breathing.

"You'll have to move," one of the nurses told him.

He backed up against the wall, next to Faith, who quietly slipped her hand into his and squeezed. His eyes followed the organized chaos around Mia's bed, heard the orders being barked out, saw them ready the defibrillator and yell, "Clear." Other orders were called out and people moved swiftly to obey them. They worked like a well-oiled machine, each person doing a specific job.

During the next few minutes Dan felt as if time had stopped. Not a man given much to religion anymore, he found himself uttering fervent prayers, promising God anything if only Mia could be spared.

At the moment he was sure he would lose his mind, he heard someone say, "She's stable. Let's keep her this way. Good work, everyone."

The crash cart was rolled out of the room and all but one of the nurses left, carrying various pieces of equipment. The one Dan had met who was assigned to Mia was checking the IV fluids and injecting medication into one of the lines.

One of the men who'd worked on Mia walked back in the room and over to Dan, an angry look on his face. "Have you any idea of the serious nature of this patient's condition? What did you do to her? And why isn't she in ICU?"

Dan felt Faith's hand slip into his and knew she was doing her best to keep him from punching the man and to remind him to rein in his temper.

"And you are?" Dan asked, every muscle in his body tense.

"Dr. Richards. I'm on Dr. Cardoza's team and the resident charged with the care of this patient. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm her fiancé and I can assure you I know just how serious her condition is. She's not in ICU because there's a killer after her. That's why we have two guards on the door. And you can believe I did *not* aggravate her condition in any way. She seemed to be trying to force herself awake and was agitated. I was just calling the nurse when this happened."

The doctor took a long, hard look at Dan's face and apparently decided arguing with him was not a good option to choose. "We're just lucky we brought her back. But I'm going to increase her sedation and talk to Dr. Cardoza about changing some of her meds. If you're going to be in here with her, you have to make sure she doesn't get agitated again."

"Let me tell you," Dan said, a muscle jumping in his cheek, "that young woman means everything in the world to me. I have no intention of jeopardizing her in any way at all."

He realized the doctor was just doing his job and didn't know him from Adam but Dan had to restrain himself from punching his lights out.

When everyone had left the room he moved back to his place beside Mia. Faith

pushed one of the chairs behind him and he collapsed into it, leaning his arms on the side rails of the bed. Then he dropped his head to his forearms and did something he hadn't done since he was ten years old. He cried.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time he returned to the hotel, Dan had managed to get his emotions under control, thanks in large part to Faith Halloran. He had stood in the hospital room, torn between wanting to glue himself to Mia's side and knowing he had a job to get done. If only he could be in two places at the same time.

"I'll call you if anything changes," Faith assured him, seeing the look of conflict on his face. "I promise. But Mia nearly killed herself to give you a message. Don't let it go to waste. Go back and get to work on it."

Only twenty years of Marine discipline gave him the strength to do what he had to do next. He kissed Mia once more, then strode from the room, his mind already shifting gears.

In his car he called Andy and gave him the latest clues on the puzzle of Mia's visions.

"Have the Dragon run every combination. Blocks. The numbers. Tumbling. Water. Someone steering. Somewhere in there is the key and we're missing it."

"If it can be found," Andy told him, "the Dragon will find it. He and I hold all the mysteries of the universe. I'm also doing a random search for sites that record precognitive visions. Maybe we can find something that matches closely enough to take it from there."

"Well saddle the old guy up and get going. This is urgent."

*Like everything else right now,* Dan thought grimly.

In his suite he found Rick alone going through more computer printouts.

"Mark's gone down to the police station to sit in with Holcomb's task force. What's that all about?"

Dan gave him a brief report on it. "Either he wants our help or he wants to keep track of us. Either way, it's better to be working with him than against him. I think Mia getting shot rattled him." He shucked his jacket, took off his tie and rolled up his sleeves before pulling a chair up to the table. "All right, where's the notepad with Mia's doodles on it?"

Rick fished under the scattered papers and handed it to him. "How is she?"

"She's..." He stopped took a breath and began again. "She's...holding her own."

"Something happened," Rick guessed, noting the pain in his partner's eyes.

Dan's fists clenched around the pad. "I nearly lost her while I was there. She about killed herself trying to wake up and tell me something. I called Andy so he could feed it into the Dragon but we need to take a look at it too."

"My God. I'm sorry, Dan. I... She'll be fine. She seems like a fighter."

"She'd better be." His voice broke and he stopped to pull himself together again. "All right. This must be damn important, so let's see if we can make any sense out of it."

Talking back and forth so they didn't leave anything out, they listed every one of her visions and the actual events they'd honed in on, then added in the new information. But at the end of an hour they were still no place.

"Andy's doing another search with the Dragon for precognitive sites that list other visions and trying to match these up. Maybe we'll come up with something there."

Rick tossed his pen onto the table. "Let's give it a break a little and see what the Dragon comes up with. If Chase is so uptight about his guest list, maybe we should go over it again, only in greater detail. Andy sent us everything he found and then some."

They were both aware that time was running away from them. They had forty-two hours and the clock was ticking. Before they knew it Friday would arrive and they'd be out of options. Neither of them thought there was a way to steal Oscar at the demonstration but at this point they weren't eliminating anything. They split the list, which contained intimate details of everyone attending on Friday. Andy had quickly learned exactly what they meant at Phoenix when one of the partners said, "Get me everything."

"Mostly corporate CEOs and high-level military personnel." Dan made tick marks next to some of the names on the list, ones he thought were key players. "I can't see any red flags here but I can certainly understand why Chase is nervous. The success of this demonstration could bring in billions to Carpenter Techtronics. They could end up being a world leader in this field."

Rick got up to get a soft drink from the mini-fridge, popped the top and took a long swallow. "How much do you figure Oscar could bring on the open market?"

Dan shrugged. "You mean if someone wanted to keep it away from all other competition? Other countries, even? Probably untold billions. More than Chase could get legitimately. Because whoever got Oscar would be in the catbird seat. They could manufacture it themselves and sell it, if they wanted. If the head of a country buys it, he could use it to detect any covert operations. Or they could just use it to protect themselves."

"That's what I was thinking. Think about an organization like a drug cartel. Oscar could always let them know when someone's coming, how many there were, record conversations, take pictures. No one could ever get near them without being blown away. Or if it goes to an arms dealer, he'd never be able to spend all the money he'd make with it."

"On the other hand," Dan pointed out, "it would be worth billions to the government if they could contract Carpenter to manufacture it. Think how it could be used to protect both our troops and black ops units in any number of situations."

"So if someone from Carpenter is involved in this, they get to keep every dime for themselves and screw the company, right?"

"That's about it. But I'll be damned if I can figure out which one it would be. Shit." He shoved all the paper aside. "Call Andy and see if he's done the in-depth on the key people yet. You can also check if the Dragon's come up with anything on Mia's numbers vision, especially the latest one with the water. Although I don't think he's had enough time to really run it yet."

"Enough time." Rick snorted. "Boy, don't I wish we had *that*."

But at that moment Dan's cell phone rang. He pressed the Talk button with a sense of dread, as he'd been doing with every call since Mia was shot. But this one was from Mark.

"Just wanted to let you know that the slugs they dug out of Nate Wilson, the bomber, were from a .22 caliber."

"Small gun." Dan was surprised. "Whoever shot him had to be right next to him to be that effective with a gun that small."

"Obviously not someone he expected to kill him. They don't have any leads here, although they're going to canvass the workers at the airport again. And see if any of the remote cameras caught anything. How about calling Andy and asking him to see if anyone at Carpenter bought a gun like that recently?"

"Okay. Rick and I were discussing the fact that we think someone there is either leading the charge or involved in it. I just asked Rick to give Andy a call. He'll do it right now."

"We'd better come up with something soon. The demonstration's the day after tomorrow. Right now we have less than forty-eight hours to find the answers."

## Chapter Sixteen

Jesus Obregon was a man who led a simple life, living with his family in a plain but nice adobe house in Galveston. He had often wondered why Maria, his wife, a registered nurse, had chosen to marry him, a man with barely a high school education. But there was no questioning the love between them and he thanked God for her every day.

He was also blessed by the fact that their children—two daughters and a son—gave them no trouble at all. While other parents battled gang influence or the creeping influence of the drug cartels, his children excelled in school, worked after-school jobs and showed their parents much love and respect.

If Jesus wished for anything, it was to be able to reward all of them for being the people they were and for enriching his life. This job, which he'd had now for a year, had been a step upward from construction work. The salary was twice what he made before and he really didn't have much to do at all. Keep the boat maintained and be sure it was ready whenever the owners wanted to take it out.

And there were always handsome tips for his work.

But this, now. This latest thing had to be something of great importance. The *senor* had brought a small wooden crate to him, sealed on all sides. He told him to sleep on the boat and not let the crate out of his sight. And best of all, he'd given Jesus a large sum of money and told him he would double it if nothing happened to the crate when he came back on the weekend.

So for two days he'd lived on the boat, eating good food and watching satellite television. And staring at the crate. Surely something that warranted so much extra pay was worth a fortune. Jesus readily admitted he wasn't the smartest man in the world but surely he could figure out a way to cut himself in on whatever the action was.

Maybe at last he could have the money he wanted for his family. Maybe at last he would be the hero he'd always longed to be.

And so he sat and stared at the crate, wondering if there was a way to open it without leaving a trace.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I got it!"

Andy was never excited. Very little rattled the cage of this super-geek who could make computers sing like opera stars and find the most obscure scrap of information. But two hours after the last call, the high pitch of his voice was Dan's clue that this was something beyond normal results.



"Okay, Sherlock. What have you got?"

"The dreams! Oh, man." Andy's voice almost vibrated over the phone. "I got it."

"You mean *Mia's* dreams? Her visions?"

"Yeah. Oh, man. Oh, man. You just have no idea. *No idea.* Jesus, Dan, it's a gold mine."

Dan had to exert every ounce of self-control not to shout at Andy over the connection. "Andrew. Will you get your act together and tell me what you've got? And how you got it?"

Across the connection he heard Andy draw in a breath and let it out. "You can thank the wonderful Dragon. And a guy I've been exchanging programming with for years."

Andy paused and Dan could almost see him vibrating with suppressed energy.

"Okay," he told him. "Pull yourself together. Start from the beginning." But Dan was having a hard time slowing down himself.

"First, I put out a call to people who work with paranormal stuff and got some help from them."

