



JENNIFER

CLOUD

Big Man BLOOD

Crying Blood

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Chapter 1

It was one in the morning when she made the county line and the blue lights appeared behind her. This was not good timing. Amelia Calhoun took the gun from her side harness, unsnapped the compartment from beneath the passenger seat and slid it inside. As she pulled over, she unhooked the holster's strap then pulled the buckle free, depositing the harness into the backseat.

The murder probably hadn't been reported yet. She couldn't risk finding out with an unregistered weapon still warm from the round she'd sent between Steven Nagasaki's bewildered brown eyes. She pulled over to the side of the interstate out of South Carolina and waited for the cop to approach.

It was a male. She could feel it when he opened the car door. Then she saw his brown hair and boyish face, fresh from whatever school he'd attended. His body was underdeveloped with a Barney Fife skinny inexperience that made her smile.

For fun, she glanced into the rearview mirror. Her face was flushed. The excitement of the kill usually brought edges of color to her pale features. She ran her fingers through her red hair tinted in nearly brown shades, giving it the essence of a fading fire. She hoped her attractive qualities would make this stop brief.

"Good evening, Miss." The officer peered inside her window. He kept one arm above the door of the Lexus. His chest was puffed out and his voice sounded strained in his attempt to lower it to more manly tones. "What brings you along my interstate?" With that, he offered a smile that reminded Amelia of a loser's attempt for a date.

"I was just heading to Virginia to meet up with some friends." Amelia smiled, flashing emerald eyes as she reached the edge of her window with her driver's license and registration. At that moment, she saw the blood on her hand. *Damn it*, she'd been sloppy. It would be her luck to be busted by some young wannabe still wet behind the ears punk. He'd be promoted, while her life would be over if they traced the dozen or so murders to her. Then again, her counterparts would have her eliminated, just like they had her father.

"Was it Virginia Beach you were going to, or the North Carolina line?"

"The beach." She winced and pulled her hand up just as he flashed his light inside going over her and the interior. Under the circular glow, she found more drops of blood.

It had been a close kill. Mr. Nagasaki had been reaching for a towel from the steamy shower stall when she'd grabbed his hand and sent a bullet into his brain. It's amazing how fast a human can react. She'd fired the moment his head was free of the curtain. He hadn't struggled, not even pulled back. His features were locked in eternal surprise as blood sprayed from the hole between his eyes.

"What's that? Are you okay, ma'am?" He flashed the light over her again. "I just had a small accident." She held her hand up to show him the larger concentration and hoped he would believe a wound existed beneath the red splatters. "I guess the springs under these seats are sharp. I must've done it getting my purse out." She pouted. "Why exactly did you pull me

over?”

“Your taillight is out, not to mention, you were speeding just a little through that straight away.” He leered at her, shifting his weight toward her car.

“I didn’t notice. It’s so late, I was just hoping to make a few more miles before I had to stop.” She offered him another smile, one filled with flirtation. Amelia let her fingers touch his hand as she took her license away. He trembled slightly from her touch, always a good sign.

“Maybe I should escort you to the hospital to have your hand looked at.” He brought the circle of light over her again. It didn’t stay on the blood drops, but lingered around her breasts.

“That won’t be necessary. Maybe you could recommend a nice hotel. I’m so tired.”

He hitched up his pants and looked down the highway as if gaining his bearings. “I believe there is a nice hotel about two exits down. You’ll see the sign.” He put his arm on her shoulder. “Would you like me to follow you there?”

“I wouldn’t want to keep you from your job,” she replied softly but noticed a change in his demeanor. His back stiffened and his hands fell to his hips. “If you’d like to check on me later, that would be fine,” she quickly added to change his demeanor.

His lips arched in a smile. “I’d like that. I get off around eleven. Maybe I could swing by and check on you then.” He touched the door of her car. His fingers were playful as they slid across the edge, near her window, before he brought his hand to his side.

A repulsed chill went over her body. “You have my name. Just ask the desk what room I’m in.”

“Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Good. I’ll see you later then.”

He nodded and tilted his hat back. With a slow strut, he went back to his car. She didn’t wait for him to pull away. She went ahead, merging into a pack of cars. Sure enough, baby Bubba’s headlights joined her on the road, tailgating to ease in behind her vehicle.

Perhaps she’d been too flirtatious.

Amelia saw the sign for the Quality Inn and took the exit. He followed. She didn’t want to check into a hotel that she couldn’t stay at simply for the purpose of losing a love lorn cop. She didn’t need the time loss. Never mind the fact that checking in for a minute would leave a trail for any pursuers.

The parking lot held a few cars. She pulled into the lot and found a spot in the back. She needed something that he couldn’t see from the road. It would buy her more time.

Sure enough, the cop pulled in the lot and stopped near her car. She got out and hurried toward the office before he reached her. He beeped once. Geez this guy was desperate. She turned and waved to him. With his date secured, he got back onto the interstate. When his taillights were out of sight, she got back in her car and followed the scenic route through Gaylord Town.

Her head and legs ached. She’d crouched in her last kill’s bushes for nearly an hour before the

time was right. Hits drained her anyway. There was the tedium of preparing for the kill. Every detail had to be figured into the perfect moment. The adrenalin built during each phase: the planning, the stalking, the entrance and the kill. When it was over and her heart stopped its mad race, she was spent.

A friend of hers, Devin, had once referred to it as a sexual high. She thought it an odd comparison, but to some, it must feel like that. To her, it was a quest to fulfill another mission and make her family happy. Another chance to earn an approving nod.

At one time, she had found it exciting, tasting the moment when she'd enter the house and find her victim unaware their last moments on earth had arrived. A flash, sometimes a half-scream and it was over. The rush was gone and she'd report back in to her stepfather/brother/boss Nick.

It was hard to keep life and death in perspective. She had a deep spiritual side that chastised her every time a call came in. Her job wasn't like working at the bank. It wasn't like she could turn in a two week notice, so she concentrated on the positives. There was the money and a terrific feeling of being above everything, the law, human beings, everything. In the end, it all boiled down to doing what she knew and this was what she'd been trained to do since childhood.

After a hit, she liked to rest at a small beach front cottage she had at the outer banks of North Carolina. It was far away from the tourist areas with soft sand and the sound of the ocean. Solitude was usually the most important thing to her, but this trip felt different. She wanted a little company.

The only man she could call wasn't the one she wanted to speak to. She didn't really have a serious boyfriend. The last man she cared about was a business associate, who thought of her as one of the boys. His name was Devin, a handsome, brilliant companion. They shared so much, but not a single kiss. It was times like these, alone on the open road, when she thought about him. He wasn't the dating kind, so she called someone else, her safety net.

She picked up her cell phone and dialed Joey. A moment later, a very sleepy, slightly confused man answered the phone. "What?"

"It's me." She already regretted calling him, but her life of isolation was eating at her brain. "How about spending the next week with me at the beach?" She spoke in gentle seductive tones. "I think we could both use a vacation."

"Like I'm just going to drop everything and come running to you when the mood hits." He huffed loudly. "Bite me."

"I always knew you were the kinky type." She pulled over into a deserted parking lot and rubbed her eyes. It was at least a six hour drive yet and she was exhausted. "You can look at this two ways, either you're whipped, or you're such a man that I have to have you. The choice is yours, unless you really don't want to see me." "I'll catch a plane tomorrow." He hung up without another word.

She turned off her phone and got out to stretch her legs. The few streetlights above illuminated the splatters on her clothes. There could be no more close calls. She opened the trunk and got into her black suitcase. First, she doused her hands with vinegar, rubbing the skin and nails

with a brush until they turned a harsh pink. She cleaned her arms with the same vinegar solution to remove the powder remnants. Next, she unzipped the main compartment. On top was lingerie, a black bra, size thirty-four C, with a matching lace thong. Beneath that, was a pair of jeans, her favorites with wear in all the right places. She pulled them out, along with a red sweater.

There in the parking lot, she stripped off the garments of her crime. Her naked body was a pale contrast in the dark night and black asphalt. The streetlights added a glow, as if it were a performance and any minute the curtain would drop.

Her clothes were wadded, bagged and thrown into the trunk. Then she wiped her face with a rag from her bag. Mascara came off in streaks, muting out the red spots that had been there. Another swipe removed all traces of make-up.

She hoisted the jeans over her hips and zipped them. The red sweater clung to her skin as she pulled it down. Her shoes were tossed into the trunk, along with everything else. She wouldn't need them. Here, she could catch an hour of sleep. The next surface her feet would touch would be the moist sand of the beach. She curled her toes at the thought.

“Cool waves, wind and sand.”

She missed it there. It was the opposite of her city apartment in New York. The trees were small but thick. The ocean whipped at the dune in front of her house, rolling foaming mounds onto the sand. Small brown sand crabs would scurry along, diving into their holes.

The people were different too. New York was rushed, wanting to fit thirty hours into a single day. At Hatteras, people appreciated time. They said hello to strangers and tried to connect everyone to a community. Food took a little longer to get. The locals loved to tell visitors about the history or the newest gossip. It was a good trade.

Not all of the Outer Banks were as friendly. Developments ate large sections of the beach with rentals stacked in lines exposing realtor adds. The people weren't locals anymore, but scavengers looking for opportunity or for escape.

Her section hadn't been molested yet. In fact, her section was poor. There were no mansions with pools in the back and the ocean in the front. The people were real and that's what she loved about them.

She reclined her seat and looked at the stars through the glass. Maybe she could retire soon. Nick might allow it. She could open one of those T-shirt shops along the strip next to the Home Cookin' Diner. She might even throw her gun into the ocean. Let the sand and salt water eradicate her sins while they rusted out the damn little pistol.

Maybe she could find a nice guy, not just a man for when she was lonely, but a serious relationship. Not another gun for hire. Maybe she'd find someone who looked like Devin, but had a simple steady job. She couldn't imagine Devin with a simple job. He was powerful and enigmatic. Not someone ready to settle down to a beach lifestyle.

Someone good or good for her had to exist. She laughed a little at the notion. It would be nice to be in someone's arms, someone who loved her. Better yet, someone who didn't care about her past.

What a bedroom confession that would be. Oh, by the way, I've killed people in their homes for money. She was sure there weren't any men with reformed assassins on their want lists. It wasn't exactly good wife and mother qualifications. With her luck, she'd fall head over heels for a police officer or an FBI agent.

The idea made her laugh. Something pure, like love, had no place in her life. Her adopted family had seen to that. Still, when she settled into sleep, it was a divine thought.

"Prince Charming, where are you tonight? Are you looking for me?" She laughed again. "Sleeping Beauty has a trunk load of evidence and a guy she left dead in the shower."

Chapter 2

It was afternoon by the time Amelia saw her first glimpse of the ocean, rising like a blue universe choosing to be separate from the rock and soil above the water line. It could come up and take the land if it wanted to. She knew and respected the ocean's brutality.

Waves formed in the distance, tumbling down into white froth and rumbling onto the beaches. The sun was high, but the wind held a bitter cold, turning the small vegetation sideways. She braced herself, even before she opened the door. The cold cut through her, chilling her soul as the smell of salt infiltrated her senses.

She breathed deeply, letting the smell, the wind and the atmosphere flow through her and wash away the life she'd left behind. It had been so long since she'd been home, too long. The city had almost taken her this time.

The grass that surrounded her home, the small patch that existed mixed with sand, was mowed. An elderly man by the name of Jimmy took care of that for her. The two trees in the front lumbered too close to the power lines, and the shrubs looked more like tattered mongrels. It wasn't Jimmy's fault. He did well for an eighty-year-old man. Every month, she mailed him a hundred dollars. It wasn't much, but sometimes it was all that kept him from starving.

Her bare feet touched the first stone step that crept up from the driveway and to the tiny section of grass and her gray home. Slat wood covered the outside of her house, weathered from years of abuse. A stormy sky made its outline invisible as it rose above the ocean.

The steps were cold, making her shiver. She began an awkward trot up the bank to where the wooden steps began. There were seventeen steps from the first section to the porch. Despite the height from the water, the front section had been built on stilts. So far, the little beach house had withstood half a dozen hurricane threats and countless tropicals.

The locals claimed this area was blessed and storms turned away. Amelia suspected the geography had more to do with it. The hard reef to the south and the shape of barrier islands to the north reduced flooding by breaking waves before shore. Some sections weren't as lucky, being rebuilt many times. The thought of being blessed made buying the property a little easier though. Something in her life should be blessed.

She nearly bought a place at Bodie, mistakenly thinking it was a hard O. The pronunciation was body, named so for the dead bodies that would wash onto the shores. Not a place to get away from murder, even if the bodies had stopped their assault on dry land. The idea made the place haunted and she didn't need that.

All she knew for sure was her home offered peace. The ghosts didn't disturb her here. There was no sound of her father's voice calling out. There was no sound of gunfire and at last, there was no blood. Somehow, the ocean always washed her clean, if that were possible.

She had her keys out before her hand ever touched the door. The old screen screeched its welcome as she pushed it aside and clicked the rusty metal lock. The wind helped open the front door. It had been too long.

Darkness filled her vision as her eyes tried to adjust. She turned on the overhead light by the door and felt the strength drain from her body. Damn, she was tired. The hit had been a hard one and the trip harder. It was time to rest.

She closed the door and locked it behind her. The next stop was her bedroom, her bed. This was where she felt comfort. She was home, lost in the beige flowers creeping across a white field that was her bedspread.

Somehow, the sheets still smelled fresh and her thoughts drifted. She was little again. The smell brought her back to the warm feeling of the clothes when she'd pull them from the dryer. Dad helped. They'd gather up the dirties, throw them in the wash, and wait until they'd come out of the dryer. Dad would wrap one of his big shirts around her. It was warm and soft. They'd sit together for hours, with her on his lap, and watch television on an old set that barely worked. Those were the happier times, the times before Dad bought new televisions, clothes, even a new car.

That's when the calls started. Another special project from their benefactor would be telephoned in. That's when she started hating that damn cop uniform. It no longer gave her a sense of pride to see her father in blue. The shiny buttons lost their fascination. He'd become a hypocrite, or so Susie Miller had said. It took her two days to find out what it meant then she beat the crap out of Susie, even though she knew it was true. Daddy stopped being proud of what he did. He traded it in for being proud of what he owned.

She reached beneath the covers and pulled the last of her clothes off. They landed in a crumpled wad by the door.

It was too late to help him and too much to think about. Still, he managed to slide into her sleepy thoughts, corrupting her sacred place. As sleep drifted in, she was no longer feeling the cool sheets against bare skin. She was twelve, in her favorite pair of jeans with the knees worn out of them, hiding behind the chair while the gunman slipped out the fire escape window. She was crying, lost, alone as her dead father's open eyes stared at her.

* * * *

"Are you sure?" The Italian man with a square jaw line and pronounced nose set the receiver down. His furrowed brow carried more than worries, it showed fear. "I need to know where Amelia is hiding."

A younger man sat on the corner of the desk with a grin on his face. "I told you it sounded like her work." He laughed, exposing large white teeth. "Nick, don't be so upset. It's not like she's family."

"Shut up, Carl." Nick looked at the much younger man. How could two brothers be so different? Lifetimes separated them. He had children older than this twit. If only Father had kept his pants on. Momma's children never acted like this.

Amelia wasn't family. She was Irish for goodness sake, but sometimes, blood didn't make family. He'd watched that little girl grow up and develop acute brutality under his direction.

He could still see her as a little girl, standing in the doorway pointing a thirty- eight caliber at Father. Her hair hadn't been combed, her clothes torn and dirty. Even in a mansion pointing a

pistol at the most powerful man in the city, she wasn't afraid. She'd had nothing to lose.

He'd come up behind her, but couldn't bring himself to take out the little girl. Her vengeance was justified. Look what they'd done to her father. Oh sure, in the meeting it hadn't sounded so terrible, just another dirty cop whose time had come. Committing the act changed everything. It was the last time he'd personally choreographed a hit.

A guy named Harold had pulled the trigger. They'd gone up the fire escape like common street thugs. Inside, they'd watched while Amelia's father read her a story. He'd gotten up to put her to bed when they snuck inside. He'd come back and died on the living room floor. It was worse than a single life ending. Amelia had no mother. He saw the little girl come out of her bedroom while he held the curtain back for Harold. She'd crept behind the chair and looked at her father on the floor. They had destroyed a little girl's world. It seemed someone needed to pay for it.

His dad saved himself from being shot by talking her out of it. It was the wild thing about their organization. Most politicians weren't bought with money. It was Dad's silver tongue that created allies, even in a little girl who knew why her father had died.

"I'm just saying that she doesn't leave us any choice. She's asking for it. It's not like she's your brother." He smiled. "We have to put family, then business. Crazy females have no place."

"Leave me now. Your attitude isn't helping." Nick looked at the chunky gold bracelet on his wrist instead of his brother. Things would be easier if Carl had fucked up. A hit would be called and everyone would've seen him as a strong leader. Carl could die in the street like a mongrel.

For a moment, he smiled, imagining Carl in the fetal position left in a ditch along a dirt road. He always imagined Amelia handling the hit. She might even pop him on the toilet. His naked smelly ass exposed for all to see.

"I didn't mean anything." Carl's gaze fell to the floor as he left.

"A hit." He didn't want Amelia to fall. "I have some calls to make." Nick spoke to the closing door.

Amelia wouldn't have done an unauthorized hit. She was unemotional about business. It was amazing she was a woman. Twenty years ago, a woman would never have been used on delicate assignments. She hadn't missed yet.

"Sally," Nick hit the intercom button, "where's Joey?"

"I'll find out. Sir, there was a question about rescheduling your luncheon tomorrow. Not all the members you requested could attend. Paul from The Rastic Corporation is having legal troubles and cannot make it until later in the week."

"Fine. Contact everyone and put something together. First, find Joey for me." Business was hard these days. Back in his grandfather's day, business consisted of protection, gambling and women. These weren't always profitable ventures. It was his father that started dealing drugs. It wasn't the street crap like coke. Their dealings were in pharmaceuticals and price fixing. It was great. Science would come up with some new crap. Their marketing group would start an ad campaign and before you knew it, every whiney ass hypochondriac was seeing their doctor for the goods. Muscle was rarely needed, unless a test had to go in a certain direction or people tried to prosecute over unforeseeable problems.

Amelia's latest assignment had been a Japanese company who had undercut the price agreement. Competition was bad with drugs. A pill that cost ten cents to make and sold at ten dollars a piece left a lot of room for all to make money. When some punk group appeared selling these things at five dollars a piece, something had to give.

"Sir," Sally's voice came over the speaker, "Joey went out of town for a few days. Nobody knows what city."

"Thank you."

Amelia had been humping this guy for several months. It was a secret, mostly due to the fact Joey was Carl's only son. Carl hated Amelia. Carl hated anyone who was smarter. He was a hateful man.

Nick dialed Amelia's house. Only two people had the number to her beach getaway. He let it ring five times then a sleepy sounding Amelia picked up the phone. At first, she sounded like that little girl they'd watched through the window. Sometimes, he felt like they had committed two murders that night. Her childhood had died on the floor with her father.

* * * *

"What?" Amelia felt the remnants of her dream fade into oblivion. If this was Joey canceling, she'd cut off his dick.

"It's me." He cleared his throat. "What do you know about a hit that went down around one this morning?"

It wasn't like Nick to call. That blowhard usually left hits to written notes. Fear of the Feds wiretapping kept calls to a minimal. "The Nagasaki hit went fine, but if you must know, it happened closer to nine." She sounded arrogant, hell, she felt arrogant.

This was her space and he was violating it with nonsense. She was the best they had. It was time for a little respect.

In her sleepy state of mind, she almost hung up the phone. It would've been her death. Luckily, Nick's Italian booming voice cut through the sleepy clutter and brought her abruptly into the real world.

"Not Nagasaki, Leviti. He was killed last night around one o'clock. A redheaded woman was seen leaving his apartment. A single bullet was fired into his head while he slept. Does any of this sound familiar?"

"Wait just a damn minute." Amelia sat up and tried to process the information. Leviti was an associate. "First of all, I didn't do any other hits last night. Secondly, if you'd think about the logistics, I mean Nagasaki is two states away from Leviti. It would be impossible for me to do both hits so close together. What's this all about?"

"Amelia," he paused and it was an unsettling sound. There had been few secrets between the two and never a lie, until now. "It's nothing." He started to say something, stopped, then changed the subject. "I just wanted to check with you. Enjoy your vacation." His breath turned heavy over the phone. "Your next job is in three weeks. I'll send you the information."

The line went dead. Doing an unauthorized hit was the equivalent of mutiny. What was worse,

the hit sounded like her. Her trademark was a bullet between the eyes. It was always the same caliber and usually at that time of night. The only saving grace was she'd already been on a hit. Whoever was setting her up wasn't high enough to know the agenda.

She slumped back into bed, giving the clock a cursory glance. No amount of fatigue would quiet her mind. Nagasaki had been in Florida. The last thing she'd heard was that Leviti and his crowd hung out in Alabama, hitting the drug trade. He'd been talking over plans to go legit with Nick.

"Shit." There was an unsettling feeling in her gut. She flung the covers back and felt the cold floor and chilly air. She'd forgotten to turn up the thermostat. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she went to the hall and turned up the dial.

Outside, the wind whipped against the house. She opened the curtains in the kitchen and found dark skies with angry water churning below. A storm was coming. She shivered again and went to the bathroom. A hot shower would help.

The faucets were old with a milky film covering the chrome. Everything was plain. A large beveled mirror hung above the sink. It was the newest addition and one she'd made only when the old one had cracked in several sections. The floor was a brown tile. The shower and bath were separate. Her shower was a small stall in the corner with a glass door, also covered with the same milky film. She changed as little as possible; fearing any influence she made would destroy the tranquility. Her touch was poison after all.

She reached into the stall and turned on the hot water, letting the steam rise in puffs before getting inside. The water was salty, but safe to drink thanks to a rusty system in the hall closet.

As the water beat against her skin, she felt the tension melt away and she imagined this was her way of life. She was a beach girl. There was no city. She would get a job, maybe a waitress or secretary. She would join one of those local churches she drove by every day and find herself a decent man. He would be a fisherman and during the slow times, he would take her out in his boat and whisper soft romantic sentiment.

She was pushing thirty. Settling down had to be a possibility. There was the idea of having a family. She couldn't send the kids off to daycare while driving to the next kill. What would she tell them? Mommy's a traveling salesman, just don't ask what she sells.

Her body stiffened. Something wasn't right. A sound made her turn off the shower and grab a towel. Someone was outside. Her gun was in the car. She stepped out and checked the room. There it was. A creaking. It wasn't the wind. The noise was too slow for that. Someone was sneaking around on her porch.

She ran to the bedroom and dressed. The noise changed as she slipped on fresh clothes. She stopped when a shadow passed in front of her window. Immediately, she grabbed a dagger from the nightstand.

This was it. Nick had sent hitters to get her. She peered out the window. A blond man crouched near the corner. He was holding something metal in his hand.

She went down the hall and out the back. It was a sliding glass door making the softest sound when pushed open. She stepped out five feet behind her intruder and clutched the dagger. It

would only take a second to send it into her assassin. She was ready to strike when a voice from behind stopped her.

“Dad, who’s this?”

She spun around and hid the knife behind her arm. Standing there was a ten-year-old boy. He was wearing a denim jacket, jeans and carrying the remains of a kite. Bright red and yellow cloth was wrapped with string. The heavy winds had shredded it.

The older man spun around. A small metal pipe was in his hand. More bits of string were tied to one end of the pipe and thoroughly entangled in her railing. She produced the dagger and cut it free.

“I’m sorry.” A surprised man got up and offered his hand. “I didn’t realize anyone was home. This place has been empty since I moved in.”

Her response was cut off by the wind. It staggered her backwards, stinging her face. Quickly, she opened the door and motioned them inside. The boy came first, then his father.

“That’s quite a storm starting. My name is Cody. I hope I didn’t scare you.” He pointed at the knife, which she tossed into the sink.

“Just a little. Didn’t you see my car?” She took a deep breath, wishing the boy would stop staring at her. It was disturbing, seeing his innocent face locked on hers. Maybe it just bothered her because she’d nearly killed his father.

“No. We live down the beach in the blue house. We came up from the front along the beach and followed the path in the rocks to your house. I would’ve knocked if I’d known. I just came up because one of our kites was blown up here.”

“That’s okay. Nice to meet you, Cody, I’m Amelia.” She finally shook his hand. “Can I get you some coffee or something?”

“No. I guess we’d better get back before the storm gets here.” He covered the pipe with his hand. Amelia noticed a wire hanging from one end.

She took a step back. Kites weren’t usually made with metal pipes. This guy didn’t look like a local either. He was around her age, thin, but muscular. His skin was tanned, like he’d lived here all his life, but the blue house down the beach was owned by an elderly couple that only came up twice a year.

“Which house did you say you lived in?” She edged her way back to the sink and her dagger.

“The blue one. It’s the only other house in this section.” He shifted his weight. “What happened to the Merricks?”

Again he shifted nervously. “Oh, they let me rent it. Wanted to get my boy away from the city for a while.”

“You must be quite a guy for the Merricks to rent to you. They never rent to anyone.” She looked at the pipe again. He couldn’t cover it completely with his arm. “I guess you’d better get back.” She offered them a smile.

"I guess so." He took an uncertain step toward the door and pulled it open. "Race you home, Pete." The boy stepped out the door then barreled down the front to the path and the beach. Cody followed while clutching the metal pipe.

Amelia waited until they were out of sight and went to her car to retrieve her gun. She wouldn't be taken by surprise again. She fished it out from its hiding place as headlights came up the road. A red BMW turned into the driveway. It was Joey. The car was a rental but clearly his trademark. He liked things showy.

He parked at an angle, revved the engine once and shut it down. There was some fumbling inside the car. When he came out, he was carrying a bottle of wine and a pizza from the restaurant thirty miles away.

"About time." She tucked the gun into the back of her pants and watched her young lover walk to her. He was handsome with classic Italian features and a set of blue eyes from his mother's side. His hair was short with a slight goatee, as if he wasn't really old enough to grow facial hair. He wore jeans and a tank top. There was the glint of gold as he walked toward her from the large tacky chain he wore around his neck.

"So, you missed me?"

She smiled, took the pizza from him and led him up the stairs to her home. The cold was overwhelming by the time she reached the porch. Running outside with wet hair didn't help matters.

Joey came in behind her. She felt his arms reach around her waist as she set the pizza on the dining room table. He was strong and barely old enough to buy the bottle of wine he'd brought. His libido matched his age. He reminded her of this as he pulled her body against him.

"Let's eat first." She hadn't realized how hungry she'd become. Dinner yesterday was the last time she'd eaten.

Joey sat down at the table while Amelia set the table. She tossed him a corkscrew for the wine. While he struggled with that, she dug through the cabinet to find plates that weren't chipped.

"So who'd you do this time?"

"I don't want to talk shop." She set everything down on the pine table and filled her glass to the top. "Has anyone been asking questions about me?" She grabbed a barely warm slice from the box.

"No."

"Are you sure? Anyone asking about my jobs or schedule or anything?"

He shook his head then looked at her quizzically. "What's going on, Amy?"

She rolled her eyes. "Nothing and don't call me that." He looked at her earnestly from across the table, as if he might care. "It's nothing, really. I was just curious."

"Come on. Did it go wrong?" He leaned forward and filled his glass. His eyes were intense as

if studying everything in her response.

This bothered her, the way he watched. She preferred to think of him as a handsome, but a mentally inferior thing. He was like a puppy, happy and pretty. Quick to come when called and just as quick to leave. It was a cold way to think about him, but he was a convenient toy that really bothered Carl. Joey rarely thought about anything other than sex and, as long as she didn't ask for anything else, he was content. She figured it was a mutually agreeable situation.

She shook off the observation while watching his blue eyes. "I never let a job go bad. You know that."

She wasn't sure what he knew. Anything from Carl's loins couldn't be that impressive. Of course, he had grown on her during the time they'd shared. She didn't like to admit it. Settling down with him wouldn't be an option, though. He was too much flash and not enough substance.

They finished dinner and went into the living room. Joey put on some soft rhythm and blues. She sat on the large brown couch and watched him dance around the room. He kicked off his shoes and tossed his shirt to the floor in an awkward strip tease. She got up to go to him, when the cell phone clipped on his belt started ringing. Without saying a word, he stepped into the kitchen for some privacy. Amelia stood in the middle of the living room alone.

The room was too dark but a bright lamp would disturb the mood. She went to the cabinet that hid her television and took a pack of matches from the drawer beneath. A small array of candles were scattered throughout the room. She lit several and glanced beyond the dining room into the kitchen. Joey had his back to her, but she could see his body tense up. He raised one hand, balled it into a fist and hit the counter.

Her home was set up in two sections. There was the front door, which opened on the living room. From there, a person could go into the dining room and kitchen, or continue through the living room to the sliding glass doors facing the beach. She liked the fact whatever entrance people used, they would be near the living room, even if the sliding door was right next to the kitchen sink and the dirty dishes she usually left. The hallway wall sectioned off the kitchen with an open area for an entrance. It continued down to the bedroom and bathroom.

Amelia took her matches to a small iron baker's rack she had in the hallway for knick-knacks. Sitting in the middle of her dragon collection were two black and green candles. She struck the match and lit the first while listening outside the kitchen.

"Okay, baby. Don't worry about it. I'll be back in a couple of weeks." His tone became soft and tender. "I love you, too."

Love? She was astonished to hear him mutter the words. So he had a girlfriend. It wasn't surprising. Their relationship was far from exclusive. Still, it bothered her. There had never been that bond or love or whatever people called it. Emotionally, she'd only connected with Nick, and their relationship was family. It would be nice to be desired though, to be in someone's heart and not just their bed.

She lit the next candle and set the box of matches on the rack near her favorite dragon. It was a baby, hatching from an egg. Its little red and black head had broken through along with one clawed hand. She touched it gently and scooted it closer to what represented its mother. This

one was a grand creature standing nearly eighteen inches tall with its tail coiled around its body.

“Here you are.” He started kissing the back of her neck. His hands ran under her shirt touching those delicate places.

It was like anything else. She would simply not think about it or the repercussions. He’d chosen to come to her and for now, that was enough. She reached behind her and touched him. As she felt him tighten, she wondered about the girl he’d been on the phone with.

Her mouth opened and she almost asked about the other woman. There was a tinge of jealousy. He’d never spoken to her of love.

It was unimportant. At least she wasn’t alone tonight. She shut her mouth and let him continue while she closed her eyes and thought of the one who’d gotten away, the one man she could only imagine, Devin.

Chapter 3

Women could keep a multitude of secrets and hide even more sins, but he never thought of Amelia as a woman. Nick tapped his fingers on the lacquered desk in a slow rhythm as he considered her fate. The hit looked like her doing, but he didn't think it was possible for her to pull off both jobs in the amount of time she had. That meant someone was setting her up.

He glanced at a photo on his desk of his wife, kids, grandchildren and Amelia. She held the newest edition, a six-month old boy. There was no hardness to her face in that picture. In fact, a rare but genuine smile had been captured.

It was getting late and he didn't like where his thoughts traveled. He got up from his desk and touched the plants arranged on his curio cabinet. His secretary had said the place needed a homey touch. She'd added her influence over every part of his business.

Sally was a good secretary, although a little young. She wasn't more than twenty-five, but she was an old twenty-five. One day, she'd marched into the office wearing a short skirt and showing incredible cleavage. For the first time in his forty-year marriage, he'd been tempted.

He might've even given in, except she'd said something that snapped him and his penis out of whatever plans they were contemplating. She'd said, "I know you're married, but guys like you need a little extra."

It was the Italian stereotype, a wife on Fridays and the whore on Saturdays. It wasn't a bad label, powerful, manly, but no one was going to fit him into a category. He'd seen it happen too many times. Money and power could earn respect, then again, what remained when the man was stripped of everything? It shouldn't be something too weak to obey vows or resist whores.

He rubbed his meaty neck and felt the sweat building. He was afraid for the first time in his life. Surely, Amelia wasn't going against his family, their family? She could run the organization. Hell, she might do a better job than he could.

Deep inside, he knew ambition grew like an evil seed, but Amelia had never been power hungry. Maybe she'd become too smart for her own good and realized how things really worked around here.

He took his jacket from the brass rack that stood in the corner and folded it over his arm. He picked up the manila envelope from the desk. Some things didn't go through his secretary. He carried it out to the hallway and to a small room they kept office supplies in. There were FedEx envelopes stuck in cubbies above a postage machine. He took one from the shelf and marked it for next day delivery. This one, he would personally leave on the first floor in the mailroom. It would go out tomorrow and be in Amelia's hands the day after.

It was an odd procedure. One he'd implemented after catching Sally reading mail marked confidential. The envelope hadn't been sealed, which didn't make it hard for a curious eye. Sally seemed loyal in all other aspects. It might just be she was a nosey woman. He'd tried to shrug it off. The real reason for the mistrust was the hunger in her eyes, more than ambition. It looked evil. Given that, he felt better bypassing Sally's desk. Good secretary or not, he didn't need any extra eyes in his business. The Feds were bad enough. Twice, he had to appear on

charges of price fixing. Honest businessmen must go through hell to make a buck.

He shut the door to the room. It was a newer building, but that room had a dark, musty feel. The copier room two doors down smelled even worse. Something about the scent of hot machinery and ink didn't agree with him. Most people never noticed. Then again, most people were idiots.

The package contained material on a hit, nothing special. He didn't want Amelia to know she was a suspect. A warning would be sent out soon, so for now, it would be business as usual.

Nick closed the envelope and tucked it under his arm. He left the room, leaving behind the click click of his shoes against the tiled section of the floor. He didn't hear anyone else in the hall as he hit the button for the elevator, nor did he see anyone slide into the supply room to look for scraps left behind.

* * * *

Amelia sat on her porch watching lightning dance off the ocean. Night had fallen but no stars or moon penetrated the darkness covering the sky. The storm had been amazing.

Thunder woke her nearly an hour ago while her lover slept. She crept out to the porch wearing only an old button down shirt. Somehow, the cold wasn't as terrible now. The wind still blew but it had turned warm and wet.

Waves leapt skyward as another bolt crashed from the heavens. Storms this fierce usually didn't last long. Too much energy burned up in its performance. Its very life, the movement of air, the gathering of clouds and the electricity were all for this moment, all for her to watch.

She stood at the edge of the porch and spread her arms as rain struck her body. Her lungs filled with the smell of the ocean, of the storm. She felt united with this force, this feeling of immense energy and strength from nature. At that moment, nothing was beyond her. She could fly. Another brilliant shard of light split the sky. The crash reverberated in her ears like a gunshot, so many gunshots, and her sense of well being vanished.

More lightning struck. The air split and for a moment she thought she saw blood on the horizon. Blood. There had been too much blood.

The color had been a trick of light. The bright flashes had temporarily marred her vision. It was odd how red could make her only think of murder. She didn't think of love or Valentines or cherries. Only death.

"How many have I killed?" she whispered to the night. She'd lost count, maybe she'd lost everything that mattered.

Lightning felt like it had cut through her. Her heart ached and her breathing sped up. She fell to her knees, trembling. With all her senses afire, it felt as if her core were glass and it shattered, freeing what was left of her soul. Tears filled her eyes. She hadn't cried since her father died but these wouldn't stop. She sobbed like a child as she curled up in a ball. So many emotions muted to black and white became alive in color and the overload felt like it would kill her. She hurt.

The storm let out another crack but it faded into the ocean. The angry waves could be heard

again. They beat the shore in protest, gathering up the tiny things that couldn't hold on and spit them onto the beach.

She wasn't sure how much time passed with her lying there. Rain had stopped. In the distance, a seagull cried. She rubbed her eyes and sat up, feeling the imprint of the hard boards in her side.

A flush of embarrassment colored her cheeks. She hoped Joey hadn't seen. Her body trembled in the night air. She went back inside and pulled a throw from the back of the couch. She didn't want to share a bed with Joey tonight.

