

Mountains of Dawn
by Rene Natan

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Second Edition

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Chapter 1

*Vermeil, Ontario
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The blast scattered bits and pieces of debris over Tanya Caldwell and her canvas. She stared at the glitter of glass speckled on the red tile shingles of her unfinished painting, on her brush and palette, on her hand. Her face. She touched her cheek. Blood as red as the painted shingles coated her fingertips.

“Kathy?” she said. “Kathy, what was that? Where are you?” Her legs shaking, Tanya looked through her broken window and into the driveway.

* * *

In the hospital, they treated Tanya for shock and stitched the deep laceration on her forehead. They couldn't treat the wound in her mind. The Emergency Room admitted her overnight for observation.

“You met this Tanya Caldwell before?” Detective Albert Warner of the Vermeil Police Station asked. He turned toward the front of the hospital elevator and pushed the button for the third floor.

“Yes. Once,” Constable Joe Halliday replied. “She had an accident. Actually, she's had more than one. She reported each of them right after they happened.”

“What do you know about her?”

“She seemed quiet, well-mannered. Neat. Dark hair and eyes, medium build. She's twenty-two, a student at MacKenzie Academy for the Visual Arts. She's an artist.” Halliday hesitated. “A bit strange, maybe? Bottles things up, I think. A dreamer. But aren't all creative people a little off?” He shrugged. Warner frowned.

Warner tapped on the open door to Tanya's room. “Excuse me, Ms. Caldwell?” he asked.

Tanya's closed eyelids fluttered. The white bandage on her forehead accented her pallor, splashes of antiseptic marking her cheeks and chin like war paint. “Yes?” she said, her voice hoarse, rusty.

The detective introduced himself and his partner. “We need to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind. I know it's going to be painful for you, but it will help us find out how it happened.”

“No. No, it's all right. Go right ahead.” Tanya leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes again. “All I can tell you is I lent my car to my roommate, Kathy Alcin. The car blew up.” She drew in a deep, shuddering breath. “Kathy's dead. That's all,” she said, her voice trailing off in a whisper.

“When the ambulance arrived, you were sitting on the driveway with Ms. Alcin's body in your arms, is that correct?”

“Yes.” Tanya's chin and lower lip trembled. “Yes, correct. Her entire right side...the bomb smashed her. It twisted her, tore her apart...” Tanya's eyes were open now. She sat upright, her arms stretched before her as if she still held her friend's body. Tears ran over the antiseptic on

her cheeks and fell, small blood-red drops, to the sheets. Her entire body shook with the memory.

“Ms. Caldwell, would you like me to call a nurse?”

Tanya sighed and fell back against the pillows again. “No. No, I’ll be fine,” she said.

“Could you please start at the beginning, and tell us exactly what happened?”

“I’ll try.” She shifted in bed, trying to get comfortable, but her discomfort wasn’t entirely physical. Her mind went back to earlier that morning, when life seemed so much simpler.

She had just dipped a brush into the red oil paint, then leaned against the drawing board to support her arm, and sketched a triple row of shingles on the roof of a mansion. The sunlight glowed on the mansion roof and highlighted the vines along the walls. “I was working on a painting, a mansion mentioned in a letter. Kathy came in...” Tanya could hear Kathy’s voice in her mind, see her standing there, a tall, thin girl in jeans, a jacket, and a baseball cap. Kathy’s long brown hair, bound into a ponytail, poked through the opening in the back of the cap.

“She said, ‘The house and terrace look very realistic, Tanya. Are you going to include the glycine?’ We talked about it, discussed the letter’s comment about the delicate glycine rambling over the mansion’s walls.”

She paused, took a deep breath. “It was all so normal, you know? Just like any other day. But then, she asked to borrow my car. She said her car wouldn’t start, and she had to pick up her parents at the airport. I hesitated, not sure if I should give it to her.” Tanya was silent, looking into the past.

“And then? Why wouldn’t you loan her your car, if she needed it? Was there something wrong with your car?” Detective Warner asked.

“Well, it ran,” Tanya said. She pushed a strand of damp hair from her cheek. “It looked really bad, but it did run. I was concerned about what her parents would think when they saw it. Kathy laughed, said she’d tell them I’d taken up stunt driving.”

“How was your car damaged?”

“It had been bumped from the back and the sides. It was hard to open the doors, especially on the passenger side. It looked a bit like a car out of a cartoon.” Tanya gave him a tiny smile. “Except the way it happened wasn’t funny.”

“And what was that, Ms. Caldwell?”

“I think, now, someone tried to push me off the road. Before today, I wasn’t certain.” She watched Detective Warner write in his notebook. Constable Halliday stood near the window, his gaze on the street below. “I was bumped from behind and into the mountain side. Steep. Rocky. I forced my car between the mountain on the left and a boulder on the right.” She chewed on her thumbnail, her expression intent. “I didn’t know if the accidents were accidental or not. But now...”

Tanya stared at the detective, her eyes huge like the eyes of a frightened child. Tears spilled from the corners and her lower lip quivered. “The explosion was meant for me, Detective. Kathy died because of me.” Her body shook, her breath came in soft gasps. Her hands covered her face as if to hide her from the memories.

Detective Warner snapped his notebook closed. “Ms. Caldwell, I think you’ve had enough for now. We’ll need a few more questions answered when you’re more up to it. Do you have any family in the area? A friend? I don’t think you should be alone.”

“Kathy’s parents should be at my place by now,” she said, her voice low. Kathy’s parents... how could she cope with their grief, grief so much greater than her own? “I’ll see them when I leave here tomorrow, then...yes, I’ll give my friend Judith a call and see if I can stay at her place for a while.” She paused. “I think you know Judith Abramson; she works at headquarters.”

“Yes, yes. Of course I know Constable Abramson. It’s a good idea to move in with her for the time being,” Detective Warner said. He smiled to Tanya. “That’s all for today.” Turning to Halliday, he added, “Find the rest of her file. I think something’s missing.”

Tanya refused the hospital dinner and dozed, slightly drugged from pain medication. She accepted a sleeping pill around 9:00 pm, anxious not to lie awake in a strange place. The drug spun her down and into a dark, deep sleep.

She woke to the sound of her own voice, screaming “Go away! Away!” The dream drifted too far out of reach for her to grasp and left her with no desire to remember it. She sat upright in the hospital bed for the remainder of the night, eager for the light of morning.

* * *

A cab dropped Tanya off at Vermeil’s public park, a large park for such a small city. Approximately 80 miles outside of Toronto, Vermeil boasted a population of only 150,000 people. Tanya had lived there for three years, all of them with her roommate, Kathy, who became her entire family.

She needed to gather her thoughts, to prepare for the emotional bout with Kathy’s parents. Kind, thoughtful people, Kathy had been their only child. Tanya’s heart ached for them. She had no idea what she could say to ease their pain. She remembered holiday visits to their home, the feeling of being part of a family she had when she was with them. Kathy had been like a sister to her. They had shared everything, from laughter to tears, for almost three years.

Guilt and fear wove through her thoughts as well; the explosion was intended for her. Kathy died for her.

She sat on a bench close to the shore of the Murex River’s small lake and watched the ducks battle for scraps of bread tossed by a family near the banks. Across the water, where the shores were protected by heavy undergrowth, she saw two herons. They stood like living statues, silent, watching the water for the flash of a fish.

In the distance, the cries and laughter of children as they rode the swings and slides of the playground came to her. A baseball game sent the crack of a bat hitting the ball across the water to her. A gentle breeze touched her hair and lifted a strand across her face. She thrust it behind her ear and began to walk.

She passed a gazebo, a delicate bit of architecture reminiscent of Victorian times, and stared across the river at the University campus. In the three years she had been attending the Academy for the Visual Arts, she’d seen every inch of the park. She knew the small indoor zoo as well as her own home, the paths, the trees and changing flowers, the bushes and wildlife living within and alongside of them, the ice and snow of winter. Much of the park had been captured in her paintings.

Everything seemed the same, and yet, different. The world without Kathy’s laughter, her impish jokes, her simple joy in living, would never seem as warm. The solace she expected stayed away.

Kathy’s parents waited for her at her apartment. Tanya left the park and entered her condo.

Kathy’s mother sat on the sofa and stared at the broken windows. Glass still glittered on the carpet, still lay in scattered clumps across the floor. Her husband paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back. Several empty cartons lay on the floor near two suitcases.

“Mrs. Alcin,” Tanya said. Her voice choked, filled with tears. “And Mr. Alcin. I don’t know what to say.” Her face twisted and she sobbed out her pain for the first time since Kathy died.

Mrs. Alcin gathered Tanya in her arms and cried with her while Mr. Alcin patted her back. Pride made his face turn red with held-back tears for a moment, then he joined the women and cried as well.

Tanya hugged the smaller woman, held her close. "I don't know what I'll do without her," she said. "She was my alter-ego, my critic, the laughter in my life."

"My Kathy..." Mr. Alcin said, his voice muffled in sobs.