"Andy. Please tell me you didn't tell them what you were working on." Dan felt his heart freeze in his chest. *Jesus! If word of this gets out...*

"No. Dan. Do you think I'm that stupid? These people don't even know where I work. No one does. Ask anyone who ever emailed with me. They still think I work in some closet and all my clients are on Planet Cyberspace."

"Fine. I'm sorry. Go on."

"I just asked if anyone out there had written programs for paranormal interpretations. That I had a special project for myself. Please, please, please. Please believe me."

"Andy. Yes. All right. Calm down." Dan made his voice steady. "I believe you. Just tell me what you found out."

"Anyway, what I'm going to tell you is so wild. Do you know there's this whole worldwide network of people with psychic abilities? They have their own website and everything. These people live everywhere. They communicate all the time and assist each other in interpreting and using their psychic gifts. There's like hundreds of thousands of people involved. It all goes back to something called The Lotus Circle."

Dan's body tensed. "Yes, as a matter of fact I have heard of it. And I'm becoming more and more familiar with it. Why?"

"See, this guy in Wisconsin? His aunt's involved in this. So is he. They're both precognitive, like Mia. So he wrote a program to help them when they can't interpret their visions. He also created a database that people all over the world use to list visions they've already interpreted. For comparisons, you know?"

*Holy shit! This has to be the mother of all coincidences.*

"Andy, did he tell you where his aunt lives, by any chance?"

"Yeah. Somewhere in Texas. But Texas is such a big state I didn't think anything of it. Why?"

"I think your friend's aunt is one of the women helping Mia. Faith introduced them through *her* aunt."

"Oh, my God. You're kidding, right? This is too unbelievable. Just freaking unbelievable."

Dan waited but when all he heard was silence, he said, "Andy? Are you still there?"

"Oh, sorry. Just trying to digest this cosmic event. So. Okay. He sent me his program, I tweaked it some, attacked the database and voilà! Results!"

Dan swallowed his impatience. "We don't have unlimited time here. Are you ever going to tell me what you found out?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry. Okay. It's a boat. She's dreaming about a boat."

"A boat?" Dan felt his eyebrows shoot up. "Why is she dreaming about a boat?"

"Because that's where your robot is. It's already been stolen and it's on a boat."

Dan shook his head, then stopped, realizing Andy couldn't see him. "That's absurd. I saw a demonstration myself after Stan Forbush's murder. The real thing is under lock and key. With two sets of our folks guarding it and a failsafe biometric ID system for the actual chamber where Oscar is."

"I don't care what you saw. Somehow you've been fooled. And not only that, I know where the boat is!"

"What?"

"What did he say?" Rick asked, unable to keep quiet any longer.

Dan held up his hand and mouthed, "One minute." Then he said into the phone, "Okay Andy. I'm taking it you've saved the best for the last. Where is it? What's the location of this boat?"

"Slip one five seven, Blockhouse Marina, Galveston, Texas."

"Holy shit." He glanced at Rick. "You won't believe this when I tell you." Then he turned his attention to Andy again. "When I get back to Baltimore you can tell me exactly how you did this. For now, I don't suppose you can email me a map or anything."

"Already on its way. Check your laptop *and* your BlackBerry."

"One more question. Do you happen to know who owns the boat?"

Andy's sigh carried over the connection. "Working on it. I'm tracing the slip rental but I have to wade through a bunch of shell corporations. Someone's really covering their tracks. I didn't want to call the marina manager and say something I shouldn't. I figure you could handle it much better than me."

"I'm on it. But keep doing what you're doing. And call me anytime you get anything."

"Where will you be?" Andy asked.

"Rick and I will be on the way to Galveston together. But first I'm going to the hospital again."

He clicked off and related everything to Rick, whose jaw dropped as he listened.

"But that's incredible. Jesus, the kid is a fucking genius."

"Yeah. I can imagine the raise he'll hit us up for after this." Dan opened his email on the laptop, found the message from Andy and printed out the map and directions. "I don't want to say anything to Chase yet, just in case we're wrong. He'll freak out and that's the last thing we need."

"He'll be looking for you," Rick pointed out. "How will you explain your absence?"

"I'll call him and set up a meeting for late tomorrow afternoon. Tell him we have some leads we want to run down but we'll be back in time to be sure everything's set security-wise for Friday."

"All right. And I'll keep going over the rest of the stuff Andy sent until you get back from the hospital."

"Oh and call Mark. Bring him up to speed but I think tell him to keep this strictly to himself until we have something concrete."

"Got it." He paused. "I'll say prayers for you and Mia."

Dan swallowed the lump in his throat. "Thanks, buddy." Then he called Faith to tell her he was on his way.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Everything still quiet?" Dan asked the two guards stationed at Mia's door.

"Still the same, boss," one of them answered. "One of us always goes in whenever a nurse or doctor is in there, after we check them out first. And of course, Mrs. Halloran never leaves her alone." He laughed. "I think we make them nervous. She's getting the royal treatment."

"Good," Dan bit off. "They'd better be on their toes."

Faith, still in her guard dog position, smiled at him when he walked in. "You got here just in time. I was afraid you'd be too late."

"Too late for what?" Dan tensed.

"We have a little surprise for you." She glanced over at Mia.

"Hi."

The voice was so raw he almost didn't recognize it but when he looked at the bed Mia's eyes were open and she was trying to smile. He was at her side at once, carefully taking the hand on her uninjured side. He had to blink back the tears threatening to leak from his eyes.

"Hi, honey." He kissed her knuckles. "You gave us a big scare here."

She wet her lips. "Sorry."

"No. I'm sorry. I'm the one who let you get shot."

She shook her head once, wincing at the pain the movement caused. "Not...your fault."

"She woke up on her own about half an hour ago," Faith told him. "She's had some ice chips and swallowed them with no problem."

Dan felt his heart kick into triple time, then settle back to a reasonable beat.

*Thank you, God.*

"The doctor's been in several times to check on her," Faith went on. "He was very pleased when she woke up. He says her vital signs are good and he's satisfied with her condition, all things considered."

"She's tough," Dan said, pride in his voice. "But I was afraid it would take more than toughness to pull her out of this."

"She'll only be awake for a little bit. They just upped the morphine drip. I wasn't sure when you'd be back and hoped she'd still be awake when you got here."

"Wanted...see you."

Mia's voice was so weak but it was sweet music to his ears.

"Listen." Faith rose and picked up her purse. "While you're here I'm going downstairs to get something to eat. I spoke to Mark a while ago and he's still tied up with the task force, so I'm just going to hang out here."

"Did he call you?"

She smiled. "In a manner of speaking."

Of course, he chided himself. With mental telepathy these two didn't need normal means of communication.

"I can't thank you enough," he said. "I know hospital sitting can be pretty tiring."

She smiled at Mia. "Not for this terrific lady. I'm happy to do it. Besides, if it weren't for you guys, Mark might never have made it out of Peru alive. I owe you big-time."

Impulsively Dan, a man not given to expressions of emotion, reached out and hugged her. "Thanks, anyway."

When Faith left, Dan leaned down and kissed Mia very gently. "I have very good news for you."

"Good. Could...use some."

"Andy deciphered your visions."

Her eyes widened.

Dan grinned at her. "The last one handed us the final clue, although I don't think I'd want another scare like the one you gave us trying to communicate it."

He explained to her in detail what Andy had discovered and what he was still

working on.

"We couldn't have done it without you, Mia."

"Maybe...give me...job when...better." She tried to smile again.

"We might just do that." He brushed his fingers against her cheek. "You have no idea how much I love you."

"Love...you too."

He had to force himself to be content with that as the medication they'd given her just before his arrival began to kick in. Her eyes closed, her eyelashes lying softly on her pale skin. He comforted himself with the knowledge that her breathing was better than the last time he'd been there. He had to trust the doctors when they said she'd passed the crisis.

She just looked so fragile lying there, dwarfed by her bandages and surrounded by all the machinery. Somewhere in the back of his mind he'd thought someday he'd fall in love and create a personal life for himself. But a someday that had always been far off in the future. He hadn't expected it to hit him like a bolt out of the blue. First there had been his long commitment to the Marines. Then building Phoenix with his partners and trolling for private and government contracts.

There was always something, with short side trips for R&R—sex with no commitments. Now he wanted that commitment, wanted it for the rest of his life. He realized suddenly at forty-three if he turned his back on it now it might never come to him again. God or the Fates or the cosmic universe had handed him this chance and he was grabbing it as tightly as he could.

He sat holding Mia's hand until Faith returned. Then he knew it was time to leave.

"I'll have Mark get hold of you," he told her.

She nodded. "Good luck."

He kissed Mia one last time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan called Rick on his way out of the hospital to give him a heads-up. The other man was waiting for him at the back entrance to their hotel when he got there, carrying a briefcase stuffed with papers.

"I can fill you in on the way," he said, getting into the SUV. "Mark just called again."

"And?"

"Someone who's a friend of Nate Wilson's—God, I didn't think people like him had friends—anyway, whoever it was called the police station and got routed to the task force. He said the night before he was killed, Nate was bragging about coming into a whole lot of money. More than he'd ever seen."

"I don't suppose he told the cops who he might be getting it from," Dan said, a wry

note in his voice.

"Yeah, right. But he did say it was a couple. That Nate kept referring to 'he' and 'she'."

"If we're convinced someone at the top at Carpenter is doing this, that means the lovely, angelic Joy is in it up to her rotten neck."

"If," Rick repeated. "We still have to prove it. And who do you think the guy would be?"

Dan snorted. "Obviously not Stan Forbush. He was a sacrificial lamb. Although they needed him for something. But what?"

"We'll get to that. So that leaves Lucas or Ladd and Lucas is the one she has a history with."

Dan frowned. "But why screw his own company? I mean, sure he gets a bundle free and clear but think how much more he could make through the contracts they'll get."

"Who knows what tempts people? We see it all the time. There's probably a lot we still don't know. Anyway, Adam and Holcomb are both searching records to see if any of the three owns a twenty-two. The guy with the sniper rifle might be a little harder but we're still working on it."

"What about the companies we targeted as most likely to make this kind of a move?"

"Three popped up with the requisite characters. Each of them has a female executive pretty high up the chain. And each is hurting for a big splash."

"Let's cross our fingers and hope a trace shows up somewhere. Remember, whoever owns it could very easily have acquired it illegally. Or 'lost' it. Or whatever. Right now we're just digging in a very large haystack."

"Jesus. This just gets better and better." Dan shook his head. "Much as I hate to admit it, my gut still tells me it's the folks at Carpenter. Too hard for someone on the outside to get in and kill Stan, dope our guys and do some of the other stuff. On the other hand, someone really, really smart could figure it out too."