A musty smell held onto the old throw, but the soft knit felt good. She wrapped it around herself, seeing the blue envelope her body. As she covered up, the corner swept over the table, knocking Joey's cell phone to the floor. She picked it up and hit the power button without conscience thought. Like so many times in her life, she worked from instinct. Everything went on autopilot and maybe that's what made her good at her job. She'd been complemented for her planning, her good sense, but in reality, reaction, not thinking, made her better. She knew what someone else was going to do before they acted because she felt it.

The green display came to life. The menu was next, then she had to choose between incoming calls and outgoing. She chose incoming. The last three calls shocked her. They were from the office.

Carl didn't like making calls from the office, but it seemed normal enough until a sick feeling started in her throat and settled in the pit of her stomach. The last phone call was from a woman...a woman in the office.

She'd been an outsider from the moment she was born. Her "adoption" into Nick's family had only meant something to Nick's father. It shouldn't matter. She was the best at her job and Joey didn't mean anything to her. The calls, the girl, shouldn't make a difference but the thought of him dating someone inside the company terrified her. Someone was on her turf.

There was more than jealousy. She stepped to the kitchen, hoping to wash away the feeling of cotton in her mouth. The glasses were a little dusty. She pulled one from the cupboard and rinsed it off.

The water didn't taste great, but it made her feel better. She went to the side of the kitchen that faced the drive. A few streetlights flickered. One poised near her car reflected a form. Amelia squinted and saw her dome light on. "Son of a ..."

She grabbed her purse from the table and pulled a small pair of binoculars from inside then returned to the window. A man rifled inside her car. As she watched, his head poked up from the dash. It was her friendly neighbor, Cody.

It would be easy to pick him off from here. She reached for her pistol, but changed her plans. There was more to Cody than met the eye. It was time to get to know the enemy and who'd sent him.

She slinked back to her bedroom and finished dressing. Her Italian stallion was too busy snoring to notice her absence. His mouth hung open with drool slopping onto the pillow.

With the gun tucked in her waistband, she looked back out the window. Her intruder kept busy.

It only gave her a few minutes but she'd done more with less time. She went out the ocean side, down the dune, and to the walk of the Merrick's home.

Breaking in was easier than she expected. Cody had left the front door unlocked. She creaked open the screen and went inside. The living room hadn't changed since her last visit. That's how the Merrick's were. They liked their lives to be a certain way, a routine, and to deviate would be worse than sin.

This was also the first time she'd ever heard of them renting the place out.

She made her way upstairs to the bedrooms. The first door she opened was the son's room. Pete, she thought was his name. He slept, tucked in with the blankets up to his chest. A teddy bear sat at the foot of the bed and his dirty clothes were on the floor.

The next bedroom was a small guest room she didn't expect to see used. That would be the last one she checked. Cody would be staying in the master bedroom. She opened that door and flashed around a small penlight. Immediately, she took a step backward. Her foot stopped inches from ripped flooring. The wooden slats had been systematically removed. Several of them had been placed against the wall with paper tags attached. There was no furniture left. The only décor was plastic bags and small brown bottles lining the wall where the flooring remained. An odd light, like a black light leaned against the window frame.

She backed into the hall and stopped at the guest room. Cody was using it. A suitcase, still packed, sat on the floor. The dresser had the typical guy things, change, a few business cards, and his wallet. She checked the cards but none of the names looked familiar. She took the wallet and found his ID. Mr. Cody Turner of Alcoa, and inside was a laminated work badge. It looked like the ones the feds carried. Before she could read it the door below slammed shut. Cody had arrived home.

She pulled the gun from her waistband and went to the stairs. He stood on the landing. He held a bag, probably from her car. She drew down on him. It was an easy shot. It would be one bullet between the eyes. Then she heard a faint cough from the next room.

If she shot the father, the boy would come running. She cursed herself as she slid back into his room and under the bed. It was a demeaning position, like a busted mistress. She breathed in the musty smells of dust and old mattress.

The floor around her creaked as the bedroom door opened. A puff of dust rained down while above her head, Cody sat going through his bag of goodies. The springs wailed as he bounced above with excitement.

"Amelia, just what have you been doing?"

It was time to get to work. She rolled out from under the bed in one swift motion. He was taken off guard and dropped the bloody top she'd been wearing earlier. Her gun, pointed at his head, held Cody's attention.

"This can go two ways. One, you can follow me outside where we can talk or I can leave your brain as a bloody wad on the pillow for your son to find. Choose." "Daddy, are you asleep?" Pete's small voice came from the door.

She had time to shoot. It would've been easy to blow them both apart. Part of her just wanted

to end this mess. Instead, she mouthed 'answer him' and her gun quivered with uncertainty.

"This isn't a good time, son. Go back to bed." Cody inched toward her.

She prayed he'd stop before she had to put a bullet between his eyes. He came just a little closer. She looked at the silencer, wondering how much longer she could wait before seeing the dust expel the chamber and Cody fall to the floor. It would force her to kill Pete too. She didn't want to see a kid die.

"Is something wrong?" The door began to open.

* * * *

Joey heard the phone ringing in the living room. At first, he dreamed the bank alarm from the first job he'd ever done had gone off. It was before Carl took him into the company. The alarm went off loud and deafening, not one of those sweet silent ones letting the crooks think they could get away. This was a small town bank out of South Carolina. What looked like an easy hit. Unfortunately, when he hit the first set of doors to exit the building, both the inner and outer doors locked, trapping him.

His dad's good lawyer got him off with five years probation, probably because he was underage. Underage was an understatement. Joey had been twelve, a tall twelve passing for sixteen most of the time. Twelve year olds didn't have sense enough to plan a heist. It was basic. He knew he wanted money and knew where it was kept.

This wasn't the alarm though. The digital tinkling forced him awake. He rolled from the bed, falling onto the floor. The corner of the nightstand caught his head. He grabbed his temple feeling a deep scratch then followed the annoying sound. He lumbered upright and went into the living room, tripping over Amelia's curio stand and badly stubbing his toe. Finally, he found the source of his irritation on a glowing green screen blinking the words 'incoming call'.

"What!" he screamed.

"It's started. Get out and don't go back again."

He hung up the phone and went back to the bedroom. Shit. Amelia wasn't there. He hadn't looked when he'd gotten up. Where was she? There was no time to find out.

"Amelia?" he called. "Honey, where are you?"

He grabbed his pants from the floor and put them on. He didn't bother with shoes or a shirt. This would be too close. It was time for their love affair to end.

It didn't matter where Amelia had gone. He was thankful she wasn't in bed with him. Explanations would be hard and he had to be somewhere else. He ran down to his car and didn't look back.

"Good luck, Amelia. You're going to need it."

* * * *

Cody sat on the bed with his arm outstretched, waving for her not to fire. Time slowed as she watched the door open. Suddenly, Cody jumped off the bed. She let him get too close. There

was still time to fire but that would force her to kill a child. She let him grab her and turn the gun to the ceiling.

"I don't want Pete to see the gun, or us fighting." Amelia looked into his eyes. "I don't want to have to kill him, too." "Then drop the gun to the floor."

"Daddy?" Pete called from a crack in the door. "Can I come in? It's important."

She released the gun and felt her heart sink as it thudded to the floor. Cody kicked it under the bed as the door opened completely and the messy headed boy in Superman pajamas entered.

"Oh," he said with a bemused look on his face. "Dad said you were pretty but I didn't think you'd be his girlfriend this fast."

Amelia smiled as she realized Cody's arms were still wrapped around her. From the door, it probably looked like a loving embrace. She snuggled her mouth against his ear. "Get him out of here now!"

"What's wrong, son?"

"I heard some noises. Never mind. I'll just go back to bed." He looked back with a question poised on his small face. "Are we expecting any company?"

"No." Cody looked at Amelia. "Is someone else here?"

"I thought I heard a car pull up." He shrugged and let out a long yawn. "I guess it was nothing."

"A friend of yours?" Cody's eyes lit up in terror.

"I think we should continue this date another time." She smiled at Pete. "Just stay out of my car and my business." She tried to jerk away but Cody wasn't letting go.

"Go back to bed, son. I love you."

Pete obeyed automatically. Another moment, they heard the click of his door shutting. Amelia pulled against him again. This time, as he pulled back, she brought her head forward, hard, smashing against his nose. Blood started running down his face. A look of surprise hung on his open mouth as she pulled away and checked the window. When the blood dripped onto his lip, he realized what had happened.

"Bitch." He reached for her. She waved one hand at him as if shushing an old friend. For some reason he stopped as if sensing the real danger waited outside. He dropped to his knees to retrieve the gun under the bed.

"Who do you work for?" she whispered.

"I think you'll be answering the questions." The gun leveled at her. "What brings you to the coast, my dear?"

Amelia felt her heart speed up. The metallic taste of adrenalin burned into her mouth. Two things bothered her. One, Joey's car was gone. Two, a stranger had parked in her driveway, a sedan, one with lots of trunk space. There were only a few people that knew where she was and all of them she'd pledged loyalty to.

“I don’t have time for this. Something big is going on and I don’t need you or your brat interfering.” She took a step forward, watching the gun shake in his hands. This guy was no hitter. He wasn’t even a cop. “What are you, a desk jockey?”

“I’m an investigator. A couple of people have turned up dead and they sent me to check the place out.” The gun quivered again, this time, lowering an inch toward the floor.

Her stature slacked as if relaxing, then she flashed him a bright smile before heaving her foot, catching the side of his jaw while grabbing the pistol and aiming it onto the floor. Surprisingly, it didn’t go off. He huffed and fell backwards against the wall. His arm hit the nightstand, knocking over a lamp and causing it to shatter on the floor.

Next, came the sound of footsteps, Pete’s footsteps. Amelia ran over to Cody, pulled him flat on the floor and straddled him. The gun stayed pointed at his head but hidden from the view of the door. As the door opened, she leaned forward, kissing Cody passionately.

“Dad?” Pete sounded embarrassed and shut the door. “Sorry,” came from the hall and again the boy returned to bed.

At first, Amelia thought Cody had passed out during the fight. Instead, he was momentarily stunned. Like Sleeping Beauty, he came to life under her kiss. His hands ran up her back. She felt his weight shift. He rolled her over as if expecting the foreplay to continue, only to be met with the wanting desire of her gun.

He bit his lip waiting just a moment before standing up and moving away from her. Cody breathed hard, and from his pants, she could tell he wasn’t trying to romance the gun away from her.

“Well, that was fun. Now if you’ll excuse me, there seems to be more nosey people in my space.” She stood, took the bag of items he’d stolen from her car, and went to the door. “I could kill you now. For the sake of your son, I won’t. Just don’t call the cops or get in my business again.” She smiled. “I usually don’t give warnings.” With her left hand she wiped her bottom lip. The smile brightened. “Not bad.”

She crept down the steps and out the back door. Her house looked ominously quiet from the outside. The sedan was gone, but she had the feeling that if she walked a few yards down the street, she’d find it parked with the engine idling. Some wannabe sitting there with a cell phone in his lap waiting on his chance to tell the boss they’d done good.

This was not a first class hit. Few organizations would waste their guys going after her. Even fewer hitters would pull into the driveway. That also meant they were sloppy, a little too sloppy.

She crept onto her porch dropping the retrieved items. No noise came from inside. She held her breath and waited. Maybe five minutes had passed when she heard a board inside the living room groan. It was a small noise, but a clear indicator.

Amelia exhaled slowly and went around back. Two flowerpots were moved. The plants in them long since dead. She’d held onto them envisioning herself as some settled homemaker who would make a good home, complete with the fancy decorated pots her neighbor had given her as a moving in gift. Those pots always stayed in the windowsill except for now.

There had to be two hitters. One perched by the front door and the other watching out the

back window. These guys weren't pros at all. She could smell cologne only slightly masked by the ocean.

An odd thought occurred to her. If she were someone else, this would be a surprise party with all her friends gathered around in the darkness waiting to celebrate her birthday with hugs and presents. Family, friends, and co-workers would be waiting anxiously, one whispering, "Here she comes."

She took a deep breath and felt her nerves harden. A shot through glass was always risky. There was the chance the bullet would be deflected. That would give them all the time they needed. She would have to be quick.

Raising her gun, she crept beneath the window. With her free hand, she scratched lightly against the outside wall. The hitter rose, glancing out. It was a stupid mistake but it's what she'd counted on. Two bullets, sounding no more than a thoop in the night, were fired. The first shattered the window and struck him in the cheek. The second went home, slicing through his eye and killing him instantly.

As if to prove their inexperience, the second called out quietly. The sound came closer. She went back around to the sliding door. This time, she slid inside. Enough light flooded through the windows for her to see the hitter moving down the hall. His face turned away from her.

He seemed to feel her eyes on him. His body barely flinched, signaling he was coming around when she hit him squarely in the back of the head. She fired again, shutting down his heart.

Amelia went to the bedroom, grabbed a few personal items and headed for the front door. A sharp sound stopped her cold. Somebody else lurked outside. The mystery guest approached the door. She raised her gun to fire at the silhouette, when they knocked.

Throughout history, each contract killer had found his or her personal style. Knocking on someone's front door wasn't unheard of, but it was far from the desired procedure. She'd only used this direct approach once in her career. It proved effective but too risky.

She pressed herself against the wall next to the door. Her gun aimed where her mystery guest stood. A second set of knocks, this time more urgent, rasped against the wooden frame.

"Who's there?" "Cody."

She rolled her eyes in disgust and threw open the door. There he stood, like a big eyed idiot. She should've shot him earlier. The kiss was good but not great and he was starting to get annoying.

Bag in one hand, gun in the other, she pushed by him and started down the stairs. She could hear his footsteps clumping behind her as she hit the driveway.

"Wait!" he finally blurted out. "What's going on here?"

"Now's not the time." She opened the trunk and put the bag inside, noticing Cody stood a little too close as she did.

"You need to stay here." Cody seemed to fumble for the words. "Pete said he saw somebody else around your car messing with the tires."

She froze. Underestimating the opposition was the first thing she learned not to do. This attempt had gone too easy. She walked around her car. Nothing seemed strange. Under the car there was no sign of brake fluid or extra wires giving away a nasty fate. Then, out of habit, she touched the lug nuts on her tire. One fell off and rolled down the pavement. The passenger side front tire was just as loose. Whoever was behind this had wanted her to get in her car and make a run for it. No doubt, that sedan waited down the road. When she lost control, wham, it would be over.

The car keys were in her hand, which had responded to the plot by turning into a white claw with knuckles bared, as if afraid to drop the keys. She could fix the tires and head out. More than likely, she could escape them. The odds weren't in her favor, though. There were too many winding, desolate roads and the incredibly long bridge with nothing but water on either side.

Staying wasn't an option either. There was always the slim chance the cops would be called. If she hadn't gotten on the road in a certain amount of time, then the police would be the next best way to get her off the street. Locked up without a weapon would make her an easy hit.

"Come on. I need to buy some time." She waved the gun at him. "Can't you just say please?" Cody started moving back to her house.

"As far as I know, you could be after me, too." She put the barrel against his back and walked him up the stairs. "You rummaged through my car."

"You don't know how sorry I am I did that." He rubbed his chin. "Why are people after you?"

"Don't worry about it."

She pushed him through the door and into the living room, where a body lay in a pool of blood. Cody froze when he saw it. Another nuzzle from the gun and he stepped inside with Amelia shutting the door behind them.

"I didn't start this fight, but I intend to finish it." Amelia gritted her teeth and started working.

She rolled over the first body and checked his jacket pockets. A cell phone and wallet were thrown over to the couch, along with a cheap revolver. A pro wouldn't use anything but the best. This guy had a dime store with no silencer. She did the same to the second man, removing everything from his pockets and adding them to the pile. Next, she took a brown glass bottle from beneath the sink and poured its contents into a bowl. She dipped each man's hands into the bowl while the top layer foamed. Cody watched as most of the skin from the men's hands disintegrated in her macabre manicure.

"Are you up for a walk on the beach?" She smiled, dumping the leftovers into each man's mouth, paying special attention to cover the teeth. A horrible smell filled the room. "Grab the gent's feet, would you?" She kept the gun in one hand as she wrapped her arms around his torso and began dragging the dead man outside.

Cody obeyed. The two of them carried the man down to the surf. He followed Amelia through the waves, finding it hard to hold on. When they were chest deep beyond the break, she signaled for the man to be let go.

At first, the body bobbed closer, as if longing to return to the scene of the crime. It rolled,

giving them a good look of the strange permanent grin burned into its face by the acid Amelia had used. It ended up face down, moving in time with the water. Finally, a little breeze helped push him out.

“They’ll find him.” Cody looked back as they waded to the beach. “Murder is hard to get away with.”

“He was there to kill me, Cody. I’m just buying a little time. Now, come on. There’s more to be done.”

They repeated the process with the second man. Next came the clean-up Amelia was far too good at. She scrubbed the floors, first with vinegar, and then with a bleach compound.

With everything back in place, she pointed the gun back at Cody. “Strip. The cops might be here any time now. I don’t need any evidence on you.”

“When the cops show up, just tell them what happened. The mess will be over with.”

“You really have no idea how all this works, do you? If you really want somebody dead, have them arrested. They have no weapons and are being protected by a group of guys making pennies. Now come on. Shirt first, then pants, I don’t have all night.”

He stripped and tossed her his clothes. With the gun still trained on him, she motioned for him to go into the bathroom. “I’ll need your underwear too, dear. We’re going to take a shower.”

She turned her back long enough to throw his clothes into the washer and add hers to the pile. No one would ever know they’d been in the ocean.

“Investigators have made my job harder over the years.” She adjusted the water. “How hot do you like your showers?”

There was no shame in her nudity. In fact, she enjoyed how Cody’s eyes kept falling to the floor as if too embarrassed to look at her. Most men leered, but he was too innocent for that. Maybe she needed a shy man, not some hit man like Devin, or a career criminal like Joey.

She motioned him into the shower. When he was safely inside, she returned to the living room and lit a scented candle to disguise any chemical smells left. Then she took the personal effects and shoved them under a couch cushion.

Outside, she saw a police car pull in the drive. Quickly she ran to the bathroom and jumped inside next to a shocked Cody. She took the soap from his hand and began working it over her body. Her gun had been deposited in the linens outside the shower but Cody never made an attempt to leave. Instead, he seemed focused on her like he’d never seen a naked woman before. His glances came and went with a wide eyed astonishment.

A loud knock rang through the house. Cody jumped. Amelia knew it was show time. This hadn’t been her first close call.

“Who’s here?” Cody leaned out of the shower. “Oh shit, what’s happening?” “The cops have arrived. Now, you know this was self-defense. You saw their guns.” She kissed him softly, pulling him back. “In a minute, they’ll break down the door and come inside.” She moved his hand close to her breast but was careful not to let him touch. “We’ve been together all night. We met last week at the bar on the corner. Later, you can confess all you want to, but for

today, you're my lover. Do you understand?"

He nodded as he pushed her against the shower wall, locking eyes with her. The outside world stopped existing for a moment. That's when the door busted inward. To his credit, he looked honestly surprised. The two officers who came in, guns drawn, were equally astonished. They made a hasty exit to the hallway.

"Excuse me. Could you two step out here for a moment?" The older of the two cops asked.

"I'll make this up to you." She gave him a gentle squeeze and got out of the tub. "Just play nice."

She tossed him a towel and wrapped another around her body. In the hall, the police were waiting. One of the younger officers blushed.

"Ma'am, we're sorry about the intrusion but we had a report about a murder here."

"Really?" She grabbed her robe from a hook in the bedroom and slid it on while an officer watched. "Are you sure someone isn't pulling a prank on you?" She walked into the living room and sat on the couch, conveniently over the slain men's items.

"Would it be okay if we took a look around?"

"Haven't you seen enough by now?" She smiled but when the gesture wasn't returned, she consented. "Go ahead."

Cody joined her on the couch, the towel still wrapped around his waist. The police split up, going through the cabinets and drawers. The man in charge kept an eye on them, asking questions and recording their responses. Amelia remained unaffected by the intrusion into her home. Cody, however, began to sweat nervously. He would crack. She knew it.

"Listen. I'm not finding this amusing anymore. You've been here for an hour without a warrant and I believe I've been most accommodating. I think it's time you wrap this up."

Cody opened his mouth to say something then stopped. He shifted uncomfortably before motioning to one of the officer's, who went outside with him. If he busted her...her thoughts subsided. The officer walked Cody down the beach to his house. Cody probably wanted to check on Pete.

Another half an hour passed before she heard the uniformed men whispering they didn't think it was possible to commit murder and have all traces removed in such a short time period. The morning ended with a handshake and several apologies.

Cody didn't return. She watched the cop who had escorted him come back. At least she wouldn't have to deal with him again. When the sun rose over the horizon, she decided it was time to leave. Hopefully, any hitters had gone after the call had been made to the cops. Hopefully.

Chapter 4

Amelia needed to find a safe place to stay until she had this mess figured out. Her apartment in the city would never do. She also couldn't go back to the company. There was something seriously wrong there. Maybe it was time to visit Max.

It felt like a lifetime since Amelia had last seen her brother. He wasn't full blood but a bastard child from her father and a waitress he saw during his married days. Dad was a roamer. Sure, he got married and tried to settle down, but before Amelia came along, he couldn't commit to dinner, much less a family or home. It wasn't that Terry, Amelia's mother, was unattractive. She had been a redheaded heartbreaker. As a wife, Amelia heard no complaints about her mother. The fault for Dad's creeping fell squarely on his own shoulders. He always wanted more and better than what he had.

Amelia was ten when she learned of her older brother's existence. It happened one night when an imbalanced woman arrived at the apartment swearing and screaming. Terry was three years gone by then. Dad sent Amelia to her room as if trying to keep it secret. When everything had quieted, Amelia emerged to find a kid named Max standing in their living room with a suitcase. Dad had a lot of explaining to do.

She was taken back to her room while Dad told her a long exaggerated tale that, to a ten-year-old, sounded like a selfish kid who didn't know when to stop. Amelia didn't say it. She would never want to tarnish that glimmer Dad held when he looked at her. Somehow, if he realized she'd seen his all too human side, she believed he wouldn't love her any more. She would've died if that happened. Besides, his faults made her love him all the more because he was so wonderful in spite of them.

She smiled, remembering him, the sadness that lived in his eyes at times. She liked to believe the world had put it there in its attempts to corrupt his heart. He was far from a saint, but she was sure he'd found peace in the end. He may have even found heaven. After all, the lying, stealing and cheating were for his family.

Over a year had passed since she'd seen Max. He'd come to her apartment in New York a few days before Christmas, glowing with the spirit. He was corny that way. She was the only real family he had left. His mother made sure he never stayed in one place long enough to form bonds. She'd dropped him off with their father three times. Each stint lasted about two weeks before she'd show up, drunk or high, to get him. A few times, they lived close enough for Max to come over after school but it never lasted long.

Fate brought them together after Dad's death. She'd decided to stay with her adopted Italian family. Josh, a hired man, had taken her back home to get a few personal possessions, and check for any incriminating records. It was that day, Max's mom, Jocelyn might've been her name, chose to bring him over for an impromptu visit. During these visits she would hit Dad up for more money.

Josh nearly shot her. Amelia heard a commotion in the living room and came out with a box of photos she'd collected. Max ran to Amelia and threw his arms around her as if trying to protect her. Her photos went flying, surrounding the two in a barrage of odd family memories held

together on paper.

She'd given Max her address and sent the two of them away. She couldn't let him join her at her new family's house. She wasn't sure how long she'd be there or if she still wanted revenge. It had been a wise call. Max turned into a successful banker. He hadn't settled down but Amelia always felt family was important to him, or maybe that was just her impression.

She needed to quit thinking about the past and concentrate. She wasn't in the clear yet. There was a lot of road before she considered herself safe.

The turn for the interstate was dark at this early hour. The sun had lit up areas of town, but the trees and a few run down buildings kept this stretch in the shadows. It seemed like a good place for an ambush. Metal railings lined both sides with intermediate areas of swampy water high enough to hide a body. It was just before the long two-lane bridge that connected Hatteras to the main land.

She increased her speed, despite the sand and water standing in the road from the night's storm. She swerved slightly as water sprayed against the undercarriage of her Lexus. It wasn't a good time to slow, something stayed to the side of the road, hidden in a small turn around. She went by a black sedan hidden in the shadows. There were two men inside; at least she thought there were two, but they didn't pull out behind her. Something had to lie ahead. They were watching for someone and probably radioing in information.

It was too quiet. Amelia clicked on the radio. Not finding anything to please her, she turned on the CD. Metallica filled her car. She was only five miles from the interstate. That's when she saw the barricade and the flashing blue lights. There was one car stopped in front of her. An officer spoke to them then sent them through. She crept to a stop and waited her turn as the officer approached her car.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asked, after turning down the radio.

There were several moments in her life that time seemed to stand still. Everything became sharper, each smell, each sight burned into her skull, forcing her to see what was there. Nick had called this talent. She thought of it as survival. Her nerves were on edge. She shut her eyes and re-opened them, seeing the scene clearly for the first time.

Three cops in all watched the checkpoint. One stood by the barricade, while a second man walked behind her car as if watching for other bystanders. The third one approached her with his hand positioned on the butt of his gun. The uniforms looked right but none of them had handcuffs. The cop cars were nothing more than sedans with blue lights on the dash. Then she saw a glint of lacquer off the nails of the approaching cop. Cops didn't get manicures.

"Please turn off the engine." The mildest hint of a Brooklyn accent came out. "This will only take a minute, ma'am."

She smiled at him while he came closer, only ten feet from her. His hand tightened on the butt of the revolver. Any moment now, he would pull it up and begin firing into her car. She saw his muscles tighten, his eyes focusing on the target. His shoulder moved back and he began to pull the gun up into firing range. In the rearview, the second cop already had his gun drawn. If she shot the guy in front, the one from behind could take her down. There were few options. These guys weren't here to question her and she wasn't ready to die.

Cody looked at Pete peacefully sleeping. He needed to see him, to know he was all right after the hell that had broken loose earlier. Before tonight, the most dramatic thing that happened to Pete was his mother leaving him wrapped in blankets on the front porch. She didn't want to raise him anymore.

A lifetime had passed since then, or so it seemed. The teenage father went to college while his parents helped with Pete. It had been difficult, but now he had a good job. Somehow he had a great kid, despite all the mistakes and the broken home. The bond between father and son had been broken as of late. Cody wasn't sure when it happened. It's like the two slipped apart while he worked. Work was the main reason Cody pulled Pete out of school and taught him at home this year. His job required travel and he didn't want Pete to drift away. Boys his age started to get into trouble, started listening to friends more than family. Pete deserved better than to be raised by punk kids running the roads, he deserved a father.

Things were better when Cody had a regular nine to five job. Pete would go to his grandmother's house. It was convenient because the school bus stopped right in front of her house. Pete would have his homework finished. Often, they'd eat dinner there. Around seven or eight, they'd go home and watch television together. Those were good times.

The family business went under, so did the cushy job. The degree he'd worked so hard for earned him a research job. He took this position for the extra cash. This was his second assignment out of town. He now lived in a house where two people had died, trying to scrape together enough clues for the FBI to take over investigating. Each week, he'd mail samples of the floor and walls. All in the hopes two murders could be linked to an aging couple with a taste for insurance money.

It was certain. They'd killed somebody, probably more than one person. The main bedroom had blood all over the floors. He wasn't permitted the details, but rumor had the DNA matching a serious cold case. Worse, the old couple would've gotten away with it if they hadn't rented the house. Somehow, the FBI got them in a financial pinch.

His firm kept a steady contract of cold cases. He didn't keep track of how many or which ones. Often, a jury wouldn't convict over science they couldn't understand. He tried not to think about it. His job wasn't to judge the guilty. He was just the lab guy and one they trusted to set up in the middle of a crime scene.

Cody shut Pete's door and went back to the master bedroom. This was where the killings had taken place. They'd been messy. He couldn't imagine what it would take to kill a person. Surely money wouldn't be enough incentive. A living, breathing person was worth more than money, at least he hoped so. He supposed in the real world, people were reduced to dollar figures. It seemed fitting their deaths would be handled the same.

He shivered. Whoever had killed here, liked it. This wasn't a distant bullet but a close, terrible death. Blood had sprayed over the walls and floor like the bodies had been dismembered while the heart was still beating. He shut the door and tried to forget what his imagination replayed.

What a job? He hated it and loved it. Death had been a focus point for his life after his father's murder. His father had died alone in an office in Nashville. The person who killed him didn't

have as much of a taste for death as the Merricks. In Nashville, the job had been done cleanly with a gun and no evidence left behind. Not a strand of hair, not a fingerprint. There was nothing left to catch a murderer with.

* * * *

Amelia reached next to her seat and brought her pistol up. She got off two shots. They were kills but bad ones, spreading mortal wounds from two holes in the front man's chest. Blood shot out, his eyes danced while he fell backward, unaware he was already dead. Behind her, a shot rang out as she hit the gas, splintering the barricades and rolling one fake cop off her bumper.

Headlights cut on behind her. She wasn't sure when she'd passed the black sedan but it was on her. They were miles to the interstate and one dangerous section where going off the bridge would plunge her into the sound. After a storm, it changed to a raging, choppy section fed from the ocean and it was coming up fast. She'd die on that bridge if she took it, but there was no other way out of here.

Bumper hit bumper. She lurched forward as her car took a hard hit from behind. She jerked the wheel, bringing it around a hundred and eighty degrees. She nearly swiped the guardrail on the narrow road. The sedan fishtailed, banging the rear section against the same railing. The big car wasn't damaged. It gained speed, threatening to rear end her again.

She went back toward the barricade, seeing the speedometer hit eighty. There were guns ahead and guns behind. It wouldn't be hard for one of the cops to fire off a couple of rounds. All that could save her was they didn't expect it. The sedan couldn't have had time to radio ahead during the chase.

Her gambit paid off. The uninjured cop was loading the barricade into the trunk. The man she'd run over didn't look that seriously injured. He sat on the ground next to his dead friend. She saw all this, while they looked into her high beams. They were deer, too afraid to move, unable to find their way to safety. As she pondered their defenselessness, the sedan hit her again from behind, sputtering her car off the soft shoulder. She fought to keep it from going off into the marsh. The passenger side tires hit mud, pulling her deeper into the mire. She forced the wheel back. Ahead, the ground grew a little denser. This was her chance. The front tire found solid ground. Amelia nailed the gas. Sputtering, the car made it onto the pavement. She turned the wheel again, sending the back of her car within feet of the officer that had been loading the trunk. It was tight, but she sent her car forward, burning tires as she went. The sedan nearly hit her head on, choosing instead to pull a late U turn. It clipped her rear panel. All at once her car spun out of control, aiming for the marsh to the side of the road. Her front tire found the watery goo. She counter steered, treating his hit like a bad patch of ice.

Behind her, she heard the screech of brakes and a man screaming. She got her car back on the road and looked back in time to see the dead man being ran over. His friend flew up for the second car accident of the night. This time, he wasn't so lucky as to limp away with a sore hip. The car caught him, bouncing him on the hood and into the window. The driver of the sedan worked to avoid the accident by over steering and sent the car tumbling off the road in a deadly roll that crunched the roof into the dash, then slid them into the deep patch of the marsh. One man might live. He'd been the fellow loading the trunk. Blood poured from his head. His arm was twisted at an odd angle that matched his left leg.

She brought the car around for a second time. It would be stupid to leave witnesses. Her headlights hung on the man as she parked the car in front of him, engine idling.

Terror entered the man's face. He tried to scoot backward. His one good arm proved useless. He floundered against the pavement, leaned up for a second attempt and fell back again.

For a moment, she thought about putting him out of his misery. There was little chance he would survive his injuries without a hospital's care. There was the witness problem again. She didn't want anyone else to die though. She backed up a few feet and parked her car to the side. As she walked up, he covered his face with his good arm. It seemed he waited to die.

"I'm not going to shoot you." She huffed. There was nothing worse than cowardice. "You've got a few options here. Tell me who sent you and I'll get you an ambulance."

"What are my other options?" He started shaking from shock.

"I could be merciful and put a bullet in your head or I could bring you with me. That would mean long hours of torture before you died."

He looked into her eyes. Exhaustion colored his face in pale tones, probably from loss of blood. His leg was twisted in the shape of a Z from multiple fractures. Even the best surgeon wouldn't be able to fix him so he could walk without a limp if he survived.

"Nick put in the hit because he got a call a few hours ago telling him you'd hit Kosovich yesterday outside of his home. After the Leviti hit, it looks like he's going after a monopoly through your kills. Everybody is saying he must've sent you, because you don't disobey. If he doesn't wipe you out, people are going to come after him." He shivered and his color went from white to ashy gray. "I'm so cold. Please. An ambulance." He fell hard against the asphalt. "Please help."

Amelia walked back to her car. She kept a small wool blanket on the back seat for emergencies. She took it and covered him up the best she could. As she drove away, she called the ambulance. Shock would probably take him before they arrived but she wanted to keep her end of the bargain.

There were no more nasty surprises. She took the interstate, headed for Max and his little home in the mountains of North Carolina. She wanted to be around family, to feel normal for a few hours. She wanted to put on a sundress and have a picnic in the park without bringing a gun. It would be nice to be one of those women who were appalled by violence. One who would swoon at the sight of blood, while a handsome stranger would catch her and assure her everything would be fine.

She doubted anything would ever be fine again.

She felt dirty. It wasn't the hit, but the fact Nick had ordered it. He'd always been her backup, her safety. If what Mr. Dead and Dying said was true, then at least three mob fractions were out to get her. The Levitis were powerful. Most of their funds came from the same research and pharmaceuticals Nick's had. The Kosovich hit was a loose link with a Russian mob affiliate. They had a hand in the FDA. Then there was Nick, the man who knew her weaknesses.

It was best not to think about it now. She was tired. Her joints ached from the adrenalin and

tension. She picked up the phone and called Max. It was early, but she wanted to hear his voice before he went to work.

“Hello,” came a groggy sounding man on the other end of the line. It had taken him five rings to pick up.

“It’s me.” She wasn’t sure what to tell him. He had no idea what line of work she was in or the danger involved. The last time they’d spoken, he believed his sis to be an executive. Somebody who had a secretary bring coffee while they pored over files or stared at a computer. “Did I call too early?”

“For a Sunday, yes.” He laughed but the sound fell into a yawn.

“Sunday?” She’d lost all track of time over the past few weeks. “I’m sorry.” “That’s okay. What’s up?”

“I’ve been working so hard lately that my boss insisted I take a vacation. I thought I’d come by. Maybe play tourist. You don’t have to put me up or anything. I’ll stay at a hotel.”

“Nonsense. You’ll stay with me.” His voice chirped in honest pleasure at the visit. “How long will you be in town?”

She hadn’t considered an extended vacation. “A week, maybe two. Things have been crazy at the office.”

“Wonderful. When will you be here?”

It was Amelia’s turn to yawn. She wanted to stop for a few hours but that was risky. By now, Nick had learned the operation had failed and would be hot on her trail. She’d always kept a healthy paranoia. Nick knew of Max’s existence, but not his location. It would be best not to stop until she was there.

“It’ll take me about five hours. I’m on the road now.” Then, as an afterthought, she added, “If anyone from work calls, tell them you haven’t heard from me. You know

how those guys are. They’ll track me down anywhere. The last thing I want is for this to be a working vacation.” She looked at the gun in the seat next to her.

“Sure thing. I can’t wait to see you.” He sounded honestly excited to hear from her.

“I can’t wait to see you either.” She hung up the phone.

They knew his name. It would be possible for them to go after him. Of course, the last time Nick knew of Max’s presence, he’d been living in Virginia. Still, it would be best not to stay too long.

Chapter 5

The road blurred. Sleep came over Amelia like a weight, forcing her eyes to close. She jerked awake as her tires hit the median reflectors causing the gentle tapping against the rubber. It was at least three more hours until she would get to her brother's place.

She slowed and took the next exit off the highway. It took her to a small, two-lane road with a row of dilapidated buildings and the perfect place to rest. She parked in the shadows behind the buildings and rolled the window down. The air here didn't smell fresh. It held old exhaust and older dirt mixed with oil but it was better than the stale scent in the car. She spent too much time in the damn thing. When she got everything calmed down, she'd trade it. She wanted one of those old fart's cars, something large and roomy with oversized comfy seats.