Mrs. Alcin drew back from Tanya and wiped her eyes. "We won't stay," she said. "I've called back home and made arrangements for the funeral." She gasped back a sob and waited a moment until she could go on. "We have to ship Kathy home, you see, and deal with everything." She couldn't continue.

"It's all wrong," Mr. Alcin said. "Parents shouldn't bury their children. A man should walk his daughter down the aisle, not lay her in her grave." He turned and left the house, slamming the door behind him.

"He'll be all right," Mrs. Alcin said. "It's just too soon. That's one of the reasons we have to go home as soon as possible. I don't think he'll be able to stay here, where it happened, where she's lived, for too long." She squeezed her eyes shut, and seemed to stop breathing for a moment, then drew a deep breath and continued. "We stayed in a motel last night, after we picked up the rental car." She looked across the room to the shattered front windows. "I don't think you should stay here either, dear. Anyone could climb in through those windows. In fact, things looked a bit messed when we arrived, but I'm not sure. It might just be from the explosion." She paused again, her thoughts gone back to her daughter in the midst of the explosion, torn and shattered. She shook her head as if to shake away the image. "I thought I should pack a few of Kathy's things, send them on home, too. Would you help me, Tanya? I don't think I can do it alone."

Tanya nodded, unable to speak. Together, she and Mrs. Alcin packed several cartons and taped them shut. They carried a few cartons, along with the luggage, to the Alcins' rental car.

"Now, Tanya, are you sure you don't want to come back home with us? I know you need to recover and...it would be a blessing to have you around." Mrs. Alcin smiled Kathy's sweet smile at Tanya. Tanya felt as if her heart would shatter.

"No, Mrs. Alcin, thank you so much. I would love to go home with you, but I have school, and work to do here. The police still want to talk to me. I can't hide...although I would love to." Tanya wished she could crawl under the bed and never come out, not until life made more sense, not until cars didn't explode when you drove them, nor strangers try to force you from the roads. "I'll stay with a friend of mine."

"I understand," Mrs. Alcin said. She hugged Tanya tight.

After the Alcins left, Tanya made a call to her friend, Judith, who she knew was out of town, and made arrangements to stay at her place for the next few days.

* * *

Tanya was wandering inside her friend's apartment when the phone rang. "Detective Warner here, Ms. Caldwell," the voice said. "I wonder if you would mind coming in and answering a few more questions?"

"No, I wouldn't mind, Detective. I'm feeling much better."

"Good. I spoke to Judith Abramson her this morning. She asked us to keep an eye on you until she can return home."

“That’s reassuring. I’ll be there shortly.” Tanya hung up the phone and left Judith’s apartment, glad to be outdoors. She drew in a deep breath, smelling the air and feeling the sun’s warmth on her face.

The Vermeil Police Station, located in an old building downtown, had been remodeled so many times, no one could remember its original appearance. The main hall had been cobbled together by breaking down the walls between several small rooms, which left the floor a mosaic of linoleum, hard wood, and battered tiles.

“Ms. Caldwell? Tanya? Do you mind if I call you Tanya?” Detective Warner said, offering his hand to Tanya. “You look great. Your cuts are healing well.”

“I don’t mind at all, Detective. And they are healing well. I’m down to one bit of gauze now.” She smiled. She followed him down the strange-floored hall into a tiny office. Constable Halliday smiled and nodded at her as she entered.

“Not much room in here, but please, take a seat,” Warner said, gesturing at a straight-back wooden chair. “Tell me about the threats you’ve received.”

“Threats? No one’s threatened me.”

“No threats? But the record shows you complained of threats when you were here three weeks ago.”

“No, I don’t think that’s correct. I complained of an accident, my second. I was pushed off the road twice. That’s what I reported three weeks ago. When I came in prior to that, it was to report my first accident.”

Detective Warner frowned. “Excuse me, please, Tanya. Halliday, come with me. I want to check the records.” As they left the room, Tanya heard Warner say, “I knew her files were incomplete. Something is very wrong here.”

They returned a few moments later, Halliday looking nonplused.

“Sorry,” Warner said. “Seems to be a minor problem. Now. Tell us about your accidents, Tanya.”

“The first time, I noticed a car too close to my bumper...”

“Where? What road?” Warner asked.

“Highway 18a,” Tanya replied, looking perplexed. “I gave all of that information to the officer in charge when I came in.” She glanced at Halliday. “You were there, too, I believe.”

“Continue, please, Tanya,” Warner said.

“The car just appeared, right on my bumper. I hadn’t seen it before. I felt a push from behind, a tap, then another. Stronger.” Tanya paused, took a deep breath.

“Did you lose control?” Warner asked.

“Yes. I ended up in the opposite lane, heading into oncoming traffic. I heard a siren. When I looked up, an ambulance was coming right at me, head-on.” Again, she paused and looked back into the terror of the moment. “I slammed on the brakes and my car went into a spin on the wet road. I ended up behind the ambulance, and going in the right direction. Thank God.” She stopped speaking and ran her hand over her face, then took another deep breath. She shuddered. “I still don’t know how I avoided a head-on collision with that ambulance. My little car and I would never have survived it.”

“What happened to the car that bumped you?”

“No idea. It was gone, disappeared.” Tanya rested her head on her hand, her eyes closed. The stress of the past few weeks rolled over her again, cold memories to chill her. “I didn’t believe it was intentional, then. I thought it might have been some kids, messing around, thinking they were funny. I couldn’t imagine anyone would want to hurt me. Not until the explosion.”

“Coffee, Tanya?” Warner asked, still taking notes.

“No, thank you. A glass of water or a cola would be great, though.”

Halliday left and returned with a cold can of cola. Tanya took it with a smile and rubbed the cold can across her forehead.

“Do you feel up to telling us about accident number two now?” Warner asked.

Tanya nodded. She sipped at her cola, then shifted forward in her chair, alert and intent on her story.

“I was returning from Roger Falls. There’s a short cut I like to take—it winds through the woods. Pretty. It’s narrow and winds left and right, so I try to stay in the middle, if I can.” She sat back into the chair and lowered her head. “I don’t remember where the other car came from. I never saw it until it smashed into the rear of my car.” Her breath came faster, as if she were running. “The left side of the road is steep and rocky. I saw a narrow gap between the mountain side and a boulder. My car just squeezed through it, but only just. The other car passed me and disappeared around a turn.” She took a deep drink of cola.

“Do you have any idea who was driving that car?” Warner asked.

“No.”

“Can you describe the car? Or the driver?”

“The car, yes. It was some kind of sporty thing, low on the road, a shiny, silvery body.”

“The driver. Male or female?”

“I have no idea.”

“No idea?” Warner said, looking up at her from his notes.

“No,” Tanya snapped, annoyed. “I was busy trying to stay on the road...trying to stay alive.” She drank deep from her cola, her eyes closed.

“I guess that’s all for today. Please, let us know if you’re going to be leaving for any reason, and if you need anything, just give us a call.” Detective Warner stood and offered Tanya his hand. When she reached for it, he clasped her hand in both of his. “Are you doing all right?” he asked.

“Yes, I guess I am,” she replied with a soft smile, pleased he was so considerate of her. “Physically, I feel fine, but I still have terrible nightmares. I see Kathy, as she was just a bit before, and then as she was right after the accident. I can’t go back to sleep after one of those.”

“It’s going to pass with time, Tanya. Time, as the saying goes, will heal all. The image will just be a sad memory.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” She looked deep into his eyes, started to say something more, then stopped. She shook his hand and left the building.

She had just returned to Judith’s apartment when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Tanya? Sorry to bother you so soon. Detective Warner here.”

“Yes,” she said, ice filling her chest with dread. “What’s wrong, Detective?”

“We’ve just received information your condo has been burglarized. Do you have any idea what they’re looking for?”

“God, no. I left most of my belongings behind, but I can’t imagine what anyone would want. I don’t think I own anything of value. I brought with me some clothes, my papers and my drawing supplies.”

“And you have no idea who would want to harm you? None at all?”

“No, none. Did the explosives used on my car give you any information?” She paced the length of the phone cord and back.

“Not much. The traces are similar to those we found in one other instance. We suspect an amateur, someone who is angry with you for a real or imagined slight. Maybe your art work was chosen over his, or the teacher likes you more. Whatever. My advice is to get out of town.”

“Get out of town? Just leave? Leave my friends, my work...everything? My life is here.” Tanya stood, frozen, listening to the words, the terrible words... Leave. Pack your things and go away.

“You may not have a life, otherwise. Go away...just for a little while. We’ll keep on looking in the meantime.”

“I’ll think about it,” Tanya said and hung up the telephone. “Goodbye,” she said as she left the room, dazed. Her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides, frustration grasping at her. Leave...Pack and leave...

* * *

From the depths of sleep, Tanya heard a woman’s terrified scream. She opened her eyes. “Go away! Away...” The words echoed in her ears, screamed in her own voice. Another nightmare. She sat up in the bed and turned on the bedside lamp.