He wanted to bang his head on the steering wheel. Proof. They needed proof. With any luck, that's what they'd find in Galveston.

\* \* \* \* \*

Located three hours from San Antonio, about forty minutes south of Houston, the city of Galveston was like a diorama of a small Southern town. It had also been the site of the worst natural disaster in the country when a hurricane swept through it 1900. More than seven thousand people were killed.

But the city had picked itself up and rebuilt itself. Loaded with excellent restaurants and a variety of entertainment choices, it was one of the prime tourist attractions in a state with an abundance of them. Its thirty-two miles of beaches had sprouted marinas like a chicken laying eggs. Whether at a yacht basin, a sailing school, or just a private

home for luxury boats, hundreds of vessels bobbed in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Block House Marina was located on South Shore Boulevard, not far from—what else?—the Block House Restaurant. Using the Mapquest map and directions and the GPS locator in their vehicle, Rick navigated them to the address on South Shore Boulevard. The restaurant sat almost right on the highway, the marina behind it. Judging from the fence boundaries a quick glance at the piers jutting into the Gulf of Mexico showed them more than one hundred boats of all kinds were moored in slips at four docks.

"If we're looking for slip one fifty-seven, they must start their numbering at a hundred," Rick guessed.

"Nothing back yet from Andy on who owns the boat that's anchored there?"

"Nada but he's still working on it. Someone's gone to a lot of trouble to bury the ownership."

"All right. There's a light on at the marina office." Dan climbed out of the vehicle. "Let's see whose cage we can rattle."

The man who opened the door to their knock was long and lean, at least fifty and excessively suspicious.

"I get paid a whole lot of money to make sure nobody bothers these babies," he told them. "Come back some other time."

Dan pulled out his Phoenix identification and his little Get Out Of Jail Free card—the note from the president. Bob, as the man told him his name was, scrutinized the card like an IRS agent looking for hidden funds. Finally he handed it back.

"So if I get in trouble over this, the president will fix it?"

"You won't get in trouble. I promise. We just want to see the boat. Who rents the slip, by the way?"

"Some company out of Argentina."

"Argentina?"

Dan and Rick stared at each other.

"Yeah but believe me, the people who come here only vacation there. They're as Spanish as I am and I was born in Oklahoma. This way."

He carefully locked the door to the tiny office and led them two piers over. "We start our numbering with one zero one. Had a big fight over who would get the Number One number so the owners decided to avoid that altogether."

Rick actually gave a short laugh. "Good idea."

"There's someone on the boat," Bob told them as they walked along the pier.

Dan and Rick both went on full alert.

"One of the owners?" Dan asked.

"Nah. Just some guy they pay to baby-sit it. A local."

"Holy shit," Rick said, when they came to a halt at their destination. *Lucky*, forty-six

feet of luxury yacht, rocked slightly with the gentle motion of the waves. "What a sweetheart."

"You know boats?" Bob asked.

"I grew up with a guy whose family minted money. Chad just added to it. Bought himself one of these a couple of years ago."

"What can you tell me about it?" Dan asked.

"It's made by Navigator. Forty-six feet long with a luxury interior. Twin Volvo engines that will run for a thousand hours. Full electronics. They can go anywhere with this and we'd have a hell of a time catching them. This particular model goes for almost half a mill."

"Hell. Whoever's doing this is either very well financed or has been doing this kind of stuff for a long time." He pulled his Glock from his hip holster, chambered a cartridge and held it down at his side.

"Hey, wait a minute," Bob protested. "I didn't sign on for any shooting here."

"And we hope to avoid it," Rick told him, racking the slide on his own gun. "But it pays to be prepared. If I were you, I'd go on back to the office now."

Bob stared at them for a long moment. Then shrugged and jogged back down the pier.

Dan and Rick nodded to each other, then quietly climbed the short ladder and hoisted themselves onto the deck. The light was on in the main salon. Through the glass doors they could see a blond-wood coffee table with a square crate in the middle. Kneeling in front of it was a dark-skinned man in work shirt and jeans, doing his best to unscrew screws that no normal screwdriver could unfasten.

He was so focused on what he was doing he didn't hear the glass door slide open or two pairs of feet softly descend into the salon. His first clue that something was wrong was when the cold steel of the barrel of Dan's gun pressed just behind his ear.

Jesus Obregon froze. His hands stilled on the crate.

"Very easily and slowly," Dan said in a grim voice, "put the screwdriver on the table and stand up. Now!" he snapped, when Jesus didn't move.

The man laid the tool down and gradually rose from his knees.

"Don't kill me, *senor*," he begged. "Please. I have a wife and children."

"Back away from the table and don't make any sudden moves and you might get to see your family again."

Sweat rolled down Jesus' face as he did what he was told, straightening his body and backing away from the table.

"Turn around," Dan ordered.

"I will do whatever you want," Jesus told him, slowly turning to face them. "Just please do not kill me."

When he saw that there were not one but two men and noted the expressions on



their faces, he felt the blood rush from his head and his hands began to shake.

*"Madre di Dios."*

Dan nodded to Rick, who pulled a pair of handcuffs from the back of his belt and pulled Jesus' hands behind him. With the man secured, he pushed him to a sitting position on the couch.

"I will give you one chance only to answer my questions," Dan said. "Otherwise I will let my friend question you his way. *Comprende?*"

*"Si! Si!* I tell you anything you want. Anything."

"What's your name?"

"Jesus Obregon."

"Who owns this boat?"

*"La senor and la senora,"* he told them. "Smith," he added.

Rick burst out laughing but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Mr. and Mrs. Smith? You've gotta be kidding me."

"I swear to you on my life," Jesus told them. "I have worked for them for many months. Senor and Senora Smith."

"Christ," Dan said. "I can't believe anyone uses that in this day and age. Or that someone's stupid enough to believe it."

"How long have you worked on this boat?" Rick asked, glaring at Jesus.

"Seven months. Since they bring it to Galveston."

They got past the basics—what Jesus did, how much he was paid. *How* he was paid—always in cash. And what did he know about the crate?

Jesus gave them what little he knew, which was practically nothing. He was nearly in tears as Rick kept his gun pressed to his temple.

"They give me so much extra money," he babbled. "It has to be worth a great deal, no? I just thought maybe I could use it to make some extra money for my wife and family."

"When are they supposed to come back for this?" Rick asked.

"They said have the boat ready to leave on Saturday."

"You should be glad we showed up," Dan told him, motioning for Rick to put his gun away. "The minute they arrived on Saturday, you'd be a dead man. All right, describe these people for me."

While words spilled out of Jesus' mouth faster than he could control them, Rick looked around for instruments to use on the crate. He finally found a pry bar in a cupboard under the sink. In minutes he had the sides of the crate pried away and let them fall to the table. He and Dan stared at what was inside.

Finally Dan stepped forward and placed a light hand on the object.

"Hello, Oscar," he said softly.

## Chapter Seventeen

Rick and Dan stared at the small robot sitting in the middle of the opened crate.

"So what do we do now?" Rick asked at last.

"Not leave him here, that's for sure. Or our greedy friend here, either." He tipped his head in Jesus' direction.

"Oh, *senors*, please, please, please. If you will just let me go home, I will never say a word to anyone."

Rick snorted. "Yeah, right. That comes right after my believing in the tooth fairy." He looked at Dan. "But what *do* we do with him? We sure can't leave him here alone. And if we take him along and the 'Smiths' call for him and he's not here, that could blow everything."

"I have an idea." He punched in numbers on his satellite phone.

"Who are you calling in the middle of the night?"

"More than one person," Dan grinned. "Mike? Hey, buddy. How'd you like to take a little trip?"

"Sure." He heard Mike yawn. "What hot spot are you sending me to this time?"

"How does Galveston sound? You get to spend a couple of days on a luxury yacht. Oh and bring one of the men with you."

"What? Have you been drinking?"

"I only wish."

Dan explained to him what he wanted. Mike chuckled and said he'd be there in an hour. Dan disconnected the call.

"I heard all that," Rick said. "You think this will work?"

"Do we have a choice? Meanwhile, I'll sit with our good friend, Jesus, here, if you'll go tell suspicious Bob that a helicopter's going to land in his parking lot in about an hour and he's not to bother the pilot or the man who'll be left to watch it."

\* \* \* \* \*

That part of the plan went over smoother than Dan could have hoped. Mike arrived with the chopper and brought one of the Phoenix men on the San Antonio team to guard it. At Dan's request they were wearing black warm-up jackets that sported shoulder patches. The design consisted of an American flag in the center, an eagle below it and above it the letters NODT. Mike had designed the patch himself a long time ago for a mission when they needed something official-looking. When Dan asked him what NODT stood for, he grinned and said, "Not One Damn Thing."

Shel Morgan, the man he'd brought with him, lounged in a careless pose against the side of the machine but no one could mistake the assault rifle cradled in his arms.

Rick went out to the lot to meet him and they jogged back down the pier to the boat.

Mike whistled when he saw it. "Someone's socked a bundle into this baby."

"But not nearly as much as they'd have if the plot to steal Oscar had worked."

"All right. Introduce me to the poor schmuck who got caught in this and you can head back to the city." He handed Dan a large duffle bag with a special padded lining. "This what you wanted?"

"Perfect."

With the tools Mike had brought they fastened the crate back together. But Oscar lay comfortably in the duffel bag, ready for his ride back to San Antonio. They left Jesus handcuffed on the couch in Mike's tender care.

"Call one of us if and when he gets a call tomorrow," Dan said. "Today," he corrected himself, looking at his watch. "You can bet the 'Smiths' will be checking up on their baby."

"Then what?"

"Then bring him back to San Antonio and stash him in a cheap motel with one of our guys until this is over."

"But, *senors*." Jesus' voice was panicked. "My family. My wife will expect to hear from me."

"She knows you're staying on the boat?" Rick asked him.

He nodded. "She calls me every morning before she leaves for work."

"Okay. Mike, he gets to talk to his wife but keep that gun in his ear so he doesn't decide to get tricky."

"I swear by the saints," Jesus promised.

"Okay. That and the gun ought to keep him in line." He turned to Rick. "Let's haul ass."

They managed the trip back to the city in under three hours and woke up the Hallorans.

"You could have called for a report," Mark joked, zipping up his hastily donned jeans.

"We need to park something in your gun closet until early tomorrow morning," Dan told him. Mark had a specially insulated closet where he kept his guns and ammunition. Oscar would be safe there from prying eyes.