Amelia yawned and slumped into her seat. She'd rest a short while before continuing her trek. Her head hurt. She took off her sunglasses, then put them back on, wanting to shut out every bit of light. She snuggled against the seat, drawing her arms close to her body.

In these quiet moments before sleep took over, her mind wandered. Her father didn't color her thoughts this round. Her mind went to a darker time, the first time, after the training had ended and it was her turn to prove herself. This wasn't self-defense. This was murder.

She'd lost her virginity by killing a research scientist who'd been selling secrets. He was a funny little man with a bald head, and not just going bald or horseshoe covered, this guy was glossy bald with slight bulges along the sides of his scalp that made him look alien. He wore glasses that were frameless and large. She'd sent a bullet through those glasses into a sea green eye.

He'd been an arrogant man, dismissing her from the moment she'd walked into his lab. Her gun had been in her jacket. She'd been given a security card to get inside. From there, she claimed to be touring the facility. When she met her target, she wasn't sure if she could go through with it. Nick had taught her to turn off her emotions and so she had. She pulled the gun and fired one quick shot, courtesy of Nick Statilini.

His alien face haunted her when trouble closed in. Her demon lurked, rising up when things became too difficult. He lived as a beast in the bowels of her mind. Over time, his body changed to have gangly, long arms and an Igor persona. It was him, though. His one eye was nothing but a red hull with a husky whispered voice. He troubled her soul, her being. He waited patiently for the day when she failed and died on the floor. He wanted to see her blood spill red pooling on the ground. It was revenge or a haunting. Either way, when Amelia felt death's cloak brush her cheek, she saw him.

"You won't get out of this one alive," he growled into her ear as sleep overcame her.

"I'm getting too old for this business. Killing really is a man's thing. Nick always said that. I thought he was being sexist, but now I think he was right. Women should bring life in the world, not death."

"Too late now. Can't get out." He became a dancing gremlin with gleaming teeth hiding behind

her eyes. "Too late now. Too late now."

"I know. You might actually win this time."

As his taunts faded, she fell into a troubled sleep.

* * * *

"She got them." Stefan stood at attention on the opposite side of Nick's desk. "One survived. He's in the hospital. The cops have reported no other deaths in the vicinity or bodies found. I have taken the liberty of sending representatives to let their loved ones know. I mean, if they haven't reported back by now, they're dead."

"Where's Carl?" Nick didn't want to have this conversation in front of him.

"He's in marketing, trying to get a date." Stefan giggled girlishly. "Would you like me to go get him?"

"No." Nick strummed his fingers on the desk. He wasn't surprised the hit failed. It was more of a warning and a good show for the hostile companies. The team he'd sent was okay but nothing compared to Amelia. He wouldn't order another hit for a while. The failed one was enough to get his people off his back. "Leave me now. I need to think."

"Do you want me to bring in another squad?" Stefan bit on the end of his pen, waiting for any further instructions.

"That won't be necessary, yet."

"Is Devin good enough to handle her? I hear she's tough."

Devin was probably the only guy that could get close to Amelia. He was her only competition. "He doesn't need to be bothered yet."

Stefan scratched his head and flipped through his papers as if checking the name. "Sir, someone has already called him. I assumed it was you." Stefan took a step back from the desk. "I received a message he was on her trail, along with a number he could be reached for updates."

"Damn it. Find out who called him. I don't like people circumventing me." He already knew who challenged his authority. Carl, it was always Carl when there were mistakes. "While you're at it, get me a copy of all Carl's personal files. Everything, his computer, his address book, I want a copy of his power bills. Be discreet. I don't want him informed." Nick's felt his face turn red with one nasty vein pulsing wildly in his forehead. "And leave my damn secretary out of it."

Stefan nodded vigorously. "I'll handle it myself, sir." "Good. Now leave me in peace."

Amelia, his sister/daughter/protégé, it wasn't like her to go against orders but she was seen leaving, and the hits were her MO. The missed hit would buy him some time if Devin wasn't on the hunt. There would have to be an unavoidable delay in getting information to Devin.

Nick needed time to conduct an investigation. This part would have to be handled personally.

He couldn't trust anyone else. If other parties heard he'd hesitated to eliminate her, it would hurt his credibility.

A calendar running his life stayed on the desk. Once, he had an electronic gizmo. It was fancy with buttons, lights, and alarms but it never beat a good old paper calendar. He couldn't work that fancy crap. Every day at noon, the damn thing would start beeping wildly. Simple things were better for simple reasons. They worked. He opened the calendar. Everything was there in neat lines on white paper, no beeping, no lights, just the date and a place to write the crap to be done.

Work seemed a little light for the next couple of months. He could juggle a few things. Maybe it would let Carl feel important if he took on more responsibility. Surely, he couldn't screw up a simple pricing meeting.

"Sir," Stefan came back into the room carrying his notepad. "Amelia has been spotted behind an old car garage off Interstate Forty. Devin called and said he was on his way to intercept her. This might be over sooner than we realize."

Nick stopped looking at his calendar. "Thank you." He tried to hide all emotion. Stefan had been with his organization for almost ten years, it didn't make him trustworthy, but he was in better standing than his secretary. "Tell Carl I will be taking him to lunch. If he has other plans, cancel them."

"Yes, sir."

Stefan opened the office door to leave and there stood Sally. She might not have been trying to listen in, but if Stefan had been a second earlier, Nick was certain she'd have gone flying into his office, landing on the floor instead of pretending to be coming after his signature.

"I need one more minute, Sally. Please wait outside." He watched her shut the door. Stefan turned to face him. "I want all her calls monitored and surveillance on her house for the next month. I'm sure you will make this happen quietly."

"You can count on me."

Stefan glowed with pride. Nick wasn't sure about the guy. He'd dealt with every type of man on the globe. He'd had prejudices about every single one of them and had overcome most of his preconceived notions. He hadn't had the same luck with homosexuals. Stefan was a go getter and had moved up in the organization, despite

Nick's personal feelings. Nick couldn't see sending him to meetings or on matters other than internal problems. He wanted to keep Stefan in the closet. It was wrong, but Nick had grown too old to deny his emotions. Stefan bugged the hell out of him. If he weren't phenomenal at his job, Nick would've fired him years ago.

"Send Sally in on your way out."

This time when Stefan opened the door, Sally was sitting at her desk staring at her computer screen. She turned, eyes shifting from Stefan back to Nick while holding an invoice. She waited for Stefan to leave before standing, as if coming too close to him would give her a disease. That bothered Nick more than his own feelings toward Stefan. He might be old and hardnosed but Sally was just rude.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just needed your signature.” She set a week old invoice on the desk. “If you wouldn’t mind signing this.” She scanned the desk, eyes roving hungrily. When she looked up, her eyes locked with Nicks. “You could leave it on my desk when you’re finished. Thanks.” Sally turned to leave and gave him a quick glance over her shoulder.

Nick smiled and gave her a polite nod, knowing young secretaries didn’t listen at doors out of innocent curiosity. Something was screwed in his kingdom. Carl’s behavior wasn’t a shock, but it had grown more brazen and his main assassin had her own agenda. There was more here. Carl hated Amelia but calling in Devin on such short notice and without authorization was near mutiny. What was Carl hiding?

It might be his conscience but he wanted to give Amelia more time and Devin was serious trouble. He was a tall, muscular man from England with a shooting eye none could compare. Worse, he was terrifyingly business. He held no loyalties or emotion when it came to work.

“Amelia,” he muttered, as if saying her name would bring her to him. It wouldn’t. If only he could speak to her, warn her. His heart felt broken. He’d changed from a powerful leader to a sick old man. Funny, he couldn’t remember when it had started. He realized his age when he’d noticed Amelia had changed into a woman. It was insane. She was supposed to stay a little girl.

Nick picked up the phone and dialed Amelia’s cell number. It was a long shot but the only one he had left. One ring, two rings, the sounds were maddening, coming too slow to be of any use. Devin knew her exact location. Three rings, four, he could only see her as that twelve year old girl, the child he’d corrupted. Even when his father died and he could’ve helped Amelia become something better, he hadn’t. She was too good, too valuable. Nick’s own children weren’t a part of this lifestyle. They were straight laced. Each went to college, had families, but the one girl that had been with him the longest, couldn’t be saved.

Now she was out there, waiting to die.

The phone rang a fifth time and Nick thought he’d go mad. Even when he heard Amelia answer, the words, his thoughts couldn’t come fast enough. He didn’t know how to explain that she was a target.

“What?” Amelia sounded tired.

“Don’t hang up. Get out of there. Run.” His mind kept playing the one word. “Run.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll make this quick. Devin knows your location and he is on his way. This guy don’t play.” At first there was silence and he feared she’d already broken the connection.

“I don’t kill without orders, Nick. I swear it. Somebody’s setting me up.” She took a long deep breath. “You’ve got to believe me.”

“Evidence is in and it don’t look good.” He felt tears welling up in his eyes. “I

hate to think you’d go against the family. If there was anyone I believed in, it was you.” “Why

are you helping me? If you really think I'm a damn traitor, why help me?" He thought about it, then looked down at his watch. "Where are you going? Do you have another house someplace, a distant relative?"

"Answer my question first." Fire filled her voice but emotions lurked there too. This was eating at her as much as him.

"I'm hoping you will clear your name before I have to come after you and know I will come after you. I have no choice." Nick looked back at his watch. She needed to get out of there.

"Just like you had no choice in setting up that hit."

"People are watching. Everyone has those kills pegged on you and if I didn't send someone, then my organization would be blamed. At least I sent a couple of screw ups. They were easy to slide."

"It was more than that. The police were called. Shit, a roadblock had been set up. I know of at least three kills on your head. Now you tell me Devin has been called? Come on. That had to have been you. Nobody calls in an outsider without your permission."

"You'd think so." He hadn't known the police had been involved or the roadblock. He'd ordered a simple hit, no fuss, no mess and one she could easily shake. "I don't know what the hell is going on anymore. I've got to figure this out."

"Well, while you're thinking, think about how stupid it would be for me to go against you. Not only would that sign my death warrant, it would be going against everything I believe in. Damn, how could you not back me? I thought we meant more," her words trailed away.

Nick looked at his watch again. Time was ticking. This emotional blame only made things worse. "We can do this later. Where are you going?"

"You just threatened to hunt me."

"Fine. I'll find you but until I do, get out of there. I don't know how much of a head start Devin has. Also, don't call here. Something is going down and if you're not a part of it, then it may explain why you have been set up to die."

"Shit!" Fear colored her voice.

He knew what that meant. She wasn't alone anymore. Sick dread filled his stomach and inched its way up his esophagus. Any minute now, he'd hear a gun blast. The woman that meant the most to him was getting ready to die.

"Got to go. Call me tomorrow if you want to see if I'm still around." "Amelia!" The world seemed to stop.

"Not now. I've got company."

Nick wasn't sure if she was still speaking or what her last words had been. His heart throbbed a painful melody in his ears. There had never been a moment when he expected her to die. She was always supposed to be there, calling in, pissing him off. She was supposed to live.

The line went dead. Sickness filled his belly, his mind. Nick went to his private bathroom and vomited. He rinsed his mouth. He'd know about the kill minutes after it happened. Devin was good at reporting.

"Please be okay, my little spitfire."

He stared at the phone on his desk. Waiting would be hell. He looked at himself in the mirror. It used to hide a secret staircase to the private records room below. He'd had it closed off. It felt too seedy to have secret passages. He didn't want to be seedy but everything seemed to boil down to who could hurt the most people and who had the most secrets.

The intercom on his desk clicked on. It startled him. A call transferred into his office. The light came on and it began ringing. It was probably Carl checking about lunch or Stefan needing information. He couldn't answer it though. His legs were frozen.

It might be Devin calling in the kill.

"Please no," he mumbled and shut the bathroom door.

* * * *

Amelia saw the SUV pull into the lot. She hoped for a soccer mom toting her kids to some early morning event at the school. It wasn't. Instead, the vehicle was dark, ominous without a single 'proud to be the parent of an honor student' sticker.

Devin always drove those kinds of vehicles. It was believed the cargo area's carpet came up to expose an arsenal that would be envied by any guerrilla army. It could've been a rumor; guys like him were legendary in her circle. She'd never had the opportunity to check for certain.

He pulled into the parking lot, then backed into a spot blocking part of the entrance and the exit. He'd known exactly where to find her, odd for a desolate stretch of road. There had to be spotters everywhere for her to be located so quickly.

She put her pistol in her left hand and dropped it next to the door out of sight. This was risky. Fire too soon, and he'd have her pinned, too late, and her bald doctor would have his revenge. She laid her head back and pretended to sleep. Odds were, he'd blow her brains out from a distance and never give her a chance. The only thing she had going for her were her sunglasses. She could watch him pull the trigger without him ever seeing her eyes.

From her peripheral vision, she saw him get out of his vehicle. He was tall and muscular, athletic with hair nearly chin length. He was handsome but obvious, as if he'd chosen the profession by watching too many movies. He wore a long black trench coat, black pants, black shirt and leather gloves. He wore sunglasses but she remembered him having green eyes and a delicious accent.

She wasn't going to do this now. Having a crush, and that's what it was, just a childish crush, was one thing. Being vulnerable to a kill was another. She could fantasize about him later, now she needed to live.

He'd spotted her. She could feel his eyes burning into her skull. He stood next to his vehicle, evaluating her stance and his approach. He sized up the opportunity and target.

They'd worked together on a large job about a year ago. It had been all business, despite the fact they had to live together for a month to complete the assignment. Several times, she'd caught him admiring her. The flirting got a little thick but there was no time for fun. Devin was professional, down to the last day they'd been together. It was disappointing.

It amazed her to watch this true predator work. His charming wit could seduce anyone. For a killer, he had a warm heart. Real emotions bubbled out of him and at times, she thought they might've had a real connection.

On several occasions, she'd gotten the distinct impression he was as tired of the game as she was. He never hesitated to pull the trigger, though he seemed to regret it afterward. She wondered if he'd regret shooting her.

It was business again, except this time she was on the receiving end. She never imagined she'd be staring down the barrel of Devin's gun. Okay, she knew she would die by gunfire. The old live by the sword thing had to apply to her. Still, she never imagined Devin would do the deed.

"Devin", she muttered under her breath. He was art in motion, always the gentleman, always prepared. She missed him but seeing him again under these circumstances wasn't what she had in mind.

The guy was good. Nick was right to be worried. Devin was systematic, incredibly intelligent and ruthless. He'd come to this country from England to attend Harvard but stayed for the steady work. From law student to hit man, how screwed up was that?

Rumor had it he'd gotten into the work because an old girlfriend had set him up. She had a drug debt and he was a convenient alibi.

Devin had told her another story. His mother moved to America, then had kidney failure. It had been an ongoing problem when she was younger. The pregnancy with Devin caused her to lose the first kidney when he was an infant. That only left one and it forced her on dialysis six months into being an American citizen. She needed transplant surgery and America wasn't shelling out the dough. Devin had done his first two hits to pay for the operation. After that, his guys wouldn't let him go. To make matters worse, his mother died just after the surgery. The doctors missed the cancer which had eaten away at her organs.

Something must've changed in him after the killings and then her death. Amelia never asked what it was, but when he spoke about his mother, there was an emptiness in his eyes. Like death had made him hollow. She supposed murder destroyed something inside the fiend who did the deed. Death was powerful and all consuming, something like cancer, or worse.

Devin worked for the Chicago mob for about a year before managing to go solo. He had steady backers and connections, even a few mandatory hits, but he wasn't tied to one group. He was a rebel and one Nick was very fond of.

He held a forty-four, equipped with a silencer. He was showy that way. Carrying such a large gun in daylight was a Freudian slip. He waved it as he walked, letting the sun glint off its surface. He slowed near her car, seeing her but questioning his luck. She didn't move. If he shot from the passenger's side, she wouldn't have a chance.

His gate changed to slow and wide. He targeted her. That was his gift, the amazing ability to aim without a gun pointed. His brain put it together. He knew where he would hit his target at first glance, tracking the strike, seeing the bullet enter the flesh and destroy the being beneath. It was his version of positive thinking and it worked.

Amelia tried to keep her breathing slow and regular. He came closer. He was well in range and still on the passenger's side of the car. It was going to be close. There was no way to avoid gunfire.

She hoped Nick hadn't sent him. It would've been better if Nick had killed her as a child than let the story unfold like this. She'd watched her father die and learned murder was more than okay. It was profitable. It was also the only way to show real loyalty or love.

Dying, she'd thought about it many times but it never scared her as much as at this moment. Religion wasn't a cornerstone of her life, but she was sure that when she passed, hell would be waiting in all its brimstone glory. The devil himself rooted for her demise, stomping his little hooved feet like a dismal cartoon character in the hopes of a big score. What pleas could she make to God? He or She would shake his or her head sadly. Amelia could imagine God's voice, loud, booming, and stern. "Girl, it's on the top ten don'ts. Thou shall not murder."

She could imagine her father. He would send her to hell with the rest of them. She'd betrayed him to work for the man who had ordered his death. At twelve, she had been lost, afraid, and alone in the world. It was easier to join Nick's life rather than live on the street or in foster care. Maybe she didn't understand devotion. She'd allowed the most obscene act, his death.

Devin rounded the car. He was three feet from the hood, looking intently into her covered eyes. She knew it, felt his eyes probing, looking for the slightest sign she was conscious. He was going for a close kill, another showboat quality that would eventually get him caught. He came to the driver's side, but stayed in front of the car. She watched him raise his gun. He wouldn't take aim. It was unnecessary. He'd played the scenario as he walked up. A quick pull of the trigger was all that was left and she saw his finger slide into place. Just a little pressure and it would send her into oblivion.

For a moment, she wanted it to happen. She could taste the kill and hoped her own would be more satisfying than watching innocent, or close enough to it, people die on the floors of their homes and businesses. There would be no more killing and no more being hunted, unless the devil took pride in it. She might find a peaceful sleep without nightmares, without blood.

Her mouth was dry. She needed to swallow. Hell, she needed to scream. Her heart began beating as it did when she worked, hard, fast and determined. Survival instincts took over, forcing her to react instead of waiting for death. In one motion, she cocked the gun and brought it from its hiding place.

Time slowed. She'd never get used to that sensation. Usually she spent playing catch up to what was happening, but in a crisis, her mind had time to think of a thousand possibilities. She even noticed an attractive quality to Devin she'd never noticed before. He nearly beamed as he readied to kill her. The act made him glow. Maybe this was his calling.

She took in the scene. A few clouds blew carelessly across the sky. A bird raced through the sky at side of the car and she brought her gun up, firing twice. Devin got off a shot after the

first round left her chamber. The bullet was aimed at her head, and he didn't miss. In that amount of time, she saw it coming, saw the glass to the front shatter, spider web into silvery strands, and the faintest smile touched her lips. This was it. She couldn't get out of the way. Glass pelted her face as the bullet came and ripped at her skin from the front.

She saw Devin. Her shot had been a haphazard lunge from the driver's side window, but his body turned. She couldn't see the hits through the spider webs of glass, but his form twisted backward. Then came pain. Amazing, she thought she'd be dead.

Devin wasn't hit badly, something she was almost thankful for. He'd regained his balance. She turned the ignition and brought her car to life, revving the engine and flooring it as Devin raised his gun for another shot. Devin's aim wasn't as true. She felt the bullet whiz by her face but no contact was made. It was an odd strike for such a professional, almost like he wanted to miss. He was either losing his touch, or trying to make her stop.

Some defiant instinct made her blow him a kiss as she sped away. For whatever reason, he didn't try a third shot. She saw him in the rearview mirror looking bemused and a little irritated.

Her tires spun as she passed his SUV and headed onto the main street. The car smelled of burned rubber. She ran through a stop sign and nearly side swiped a car as she gunned forward.

She didn't know how bad the first hit had been but there wasn't time for that. She had to find safety and fast. The front glass made driving next to impossible. If she attempted it much longer, either she'd wreck or the cops were sure to pull her over. Devin would also be on her trail soon. He didn't give up. It was one of his nicer qualities.

Without knowing the area, she had few options. She drove until she saw a road that turned to the right. It was a small, deserted looking dirt road. Amelia took it and found a nearly overgrown driveway. She backed in there.

The window proved harder to deal with than she'd thought. She struck the inside with the butt of her gun but it didn't budge. A few more swings freed a couple of chunks. This wasn't going fast enough. Her path wouldn't be hard to follow. Unless Devin was seriously injured, he'd find her in another minute or two. She got out of the car and jumped up on the hood. There were a few holes in the windshield. She stuck her fingers through, hooked them on the other side. Then she started pulling. It hurt. The skin on her fingers pulled, caught, and began to tear. Her heart pounded. Beads of sweat appeared and started running down her face. She reached up to wipe it away and found blood on her fingers, blood on her face, and time running out.

In the distance, she heard an engine revving high.

She stuck her fingers back in. This time, as she pulled, the edges buckled outward. The back rubbery seal pulled from the sides while, down the road, she heard a car coming closer. Its tires squealed to catch up, to catch her, and eat her like some mythical monster, leaving her dead body on the side of the road and a half-pound or so of drugs so the investigation would be light.

Adrenalin kicked in and she pulled again, wrenching it from the car. Blood streamed from her fingers and landed along with the slung glass. The wind picked up. She couldn't hear

his engine. He might've already spotted her and parked. He wouldn't risk another close shot. He'd track her from the edge of the road or the woods. There was no glass to deflect his aim this round. Like so many of her victims, she'd blink out as a bullet shredded her brain. *Would it hurt?*

Behind her a twig snapped. She spun around, gun drawn to see a clumsy squirrel hit the ground and race back up. Another valuable second wasted. She was completely exposed here, trapped between the road and a dilapidated trailer.

She got back in her car. The monster growled again, giving away its location. Maybe a hundred yards separated them. It was too close to pull out. She would have to let him pass, then hope the road would be too narrow for him to turn around. She started her car and said a silent prayer. It was probably too late for a last minute reprieve from her sins, although it couldn't hurt.

As she opened her eyes, a black SUV went by and hit the brakes. She'd been spotted. She hit the gas as the reverse lights came on Devin's vehicle. He tried to block her again.

She went forward as his SUV came back. The space was tight, then she heard metal scraping. His bumper found the back wheels of her car as he tried to prevent her escape. Her car was caught; she was unable to break the bumper free that had become lodged in the rear wheel well. Luckily, her tire had been punctured.

Amelia could see Devin leaning out the window behind her, grinning, amused at her frustration. She would be dead in minutes if she didn't break free. At this range, a single shot from him would end this chase. There was nothing she could do but hope. She floored it and began to scream.

* * * *

"You're thinking about her again, aren't you?" Pete looked at his father over their bowls of cereal. It was lunch time but when Pete said he wanted cereal, Cody fixed them both a bowl, happy there wasn't going to be any cooking involved.

Raising Pete hadn't been easy. The two of them had become more like friends than father and son. It was a relationship that would bite Cody in the ass once Pete reached his teenage years. Friends don't get the same respect a father should. Still, this oddly close relationship gave Pete many insights into Cody's personality. It was true, he was thinking about Amelia. His beautiful murderess was out there and he needed to know where.

"Why did she leave?" Pete's big eyes watched him.

"She had some work to do." He could only guess as to what kind. "She was something and nothing I would've expected." He could picture her face exactly, the passionate strength with fiery eyes. She was a scrapper. He'd always pictured his ideal woman as a demure lady-like thing. He laughed out loud. She was far from any ideal woman. He was an investigator and she was a criminal. She'd threatened not only his life, but his son's as well, although she hadn't been serious about it.

It would've been easy for her to shoot them both and go about her business. She didn't. She'd

flirted with him, not seriously, but enough to make him consider things he shouldn't. It might've been an attempt to keep him quiet, but he didn't think so.

"Dad..." Pete had been trying to get his attention for some time. "Earth to Dad." "What?"

"What's wrong with you? You don't even know I'm in the room." Pete scooted his chair back and took his bowl to the sink.

"I'm sorry. I'm not myself today." That was an understatement. He'd spilled Luminol down the back stairs and faxed a report to the lab instead of his boss's office. Part of it was fatigue. He was tired but didn't want to sleep. She might come back. Okay, that wasn't likely. Even if she came back, he would be of little assistance. Still, he could fantasize. Amelia was best left as a fantasy. None of last night happened, no one died. There was no reason to call the police or worry about what happened next door.

"You should call her. It would be easier on both of us."

"Maybe later." He wished he had her number. There was no way for him to know if she was okay or where she was.

"Why later?"

"She didn't give me her number." He stirred the mush in his bowl. "Maybe she'll call us."

"Dad, you're an investigator. Can't you get her phone number?"

Her house was next door, unlocked. Her cell number had to be inside somewhere. Surely, the danger had passed. It wouldn't hurt if he ran next door and took a quick look around.

"I am an investigator." He scratched his chin and grinned. "I'll be right back." Besides, he had other reasons to be interested in Amelia. He didn't need to sit around day dreaming.

"I want to come."

"No." He thought a minute. "Somebody needs to stay here and be look out. I can't get busted, digging around her house."

Pete rolled his eyes but didn't argue. Cody slid on his shoes and went out the door. He could see her stairs from his porch. It looked deserted. There were no cars in sight. He crossed the yard and went up her driveway. "Amelia," he let the name roll off his tongue. It was a pretty name, almost worthy of a castle with her high in a turret, guarded by a dragon. He just hoped the dragon didn't carry a sub-machine gun.

The backdoor was open. He walked inside, noting that even though the place was clean, it didn't appear well lived in. That wasn't uncommon for property in the area. The lack of industry had created a scarce number of year round residents. The refrigerator had last night's leftovers but no food, not even condiments. The cupboards were equally bare.

He skipped through most of the living room. There weren't any places to search. The furnishings were plain. Some bric-a-brac sat on a display in the hallway but no clues as to how to contact her or even a hint about her personality.

The bedroom was a little nicer. In the chest of drawers, he found delicate, lacy things women

wore to drive men mad. There wasn't much of it. It looked new as if those garments only touched her skin for brief periods of time. In the next drawer, were cotton tank tops and more sensible items. These were well worn, some had thin patches and frayed elastic. They came in several shades, gray, black, white, beige, and one baby blue. He grabbed a handful of cloth, inhaled deeply and realized how absurd he looked. If she had come home, she would find this pervert sniffing her clothes. That wasn't a good impression.

There was a curious lack of paper. Most houses had old bills, notes, messages, and a thousand other clues people littered across their homes. She didn't have any of it. Was it possible she spent her life on the run?

The search yielded nothing. He started to leave when a truck pulled up. Cody's heart skipped a beat. He looked outside and saw the FedEx truck door open and a man approach the front. Cody froze as the delivery man knocked at the door. He knew he shouldn't get her mail, but damn it, there was nothing else to look through.

Cody opened the door. "Can I help you?"

A uniformed man stood with a small package in hand. "Delivery for Amelia Calhoun."

"I'll take that." Cody happily signed his name and took the envelope. The item made him feel good enough to wave goodbye to the FedEx guy.

Cody took the envelope inside and pulled the tab, making a gash across the top of the envelope. Like a kid at Christmas, he peeked inside then scurried next door with his prize. When he got in his kitchen again, he shut and locked the door and dumped the contents of the envelope on the table. Pete slid in the chair next to him.

"What did you find?"

"You do know what we're doing isn't right?" The father side had to come out some time. "It's wrong to go through people's mail."

Pete huffed and flopped back in his chair. "Dad, every moment in life doesn't have to be a lesson in morality. I know it's wrong to open other people's mail. Now can we get on with this?" He smiled in that smart-ass way he'd been developing.

"You're going to be a hellion when you get older and I'll only have myself to blame."

The two exchanged glances, then started going through the papers. A color photo with the name Tom Reading scrawled across the back was on top. Next, came an itinerary with times mapped for an entire week. There was another photo of a car and the front of a gated home. The last page looked like a form of memo with a home address, and a completion date.

"Oh, shit. She's really a hit man." He'd heard rumors about people like her but dismissed it as more of his crazy sister's ranting.

Cody rubbed his hands over his face. There had to be another explanation. He thumbed through the papers and found a few more personal items about Mr. Reading. Written in large letters were the words, 'NO FAMILY'.

"Cool!" Pete grabbed the photo of the doomed man. It looked to have been taken outside of a business by a telephoto lens.

Cody picked up the envelope. FedEx required telephone numbers for the sending and receiving parties. There was Amelia's telephone number printed in plain ink on the address label. He grabbed the phone off the wall and stopped. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to her or what he'd say. He set the phone back on the cradle. Someone who murdered for a living, it didn't seem possible. How did someone get in that lifestyle? He picked up the phone again.

"Are you going to call her, or play with the phone all day?" Pete looked from behind the picture. His bangs were too long and he needed to wash his face. Cody started to say something, then looked back at the phone. "Forget how to use the phone?" Pete grinned and ducked behind the photo.

"I think we should go into town today and get you a haircut, something nice and short. Something military would curb the smart mouth of yours."

"Sorry, Dad."

Cody looked down at the number and dialed. It was a mistake. She wasn't a killer and it was a mistake to call. Trouble followed this woman and he didn't need any of it or her. A close call in a shower didn't make a girlfriend or an emotional attachment.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded soft, dreamy.

"Hello." Suddenly, it occurred to him that she wouldn't know his voice. "It's Cody. Your neighbor." He stopped himself from continuing. "Cody? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." It was stupid to call her. He wished he'd had some legitimate cause, then he looked at the envelope. "I hope I'm not bothering you. A package was delivered to your house. The driver left it with me. Your number was on it."

"Oh." There was a silence, one of those long awkward things. "It's a package from work. Just throw that delivery away. I don't need it."

Wouldn't need it?

"Are you okay?"

She laughed. "Yes. Don't worry about me. In a few weeks or so, I'll be back. There are some things I need to clear up first."

"I didn't mean to bother you." His hands felt sweaty. He cleared his voice and tried to think of a way to end the call. "If I'm still here, stop by when you get back in. I mean, I should be here for a couple more months but the office has discussed pulling me early."

"Cody," he could hear the smile in her voice and the sound of wind. "I'm glad you called me. I'm on the road now, but feel free to call me anytime."

"Okay. I was just calling because of this package but um...I'd like to call you again." He let out a long sigh. "I'm so bad at this. It's just you got my attention and I'm more than a little curious about you. Not too many women surprise me in my bedroom."

Amelia laughed again. "I guess that was a rude introduction. I'm sorry about that. I overreacted to the snooping in my car. I appreciate your not turning me in."

“I don’t apologize for snooping. It’s not the best way to meet women, but it works.” He sat at the table and looked at the photos. “Is there anything I can do? I mean, it seems like you’re in serious trouble.”

“I am in serious trouble or do you consider dead people minor?”

There was no way to respond. He considered guns serious, much less having to use them. He especially didn’t like that type of trouble near his son. He didn’t want her to be alone in this though. A woman like her shouldn’t be alone.

“Can this be fixed?”

“Sure. Anything can be fixed.” Amelia answered quickly, as if thinking about it would make her change her answer.

“I don’t know you that well, but it sounds like you’re not so sure.”

There was silence on the other end. She was still there. He could hear the wind blowing in her car, the low hum of her engine, but Amelia was lost in the possibilities. He didn’t want the conversation to end on a sour note, but whatever time they spent together needed to be honest.

“I’m sorry.” He wished she’d stayed. There was something about her, the flow of her hair, the sound of her voice, something wonderful. He wished she hadn’t been so wonderful. “If I can help you in any way, please let me know.”

“There’s nothing you can do, but I appreciate the offer.” “Is there a good time to call you?”

“Anytime.” It was a nice change from the silence. “I should go now, though.” “Okay. See you later.”

The dial tone filled his ear and he immediately missed her. What in the hell had he gotten himself into? His son watched him from the table with a knowing grin. The kid was too smart for his own good.

“Dad, I think you’d better get to work. When she comes back, you won’t be able to get anything done.”

He was right. It was time for him to finish his investigation and pin the murderer. A forensics investigator dating what? An assassin? An innocent woman on the run? Innocent women didn’t act like that. Worse, he wasn’t really dating her, he couldn’t. No amount of pretending would hide the truth, she was a hit man. He knew it, and he had proof.

“Why did you have to be so charming?” he whispered. “Why couldn’t I be someone else?”

Chapter 6

Joey turned into the parking lot of the Super Eight by the airport. He didn't know if Amelia was dead yet. The details of the hit wouldn't reach him so quickly. He might be a major player but he had trouble staying in the loop on some things. He blamed that on those inferior to him. They always made mistakes.

After checking in, he went to his room and fell on the bed. He didn't pull the spread down. The tacky red and gold floral pressed against his cheek. He shut his eyes wondering what had happened, afraid to call and find out. The spread had a slick feel to it, the room cool and dark. These were the things he concentrated on.

Over the years, he'd developed a sick fascination for mob life, not that any of them were really mobsters any more. Maybe most businesses were managed like the mob now a days. He was pretty sure pharmaceuticals and oil went along the same lines.

They didn't always physically eliminate the competition but they had their ways, all nearly as ruthless. They had fancy clothes, power lunches and private deals. At one time, mobsters ran the prostitution business, being pimps for whores. Now, they employed escorts for clients. Instead of a protection racket, it was business insurance. Drug dealing changed to pharmaceuticals. It was all sanitized.

Drugs were Nick's toys. He pretended at being legit, too good to handle the other side of the business. He didn't order a hit unless there was absolutely no other way. It was weak. Perhaps Nick's time was growing short. He'd gone soft on many business deals, opting for a buy out instead of a forced take over. There was no room for weakness in business. Joey's father, Carl, knew that. Only dumb birthright gave Nick control of the company.

He rolled over and swept a pillow from beneath the red and gold sea. Amelia, his sweet temptress, what had become of her? She'd be pissed when she realized he'd left her to the wolves. He'd known about the plan ahead of time. He could've warned her, or swept her to a safe location. She'd given herself a dozen times and he couldn't find the heart to offer a hint.

"I guess that's what she gets for being so damn bossy."

He regretted the words as soon as he said them. Guilt struck his heart as if she might be a ghost hovering just above his head. Some beast, no, not a beast, she would be a banshee, an Irish shrieking banshee, haunting him for the rest of his days.

It was more than fear that tore at his conscience. Sally would be here soon and want to make love. He hadn't showered from being with Amelia. Sally would know by smelling it on him. He shouldn't have stayed with Amelia. After verifying her location, the next order had been to leave town. Instead, he stayed, wanting that creamy white skin one more time. Sally might forgive the transgression. She'd bitch though. A year from now he'd hear about how he'd slept with Amelia. Luckily, Sally didn't know how many times he'd slept with her.

Joey forced himself to stand. Soap and water would erase any evidence. He headed to the bathroom, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror. For a split second, he wished he

had told Amelia everything. There was something to being honorable. It was a trait that had bypassed his family. What choice had Nick given them? They were treated like stepchildren, second class, just because Carl had been born a bastard.

He stepped into the shower. Steam rose as the water erased her scent from his body. Too bad he couldn't have both. Sally was a pistol but no Amelia. It was Sally's placement in the office that changed things. Justice existed in the form of a typist with good ears. Eventually, he would discard her. She wasn't a proper lady and not suitable for more than an extended fling. He would have to be careful with her though. She was a conniving little bitch.

Cold air hit his skin as he finished and stepped out. He ran a comb through his wet hair, tossed the towel to the floor and slid into bed. Sleep was more appealing than sex. He felt drained. Sleep quickly overcame him, like a lead fog. Still, when Sally's soft body slid against him, disturbing his dreams, he rose to the occasion. While in the moment, he shut his eyes. His thoughts weren't for the lovely secretary but his little redheaded Amelia. She was with him again, loving him, promising never to leave.

He became lost in the moment and nearly muttered her name. She'd been a simple beautiful thing. He opened his eyes to find Sally and shut them again. For now, Amelia was sweeter.