Her nightdress clung to her, cold and wet, soaked with perspiration. Her heart fluttered in her chest, a small trapped bird, and sent her pulse pounding in her temples. She gasped for breath as if she were running a marathon. A headache raged.

Pack and leave. She thought about those words as she slid from bed and fetched a clean nightdress, slipped the damp one off, and felt the soft, dry folds of the clean garment cover her nude body. Pack and leave. Those damn words, told to her, to pack her things and leave one foster home for another. She left the old farm behind for a new one, her old friends behind for the unknown. Pack. A small amount of clothes, old and new drawings, her paints. Her life in a suitcase, so small and simple.

In her nightmare, she stood at the side of an empty, dusty road. In each direction, she could see nothing but dust and dirt, dead trees and naked bushes. She waited for an unknown car which would take her to another nowhere, a place without a name and people without faces. There was more to the dream, but she could never remember. The nebulous, wispy images refused to be grasped.

But the dreams, of late, always ended in the same way. Kathy. Kathy, staggering down the dusty road toward her, her disfigured body blown to gigantic proportions. She stomped with the pulverized parts of her leg, then thrust her other leg forward. Her arms flailed, one sending showers of blood and flesh into the road, the other reaching for Tanya. One eye, blown out of the socket, hung by a thread of nerves and fiber, the other stared at Tanya as the monstrous Kathy howled her pain.

She sobbed, went into the bathroom and turned on the lights. More light to expose what hid in the shadows, more light to remove fear. Making a cup with her hands, she splashed cold water on her face and neck, then washed down four aspirins. Her reflection in the mirror mocked her with blanched, white skin still patched with gauze. Her eyes stared into the distance, hurt and confused.

“I can’t go on like this,” she said aloud, her voice a whisper. “I can’t work, can’t sleep, can’t rest. I don’t know me. I’m not Tanya.” She stared into her own eyes as she intoned the words, informing herself of her problems, then left the room. She didn’t bother to turn off the light.

Chapter 2

The nightmare knocked all thoughts of sleep from Tanya. She wandered into the kitchen and put on a pot of water to boil. Camomile tea, she thought. Nice and hot with a bit of honey, just like Mom made it when she was small.

She sat at the table and rested her head in her hand. Where did that thought come from? It had been so very long since she remembered her early childhood. In fact, she hardly remembered it at all. But now, with no warning, memories came flooding back—her mother, full of laughter; her father...she had images of a strong man holding her in his lap and reading to her, sharing loving glances with Mother. Her brother, a sleeping baby, lay cradled on her mother's lap. Mother sipped her tea and listened as Father continued to read.

Autumn, and the beginning of school... Her first year at school, just six and small for her age. Nanny tucking a clean hanky in her pocket, adjusting her coat... Nanny, who died too soon. Mother and Father... Tanya watched them leave, watched them enter the big car to take them to the airport. Her baby brother, wrapped in blankets, rode in Mother's arms. Gone, never to return.

She saw herself, a lost child, as her home was sold. She listened in her mind's ear as Uncle Ron, a stranger to her, told her she was an orphan. No one wanted her. No one cared. She was, he told her, a great inconvenience, but he would provide if she behaved.

He sent her to the first farm, and then to the second less than a year later. And many others after that. Rules changed from place to place, but she learned never to question. Questions and objections could lead to pain and punishment.

Tanya found her only solace in school, where she learned how to learn, how to study, how to play. Expectations were clear, rules were simple. She loved everything about school, and did well.

The tea kettle whistled, breaking into her thoughts. Tanya poured hot water into the pot, added a teaspoon of honey on top of the tea, and left it to steep.

Her mind returned to the memories brought back by Detective Warner's words, and by her dream. Pack and leave... So many times, she had to gather her belongings and leave, an unwanted orphan, worthless...

She shook her head. No, not worthless. Tanya's angel took her into the future, brought her to where she was now—the angel from her childhood Christmas tree, drawn by eager fingers and entered into the school contest. She could still feel the pencils in her hands, carefully drawing the angel over and over in her every free moment from chores and fifth grade homework. With no colored pastels available, she varied the shades of darkness to contrast each element in her scene. And the angel grew, took form—tall and regal, his wings showed every feather as they partially enfolded his body. His cheeks puffed from the effort to force sound from the long trumpet. His robe flowed to touch the toes of each slender foot.

The angel's creation took hours of attentive work, but the day before the deadline, he stood every bit complete. His arms stretched high and determined; he held the trumpet high in the sign of jubilation.

And her angel won. Tanya poured her tea, breathed deep of the aroma, and listened to the applause in her mind from the audience of long ago. Her angel won her more than a contest,

more than praise. He won her a teacher. Her arts teacher, a young man in a wheelchair, chose to teach her over the entire summer. She learned the rudiments of painting, the secrets and crafts of drawing, and left her loneliness behind in paper, paints, and work.

Tanya sipped her tea, still wandering in the past.

“Is there enough for me in there?”

Startled, Tanya jumped and nearly dumped the tea pot. “Judith! I didn’t expect you until tomorrow. I’m so glad to see you.” She hugged the taller, slender woman, and was hugged in return.

Judith poured herself a cup of tea and sat at the table. “I left early. Didn’t bother with the going-home party. I thought you might need some company.” She grinned, flashed her perfect white teeth. Her huge brown eyes showed signs of exhaustion.

“You must have been driving for hours. But thank God you’re here. I doubt if I’d ever get back to sleep tonight, if you weren’t. What time is it?” Tanya glanced at the kitchen clock.

“Just a bit after midnight,” Judith replied. “So, what’s keeping you awake? Bad dreams, or hearing noises in a strange house?” She paused to swallow her tea in two gulps, then poured another cup. “I felt terrible I couldn’t be here for you when you needed me, but I would have lost the opportunity to work with this new high-profile agency.” She looked thoughtful. “Perhaps they’ll be of use to you, eventually.”

“I understand, truly,” Tanya said. “I’m just so glad you’re here now. Judith, I’m concerned. Detective Warner told me to leave the area. What do you think?”

“That’s not good,” Judith said, her brows creased in a frown. “Warner doesn’t scare easily. If he said that, he has to have a good reason, and more than he’s told you.”

“What?”

“I have no idea,” Judith replied, shaking her head, “and I doubt if he would tell me, either, since I plan on leaving for good.”

“Where are you going? Are you going far away?” Tanya asked, a twinge of fear washing over her.

“No, no. I’m going to take this new job with the Investigation Agency I mentioned before. It’s located in downtown Vermeil.” She paused, took a deep breath. “They trained me well, at the camp. I think I prefer their work to the work I’ve done in the past. It will be different, exciting. I’d be helping the law rather than enforcing it.”

“That sounds much better for you.”

“Yes, I think so, too. I’ll be involved in some investigations, some of the action. I’ll have access to the archives...that sort of thing. But what about you?”

“I’d hate to leave right now. I’d lose a term, at least. We’ve just begun.”

“I know how important school is for you, Tanya, but think... How important is your life to you?”

Tanya stared at her friend, her eyes wide.

“It’s a serious situation. Someone pushed you off the road, not once, but twice. You lucked out there. Then, your car... Kathy took that, but you know it was intended for you.” Judith shook her head. “You can’t keep counting on luck, Tanya. Someone wants you out of the way.”

“You want me to run. Just run, without ever seeing who is after me...and what’s to stop him from finding me again?”

“Look, I know how you feel. Let’s just sleep on it, and talk about it again in the morning. I’m beat, and I know you are, too.” Judith ran her hand over her face and pushed her hair back. “Tomorrow, I’ll make a few calls and see what I can find. We’ll work something out.”

* * *

Tanya woke to bright sunlight streaming in the den window. She slid from bed, wrapped her robe around her, and went into the kitchen.

“Judith?” No answer. A note on the table told her Judith would be back shortly. With a sigh, she settled into the dining nook with a cup of coffee.

Judith had been her friend for almost a year, since Tanya worked at the Arts Gallery as a volunteer, Judith as a guard. Tanya still enjoyed the work—updating the database of the collection; preparing new sketches for the fall catalogue, and typing identification labels. Judith interested her from the first time, when she saw her walk by on her patrol. Her artist’s eye was captured by the incongruity of an elegant beauty, fashion-model perfect, wearing a police uniform and lugging a holstered gun.

They had exchanged a few words of greeting for about a week, until the day Tanya saw Judith in the cafeteria, sitting alone at a table. She remembered their conversation, how their friendship began, and grew from there.

“Mind if I join you?” she asked.

“No, I’d be happy to have the company. Pretty quiet right now,” Judith replied.

“Tuesday’s usually pretty slow,” Tanya said. She crumbled a cracker into her soup bowl. “You’re a cop, aren’t you? I mean, a police officer?”

“Yes, but I’m on leave right now.”

“What brought you here?”

“Quiet. Peace. Lack of stress, I guess.” Judith sighed.

“Oh, I just recognized you! It’s been driving me crazy. I knew I’d seen you before.” Tanya grinned. “You won last year’s ‘Guns for Fun’ competition.”