"Come along. Then I expect you to tell me what you've found out. And I'll give you my report from the task force. Which will take all of two minutes."

By the time Dan and Rick made it back to the hotel, they barely had time for a couple hours of sleep. But they were used to this kind of routine and showers and

coffee somewhat revived them.

Over the second pot of coffee, they reviewed their plans for the next two days. Dan called Mark to fill him in on his part, then left for the hospital. Rick would monitor incoming information from Andy until he got back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite the fact that he had a lot to do and not enough hours in which to do it, Dan had to see Mia before he did anything else. Reassure himself she actually had come awake and was going to live. When he walked into the room she was a deathly still presence on the bed. Then her eyes opened, he saw her color was slightly better and his heart settled back to a normal rate.

He'd checked in with the guard on the door. The other one was sitting in the big recliner chair near the bed.

"I finally insisted Mrs. Halloran go home last night," he reported. "She would have stayed but she looked dead on her feet."

Dan nodded. "Good idea." He leaned down and kissed Mia's dry, parched lips. "Hi, gorgeous. You sure do look beautiful."

Her eyes flashed *Liar!* "Ice?" she croaked.

"You bet." He lifted a fresh cup of ice chips and fed her a spoonful with extreme gentleness. "Go get some breakfast," he told the guard. "Your relief should be here shortly, anyway. I'll be here for about half an hour."

"I'll just wait until they do," the guard told him. "Collins and I will get something together then."

"Okay. Your choice."

Still, assessing the situation, the guard discreetly backed out of the room left them alone.

"Love...you," Mia croaked.

"I love you, too. And I have some news for you."

While he fed her ice chips, he told her about Andy's report and the trip to Galveston. Her eyes brightened when she heard they had the real Oscar under lock and key.

"So you see, you were right all along. From the very beginning. And those visions with the numbers—especially the last one with the water and movement—honey, that's what made the difference when Andy looked for comparisons and similar visions." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "You were right on the money the whole time."

"Killer?" she asked, wrinkling her forehead.

"I have my ideas. Both who did it and why. I just don't want to say anything, even to you, until I have the proof. Listen." He set the ice chips aside and took her hand. "Faith is coming back to spend the day with you again."

She shook her head once. "Too...much for her."

"The guys sent her home to sleep last night. And she really wants to do this. Besides, the more you get to know her, the better. When this is all over I have something I want to talk to the two of you about."

"Sure?"

"Absolutely."

She shifted slightly and he saw her bite her lips against the pain that racked her.

"Let me get the nurse, sweetheart."

"Right here," said a voice behind him.

He turned to see the regular day nurse, who checked the morphine drip.

"Just making sure she gets what Dr. Cardoza ordered," the woman told him. "When she improves a little more we'll get her a PCA—a Patient Controlled Analgesic. That way she can push a button whenever she needs something." She wiped her hands on a paper towel. "Meanwhile she should be out again in a few seconds."

"Okay. I'll be going, anyway."

At that moment he heard Faith chatting with the day shift guards. Then she walked in, carrying a huge bouquet of roses in all colors, in a cut glass vase.

"We needed to brighten up the room a little," she grinned.

Dan kissed Mia again. "Faith's here now with a gorgeous bouquet. I have to go, sweetheart. But I'll be back later. I love you," he said again.

"Me too." But her eyes were already closing.

Dan hugged Faith, again overcome with an unfamiliar emotion. For a moment he couldn't say anything. Then he stepped back.

Faith smiled at him. "She'll be fine. I promise. They'll be in shortly to change her dressings and make sure all her vital signs are still good, but I can tell just by looking at her." She winked at Dan. "Anyway, you're the best medicine she needs."

"I have to go. And I'm sorry for waking you and Mark up in the middle of the night."

"Hey. We're used to it. And your package is still safely locked away in the gun closet."

"Thanks, Faith. For everything."

"Just get these guys, okay?" she called after him, as he headed out of the room.

"That's a given."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rick and Mark were buried under the latest printouts from Andy when Dan returned to the hotel.

"Chase called," Rick told him. "Seemed a little put out he hadn't heard from you

this morning. He wants to meet and go over the security for tomorrow. Unless you want to change it, I set it up for three this afternoon."

"No. That's fine. I have a few wrinkles to add." Dan tossed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. "Anything new on the key folks? Or anyone else?"

Mark handed him three printed sheets. "It seems our girl Joy has a little more to her past than we discovered at first cast. Take a look at this."

Andy had managed to dig all the way back to Joy's childhood.

Dan's eyebrows flew up and he looked at Rick. "In Argentina? Like our boat owners?"

"Uh-huh. Same place as the home of *Lucky*. Joy's father was with the diplomatic corps and was assigned to the embassy there for a number of years."

"So," Mark interrupted, "she may still have contacts from when she lived there. Wonder why that never showed up on her info before?"

Dan handed him one of the sheets of paper. "Because she lived most of the time with her grandparents in Maryland so she's listed as being from there. Too much instability in Argentina. But she visited there a lot when she got older. And look at this?" He circled a paragraph. "When she was there in her late teens—eighteen, nineteen—she dated one of the embassy guards named John Grant. Even though it was forbidden. And guess what he did after his assignment there?"

Rick made a face. "Let me guess. He went back to his unit and became their sniper."

"Bingo. His aim seems to be a little off these days, though. Thank God for that."

"I called Holcomb and asked him to put out a BOLO for him—Be On the Look Out—but not to give any details. You can be sure Grant's long gone from here by now."

"You think Joy used her father's connections to get started in DC?" Rick wanted to know.

"I'm sure he opened doors for her. After that she was on her own. But nothing here indicates she needed any help. She may look like an angel but she's one tough, smart cookie." Dan raked his hand over his face. "She started off as a legal secretary in the top law firm in Washington, built her connections and after that she was on her way to the top."

"God knows that else she's done," Mark commented. "But with every job she's had, her private economic status has improved. Andy managed to trace half a dozen offshore accounts that link back to her. And I'll bet if we use one of our really good forensic accountants, that's not all we'll find. She's got to have her fingers in every dirty pie being baked."

Rich shook his head in wonder. "Well, she was in a perfect position to dope the guards. And she easily could have killed Stan. I wouldn't put anything past the little bitch. But how did she expect it all to end? If she marries Chase, she can't keep this all hidden. Especially if she's one of the people behind everything going on with Carpenter Techtronics."

"I don't think that's going to happen," Mark told him. "Take a look at this. Guess who 'Mr. Smith' is?"

They all stared at the information Andy had found.

Finally Rick broke the silence. "Well, shit."

\* \* \* \* \*

The two conspirators were using yet another pair of disposable cell phones. One of them was in a hotel room, the other in a parked car.

"All right. I'm ready to make the call to Khalid. It was a pain in the ass having to rent a hotel room to do it."

"Better than having someone e walk in you, isn't it?"

"I suppose. Did you check in with Jesus?"

"Yes. Everything's fine on the boat. I have the feeling he'd run off with Oscar and cut us out if he knew what the hell it was and what to do with it."

"It won't matter after this weekend. We'll be able to dump him when we're far enough out in the Gulf."

"Are you ready to go?"

"All set. Call me back in an hour."

The call was disconnected. The person booted up the laptop on the table and navigated to the appropriate screen. In a moment, a series of numbers was punched into the cell phone.

*This has to work. It just has to. I haven't put up with all this crap for so long to come out on the short end of the stick now, at the biggest payday. Tomorrow when Oscar fails, Carpenter Techtronics will fall apart and I'll be on my way to a meeting in the Atlantic Ocean.*

The phone rang.

"Your call is ready," the operator reported.

"Thank you." Deep breath. "Good afternoon, Khalid. I'm ready for you to make that transfer now."

"And Oscar?"

"Safe and sound. We'll meet out in the Gulf as planned on Saturday. Your boat or ours. You can transfer the rest of the money and we'll hand over the robot at the same time."

"You wouldn't have plans to take the money and keep the robot, would you?" the deep voice asked.

"I could ask you the same thing in reverse. You could easily take the robot and kill us." A short laugh. "Although that wouldn't do much for your business reputation."

"You speak the truth," Khalid said.

The call lasted less than thirty minutes, with both parties satisfied. One hundred

million dollars looked like a nice tidy sum.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That was very good, Jesus, my man."

Mike D'Antoni clicked off the cell phone and stuck it in his pocket. Just in case. He helped Jesus, whose hands were still cuffed, to rise from the couch and prodded him up the stairs to the deck.

Getting down to the pier was a little tricky. He solved it by simply throwing the man over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and swinging himself over the side. Military training came in handy in civilian life too.

"Do not attempt to call out to anyone," Mike warned. "My trigger finger gets itchy after I've been up all night."

"No, *senor*. I mean, *si, senor*. I mean..."

"Shut up. I know what you mean." He threw his arm over Obregon's shoulder and positioned his body so the handcuffs were concealed.

Shel Morgan was still leaning against the chopper, the rifle still resting in his arms like a sleeping baby.

"Any trouble?"

"Nah. It's too early for weekday boaters. Bob stuck his nose over here so I opened the cell phone and told him I was calling the White House. When the day shift guy came on, Bob whispered in his ear, then ran like hell for his car." Shel burst out laughing. "This is better than being in a movie."

"Yeah, well, you better hope it comes off as well as a movie. We don't have a director who says, 'Cut, do it again'. No do-overs here, my man. Help me get this asshole into the chopper."

In a few short minutes they lifted off and swung away over the water, then turned and headed up the coast. Landing at the private hangar in San Antonio, they hustled Jesus into the waiting SUV and fifteen minutes later were set up in a cheap but clean motel room.

Mike got Dan on the horn. "Me. We're all set to watch our soap operas. Call when you need me."

He tossed the phone on the table and handed some money to Shel. "Mind getting us something to eat? I think Jesus here and I are going to have a conversation about just how these people found him and hired him."

Shel heaved himself to his feet. "Sure. Back in a few."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan sat at one end of the conference table, flanked by Mark and Rick. Chase was at the opposite end and the other seats in between were taken by the rest of the key



players. Even Paul Harrison had come out of his closet for this.

"I want your guarantee that we have enough security for tomorrow," Chase opened the conversation. "Nobody's managed to come up with Stan's killer or whoever shot Mia Fleming. Or who doped the Phoenix guards. So I want to be sure no one manages to fuck up things tomorrow."