* * * *

It was late in the afternoon when Amelia pulled into Max's driveway. Her car was badly dented from the SUV's bumper. A long scratch marked the back end where she'd broken free. Devin wasn't able to follow her. She'd lost him when he'd tried to trap her and he ended up stuck between the ditch line and two trees.

Part of her wanted to go back and laugh at him. He was a sexist creature. Many times he'd remarked on women drivers or asked if it was her time of the month because she'd been cranky. There was something fulfilling about leaving him helpless on the road, even if it was only temporary.

She smiled at the close call. She'd beaten the best, at least for the time being. It felt good to be alive and better to be at her brother's house.

Max lived in a cute little brick rancher with a split rail fence in front. He lived alone, which was a shame. His three-bedroom home screamed for a couple of kids and a wife baking cookies in the kitchen.

Amelia hadn't realized how much she'd missed him until he appeared at the door. His hair was mussed with a section falling over his black rimmed glasses. He looked more like their father. The dark hair and eyes, they were so much like his. The memory of their dad had been fading. Every year it was harder and harder to remember his face, his voice, then she saw her brother and it all came back.

"Amelia," he came out to the car and took her bag before she got it out of the trunk. "It's so good to see you." He hugged her with his free arm.

"Are you sure this isn't inconvenient?"

"Yes. You know I love having you over." He stopped and looked back at the car, then at her. "What the hell happened?"

She touched the bloody streak where the bullet grazed her head, then pulled her hair over her temple to hide it. "You know those big dump trucks. I got behind one on the interstate and the damn thing kicked out a rock that shattered the window. Couldn't see a thing until I pulled the glass out. It made the drive a little windy, but at least I made it. Do you know a good shop where I can get it fixed?"

He paused, looked at her, then back at the car. He knew she was lying. She could tell. It wasn't the first time she'd had to explain away an odd circumstance. He gave her that look, the one that said he'd ignore the obvious just to have her company.

"I guess you didn't get the tag number."

"No. It happened too fast." She looked at the ground, then back at her car. This was a bad idea. She shouldn't have come. "Listen, I have a few things to do in town. I think I'll stay there and we can get together for dinner or something."

"Amelia, don't start. You're staying here." He led her by the arm. "I've heard that happens a lot. Dump trucks get a big load and lose part of it." He looked back at the car as he opened the front door. "I'll take you to a glass company in town. They fix it while you wait." He set her bag down and gave her a long hug. "Were you hurt?"

"No. Well, I may have gotten a scratch from the glass." Her fingers were sore and her head stung as sweat ran into the wound. "It's nothing though."

"I didn't think it was." He shook his head, letting her have her way again.

She followed him inside. He'd decorated since she'd seen the place last. The decor was artier. A mosaic hung over the couch and a small series of wooded scenery by the door. A flower arrangement with dried out versions of cattails and yellow flowers sat on an end table. Flowers. Her brother didn't do flowers.

"So what's her name?" Amelia touched the arrangement.

"Darcy." He grinned a huge boyish obscene smile that filled his face. "I didn't know it was that obvious."

"Will she mind my staying here?"

"No. In fact, I hoped you two would meet. I'm thinking about asking her to marry me." He continued down the hall to the guest room. "She's a school teacher. Second grade. She loves those kids." He opened the door to a small room with beige walls and a yellow bedspread. This was how he decorated, basic and simple. "She's never been married. Darcy wants a couple of kids of her own. You know I do, too. It would be nice to hear the pitter patter of little feet on these floors."

"I know what you mean." She sat on the bed and kicked off her shoes. "Marry you? Girl can't be all together if she says yes."

"Thanks." He dropped her bag on the floor and fell on the bed next to her. "I think you'll like her. She's down to earth." Then as if putting in a request, "I really hope you like her."

"If you like her, I'm sure to." Amelia felt her head sting again. "I can't wait to meet her."

“Then why don’t the three of us go out to dinner tonight?”

“I’d like that.” She flopped backwards, lying next to him. It felt so good to be in the quiet and not have bugs hitting her in the face. She was also very glad to not hear the wind. Three hours of that was too much.

“I was wondering.” He stopped and rolled onto his side to look at her. “You can tell me if it’s none of my business.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Okay, smart ass, let me ask first. Are you seeing anyone?”

“I’m seeing lots of people.” She knew where this was going. Every visit was the same. Max wanted her to settle down. Every card he sent seemed to have the subliminal message and every meeting had this cute friend she should meet. It was as if he couldn’t marry until she had. Shakespeare had written his life.

“The reason I ask is Darcy has this brother.”

“No, Max.” A brother, she should’ve known. What was he hoping for, a double wedding?

“He’s a doctor. Recently divorced with a nice place not far from here. No kids but he wants lots of them. He’s got his own practice.”

“No, Max.”

“Could you just meet him and see if any sparks fly? I mean, I wouldn’t bother you but I told Darcy about you and she’s dying to fix her brother up.”

Amelia huffed loudly. “No.”

Max fell silent in a pout. “Why not?”

“I’m seeing someone.” Who was she seeing? Joey helped with the hit on her and

Cody was an investigator. “He’s special.” “Not that awful Joey punk.”

“No.” She didn’t want this visit to get any more complicated. Any name would do. It wasn’t like Max could check on it. “His name is Cody. He is a forensics investigator, a real nice guy. He’s got a son and the hots for me.”

“Really?” He gave her the same look as when she’d created the dump truck story. “How did you meet him?”

She should’ve stayed in the hotel. It was exhausting keeping up with all the lies. “Please, Max.” She looked back over. He wasn’t giving up. “Fine. Cody was tearing apart the house next door to mine on the coast. His son wrecked a kite into my house and there you have it.”

Max frowned and looked at the ceiling as if counting tiles. “I wish you’d told me about him earlier.”

“Why?” She was being trapped into something. He knew exactly how to work her.

"I kind of told Darcy to invite her brother for dinner tonight."

"Jackass." She reached over and hit him in the chest. "You'd better hope Darcy is a hell of a woman because so far, she's batting zero with me."

"I'll call and cancel. I'm sorry." His voice fell. His earlier excitement vanished and Amelia felt like a jerk.

"Max?"

"Yes," a half smile painted across his lips.

She looked at his expectant face. One dinner wouldn't kill her. "If it means that much to you, I'll do dinner. I'll even put up with the doc but don't get any bright ideas. I already hate the guy."

"I never have bright ideas." He raised his eyebrows. "Besides, you might like this guy better than Cody."

She smacked him in the stomach and noticed the tiniest pudge starting. Domestic bliss was already taking root on his midsection. "You know I could kick your ass."

"Little sis, I have no idea of what you could do." He stood and gave her a gentle smile. "Why don't you rest up? I'll knock on your door in a couple of hours, and we'll decide on where to go for dinner. I might even find someone to fix your car."

She watched him shut the door. It was weird but she loved that butthead so much, it hurt. Her brother, the one great surprise in her life.

Her head ached. She got up and looked at the wound in the mirror. It wasn't too bad. The bullet had hit her at her temple, grazing into her hairline. The glass had saved her. She was certain of it. Even with the glass, it was odd for Devin to miss. Maybe he was getting tired of this game, too.

Finally, a moment to play catch up and consider the past few days. Devin was on her trail and apparently, without Nick's consent. That meant someone else in the organization was opting for his position. A vie for position wouldn't be unusual. One with enough pull to create a threat was. An outside company might have spies. Their people would've heard about it, though. It was more than likely an internal problem. They'd been doing some heavy acquiring over the past few years. Some low positions were filled from the mergers, but why attack her?

She picked up her cell phone and opened her recent calls. There was Cody's number. He'd offered to help. Whether he honestly meant it, or used it as a ploy to finish their rendezvous was anyone's guess. She knew when she needed help. Maybe he had a few connections.

"Hello?" came a child's voice over her phone. It was Pete. "Hi, it's Amelia. Is your dad there?"

"Dad!" He dropped the phone. She could hear him screaming as he ran away, his voice growing distant. A moment or two passed and the sound of footsteps approached followed by the soft voice of Cody.

"Hello." He sounded out of breath. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be calling you but you offered to help and I think maybe I could use some right about now." She realized she had no one. Her closest alliances in a pinch were with a near kill she'd teased in a shower. "Never mind."

"No. What can I do?"

She let out a long sigh. This wasn't easy. "I need you to do some investigating for me. Nothing dangerous. I want you to keep your nose clean. It's just, I'm not in a position to get much accomplished."

He hesitated as if there was something he wanted to say. There were uneasy breaths and a sound then he stopped. "Anything you need. I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it. Where are you?"

She ignored the question. "I need you to get me the acquisition information on a company called Itam Pharmaceuticals, also info on the president, Nick Statilini, and his half brother, Carl Menahime. They are dangerous people. If they find out you're checking them out..." she paused, unsure of how much to tell them, "it could be bad."

"I've got access to some pretty serious shit and a friend with licensing. I think I can poke around quietly." He seemed focused, his mind already ticking away. "Isn't the Itam Group the place that sent you the package?"

"Yes. They go by a hundred different endings, but always Itam." They had branches to handle taxes, drugs, investments, research and acquisitions. They'd even discussed the idea of starting a toy company. How perverse was that? Technically, she worked for Itam Acquisitions and Holdings. "Will you do this for me?"

"Sure."

He answered immediately but something sounded wrong. "Why?" "Why what?"

"Why are you helping me? You could've gone to the cops by now. With you, they'd have enough to arrest me. Why help me? You barely know me."

"Hmm." It took him a moment to come up with the answer. "That's the reason I want to help you. I haven't got the chance to know you." She smiled in spite of herself. "Thank you."

"Any time. Just call me Prince Charming."

"Good bye, Prince Charming. Try not to get shot at." "You got it."

She hung up the phone. Maybe Prince Charming did still exist. She severely doubted Cody was it though. At least he was nice.

* * * *

"So you ordered a hit without my authorization." Nick sat across from Carl, a half empty set of martini glasses between them. Carl played with a breadstick and listened to his list of transgressions. "I do not approve of outsiders being called in on a private matter and I do not approve of deals being made behind my back. Explain yourself."

"I thought I was making things easier on you. Amelia seems to be a difficult subject

for you these days. I was just helping my brother.” He smiled but his eyes stayed fixed on the shredded breadstick. “I meant no disrespect.”

Nick drained his glass and motioned for another. His large stubby fingers reached into the glass, plucked the olive from the bottom and popped it into his open mouth. He said nothing for a long time. The waitress brought him another drink and took the empty glass. Nick sat there without anything being uttered from his thick lips. It was maddening watching him from across the table and Nick knew it. He’d broken many disagreements using a silent stare but Carl knew the routine, too.

“What would you like for lunch?” Nick picked up the fresh glass.

“I’m not really hungry.” Carl set the breadstick down and started on the cloth napkin.

“Too bad. They have some terrific food here. The steak is wonderful.” Nick plucked a breadstick from the basket and took a bite. “How do the new allergy patents look?”

“Um,” Carl stammered, clearly taken off guard. “Everything is on schedule. We have FDA approval and a release date of June the second. We also have a great new diet pill in the works. I believe research and development will have some hard numbers for you in our next meeting. So far, it has surpassed expectations. It takes nearly half of the calories consumed and passes them as waste instead of storing them. Even better, the process instantly reverses once the medication is stopped. We’ll have armies of people popping our pills for the rest of their lives, all so they can eat like piggies without looking like them.”

“See, that’s what I like to hear and that’s what you should be doing. Present me with business. That’s what we are now, businessmen.” Nick leaned in close and spoke in a husky whisper. “I better not ever hear of you ordering another hit. It’s not your place. If I hear of you crossing the line again, Devin will be coming after you.” “Don’t bet on it.”

“Excuse me.” Nick raised his voice, catching the attention of several surrounding tables. “Explain yourself.”

Carl’s gaze stayed on the table as he measured off his words. Then like an unleashed tiger he let his fury roll. “I’ve done you a favor and you’ll see that, maybe not today or tomorrow, but soon. Everyone saw how easy you were being on Amelia. Now they think you’re in charge and handling things appropriately.” Carl finished his drink with shaky hands.

“Let’s get a moment of privacy. Come with me.” Nick led Carl out of the restaurant to the parking lot, giving the waitress a brief nod. She was accustomed to his meetings and knew not to clear the table.

“Damn it, you say we’re businessmen but you don’t treat me anywhere close to an equal. Let’s face it. We’re damn thugs.” Carl shifted his wait nervously. “We both know it.”

“Shh.” Nick took him around the corner of the building, away from the windows. “No. You are a damn thug and I won’t warn you again about your behavior. The only reason I’m tolerating you now is because you are blood. That won’t absolve you of further transgressions, so I suggest you check your priorities.” Nick’s voice stayed calm as he reached into his suit. The calm gave no warning. He pulled out a small slapjack and waited for Carl to look up at him. As

his eyes rose, Nick sent the cloth filled sack against his temple. Carl blocked, but couldn't stop the crack as the slapjack went across his nose, breaking it. "That's how thugs are treated. Now why don't we act like businessmen?"

Carl brought himself upright, tears and blood streaming. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and met Nick's gaze for the first time. "Did you cancel Devin?"

"No." Nick rubbed his eyes. "No I didn't. That doesn't excuse your actions." Nick put the slapjack back into his coat. "I know you don't like Amelia. That is your business. Mine is building an empire. Cross me again, and I'll personally put a bullet in your brain."

"I apologize." His nose began to swell and both his eyes had purple undertones. Black bruises started to form on the side of his head.

"Was Devin successful?" Nick tried to hide the lump in his throat.

"No. Amelia slipped by." Carl gritted his teeth. "He's in pursuit, though. She's temporarily disappeared. There's been no sign of Amelia at her New York apartment or her North Carolina house. Do you have any ideas where she could be?"

"No." He leaned back and stared at Carl, beaten like a mongrel dog. Damn, that felt good. "She'll turn up."

Nick gave Carl one last look. If a hit had to be ordered, it should be on Carl. Why would having a brother be such a burden? Blood was a bitch. The same father. Why couldn't the old bastard keep his pants up, or at least choose some quality stock to screw? A brother, the curse circulated through his mind and came to culmination.

He'd overlooked Amelia's one weakness. She had a brother

"Carl, take the rest of the day off. I don't want to see you in the office for a while. You're working too hard." He didn't finish with, at getting my position, but he thought it.

Besides, he had some snooping to do and he didn't need anybody observing him. "I'm going back inside to have lunch. I'd invite you to join me but you're quite a sight." Nick started back inside, then added, "Don't have too much fun on your day off. I don't want anymore surprises."

"I understand." Carl walked to his car.

* * * *

Amelia closed her eyes but didn't find sleep. It felt good just to relax for a minute and pretend she was just a visiting relative. It was even nice to pretend there was a suitor waiting for her on the coast. She smiled when thought of Cody. Things couldn't work out. Odds were that he waited to bust her, but the fantasy was better.

She sat up and opened her bag. She didn't want to unpack. Hasty exits had become second nature to her. She opened the side compartment of her case and pulled out a small stack of business cards. Knights in shining armor didn't come around every day. She needed a back up.

Phyllis Schimmer was a tough old bird down in records. She wasn't the best help in the world, but she owed Amelia more than one favor. Her home number was written on the back of the

marketing manager's card, along with the head of payroll, and their attorney at large, Mr. Henders.

Amelia dialed the number and waited. She hated brining anyone else in this mess. The last thing she needed was anyone else getting hurt. She had enough blood on her hands.

"What?" Phyllis always answered the phone like that. It got her in trouble a few times at work but she was one of the few who wouldn't back down. Once Nick marched down to her department demanding some bit of paperwork. She politely told him to sit down, shut up, and wait his turn. It was a beautiful thing.

"It's Amelia."

A familiar sound followed. It was something like a laugh choked with too many years of unfiltered cigarettes. "Little Amy. What are you doing, honey? I've heard a bad rumor about you."

"I bet you've heard a few." She was the only person Amelia would tolerate calling her Amy or honey. "I'm in a spot. Can you send me some information?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

"I don't know. Things have turned pretty sour for me. I think maybe a company we've recently acquired is out to set me up. It could've been something we got into a year or more ago. I'm not sure. This took some planning." This took a lot of power, too. "Will you help me?"

"Sure."

"This has to be kept quiet."

"Of course and don't worry. I won't mention a word to those lousy sons-a-bitches." She chuckled again. She loved getting one over on the bosses. It went from the breaks that took too long, to putting demands of the higher ups on the backburner. "Anything you need, honey, I'll get it."

"Thanks. I'll call you tomorrow with an address where you can send the papers." Researching wasn't her forte. She was usually given information and sent out. Maybe whoever was doing this knew her Achilles heel and left some door open. "Phyllis, one more thing. How would I check into a government worker?"

"Like who?"

She couldn't say handsome beachcomber who might have her ass in the frying pan. "A forensics investigator, you know one of those blood splatter guys."

"Well, it depends on which department he works in. There are at least a dozen splatter guys in every state. That's not counting the Feds. If you could narrow it down for me a little, I can see who I know."

"Okay. Thanks again." Amelia hung up the phone. She knew tracking Cody would be harder. It was too much to believe anyone did anything out of kindness. The world was shaped through money and power. Everything else ended plowed under.

Next was this blind date crap. She had no interest in doctors or dating for that matter, but her brother had his heart set on making her a June Cleaver. She looked into her bag but there was nothing suitable for a date.

“Amelia, you up?” Max was at the door.

She thought about not answering. Maybe if she pretended to be asleep, he’d forget about the fix up. Her first visit in a year and she was trying to avoid him. Those good social graces were showing up again. “Sure, come on in.” She was kneeling on the floor in front of her case. “I hope we’re not going anywhere formal because the dressiest thing I packed was jeans.”

“I figured. I hope you don’t mind, but I asked Darcy to bring you something. You two are roughly the same size.”

She started to protest again but he interrupted. “I also had the glass replaced in your car while you were resting. The guy was amazed a little rock could do so much damage. He’d seen bullets do less.” Her brother gave her that look again. Damn, she hated that look.

Depends on the caliber, nosey ass. “I didn’t hear you leave.”

“He came to the house. It’s one of those call in places.” He leaned against the door jam with clothing folded over his arm. “It sure is funny how a little piece of gravel could do so much damage. Anyway, I wanted to get it fixed before anyone came over.”

So he fixed it out of embarrassment. It figured. “You’re working awfully hard to impress a doctor.”

Max grinned at her. “You’re working awfully hard not to.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “I would hate for Darcy to see me kick your ass.”

“I’d hate that too.” He opened the door wider and threw a couple of dresses on the bed. “Try these out. We’ll be leaving in an hour.”

Darcy had good taste. The bright red dress clashed with Amelia’s hair but there was a hot little black number that worked nicely. She primped, trying not to curse Max for making her go through this. He didn’t know what hell of a couple of days she’d had. Something about putting on make-up after being shot at seemed ridiculous.

For his sake, she covered the temple wound and fixed her hair over it. Tonight she was a normal woman that would never know what to do with a gun. She was more apt to donate time to some organization than get shot at. For now, she was the Amelia Max always wanted her to be.

With everything in place, she made her entrance into the living room. Standing there was a lady, Max, and a gorgeous man with dark brown hair and the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. He was around six feet, thin and muscular but not to the point of being a gym freak.

“Amelia, this is Tom Conner and Darcy.”

“Nice to meet you.” The scene threw her off. She’d expected some nerdy bald man with thick glasses and a bow tie. Something like her dancing gremlin brought back to make her life hell. She held out her hand. He shook it, and held on just a moment too long. “I hope I

haven't kept you waiting." There was a spark of an attraction. Nothing much, just enough to make her wonder if a killer should date a doctor. Next, she'd be dating some minister.

"I just arrived." Tom had a soft voice, soothing. "I've heard so much about you. It's a pleasure."

Chapter 7

Nick stood in the middle of Amelia's New York apartment. She didn't know he had a key made. There were lots of things Amelia didn't know. He rummaged through the desk closest to the door. A stack of old letters, bills and odd paperwork were kept in different slots. He pulled each out, examining it. There had to be an address.

One slot seemed to be correspondence. In the middle of the stack, were two letters from Max. The first had the address torn off the envelope. With the second, she'd gotten lazy. A black magic marker had been used to cover the label.

He grinned, knowing he'd have the address before tomorrow. He had a better lab than half the police departments in the country. They could find out what lay hidden beneath the black lines. He shoved the envelope into his pocket and continued his search. If any evidence of disloyalty existed, he was going to find it.

He opened the coat closet and checked every pocket. He found a parking voucher for his building but that was all. A lunch receipt lay on the floor. He went to the kitchen and searched the drawers. She had a very large assortment of steak knives, and other steely sharp things tucked into every drawer, a few bordering on being instruments of torture.

Her cupboards looked like sad relics of places food should be stored but seldom was. The refrigerator looked the same. Only expired milk and some fuzzy fruit sat inside.

The other rooms were equally bare. She had weapons of some sort hidden in nearly every corner of the apartment. A gun in the vegetable compartment of the fridge, one behind the toilet, under the bed, two in the closet, one under the couch, and a small pistol in the desk. In a box in the bottom drawer of an armoire sat her rifle. He recognized the gun from the first kill she'd ever made. The gun had been broken down and cleaned. She must've done it frequently because he could still smell the gun oil.

The rifle hadn't been her first solo job. An interior doc she'd jammed after work took that honor. This one came from a test run in the park. Amelia had always suspected her shot had killed him. Nick tried to tell her the kill shot came from his gun. For some reason that was important to her.

She'd been fourteen and wasn't tall enough to see the victim through the underbrush. She'd gone up the tree for a clear view. It's the first time he knew her instincts were right. His gunfire became lost in the foliage, hers in the heart of a fed. After that, he started seriously training her.

He checked her bedroom last. Two large ornate swords hung on the wall over the dresser. A crossbow hung on the wall next to the bed. No wonder she never dated. How could she bring a date here?

Dating, she'd never been good at that. Dad hadn't helped things. On Amelia's sixteenth birthday, he'd invited a young man to her dinner party. Of course, at sixteen her guests consisted of killers, thieves, and a few computer hackers from Itam. All of them had taken to Amelia and didn't like the thought of some boy in her life. Nick never found out which dinner

guests had threatened the boy, but he made a hasty exist before dinner was served.

Amelia must've been so lonely growing up with no one to play with or openly talk to. She'd been schooled for two years at Sister Agatha's in town. By the age of fourteen, Dad decided home schooling was best. The change came about the same time as her first kill. No one wanted the Saints corrupting Amelia. She was too valuable as a protégé. Besides, he seemed to remember her getting suspended for threatening a nun.

Nick sat on her bed and picked up a small brown teddy bear she kept in the center. It looked ratty with the fur completely gone in some areas. She'd had it as long as Nick had known her. It had to have been a gift from her father. She never mentioned where she got it, only threatened anyone that got close to it. The bear was the only toy he'd ever seen her with and one she'd kept hidden away when she lived with Nick.

It amazed him that she'd held on to it all these years. A symbol of a tiny part of her childhood the organization hadn't corrupted. It was a nice thought. Somewhere down deep in her soul, innocence could still exist.

He laughed. His Amelia had been born damned. Once he'd gone as far as to tell her so. She'd looked at him blankly. Those eyes had a way of cutting through him, even at sixteen. Then with a shrug, she'd looked at the gun he'd given her at the private firing range and said, "Damned at birth, damned at twelve or sixteen. Tell me something I don't know."

One photo sat by the bed of Nick and his family taken at a reunion. Amelia wasn't in this picture. Only black haired Italian blood smiled along with the married in blonde. Poor Amelia had been an outsider from the beginning, having to become a hired henchman for acceptance and respect. She didn't have much choice in becoming a killer.

* * * *

The restaurant was nice, not terribly upscale but the ambiance eased her mood. Everyone talked, gentle chit-chat about taxes and the economy. The mingled mutters of mediocrity, the gentle slurs of lives not quite lived. The lack of extreme, the toned down emotion seemed to be the theme. Where life became wondering what to have for dinner and the harshest lessons were displayed on the news as other peoples problems, while someone worried about the mortgage or whether to buy a new car.

In this mist of not quite interesting, Amelia could see herself. It was as if her soul had become bored and vacated her body. She watched from the street, looking in the large window. From a distance, she fit in, some lovely thing sitting next to a handsome man, nodding at his comments as if they mattered. This was it. Her mind grew numb. Soon, she'd wake up with three kids and a house in the suburbs. It wouldn't be so bad. She wanted a normal life, but when did this become normal? Had she seen too much to find happiness, experienced too much to find contentment in the everyday?

"Amelia?" Max was staring at her. "Earth to Amelia."

"I didn't realize I was so boring." Now Tom watched her.

"I'm sorry." How could she explain that the world didn't seem as thrilling after watching a man take his final breath? "I don't feel very well." It wasn't a lie. She desperately wanted a home

and family but how long before it drove her mad?

“What’s wrong?” Tom put his hand a little too close to her shoulder on the back of her chair.

Never use a medical complaint around a doctor, she chastised. “A trying few days has given me a mind numbing headache.”

“Maybe we should cut dinner short.” Tom turned to find their waitress. “I’ll take you home and Max and Darcy can finish their dinner.”

“No. Don’t do that on my account. I’m just going to step outside for a moment. Some fresh air would do me good.” She rose from the table and the surreal feeling returned. She could see herself crossing the floor. People were watching, they knew she didn’t fit in. She was sent to spy on their little world but they knew she didn’t belong. She could almost see the word ‘murderer’ burned into her flesh. They watched the outsider, the hunter among them and they hated her. She hated herself.

She opened the door and stepped onto the walkway next to the street. The air felt cool and filled with exhaust. It was dark. Streetlights lit up the world in small orbs cast onto the road and sidewalk. She wanted to run into the night. Disappear into the nothing and become someone else, someone better. She took a deep breath, smelling the acrid fumes. It was stress. She’d been under too much stress for too long.

It only took her a moment to regain control and lose it again when the cell phone in her purse rang. She hadn’t realized she’d picked up her bag when she left the table. It was habit, mostly because of the piece inside. Still, she opened it and saw a strange number on the display.

“Hello?” There was silence on the other end but it had a familiar feel, or maybe it was the breathing. “Joey?” Instincts kicked in. “Joey, say something.”

“I just wanted to see if you were okay,” he whispered softly into the phone.

If he’d been in her line of sight, she’d put a bullet through his brain. “No thanks to you. Sleep with me, then leave me to the firing squad. You’re a bastard.” She calmed down. She’d vent later, when she could put her hands around his throat. “So tell me, who ordered the hit?”

“Nick did. I’m sorry.” His words faded. At first, Amelia mistook it for guilt, then she realized he was being quiet for a reason. “I should’ve warned you.”

She thought for a moment. “Did Carl tell you Nick ordered it?”

“Don’t torture yourself with the details.” A woman’s voice cut through the background noise. Joey ignored it. “Where are you now?”

“I can’t tell you.” She wouldn’t fall to his idiotic charms. Besides, it sounded like he was working on setting her up again. “Who’s the chick?”

“No one important.”

“She’s from the office. Who is she? Come on. You set me up, the least you can do is tell me who else you’re screwing.” It would’ve been better to play coy. To pump him for more info but the rage inside wouldn’t permit a game.

“You don’t want to know.” The sound of a door shutting followed, as if he tried to gain more privacy. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“No, just put a bullet in me. I’m surprised you didn’t try to do the job yourself. Carl would’ve liked that.” There was silence. She was losing him. “Come on. Tell me who the other woman is.”

“I don’t see why it matters.” He huffed. “If you must know, it’s Sally, Nick’s secretary.”

“How cozy.” She felt a pang of jealousy, then dismissed it. “I guess you realize we’re through.”

“I know. Besides, you’ll be dead in a week.” He let out a long breath. She couldn’t tell if it was from arrogance or guilt.

“Can you tell me who is doing hits like me?” She waited, but he wouldn’t respond. “I deserve to know why people are trying to kill me.”

“It’s complicated.” He sounded strange, as if he couldn’t speak freely. Sally must’ve rejoined him. “I am sorry.”

The line went dead. She dropped the phone back into her purse. Behind her, the restaurant door opened. She wasn’t ready for a conversation, for a pile of lies she’d have to keep up with in the days to come. It was a necessity in her line of work. It had been so long since she’d spoken with Max, she wasn’t sure what he thought she did for a living. Maybe the last job was an insurance adjuster, or was it an account specialist for the pharmaceutical group?

“Feeling better?”

She turned to find Tom standing behind her. He had a warm, gentle look, but it seemed out of place. Maybe the doctor had a maniacal side. To look at him, one would expect him to be pictured on a Christmas card with his wife and two kids. He would vacation in Cabo. That life might not be so bad. Then again, he didn’t seem as attractive as when she first met him. It was in his eyes. Maybe he’d seen too much death, too.

“My headache is starting to go away.” She offered him an uncertain smile. “I’m sorry about being rude earlier. I’m afraid I’m not very good company tonight.”

He studied her for a minute. “I’m the one that should be sorry. You drive into town and before you know it, you’ve been fixed up on a blind date. I don’t even know why I agreed to it. I guess to make Darcy happy. She tries but she doesn’t believe she should be divorced.”

She managed a smile. “My brother doesn’t think I should be single. He’s always harping on my love life. I guess you can understand. Sometimes work gets in the way of real life.”

“Well, it is surprising, a lovely lady such as yourself not being involved with anyone.”

She eyed him carefully. “I’m not sure if you’re sweet or slick.”

He put his arm around her. “Don’t worry. I don’t try my slick stuff until the second date.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“Of course, it might be nice to go somewhere quiet. I wouldn’t try anything. It’s just hard to get to know you inside that noisy restaurant.” An intensity filled his expression.

“I can’t leave my brother now. We always have dinner together the first night of a visit. Sorry. I hope you understand.” It was another lie, but he appeared hungry for more than conversation and she wasn’t in the mood.

He held the door open for her and she stepped inside, not really wanting to return to the table, but not having a good excuse to leave. As expected, he remained a gentleman, down to holding her chair while she sat. Although it made her uneasy having someone stand behind her. He grazed her shoulder, touching it lightly as he returned to his seat. A chill went through her. She didn’t know why, but something felt wrong. She scanned the restaurant. Her sight fell on the window in front and a familiar car pulling into the parking lot. Devin had arrived.

Son of a bitch! She couldn’t believe he’d found her this fast.

Her heart sped up. If this were another time, she would’ve ran to him and begged him to get her out of here, even if it was just for a beer down the road. Before, all their relationship consisted of was beer and conversation. She wanted more than to be his buddy, although being his victim was far worse.

Shot down in front of her brother, the only family she had, that figured. Damn, would this day never end? She looked back at the glass. Devin checked the parking lot. There were many things she could’ve done. Staring blankly waiting for him to notice her wasn’t the wisest choice. Unfortunately, that’s what she did. He pulled through the lot, checking each row. She lost him as he rounded the corner. She watched when his headlights returned and the SUV crept back around the building and stopped in front of the window.

They made eye contact. To an outsider, they probably appeared like lovers gazing into the darkness to find each other. She’d been found all right, but this wasn’t her lover.

There should’ve been the sound of bullets cutting through air, glass shattering and screams. None of it happened. Instead, Devin grinned at her menacingly, then parked his car and waited. The showboat had learned patience.

She watched him through the end of their meal. He parked too far away for her to see his eyes, but they cut through her all the same. She knew those eyes, those earth shattering eyes.

Dinner ended with coffee and more tired conversation. They walked together to the car, the two couples making their way through the parking lot. Amelia saw Devin parked, engine idling. Still, no shots rang out.

Devin followed to Max’s home. She saw him pull by as the good doctor gave her a kiss on the hand. This time, she pretended not to see. There was no point in pushing it and risking her brother. She said her goodbyes and went to her room, leaving Max and his fiancé to their affairs.

She would be visited tonight. Devin was bound to come inside and kill her. She thought about leaving, driving away to another safe location. Devin might hurt Max, though. At the least, Devin would torture Max for information. She’d seen it happen before. It shouldn’t happen to her brother. It was time for the chase to end.

Amelia pulled out her suitcase and got out a fresh t-shirt, rubbing it gently between her thumb

and fingers. Soft fabric, it would be nice to feel it fresh from a shelf or closet, instead of this continual cycle of packing. This was what she thought about, shelves lined with fresh, clean things in her home. The last minutes of her life were filled with laundry. She realized this and laughed.

Outside, she heard something, a step, and a twig snapping underfoot. The sound came from the back of the house near the window. She pulled the drapes, looking out, but finding nothing. Devin would probably come later. He would wait until the lights in the house had gone off. Hits were easier when the house became quiet. She should have some time left. She checked her gun and put it under the pillow.

A smile crept across her face. It wouldn't be easy to hide her profession from Max if she killed a guy in his guest room and what would he think if she turned up dead. It

would be listed as a nasty break in or maybe Max would be blamed. There's no telling who those clunk heads would try to pin her death on.

She slid out of her dress and into her shirt. She didn't like wearing other people's clothing. It felt strange, like she wore part of their skin. As much as she wanted to like Darcy, she didn't want to be that close, not even for Max.

The covers felt warm, comforting. She snuggled down. Trouble would come, but later, in those early hours when trouble lurked, growing before sunlight could scorch its wickedness. Maybe three or four o'clock, that's when death seemed the strongest. She'd felt its allure when the moon finished its path, as if the lust for killing grew during the night, culminating, ripening when the air was the chilliest and the night the darkest.

She could nap for an hour or two while Max and Darcy were awake. Then she'd sneak outside and check on her friend. More than likely, he'd watch the house and catch her if she attempted a preemptive strike before the lights went off. Let him relax and plan his next move. When she heard Max go to bed, she'd get up and go after Devin.

Those thoughts, or maybe just fatigue, helped her settle into a sleep too sound to hear the window opening. By the time she became aware an intruder was in the room, Devin had his hand over her mouth and a gun pointed at her head. She reached beneath the pillow but before she could put her hand on her pistol, she felt his barrel press into her flesh.

His face moved close to hers. She felt his black hair brush her cheek and his breath in her ear. "Don't move. We need to talk."

Amelia tensed but didn't try for the gun again. Devin's hand held tight on her mouth. The gun barrel was warm. Her eyes darted to the clock. That jackass didn't even let her get in a good twenty minutes. She nodded her cooperation and felt the hand on her mouth relax.

"Why am I not dead?" she asked in an even tone.

"Is that what you want?" He put the gun in his waistband. "I wondered why this was too easy."

"I've been screwing up a lot lately." She reached over to turn on the lamp, stopping when she'd heard him pull out the gun and cock it. "Relax. I just want to see your face."

"No. No light." He didn't press the gun against her again but returned it to his waistband. "So

why do people want you dead?"

"They think I've been pulling unauthorized hits. My guess is someone is tearing down Itam from the inside out. They know Nick and I are practically family. Anything I did would show against him. If he doesn't order my death, everyone turns against him. If he does, his best hitter is out of commission."

"His best? You always did think a lot of yourself." He laughed and fell on the bed next to her, bouncing her softly. "You know, I got three phone calls about you. By the way, you nearly killed me out by the road. Very rude, chicky."

"Oh, come on. You were going to splatter my brains." She felt her voice rise and tried to control it. "You nearly did. I've got a graze wound. Was that an accident?"

"The graze was an accident after nearly getting blown apart." He nestled close, allowing his leg to rest against hers. "We've worked together. I'm not gonna do a hit without good reason and certainly not one from a second-in-command."

A second-in-command? So it wasn't Nick who'd ordered the kill. It helped knowing he wasn't to blame. "Who called?"

"Carl."

More movement filled the house. Amelia and Devin listened, waiting to see if they'd been heard. A light came on in the hallway. It went off a moment later, causing another chuckle from her intruder.

"Rather like teenagers hoping not to get caught by their mums."