Judith frowned. “Yes. I love target shooting. I get a lot of opportunities to practice that, in my job. Some of them are the wrong kind of practice, though.” She turned from Tanya. “I would rather have the kind of shooting experience that goes with winning contests.” She glanced back, smiled. “I won the last four years—two firsts, two silver medals.”

Tanya remembered her whistle of admiration.

Judith told her, over a period of several lunches, of her discomfort in her job as a police officer.

“I hate to hurt people,” Judith said, her dark eyes filling. “I do what I have to do, but I don’t like it.”

And Tanya listened. She knew from experience the more she listened, the less she had to reveal about herself. No one need know how different she was; no one need feel pity for her. She forced Tanya into the background and refused to deal with her, while bringing out the other person’s inner self.

Tanya leaned back and glanced at a framed picture hung on Judith’s living room wall. She smiled as she remembered the picture’s creation.

“I did it while you bragged about that awful idea of prying into the sacred inner thoughts of people, while trying to discover the criminal inclinations we all make a supreme effort to hide,” Tanya had said, laughing.

Judith had pontificated on the subject of psychological profiles as a means to predict criminal behavior. “Nobody has to suffer because of crime, if we are able to prevent it,” she said. Her eyes had the intent look of a zealot, her jaw set and determined.

Tanya, seated on the high stool behind the cashier's desk at the Gallery, had nodded, encouraged her rant. She stared at Judith for seconds at a time, then glanced down.

"Okay," Judith said. "What are you up to?" She stood on tip toe to see over the counter. "Let's see." She walked around the desk and stood beside Tanya.

"God. That's fantastic." Her mouth dropped open as she stared at herself, sketched on a sheet of 11" x 17" paper.

"It's yours," Tanya said.

She glanced again at it, nestled against the wall in its elegant frame, guarded from dirt and dust by a sheet of beveled glass. She smiled. Judith's fine, oval face smiled back at her. Her chiseled features fascinated Tanya, as always, with the small nose and sensuous mouth. She had tried and succeeded in capturing Judith's expression, the light in her eyes that showed a special soul. The day of Judith's passionate discourse on people's suffering brought it clearly to Tanya's attention, and to Tanya's drawing.

She frowned for a moment, remembering Judith's questions.

"Why do you work here, at the Gallery, when you could be making money with your art?" Judith asked. "You must need money. Why don't you sell your work?"

"I won a scholarship to MacKenzie Academy," Tanya had said, avoiding the real question. "And I like it here."

"Checking out your old work, are you?" a voice said from the front door. "Come help me with this stuff. The elevators are out of order, and I had to climb fourteen floors with four bags of groceries." Judith huffed an exhausted breath. "At the least, come tell me how sorry you feel for me." She laughed and came into the dining nook lugging four large bags. She glanced at Tanya. "You look like you could use some food."

"What do you have there?" Tanya asked, her mouth beginning to water from the wonderful aromas.

"Food," Judith replied. "When I left this morning, early, you were out like a light. Guess you needed to catch up on some sleep. I had a ton of things to do, and now I'm back with a good idea and a fantastic meal." She looked as proud as a lioness bringing food back to the pride, and nearly as elegant. She unloaded four containers onto the table.

Tanya read the tags on the cartons, stumbling over each word. "*Artichauts à la vinaigrette, canard rôti, croquettes de pomme-de-terre, fenouils au gratin, galette aux cerises*—can you translate?"

"Can't. Got them at the French Buffet. It's a new restaurant, just opened. I scooped a bit from five different containers, and grabbed the tags, too. I thought we could improve on our French."

"By eating French food?"

"No, or course not. By matching each dish with the correct tag."

Tanya giggled. "But the tags are all loose. I'm afraid it's going to be surprises, all the way." She lifted the lids and sniffed the contents of each container.

"It's supposed to be super, anyway. And you usually eat anything that's put in front of you, so dig in."

"What's first?"

"Let's see. The *galette* looks like humble pie—we could start with the meat."

"Great," Tanya said, helping herself to the duck. "Now, what's the good idea you mentioned?"

"I called the head of the 'Invicta.' That's the agency of the camp where I trained."

"I remember," Tanya said, putting a large forkful of duck into her mouth.

“I told him I was going to accept the offer and join the agency. He seemed pleased. Then...” She paused, glanced at Tanya as if to weigh her reactions. “I briefly mentioned your accidents. He knew about them. In detail.” She paused again to scoop some food on to her plate, and take a small bite. “The man’s sensational. He knows everything, no matter where it’s happened. I think, sometimes, he knows about things that haven’t happened yet.” She paused for another forkful of food. “He’s willing to listen to you and advise you.” She ate a bit of a *croquette*. “I can introduce him to you, right away.” She put her full attention on her plate.

“What? I don’t understand. I’m not even dressed yet.” Tanya said, her eyes wide.

“We don’t need to go anywhere,” Judith replied. “Take your plate and follow me. I’ll just show you his Web page, on my new computer.”

She picked up her plate, added a few more scoops of food, and left the table. “Come and see,” she said, preceding Tanya into the den.

Judith turned the machine on, then struck a few keys to connect her new Packard Bell Pentium to the local Internet supporter. She typed a few commands and the screen flashed on the word ‘Invicta.’ It glowed in huge letters, surrounded by a string of international flags parading around it in a circular motion. Directly under the blazing logo was the name of the director, Malcolm Clark, and his picture. Following those were the agency’s telephone number, fax numbers, electronic mail addresses, and Web links.

Judith clicked on a link, which brought them to an abridged bio of Malcolm Clark:

“Former Chief of Police, Metropolitan Toronto Police Service, Malcolm Clark cooperated with Interpol, with the government of Mexico, the United States, Brazil, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany.

“Malcolm Clark graduated summa cum laude from Dromouth University, receiving his doctorate in medicine. In 1971, following the death of his wife—a victim of an unpunished crime—he joined law enforcement. In 1990, he was awarded the ‘Commonwealth Medal of Honour’ for his extraordinary contributions in the service of his country. In 1996, he founded ‘Invicta,’ an international private agency for the active protection of citizens against crime.

“The Invicta prides itself on including among its employees former officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and of other high-profile police departments around the country and abroad.

“Malcolm Clark received recognition from all over the world for his ability to solve intricate, at times mysterious, cases.”

The Web page continued with several headings, each a hot link to another page. The first read ‘Articles of the Press on Malcolm Clark,’ the last, simply, ‘Malcolm Clark.’

“Want to see a short movie of the man?” Judith asked.

“Sure,” Tanya replied, still trying to figure out how all of that information reached Judith’s computer in a matter of minutes.

Judith clicked on the last line with her mouse. Approximately twenty short video clips appeared, one after the other, showing the former chief of police in the midst of a crowd of reporters as he made statements following the arrest of wanted criminals.

“Impressive?” Judith asked.

“It certainly is,” Tanya replied. “How about ‘Fees and Related Issues?’”

“Sure.”

The page appeared, basic text with no graphics, no pretty pictures to distract the eyes of the reader. “Basic fees are charged according to services requested and difficulty of case. Final fees depend on time and number of agents involved.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything,” Tanya said with disappointment.

“Oh, yes, it does,” Judith said. “It tells you that the services of the Invicta are expensive... very expensive. It tells you they’re too expensive to specify, and worth every penny.” She grinned.

Chapter 3

Tanya shivered. What had started as an Indian summer day, warm and sunny, began to give signs of cold weather on its way. The westerly breeze blew, intermittent at first, whirling the softest leaves with levity and grace. By afternoon and nearing time for her appointment, the breeze turned into a steady and pungent wind which broke off branches and forcefully bent trees.

She watched two men nail logs together and raise a snow fence along the open field surrounding the headquarters of Malcolm Clark. At a distance, a ravine and dense wood flanked the building on two sides.

Tanya drove her rental car around the circular driveway which had been cut through the middle of the front lawn. She stared at the building as she approached—purple and gray bricks, interspaced with long, dark windows, and unpainted concrete for the sides. The two-story construction gave the appearance of a normal business center, rather than the headquarters of an intelligence agency.

She saw one C band parabolic satellite receiver and three new RCA digital dishes behind the building in a fenced area. Certainly is high tech, she thought, awed. I have no idea what those things do, but I'm sure they're linked to outer space. She grinned. "Might even be trying to talk to extraterrestrials," she said aloud, the sound of her own voice reassuring.

She pulled her car in front of the building and parked, leaving the keys inside, just in case someone needed to move it. And she entered the headquarters of the Invicta.

In the reception room, she sat on a brightly upholstered chair and fingered the metal cross she wore around her neck. The magazines on the low, square table in front of her held no interest, nor did the collection of recent movies near the VCR and the television set.

What's the worst that can happen? she thought, philosophically. I'll have to leave town. Regrettable, but not a tragedy, like Kathy's death. What will be... She sighed.

Judith leaned into the room from the doorway. "Mr. Clark wants to see you now," she said, with a smile. "He prefers to see you alone, so I'm off to the basement. I can't wait to check out all the equipment they have."