Dan gave him a steady look. "Chase, I can promise you. Tomorrow will be successful beyond your wildest imaginings. No one will disrupt the process."

"How can you guarantee that?" Ladd asked. "You haven't been too successful so far."

"That's right." Joy slipped her arm through Chase's in a now-familiar gesture. "We can't afford any slip-ups. Or anyone else killed."

"First of all," Dan said slowly, ignoring what they'd said, "I want to thank you for the concern you've shown for Mia and for inquiring about her condition."

They all had the good grace to look embarrassed.

"Secondly, we are in possession of information now that we didn't have before. After tomorrow's event, we'll sit down and I'll explain anything you have questions about. Just believe me. Everything is well in hand. Mark? You have information to share?"

Mark explained about the task force and, without revealing anything they'd discovered, told Chase that Captain Holcomb and several members of the SAPD would also be in attendance.

"They'll be supplementing our staff and making sure things don't get out of hand. Now," he went on smoothly. "I need every detail of this demonstration one more time. Where it's going to be and how it will work. Then I want to see the room where everyone will be watching."

Chase showed him on a map of the city the location of the empty house they used and promised to introduce Dan and the others to the team who'd be running the demonstration.

"Mark and some of the police officers will need to be there to oversee things and make sure the area is secured," Dan told him.

When they'd covered every detail of the process, Chase led the way one floor down to a large auditorium that had been fitted with several huge plasma screens.

"Lucas will be at the podium, explaining things and answering questions," Chase said.

"And where will you be?" Dan asked.

"At the demonstration site. I'll be delivering Oscar."

"Now there's where we're going to make a change," Dan told him. "You need to be here. This company bears your name. I'm going to be the one to deliver Oscar, with plenty of backup."

There were immediate objections from everyone on the Carpenter team. Dan held

up his hand.

"No arguments. That's the way we're doing it. I understand everyone's concern but this is what we do best. I'll have plenty of protection. And we're going to take him by helicopter rather than a car."

More objections, more arguments but in the end Dan managed to get their agreement by threatening to walk out and take all his men with him.

By five-thirty the meeting was over and Dan was heading back to the hotel with Mark and Rick.

"Okay. Mark, go home," Dan told him. "I'm going to relieve your wife at the hospital so the two of you can remember what you look like. Rick, get hold of Mike, make sure Shel Morgan is still there sitting on Jesus Obregon and that everyone is fed. And have Mike set the chopper down in Mark's backyard at six-thirty tomorrow morning."

Mark threw back his head and laughed. "That ought to give our neighbors something to talk about. Okay, tell my wife I'll see her at home."

"I'm for a steak and a beer," Rick said. "And organizing all Andy's information so we'll be ready to spill the beans tomorrow."

They split up at the hotel and Dan left for the hospital. He was anxious to have this all over now, so he and Mia could move forward with their lives. At the same time he could discuss a special project with her and Faith.

## Chapter Eighteen

"It's a good thing we followed our original plan. Security tomorrow will be tighter than a noose around everyone's neck."

"Please. Could you use a different analogy?"

"Sorry."

"The money is in our account?"

"One hundred million. Wired into the account I gave him. Then it gets transferred automatically six times and I've already set that up. No one could follow its trail. We'll get the other half when we deliver Oscar."

"You'd better be right. This is the big payoff for us. Then it's *adios* to all this bullshit and on with our new lives."

"You'd just better hope these guys from Phoenix haven't got something up their sleeves besides their arms."

"Quit worrying. So far they haven't been able to find their ass with both hands."

"Well, let's just get through tomorrow's fiasco, play our parts and Saturday we're out of here."

"Okay. Meanwhile I've got a call from our nervous Nellie who's predicting doom for the company. Let me call him back and get him quieted down until after tomorrow. After that I don't care what he says to whom. It'll all be over."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I know what you did and how you did it. And I want my share."

*Whoa! This wasn't exactly the expected conversation.*

"I don't know what you *think* you know but whatever it is, you're very much mistaken. Nothing's happened."

"Don't bullshit me. I know exactly what you did." And the voice proceeded to tell him in detail. "So whatever you're getting for it, I want my share."

*Shit!*

"Listen, why don't we get together and talk about this. You've come up with some off-the-wall story and we don't need this floating around right this minute."

"If you're coming to talk about money, come on over. Otherwise, stay the hell away. I've got other fish to fry."

*Double shit!"*

"I think we need to discuss this in person. Give me half an hour and I'll be there."

The call was disconnected and more numbers punched in the disposable cell phone.

"We've got a problem." The explanation was terse and to the point. "I need you and your trusty twenty-two. Can you get away?"

"Now? Are you kidding me?"

The heavy sigh carried over the connection. "We have to shut him up."

"Then you'll have to do it. And figure out a way to keep everyone off the trail until tomorrow night."

"You don't want much, do you?"

"Just for *you* to take charge for a change and get it done nice and neatly."

"We're piling up the bodies, you know. Every one of them brings up more questions."

"Not to worry. We'll be long gone before this one causes a problem."

"You hope." Another sigh. "Fine. Is it at all possible you can bundle up the twenty-two and leave it at the front desk? Without raising a lot of questions? I'd like to stick to the same gun. We can ditch it when we're out in the Gulf on Saturday."

"I can do that. In fact, I hear the shower running so this is a good time for me to run downstairs. You can pick up the package from the security guard. Don't worry, I'll camouflage it."

"I'm on my way. I just hope nothing else jumps up to bite us in the ass."

\* \* \* \* \*

John Grant pulled his motorcycle into the parking lot of Forest Bank in Millsap, Colorado, set the kickstand and sauntered in as casually as he could. He'd used the bank many times for wire transfer, having set himself up as a businessman who came to the area to relax.

"It's just a lot easier than having to drive to the city," he told the bank president, who was only too glad to have such an important customer.

Grant smiled icily to himself as he thought of the royal treatment always accorded him. He especially liked the fact that nobody asked him any questions. They simply accepted his explanation that he was the head of a multinational business. Well, if you listed all the jobs in all the different countries that he'd done for the blonde witch, the description wasn't so far from wrong.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Grant," the teller smiled. "Back up here to relax for a few days?"

"Whenever I can, Nita. This place is good for my nerves."

"Well, we're always glad to see you. What can we do for you today?"

Did she seem a little nervous or was that just his imagination? Jesus, he needed to do something about the bad case of nerves that suddenly was overtaking him. Missing that girl had been part of the problem.

"I need to transfer a deposit out of my account to these two banks." He slid a sheet of paper across the counter to her. "Same process as before."

"Certainly. It'll just take a minute."

She moved away to the computer used for wire transfers. As she did two men who'd been completing deposit slips moved in behind him.

"If you're smart, you won't make a fuss," one of them said. "Just back up slowly and move out the door with us."

They had a tight grip on his arms and tugged him away from the counter.

"What the hell is this?" he asked, belligerent. "Who are you?"

One man pulled out a small leather badge wallet. "Department of Homeland Security. Trust me, I think it won't make much difference what condition we deliver you in."

Grant's first inclination was to fight. Cut and run. But he looked at the men on either side of him, at the grim expression on their faces and nausea rolled up from the pit of his stomach. So this was it, then.

But how the hell had they found him?

\* \* \* \* \*

Mia was sleeping when Dan entered the room.

Faith grinned at him. "She's been waking up off and on but she just fell asleep again a few minutes ago." She frowned. "She seems a little agitated again. I wonder if they need to change her medication."

"How's she been during the day?"

"More alert now whenever she wakes up. She's had some liquid nourishment. Soup and juice. And she kept it down."

"That's good. Very good." Dan had seen his share of extreme injuries during his stretch with the Marines, people who had recovered in worse situations than Mia's. The difference here was his heart was involved, so it was hard to be detached and logical.

"This woman has guts, that's for sure," Faith told him. "If I were in her condition I'd be sobbing like a baby and begging for more drugs every minute."

Dan was already at his usual place beside the bed. Mia had her eyes closed but her legs were moving restlessly and little moans whispered from her dry lips. Dan brushed his knuckles lightly against her cheek, trying to soothe her. But when he bent down to kiss her mouth, her hand reached up and grabbed his shirt, clutching it in a death grip.

"Don't go." Her voice sounded dry and raw. "Please. Don't go. Gun. Gun." Her voice was rising and her legs moving faster, as if she was trying to run away from something. "Dan," she cried. "Gun!"

Heart thudding, not sure if he was doing the right thing, Dan put his hands on either side of Mia's face and kissed her hard. "Wake up, sweetheart. It's all right. I'm

here."

He was afraid to shake her because of her injuries and all the equipment she was hooked into. He looked over at Faith, who had moved to the other side of the bed, a worried frown creasing her forehead.

"She must be having a vision," he said. "I don't know what the protocol is for waking someone in this condition. I don't want to do any damage."

"Try kissing her again," Faith told him and took the fingers of Mia's other hand, the one on her injured side. "Mia." Her voice was soft. "Mia, honey, it's Faith. Come awake now. You're safe and so is Dan. He's right here next to you."

Dan still had his hand closed over the fist holding onto him. He kissed Mia again, this time a little more firmly. "Mia, sweetheart. I'm here. Open your eyes and you can see I'm all right."

After a long, interminable moment Mia's eyelids began to flutter, then her eyes opened as if the lids had heavy weights on them. Gradually her eyes began to focus.

"Dan?" She tried to sit up, then bit her lips as the sharp wave of pain hit her.

"When did they adjust her meds last?" Dan asked Faith.

"Almost four hours ago. My guess is the onset of the pain triggered her subconscious and brought on the vision. She associates the gun with the pain."

"We'll see. Can you get the nurse?"

Faith picked up the call button and pressed it.

"D-Dan?"

His eyes fastened on her face, now pale again, light beads of perspiration on her forehead.

"It's me. The one and only. Take it easy, honey. Were you having a vision?"

She blew out a breath, trying to ease the pain. "Yes." She gripped his hand tighter. "Yes, I was. And it had to do with you. Dan, you have to be careful."

He eased her back onto the pillows just as the nurse came in to adjust the drip.

"I'll go to sleep again," she protested. "Don't let me go to sleep until I tell you."

"It's okay. I'm right here. Go ahead."

She swallowed, wincing at the abrasion of her raw throat. "Gun. Tonight. Someone will try to kill you. Tonight or tomorrow."

"It's all right. We know everything, Mia. And we're taking extra precautions. Let me give you the nickel description."

He stroked her hair as he told her everything they had dug up, about Oscar, about the people involved. And how they planned to handle things in the morning.