Amelia felt his muscular body next to hers. It seemed closer than a moment before. Was he trying to get closer? "Devin," she whispered but found her breath caught in her throat. She tried to clear her mind to more pressing issues. "How did you find me?" "When we were working together, you got a letter from your brother. I noticed the address before you blacked it out. I had a good idea of where you were going, but I thought given the circumstances, you'd get a hotel somewhere. That's when I noticed you in town. That restaurant is next door to a Hilton. Dumb luck brought me to you. Well, that and, uh..." He laughed again, but it sounded nervous, forced. "I have a confession to make. I had a hell of a crush on you. I paid attention to every bit of drivel that came out of your mouth, including the type of food you like and the kind of places you like to stay."

"Really?" She couldn't help smiling, knowing the feeling had been mutual. On their last assignment together, they'd nearly kissed. She still wondered what it would feel like. "I guess you should've told me before accepting a contract on me."

He huffed then touched her cheek thoughtfully, running his finger to her jaw line. "Maybe so." He pulled his hand away and propped on an elbow. "Hey, who was that stuffed suit you were with tonight? He didn't seem like your type."

She noticed the jealous tone in his voice. "A doctor my brother was trying to fix me up with. Did that bother you?"

Devin fidgeted, scooting closer and driving her mad. "Thinking about trading in your pistol for

an apron?" He answered her question with another. It was the one thing about him she couldn't stand, the way he avoided conversation.

"I could do worse." She liked him being so close. They'd slept in the same bed once. Only slept, at least he had. She'd felt safe next to him, secure, but unable to settle her thoughts enough for rest to come.

"You could do a lot better," Devin spoke softly near her ear again, sending sparks through her body. "So much better."

"The way things are going, I don't think so." She groaned loudly. "I always knew someone would put a bullet in me but I thought I had at least another ten years left. I've obeyed every order. Now people are coming after me for being a renegade. It doesn't make sense."

"What's up with that Joey guy you were doing?" Devin seemed to have a different itinerary than murder.

"He was part of the set up. He's doing some secretary. I'm all alone in the world." She let her head rest on the pillow, reveling in the feeling of him next to her. Damn, she'd missed him. "And I thought my sweet Devin was going to kill me. That would've been a shame." She shifted her weight, trying to bring him even closer.

"Amelia," he let out a small sound, nearly a gasp as if she were having the same effect on him. "I've got a proposition for you."

"What?" Electricity seemed to race over her skin. His body hovered close, brushing against hers with every breath. "Sex in exchange for my life?"

"Hmm." He sounded as if he were seriously considering the joke. "Maybe later." It was too dark to see his face but she was certain a sick smirk covered it. "You are damn good and it turns out I need a partner. How about you and I going into business together? We could make a hell of a lot of money and never worry about loyalties." He leaned close to her ear again. "Besides, it could be fun." His mouth stayed close, letting her feel his breath.

"Well," she wanted to say something witty but everything jumbled inside her. She turned her head so her lips grazed his cheek. "Help me get out of this mess, and you got yourself a deal."

He trembled then pulled back. His breaths were fast, hungry, then as usual, it was back to business. "That's what I thought. You hide out here a little longer and I'll be in touch. I've got a plant in your office. Something good is bound to come out soon."

"A plant?" That took time. If he'd just been called, why would he have a plant? "Sounds like you want more than a hit operation. Sounds like you want an empire."

"I figure you'll be working for me one way or another. Meet me in the park tomorrow night around ten. Be alone." He started to get up then stopped. He cupped her chin in his hand and let his thumb trace her lips. "One more thing."

He moved back onto the bed but she couldn't see what he was doing. All she knew was his hand had left her face, making her wish for another touch, even a slight one.

Without warning, he grabbed both her wrists and pushed them over her head. She felt his body move against her, the gun in his waistband. He pressed his mouth against hers. His lips

were soft, grazing, tickling hers, and then increasing in intensity as she responded to him. His strength was amazing, wonderful, and he possessed her mouth.

Her tongue reached to his lips, wanting more. Their bodies began moving together. Her thigh came up, encircling his. The kiss went on for a full minute and when it ended, she couldn't help feeling an ache for him, a madness only he could ease.

Her hands were free but she hadn't noticed. She kept them above her head, wanting him to touch her again, wanting him to take control.

"Until tomorrow." Devin whispered softly, leaving a kiss on her neck when he'd finished speaking. A moment passed before he left, as if he couldn't manage the will power to go. A noise from the hallway jolted both of them. With a sigh, he went back to the window.

"Devin?" She could barely make out his silhouette next to the curtain. She wanted to ask him to stay, to say please, something, but she couldn't bring herself to beg him. It wouldn't be right in her brother's house. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Always." Then he ducked out the window.

She took a deep breath and listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps. Devin was incredible. They'd always had good chemistry but she'd thought it was just a working relationship thing. Of course, he could be part of the set up.

Her lips tingled. She licked at them, wanting to taste his mouth again. He was a beautiful creature. So many times she'd wanted him to do that, kiss her. She didn't mind making the first move, but something about him made her yearn to be taken.

Reality came crashing down as she heard Max getting ready for bed. People like Max could date and have normal lives. She didn't have a chance in hell of anything normal.

Devin could be out to get her. They'd been together before and he'd never made a move. A few glances strayed her way but he'd never been as bold as he was tonight. This was an odd time to start a partnership, or a romance.

Why would Carl risk ordering a hit? She never imagined he hated her so much. It would explain Joey's participation.

She felt paranoid, insane, and she couldn't get Devin out of her mind. Out of curiosity, she looked out the window. He was gone. She fell back into her bed and into a fitful sleep.

* * * *

It was almost midnight when he got out of the cab. The brown box stayed securely in his hands as he entered the Itam building. He was careful not to shake it. The mechanism inside was delicate, failsafe.

The security desk waved him through without questioning his presence there. He was practically a fixture and above suspicion. It was the main reason he was chosen, not for any great intelligence or skill, just for being himself.

He took the elevator up to the records room, a floor beneath the main offices. That's where all the documents were held. Tons of files, hard copies kept for years, growing dust and hiding

secrets were back there. Only a handful of people had access. He'd only been there twice, courtesy of an office fling with a temp. He didn't know every activity Itam made was logged back there. Other people, however, had known for sometime.

He checked the hallway as he took the stolen key and opened the private records section. It was dark in there. He felt around the wall for the switch, bringing the room alive in fluorescent fixtures hanging from the ceiling.

The files he needed were kept in the back section. The oldest ones, some dating back fifty years, came from the start of the company. These were kept in a special vault.

He approached the safe slowly. Given the sensitive material, he'd expected a stronger security system than just a locked door. Nick had never been a fan of technology. Maybe an old-fashioned lock was all he trusted.

The air smelled musty. He felt a cold chill run through him as he approached the safe. If he got caught, his body would be found in pieces strung across the state.

In his jacket, were two vials he'd been given. The first, he applied around the lock and at the hinges. The second contained the activator and stank to high heaven. It went on thickly, like snot. He used his sleeve to cover his face when both gels began to bubble and smoke, giving off an ammonia smell. In a moment, the metal gave way. It was a slow process taking nearly five minutes but the lock and the door fell to the floor, rattling noisily. There was no one else around to hear. He took the notebooks from the safe and propped the door back into place. It was too heavy to stay. He grabbed a box of files from the shelf, pissing off a spider in the process, and pushed them in front of the empty safe.

Next, he had to find the perfect place for his package, his final gift to the damn place. He put his ear against the side of the box. There was no noise. The timer was digital but, for some reason, he thought it should tick like a bomb in a cartoon. He couldn't open it and check. That would make it detonate immediately. He decided to leave it in the corner of the room. From there, the blast would decimate the room but wouldn't take down the building. The crime was a necessary evil. His theft couldn't be discovered.

He still wasn't sure why they chose a bomb. A simple fire would be better or stage a large theft. Bombs sounded too risky. It was also odd that they told him not to put the bomb near the safe. They wanted it on the opposite wall. They were specific about the placement as well as the time of night it was to be left.

He looked at the brown package. It seemed menacing and heavy for a small interior explosion. He couldn't question anything about the job. Details didn't matter anyway. The plan was in place. Besides, he couldn't be linked to the crime. Right now, a call was being placed to Nick that Amelia had been seen in the building. The bomb would go off tonight and any loyalties he had to her would be gone.

* * * *

Phyllis opened the door to the private records room. She took a cup of coffee with her, trying to wake up while looking at the shelves. It was almost nine in the morning. Everyone was arriving for work. It would've been smarter to get here early and find Amy's information but hell, she never was a morning person.

Somebody setting up her sweet little Amy, it was unthinkable. It had to be an employee working here, though. This place wasn't exactly on the up and up. Phyllis had known what kind of company she'd been working for going on ten years. They were brutal when it came to business. It paid well though and the big boss kind of liked her. She had no idea why. It wasn't like she went out of her way for him or anything. In fact, a few times, she thought he'd fire her. Instead, she kind of grew on him, at least that's the best she could figure. Last Christmas, he even sent her a present. It was a lovely red sweater followed by a Christmas bonus twice the size of any of her fellow employees.

She kept it quiet. Things were best kept quiet around here.

A place like this also attracted a not so honest employee. She didn't know if it was that karma crap or not, but they'd had some serious crimes here. Things like embezzling, threats (okay, that wasn't one of the smarter employees), there was even a rape in the basement. The incident had been swept under the rug because of publicity. Let's just say Sherry never has to work again. The guy was caught on the video monitor, so Sherry's statement was never questioned. The guy, what was his name? Anyway, the guy disappeared. People said he had been put into research and development and not as a promotion. The pharm guys had come up with a drug to control sexual behavior. It was something for prisoners. Back in the day, they called a similar thing saltpeter. Anyway, heard he was their first test run. This drug attacked the problem at the source, the brain. Let's just say, the side effects weren't all worked out. The guy became a vegetable from the last rumor that went through. Didn't have to worry about him committing another rape.

Phyllis pulled out the files from the most recent acquisitions and gathered the ones from years ago that hadn't gone smoothly. Some were fifteen years old but when a company gets acquired, there were bad feelings. Especially the way Itam took over companies. There's some saying that goes along with revenge being served cold or something. For ruined lives, fifteen years didn't seem like too long to hold a grudge.

A few takeovers stuck out in her mind, nasty things where people died. She pulled and marked the ones she could remember. Damn, Itam hurt as many people as it helped.

It was nine-twenty. She still had a few minutes before anybody missed her. She shoved everything into a Federal Express envelope and started into the hallway. Just then, as luck would have it, the mailroom guy was getting on the elevator.

"Wait a second." Phyllis waved the envelope. It was a long walk to the mailroom and she felt older than her years today.

"What, Phyllis?" asked the long haired boy with two earrings. He would take a few years to work the kinks out before he became useful.

"Take this down for me. It's important from Nick. It has to go out overnight today." She added it to his cart.

"Sure thing, honey." He smiled at her. "Got a smoke?"

"Bag that honey stuff, kid, and do your job." She smiled back at him. He was a punk kid but she liked him. Besides, she didn't want to be seen with a box full of files going to North Carolina. It looked suspicious. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a pack of

cigarettes. "Here." She handed him one and tried to look mean but the kid just made her smile again.

She watched him pocket the smoke and hit the button for the bottom floor. Phyllis stood there until the elevator doors shut. The deed was done. By this time tomorrow, Amelia would have the files. Phyllis just hoped it would be enough to save her ass. This would be a lonely place without Amelia blowing through to stir things up.

Phyllis started to get on the next elevator and head to her floor but she stopped as the doors opened. She should try harder for Amelia. That little scamp had done so much for her and all she was willing to do was throw some files into an envelope. Maybe she could do better for her little Amy.

She went down the hall. It had been a while since she'd spoken with Kathy. The girl was a ditz but as far as gossip went, she was a goldmine. There might be something floating around the office to help Amelia.

Kathy worked in the invoice office. Legit things went through there, not that they'd ever let her work where secrets were kept. It made people come in contact with her for supplies and such. She was a friendly sort, too friendly. People opened up to her naturally. If she was worked right, Kathy could be an asset. Say the wrong thing and the entire state knew.

"Hi, Kathy." Phyllis tried to act sociable. It wasn't easy. "How are you doing this morning?"

"Oh fine." The woman smiled bubbly. "What brings you down here?"

"Out of pens. Can you get me a box, some paperclips, too?" Phyllis looked over her desk. There was nothing extraordinary.

"Sure." Kathy got up from her desk and opened a supply closet.

"Heard any good rumors lately?" Phyllis felt too old for beating around the bush. "I'm bored."

"Well, have you heard about Jill in accounting?"

Phyllis would have to endure a lot of shit before anything of value turned up. This could take a while. At that moment, she realized her cup of coffee was still in the records room.

"Just a minute. I left my coffee. Don't want it getting cold."

She went back down the hall. It took her a few minutes to get the key in the lock. Her hands had started shaking. Eventually, she figured there would be no use for her at all once her typing went to hell. Her handwriting had already degraded to the point only a few could read it.

Finally, the door opened. There was her coffee, sitting on the table. There were two pleasures left in her life, a good cup of coffee and a cigarette. She considered lighting up. It was against policy but those healthy in your face butt holes couldn't catch her here. There were designated smoking areas, all of which were outside. She didn't like going outside.

She pulled out a cigarette then looked around for smoke detectors. Those damn things were everywhere. One had busted her, too. She'd lit up in the lady's room and sirens went off throughout the entire building. They'd started evacuating when she appeared along with a cloud of smoke. Nick had been pissed that day.

Something in the corner caught her eye. A brown box sat there, and it looked too small to have files inside. She started toward it when she saw an empty space on the shelf. Dust outlined where the boxes should've been.

Few people came up here, and fewer would be going through those old files. She went back and saw an extra box in front of the safe, the one place even she wasn't granted access to. Things have to have a place, so she picked up the box and set it back on the shelf. The door to the safe fell to the floor in a loud metal thud.

It took her a minute to realize what had happened. Her first reaction was that she'd broken something else in the old building, then she put it together. "Damn it! We've been robbed."

An old intercom was in the wall next to the door. She'd never used the one in here. There was no need. To be honest, she thought about not using it now and just walking away lest her own theft be discovered, but no. This was too important. Anything in that safe could bring Itam to its knees.

She went to the door and hit the lobby button. It buzzed. This must've been an older model. She hit the button again, which was supposed to ring at the security desk at the front. Against the wall, the brown package began to vibrate. It was a small sound of paper rubbing against the wall. It almost sounded like a mouse trying to burrow out of the mess.

Phyllis checked her watch, nine-thirty. Someone should be at the desk. She hit the button again, cursing under her breath.

"Front. What d'ya need?"

"This is Phyllis. I'm in the old records room. Looks like someone robbed Nick's private safe. Somebody better tell him."

"Repeat that." The guard sounded more alarmed than confused. "What's been robbed?"

"The records room has been robbed, dumb ass." She took a sip of her coffee. It had started getting cold already. Nothing tasted worse than cold coffee. "Get the wax out of your ears. The old records room safe has been robbed."

Her nerves were too old for this. The tremble in her hands got a little worse. It was a good time for a cigarette. That would be cute. Sitting in the records room smoking, while Nick and a few yes men went rabid looking for clues.

One audible bleep emitted from against the wall. That was the only sound. The vibration stopped, leaving an ominous moment when Phyllis realized what had been in the brown box. Then it exploded.

* * * *

Carl slammed the phone down. Devin had failed again. This time, he claimed Amelia slipped from his view somewhere in Florida. It didn't sound right. She'd only been there three times and each was for a hit. If she were on the run, she'd go somewhere safe, where she knew the area.

"Sir," the intercom went off. "Your son is here."

It was nine o'clock. The dumb ass was thirty minutes late. Not a huge surprise, but a tiring habit. "Send him in."

Joey strutted with more haughtiness than usual as he entered the room. He looked tired. Probably out all night with a new whore. He was a terrible skirt chaser. At least he hadn't been with Amelia lately. That situation nearly caused Carl an ulcer.

"I got your message." Joey looked at the glimmer of Carl's pinky ring like a child amazed by something shiny. He followed the ring to Carl's face. "What happened?"

"Don't worry about it." Carl leaned back in his chair, sizing up the son he still wasn't sure he wanted. "I want you to attend a few meetings. I also want you with Harvey this week. He's over in research. He's not your standard biologist. His expertise is shaking down interns helping out at big businesses, then getting an in on new things to hit the market. He could show you a lot."

"Don't start that shit with me. I shouldn't be doing the simple stuff. Come on. We pay guys to find out info and pay people to outdo the competition. I should be running things."

"Let me tell you something..."

"No, old man, let me tell you. One day, I'll be running this operation and I don't need to know the pansy side of things. I need to see how you operate because it's your job, not good old Harvey's job, I'll be taking."

Carl grabbed a crystal ashtray off the desk, gripped it tightly in his hand, then flung it at Joey. It struck him in the temple, nearly knocking him down. When Joey looked up, Carl had a pistol.

"Are you crazy?" Joey took a step back.

"No. Maybe I'm just starting to wise up." He set the gun on the desk in front of him. "You know, Nick's kids don't want a position in the company. They've all finished college and decided they want to build their own empires. Nick instilled something in them, an honesty that I failed give you. His oldest has started a consulting firm. The youngest is an architect. If Nick ever helped them, he never admitted to it." Carl rubbed his eyes. "You aren't willing to work for anything. Let me give you some advice. If the servants can run the castle better than the master, they get rid of the master. Find a reason you aren't a waste of oxygen."

"Amelia works for the company." Joey touched his temple. "She's practically his daughter."

"She's also worked from scratch, learning everything she could. Don't get me wrong, I hate her, but I have to respect her for earning her stay. She could've very easily stayed at home and made Nick keep her. She didn't." He strummed his fingers on the table. "It's time we found a use for you. When and if you take over this company, you will be a great leader. It will only happen if you understand this company from the bottom up. Now, I suggest you start with Harvey. I will call and get updates on your progress and only when I say, you will go to another department and learn it. If I were to die, I don't want one of Nick's heirs coming in, so earn it."

"Fine." Even Joey knew when to stop arguing. "Just so you know, your precious Amelia was seen in the building last night. I heard Nick got a call about it personally. Seems Amelia is still in New York."

"Really. That brings up another matter. Don't do business in my name or I will blow your brains

out or get Amelia to do it for me.” He leaned forward with eyes swimming mad in a sea of red lines. “I mean it.”

Joey stomped out of the room and slammed the door. Carl knew this wouldn't be the end of it. He would have to stay on top of the boy to make him learn anything. He would learn though. He had to.

Carl leaned back in his chair and tried to relax. He was sick of this Amelia thing and the way Nick handled it disturbed him.

Amelia had been seen in the building. Nick didn't mention anything about it in his phone call. So was Devin lying, or was Joey? One of them had to be unless she managed to be in New York and Florida within hours of each other.

Carl dialed Nick's office. “Sally, is Nick in?”

“No. He just took some stuff to research. He even cancelled his morning meetings and had Pete fill in for his afternoon ones.” She sounded annoyed with Nick and his conversation. “He's heading out of town on business. Would you like me to give him a message?”

“A message?” Nick didn't mention anything about going out of town. It was probably just a ploy for a little privacy. He might have Amelia in there right now. “No message.”

It was nine-fifteen and Nick wasn't in the office, not likely. He'd had Sally lie and Amelia sat in one of those leather chairs discussing new business. That was it. Amelia had come in the building last night and hung around to talk to her safety net. Well enough was enough. He wasn't harboring that whore a minute longer. If he had to blow Amelia's brains out in front of Nick, then he'd do it.

Carl's office was on the opposite end of the floor. He marched out of his office and didn't speak to his secretary or a single person in the hall. On his end, nobody roamed about on business. That's because Carl had been shoved aside, pushed to where he couldn't overhear important conversations or accidentally find out about business. Low level drones surrounded him while Nick's end of the world stayed quiet for important business.

Even the carpet felt thicker on this hallway. Carl approached the double doors that went to Nick's outer office and threw them open. He expected a battle with the secretary. He looked forward to shoving her to the side like some insignificant bug, proving his importance. Nobody here respected him. He was the brother who got handed a job. Not for his cunning or skill, but because of birthright. That's why Joey had to learn this place. He wasn't going to have the same curse of working for a child of that damn Nick's. He would earn his place.

Carl marched to the desk and found Sally gone from her station. That sucked. He wanted to demand attention from someone. Her little special desk with the tall leather chair, it looked nicer than his. She even had a flower arrangement on her desk set in one of those cheap milk glass vases. Carl swept it off her desk, spilling water and roses over the carpet, which was too padded to even break the vase.

“Ahh!” He clinched his fists in frustration and slammed them on her desk. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair. He was a good leader, a strong leader. In the old days, he'd be the man in charge while Nick scurried for acceptance.

Carl took a deep breath, feeling too old for these fits. This was ridiculous, wanting to lash out at an underling, a secretary for crimes her boss and his whore had committed. They were in everything together. He'd heard them talking, laughing like friends. The dinners he'd shared with Nick were business and only a limited amount of it. Even the Irish woman was considered smarter than him.

He bent over and picked up the flowers, placing them back on her desk. Hopefully, Sally wouldn't notice the water on the carpet. Maybe later he'd order her some fresh flowers, a nice little anonymous bouquet.

Now for the reason he'd come here. He threw open the doors to Nick's office. Inside, he knew he'd find Amelia and Nick talking, laughing and planning. Nick had always wanted Amelia to take his place. It was laughable twenty years ago but the world had changed and women were in charge everywhere.

The doors opened hard, banging against the wall. He wanted to see them together. Wanted to spill Amelia's blood on that thick carpet in front of Nick. The office was empty though. Carl checked the bathroom, the closet, even under the desk. There was no sign Amelia had ever been there.

Carl beat his fists on the desk. He belonged here. This should be his office. He should be at the least Nick's equal, not in the sorry position of a pathetic attempt at nepotism. Nick hadn't even told him about leaving town.

Carl spun around and looked out. The view from Nick's window was impressive. It looked out over the city. They weren't too high up. Nick was a little afraid of heights. It was one of the few things that scared him.

It had been hard designing the building. The designers felt the president should be up on the top floor, especially considering Nick owned the entire building. He'd refused. The basement held the mailroom. Offices and such held the first through fifth floors. The sixth floor was for meetings. Oh, that room was grand with wood so shiny, it looked like a glass sheen over its surface. The seventh floor held extra security cameras, monitoring research as well as the elevator, stairs and parking lot. It was also where the main computer system, elevator shaft repair and general machinery was kept. The eighth had a few research specialists too good to work on the upper ten floors. The ninth and tenth floors were for records. In fact, the oldest records room had been placed directly under Nick's office. Rumor had it, Nick had a secret stairway that directly accessed it and another private room where paperwork was kept on every dirty deed ever committed at Itam. Carl had searched this office repeatedly but never found it.

Carl leaned against the Italian leather chair. The surface felt like butter. He eased into the seat, feeling like a bad boy. Sally had been gone a long time. It was nearly nine- thirty. She might walk in at any minute. He didn't care.

He stared down at the empty desktop and tried the drawers. They were locked. He ran his palms over the top of the desk. It would be nice to be Nick for a day, to be the legitimate son, the rightful heir to so much power. A lot of things would be nice.

"Yes, my father built this company." He imagined giving statements to the press, his face on the new add campaign for families with dysfunctional children from a family owned company.

The slogan went 'We're here to help' and a nice packaged drug would be pictured below.

When he first started working at Itam, he'd wanted Nick's respect. He wanted to be the number one guy everyone relied on. The years rolled by without a single possibility of being more than a sidekick. Now, he wanted it all.

Carl looked at the desk again and smiled. Power became addictive. He'd give anything to be Nick's boss, to leave him on the noisy end of the hall checking unimportant papers. He leaned back in the seat and fantasized.

Being in Nick's seat was the wrong place to be. Carl never saw the package against the wall or heard Phyllis's call to the guards. His last moment was of Zen, pretending to be someone else in a life he never knew. His mind barely had time to realize the floor and his body were flying up and out the window.

Chapter 8

Nick had never been a fan of flying. Sure, it was faster. Then again, speed wasn't everything. How many times had he'd seen an advertisement for the local authorities saying speed killed. On the ground, pull off lanes lined the roads and accidents didn't result in being dropped thousands of feet and smashing into the earth.

After every flight, he managed a small prayer of thanks, although he felt like kissing the ground. He finished this prayer and headed to baggage claim, gaining a few odd looks from the other departing flyers. He'd arranged for a car in Charlotte, North Carolina and from there, he'd go to Asheville. According to the address he'd uncovered, Max's house wasn't more than two hours away.

To cover all bases, he'd had Devin's phone bugged. If Devin had a bead on her, then Nick saw no reason to ignore good surveillance. He should have Amelia pinned down tonight, then he'd handle her personally.

He approached the rental counter by following the lighted sign, with a man smiling too broadly in the photo promising fast service, pointing the way. There were two people at the counter in tacky green uniforms with odd little ties. Each presented a customer with forms. Oh, Nick hated forms.

Nick despised the rental counter. It was too ordinary, too common man. Any sort of line gave him the same sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. This feeling told him he was just a common Joe, waiting to be discovered. The forces at large would remove him from his office and plant him in a deli somewhere or perhaps, in construction. He hated that sort of life where the guy went home after working ten or twelve hours, only to have his wife bitch at him and the kids scream. His home life showed his position. The wife knew her place and, even when she was right, she only let on with a sarcastic smile.

"Mr. Statilini, I have a message for you." A cute little blond looked up at him from the counter. "You need to call Sally's cell phone immediately."

He took the number along with his collection of carbons of tiny print forms he'd just signed. His next stop was E nine, where his vehicle waited. Another bit of traveling tedium which drove him mad. It seemed to take forever before he was able to find the E aisle and walk down the white painted numbers to his sedan.

He'd kept his cell off during the flight, but always checked in. It was rare for Sally to leave him a message, especially for him to call her personally. His heart skipped a beat. What if they'd taken out Amelia? Devin was good but Nick thought he'd delayed his actions a few days. No matter how good the hitter, he never believed anything bad could happen to his little Irish hellhound. His hands began to shake and, for a moment, he thought he was having a heart attack. The life drained from his body, leaving nothing but an old man. He dialed the number.

"Hello?"

"Sally, what's happened?" It felt like a lifetime before she spoke. A few seconds went by with his heart in his throat. He bit his lip trying to wait, listening to nothing. "Sally, are you there?"

“Yes, sir. There’s been an accident.”

An accident, it sounded like a nice way to put things. Someone was dead. Sally had that tone in her voice and, damn it, he felt like he’d died too. Amelia was everything to him. They were closer than family, closer than lovers. They shared some strange bond only people who’d survived hell could share. He was her teacher and maybe he would be blamed for her sins. In another life, she would’ve been a mother, maybe a doctor or some other noble occupation. Instead, he’d turned her into a vile monster, a vampire creeping across the country, removing living beings from the world as if they were no more than rabid dogs, all because they’d disobeyed. Surely he would go to hell for her crimes as well as his own.

He could still remember the first time she’d held a rifle. It was too big for her but Amelia wanted to impress him. She’d fired the gun and it nearly knocked her off her feet. Amelia tried to act tough, though, even at the earliest age. She knew she had to be better than everyone else to survive.

My poor Amelia, the thought circulated through his mind. He could still see the child hiding behind the chair in her father’s living room. She’d known who was responsible for her father’s death and she knew who had caused her own.

“There’s been an explosion on the tenth floor. It took out the private records room, your office and several sections of the main hallways. I’m afraid Carl can’t be found. Somebody saw him heading to your office before the explosion. I’m sorry, sir.”

Nick had been lost in his grief and almost didn’t comprehend Sally’s words. An explosion in his building? “Where did it originate?”

“There was a call made just before the explosion saying the records room had been robbed. Phyllis was in there, sir. She was on the phone when the place went. So far, they’re pretty sure that’s where it started.”

“The private records room? The one directly below my office?” The safe had records going back before Itam’s origination, back in the days when they were a good old-fashioned mob.

“Yes, sir. I hate to say this, but there’s a rumor circulating.”

Great. A bomb goes off in his building, his brother was dead, now what? “What rumor?”

“They’re saying Amelia did it, sir. Someone claims to have seen her in the building last night.”

“I’ll call you later.”

Nick hung up the phone. Someone took great pains in setting up Amelia. She had no access to the records room and explosives weren’t her style. She was a hands on kind of girl who’d never held an interest in their records. Another thing, she never would’ve risked Phyllis’s life. Somebody had screwed up. Now who was after Amelia?

A worse conclusion came to mind. She was an asset. Someone drove a wedge between Itam and Amelia. Could she have planned all this as a way out? Surely she’d come to him first if she wanted out of the business. He’d told her many times she’d be a better mom than a hunter. He’d also told her no one in a high position could be trusted to leave Itam. She’d fixed two of those problems when a higher up thought a resignation would get them out of their jobs.

They'd been clean kills in an airport parking lot.

Nick shivered and looked around. Parking lots held great possibilities for kills because of easy access to an exit and the victim usually kept busy reading those damn rental forms or some other such nonsense. With plenty of places to hide and moments without a single witness, he'd utilized those spots on many occasions.

What if she decided to work with someone else? He'd never wanted her as an enemy. She might try to tear Itam down from the inside out. Amelia was the one person that could destroy his company.

It wouldn't be impossible for her to gain access to the records room. Phyllis might let her in. Her death was probably an accident. He didn't want to believe Amelia would try to harm him. The bomb was obviously meant to take him out, along with the records room. He'd never been hunted before and the idea alarmed him.

If he'd been on schedule, he would've been in his office all day with meetings. Whoever planned this, had to know his schedule. That didn't leave many people as suspects. He picked up his phone again and called Sally.

"Hello?"

"It's me again. What time did the explosion occur?" "Nine-thirty."

Nick thought for a moment. "Who was scheduled to be in my office at that time?" "Let's see. I think it was Warldoff from the small Seattle firm."

Nick didn't bother saying goodbye. Warldoff had a new diabetic treatment in the works. If it went well, it would retune the system to make insulin production. It would've been like a once a year fix for them and capable of making millions. His own research firm found out the information through an attorney that kept up with their test subjects. Today's talk would've been about a partnership, albeit a forced one.

"Sir, can I help you with something?"

Another neon orange attendee stood next to him speaking. That's when Nick realized he'd been staring at the mid-sized sedan for a long time while trying to figure out the mess he'd gotten into.

"Sir? Is something wrong with the vehicle?"

Yes, something is wrong, he wanted to say. The damn thing was too small and his life was too big. He'd had every opportunity to make a good life for Amelia and it looked like he had to end it and for what. Money? Power? What was her life worth? He could build empires but couldn't protect the one person that mattered the most. Instead, he had to end this, end her.

Nick looked at him, wanting to shake him, wanting someone to blame for this mess. Instead, he shook his head no and got inside his cramped car. He preferred big cars, roomy things he could stretch out in. This would do. He pulled the tag from the rearview mirror, tossed his rental agreement in the passenger's seat, and pulled out of the lot.

He'd had the chance to set Amelia up with his son, Joseph. He'd met Amelia at a family function and fell head over heels for her. The next day, he'd sent Amelia on a job in Texas. No

time for dating. His hitter had to stop a guy before a statement could be given to a grand jury.

How many times had he forced Amelia into jobs? In the beginning, she would've done anything to please Nick and Dad. After Dad's death, she had second thoughts. Nick knew he bore the guilt of keeping her in this lifestyle. He'd embarrassed her with talk of family, the company and memories of a man who'd ruined her life. Of course, in Nick's version, he'd saved her and given her the world.

"How could you turn your back on me?"

He wished he had an answer. Maybe he deserved it. He knew he deserved it but loyalties were loyalties. Nobody attacked his company. If Amelia were involved in any way, she would pay dearly. Itam belonged to him, built by him, and had become his sanctuary. No place in his heart could make up for this transgression. Somebody had to die for this. Itam was more than glass and steel.

* * * *

Joey heard the news while driving along the interstate. He turned off his cell phone and pulled over to the shoulder of the road. It shocked him. There had been nights when he'd fantasized about his father's death. He'd always wanted release from the old man. He imagined he'd start laughing, call Mom and share the joke with her. His father had never been good to Mom. Not that Joey blamed him. Mom was a whore. Still, she was the only one who would appreciate the news.

"Dad's dead." He said the words aloud but it didn't make them any more real. His voice even took on a strange tone, reminding him more of Carl's than his own. "Dad, are you really?"

He'd imagined he would laugh, maybe dance around the room. It wasn't supposed to end like this, though. He wanted Carl dead after he'd proven himself, maybe after taking his place in the company. That would've been better. More ironic or some shit. He wasn't supposed to die as a mistake, not before Nick.

It created a new set of problems. Nick was his uncle but didn't owe him a place in the company. There might not be anything left for him. Nick wasn't a big fan of his work. Joey would've been fired a dozen times by now, if not for his dad.

"Dad, why couldn't you've died after Nick? Things would be so much simpler then. How did this happen?"

Everything Carl had said in their last meeting felt like a premonition. Joey hadn't earned anything in his life, expecting everything to be handed over. What happened now? How could it all fall apart so fast?

Sally wanted to meet him tonight, but now he didn't feel like it. He needed time to grieve, if not for his father, then for the lifestyle he would lose with his death. He couldn't stand her up though. She was smart, a real troublemaker and he'd be wise not to cross her. Too bad other people hadn't learned that lesson. Things might be different for all of them.

He picked up the phone and called Amelia. There was no answer, not that she'd pick up the phone when she saw the number. He'd hoped to hear her voice one more time. She was practically a dead woman but he needed her right now. He needed someone to care.

He started at the beep of her cell's voice mail. "Just thought you'd want to know that Dad's dead. An explosion at Itam killed him. It got that Phyllis chick you liked and about five others. Kathy died and that Morgan guy. I guess that's all I wanted to say to you. Goodbye, Amelia."

There was no telling what she'd do when she got the news. She might realize she was a suspect or she might do something stupid, like show up in New York. At any rate, she would call Nick, just to make sure he was okay.

Joey didn't fully understand alliances. His father had once told him the friends a man chose would make or break him. That was just after Joey had been arrested for shoplifting. Dad wasn't pleased. Joey became an embarrassment and that was being kind.

"To hell with the old man. He shouldn't have been in Nick's office."

Joey pulled back onto the road and floored it. Tonight, he would go to the old man's house. He was the only heir. It all belonged to him anyway. He might even sleep in the old man's bed.

* * * *

Amelia watched the sunset from Max's balcony. The sky filled with beautiful orange and red hues descending behind the mountains. She picked up her cell and turned it on. The message envelope appeared. She hit the numbers and dialed in her pin. That's when the world stopped.

Some moments in time were forever engraved in her memory. The first was a faded still shot of her mother. Next was her father, dying on the living room floor. She'd known who'd really committed the crime, having met him in his mansion so Dad could pick up his money. She knew where to go, who to see and who to point the gun at. Next, she remembered setting the gun down and pissing on her father's memory, betraying it forever. Many murders swam through her head, but after the age of twelve, one constant remained in her life, Itam. It engulfed her, while she learned from Nick "A bomb in Itam." She said the words aloud and wondered about the damage. It couldn't have been much for only five to be killed. "A bomb?"

Phyllis had died. She was part of the place, like the lighting and the smell of copiers. The news had to be wrong. Phyllis couldn't be gone. It just wasn't possible. She seemed eternal, like the bricks that held the place together.

Amelia didn't cry. She couldn't. The wound was too fresh, like a sudden vacuum that left her empty and there had to be something there to let the tears break through. The void managed to suck away the sadness, the tears, and any emotion died in its wake.

Her next thought was of Nick. Part of her wanted him dead. It would be easier. The other part wanted desperately to hear from him, to know he was still among the living.

She picked up the phone and called Cody. He couldn't help. He was as untrustworthy as they came, but she wanted to hear his voice, telling her anything from the mundane world, where bombs didn't go off and people didn't get killed by contract.

"Hello," Cody picked up the phone. "It's me, Amelia."

"Oh." He sounded depressed, even a little irritated. "Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you. You sound like I killed your dog." She reached for the END button but the sound of his voice stopped her.

“No. I’m the one that should be sorry.” He stammered, trying to put his words together. “I just didn’t realize how powerful this Itam Corp was. I did a little snooping and I have to admit, I’m scared.”

“I won’t bother you again.”