If it weren't for his warm smile, Malcolm Clark would have terrified Tanya. The man stood six feet ten inches tall and weighed more than two hundred and fifty pounds. He wore wrinkles on his forehead and around his mouth and eyes like badges earned 'above and beyond the call.' He showed the wear and tear of his calling, as well as the pain he'd seen over the years.

Tanya doubted his deep set eyes missed anything, from a glint of the eye to a shadow in the background. Judith had told her he claimed his ability to observe declined with age—he had just turned fifty nine—but Judith denied it vigorously. She said he could play back a casual encounter or a testimony from memory, with deadly precision, even several months later. She claimed his mission in life was to force everybody to respect the law, nothing more, nothing less, as if it were a mission assigned by the gods.

Tanya smiled back at him, his smile infectious.

"Come in, come in," he said, rising to greet her. He clasped her hand in both of his. "Miss Tanya Caldwell, right? A friend of Judith's, right?" Before Tanya could reply, he said, "Malcolm

Clark here.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Clark. Judith has told me so much about you.” He gestured, and she sat in the chair before his desk, her hands folded in her lap.

“Judith told me of your problems,” he said with a warm smile that showed his perfect teeth. “But I want to hear about it from you. Tell me about your two accidents and the circumstances surrounding the death of your roommate.”

Tanya stared into his eyes. She felt as if he could see completely through her, as if she were as transparent as the very air around her. She looked away from him and spoke to his twenty five years of service award on the wall. In a monotone, she told her story once again, slowly and smoothly, as she’d told Detective Warner, but even more concisely.

“Is that all?” he asked, after a moment of silence.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Could you tell me a bit about your past life, perhaps?” His smile was warm, inviting.

Tanya told him the usual information she gave everyone— orphan, foster homes, passion for painting, scholarships and academic interests. She covered her entire life in ten minutes.

The silence stretched. Tanya glanced all around the room, her gaze wandering from picture to floor, to the papers on Clark’s desk. She did not look into his eyes.

“Tanya,” he said, an undercurrent of concern in his voice, “I need to know you, need to know where you are, where you’ve been, and where you’re going.” He paused. “I need to know what you’ve done in your life.”

Tanya became defensive. “I never harmed anybody, Mr. Clark. I always have been very careful not hurt anybody’s feelings. I couldn’t afford to upset anybody around me, believe me.” Her voice rose, harsh with anxiety. “I’ve done nothing wrong. Absolutely nothing.”

“It may be true you’ve done nothing, Tanya.” He paused at a knock on the door. “Come in,” he said. He turned to her, looked close into her face. “It may be who you are, not what you’ve done.”

A tall, slender young man entered the office with a small tray. He deposited it on Malcolm Clark’s desk. It held two cups, a small coffee pot, a sugar bowl and creamer half full of cream. “I thought you might need this about now,” he said. “Your coffee machine is on the blink.”

“Paul Brennon, Tanya Caldwell,” Malcolm said. He raised his eyebrow in inquiry as he lifted the coffee pot and held it over a cup. Tanya shook her head.

“No, thank you,” she said.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I need this witch’s brew to keep me going, or I get grumpy. Paul knows how to prevent problems in this office.”

“That’s only partially true,” Paul said, smiling at Tanya, his deep blue eyes intent on her face as if he were trying to commit it to memory. “You’ll probably get grumpy anyway.” He handed Malcolm a sheet of paper. “Here’s the report you wanted.”

Malcolm put on his half lensed reading glasses and examined the paper. “I was afraid of that—out of the country explosive.” His eyes sought Tanya above his glasses. “Do you know Mr. Brian Miller?” he asked.

“No.”

“Have you ever heard of him?”

“I don’t think so. The name doesn’t ring a bell. Is he a teacher at the Academy, or a painter, or someone working at the Arts Gallery?”

“No. Time for a break,” he Malcolm said. “I have a bit of research to do, then I’ll join you again in, say...half an hour.”

Outside the office, Malcolm glanced at Paul. “Tanya’s case has some similarity with my brother’s, don’t you think?” As usual, Malcolm referred to Brian Miller as his brother, even if they were not blood related; they had just grown up together.

Paul nodded, pensive.

“Hmm. Call Brian and ask him if he’s ever heard of Tanya Caldwell. Long shot, but you never know. Give him a description of her, too.” He grinned. “I think you’ll be able to do that pretty well, don’t you? You never took your eyes off her.”

Paul grinned back with a slight blush. “Okay, will do.” He sat on the edge of his desk, one of six in the large office. “Not sure if he’ll be there, though.”

“Give it a try. The explosives are identical—Telgex. That’s a strong link. In both cases, the police suspect an amateur, not a professional. That’s link number two. No link on the sports car yet, but there might be.”

“What are you going to tell her?” Paul asked, taking notes. “She looks scared half to death, almost lost.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to disappoint her by telling her the same thing the police told her. Leave town. Pack and leave, and don’t come back for a couple of months. I doubt if she could afford to hire a bodyguard.”

Judith stayed with Tanya until Malcolm returned, slightly less than half an hour later. She slipped out of the room as Malcolm entered. Tanya stood before a grouping of photographs of the Stanley Cup winners. Grouped in three’s, the pictures hung on the largest wall between the long windows.

“Hockey fan?” Malcolm asked.

“Not really,” Tanya replied, turning toward him. “My boyfriend—that is, my ex boyfriend—was a member of the hockey team, here on campus. I went to watch him play and we watched some games on television.”

“Why is he your ex boyfriend?”

“He won a scholarship, about two years ago. He moved to Denver.”

Malcolm frowned, looked thoughtful. “His name...I remember reading about an up and coming young star... His name was Leight—John Leight.”

“Jeff Leight, but you were close. You have an amazing memory.”

“Jeff Leight, right.” He gestured for Tanya to sit in front of him. “I’m afraid there isn’t much I can do for you, Tanya. I agree with the suggestion the police gave you. Pack and leave. Move out of town for two or three months.”

“I’m really a target, aren’t I?” she asked, her eyes wide. Her fingers twisted the cross at her neck, rubbed at it, then turned it from side to side.

Malcolm nodded. “It appears so.”

“What do other people do, if this happens to them? Do they all run away? Do they leave their jobs, their families, their lives, and just run?” Her voice was tight with tears.

“No, not everyone. Some people can afford to build protection around themselves. They hire guards around the clock. They have money, Tanya.” His voice was soft, gentle.

“I have money.”

“I’m sure you do, since you manage school and a nice home without working, but I speak of *big* money.” Malcolm spread his arms wide. “Really *big*.”

Tanya leaned close to Malcolm and stared directly into his eyes. “I have really *big* money.”

“Ten million dollars?” Malcolm said, with a smirk.

“No. Twenty. I have *twenty* million dollars.”

Malcolm Clark’s jaw dropped. With his mouth still open, he pulled her file to him and leafed through it. “Are you sure?” he asked, his eyes wide, looking at her from above his reading glasses.

Tanya laughed. “Yes, I’m sure. I know I give the impression of the poor little orphan. I act like a poor girl. That’s because I was poor, up until about four years ago. Raised in foster homes, taught to scrimp and save...but four years ago, everything changed.”

“What happened?” He closed the file and folded his hands on top of it.

“My parents left me a trust. It came to light, surprising everyone, me most of all. I never counted the money—the bank did it for me. And I’ve hardly had reason to spend any of it, until now.”

Malcolm’s mouth still hung open in shock. Tanya laughed.

“Listen, Mr. Clark...I’ll do anything you say, hire anyone you suggest, for as long as you deem necessary. But don’t make me pack and leave. I never had a life, until I came here. I don’t want to lose it. It’s all I have.”

“Except for just a wee bit of dollars,” Malcolm Clark said with a grin.

“Twenty million, Mr. Clark, tw e nty mil li on dollars.”

As she drove home, she remembered the meeting and the funny little man who was the director of the bank. She remembered her shock more than anything else.

“Twenty million dollars...” Tanya gasped, held her breath for a moment, then let it out with a whoosh. “Are you sure?” She sat, totally flabbergasted, in front of the bank’s director.

“Oh, yes, indeed, Miss Caldwell,” he said. “That’s the amount we have in your name, plus a few thousand and some change. It appears the fund was established only weeks before your parents died.” He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. “It has increased in value every year until now, and will continue to increase, if you handle it well.” He shoved a business card at her.

“This is the lawyer who can assist you with any problems or questions you may encounter in your new financial position.”

Tanya took the card. It read, “Leslie G. Hadson, Corporate Lawyer, 32 B. Franklin Avenue.”

The director gestured at the card. “That building had been our bank’s headquarters before we moved to this new complex. It’s easy to find.”

“I don’t understand,” Tanya said, sliding the card into her purse. “I’ve been broke most of my life. Couldn’t even buy a new dress...always went to the Salvation Army. Never went to the theater, or to a museum. Saved every penny I could, and all the time I had all of this money?”

“Well, no, not all of it. You didn’t have that amount until it had been properly invested. You need to have someone explain to you about making profitable investments.” He wound his fingers together and glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes.