"I'll have enough people watching my back that no one will be able to get near me. And tonight," he said, kissing her cheek, "I plan to spend here with you. Those two husky guys outside your door won't let anyone in here who shouldn't be here. Okay?"

She relaxed slowly. "All right. But I saw it, plain as day. A gun pointed at your

back." She tried to sit up again. "And Dan? It was the same gloved hand I saw with the knife."

Dan's stomach knotted. So the killing wasn't finished. He'd have to tell Mark and Rick in the morning to tighten up all security. And have Mike fly air cover over the demonstration site and at the Carpenter building.

"I'll take care of everything, beautiful. And when it's over I'll be back up here in one piece." He kissed her fingertips. "Meanwhile I'll be sitting right here all night with you. That recliner chair looks pretty comfortable, don't you think?"

"In that case, I think I'll go home and reacquaint myself with my husband," Faith joked. "But I'll be back first thing in the morning." She put her hand on Dan's arm. "Try to get some sleep, okay? You've got a tense day tomorrow."

"I learned years ago how to be alert without sleep." He grinned. "But yes, I will catch a few winks."

He pulled the recliner closer to the bed, took Mia's hand in his again and leaned back in the soft leather. He'd be damn glad when this was all over.

\* \* \* \* \*

At five-thirty in the morning the tiny alarm on Dan's watch roused him. He looked over to see Mia awake and watching him.

"I ate soup yesterday," she croaked and rolled her eyes. "Yum. Not."

"Before long I'll be feeding you pasta primavera and a wonderful wine. That's a promise."

"Dan?" She gripped his fingers. "Please be careful today. That vision was very clear. I couldn't see faces but I recognized the arm and hand." She nibbled at her bottom lip. "I think it's a woman."

He nodded. "I think Joy Rivers is our prime candidate. Remember what I told you last night we'd learned about her?"

Mia's eyes widened. "But that means she killed Stan and cut off...cut out..."

"I know. She's got nerves of steel and no heart at all. But we'll get her. Okay?"

She nodded. "Come right back...afterwards."

"You bet. Faith will be here shortly and I've got to get ready. Do your best to rest, okay?" He gave her one long, last kiss, then disappeared into her bathroom where he'd stashed his stuff the night before.

He couldn't believe it when Faith showed up at six.

"Mark's making so much noise at our house I couldn't sleep anyway," she told him. "And the chopper's due soon. Besides, I've got a galloping case of the nerves today. So I got dressed and came here."

Dan hugged her. "You know I'll never be able to repay you for any of this."

"Just get going and get this done. And don't you dare get hurt. You or anyone else."

"That's a promise."

Then he was gone, jogging down the corridor to the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark waited until the chopper took off with Dan and his package before getting into his SUV and heading for Carpenter Techtronics. The guests were due to arrive at eight o'clock, with the demonstration at nine. That gave Chase enough time to introduce the key players and explain what was going to happen.

"Ladd's not here," was the first thing Chase greeted him with. "He was supposed to be here at seven to go over any last legal details with us."

"Did you call his house?" Mark asked.

"Of course I did." Chase grimaced. "Don't you think that's the first thing I did?"

An uneasy feeling settled over Mark. "Let me have Captain Holcomb send one of his men over there."

"No." Chase was nearly shouting. He swallowed and lowered his voice. "No police. If something did happen, I can't have it disrupting this event."

"All right. I'll send one of my men. Do you have an extra key to his place?"

"He keeps one in his office here, just in case. Come on, I'll get it for you."

"What's going on?" Joy slithered up and linked her arm through Chase's. "You should be greeting your guests, honey."

Chase removed his arm. "You and Lucas do it for a minute. I'll be right back."

"But what's wrong?" she persisted.

"I said, I'll be right back," he snapped. "Just one time can you do what I ask? Come on, Mark."

Mark pulled one of the men from Oscar's area, knowing he really wouldn't be needed anymore and sent him off to Ladd's with the key. Then he hurried back to the large hall where Chase, Lucas and Joy were doing the glad-hand thing with enough military brass and corporate executives to plan world domination.

"Where's Dan?" Joy whispered, as Chase headed for the podium.

"Doing what he's supposed to."

"But he insisted on taking Oscar to the site himself and I haven't even seen him around here collecting the robot."

Mark took her arm and guided her toward the front of the room. "Don't you worry one minute, Miss Rivers. Dan's got it all under control."

"But..."

Mark urged her into the chair reserved for her in the front row, then ran to call Dan on the satellite phone.

"You think he's dead?" Dan asked.



"I'd say there's a good chance of it. I sent one of our guys to check."

"Okay. Whatever you find, sit on it until we're done here. We're just about to start."

"Got it."

At exactly eight o'clock Chase began his presentation. Nervous at first, his confidence grew as he got into the specifics of Oscar's technology and what the robot could do.

"The demonstration is set up at a remote location. If you'll watch any of the screens in the room, you'll be able to see everything."

The room darkened and the screens lit up. Chase sat down next to Joy and Mark heard her say, "Please don't be too upset if something goes wrong, honey. Whatever it is, we'll fix it and do this again."

"Don't you understand," he hissed at her. "There is no second chance here. They won't trust us next time."

"Then I'll just cross my fingers."

"Damn it, Joy. It will take a lot more than some stupid good luck symbol to fix this if I fall flat on my face. Don't you know that?" He moved slightly in his chair, as if trying to put distance between the two of them.

Mark saw her glance at Lucas, before she turned her gaze back to the screens.

Everyone stared at the abandoned adobe house and the rock-strewn yard. Then, without warning, one of the rocks began to move, bumping along. Suddenly the image of a computer screen replaced the scene and the audience could see hot spots where people were identified. But more than that, they heard conversations coming through the speakers and a closed caption program printed out the conversation at the bottom of the screen.

Then the picture switched again to show black-clad warriors breaching the house quietly, capturing the occupants and signaling a successful mission. The screens darkened, the lights in the room came on again and thunderous applause greeted Chase as he mounted the stage again.

"That, ladies and gentlemen, is Oscar. For obvious reasons we didn't print brochures." A ripple of laughter ran through the room. "But I'll be happy to answer any questions and make appointments to meet with you individually. Meanwhile, please help yourself to coffee and refreshments at the back of the room."

Mark and Rick were especially interested in Joy and Lucas, who looked at each other with shocked expressions on their faces. Mark had managed to plant a tiny transmitter under the lapel of Joy's suit jacket when he ushered her to her seat. Now he and Rick stood at the back of the room, miniature receiving buds in their ears, pretending to study the crowd as they listened to the conversation between Joy and Lucas.

"What the hell happened?" Joy demanded. "I thought you switched the robots and put the dummy in Oscar's place."

"I did," Lucas answered through clenched teeth. "I handled it myself."

"So how did the real Oscar get here? How did Dan Romeo get him and bring him back? How did anyone even find the damn boat?"

Lucas pulled a cell phone out of his pocket, punched in a number and put the phone to his ear. His frown told Mark and Rick that no one was answering on the other end. And with good reason, as they knew.

"Something's not right," Lucas told Joy, his jaw tightening. "Jesus isn't answering."

"What do you mean he's not answering? He's supposed to be right there in the salon with the crate. Stupid ass. I told you we couldn't trust him." Her voice quivered with rage and something else. Fear.

"We have to get there right away."

"Exactly what do we tell that idiot Chase about why we're running off on his big day?" she demanded.

"Tell him we're going to the site to make sure they pack up properly and we'll be back soon. Then run like hell."

"They're on their way," Rick commented, as he watched the couple moved quickly from the room.

"I'll stay here with Chase," Mark said. "Someone's got to hold his hand, especially when this all comes down. Call Dan and have Mike take you and him to Galveston."

"I'm on it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rick snapped his phone shut and climbed into the helicopter on the roof of the Carpenter building. "Tolbert's dead. Our man found him and I told him to call Holcomb. I also asked him to keep a lid on things until we can wrap up all the loose ends."

"Jesus," Dan said. "They don't mind piling up the bodies."

"Holcomb also said they've got shadowy footage from some of the security cameras at the airport. The person who parked next to Nate Wilson and got into his car was a woman. Short. With a ponytail."

"I don't think we have to wonder who that is. Okay. Mike? Let's make tracks. I want to be there waiting for them. We don't need this to play out in a roomful of bigwigs."

The day shift man was there when they landed at Block House Marina. He poked his head out the door but when he saw the men climb out wearing their NODT jackets, he moved all the curiosity-seekers away, mumbling something about the government, then went back into his little shack. Luckily two other helicopters were there, having delivered their high dollar passengers, so there shouldn't be any warning signals to their prey.

They were ready, guns locked and loaded, when they heard running footsteps on the pier and voices arguing, coming through the ear buds.

"But I'm telling you, I saw a black helicopter over there with the other two." Joy, edgy and angry. "Just like the one Phoenix has."

"You think that's the only black helicopter in the world? Honest to Christ, Joy. People fly out here in choppers all the time. We've done it ourselves."

"But what if they know?"

"About us? The boat? Oscar? Don't be ridiculous. There's no way they could possibly know anything." Lucas, abrupt and just as angry. "If they did, they'd have been all over us today."

"So where's Jesus? And where did they get the real Oscar?"

"We're about to find out." He clambered up the ladder, Joy behind him and slammed open the glass door to the salon. "Well, the crate's still there. Come on, let's open it."

But as he moved down into the room, Dan and Rick moved from where they'd been hidden, guns in hand, tight smiles on their faces.

"I think you'll find that crate a little empty, Lucas," Dan told him. "Uh-uh-uh," he admonished, when Lucas reached for his gun at the small of his back. "Nice and easy, please. If you just sit down over there we'll all be very happy. You too, Miss Rivers."

Joy had paused at the open door. Now she turned to back away, only to find Mike at her back holding his own gun. He reached under her jacket and pulled the gun from the small of her back, then patted all her pockets. Then he nudged her with his gun.

"Nice to finally meet you, Miss Rivers. How about joining our little party?"

She stopped, looked down into the salon, back at Mike and started down the stairs. At the bottom she looked as if she'd tripped and bent to catch herself but when she straightened up she had a small gun in her hand. Quickly she backed herself against a corner and her eyes moved from one man to another.

"Ankle holster." Her smile was evil. Her gun was leveled at Mike's crotch.

"Well, shame on me," Mike said in his slow drawl. "To think a nice lady like you would want to shoot me."

"Put the gun down, Joy." Dan's voice was like steel. "You won't be going anywhere. You can't shoot all of us at the same time."