“I didn’t say that. In fact, I know this sounds odd, but why don’t you come and stay here for a few days? Whoever’s after you won’t suspect it. I wouldn’t go home, though. You’ve had three break ins and a black car coming by every day, just to see if anything is out of place.”

“Oh shit. I hoped they’d steer clear once I’d left. Let me know if they bother you.”

“I think I’m bothering them more than they’re bothering me. I keep moving things around on your property when nobody’s watching. It’s driving them crazy. Last night, I left two lights on just to mess with them.”

She had to laugh. That boyish charm showed through again. “Don’t get caught in there. They’ll do bad things to you, bucko.”

“I won’t get caught. I’ve rigged your front light to come on with a timer. It clicks on at midnight and shuts off at six a.m. I don’t think I’ll be going in there tonight, though. One guy stopped by to ask about my missing neighbor. You’d be proud. I lied like a pro. Told them that you’d taken off and mentioned something about Canada.”

“You’re amazing.”

“Does that mean you’ll come stay with me? Or better yet, this assignment will be over soon. I’ve got a great little place in Knoxville. Nobody could track you there.”

“Shit. Your phone might be bugged.”

“Relax. I’m an investigator. I’ve already checked for bugs. I’ve got a light rigged to my phone. If an extra line taps in, the light turns red. I’ve also stopped using the cordless phone. Those are too easy.”

He couldn’t be for real. “Ever thought about switching sides?” “Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“I can’t be on here long. I just wanted to tell you to be extra careful. There’s been an accident at Itam. People got killed. Anyway, I’m a suspect. They’ll be on me harder.”

“Are you telling me I should leave town?”

“It’s not a bad idea.” It was amazing they hadn’t already tracked him. He’d signed for a package. Anyone could track the package and get his name. From there, he would be an easy mark.

“Fair enough. I’ll be out of here tonight. I’ll call you when I hit Tennessee.” He didn’t sound excited. “Hey, I’ll be on the road. I can swing by wherever you’re at and have a visit.”

“North Carolina is on the way.” She laughed, feeling the load come off her shoulders. Somehow, he made her feel better.

“Then I’ll call you when I hit,” he paused. “That’s a big state. Can you give me the name of a

city?"

"Asheville."

"I'll see you in Asheville tomorrow. Don't plan any dates and blow me off."

"You either."

Cody, she hadn't heard that name in a long time. The name almost sounded like a hero. It rolled easily off the tongue, as if just saying it would make him appear. If she whispered it, would he know?

"What are you thinking about?" Max walked up carrying a glass of ice tea. He handed it to her and sat down. "It's my special blend. Try it."

She took a sip and tasted the liquor. "Since when do you drink?"

"Now and again I enjoy a drink. Nothing major." He stretched and looked at the sky slowly changing into night. "Tom is coming by again tonight. I thought we'd order Chinese or something and eat here."

Tom again. She was starting to hate the good doc already. "Oh, shoot. I've got plans."

"Plans?" Max raised an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry. It's getting so late, I didn't think you guys had arranged anything special. I'm meeting a friend in town and eating with him."

"Him, huh? Why don't I believe you?"

"I have no idea." She took another sip of her tea, trying to end the conversation. "Who is he?"

She thought about the impending lie. Cody wouldn't be in until tomorrow. "Devin. He's a colleague I used to work with a few years ago. He phoned to say he was on his way to the coast and wanted us to get together. Turns out he was passing through this area too."

"Why don't you bring him by here afterwards for coffee? I'd like to meet anyone you've worked with."

"I don't think you believe me."

"I'll believe what you really want me to believe, but you and I both know you keep a lot of secrets." He winked mischievously.

If she didn't do something, they'd force Tom on her. By now, they'd probably planned the wedding and named the kids. If Tom became annoyed at their attempts, he never let on. He'd tried continuously to get her alone last night. Tonight would only be worse.

Devin might not go for a meeting, though. He wasn't an overly outgoing person, although she'd try anything to get Tom off her back.

"I'll bring Devin by. It will probably be pretty late."

"No problem. I don't mind waiting up." He smiled like he'd busted her. "Besides, with this late dinner, I'm sure nobody will be ready for bed too soon." Max looked at his watch. "In fact, Tom

should be here any minute.”

“I’d hate to miss him but I’d better get going. I wouldn’t want to keep Devin waiting.” She handed her tea back to Max.

“I’m sure.”

She tried to smile at Max but she already felt like she’d stayed too long. What a set up. The bad girl gets with a naïve doctor and settles down, only to have her past come back and get them all killed. How poetic?

Amelia sprinted to her room and grabbed her purse. She got in her car and pulled out, just as Tom appeared on the road. Thirty more seconds, and she would’ve had to speak to him. She looked straight ahead and drove away without ever acknowledging him. Max could do her explaining. That’s what he deserved for playing cupid.

At almost eight o’clock, a little late for dinner, she headed down the tunnel and into Oteen and The Village Grill. They had a sub that couldn’t be compared to anything in New York or any of the dozen places she’d visited on the east coast. It was a tiny place with no atmosphere but with the food, they didn’t need the dim lights or frou-frou decor.

The small parking stayed packed. She parked in front of the dumpsters.

Dumpsters were great things. Twice, she and a colleague had dumped bodies in them. For fun, Nick tracked the investigation, giving her copies of the paperwork turned in by the cops. Needless to say, the investigation went cold after a profiler decided it was a black man in his mid-forties.

Amelia preferred leaving the bodies in the homes. It was easier for all involved. The families didn’t have to wonder what happened and the cops didn’t have to work through fingerprints or missing person’s reports to find their identity.

She went inside and stood at the door for a minute. This was the life. People were huddled at the bar in the back. Two TVs were on but the sound was down. Apparently, there were no big games to watch. The main section had three rows of tables with the last two containing booths. Families ate, couples gazed into each other’s eyes, and everywhere life, the clamor, and the messy-nice side of things.

“Can I help you?” A twenty-year old stood at the register. They didn’t have a real hostess here, just a chick that pointed to a table and took the money.

“I’d like an order to go. I want the turkey club and an order of wings. Can you throw in four beers with that?”

“Sure. What size sub do you want?”

“Large.” Amelia wasn’t sure if Devin would eat before their meeting, but maybe it would help get him to Max’s house if she bribed him a little.

After thirty minutes, the order was ready and Amelia got back on the road. It was a long time before her meeting but, if memory served, Devin always showed up thirty minutes or more before meeting anyone just to watch.

Amelia pulled into Riverside Park. It was closed at this time of night. She drove by a ranger locking the main gate, so she circled along a side road. She parked in a little pull off. After a small walk to a narrow stream, she entered the park.

She got out of the car and listened. Everything in life made an impact, a noise, smell, or impression. Once she'd found a man by his cologne. Okay, it was really loud cologne, but she still found him by it.

Tonight, the park stayed quiet. The wind rustled the leaves. From a distance came traffic noises from the nearby overpass, but no sounds of people. She started to think Devin hadn't arrived.

"An hour early? Couldn't stay away from me, huh?"

It was too dark to see much of anything but she knew the voice and followed it to the shadowy figure. Devin sat at the base of the tree near the main path into the park. The sky wasn't pitch black yet, but an encompassing gray that sucked up the light before it reached the earth.

"You eat yet?" Amelia shook the white paper bag at the shadowy form and stepped closer until she could see his face.

"No." He didn't look at the bag, but let his eyes roam over her body.

She felt an odd surge rushing through her. Devin had never looked at her so intimately before. She'd never felt eyes so close to a touch before.

"Good," she managed and sat next to him.

"Nothing personal, but I don't want to eat what I can't see. Let's head back to my car."

She started to get up, then stopped. "You're not going to kidnap me or anything, are you?"

He leaned in close, finding the tingly spot at her ear. "Only if you want me to." She shuddered and hoped he didn't notice. Maybe she did want him to kidnap her, take her away from all this madness. Of course, anything he said had a seductive edge.

He helped her to her feet and they went back out. He'd switched cars. This round, he drove an old Jeep. He opened the door for her and went around. Next, he clicked on the key just enough for some bad pop tunes to fill the vehicle.

"Complete with dinner music. What are we having anyway?"

She handed him a beer. He set it on the dash. "Wings and subs, of course. Isn't that proper guy food?"

"Why? Are you hiding a penis under there?" He touched her thigh playfully, sending a surge of heat up her leg.

"Funny." She slapped his hand. They'd always been very flirty with each other. She shouldn't believe the kiss from last night had changed anything. "Why, did you need to see what one looked like?"

He shook his head. "Always the smart ass."

They started eating, making her grateful for the dim light emitted by the dash. Subs were messy and staring at each other through quiet chewing while sauce dripped down their chin wouldn't help matters. One of them should be talking anyway.

"Found out anything?" It sounded like a reasonable question, although she doubted he knew more than she did.

"I know the building had an explosion. I also know if you were still in good graces, you might be second-in-command right now. That Joey isn't worth his weight in piss." He seemed to take pride in knocking her old boyfriend.

"Got any idea about who's setting me up?" She tried to keep focused but his cologne filled her senses. She breathed in deeply, feeling him in the air around her.

"Sort of, but I don't know enough to give you an easy answer."

His matter of fact tone woke her from her desire. "What the hell does that mean?" "My guy said someone kept in contact with another branch down in Sarasota.

Itam took them over about five years ago. I think they were called The Goodworks Company. Ring any bells?"

"Not really. I don't handle the business aspects." She'd never even filed paperwork. In some ways, she envied the secretaries busily typing on their PC's. They probably knew more about Itam than she did.

"I don't have all the answers, but it shouldn't take long." He reached over and put his hand back on her thigh. "I'm doing the best I can for you."

Their eyes locked for a moment in the darkness. Amelia almost asked him to remove his hand from her leg, but she couldn't make the words come out. Instead, she found herself leaning closer, hoping his hand would run up her thigh. She shouldn't want him. Her body felt on fire, hoping and waiting for him to touch her, but too afraid to make a move on him. She hadn't had many lovers, despite her brazen actions. She was taught early that her body was as much of a weapon as her gun, which made modesty a weakness.

Still, she didn't feel brazen around Devin. Certainly no one had made her pulse race the way he did. Devin pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear.

"Do you like me, Amelia?" His voice was liquid darkness surrounding her in an intoxicating spell. "Tell me. Do you like me?"

She wanted to be a smart-ass and say hell no but her mind wouldn't work. She nodded against his hand, yes. Trying to speak just then would let him know how much she wanted him, even needed him.

His lips traced her forehead. "That's good." His hand inched its way up her thigh until a small moan made it past her lips. "Very, very good."

She reached down and stopped his hand. He lifted it to his mouth and kissed her knuckles softly. Devin took her fingertips and caressed his mouth.

"I want you to like me. If you'll give me the chance, I'm sure you will." He kissed her wrist then

pulled her closer. "I've waited a long time for a chance with you. When we worked together, you were seeing Joey off and on. So I waited."

"I was never serious about Joey."

"I know, but I wasn't sure you could be serious about anyone then." He touched the side of her neck. "You're one twisted little lady."

The moment vanished, making her eyes water. "Gee, you sure know how to sweet talk a girl." She pulled away, knowing what he'd said rang true. She wasn't sure how to get close to people. Her training hadn't included social skills beyond flirting to get her what she wanted. "It is probably best for you to keep your distance from me."

"Don't be cross." His hand held hers again. "Sometimes, I'm a little too honest." "You managed to keep secrets on our last job."

"If I'd told you how I felt, what would've happened? Would it have turned into something?" His mouth came too close, violating her with soft touches.

"Definitely," she tried to sound strong but everything melted into him. "Couldn't you tell I was attracted to you?"

"I want more than your body, my dear. Although I believe that would be a nice place to start."

He shifted his eyes, watching her with an intensity that made her shiver. Then, without warning, he grabbed her by the back of her head and put his mouth on hers. At first, she resisted but it was pointless. His body demanded her full attention. She moaned softly, lost in his embrace. He pulled away, finishing the kiss. His hands remained on her, one at her cheek, the other left her back and held her hand.

"Not yet. Not here." His words were breathless as if he tried to convince himself to wait. "This is too important for the inside of a Jeep."

Amelia couldn't respond. Her body was on fire, preventing thought and reason. She sat back in her seat, waiting for the fog in her mind to clear.

"I'm not ready for this." Amelia finally managed. Somehow, she knew having sex with him would mean more than anything in the world. It was like she'd never really made love before and when she did, she would never be the same.

As if sensing her fears, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "Don't be afraid of me." He pulled back and rubbed his hands over his face.

The two professionals were too engrossed in their conversation to notice headlights pulling up behind. They'd been found. Even the shutting of the car door and his footsteps to the passenger side of the Jeep went unnoticed. Devin was in the middle of making a move on Amelia. He leaned in too close, caught in the act. A little noise grabbed their attention, the sound Nick made when he cocked his gun and prepared to fire.

* * * *

Nick was glad he'd put a trace on Devin's cell. An hour ago a call came through stating he would be meeting the lamb at the park at ten o'clock. He hoped it wasn't Amelia. Things didn't

look good though. If she had teamed up with Devin, then she had no loyalty and the two best in the business were after his company.

He swung around the river. It was nine-thirty. His headlights found the after hours parking and his heart sunk. There sat Amelia's car.

Don't jump to conclusions, he reminded himself. There could be a logical explanation. Perhaps she was going to kill Devin before he went after her again. That was it. The two of them weren't plotting to take over Itam.

There was a closer parking spot, but even at a distance, Amelia had probably spotted his headlights. She might try to kill him. Facing her gun had always been one of his worst fears. When she was a teenager, he had nightmares about it. She would creep up on him while he was sleeping. She'd want revenge for her father. It would be a quick death. He would wake and die simultaneously as the trigger was pulled.

Nick got out of the car. It had been a long time since he'd been on a hit. He shut the car door too loudly. Even his footsteps seemed to echo, scream his presence in the night. Everything was trying to tell Amelia he'd arrived. Give her a warning.

It was unthinkable. He crept up, praying Amelia wasn't running against him. Praying this was all a mistake or a dream. Part of him even prayed he hadn't taken out her father and started this entire chain of events. It would've been better to love her from afar and let her live a normal life.

Damn it, there she was. She wasn't waiting to kill him. Devin and Amelia were talking like old friends or maybe something more. He shut his eyes and reopened them. His worst fears were realized. Not only had he created a killer, but an ambitious one. He didn't slow his footsteps or try to mask his presence. Let the twigs snap and the leaves crunch. It would be better if she knew he was coming and better if she put him out of his misery.

Maybe it wasn't her after all. The people in the car didn't move. Their heads stayed close together as if they were lovers instead of business associates. It would be sweet if he startled two lovers.

He approached the side of the Jeep. There was one streetlight just to the side of where it was parked. Its light shined a little through the window and he saw that unforgettable red hair.

Rage went through his body. He felt the vein on his forehead pulse. Tears of rage filled his eyes while his hand gripped his pistol. "Amelia," he whispered. A cold sweat covered his body, as if he were already looking at a ghost.

He shuttered and raised his gun, cocking it as he went. Their eyes met. Amelia smiled at first, then registered the gun. It went too fast but he could've sworn there was a tear in her eye. His finger applied pressure to the trigger. He wished there could've been another way. He wished he didn't have to splatter her brains across the front seat, but she'd left him no options. He had to watch her die. For a moment, she looked twelve again. Those green eyes, innocent and sweet watched him. He shut his eyes and pulled the trigger.

* * * *

Joey opened the door to his father's mansion. The funeral was planned for tomorrow. Sally

saw to every detail. She was wonderful, he supposed. At least she told him so and went so far as to mention marriage.

Marriage? He could only imagine their children. The ambition from her genetic pool would be terrifying. He couldn't run around any more. Not that many wives would permit it but she had the means to put a stop to anything she wanted.

He'd never considered marrying anyone except for Amelia but that would've been to piss Carl off. Marriage just sounded like the end, a death sentence. He supposed they were pretty much the same thing. Both had a preacher somewhere in it and a long walk that changed everything. Death was even mentioned in the wedding vows.

Joey went to the bar and fixed himself a drink. This place was nice. Nothing like what he and Mom had during his childhood. Eventually, he would share some of the wealth with her. He wasn't sure how much the old boy had, but he imagined it to be in the millions.

He finished off that drink and got another before touring the rest of the house. It had been a while since he'd felt welcome here. He'd visited little in the last two years and never made it beyond the foyer. The lack of hospitality was to hide any new treasure's Dad had acquired. Carl wasn't fond of sharing. The slightest inquiry about money made him go ballistic.

"Well screw you, old man."

He went through the lavish living room and down a hallway to the dining area. Next, was a kitchen with two refrigerators. Weird since the guy lived alone. How much could one old dude eat?

After making a loop, he came back to the staircase. He'd been up this thing one time when Dad first got the place. It was nice, carpeted. Joey felt thick carpet was a sign of class and carpeting was everywhere, except for the kitchen.

The banister was high gloss that almost looked like plastic, except Joey was fairly certain it was wood. He topped the stairs and saw five doors facing him. The first was a linen closet. Next came a bathroom, very nice with a whirlpool.

Behind another door was an office. Joey went through it, hoping to find a stash of money. No such luck. The office seemed to be just for show. There was a heavy desk with very little inside. Pens sat in holders on the desk but they were dusty. Books lined one wall. At first, they were impressive. Upon closer inspection, Joey found a haphazard collection, as if Dad bought the books by the pound and stuck them in the shelves. There were even two volumes from a set of encyclopedias.

The last two doors were bedrooms. The first had to be for company because it had nothing in any of the drawers. The last room though, that was a gold mine.

He opened the door on a four-post king size bed. The room was done in crimson against a dark wood paneling. There was a private bathroom off to the side and a huge walk-in closet. Joey took a running jump and landed in the middle of the bed, bouncing slightly and coming to rest in the center. This was the life.

There was nothing to stop him now. He'd guilt Nick into keeping him. He had no father. The death happened in the company. That had to be worth something. Besides, Nick might want to

keep him around just to shut him up.

Evidence. He should've gathered evidence on Itam all these years. He wasn't dumb enough to blackmail them, but a security box with a little insurance might save his life. Nick wouldn't have his nephew killed. Would he?

He rolled over and saw a picture next to the bed. It was of him on his Dad's shoulders. He must've been seven years old or so. A day when Carl had loved Joey, it had existed. It felt like a lifetime ago, but there was a photo as proof.

Mom had been the one to start the wedge between them. He remembered how she'd go on about money and what Carl owed her. Mom taught the lessons about money. Once, she took him to a swank New York department store. Joey couldn't remember the name of it. They were dressed poor and treated like shit. The next day, they went in dressed nice. Everything was fine then. Superficial things mattered most. Dad didn't agree. He never agreed with her but Mom had the proof. All Dad had was a big bank account he wasn't sharing. He wanted them to be trash.

Joey picked up the photo. The smile on both their faces looked genuine enough. Love, it was the only reason Carl had put up with so much of Joey's shit over the years.

Joey felt it too. He'd never told the old man he shared the sentiment, hell he didn't even realize it until today.

"Well, maybe you had a heart after all." He set the photo down and wiped a tear from his eye. "Enough emotion. It's time to get moving."

He rubbed his lips and started searching. The old man would've kept it close. Greedy bastards usually had their money nearby. Joey started pulling pictures off the walls and opening drawers. There had to be a safe somewhere with money inside. He dug through the closets, checked behind the shoe rack and even pulled the curtains away from the windows. After an hour, he slumped next to the bed discouraged. That's when his hand landed on something. A large fireproof box had been stuck under the bed. He slid it out and found the box unlocked.

"Finally."

He felt the cold metal, the anticipation, the hunger as he flung open the lid and gazed inside. Sally had laughed at him for coming here. She'd considered it another wasted effort. He'd show her. He'd take her out somewhere fancy tonight and brag like hell.

In the box sat stacks of papers. He tossed those aside and found a life insurance policy naming his mother as beneficiary. It was twenty years old and in the amount of fifty thousand dollars. A few other documents littered the stack but none of it mattered to Joey. In the bottom clunked his mother's diamond engagement ring. The one she returned when she broke up with Carl. No money, no treasure hidden away for him to find.

"Damn. Sally was right. I hate it when she's right." In fact, she was always right.

She'd warned him rich men kept things in banks and at accountants. He hadn't believed her. He was convinced there would be a little stash, maybe not much, but enough to get him through the will reading. His father had left him to his own devices.

He should've listened to Sally from the beginning. She told him how things would happen. From the moment they met, she'd made it clear she was more than a secretary. She'd even boasted that the difference between a rich man and a pauper was a good woman. Maybe good wasn't the right word. Joey didn't want a good woman. He wanted someone that could get the job done. A man needed a smart woman, someone to guide them from behind the scenes. Maybe with her, he could accomplish the things Dad never could.

"Marriage," he whispered the dirty word again. Sally would stand by him if she were his wife. He needed someone right now. She also seemed to have a decent bank account of her own. It would come in handy.

He picked up the phone from next to the bed and dialed Sally's number. She was devious, sure, but at least she'd didn't make a living blowing people's brains out. Sally could be a mother. She could pull off that whole Susie homemaker crap. She might even be able to keep him in line.

I'm smart. Maybe all I need is someone to take care of me.

"Hello?" Her voice was business tone sterile. She was working on something. Hell, she always worked on something.

"Hi, Sally. It's me." He held the diamond ring in his hand. This might be the biggest mistake of his life, or it might make him into a great man. "I've got something for you."

* * * *

Amelia registered the sound of a gun and turned to see Nick. At first, relief filled her to see him alive and she almost hugged him. She wanted Nick to tell her everything was all right and she could come home, then she saw the gun pointed at her head.

As smart as Nick was, he wasn't an experienced hitter anymore. He stood too close to his target. She reached down with her free hand and opened the car door, nailing Nick in the stomach while grabbing the gun. The air went out of him as he fired. It grazed the top of the Jeep, just missing her head.

She stared at him for a minute, lying on the ground trying to catch his breath. It would've been an easy kill. Her gun was in her hand, although she hadn't remembered reaching for it when she got out of the car. She held it up as his head turned. His right hand groped on the ground for his pistol.

"Please don't do this." She pleaded. "Please, Nick."

His hand kept going, but she couldn't fire. She threw her gun into the Jeep and started running. That should've ended it. He shouldn't want her dead after she'd let him live, but he got up and went after her. Their business knew no mercy.

She heard his footsteps and the sound made her cry. It was a terrible feeling, knowing the man she'd thought of as a father, a brother, wanted her dead. She ran, half blinded by tears and darkness. The path was ragged, causing her to fall several times. Finally, a low-lying branch whacked her across the forehead, sending her to the ground.

"You traitorous whore!" Nick came down on her quickly. She couldn't see him, only hear the

boom of his voice and the labored breathing from a hard run. "You won't take over my company."

She could've gotten up and ran but she was tired of this mess, tired of being considered a traitor, and tired of living. It was easier to wait for a bullet years overdue.

When Nick caught up to her, she sat on the ground waiting for him. His foot touched hers. She didn't look up to face him. The time had come for this to end.

Then the gun went off causing Amelia's body to shudder. The bullet was spent, the damage done. Then like a heavy sack, Nick's body fell on top of her. She felt the wet drops of his blood on her face.

"Are you okay?" Devin asked as he rolled Nick off her.

She didn't say anything. Only lie there and tried to regain her composure. He'd been her world. Sure, Max was blood family but the dead man on the ground had given her purpose, a reason to go on after her father's death. Perhaps he should've killed her. Death seemed eighteen years late. If she could go back in time, she wouldn't have hid behind the chair in the living room watching Dad die. She would've screamed, "You forgot one."

"Give me your hand." Devin reached down and pulled her to her feet. "We need to get out of here before the cops show up."

"I can't believe it," she whispered.

"Me either. You nearly got yourself killed."

"It's over." She started to slump back to the ground next to Nick but Devin pulled her up against him.

"Honey, it's only begun." His eyes locked with hers. "Do you really think the person that started all this is going to let you live now? If you ask me, someone played Nick. They found the one person who could push his buttons, the one person he'd go after personally. You'd be forced into killing him. Now you've got to go. Instead of just Itam after you, every corporation in his alliance will be after you. Even if Itam insists this is dropped, there are three other companies that think you offed their bosses."

Amelia didn't say a word. He was right. This smelled like a set up from the get go. Whoever planned this had arranged for the death of both bosses and her demise as well. Joey would've been her first suspect, except it was too well planned. Not to mention, he had nothing to gain with Carl dying first. It didn't make sense.

They went back to the Jeep. He brought her around to her car, then made her promise to follow him back to his hotel. She didn't argue. Arguing was too hard. Besides, she didn't want to face Max with his doctor friend.

Devin pulled in at a run down dump called The Blackbird Motel. It hadn't seen a coat of paint in ten years and from the litter of beer cans and condom wrappers, it wasn't exactly a family place.

He pulled around the back of the building in front of room number seven. She parked next to him and waited for him to motion her out of her car. She followed him inside the tiny room with

the cracked plaster and clean spot where a painting used to hang.

“Why in the world would you get a room here?”

“They don’t check ID and I’ve been a little jumpy lately. It seems there are eyes looking for you everywhere, maybe even for me now.” He set his cell phone on the table, along with his car keys and a small map of Asheville. “Did you know there’s a new guy calling me? Someone Carl put in charge of finding you.”

“Really?” That wasn’t standard protocol. Only certain people handled hits.

“Seems you’re supposed to be at the River Plaza tomorrow evening. They even had a room number for me, twenty-seven. I’m supposed to bust in, shoot you and leave a witness. Me, leave witnesses?” He laughed. “I’m to get a huge bonus. The message stated Nick was getting antsy about your death. I guess he’s not getting antsy anymore.” Devin pulled off his shirt and slung it on the floor. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to shower up. Will you wait ’til I get out?”

“Sure.” She wasn’t sure what she waited on, but it was nice to have a few minutes to herself. How did Nick know she was with Devin? Devin could build quite a company if he forced her into a partnership. They’d easily take Itam and the other companies trying to reconfigure after the CEO’s deaths.

She sat perfectly still until she heard the water cut on. Next, she had to find his cell phone. It was by the bathroom door but seemed to vanish for the longest time. She’d almost given up the search when she saw the little black box. She grabbed it and started going through the memory. There were several calls from Itam but the most recent one caught her attention. She checked the date and time.

“What are you doing?” Devin stood at the bathroom door with a towel around his waist. The water was still running.

“You left the water running.” She looked up but kept from jumping, despite the sight of the muscular man barely covered in a hotel towel.

“I wanted to see if you were going through my stuff.” He leaned back in the bathroom and cut the shower off.

“Glad I didn’t disappoint you.” She had no proof who the odd number was from but she knew the area code. It was Tennessee and she only knew one guy that mentioned Tennessee.

He sat on the bed next to her. “So what do you know I don’t?”

“Be real quiet and I’ll tell you.” She dialed the number on her cell phone. “Hello,” answered a familiar voice.

She smiled but she felt like climbing through the phone and ringing his lying asshole neck. “Cody, hi, it’s Amelia.”

There was a noticeable problem on his end of the line. “I...” He stuttered, then took a deep breath. “I didn’t realize you had my cell number.”

“You gave it to me the first night we spoke by phone. Don’t you remember?” She gritted her

teeth. "Is there a problem?"

"Oh. I guess it slipped my mind." He fumbled for words as if trying to remember. "What's up?"

"Are you on your way? I can't wait to see you." She hid her rage well, letting her words drip with soft, feminine qualities.

"Yes." He hesitated again. "I just dropped Pete off at his grandmother's house. I thought maybe we could have some time alone."

Alone. He'd like time alone to set up the kill. "I'd like that. Do you know where you're staying yet?"

"I haven't really decided. Maybe the Comfort Inn, or if I'm really feeling luxurious, the River Plaza."

Something told her he already had the room number picked out. "I like the Plaza."

"Okay. Sounds good to me." "I can't wait to see you."

She hung up with contempt in her eyes. She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid. The guy trying to set her up was at her beach house. She'd been easy.

"Who's Cody?" Devin smiled but it looked like a poor attempt.

"A guy I mistook for being Mr. Right." She laughed hysterically. "I've been calling him. I can't believe I trusted him." She threw the cell phone onto the bed. "I wonder who he really is."

"Maybe his phone is just bugged." He looked at her but she didn't reply. "Lovers?"

"Jealous?" She leaned back on the bed but Devin didn't respond. "No, we weren't lovers. We did some flirting. You know how it goes when you're trying to stay alive.

He's one of those clean-cut guys. I thought he was an investigator." She huffed, shaking her head sadly. "My taste in men certainly sucks."

She looked at him intently, wondering why she couldn't get Devin out of her head. Even when she'd been with Joey, it was Devin who filled her thoughts.

"I'm sorry for being a little jealous," Devin shut his eyes, then refocused on her. "You really shouldn't blame me though."

"I don't have a lot of experience in dating. A lot of guys have seen me naked, but those I shot. As for lovers, those have been few and far between. None of them were serious. I was hoping Cody was a nice guy. You know. I wanted to find a good guy to date, instead of a Joey."

"Maybe you should quit looking so hard." He slid up on the bed, letting his towel fall to the side. "You've been through punks, doctors, and now a lowlife trying to get you killed." He came close to her ear. "I think you should stick to your own kind."

She turned her head and their lips met. His hands were gentle as he undressed her. She looked into his eyes and knew she wanted this to happen. The last ounce of fear drifted away as he pulled her shirt off and tossed it.

"I've always wanted you, Devin."

His lips pressed against her neck as he unfastened her pants. Together, they removed her jeans, exposing her lace panties.

Her bra vanished as his mouth found hers again, delicately probing for her response. Desire took hold, making her breath come hard and fast. He didn't rush. He wasn't there purely for himself. His eyes studied her face thoughtfully as she reached for him.

The smell of Ivory soap tinged the air just above his skin. She felt her hunger rise. The feel of his flesh beneath her fingertips urged her. He mounted her, touching her curves, memorizing the landscape of her body. It was intoxicating.

Doing this wasn't climbing out of this lifestyle like she wanted. She should be with the doctor but damn it, she needed this here and now. This was the man she wanted, maybe the only man she'd ever wanted.

He kissed her throat, letting his hands roam. His touch was light, almost tickling as he caressed her breasts, her thighs. A moan escaped her lips and seemed to excite him. She arched against his touch, wanting more, needing more.

The weight of him was superb, pinning her against the bed and forcing her thighs open. His flesh rubbed against hers and she whimpered while his mouth took one nipple between his lips, and then turned his attention to the other. Carefully, his fingers searched below, making her body jerk.

"Please," she moaned.

He smiled and nudged against her. This was the moment she'd dreamed of, becoming his. Her body quaked as he entered her. With the second thrust, he stopped being gentle. His animalistic instincts took over. He pressed inward as if he wanted to hurt her. Each thrust was harder. He placed his hands firmly on her hips, not letting her gain an inch from him. She sunk her nails into his back at the first wave. She didn't want him to stop, she wanted him, wanted her body to remember him tomorrow. She wanted bruised thighs and to be sore. She wanted more.

Ten minutes later, he slowed, fighting his orgasm. Sweat dripped from his brow to her chest. She squeezed him inward with her legs, feeling helpless in his arms and agonizing for a little control. His body shook and hers joined him as the world exploded around them. It was too much, too fast. She couldn't stop. He buried his face in her neck as his body hammered hers again. A single growling grunt and he collapsed.

She brushed his hair from her face, but didn't roll him away. Instead, she petted the back of his head and felt his breath on her skin. The room was quiet and she realized she was still breathing hard.

"I love you," he whispered.

Tears stung her eyes. She turned her head and kissed the side of his face. He leaned up on his elbows and pulled out. A tear escaped and ran down her cheek. He caught it, wiping it away.

"You don't have to love me. It's okay." Devin kissed her cheek. "Really." "Can I stay with you tonight?"

“Of course.”

They slid beneath the covers. The room was dark, except for the muted television. The only sound came from the hum of the air conditioner. She cuddled against his body and dozed off.

At four in the morning, the ringing of his cell phone woke them both. He grabbed it and spoke quietly. It was about her. He had been hired to do a job, to be her murderer.

“Who was it?”

“I think it was your boyfriend, Cody.” He laughed but noticed she didn’t share the joke. “It was my contact verifying the hit for tonight.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” She half punched his shoulder.

“Well, not anymore.” Devin climbed back into bed. “You know, I had a dream I got you pregnant.” He patted her belly.

“That’s the least of your worries.” She looked at him lying in bed next to her. She did love him, in fact, she always had.

“A kid might calm your ass down a little bit.” Devin brushed the hair from her cheek. “Maybe I could convince you to bounce babies and bake cookies. That sort of thing might be nice, instead of hunting people.”

“It would be nice to live a normal life.” She sighed as she thought of it. “I don’t see how it could be possible. Could you work a nine to five job?”

“I’m not a cold hearted person, Amelia.” He shook his head sadly. “It’s hard to get out once you’re in. I can either kick myself, wishing I had chosen another path, or be happy with what I am.” He looked at her harshly. “You should stop trying to look to a man for acceptance and accept the one next to you. I’m not so bad, maybe not nine to five, but not horrible.”

“I never said you were.” She gave him a soft kiss, grazing his lips. “I just feel trapped.” She rolled back onto her pillow. “Part of me really wants out. Even if it were possible, I don’t know what I’d do. I’m not exactly trained for anything.”

“Let’s handle one problem at a time.”

She smiled at him. “You have to decide how to get around killing me without pissing anybody off.” She paused, thinking about it. “You aren’t going to kill me, are you?”

He sneered as if considering it. “There are too many other things I want to do to you.” His fingers reached out, touching the lines of her body. He touched her cheek, and then tickled her lips. He didn’t hold her close as if wanting to watch her react to him. He pushed the covers away from her naked body and caressed her. She leaned up to touch him but he put one strong hand on her chest and shook his head no.

One hand went to her breasts, teasing her nipples. He slid between her thighs while she trembled. His touches were soft, light. He took both of her hands in one of his and pushed them over her head. When she squirmed against him, he stood, going to the blinds over the window and pulling a cord free. She barely fought when he tied her hands.

“I want to explore you.” Devin eyed his prize. “I think you need to be out of control for a while. See what it feels like to enjoy.”

“Is this how you intend to tame me?”

He didn't answer. It thrilled and terrified her to be completely under his power. She wanted him to have his way, but this was something she'd never experienced. There was no question. He could do anything he wanted to her.

Torture seemed like a kind description for the desire which swelled inside her. He kissed and licked, exploring every inch of her body. She'd never experienced such ecstasy before, so completely at his mercy. She tried to pull her hands free, wanting to touch him. It wasn't possible. She was his.

Her body arched, responding to every touch of his fingers, every flick of his tongue. She watched him kiss her breasts, tasting her flesh, traveling over her as he took possession.

“You are so beautiful.”

The statement threw her. She considered herself attractive. It was one of the things that kept her alive, but hearing him say it made it real. “Do you really love me?”

“I do. I want you to be mine forever, church, ring, and all. I am madly in love with you.” He straddled her and untied her hands.

Her eyes filled with tears she batted away. She kissed him and felt his energy rising. “I think I'm going to enjoy being hunted by you.”

Devin kissed her neck softly. The feeling of his breath against her skin was maddening. He toyed with her nipples, while she moaned in delight. With playful bites and kisses, he covered her breasts, then moved to her hips.

“Take me,” she sighed.

“Not yet.” He grinned from her navel while placing his fingers on the bud below, toying and flicking until she trembled, coming before he'd begun.

“I have to have you.”

She pushed Devin onto his back, and then climbed on top of him, kissing him while sliding him in place. He didn't fight her, allowing her control. She sat back, watching him as her body moved up and down on him. They locked eyes, feeling things no words could explain as pleasure built and bound them.

He felt her climax rising and put his hands around her waist, pulling her down in rhythm with his body. She cried out as he pushed harder upward, making her collapse on his body.

When she'd finished, he rolled her over. His eyes looked wild and she gave in easily. He leaned down, pressing his face into the pillow next to her ear.