“I have an idea,” he said, his voice suave. “You come here one hour each week, after we close, and I’ll teach you the rudiments of banking. Capital. Interest. Transactions. Investments. Bonds and shares. The works.”

“That would be nice of you,” said Tanya, a bit surprised.

“Well, in exchange...”

“In exchange, what?” she asked, frowning.

“In exchange you promise to continue to use our services for your banking. You’re our most important investor, Miss Caldwell.” He simpered.

“I’m important?” she asked. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. You’re the person with the largest deposit at the bank. We value your business. Let’s say, in exchange for the lessons, you promise to stay with our bank for a couple more years?”

Tanya looked thoughtful, then answered, “Yes. I’ll leave my money with your bank for two more years.”

And then...then she discovered she had also been left an estate on the Italian Riviera, a neoclassical mansion with adjoined orchard and vineyard.

She had allowed herself only to dream, about the mansion and all that she could do with the bulk of her money. For the time being she would use only some of the yearly interest to go to school.

But the money had a use in the present, she thought now, a need. She would use it to protect herself, to save herself from the terrible words ‘pack and leave.’

It was time.

* * *

Malcolm saw to her bodyguards immediately. He introduced her to Charles Aldrin, an experienced driver and excellent shot, and Edda Milton, a retired police officer. Charles became her shadow. Together, they found a new rental house for her. Charles personally supervised the installation of the finest security system. He refused to allow Tanya to go anywhere without him.

Edda became her housekeeper and personal bodyguard, with a bedroom near Tanya’s. She listened through the night, occasionally getting up to wander around the house, checking windows and doors, alert for the sounds of the alarm system.

Tanya found it difficult, at first, to adjust to strangers living with her, caring for her. She was much more used to being on her own, independent. She still suffered from the occasional nightmare, though they were weaker and less frequent. She began the attempt to pull the pieces of her life back together.

Chapter 4

The table glowed with soft candle light as Tanya lit the silver candelabrams on each side. The white of the table cloth caught the candle's glow and shimmered with tracings of gold. She pressed her fingers across the starched surface, smoothing imaginary wrinkles, and adjusted the Royal Doulton place settings. Suffering from boredom and slightly depressed, Tanya had decided to hold a dinner party.

"You never told me you had money," Judith said, beside her.

"You never asked," Tanya said, avoiding the subject as she skirted her friend and adjusted another place setting. She lifted the crystal wine goblet and held it toward the candle light, watching the sparkles, fire light caught and held within.

"I did. I asked you why you were a volunteer at the Arts Gallery, and why you didn't sell your work."

Tanya placed the goblet beside the dishes, and turned to her friend. "I'm sorry," she said, her expression contrite. "I really didn't want to hide anything from you, and it certainly wasn't because I didn't trust you. Part of it is reluctance to show off my wealth, wealth I didn't even know I had until four years ago. And that's the other part—I'm simply not used to being rich." She frowned. "To go from dirt poor to rich, just like that..." She snapped her fingers. "I have a tendency not to believe it myself, at times." She removed two goblets from the table and poured wine for Judith and herself. "Let's sit. Charles and Edda should be here any minute."

"How did you find out about the money?" Judith asked.

Tanya looked slightly uncomfortable, as if the subject disturbed her. "It was late afternoon, I remember," she said. "A man arrived at the Listown Farm, near North Bay. He was wearing a dark suit and a bright tie—I can still see that tie in my mind's eye—bright yellow, almost phosphorescent—and shiny, expensive shoes. He told me he'd been wandering around looking for the owner when he heard noise coming from the barn." Tanya paused. "The pig barn. The barn I was cleaning."

"A pig barn!" Judith said, looking disgusted. "I hear the smell is atrocious."

"It's pretty bad, but you get used to it." Tanya looked thoughtful, lifted her wine glass to the light and watched the glitter. "You get used to most anything, in time."

"So, what did the phosphorescent man want?" Judith asked.

"He seemed to want answers. He asked me a whole lot of questions, like who I was and where I'd been, and so on. Then he told me to meet him in his office the next week, after school. That's how it all started."

"Who was he?" Judith sipped her wine, her fingers trailing over the goblet's carving.

"A private detective. He'd been sent to find me."

"Why hadn't anyone contacted you before?"

"I don't know. There was a fund. Mom and Dad had set up a fund for me, right before their accident. It wasn't supposed to come to me until I turned eighteen."

"And no one else knew about it?"

"Not really. The old judge Mom and Dad used had made some notes about it and left them in his home office. He died around the same time as my parents." Tanya paused, took a long drink

from her wine. “Now the story becomes foggy...”

“It wasn’t that clear before.”

Tanya frowned at her and continued. “The judge’s niece found the notes when she was packing up his office. She planned on selling the house. I was about seventeen at the time. The notes, or rather, documents, included the date, the total amount of money, the financial institution where the deposit had been made, and some basic information about me.”

Tanya shrugged. “That’s what I was told. The niece notified the financial institution, a private detective was hired, and I was found. The money was there for me. That’s what really mattered, twenty million dollars, all for me.”

“You’re certainly practical,” Judith said, smiling.

“Hello, Charles,” Tanya said as a man in a beige suit entered the dining room. “Judith Abramson, Charles Aldrin. Charles is my bodyguard, Judith.”

With quick, brisk movements, Charles crossed the room to Judith and offered his hand. Of medium height, he stood on a level with the tall, slender Judith. He clasped her hand.

“I’ve heard so much about you from Tanya, Mr. Aldrin. I work for Mr. Clark, too.”

“I know,” Charles said, smiling. “Everything looks so elegant, Tanya.”

“Where’s Edda?” Tanya asked.

“Edda is right here,” a voice from behind her answered. Edda, a woman in her fifties, wore a severe navy blue suit. Her short, straight hair gleamed, framing a warm, friendly face. “Hello, everyone,” she said, “I’m Edda Milton, here with the food.” She grinned as she wheeled a cart full of covered dishes into the room.

“Oh, good, Edda! I’m starved,” Tanya said.

“Edda, did you cook all that?” Judith asked as the covered dishes were placed on the table.

“No,” Edda replied. “Tanya didn’t let me cook tonight. She sent out to a gourmet restaurant.”

“Edda is my right hand,” Tanya said with a smile at Edda. “For once, I wanted her to relax and enjoy.”

“Tanya, this is all so beautiful,” Judith said. “Big house, nice furniture...even the china is beautiful.” She fingered the flowered pattern on her dish’s rim.

Tanya laughed. “It’s all rented, Judith. House, furniture, dishes...all of it.”

“I see. Wise move,” Judith said.

Charles kept his gaze on Judith as if he were unable to glance away. “I hear you’re an excellent shot, Judith. Busy winning medals. Is that short or long range?”

“Both,” she replied. “I’m fast and accurate.” She paused. “I believe it’s because of my eyesight,” Judith said. She scrunched up her face, squinting her eyes, and laughed. “I have 23/20 eyesight. I can recognize the target in front of me before anyone else does.”

“Interesting,” Charles said. “Do you practice much?”

Judith smiled up at Charles. “It’s my hobby, or perhaps I should say, my obsession. I’m at the range whenever I have any free time.”

“Pity you left the force. They need people like you.” Charles took his seat at the table.

After a fairly long pause, Tanya turned to Judith. “Was action stressful for you, Judith?” she asked.

“Well—” Judith replied. “During times of real danger, I’m cool, almost a machine. My entire body is alert. But later, I question myself. I worry I may have hurt someone unnecessarily.” She looked pensive. “I’m filled with self-doubt, in the aftermath.”

Tanya reached across the table and patted her friend’s hand. “Your new job should be less stressful for you.”

“Hopefully,” Judith said.

A delicious aroma drifted from the covered dishes. Edda lifted one and offered a huge plate of spareribs to Judith. “Help yourself,” she said. “Are you in charge of Tanya’s case?”

Judith carefully lifted the food onto her plate and passed the platter to Charles. “No,” she replied. “Right now, there’s nothing much anyone can do for her. The agency—the Invicta—is concentrating on the explosive. It’s manufactured in Norway.” She paused to help herself to some garlic mashed potatoes from a steaming tureen. “The agency wants to find out which companies sell directly to private citizens, and how much at any given time.” She added a helping of roasted asparagus to her plate.

“Tanya, this food is marvelous,” she said. “Lamb with mint sauce, too. Oh, boy, I’ll never manage to eat all I’d like to eat, without busting!”

Charles stood and refilled the wine glasses. “Where do they plan to go from there, Judith?” he asked.

“I’ve been told Mr. Clark plans to hire a new person from the police department. He’s just a constable, but he has a lot of experience with explosives,” Judith replied.

Charles looked thoughtful. He ate some of his potatoes, then turned to Judith again. “It sounds as if they might have more than one case.”

They ate in silence for a while, gradually whittling away at the mountain of food.

“What are your plans, Tanya?” Judith asked as she pushed her plate away, still partially filled with her third helping.