"But Lucas can get his gun and then we'll be a little more even. So all of you put your weapons down before this gentleman here has permanent birth control."

But Dan was quicker than Joy Rivers ever thought of being. As he dropped his hand to lower the gun he fired upward, shattering her hand that held the gun. She screamed in pain and began swearing in three different languages.

"You bastards," she spat out. "How about some help here?"

"Let me go to her." Lucas tried to get up from the couch.

"She'll live." Rick had his gun pressed against Lucas' temple. "Don't move or both of you will need help."

Mike grabbed dish towels from the galley and wrapped them around Joy's hand.

Dan pulled out his cell phone and punched a number. "Holcomb? Tell the guys here to come on in and pick up the trash. And we need a medic."

"What's in that crate if it's not Oscar?" Lucas demanded.

"Nothing," Dan told him. "We emptied it last night. Oscar's been at a different location since then waiting for his big performance."

"And where the hell is Obregon?"

"Sitting very comfortably in a motel with one of our men, ready to sing whatever sweet song we ask him to."

Joy was sitting in a chair now, cradling her hand, her face pale but rage flashing in her eyes.

"How did you figure it out?" she asked. "We thought we covered all our bases."

Dan shrugged. "A lot of hard work and a great computer expert. You were smart but we were smarter. We know everything now. And I mean everything."

"Lucas?" Joy's voice was little more than a whisper now.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"The buyer. He'll kill us."

"He'll have to get to you first," Mike told them. "And here comes the cavalry to save you. You might want to decide which of your choices is the lesser of two evils."

Six men flashing Department of Homeland Security badges boarded the boat, the team leader introducing them as he shook hands with Dan.

"We have to stop meeting like this," he said with a wry grin.

"No kidding. Well, they're all yours. My guess is someone wants them badly enough that they'd prefer your company. Pump them for all you can. Give me your email and we'll send you everything we've dug up on them."

The man, who introduced himself to the others as Jack Henry, handed Dan a small card. "This will come directly to me." He nodded at everyone else. "Nice meeting you, gentlemen."

They escorted Lucas, in handcuffs and Joy, still moaning in pain, up the steps and off the boat. Dan climbed up to the deck with Rick and Mike and watched three black SUVs pull out of the parking lot.

"I think we'd better go back and let Chase know what's happening," Dan said. "He's probably ready for a nervous breakdown right about now."

## Chapter Nineteen

They found Chase in his office, mountains of paperwork on his desk, staring out the window with a beaten look on his face.

"It's as if I lost part of myself," he told Dan, as the story came out. "Every member of the team is either dead or in jail. Except Paul, who's gleefully calculating revenue in his office. Thank God for him, I guess."

"It's not a pretty story but it could have been a lot worse. They could have actually gotten away with it."

"I feel like ten kinds of a fool, you know." Chase just stared at them, the bewildered look on his face laced with pain. "You think you know people, you make them part of your life and then something like this happens... Maybe I should just shut down the company."

"And let them win after all?" Dan asked. He stood in front of him, forcing him to make eye contact. "Chase, listen to me. I think we've all been there before. And you were victimized by some highly sophisticated crooks and killers. But that's no reason to throw in the towel. Not with what you've got going for you here."

"You still have a terrific staff," Mark pointed out. "And if their actions today are any indication, they're still very loyal to you."

"Mark's been checking regularly to make sure each department is functioning," Dan pointed out, "and every single person asks the same question—what can they do to help?"

Chase had a dazed look in his eyes. "I can hardly believe it, either. I hardly know most of them except by name and they're going out of their way to show me their support."

"And by the way," Rick added, "when we left them, your erstwhile partner and fiancée couldn't talk to the guys from DHS fast enough to buy protection from the Middle Eastern arms dealer who most likely has them in his sights."

"Pardon my sense of practicality," Dan continued, "but aside from the company's reputation, you are about to get a mega-million contracts for Oscar and they know that. But still, if they didn't trust you, they'd be out the door."

"I guess you're right. It's myself I'm having trouble with." He flapped his hands at the air. "I still don't understand why they killed Stan."

"They had no intention of using his biometrics. But they knew the system would be down while we reprogrammed it and that you'd insist on checking Oscar's authenticity. If you remember, Lucas was the one who offered to get him and take him to the lab. That's when he made the switch."

"So they sacrificed poor Stan for that?"

"Not just for that," Dan told him. "His death also meant he couldn't then design something that would even surpass Oscar."

"So which one of them did it?" Rick asked.

Dan sighed. "You won't like this but Joy was responsible for all the killings, one way or another. Even the sniper who shot at Mia was an old boyfriend of hers. Except for Ladd. She couldn't leave you long enough to get it done so she got Lucas to do it, using her gun. The idiot still had it when he was arrested. They'd planned to dump it when they got out in the Gulf tomorrow."

"And Ladd? I still don't know what his role in this was."

"My guess is he found them out and wanted a piece of the action. Chase, there's something else I have to tell you that you'll like even less."

"Less than being engaged to a cold-blooded killer bitch and having a thief with no conscience for a partner?"

"You and Joy never would have been married." Dan hated to give him this piece of news but he figured faster was better. Kind of like ripping off an adhesive bandage. "She was already married to Lucas. Has been for a long time. This whole thing was a setup from the start."

The three men watched as what little color was left drained from Chase's face. He turned to stare at the photo of Joy on his desk, then picked it up and hurled it against the wall. The glass splintered and the wood shattered. No one said a word but every man there felt exactly the same way.

"Talk about being unbelievably stupid." He scrubbed his hands across his face. "Jesus. She sure played me for a sucker. And what kind of man lets his wife sleep with someone else? Have sex with them? My God, it's enough to make me throw up."

"Chase, these people have neither morals nor scruples. They don't even operate on the same plane as you and I do."

His face was pinched and pain filled his eyes. He dropped his head into his hands. "Just look at the situation. My engineer murdered. My attorney a blackmailer and killed for his efforts. And the woman I thought I was going to marry was married all the time to the man I thought was my partner." He pounded a fist on the desk. "Shit. How much worse could things get? And what a monumental task I'm looking at now, not just with the actual engineering work. I'll have bids to prepare, contracts to review and all the stuff Lucas used to do..."

Dan knew the man would be a long time recovering from this but he also knew how to help him. "Right now," Dan interrupted, "what you need is a good attorney who can help you wade through all the contracts for Oscar and make sure the company's on solid footing. He'll bring in a good forensic accountant too, just to make sure all the change is in the right place."

"You know someone like that?" Chase's skepticism was obvious but he couldn't

keep the note of hope from his voice.

Dan nodded. "Phoenix uses him a lot. I called him on our way back from Galveston. My brother Ed is picking him up in DC in the morning and flying him here to meet with you. He's cleared his calendar and can spend at least two weeks with you. He'll be here about noon."

Chase was stunned. "How the hell did you get him to do that?"

"Let's just say he owes me a favor or two. And he'll be able to help you rebuild your executive team. Listen to him. He knows what he's talking about."

"I don't know what to say."

"This is where you man up, tiger," Dan told him. "You've got a great reputation and a valuable new commodity. Don't let that go to waste."

"I guess you're right," Chase admitted. Then one corner of his mouth turned up in a hesitant smile. "But listen. Tell Mia thanks for everything. She's the one who started this or I'd never have known anything was going to happen. I'm sorry I gave her such a hard time but she's made a real believer out of me now."

"I'll do that. She'll be happy to hear it."

"And thank you, all of you, for what you did. For what you're doing. I just... I can't..." He couldn't finish.

Dan cleared his throat. "All right. Here's what I think. You need to call everyone into that big hall and give them a pep talk. We'll be right with you. Assure them the company is stronger than ever, especially with all those requests I see in that pile to discuss Oscar. Then go back to the hotel with Rick. Have a good dinner and a bunch of drinks. We'll send someone to clean out Joy's stuff so you won't have to take care of it. And tomorrow, we'll start a new day. I'll make my calls to get everyone here as soon as we're done."

After the general meeting, which went very well, Dan watched as Rick led an unresisting Chase to his vehicle. Mike had flown back to the airport. He'd hang around another day to see if he was needed, then head back to Baltimore.

Finally Dan looked at Mark. "You, my friend, can go pick up your wife because I plan to spend the night at the hospital again. And as soon as Mia can be moved, I'm taking her to the cabin in Maine. You might think of bringing Faith up there after a while. I have a proposal for the two women."

"Care to give me a hint?"

"Nope. I want to firm it up in my mind first. Meanwhile I need to go show Mia I'm in one piece."

\* \* \* \* \*

Although it was June, the weather in Maine still had a chill cutting through it. That

didn't deter the Phoenix partners from using the cabin that was their retreat. Perched on the edge of a bluff, isolated from everything except by air and a long, serpentine road, it was a place where they recharged their batteries and planned the most secret of their missions. This was the place where Rick Latrobe's brother, a sniper in Mark Halloran's former Special Ops unit, had been hidden away to recover from a blown mission.

Mia's recovery had been long and painful. Dan took himself out of the agency loop completely while she was still in the hospital, staying there day and night. A happily married friend had once told him when he finally lost his heart he'd lose it completely and never want it back. That friend was right.

When she was released from the hospital, he moved into her house with her and oversaw every minute of her physical rehab. She'd always have scars to remind them of the disaster but Dan paid careful homage to them with his lips when at last they were able to make love again.

A week ago the doctors and therapists had signed off on her final papers. Now, with the Carpenter Techtronics disaster well behind them and Mia mending beautifully, Dan had commandeered the cabin for a week of rest and relaxation. Mark and Faith would arrive later that afternoon.

At the moment the two of them were laying in bed, naked, a condition that Mia had finally had to tease him into.

"I still think it's too soon for any kind of physical activity," Dan said for the tenth time.

Mia grinned at him. "The doctor said mild activity. And it's certainly been mild so far."

"I don't want to do anything to hurt you," he protested.

"It will hurt me a lot more if I have to lie here like this much longer without something happening."

For two days Dan had treated her as if she was made of spun glass, hardly daring to kiss her, much less touch her anyplace else. By this afternoon she'd decided if she didn't take matters into her own hands, nothing was going to happen anytime soon. When he sent her into the bedroom to take a nap, she'd waited ten minutes then called out that she needed help.

If only she'd had a camera to capture the look on his face when he walked in and she was lying on the sheets stark naked.

"Mia." He swallowed visibly and clenched his fists. "You need to cover yourself up before you take a cold."