“Sweet little thing.” His voice was deep commanding. “I'm going to make love to you until you can't leave.” His timing was slow, steady. “Can't leave.”

He moaned, then mumbled incoherent phrases about what he was doing and what she

wanted while his rhythm slowly grew, becoming a deep hard motion. His words were lost in a fever. Her body built and released time and again until he was finished. She felt complete for the first time in her life and it scared her to death.

Chapter 9

Darcy sat on the bed in the guest room where Amelia slept. A Fed Ex envelope was in her hand and a gun on the night table. She didn't move when Max came inside, only raised her head to acknowledge him.

"What's wrong?" Max sat on the bed next to her.

"This package came for Amelia. I knocked at her door but she wasn't here. Look what else I found." She pointed at the gun as if it were the devil.

"Amelia travels long distances alone." Max shook his head and put it in the drawer next to the bed. "She needs it for protection."

"People don't carry around this many weapons for protection. I bet her car has a lot more." Darcy opened a zipper compartment on Amelia's suitcase and pulled out another small pistol and a switchblade. Next came a set of brass knuckles with razors on the knuckle plate. Finally, she found a rifle, ready to be assembled for use. "Do you know why she's here on a visit?"

"I would assume to see her brother." Max sat next to Darcy and put his hand on her back. "You need to relax. Not everyone who carries a gun is evil. I even have one in my closet. It's good protection."

"Look what I found in a plastic bag in the bottom of her suitcase." She held up a shirt with dark brown splatters across it. "I don't even think she knew it was in here. I saw her carry this bag in from her car last night. It was in a pile of dirty clothes."

Max stopped rubbing her back and looked at the shirt. "Why were you going through her stuff?"

"I don't think that's an issue." Darcy looked flustered. "If you must know, I was going to do her laundry as a good will gesture. Now it looks like I'm going to call the police."

"Call the police?" He took both her hands in his. "Over a dirty shirt and a gun? You're being neurotic. There's a logical explanation for everything. Let's just wait and see what it is."

She pulled her hands free and began waving them as if she needed them to speak. "Do you remember the bombing on the news last night?"

"Yes?"

"It was a company named Itam. They said the explosion was a diversion to cover a theft." She held up the Fed Ex envelope. "Look at the address label."

He took the package and threw it on the bed. "Coincidence."

"You told me you weren't sure what she does for a living." She lowered her voice. "I think she's involved in industrial espionage."

"You're being ridiculous." He tried approaching Darcy again, but she moved back to the suitcase and other treasures waiting to be uncovered. Neither saw Amelia standing at the door.

“What’s going on here?” The smile Amelia wore faded quickly.

“You can’t get away with this.” Darcy stood and started toward the bedroom door. “I’m going to make a phone call.”

“No you’re not.” Max grabbed her arm and slung her back on the bed. “Amelia, Darcy was going to do your laundry and she came across a few things. I think we’d appreciate it if you gave us an explanation.”

“You want an explanation from me after you were going through my things?” Amelia felt heat rise to her face.

Darcy jumped up indignant. “Come on, a bloody shirt, a gun.” She flipped open her suitcase and the layout from a house fell to the floor. “You show up unexpectedly and what’s this?” She picked up the layout.

“The gun is for protection. The layout is of a home I’m thinking of purchasing and the shirt is evidence.” She thought quickly. “I was assaulted in my home on the Outer Banks. The police were of no help. A friend of mine told me to bring the evidence to them. That’s my friend, Cody. He works for an investigations unit out of Raleigh.” She jerked the shirt out of Darcy’s hands. “I was supposed to keep this sealed in plastic to preserve the evidence.”

“Happy, Darcy?” Max’s voice rose. Amelia had never seen so many veins popping out of his head.

“Sounds odd to me.” She pushed by Amelia.

It would’ve been easy to grab her and snap that whiny neck. Amelia resisted the urge and let her pass. She began packing her things and saw the package on the bed.

“Please don’t go,” started Max. “I’ll talk to her. I think the gun just threw her off. She’s one of those people that believes guns run around killing people by themselves.” The statement made Amelia smile. “I’m sure we can work this out. She’s not usually like this. I don’t know what got into her. Please stop.”

“Darcy is your girlfriend. Don’t ruin it because of me.” She took her things and went to the door with Max right on her heels. “I’ll call you later when she calms down.” She started toward the hallway, then stopped. “At least she won’t be fixing me up anymore.”

Max managed a smile. “Sis, I love you.” “You too.”

Darcy didn’t look up when Amelia passed. There wasn’t a phone in her hand. She was thankful for at least that much. Darcy sat with her foot tapping ninety miles an hour. She didn’t look as angry anymore. In fact, her temper felt fake.

Amelia got in her car. Maybe being with Devin wasn’t such a dumb idea after all. He would never judge her or what she’d done. He was one of the few people she could be honest with and never worry or care if her past came out. She called his cell.

“Good morning.” He sounded happy. “Recognized the number, huh?”

“Of course. Don’t say any names. You’ll never guess what I found this morning, Margaret, a roach, nasty thing. This hotel should clean better.”

“Interesting.” His phone had been bugged. “I’ll call you back from another number.” “Okay.”

They hung up and she waited, driving aimlessly through town. There was something bothering her about that scene at her brother’s. Most people didn’t recognize blood on clothing. It was sloppy to have evidence but that didn’t answer the question of why Darcy went through her things. Laundry? Come on.

She considered the possibilities, replaying the scene in her mind again and again. Darcy wasn’t angry. Women’s eyes tear when they’re angry and hers were clear. Darcy’s reaction denoted more guilt than rage but it might’ve been from opening the suitcase. Why would she freak out over a gun? It was foolish to believe whatever conspiracy was surrounding her was in her brother’s home. Stranger things had happened though. She might have to have a long talk with Darcy when Max wasn’t around.

The cell phone ringing broke her concentration. She looked at the display but didn’t recognize the number. “Hello?”

“It’s me.” Devin soft accent filled her mind.

“I’ve got a problem.” Yes, another one. “I can’t stay at my brother’s anymore. Something odd is going on there.”

“Perfect.”

“Perfect? Not exactly. His girlfriend is acting weird. I think she knows more than she’s saying. She practically called me a hitter. This sucks.” She hit the steering wheel and took a breath to calm down. This was not the time for self-indulgence on her predicament. “I think I’m going to head back to the coast. I got a package from Itam. It looks like Phyllis got something sent out before the place went up.”

“Don’t go back to the coast, at least not yet. I’ll get a different room and we can go over your stuff together. Besides, I’d like to spend some time with you.” His voice grew sexier. “It surprised me when you bolted out of our bed this morning.”

“I’m sorry. Things are just a little wild right now.” “Some things are supposed to be wild.”

That feeling crept into her thighs again. “I need to get my head straight. Things are going to get tricky and I can’t keep screwing up if I’m going to make it.”

“That’s why you need to stay with me.”

She considered it. Staying with her hired killer was a lot more fun than being alone at the beach, but she wasn’t convinced of his intentions. More questions floated around than answers and anyone could be involved. “You talked me into it.”

“Meet me at your favorite hotel, downtown. Find me. I’ll be checked in as,” the sound of him shuffling through his cards, “Edward Rittman. I’ll tell the desk to expect my wife.”

“Your wife? Sleep with you one time and you want a commitment.”

He laughed. “Technically, it was twice, unless you’d prefer me to count it by your orgasms.”

“I’ll be at the hotel in thirty.”

“Just wait for me in the parking lot then. We should be there close to the same time.”

“See you then.”

She hung up and turned around in a church parking lot. During the turn, the package from Phyllis slid off the seat onto the floor. It felt like a prompt from the grave. Phyllis probably wouldn't have been near the records room if it weren't for her. Probably hell, she wouldn't have been. Phyllis always knew Itam would get her killed. She never thought her Amy would be the cause.

Amelia hit the bypass and started toward the cluster of buildings known as downtown. She was hours from meeting Cody with no idea on how to handle the situation. Was he a dumb dupe or out to get her?

Devin filled her thoughts. He was an interesting man with idiosyncrasies bound to get him killed, not that he wasn't good. That man could pull off some incredible hits she wouldn't touch. His attitude made him dangerous though. Invincibility was a necessary belief for anyone in their line of work but with him, it created too many holes. She'd stake out a joint and ease into the kill. He'd just arrive and bang, the mark dropped.

She took a deep breath and started to feel like her old self. Maybe it was analyzing her setup or her present company. Things looked more manageable. The first thing they had to do was handle Cody. If Pete weren't at his grandmother's, she wouldn't be able to pull it off. The maternal thing kept getting to her.

Amelia pulled into the parking lot of the hotel, circled twice, but didn't see Devin's car. Of course, he could've have switched vehicles by now. She found a little shady spot in the back that looked perfect and backed in. Next, she grabbed the package from the seat next to her and ripped it open. Inside were a variety of files from Itam. She thumbed through them and found one with pencil marks on the folder. In very light writing was an asterisk and the words, “very hostile” in Phyllis's handwriting.

Inside were the details of a corporate takeover. Nothing looked familiar, until she saw the picture of the president. She'd killed him five years ago. The company was a small Greensboro based operation. His home she remembered as being very modest. Not many presidents live in three bedroom farmhouses next to a cattle pasture. The man had also lived alone, leaving the only witness a tired black lab.

The files were well organized. Much cleaner than real life, listing an unknown homicide. Three offers to purchase the company had been made while the man lived. One was very generous. The company had been in financial jeopardy but had several interesting projects in the works. According to the file, research on an Alzheimer's medicine looked promising. An interesting chemical equation followed. The section continued on to mention a diet drug. Every company had their special patented one of those.

The research on the company was flawless, including news releases and corporate affiliations. The most interesting notes included the addition of a scientist known for his attempts with cloning tissue for transplant procedures. It was a small operation to have such a world-renowned scientist.

The CEO's were his children. There were two daughters and a son. The vice president was

Camilla Everett, his eldest daughter. Peter Everett held the position of head of research and finally, there was Marcy Everett with a PHD in biology. It was quite an impressive family.

A list of stock purchases followed. Itam owned nearly thirty percent before Conwick Everett's death, not a controlling interest. That must've been why she'd been called in.

Amelia looked up and saw Devin approaching. He pecked on her window, smiling in that ridiculous way. His eyes were lit up like a virgin's on prom night. Surely that smile wouldn't betray her.

"Come on. Our room awaits."

He opened the trunk and took out her suitcase. They walked together to the hotel, his arm wrapped around her waist. They entered the posh lobby and continued to the double set of brass colored elevators. Devin led the way and pushed the button for the fourth floor. She usually didn't stay so high up. In fact, she preferred stairs to elevators. There was something suffocating about the way the doors shut and everyone stood facing one direction waiting for the doors to open, like a mass casket hoping to see the light of day again. It was agonizingly slow. She clutched the files Phyllis had sent to her chest and hoped this man made contraption would open or, at the least, not crash them into the basement.

It stopped twice before their floor, letting off a businessman and an elderly woman. Finally, the number four appeared. The mechanism stopped and, after an agonizing few seconds, the doors opened, exposing a fancy hallway. Devin led her down the hall and opened the door on number four ten.

Devin had gone overboard. There was a large living room and small kitchenette. Amelia pushed open the double doors to expose a king size four-post bed with a Jacuzzi tub a few feet away.

"I hope you don't mind keeping up appearances. I rented one of their honeymoon suites for the week."

She dropped her files on the table, grinned once at him, and pulled open the Everett case. "Work first, my love." "Love?"

"Don't get your panties in a wad. It's just an expression. I guess it's better than calling you a shit head." She pulled out a list of family members. "Phyllis sent this to me before she died. She marked this one in particular. Can you get a background check done on these people? There's a lot of people that might want to do me harm. Let's start with the openly aggressive ones first."

"Let me see." He got out a notepad and wrote down the names.

"This one is from the most recent takeover. We need to research them too. Blair Jefferson, I remember that hit. Bitch wore a wig. Completely threw me off. There's also George Clanden. His brother went down a year ago. The dead guy's son is now an exec at Itam. He never appeared angry. Itam pays him a lot more than he used to make."

Devin thumbed through the files. "You've made a lot of enemies. Lucky for you, few of these people have any idea who was involved."

“I didn’t kill everyone associated in a takeover by Itam. They managed a few brilliant maneuvers and had a few legitimate practices. Not many, but a few.”

“I’ll call these in, but it might take a day or two. Not that I’ll be called off the case anytime soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m supposed to kill you tonight. That’s not going to happen, so they’ll want me to stay in town. I might even need to up my price for all this frustration.”

“I’m going to have to pay Cody a visit.” She pulled her gun out of her waistband and set it on the table. “Maybe he has some answers.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Not as bad as a few of them I’ve had lately.”

“I’ve got an idea right now.” He smiled and leaned closer.

* * * *

Joey knew women were weird about marriage but he had no idea how nutty Sally would be. He was thirty minutes late getting to Sally’s because of the stop at the bar to work up the courage to ask her. It had taken three shots of tequila and a quick Hail Mary before he could attempt it but once there, he’d gotten on one knee and proposed. It wasn’t the most romantic thing he’d ever done. He’d heard of romantic interludes in which the ring was slipped in champagne or presented in front of a roaring fire after making love. His was a blur of her kitchen but it must’ve worked, because next morning, she’d dragged him to the justice of the peace at nine in the morning. No year of planning, no long engagement, no fancy dresses or flowers. Things went quick. It was noon before he realized he was married.

So far, it wasn’t bad. The sex grew wilder with her more passionate than ever. She’d agreed to stay the night in his small apartment and for once, she seemed loving, almost kind. He looked over at her, asleep next to him. She was a voluptuous beauty. Not like the skinny things he used to date. She had ass and breasts to spare. He liked that. It seemed odd for a woman to die her hair black. Most natural blonds were proud. He figured she did it to look more Italian. Italians were treated well at Itam.

Itam was going to be a real beast. The news hit about Nick. His body had been found in a park in Asheville, North Carolina. Amelia had left him to die in the mud. Joey smiled at the thought of the powerful man left to rot in the muck.

Sally was already calling him the boss. It wouldn’t be that easy though. The chain of command didn’t just fall to him. Nick died last, that meant his kids would have first run of things. Then there was Amelia. He doubted she’d been killed. Part of him believed she was eternal, like a vampire existing through the ages, never changing, never growing old, just prowling for the kill. It wouldn’t be long before she came after him. It wouldn’t be long before she came after all of them.

A cold chill crept up his spine. She could be in New York, driving by his house, ready for the kill. She was slick. He’d heard a story where she’d broken into a man’s home and killed him

with his entire family present. Even his wife sleeping in the bed next to him never heard a thing. The police didn't believe it. She claimed to wake up and felt something wet in the bed. She turned on the light and there he was. Blood covered both of them. Her case was on appeal.

Amelia would enjoy killing him. Joey had committed the ultimate sin and left her to die in her home. At least that's all she knew about. He looked around the room as if she might sneak up behind him. He hoped she would be eliminated soon. Even if she didn't try to kill him, he couldn't face her again.

A hit, the hit on Amelia might've been called off now. He wasn't sure if he had the authority to issue a kill. Sally didn't seem concerned though. She'd just smiled and said everything was underway. He hated when she did that. It scared him.

* * * *

Amelia opened the door on Cody's hotel room an hour earlier than their date. She could hear the shower running. Thankfully, there was no sign of Pete. A slim chance existed that Cody wasn't involved. Maybe someone called using a double of his cell number.

She opened a few of the drawers. There was nothing inside, not even a suitcase on the floor. His cell phone lay on the table. She grabbed it and checked the recent calls. There was Devin's number. Whatever conspiracy circled around her, he was directly involved. She popped open the battery and placed a tiny receiver inside.

This had to be handled delicately. She took the gun from her shoulder strap, and brought out her tazer. The water in the bathroom stopped. She pressed against the wall next to the door and waited, feeling her heart slow, body ready. When it opened, she instantly responded, nailing him in the arm. He went down hard, volts surging through his body and making every muscle quake. His eyes rolled back in his head but he didn't pass out.

"Where's Pete?" She sparked the tazer again, knowing he couldn't talk yet. He couldn't even make an expression of surprise. Amelia waited for his eyes to start blinking. She straddled him and sent the blue charges beneath his nose. "Where's Pete?"

"With his grandmother." His breathing was erratic. The smell of singed hair from his body filled the room. She liked that.

"Why did you put a hit out on me?" She got off his body, choosing to kneel next to him in case she had to zap him again.

He didn't say a word. His head flopped on the floor and he shut his eyes. For a second, it looked like he was praying. She'd never seen that before. In all her years of work, no one said a legitimate prayer. There were times they called to God in profanity but nothing serious, nothing real.

"Pete isn't even your son, is he?"

Cody looked up. Something broke through his quiet murmurs. He locked eyes with her. She readied for an assault. Her finger cranked the tazer, sparking a blue arc but he didn't move.

"Yes. He's mine." He coughed and tried to make his voice stronger but it remained frayed from

the shock. "How did you know about the hit?"

"I saw Devin out front. He's setting up. No one knew I was coming here but you." She backed off him and pulled her gun. "Who is ruining my life?"

"Why should you care, after all the lives you've ruined?"

She wouldn't let her mind stray to the sincerity of his words or the truth that lay in them. There would be another time for penance and this punk on the floor wasn't qualified to distribute justice.

She aimed the pistol at his shin. "Answer my questions or this is going to get painful. Again, who is doing this and why?"

"Bitch."

She fired. He screamed. She liked the sound. There was power in it. Not in the sound of the bullet firing. The silencer took care of that. It was that scream, the moment in which she gained control.

"Again, who and why?"

He held his shin. She'd been kind and missed the bone. It was a clean shot, painful but not a bleeder. Her next bullet wouldn't be so nice. She just hoped he spoke before she reached his chest. It would not be a fruitful meeting if she had to use a lung shot. People didn't speak well after one of those. There was also a time limit after a lung collapsed.

"I was going to inherit my father's company. I'm not saying my dad was a gem of a guy, but he was my father. You don't know what it's like losing someone like that, then turning around and getting a job offer from the company that caused his death."

"How do you think I got into this business? I learned early. You live or die. Now choose. Tell me who is doing this and you'll live."

"I don't have much family left." There were tears in his eyes, the same hateful tears of a twelve year old girl that watched her father die. Two different people, two different responses, but the same emotion held them both.

"So it's family members? Better yet, you still have people you care about."

"No," he whispered. "Dad used to take me on picnics. After he started that damn company, everything changed. He didn't have time for us anymore. Everything was the company. I suppose it's fitting the company got him killed."

She didn't have time for his emotional upheaval. "Answer who. You have until the count of three. One."

He was fast. His body was halfway up before she planted another bullet in his thigh. That put him back on the floor, rolling in torment. There was a nasty progression to this game.

"Two. Now tell me who." She waved the gun in front of his face. "It only gets worse from here."

"I hate you."

“Yeah, I sort of guessed.” She moved the gun up and down, letting him see how fast or slow this game could go. “Why did you help me in North Carolina? You could’ve had the cops take me away.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be closely involved. Pete was there, the cops were there and I didn’t have any options. If I had turned you in, we both would’ve been questioned. Besides, I wasn’t sure about things then. Anyway, the hit wasn’t supposed to go down for another day. I was supposed to wire the house for sound and...” His words broke off.

“And what, little man?” Her patience was wearing thin. “I suggest you finish the thought.”

“I was supposed to have a bomb hooked into the heat and after you’d gotten home and turned up your thermostat, the place would’ve gone up sky high. I would’ve watched it happen from the blue house and never made contact with you. It was supposed to be activated the previous week but I had my doubts.”

“You had your doubts about what?”

“I shouldn’t talk about it.” He didn’t try to attack again. His body lay on the floor, with his hand holding the wound in his thigh. His head stayed back, staring at the ceiling.

Every expression told her he’d been defeated. “I don’t know how it got so messed up. She promised everything would be neat and clean. I’d never see your face.”

“Tell me who is involved.” She kept the gun aimed, knowing a defeated man was as dangerous as a motivated one. Cody no longer had anything to lose.

“Screw you.” He muttered without conviction.

“Buddy, the next shot goes into your balls. Believe me, if you live through this, you will never feel pain like this again. Do you know how hard it is to get a bullet out of there, if it doesn’t blow them off? They slice into the skin and dig, trying to get at the fragment. If you’re lucky, it will go straight through, but I don’t know. I’ve seen both happen. Now stop this game. Tell me who.”

“Why are you doing this?” He pleaded from the floor, the blood trickling onto the carpet from his legs.

“It was you and whoever you work with that went after me. Hell, before you, I considered getting out of this branch of work. I do have a knack for it though.” She grinned. “Three.”

Shooting a man there was a hard thing for another man to do, not so much for a woman. It was that thing that kept women up late at night, waiting for the guy to just get done and leave them alone. It was that thing that made men run around like idiots and lose all sense when a pair of breasts entered the room. Everything annoying about men was lodged in those swaying sagging sacks that itched them every time they went out. She thought about all these things as she pulled the trigger.

Cody screamed, shrieked while he grabbed his balls and rolled around on the floor. His face gnarled into a look of pain, although it was uncalled for. She’d been kind again and shot less than an inch below his crotch. The bullet lodged in the floor between his legs and the man started crying, holding himself like a child needing to pee.

“Grayson Industries,” he sobbed. “Grayson Industries is what we were before Itam came along.”

“Thanks.” She blew him a kiss and pointed the gun between his eyes. “I should kill you.” She cocked the pistol and let him feel the silencer on his flesh. “I would enjoy seeing your brains blown out on this carpet but I want you to tell your cohorts I am alive and now, I will destroy everyone and everything associated with Grayson. That does include you.” She leaned up, letting her knee rack him. “I have to run before Devin shows. He’s quite dangerous.” She went to the door and looked back. “You have one chance to save your lives. Call off the hit on me and let the affected associations know I wasn’t responsible for the hits. Anything less and everyone dies.”

She went out the door to her car and waved at Devin. That was his signal to turn on the bug. She pulled out of the parking lot. There was a file she wanted to look over marked Grayson Industries.

* * * *

Devin flipped open a digital reader, which logged each number called from Cody’s cell phone. Nothing showed at first. Amelia must’ve scared the hell out of him. He also had a tape recorder hooked up to his wire tap. He had to wait for the first call. The first one was to him. He saw his number appear and his cell started ringing. He cut off the volume on the recorder and answered.

“What?”

“You dumb ass. You missed her. She nearly killed me.” A lot of hard breathing followed. “Son of a bitch, you let her slip right through your fingers.” Next came crying. “She shot me, you stupid asshole.”

“Who is this?” Devin tried hard not to laugh.

“This is the guy in the hotel room. Amelia bolted. Oh shit. I’m bleeding. She nearly shot my balls off. Shit!”

“How long ago did she leave?”

“Just now, you piece of shit. She shot me.” “Why didn’t you call sooner?”

There was more howling. “She incapacitated me. Just find her. Oh shit, I need an ambulance.”

“I’m on it. Oh and if you call me a dumb ass again, I’ll kill you before I get to her.”

Devin hung up the phone and waited. Five more calls went out. He taped each one. After a few hours, he headed back to the hotel. His equipment wouldn’t pick up from a long distance, but he thought they had everything they needed.

Chapter 10

Joey sat in the lawyer's office facing Nick's children. Several would give him only cursory glances. The one that looked at him, Jack, had a hard expression, locking eyes and not letting up until Joey's gaze fell to the floor. He was the eldest and rumored to be a hard hitting attorney. Tony sat next to him. He'd been an architect for five years and had just started his own company. He held hands with Carlotta. She'd become a surgeon at General but was rumored to devote her time to her husband and three kids. John stood at the wall behind them. He was as close to the family failure as the Statilini's could claim. He was divorced and running a small grocery at the edge of town. Finally, there was Mary. She was a lovely thing around Joey's age with two children. She owned a small greenhouse and florist supply in the northern section of the state.

Joey couldn't help wondering what he would have become if he'd been born Nick's child. It would've been great. He'd be some businessman, own a company of his own. He would be something interesting, a middleman who stayed behind the scenes and collected money and power. He wasn't born a Statilini though, only the bastard child of a bastard child with no claim to fame. They were leeching on those who had built empires because of a faulty lapse in judgment that left a sperm donation and a man wondering what a night in bed could really produce. Joey had the answer. It produced hatred and death.

The Statilini lawyers were going over the division of the company. Sally sat at Joey's side. It was an informal meeting. Carl's funeral was planned for this afternoon. Nick's was two days later. The autopsy was scheduled today in North Carolina. Afterward, Nick's body would be flown in and a proper ceremony performed. Unfortunately, such a large company couldn't run for long without supervision. As soon as the death was confirmed, the heirs were called in.

"Is Amelia Calhoun present?" Jeff Fitz, attorney at law, was the only of the three lawyers to speak.

"No. Her whereabouts aren't known." One of the Statilini lawyers spoke. "We have queries out."

"This complicates things considerably." Mr. Fitz tapped a pen against the desk, then looked over the group. "I'm afraid control of the company was left to her. Next was Jack Statilini, the eldest. In the event of Amelia Calhoun's death, the company was to be ran by Jack Statilini, as acting president, Carlotta Breggs, as chairman, Tony Statilini, as board member, John Statilini, as board member, Mary Swanson, as board member, and Joey Statilini, as board member. This arrangement will be temporary until Amelia Calhoun can be found or her death certified. There will be a formal will reading in two weeks. Until then, Jack, you're in charge."

Joey felt Sally stiffen next to him. If Nick had died first, he might have control of the company. Now he was just an acting board member and that wouldn't last. One screw up and he'd be voted off.

"Thank you all for coming. Jack, may I have a word with you after everyone leaves? There are more details and some forms to be signed."

That was the signal to go. None of Nick's children spoke to Joey on the way out, making it

apparent who the outsider was. Joey remained a lowlife with a father that lucked out and was given a company by a gracious brother.

Sally took his arm and the two of them went out to the parking lot. He opened the car door for her. She got in silently, keeping her eyes fixed out the window. He could see her jaw muscles tighten. Her freshly painted nails dug furiously at her skirt until she'd ripped a hole in it. The two drove in silence.

When they were home, she exploded. Not in Carl's mansion, but the small apartment they occupied until everything was finalized. The apartment she'd hated from the moment they'd started dating. She was meant for mansions and Mercedes she'd told him, not this life, not these things.

"How dare they cut you out of things! This is ridiculous." She ranted, throwing her purse against the wall and kicking her demur pumps against it as well, leaving black marks in the paint. "There will be changes." She turned and looked at him with venom in her gaze. "That damn Amelia will have control of the company. That bitch is gonna die."

She picked up a candlestick from the entertainment center. "Are you still screwing her? Are you letting her in on the plans so the hits fail?"

"Of course not."

She tapped the candlestick against her hand and tossed it to the floor. "I need to make a call." She went into the bedroom and shut the door. She got on the phone. She spoke to her family frequently since the wedding. For some reason, they never wanted to speak to him. In fact, he'd never met them.

* * * *

"I've got their file. Grayson Industries." Amelia showed the papers to Devin. "It was the first company Phyllis had marked, a son and two daughters. There was a Camilla Everett, Peter and Darcy. They look like a real hands on kind of family."

"I started a check on them today. I should hear something soon. Take a look at these phone numbers and tell me if any look familiar." Devin showed her the list. "He's been a very busy boy."

"Let's see. There's your number." She continued scanning, finding the next number local although it didn't register any connections. The third shocked her as she her brother's telephone number came on the display.

Her heart fell in her stomach. This went farther than she'd ever imagined. "My brother's house, no." She put her head on the table. This was horrible. Her own brother had betrayed her.

"Let's lay low for a couple of days. Just until I get some information."

"No. I have to handle this now." She got up and grabbed her pistol, loading it into her shoulder harness.

"Amelia. There's more to this than we can see." He touched her shoulder. One caress was enough to make her ease back into the chair. "Let's at least listen to the tapes."

He turned on the player, turning up the sound to cut through some of the static. He didn't have much luck. There was Cody, retelling his experiences with Amelia. Devin smiled each time Cody retold the story. The first call after his had no answer. The second had a woman's voice. That should've been the one at her brother's house, but the static cut in too bad to be certain of anything she said. The next calls were the same. On the last, they could make out one phrase. "Call me back at Itam tomorrow."

"You need new equipment," Amelia bitched. She got up to leave again. "I'm going to my brother's."

"Wait!" He grabbed her by the arm. They wrestled for a moment until he pinned her against the wall. His body pressed against hers, his mouth came close to hers. "Wait. Let's think about this. It's too dangerous." He kissed her softly. "What if I tell Cody I killed you? You'd be out of this." His kisses continued on her neck softly, feathery light. "It would be a fresh start." He brought his mouth close to her ear. She could feel his breath. "We could play house somewhere secluded. Come on. Let's play." His hand found her shirt and began unbuttoning. "Will you play with me?"

She didn't answer but let the mood take her. Devin was a drug. Her animal instincts were transformed from murder to sex. His mouth met hers while his hands pulled her shirt free. He seemed fond of her breasts, fondling her as he brought her to the bed. She liked it, his detail, and his tongue as it started at her mouth and worked over her body. He'd begun a craving deep inside, making her weak.

"Wait," she managed between ragged breaths. "Just wait one second."

She stopped him, wanting to taste him this time. Take him before he had her biting the pillow. She wanted to bring him to the point, then back away, just to drive him crazy. It was a poor gambit. His hand fell to the back of her head, pulling her away just after she'd begun.

"You're not making this any easier on yourself." He waved his finger in front of her mouth. "This time, I will make love to you until you submit."

He started with her beneath him. Their lips touching, tongues hungry. Then he flipped her on all fours. One hand stayed at her hips, bringing her to him as he thrust into her. The other went to her breasts, fondling, feeling, while she moaned.

When she thought she'd collapse, he turned her over, bringing his mouth to hers, while his body worked a steady rhythm.

"You're mine." His teeth nibbled at her ear. "Tell me who you belong to."

She felt lightheaded, senseless from the havoc he created inside her. Her body became powerless beneath him. His mouth moved to her neck, nibbling toward her breasts, following his flicking, tickling fingers.

"Tell me." His pace quickened. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her, into her. "I want you to say it. Who do you belong to?"

"You," she cried out breathless.

"Say my name." Sweet pain and pleasure filled her as he thrust deeper, faster. "Say who you

belong to.” Somehow, he kept the tempo, trying to force her to comply. “Say it.”

Her heart raced as she fought to hold on. It was pointless. She was surrendering with every second, unable to stop the world from shattering around her.

“Say it,” he demanded again, nearly growling as his body slammed into hers. “I belong to Devin.” Her voice begged as she succumbed to another wave.

Her lip service was rewarded with twenty minutes of rising and falling while he only slowed twice. The first time was in the middle for control. The next came as he did and they both collapsed on the bed.

“You’re mine,” he whispered as sleep overtook her. “You’re mine.”

She heard his words melt into her. Dream images filled her mind, keeping her exhausted body from finding rest.

Sleep didn’t last long. Her mind filled with possibilities. There was something irresistible about Devin and he was right. A fake death created the perfect way out, although not a permanent one. Eventually, someone would see her or go after Devin. Either way, playing house would only be temporary.

She lost track of her thoughts, letting her emotions run together. She was in love with Devin. If she trusted that evil emotion, she’d proclaim it. Somehow, she feared if she told him how she felt, he would die too.

Love, what was she going to do now? Loving him was no way out of this mess. He couldn’t keep her hidden away in some private hideaway while they pretended to be normal.

She concentrated on her pressing trouble, letting the puzzle churn. The answer to Grayson was there, she just had to put it together. She tried to put herself in their place. If Max had been a full brother and part of a large business, it would take little to push her over the edge. Families were like that. When you hurt one, you hurt everyone tied to them.

“Family,” she whispered. “Working for the man who’d killed her father, their father.”

It hadn’t been an easy thing to do. Love grew in the relationship though, taking away the grief to a tolerable level. Cody would find that peace if he let go of his hate long enough. He’d sounded like the hate was fading. Cody had doubted planting the bomb. That meant the women fed the fire and one of them had to work at Itam.

The pieces all fell into place. Each person had been placed strategically to bring Itam to its knees. Cody was the brother. The time had come to visit the two sisters.

Amelia slipped out of bed without disturbing Devin. She went out onto the balcony and saw two things that put her on edge. There was a car with two men parked a space over from her vehicle. Secondly, their motor was running, which meant someone was on an errand that made a quick getaway important.

“Devin!” She shouted at the bed. “Get up.”

“What’s wrong?” He rubbed his eyes and sat up, still in a dreamy fog of sleep. “Who knows we’re here?”

“No one.” He reached for the clock by the bed and turned it to read the time. “I haven’t told anyone.”

“Get dressed.” In the parking lot, the car still idled, waiting for something. “I have a feeling all hell is about to break loose.” She tossed him a pair of pants. “Move it.”

He dressed and grabbed his gun. “What is it?”

“Look.” She pointed down to the parking lot. She’d seen this set up before.

“I’ll check the hall.” He slid on a shirt and went out the door.

Amelia crouched next to the door with gun drawn. Her heart raced. She listened for gunfire or the telling thoop sound of a silencer. She couldn’t imagine being without Devin. She’d give anything for one of those boring lives with him, where her biggest concern would be his being late for dinner.

An eternity passed before she heard anything in the hallway. Finally, the hotel key clicked and Devin came back inside.

“Everything looks fine.” He stepped into the doorway but failed to shut the door completely. “You’ve got to relax. I bet those parking lot fellows are after drugs or something.”

That’s when it happened. She didn’t have time to say anything, to warn him, or check the hall again. The door flew open, hitting the wall. There was no time to react. One minute she opened her mouth to speak, the next, the sound of air split from a bullet. Devin dropped to the floor of the room. Blood flowed instantly down his shirt. Without thinking, she pulled her pistol and fired, as another round went off. A shot hit her shoulder, grazing her. The intruder fell to the ground.

“How bad are you hurt?” She pulled the dead man inside the room.

“I’m fine.” Devin clutched the wound. “Throw some shit in a bag and let’s get out of here.”

She grabbed a duffel from the closet and tossed their clothes inside. There were still men outside. She went back to the balcony, keeping low. It was a bad angle. She took a larger pistol from Devin’s case. The longer barrel would help. She cocked it and turned her wrist, trying to compensate for the glass and angle, then fired twice. It took another shot to kill the passenger but she’d done it. Next, she tossed two duffel bags off the balcony to the ground. She helped Devin to his feet and the two went to the elevator. Except for him leaning heavily on her, everything looked fine.

She loaded him into her car, then went back for the bags. As they pulled out into the street, she noticed his color didn’t look good. She ripped away his shirt. It was a lung hit. She started toward the hospital.

“Are you wanted for anything right now?”

He didn’t speak, only shook his head. All the color vanished from his lips. Blood, nearly black, bubbled out of his chest. She reached over, trying to help compress the wound. He moaned but didn’t move from her hand.

The wound was dangerous. She couldn’t tell from the angle if the damage went to his heart, or

if the lung could be saved. It could be a matter of a little surgery, or he could be a dead man.

She got to the hospital and ran inside for a stretcher. In moments, two men were lifting him out of the car and taking him inside. She took his wallet and left him with one set of ID for a Mr. Parks. An orderly took the ID and ordered her to stay in the waiting room.

“Miss.” A lady in white approached Amelia while she stood at the edge of the hallway. “We need to get you to fill out some forms.”

She seemed friendly enough but this was a bullet wound and that meant police. It wouldn't take long before the cops got wind of three dead. She'd be in custody within the hour if she stayed.

“Sure. I'll be glad to give you whatever you need.” Amelia looked back down the hallway, wishing she could be with him. “Can I call his parents first? They really should be here.”

The nurse hesitated. “Sure. You can use the phone by the desk.”

Amelia followed and picked up the receiver. She dialed Devin's private cell number and waited for the voice mail to cut on. “I'm at the hospital. Things don't look good for you. The cops will be here soon, so I'll have to run. If you get this message, know that I love you. If you don't see me again, well, I'm sorry things couldn't have been different.”