“I intend to follow Malcolm’s instructions. Keep a low profile, just go to classes and the library occasionally. I have just one seminar left. I’ll graduate in the spring.” She smiled and winked at Edda. “Edda, will you do the honors? I think it’s time for dessert.”

With a twinkle in her eye, Edda left the table and closed the door to the kitchen behind her. She was gone only moments. As she entered the dining room once more, Tanya turned out the lights. A brilliant glow entered with Edda.

She set a blazing platter of crepes Suzette on the table, the flames from the brandy catching a warm glow in Charles’ eyes as he watched Judith haloed in its light.

The dinner party helped, but Tanya still felt restless. Christmas loomed, just a few short weeks away. She had a childlike desire to see the decorations in the shops, the lights around homes, all the glimmer and glitz of the season.

“Charles, don’t you think we could go shopping? I mean, half a day in downtown Toronto, looking at the holiday decorations, wandering through the stores...maybe a nice dinner out, for a change.” Charles had the long-suffering look of a man who has followed a shopping woman in the past. Tanya laughed, poked her fingers into the sides of his mouth and pushed up, to form a smile. Charles laughed. “There, that’s better. Come on, Charles, it’ll be fun.”

Edda chimed in, as excited as Tanya. “Oh, yes, Charles, come on. It will be perfectly safe, we’ll both be with her.” She looked thoughtful. “Maybe cover her up good with scarves and hats, and no one would recognize her. We all need to get out for a bit.”

Charles sighed. “All right, but we have to be back before nightfall. No dinner out.” Tanya pouted. “Well, maybe lunch, but back before dark.”

The streets were dressed in glitter and gaud. Lights sprinkled on every surface, along with ropes and garlands of green and the bright red of poinsettias. Tanya skipped down the sidewalk, and did a little twirl. “You mustn’t watch what I’m buying, now, Charles. It could be for you.”

And she scooted into The World Biggest Bookstore. Charles and Edda followed, keeping her in sight.

“Tanya, it’s almost four thirty,” Charles said, eyeing the throng of people filling the store. In the past half hour, the crowd had grown to a pushing, clamoring horde. Charles looked slightly paranoid.

Tanya chattered like a little girl, hugging her gifts to her as they walked toward the parking lot. Edda walked slightly to her right, with Charles preceding. They listened to the Christmas carols, and joined in on Silent Night.

A man jumped out from behind a car and grabbed Tanya around the shoulders. Before she could react, Charles spun around and hit the assailant with a flying kick to his head. The man slammed back against a building wall, then staggered into a rowdy group of revelers. He disappeared.

Charles hailed a cab and pushed Tanya in, then joined her. Edda took off in the direction of the assailant.

“Edda! What about Edda?” Tanya asked as Charles gave directions to the rental house.

“She’ll be fine. She has the car keys. She’ll just drive home,” he replied. His eyes blazing. “I doubt if she’ll find him, not in that crowd, but she’ll give it a try.”

“But what did he hope to achieve? He couldn’t have kidnapped me, not with you and Edda there.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he was drunk... Maybe he just wanted to touch you. We don’t know. But one thing is sure: we’d better be careful.”

Tanya gasped. “Perhaps it’s for the best if we don’t come here anymore. Edda may have to finish up my Christmas shopping.” She huddled into her coat and scarves and sat back further.

* * *

Malcolm entered his office juggling a pail full of water, a long cleaning brush, a rug, a bag, and three newspapers. He dropped the newspapers onto the coffee table and set everything else on the floor near the fish tank, then went to turn on his new coffee maker.

While the coffee perked, he turned off the heater and filter in his fish tank, then scooped up each fish with a long-handled net. He dropped them, one by one, into the waiting pail of water. He then drained, scraped, and scrubbed the inside of the tank. After a careful rinsing, he covered the bottom with a layer of fine blue gravel and began to refill the tank with water.

He heaved a sigh of satisfaction, fetched a cup of fresh-perked coffee, and settled into an easy chair. He had just finished reading the first newspaper and had begun on the second when a knock on the door demanded his attention.

“Enter,” he said. His gaze still scanned the newsprint.

“Hi,” Paul Brennon said. “You busy?” He glanced into the pail. “Your fish don’t look so good.” Malcolm didn’t respond, intent on the newspaper. “I can come back later, if you want.”

“No, no...just reading something interesting here—a citizen’s complaint. Unusual. Sorry, I was distracted.” He turned to look at Paul as he closed the newspaper and slid it onto the coffee table. “You have something new on Tanya’s case?” He looked at Paul. “What happened to you? Where’s your usual jeans, your sweatshirt?”

“Oh,” Paul said, with an attempt at nonchalance, “I thought I might dress up for a change, seeing as how we have such wealthy customers now.”

“Ah, I see. We’ve always had wealthy customers, Paul...or are you referring to one

particular wealthy woman?” Malcolm gave a short laugh. “Look at you! That shirt—looks like green silk, or is it blue?” He laughed harder. “And your pants—Levi originals, to go with your designer shirt.” Malcolm circled Paul, chuckling.

“Since when do you know anything about fashion?” Paul said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“My brother Brian never stopped mocking my choice of clothes when I worked for the police. Now, since I founded the Invicta, my mother makes sure I have a few new items each season.” He grinned at Paul, then ran to turn the water off in his fish tank, just in time. “It still doesn’t shut Brian up, unfortunately. But he never shuts up anyway.”

He returned to his desk. “Let’s hear what you have. I want to compare the Miller and the Caldwell case, see how many matches we have there.”

“Well, they tie together, but only peripherally. The explosive, Telgex 80/90, is the same for both cases. Traces of it were found in the Caldwell car, and one unit was found intact in Miller’s car. Made in Norway, but probably from a subsidiary of the main manufacturer, a little company located in France.”

“Anything new on the Caldwell case?” Malcolm picked up his pen and twiddled it rapidly between his index and middle fingers.

“Not much. Just a bit of a lead on the sports car. A couple of witnesses claim a shiny import was seen coming and going on the day of the accident.”

Malcolm watched the flip of the pen between his fingers, absorbed in thought, silent.

“Anything else you want from me?” Paul asked. He glanced down into the pail again. “Your fish need CPR, Malcolm.”

Malcolm nodded absently, then picked up the second newspaper, the Globe and Mail.

Paul shook his head. “Okay, I’ll be going, then,” he said, and left the office.

* * *

Christmas came and went with little change in Tanya’s lifestyle. She gave presents to Judith, Malcolm, Charles and Edda, and felt good about it. She lit candles on Christmas Eve and sang carols, while Charles placed the star on top of the tree. It all began to seem like a normal life, with her books and paintings, and their daily routine.

“Edda, you’re going to turn me into a baby elephant with your cooking,” Tanya said, sampling another of Edda’s mid-day snacks. She glanced at Charles, who had just finished watching an action flick. “Time for our usual walk, Charles?”

Charles looked at his watch and nodded.

The brisk air felt wonderful, even though it was a little colder than Tanya had thought. “Just a moment, Charles,” she said, turning abruptly back toward the house. “I think I need my wool scarf...”

She took no more than two steps when a sharp crack echoed and chips flew from the bark of a tree about five inches from her face. She felt herself fly through the air to land with a thud, Charles pinning her to the ground. They slid over the snow-covered grass, and into the shelter of an old shed.

“Stay down,” Charles said, his voice harsh. “Don’t move.”

Blood dripped on Tanya’s cheek. “But...you’re hit. Let me help you.”

“Don’t move, damn it,” he said. “Nothing can be done right now.” He looked around, his gaze missing nothing, as he slid his Glock 20 handgun from its holster and released the safety.

“Edda would have heard. She’ll call for help. In the meantime, I know where the sniper is. He’ll have to come into the open to reach us.” His lips twisted into a snarl. “He’ll make a good target.”

“I hear a car. It’s leaving. Might be the sniper.”

“Yeah, and it could be a trick, too. Don’t move. Not yet. There might be more than one of them, or it could just be some passing motorist.”

“But Charles...you’re wounded. You’re bleeding.”

He grabbed at his left shoulder, the blood leaking through his fingers. “Nothing. Just a flesh wound.”

Tanya shivered as she watched the blood spurt from his wound. It needed medical care, and immediately.

Moments later, they heard the wail of a police siren.

* * *

“Sit down, Tanya,” Malcolm said. “I hate to repeat myself and give you the same bad news again, but I must. You have to leave town, Tanya. Pack and leave.” He ran his hand through his hair, then picked up a pencil and began to twist it between his fingers. “I suspect there’s a contract out on you, now. That means we’ll be dealing with professionals, not the amateurs we’ve had up to now. You have to leave, maybe even change your name.” He looked at Tanya’s strained features. “It’s just until we get a lead on them, find out what’s going on.”

“But that could be never,” Tanya said, her voice sharp and anxious. “I’m so close to my goal, so close to getting my degree.” She hitched a sharp breath, close to a sob. “I have only one more formal seminar to finish—”

“Perhaps the Academy’s administration would let you finish in a correspondence course, something like that. Maybe even over the Internet.”