"What I need," she told him in a voice as sultry as she could make it, "is for you to come over here and reassure me that I'm still a living breathing woman and not an invalid." She patted the bed next to her. "And right now."

"Sweetheart, I don't—"

"Dante Romeo, if you don't get over here right now you may never get in this bed



again. I'm tired of being treated like I'll break any minute. I may not be up to any swinging chandelier calisthenics but some slow, quiet sex would do us both a lot of good."

She'd amazed herself at her boldness, but she knew they had to get past this. She'd managed to coax him out of his clothes, salivating at the golden sight of him, and entice him onto the bed with her. But she could tell he was still holding back.

Mia maneuvered herself onto her side and trailed her fingers along one muscular thigh, fingertips dancing over the skin until she reached his cock. His mind might be holding him back, but his body was in a state of total readiness. His cock was rock-hard, the vein that wrapped around it pulsing with the heavy beat of his heart. The bead of fluid that sat on the slit told her just how close to orgasm he really was.

Teasingly she spread the viscous fluid across the velvet-smooth head with her thumb, watching his face darken with passion as she did so.

His big, warm hand stroked her back, fingers tracing her spine before dropping to the curve of her buttocks and then gently into the warm crevice.

"Just as soon as you're in fighting shape," he said in a voice like warm honey, "I'm going to fuck you here. Something tells me I'll be the first."

His words sent shivers skittering over her skin and something dark rising from deep within her. She squeezed her thighs together against the increased throbbing and the fresh spate of her liquid.

He rolled toward her. "I'm right, aren't I?" His other hand moved up to cup her cheeks, his warm breath like a soft breeze.

"Y-Yes."

"Would you like that?" His thumb brushed over her bottom lip, stroking it lightly. "Answer me, Mia. I can see it in your eyes."

She ducked her head. "Yes." She could barely get the word out. "I'd like that."

His probing fingers touched the tiny, tight brown hole and pressed lightly. Just once. "Soon, sweetheart." His grin was hungry. "Keep that in mind."

"I can tell what thinking about it's doing to you," she said with a throaty laugh. His cock had hardened and flexed in her grip.

"You, too." He moved his hand to probe between her thighs, finding the wet swollen flesh of her cunt. Sliding one finger inside.

"I want you," she told him.

"Then let's see what we can do without putting you at risk."

He rolled her onto her back and knelt between her thighs, his eyes drinking in the sight of her wet folds. With gentle fingers he opened her labia, bent his head and took a slow, thorough lap. Mia felt lightning zap her, from her womb to her breasts and moaned softly.

"You like that, sweetheart? So do I. You taste like heaven. I could eat you like ice cream."

And he proceeded to do just that, using his tongue to lick at every surface, rasp against her clit and thrust inside her quivering channel. It seemed like forever since they'd last made love and the residual pain from her injuries faded beneath the heat he generated in her body. The more he licked the hotter she got until her skin felt too tight and her breasts ached.

"Oh, please," she begged. "Please, Dan."

"Let's make this work." His own breathing was none too steady.

He reached into the nightstand drawer and fished out one of the condoms he'd stored there—"just in case", he'd said at the time. It only took him seconds to roll the latex on. Then he pulled the pillows this way and that until he was sure Mia was properly cushioned before kneeling between her thighs. He braced himself on his hands as the head of his shaft probed at the entrance to her pussy.

Very slowly he inched his way inside her, each slow glide setting off fireworks that rocketed through her, until he was all the way in, the head of his cock bumping the mouth of her womb.

"Here we go," he said, his gaze holding hers.

And with slow, steady strokes he moved in and out of her, watching her carefully as he increased his pace. Impatient, she wrapped her legs around him and pulled him more tightly against her, raising her hips to meet him thrust for thrust.

It seemed forever that his cock slid in and out, stretching her, stimulating all those tiny little nerves in the wall of her pussy. And little by little the coil of need and desire wound so tightly deep inside her began to unwind, moving higher and higher. She'd thought she wanted it hard and fast, but this was even better, stretching out the voluptuous feeling that roused every one of her senses.

It went on and on, stretching her on an unbelievable rack of pleasure. His eyes darkened until they were as black as onyx, lit only by the fire of passion burning deep inside him.

When he tensed Mia knew he was close, as close as she was, and silently she signaled him to increase the pace. By that time she was so close that it took only seconds before she convulsed with her orgasm, taking him with her. They shuddered together, gripped by the release of an incredible need.

When they were spent he rolled to the side, taking her with him, and she knew he didn't want to risk his weight on top of her. She tucked her head against his shoulder and pressed her palm against his chest, feeling his heart beat the same erratic tattoo as hers. Listening to him gasp for breath as she was doing.

And then finally they were both quiet.

"I never thought it possible to love someone this much," he said at last, fingers threading through her hair.

"Me, either." She sighed. "To think all of this started with just a vision."

He chuckled. "Both of them."

Realizing what he meant she felt herself blush and buried her head against his chest.

"It's okay, sweetheart. "I just hope the real thing was as good for you."

"Better." She raised her face for his kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Faith and Mark arrived late in the afternoon, bringing lobsters for dinner.

"I can't believe you've been in Maine for three days and Dan hasn't taken you to eat what the state's famous for," Faith teased.

Mark brought agency news with him. There were several corporate security contracts pending plus four new covert missions for the government. Rick was busy sorting them out and prioritizing, putting the teams together and deciding which ones they'd have to turn down. For the moment Dan and Mark were enjoying the little break.

After dinner the four of them sat on the porch now, dressed in heavy sweaters and jeans. Even in June the nights in Maine were still cold. Tomorrow Dan and Mia would be married at the city hall in Bangor, with Mark and Faith as witnesses. The Hallorans would stay on through the weekend, then head back to Texas to give the newlyweds some additional days of privacy.

"Dan, you've been as edgy as an expectant father for two days," Mia commented. "I know when something's chewing on your mind, so...what's up?"

Dan swallowed the last of his coffee, rose from the glider and leaned his hips against the porch rail.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about an idea that came up during this case." He looked at Faith. "Remember when you showed up with your ability to telecommunicate with Mark? You gave me a short course on the value of psychic gifts, not to mention the vast network of people who have them. At first I was very, very skeptical. You know that. But without you, Mark never would have been rescued."

She and Mark smiled at each other and twined their hands together.

"Then," Dan continued, "along comes Mia with her precognitive ability and gives us the clues to avert a major – and I mean *major* – disaster. And while trying to get her help to translate her visions I discover there's a whole world of people out there not being tapped into."

"So what kind of plot are you hatching?" Mark asked. "I know something's been rolling around in your brain."

"I had Andy do some research on this, now that it's become his fascination of the week. Are you aware the government has been doing testing in parapsychology for some time in labs they've set up?"

Mark shrugged. "I can't say I'm surprised."

"I learned that parapsychological activity is called Psi activity," Dan continued.

"From the Greek letter, Psi." Faith interrupted. "Picked for its relation to psyche, which means soul or mind."

Dan nodded. "It includes telepathy, empathy of many kinds, precognition, clairvoyance, reading auras, channeling...lord, I didn't realize just how many different types of psychic abilities there are until I started looking."

"Research has been ongoing for a long time," Faith told him. "There are still a lot of skeptics but there's real proof that Psi-enhanced people have been able to help in a number of tricky situations."

"Yes. Like you and Mia did. You brought Mark's capture to our attention, helped us rescue him and take down some very traitorous people. And Mia, without your visions, Lucas and Joy would have gotten clean away with Oscar and Carpenter Techtronics would be digging itself out of a very big hole. Although the world is a long way from accepting the influence and effect of parapsychology and Psi phenomena, I see it as a very useful tool when standard methods don't or can't get the results you want."

"And all this is leading up to—what?" Mark asked.

"I'd like to establish a Psi department at Phoenix. I'm not saying put an ad in the paper, or anything crazy like that and have the *real* nuts on our doorstep. But let's tap into the people Andy and Faith's Aunt Vivi have connected us to. Let Vivi and her group act as guides who help us select the right people. Until we know more about what we're doing, that is. We can teach these people how to use their abilities to help with investigations and they can become a powerful resource for Phoenix."

"I can give you the name of some parapsychologists who'd love to participate in this," Faith told him.

Dan nodded. "That's exactly what we need. Professionals who can design and implement the program."

"And who," Mark asked, "would run this department? It's not as if the rest of us are exactly sitting around with nothing to do. It will be a full-time job for someone, supervising everything, coordinating everything."

"Well." Dan cleared his throat. "Assuming Mike, Troy and Rick agree to it, I was hoping Mia would accept the job."

He grinned at the astonished expression on her face.

"Me?" she squeaked.

"Who better? You said you didn't want to go back to the museum. That you wanted to do something totally different."

"Oh, say yes," Faith cajoled. "You'd be absolutely perfect for it." She looked at Mark. "I can help too, right?"

He grinned at her. "As if I could stop you."

"We'd have to set some parameters on how we'd run it and when we'd use its...resources," Dan added. "And it would also mean splitting our time between San Antonio, where we'll all be living and Baltimore where the office is. What do you say?"

And who knows? Maybe another treasure like you and Faith will pop up out of nowhere."

Mia looked at him for a long moment, then jumped up and threw her arms around him. "I say a big *Yes!* I'd love it." She lowered her eyelids shyly, lashes sweeping across her cheeks. "I actually had a vision."

They all laughed.

"I'll bet you did," Dan joked as he wrapped his arms around her and his mouth descended on hers.

Neither of them was embarrassed by the deep kiss that followed, or the obvious heat that surrounded them. It didn't take a vision to know that these two were made for each other and for a long life together.

## About the Author

I always wonder what readers really want to know when I write one of these things. Getting to this point in my career has been an interesting journey. I've managed rock and roll bands and organized concerts. Been the only female on the sports staff of a university newspaper. Immersed myself in Nashville peddling a country singer. Lived in five different states. Married two very interesting but totally different men.

I think I must have lived in Texas in another life, because the minute I set foot on Texas soil I knew I was home. Living in Texas Hill Country gives me inspiration for more stories than I'll probably ever be able to tell, what with all the sexy cowboys who surround me and the gorgeous scenery that provides a great setting.

Each day is a new adventure for me, as my characters come to life on the pages of my current work in progress. I'm absolutely compulsive about it when I'm writing and thank all the gods and goddesses that I have such a terrific husband who encourages my writing and puts up with my obsession. As a multi-published author, I love to hear from my readers. Their input keeps my mind fresh and always hunting for new ideas.

Desiree welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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