She hung up the phone and saw the nurse pointing in her direction and speaking with a doctor. If Devin had died, she couldn't know about it yet. Things were too heavy. It was time to move.

The doctor started toward her. She picked up the phone and pretended another call. When the doctor came close, she wailed loudly. The doctor turned and stepped back to give her some privacy. As soon as his eyes were off her, she headed to the entrance. At the glass doors, she saw two boys in blue approaching. She walked by them and felt the fresh air blow on her face. Just a few more feet to freedom. An ambulance pulled by and she saw her car. It was close. She tried to keep her footsteps even and not draw attention. Her car keys were in her hand. She touched the door handle of her car when she heard the yelling.

“That's her. Stop her!”

The doctor led the way, followed by the cops. In a moment, they'd passed him. Amelia slid into the front seat as they drew down on her. She started the engine. The first crank brought nothing but the lights dimming. Two uniformed officers had guns drawn, one down on one knee, the other had his pistol anchored against his arm, searching out the shot. She tried to start it again. The cops came closer, closing the gap. The engine roared to life with them twenty feet from her. In any other circumstance, they'd have her, but there were too many people around. She pulled out without a single shot being fired.

Biltmore's intersection was tight. She ran the light, nearly hitting a station wagon. That's when she heard the sirens wailing behind her. They hadn't cleared the intersection yet. She hit the turn on the right and went back toward the river. It wasn't possible to outrun police. A cop car, sure, but they had those damn radios and most cities had helicopters.

Still, they'd lost sight of her. She had to think fast. There was a rundown business district. Old bricks fell away from what was left of buildings long past usefulness. A few artsy places had

sprung up, probably because this was the only rent they could afford.

She didn't have time to look. Just ahead was a diner. She pulled in the lot and stopped next to a dump truck. Her car had just stopped moving when she heard the sirens go by. The blue lights flashed as they sped by, nearly hitting a station wagon.

They had a description of her vehicle. There was no way she could get out of town in that and stealing a car from a diner wouldn't buy her more than twenty minutes. She checked out her surroundings. At the end of the street was a mechanic. Perfect.

Amelia looked in her rearview and added a little make-up. Then she drove over to Eddie's Tow and Mechanic Shop. There were two guys in coveralls standing out front. Probably because of the sirens, she wasn't going to ask. She parked her car next to a big Ford truck and got out.

"Hi." She smiled. "I was wondering if I could get some help."

"I own this shop. What can I do for you?" He smiled but his eyes never quite made contact.

"Well, I've got two problems." She bit her bottom lip. "One, my car keeps over heating and two, I've got a nasty dent. I just don't know what to do. This thing can't get me back to my hotel."

"Let me look at it. Can you pull it in the shop?"

"I'll try." She flashed her smile. "It looks kind of tight though."

Amelia got behind the wheel and drove it into the side bay. Part of her hated this act. The demeaning damsel in distress crap made her sick. It was a great advantage though.

He motioned her to roll down her window. "Pop the hood." He went back to the front of the car, then came back. "You from out of town?" He smiled again.

"Sure am. I'm in town visiting my sister." She sat there, enjoying the cool shade of the garage. In her rearview, she saw another cop car drive by. "I'm scared to drive my car too far with it acting funny."

"Start it up."

She complied and watched a cop car pull in the diner across the street. For some reason, she didn't think they were there for lunch.

"Ma'am. You can turn it off now. I don't see no leak and the radiators full. I bet it just needs flushing. As for the dent, my brother can fix it. It might take a few days though."

"Oh. I need to get back to my hotel. Could I use your phone to call a cab?"

"It's on the wall there." He looked at the floor. "It's quitting time. How 'bout I give you a ride?"

"Are you sure it wouldn't be too much trouble?" She put her fingernail at the edge of her lip. "I wouldn't want you to go out of your way."

"Nah. Give me a few minutes and we'll leave. That's my truck over there. You can climb on in."

He pointed to a blue and white old Ford pickup. It had character. The doors squeaked with a heavy metal sound. The inside smelled of grease and gasoline. The vinyl seats were torn and the floorboard was littered with beer cans. She got in and waited.

Down the street, the cops had left the diner. They were going door to door, and she knew they had a description of her and her car. It was only a question of Eddie's timing.

Amelia hunted for Devin's car keys in her purse. Then she realized everything she had left was in the trunk of the car. She got out, risking another trip to the car, and opened the trunk. Eddie was nowhere in sight. She grabbed a screwdriver off the counter and took off her plates, tossing them under the spare tire.

She looked across the street. There sat the cops, speaking to a hippy chick with ribbons braided in her hair and a long shapeless dress covering her thin body.

"Ready?" Eddie came up behind her.

"Yes. I just had to get my bags out of the trunk."

Eddie carried them for her and threw them into the back of the truck. He was too slow. The cops joined traffic and made the turn into the mechanics shop. Eddie started to pull out when the police pulled in their lot. Her options were very limited, so she kept quiet.

"Excuse me, can we ask you a few questions?"

Amelia sat still. The world was nearly dark but that didn't make her invisible. The streetlights had cut on, illuminating the lot in an iridescent glow. She took a deep breath. She was trapped.

"We're kind of in a hurry. What's this about?" Eddie spoke slowly. Each word seemed to take an agonized eternity.

"Did you see a car tearing through here earlier today? There was a woman driving."

Eddie stopped him. "Mister, I saw two cop cars come tearing through here, but I never did see anything you could've been chasin'."

"Miss, could I ask you a few questions? Did you see anything?" He aimed his flashlight at her head.

"No, sir." Amelia tried to sound southern. To her ears, it sounded like muddled New York, but the cop never questioned it.

"If that's all, we will be leaving. The shop opens at nine in the morning. You can see me again then." Eddie started up the car. The officer started to speak but Eddie gunned the engine and pulled away, leaving one very annoyed cop.

"Damn cops think they run the town." He huffed. "I'm sorry. Which hotel are you staying at?"

"The one up the road here on the left." She looked behind to see if the cops were following. Apparently, they were used to being unwelcome in this part of town.

"I'll have you there in a jiffy."

It was a short drive. The scenery changed back to the standard buildings trying to reach into the sky. She didn't see another police car until she reached the parking lot of the hotel. There were three sitting out front.

"Man, the cops are everywhere today."

“Would you mind pulling around to that Jeep? That’s my sister’s.” “Sure.”

“Thanks, Eddie. I’ll call you tomorrow or the next day about my car.” She opened the door.

“Listen, if you need anyone to show you around town, let me know.” Eddie practically blushed.

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You are so sweet.” She slid out of the truck and smiled at him again. He looked like one of those guys who wanted a few kids and a nice girl to take home to momma. It was positively charming. “Maybe I’ll give you a call tomorrow. You know, depending on what sis has planned.”

He smiled in an awe shucks kind of way. He got out a card and wrote something on the back, then handed it to her. It was a business card with his shop’s and home phone numbers on it.

“Thanks again.” She took the card and put it in her back pocket. “I mean it. You’ve been a real life saver tonight.”

She plucked her bags from the back and put them in the Jeep. She walked toward the hotel and waited at the side entrance until Eddie drove away, then she got in the Jeep and took off.

Grayson Industries, a family ran company. She pulled in at a gas station and took the folder out of her bag. A press clip was in the folder but the photographs weren’t clear. Without Devin’s contact, there was no way to identify them. Her connections would be too risky to use. Cody had dialed her brother’s number. If she believed Max was on her side, that left one suspect, Darcy. If she had to wager, she’d bet Darcy was Marcy Everett.

It would be easy enough to find out. She turned toward Max’s house, stopping two streets before his. She wanted Darcy, not Max. He’d have to get out of the way. She dialed his number.

“Hello?” Max answered the phone. “Are you alone?”

“No.” His speech sounded guarded. “Why do you ask?” “Is Darcy with you?”

“Yes.”

“Leave her there. Meet me at the ice cream joint on Tunnel Road. I need to speak with you. It’s important.”

“I’m sorry about earlier,” started Max. “I wish I could’ve done something.”

“Shh. It’s okay.” She’d make nice with Max later. For now, he needed to be out of the way. “Just meet me. Make up some excuse, work or something.”

“I’m on my way.”

Ten minutes later, he drove by her, always the devoted brother. She loved him. It was a nice feeling, even if she thought he was naïve. Maybe he just let her believe in his simple qualities.

Amelia started her car and parked on the road in front of the neighbor’s house. Darcy was inside. She heard the television playing. It would be rude to bloody up Max’s house. She’d have to take Darcy on a ride before the long questioning.

The backdoor was unlocked making it easy for Amelia to walk inside. She could see Darcy’s

head on the arm of the couch. Poor dear must've been tired. What a shame. Amelia pulled out her tazer and zapped the bitch before she knew someone had entered the house.

"Hi, Darcy, or should I say, Marcy Everett of Grayson Industries. Where's your sister?"

Darcy moaned and jerked. Amelia gave her another jolt for good measure, then went back to the kitchen. Max kept a junk drawer filled with useless things. There she found some duct tape. She carried it back to the living room and bound Darcy's hands and feet. The lady wasn't light. Amelia drug her to the back door then brought the Jeep around. It took three tries to load her inside. The jolt wore off and she bucked but didn't really fight. Finally, Amelia had Darcy sitting in the passenger's side.

They reached the red light before Amelia noticed something very wrong. Darcy wasn't screaming. She was white with fear, but hadn't uttered a peep. She didn't strike Amelia as the brave type.

"Why aren't you screaming?" "Would it help?" She asked flatly.

"No." Amelia turned off the main road into a little alley. "You know my brother loves you. You shouldn't have used him to get to me."

"You're right." She took a shaky breath. "If it's any consolation, I love him too." She began laughing hysterically with tears in her eyes. "You know, the plan was to set you up with Tom and then he would kill you when he got you alone." She laughed again, letting the tremors settle to a quiet cry.

"Then why did you make me leave?" It was the second time one of these Everett kids had blown the hit.

"I didn't have the heart to go through with it." She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "You may be a cold hearted killer, but I'm not. I'm just a teacher now. My work has always been around biology. I never even had a hard edged business sense. Cami was the executive. This was her lame brain idea. She found Max by intercepting some of your mail. I managed to bump into him at the grocery store."

"Where is Cami now?"

"I can't tell you that." Her eyes filled with unshed tears and a touch of fear. "I'm sorry."

"I might let you live."

"Live for what. I'm in love with your brother and he's in love with someone I'm not. I hoped you'd get killed and let me keep pretending." She looked at Amelia, finally making eye contact. "I am sorry. You seem like a nice person, probably nicer than Cami."

"You know, I like you too." Amelia rested her head on the steering wheel. She had no reason to believe Darcy or whoever this frightened girl was next to her, but she did. "I don't want to be a hit woman. I don't think I ever did, but when you see your dad die, it changes you." She laughed, at least it sounded like one. "I became what I hated. I guess when it comes down to it, I'm a survivalist. That means I have to kill Camilla. I let Cody live, but Camilla has to go."

"And me?" Darcy looked back out the window. Her voice showed no hope, nothing but regret.

“Tell me where she is.” Amelia pulled her pistol from her waistband and attached the silencer. “I don’t want to hurt you. I swear I don’t.”

“What about Max?”

“I’m not going to hurt Max. He’s a good man and probably the only good person in my life.” She tried laughing again as her mind wondered back to Devin. “Not the time for humor. Listen, I think all of us have some explaining to do. For now, we’ll let things ride. When everything is over, we’ll work it out.”

“You’re asking me to betray my sister.”

“It’s your choice. I’m offering you a way out, an honest way out of this madness.” Darcy looked at her thoughtfully. “I never really liked Cami. She was always a bitch. I do love Cody. You should’ve seen him as a boy. He was quiet and nerdy and downright loveable.”

“I’m not going to hurt him. Well, not seriously. I had to question him pretty hard but he lived through it. You can apologize for me later at whatever family reunion you and Max attend.”

Darcy looked at Amelia as if judging her words. “Okay. You win.” She wrung her hands together. “Camilla works for Itam industries. She’s the executive secretary.”

“Executive secretary?” Titles always threw her. Then she figured out the only person that would have the power to handle a set up this complicated. She would have to be in a perfect position to interfere with the main office. “Sally?”

“Yes. I think she’s trying to work a corporate takeover from the inside. Unfortunately, Carl died before Nick, which means everything was left to you. That wasn’t the plan. Nick was supposed to be blown up with you blamed for it. Carl would take control and when he died, Joey would be in charge. She married the dumb ass and everything expecting to be Mrs. Itam. Some brilliant exec, huh? You’re the lady in charge, not that moron.”

“Holy shit. Joey married?” She was impressed. Sally had planned everything thoroughly.

“Cami’s not like me. She’s like a woman possessed. I mean, she married for a company. You should hear her talk about the guy. He’s brain dead or something. I don’t know.” Darcy shook her head. “Some things are more important than money. I wish she knew that.”

Amelia pulled out a knife and cut Darcy’s wrists free. “I knew there was something screwed up about Tom.”

“Cami hired two hit men to go after you. One, a real pro, the other was Tom. They tailed Devin. I guess you know they found out you were involved with him. They scheduled a hit on both of you with some company out of Chicago. The guys are supposed to be sloppy, but fast.”

“They shot him a couple of hours ago.” Her words were barely audible. “Is he...”

“I don’t know. Can’t find out.” She touched her eyes, keeping the tears from running. “Do you think Cami will come after you?”

“Oh yes. I had some objections to this a few months ago. She let me know I was expendable.” The tears started again. “She’d kill me, her baby sister. I guess I’m starting to become a survivalist, too.”

“Nice family you have.”

“Cody isn’t like that. He’s just brainwashed by Cami.” Darcy rubbed the skin on her wrists. “What are you going to do?”

“First, I’d better call Max so he doesn’t worry. Hey, feel like some ice cream?” Amelia started the Jeep and headed toward the ice cream shop. As predicted, Max was in the parking lot, looking worried. She saw his face as they pulled in. Wide eyed innocent concern and he was involved with two treacherous bitches.

“Maybe we should go ahead and tell him the truth.” Amelia’s words terrified Darcy. “I’ve got a lot more secrets than you do. He’s also the only family I have left. It might not be easy finding out your sis is a killer.”

“It might feel good to be honest. You know he asked me to marry him. Now would probably be a good time to confess.”

Amelia stopped the car and got out. She slid into the passenger’s side of his Town Car. Darcy got in the back. For a moment, all he could do was look from Amelia to Darcy.

“Do you know what I really do for a living?” Amelia smiled. She’d never told anyone the truth about her job. There was never anyone to tell.

“I figured it was illegal.” He shrugged. “I didn’t need to know anything else.”

“I kill people for a living.” The air went dead around her as if the words sucked every last bit of life from the car and dared anyone to reply. No one could breathe and from the look on Max’s face, he couldn’t fathom the words she’d spoken, almost as if he was trying to convert Latin into English.

Amelia touched his arm and tried to continue. “I guess you know when our father was murdered I was taken in by the Statilini family, actually by the man who ordered Dad’s death. I went to his house to kill him. I was just a kid, so they disarmed me and for some reason, thought I had potential. They became close to me and I did jobs for Itam.” Amelia couldn’t believe he was still in the car or that she was still talking. It was surreal to confess a lifetime of sin. How do you explain away murder? “I killed Darcy’s father a few years ago. He had controlling interest of Grayson Industries and Nick wanted it. Darcy’s sister planned my death by setting me up for several unauthorized kills. She also set Darcy up with you.”

“I’m sorry, Max.” Darcy sulked in the backseat.

Max looked directly ahead. His face flushed. Amelia couldn’t tell if he was angry or hurt. Then she saw his hands clench the steering wheel, his knuckles white. Behind them, Darcy cried.

“She fell in love with you, Max, and I love you, too.” Amelia felt tears building but wouldn’t permit them to fall from her eyes. “We both love you.”

“Love me! You put me in this situation.”

“Stop it. Maybe I should’ve confessed to you years ago and given you time to forgive me but the truth is, there’s no time to do this now. If I screw up, Darcy and I are dead. I’m probably dead anyway and honestly, what I did for a living doesn’t concern you, so get over it.”

Max got out of the car and started walking to the back of the parking lot. Amelia looked back at Darcy. She looked like hell. Her make-up had changed her into a pouty raccoon.

“Clean yourself up.” Amelia opened the car door. “I’ll be right back.”

“What are you going to do?” sobbed Darcy. “He hates me and I don’t blame him.”

“My brother needs to learn a few things about real life.”

Amelia started after him. The lot was deserted, except for a few teenagers hanging out next to the road. She caught Max as he turned the corner of the building and grabbed his arm.

“Get off me.” Max tried to pull his arm free, finally shrugging her off on the third try. “We don’t have anything left to say to each other.”

“Screw you. You have it all, a woman that loves you, a good life if you play your cards right. So you hate your sister. I’ve been hated most of my life. Go on hating me but at least give Darcy a chance. She could’ve had me killed. Instead, she fakes shock at the crap I carried and gets me to leave before her fake doctor friend, or her brother, killed me. Her sister will go after her for that. She risked her life for me.”

“Get away.”

Max shoved her and she took two steps back. She took a run and shoved back. He hit the brick on the back of the building. He was mad and, for a split second, she thought he might try to hit her. Instead, he pushed her again, forcing her on her butt.

Amelia emitted a single growl and she was on him. Before he got out a single word, she had him face down on the ground with his arm pinned on his back. He was strong, but he hadn’t been fighting for the last fifteen years.

“Get off me!” He squirmed beneath her but couldn’t work himself free.

“Shut up. You had everything, a parent who loved you, a future. I’m sorry I’m not the sugar and spice sister you hoped for. Hell, most days I don’t even like myself. Don’t you see, I don’t want to do this anymore but I don’t know what else I can do. I’m a wanted woman. Camilla Everett has set me up good. The people at Itam even think I’ve gone over the edge.” She let up the pressure on his arm and felt tears coming again. She’d never gone over the sins or her present situation, not even subconsciously. It was too awful. “Oh what do you care? We barely know each other anyway. I’m going to let you go. Just stay on the ground until I can get out of here. I’m leaving Darcy with you. At least be a gentleman and take her home.”

Amelia got off his back and started toward the Jeep. She listened carefully, hoping he would call her name or say something. Even a tap on the shoulder, something saying he still considered himself her brother. Nothing came.

She reached the Jeep and turned around. He was at the back of the building watching her. He wanted her to leave as much as she wanted to stay, so she got in the Jeep. As she pulled out of the parking lot, she checked her rearview mirror. He wasn’t running after her or waving. Max was finished with her.

She drove around for what felt like hours, although her watch had stopped working around five in the afternoon. Maybe it was the electric shock. It was an odd thing to worry about. Time

shouldn't have any meaning.

She went back to Riverside Park. It was almost dark. A few streetlights dotted the road. She parked beneath one and picked up her cell phone. Her next call was to information, then the hospital.

"Mission patient information. How may I help you?"

"Hi, I need to check to status of my brother, Larry Parks."

"Just a minute." Moments passed, then the operator returned. "I'm sorry, we cannot release any information about that patient. We are looking for the next of kin to sign some papers. Why don't you come down to the hospital so we can help you?"

"Sure. I'm in Georgia now, so it will be tomorrow before I can get there. Is there anything you can tell me about his condition?"

"No, ma'am. I'm sorry."

Her heart sank. Asking about next of kin was a bad sign. "Thank you," she managed to say as she ended the call.

She got out of the Jeep and walked over to the River. Devin was certainly dead. She wished they'd gotten together sooner. At least she knew him for a time.

The same could be said for Max. She had a brother for a while. When it all came down to it, maybe the people that meant something along the way were worth more than anything else in life. It also meant her crimes were the worst. There was no way to make amends. With Carl and Nick gone, the killings could stop, unless Camilla was blood thirsty and it looked like she'd gained an expertise in that field.

When she was a teenager, she'd read Dracula. On her first kill, she imagined she was a vampire and she'd find a vampire lover. Someone eternal a bullet couldn't kill or a knife or any of the other tools she'd been instructed on using. When she pulled the trigger, she lost the fantasy. There was nothing romantic or beautiful about death. It was nasty and messy and forever.

Amelia crept closer to the river and listened to the quiet roar of the water as it ran over rocks, a menacing ribbon of black cutting through the night. It was dangerous and the real reason the park closed at dark. Someone could slip in and be carried away, churned beneath the water. Even a good swimmer would bash their head against the rocks and drown.

The toe of her sneaker touched the water's edge, causing a little water to seep inside, chilling her foot and making her skin break out in gooseflesh.

There was no clear way out of this mess. She could kill Camilla, but there were police to answer to already. It might be possible to beat the charges. There was nothing to go back to though. Nick was gone. She'd miss him despite the necessity of his death. Even Joey was beyond the quick affair when she got lonely.

Water started filling her shoe. It was cold but she stepped closer. A shiver ran through her as the other shoe filled with water. She stood at the edge of a drop off. It would be easy to slip into that icy grip. Her balance shifted and she almost took the step, except her sins flashed

before her eyes.

She would pay for eternity, if it existed. There had to be more than this life. She'd seen too many eyes as death took hold. There was something else and she didn't want to face it like this.

She went back to the bank. It was time to use her skills to get her out of this jam. Without anyone else, it would be hard. She looked at the cell phone. Maybe Darcy would be willing to help. She called, hoping she was at Max's place.

"Hello?" Max answered.

"I..." she couldn't finish. A blood relative, the only good person she knew, had shunned her. There was nothing she could say in her defense, so she stood there, staring out into the night, unwilling to hang up, but unable to speak.

"Amelia?" asked Max softly. "Are you there?"

She took a deep breath, not knowing what to say. It would be easier if she just hung up but Darcy had taken a risk to help her. She should at least try to repay the favor.

"I just called to see if Darcy was there."

Max pulled the receiver from his mouth and laughed. A full minute passed before he returned. "You're insane." He laughed again, then the sound slowed to a chuckle. "I never thought you were quite right and this proves it."

Amelia felt emotion rising in her voice. "I hoped you two had worked something out. Can I have her home number and I'll call her there?"

"If you want to talk to her, you'll have to come here in person." He laughed again. "Think you can beat me up in a parking lot, then forget about it? I don't think so, sis."

"What, you got the cops waiting for me?"

"Only if I could find a nice one you'd settle down with." He laughed again. "Come over. We've worked everything out."

"Really?"

"Don't make me beg. I know how you women like that, but twice in one night is really too much for me."

"I'm on my way." She smiled and realized how much she wanted her brother's love. She also realized how uncomfortable wet shoes were. She kicked them off and felt the cool grass beneath her feet. Maybe things could be all right. Maybe she could have a little hope.

She went back to the Jeep and got inside. Darcy must be an incredible woman to make him forget everything. There was a way out after all. Amelia almost had a plan but this couldn't be a single woman operation. She needed help.

As she pulled out into the street, another car fired up its engine and followed. She never saw Cody inside or the gun he kept in his lap. After all, Camilla was a convincing woman.

Chapter 11

Joey sat at the coffee table with his head resting in his hands. Sally was an ambitious sort. She'd ordered a hit. Joey didn't know she had connections beyond Itam. He was starting to learn a lot about his new bride.

"That's right. Jack Statilini."

"Hun. I don't mean to criticize, but we don't have a lot of money left to pay hit men." She silenced him with a wave. It was true. There was no telling how much money, if any, Carl left him. Sally had already managed to purchase more shares of Itam. She probably knew his standing on the board would be short lived. Still, buying stocks wouldn't secure his place on the board.

She hung up the phone. "Don't ever contradict me. That guy heard you." The phone started ringing again.

"I'll be quiet then. I bet the phone's for you." He slumped on the couch. "You'd better get it," he added when it rang again.

She glared and answered the phone. The news was good. Her face lit up in that predatory way that said her teeth were sunk into something. The call didn't last long, maybe fifteen minutes.

"Hallelujah, the witch is dead." She slid on the couch next to him and gave him a hard kiss on the lips. "That was my sister, Darcy. Cody did what your precious Devin couldn't. He caught Amelia coming out of Riverside Park. He finished her at a red light. Amelia never even saw it coming." Sally beamed with the new information. "Darcy is coming into town. She wants to meet my new husband. Want to hear the kicker? She still wants to marry Amelia's brother. Ain't love grand?"

He'd never met Amelia's brother. It seemed twisted to kill a guy's sister, then marry him though. He sniffled and realized there were tears in his eyes. He would miss Amelia.

"What? Don't tell me you're feeling sentimental?" She rolled her eyes in disgust. "Come on. You should be happy that horrible woman is dead."

"Can I ask you something? Are you planning on killing me as soon as I get control of the company? I mean, all this work to get Itam isn't for my benefit. Something tells me you do very little for anyone else."

"Don't be silly. I'm just a secretary. What would I know about running a company?"

Joey considered her carefully. "What did you do before you started working for Itam?"

Sally just laughed. He hated the sound of her laugh. It was maniacal. In a past life, she'd been a mad scientist. He just hoped in this life, he wasn't part of her experiments.

"Now back to handling Statilini."

Jack Statilini sat in his living room waiting. His family was on an unplanned vacation to the Caribbean. All the lights were off, except for the flickers from the television screen. Even the sound remained off as he sat there watching the colorful images.

It was dark for eight o'clock. The sky had been cloudy all day as if, at any moment, a storm would break. It hadn't, though. The day had dragged on without a single raindrop. He wanted it to rain. His wife's roses needed watering. They always grew better in rainwater instead of that softened shit they used.

He heard a twig snap outside and rechecked the clock. Right on time. The window beside the front door opened. He knew the sound of it catching against the heavy drapes in front. Several times, he'd locked himself out and pushed the heavy cloth out of the way when it caught against the aluminum edge.

Next came the sound of the table scooting out of the way. It really sat in a bad spot right there under the window. His wife said it had something to do with balance. He didn't understand it. She never let him put his keys on it when he walked in the house, so it didn't make any sense to him.

It proved useful helpful this time. His visitor had arrived and would be entering the living room, sneaking up behind him at any moment. He appreciated punctuality in a killer and this guy was right on time.

* * * *

Max and Darcy arrived too early to check into their hotel, so they grabbed breakfast at Kelly's Diner. It was a coffee shop at the corner of their almost nice hotel on Fifth Street.

"I can't believe how well you're taking all this." Darcy stirred cream into her coffee. "I can't believe you still want to marry me."

"I love you. Why wouldn't I marry you?" He smiled and reached across the table to hold her hand between the plates of eggs and toast. "As soon as we get things settled, we'll get married." He blushed a little, then added, "When are we starting our family?"

"Well, we could practice tonight. I'm not going off the pill until I'm properly wed."

"They say practice makes perfect." Max squeezed her hand.

"Are you sure you don't want to live together first?" Darcy looked at him so softly, it melted his heart.

"No. I want the real deal. Besides, I may have premarital sex, but I don't want proof of it."

Darcy got quiet. There was a more ominous tone coloring the day. "I'm sorry about everything that's happened with Amelia."

"You didn't cause her to go into that kind of work." His grip relaxed. "I guess she didn't really choose it either. Funny how that stuff works out."

"I suppose you're right."

They finished their breakfast when a gentleman dressed in jeans and a skater shirt stumbled

by their table. In his wake, he left a piece of paper with a telephone number and a time. Max slid it in his pocket without looking at it.

“Let’s see if our room is ready,” Max took a last sip of coffee. “I feel like doing some practicing already.”

“Into the danger sex. A little thrill, hmm? How will I top this trip to New York?” “We could always try places we could get busted in, but I don’t want to end up in the papers. With my luck, our kids would find it. Could you imagine explaining why Mom and Dad got arrested?”

“I’ll think of something to keep you entertained.”

He slid her arm into his and they walked out the door, never looking back at the guy too old for his skater clothes.

* * * *

“Hurry up. We’re supposed to meet them at four o’clock. I don’t want to be late.” Sally looked over at Joey. “Come on.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen your sister?” Joey looked in the mirror and combed his hair for the third time.

“Over a year and I don’t want to be late.” Sally looked dreamy eyed for a moment. “We used to get along as kids but when we grew up, we went our separate ways. It’s going to be nice to have her in my life again.”

“I’m ready.” Joey gave his reflection a wink, then pulled the gold necklace out of his shirt to display it on his chest.

“Finally. You primp a lot for a man.” She looked towards him. “Let’s see.”

He slid his shoes on and walked to the door. She looked him over and gave him that look. It was the expression of a woman who let the five year old pick out their clothes and regretted it.

“I guess it will do.” She rolled her eyes and stuck the chunky jewelry back into his shirt. “Just don’t embarrass me.”

“Yes, dear,” he said sarcastically. “Whatever you say, dear.”

“Don’t start that shit either.” She managed a punch to the shoulder. “I want to appear like I married well, instead of marrying you.”

“Yes, dear. So glad I can make you happy.”

Sally rolled her eyes and checked her make-up in the mirror. This was the start of the rest of their lives. Nothing could go wrong now that Itam was in her grasp.

* * * *

“Objects have pulled into the parking lot. Everyone in position,” barked a black clothed man into his radio.

“Ready in room.” The first voice came back calm and determined.

“Parking lot is a go. We’ll take them on signal.” The radio picked up the sound of the automatic weapon readying to fire.

“Blue five, everything secure in stairwell.”

“Wait for my mark. This is going down fast and hard. I don’t want them to know what hit them.”

* * * *

“Darcy!” Sally screamed when the door opened. The two hugged. Their embrace broke as her eyes met Max. “You must be my future brother-in-law.” She reached out and hugged him next.

“This must be Joey.” Darcy shook his hand. “This is Max.”

“Where’s Cody?” asked Sally. “I was hoping to see him before we broke everything down and signed the contracts.”

“He still isn’t up for travel. Amelia really did a number on that guy.” Darcy looked at Max, then at the floor. “So let’s talk. What have you been up to?”

“Trying to rule the world, what else?” Sally laughed but the threat sounded too serious.

“Is that Statilini thing fixed?” Darcy looked serious and sat on the bed. “I don’t want any loose ends strangling us.”

“Since when do you care about that stuff?” Sally moved close to her, watching her quizzically. “I thought the details were on my end.”

“Since I am going to have a controlling interest in Itam. I mean, technically the company was left to Amelia and Amelia left everything to Max. And things would be easier if the Statilini’s were out of the picture.”

“The company was never turned over, sis. If anyone is going to have a controlling interest, it’s Joey. Why aren’t you going along with the plan? Is this Max guy changing the deal?”

“The deal hasn’t changed. I started worrying since it took you so long to get anything accomplished. It was sloppy.” Darcy stood, took a step forward and got in her sister’s face. “There’s no excuse for it.”

“Sloppy? You couldn’t have arranged everything. Hell, you couldn’t have even gotten a job at Itam, much less set up that skank bitch, or killed her boss. You don’t know about explosives. You wouldn’t have even known who to call to arrange a kill. How would you have handled Jack Statilini?” She huffed loudly. “I bet you’d sent him brownies.” Sally threw her hands in the air. “I did everything. I hired the hit on Statilini, on Amelia, and blew up Carl. You did nothing.”

Darcy fell silent, letting her eyes drop to the floor, away from her sister’s hateful gaze.

“You wouldn’t have gotten rid of anybody, I can tell you that much.” Sally took a deep breath, calming herself. She shut her eyes and regained her composure. “As for an interest in Itam, I’m sure we can manage something as long as brother dear doesn’t cause me any grief over ownership. The plan was for the three of us to set up shop, just like at Grayson. I won’t turn my back on you.” She reached out to Darcy and put both hands on her shoulders. “You are my sister.”

“The three of you. Where do I fit in this deal?” Joey crossed his arms over his chest and stepped into Sally’s line of vision.

“Hubby dear, let’s face facts. You’re not the most intelligent soul but I care for you, so why don’t you just enjoy a position in the company? It will keep you in a better lifestyle than what you have now.” She shifted her gaze to him. “It’s really better than anything you could’ve managed on your own.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I have more connections than you. I don’t think you want to look over your shoulder. Hell, I even got rid of Devin. He was supposed to be unstoppable.” She squared her shoulders and strutted across the room to Joey. “Please. You men aren’t any concern to me, so stay out of my way.”

Next came a knock at the door. It was beautifully synchronized as the black garbed FBI men flooded the room with their badges on strings around their necks over their bullet proof vests. Sally, better known as Camilla Everett, was taken to the floor along with Joey, Darcy, and Max. Each was patted down, while another officer cuffed them.

It went too fast for anyone to run or realize what was happening until one man started reading them their rights. Each had their faces on carpet, completely helpless.

“You set me up,” screamed Sally. “I can’t believe you set me up.” The officer reading them their rights nudged her with his foot, silencing her until he finished.

“I never set you up,” stated Darcy.

“No, I did.” Amelia came in the room once everything had been secured. “I think this will make an interesting story on the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper where everyone in town can read it. I bet it will make national news. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure they spell your name right. By the way, I called Jack Statilini. He’s fine and your hitter is having a long talk with the cops. Not that they’ll need his confession after the tape you just made.”

“No!” cried Sally. “Why aren’t you dead? Where’s Cody? I’m gonna cut his head off!”

“Ma’am, we can use that against you,” remarked an officer, who brought Joey to his feet.

Amelia stood with her feet inches from Sally’s face. “All the people you played against me will know who was responsible. I hope your insurance is paid up.”

“This isn’t over, yet. I’m not finished with you.” Sally screamed profanities as another officer helped her stand.

Sally and Joey were taken to the police cars. They fell silent while the officer pushed down on their heads to load them in. They were transported in different cars. Joey started talking as soon as the car door shut. Amelia couldn’t be sure of what he said, but it was bound to be a rollover on Sally.

As soon as Sally and Joey were gone, the police took the cuffs off Max and Darcy. Amelia reached down and helped Darcy to her feet.

“Thanks for your help.” The agent choreographing the event smiled proudly. “We’ll need your

statements today or tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Amelia shook the officer’s hand. “It’s been a pleasure.” She turned toward Darcy. “We need to thank Cody, too. Poor guy deserves a vacation.”

“He’s getting rest at Max’s house. I don’t know why he went after you. I’m just glad you shocked him instead of killed him. I have to admit, I didn’t know what to think when you dragged him in Max’s back door.”

“Are we done with the surprises and confessions yet?” asked Max. His arm was firmly planted around Darcy. “I don’t think I can handle any more secrets from you two.”

“There’s one more person you’ll need to meet.” Amelia bit her lip. “He’s pretty special.”

A second later Amelia’s cell phone rang. “Hi.” She noticed the number on the display and her face lit up. It had been too long since she’d spoken to him.

“How’d it go?” asked Devin with his delightful English accent.

“She’s in custody and in a few days, I will be the official owner of Itam. With Darcy and Max’s help, it’ll be a legit company. The Statilini’s never wanted to be involved with it but I asked two of them to stay on. They’ll be involved in votes but that’s about it.” She leaned against the wall.

“Legit, huh?” He sounded pleased with the idea of being involved with a regular business.

“Do you think you can handle the change, Devin?” She knew he wanted out almost as much as she had. “Life will be completely different.”

“I can handle anything, as soon as I get out of this damn hospital. The food here stinks. They refuse to season anything.” He paused. “Can you cook?”

“A collapsed lung and you’re worried about your stomach.” It was a good sign. “It’s not collapsed any more. The doctors said I should be able to leave next week.”

“I’ll fly down and bring you back personally.” Her heart sped up thinking about seeing those green eyes again.

“Don’t trust me to show?”

“Hell no. You might get cold feet.”

“I can’t get cold feet. I’ve been chasing you too long.” He laughed and the sound filled her heart. “You’re supposed to nurse me back to health. That means feeding me real food.”

“I can cook. I’m actually pretty good.”

“You are going to let me bring some of my stuff into that apartment of yours. I mean, we are a thing now, right?”

“I might let you have a drawer.” She smiled, knowing she’d already cleaned out half the closet for him.

“That’s all I ask.” Devin’s voice grew quiet. “I wish I could’ve been there to help. You shouldn’t have had to go through it alone.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” Amelia knew it was true. She was ready to die for the life she’d led, not fight for a new one. “I love you, Devin. I honestly love you.”

“I love you, too.”