Tanya brightened. “Do you think it’s possible? Would they do that for me?”

“Can’t hurt to try. I know there’s a lot of courses on the Internet now, with college credits and degrees. Talk to your academic counselor, as a starter. If you were a poor student, I doubt if there’d be a chance, but you’re good, and they know it. I think you might be able to do it.”

Malcolm rose from his desk. “It’s time for my four o’clock coffee. Join me?”

“Yes, I think I will today.” She lifted a mug from the coffee tray. “Nice mugs. They have a schedule of this season’s hockey games with the Maple Leafs.”

“That’s to make sure I don’t miss any,” he said with a laugh. “At least, I won’t miss those on television.”

Warming her hands on her mug, Tanya walked around the room. “I have an idea,” she said. “I know what we can do with me, where we can put me until this is over.”

Malcolm raised one eyebrow and waited.

“I own a mansion in Italy. On the Italian Riviera,” she said, watching him to see his reaction.

“Yes. I know. It was won by your father. He gambled.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that’s how he got it,” Tanya said, surprised. “I didn’t think you knew about it.”

She put her mug down on the green marble coffee table. “Look, that would be the perfect place for me, with Charles and Edda. Charles can recuperate, Edda can cook and spoil me, and no one would know my identity.”

Malcolm sipped his coffee, thinking. “Okay, give me as much information as you have on this place. I need the exact location, the size, all you have and then some more.” He put his mug

down and began to pace. The thick pile of the carpet flattened with his footsteps, then sprang back in place. "I'll check and see if the Invicta has any connections there, then check on your neighbors." He looked at her and smiled. "If I get a positive response, I may approve of your idea."

Tanya jumped up and hugged him. "That would be great! I can't imagine living on the Riviera and still be working on my degree. Bless you, Malcolm!" she laughed. "I can't believe it."

"Easy, girl. Things aren't definite yet."

"But you'll make them definite, won't you? I know you will. You'll make it all come together, just like you always do."

Malcolm's grin grew larger. "Of course, if you leave for the Riviera in, let's say, a few days, no one would have any idea where you were. It would be literally impossible to track you down." He laughed. "No one will know where you're hiding, except for the police and ourselves."

A big smile covered his face. Tanya hugged him again, then left to tell Charles and Edda.

Chapter 5

Malcolm shook the newspaper, folded it, and added it to the growing pile beside the coffee table. "There are more allegations of wrongdoing against a lawyer. I've been following this for more than a week now," he said to Jim Cramer, another agent of the Invicta.

"What's it about?" Jim asked. "Who's the lawyer?"

"Don't know. They don't give a name. But each accusation is brought forward on behalf of a senior citizen. And each is sent to a different newspaper." Malcolm fingered the paper on the top of the stack, then tapped an article. "The guardians of these old folks want to know how to stop this well known attorney, bring him to justice, and keep themselves out of hot water. They don't want to bring in another lawyer, either. Can't say I blame them. But there's quite a few complaints here. And the newspapers have withheld the complainers' identities."

"Interesting," Jim said. "Never heard of a newspaper withholding anything, especially several at once. Sounds like a coordinated action."

Malcolm nodded, then glanced at the memo in Jim's hand. "What do you have for me?"

"Mr. Brian Miller called. He's coming in to see you on Monday."

"Monday, huh? Wonder of which week," Malcolm said in a grumble. "Never can count on his doing what he says he'll do."

"He was pretty explicit about it. He said this coming Monday. He tried to call you at home last night, but couldn't reach you." Jim glanced at his memo. "He also mentioned you're expected for supper at his mother's...ah...your mother's... Mrs. Jessica Miller's next Saturday."

"Thanks, Jim."

"What happened to your fish tank, Malcolm?" Jim asked as he looked into the empty tank. "Need any help?"

Malcolm looked slightly sheepish. "You know, I really enjoy taking care of my fish, but sometimes I get so involved in something else, so busy, that I forget about them. Hell, I forget to eat. The pet shop is going to deliver a new stock of tropicals for me." He gestured at a box on the floor near the tank. "I bought some fancy stuff to put in the tank. I like to watch my pretty little creatures while I try to unravel a particularly knotty problem."

"Nice," Jim said, lifting a large piece of white coral from the box. "Must have cost a pretty penny. Can I put it in?"

"Sure. Put it toward the back. And put that flat maroon stone toward the front. Should look good there."

Jim arranged the coral and stone, then stepped back to examine his handiwork. He smiled, nodded, and left.

Malcolm reviewed Brian Miller's dossier, although he knew its contents almost by heart. The two accidents had a disturbing similarity to those experienced by Tanya Caldwell. The third accident didn't end in death due to the care Brian's chauffeur, Mike Harrison, gave his car. Mike found explosives near the engine during a routine checkup, saving both his and Brian's lives. The recent attacks on Tanya caused Malcolm more concern over the safety of his brother, Brian.

He glanced up as his younger brother sauntered into the room. Brian looked the part of the casual playboy. His golden blond hair slicked back from a well tanned forehead. He wore light

wool trousers, an off white sweatshirt, and tan loafers on his bare feet. He grinned at Malcolm, then sprawled on the sofa.

“Well, big brother, here I am...at your mercy.” His melodic voice did nothing to hide his sarcasm. “Or is it, rather, at the mercy of the powerful chief of police? Oops...ex chief of police.” He grinned.

Malcolm stared, his face expressionless. “How was your trip?” he asked.

“Good. Excellent. A bit too long, perhaps. Three months away from home is a long time.”

“Do a lot of traveling?”

“Yes, I’d say so. I rested a couple of weeks on *La Côte d’Azur*.” His grin became a smirk. “The weather was splendid, the girls great. Tanned, petite...to my liking.”

“Did you accomplish all of your goals?”

Brian waved the question away with languid grace. “Yes. I liquidated all of my assets in Europe. The market systems over there are getting too complicated for me. And you know I like simple things.”

Malcolm watched Brian from above his reading glasses. “And are you more rich than before?”

Again, Brian waved the question away. “Something like that,” he said. “I sold at the right time.”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” Brian said, repeating Malcolm’s remark, complete with sarcastic emphasis. “It’s no fun to lose money. And I like fun.” His smirk became wider. “Especially now that I’m a single man again.” He began to squirm under Malcolm’s stare. “Nice new coffee table,” he said, running his fingers across the table top. “I like the marble top.”

Malcolm ignored his comment. “Brian, we have a record of other accidents with similar characteristics to yours. If we’re dealing with a nut case, we can’t predict his next move. Prevention is the best solution. You have to get more protection. I insist.”

“God, Malcolm, don’t be such a big brother.” Brian pouted, frowned. “I have good protection. I have Mike Harrison, my driver. I haven’t touched a steering wheel since the second accident.” He sighed. “No more sports car. Just a boring limousine.”

“Pity. I feel for you,” Malcolm said, with contempt. “You know I mean more protection than that, Brian. You need ‘round the clock’ protection, a professional. In the house. Guarding you. As well as the chauffeur.”

“Around the clock? God, Malcolm, that’s bound to be expensive.”

“You can afford it.”

Brian looked thoughtful. “Okay, I’ll go along with it, but I want a live in guard, for at least five days a week. Don’t hit me with shifts of different faces every few hours.” He gave Malcolm a winning smile. “Honest, big brother, I promise not to go out at night and party...at least, for a while.”

Malcolm frowned, suspicious of the sudden shift in attitude.

“Look, you know Mike has bodyguard training. He can help,” Brian said.

“I’ll go along with you on this, if you install a new security system in the house. You’re too isolated. Your only neighbor is the Sports and Hunt Club.”

“That’s the beauty of it, of course. Quiet, peaceful...green and secluded. But I’ll do it, if you insist.”

“I insist. In fact, if I remember correctly, I insisted the last time we spoke and you promised to do something about it then.” Malcolm glowered.

“I’ll do it, I said. I promise. Absolutely.” Brian clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back. “One thing more, though, Malcolm.”

“What’s that?”

“I want a woman as the live in guard. I like the idea of a bodyguard with curves. It pleases me.”

Malcolm’s glower deepened. “You never change, do you, Brian? But this isn’t as impossible as you might think. We have female agents.”

“Oh, I’m sure you have, Malcolm,” Brian said, his hazel eyes twinkling. “But this female agent has to be special.”

“Special? What do you mean, special? All my agents are special.”

“I’m a great believer in Affirmative Action. I want a female agent of color. Indian. Part Indian will do.”

“Indian?”

“Right.”

Malcolm stared, his face flushing with annoyance.

“You know what an Indian is, don’t you, Malcolm?” Brian buffed his fingernails against the front of his sweatshirt, then examined them as if they were the most important item in his life. “They were the people who roamed free over this fine land before the white man came along and booted them out. Any kind of Indian will do...Chippewa, Cree, Iroquoian... I’m not hard to please.”

Malcolm drew a deep breath, still glowering at his brother. “You’re totally impossible. But you’re not going to win this round. Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

Fifteen minutes later, he returned with a big smile. He held two glasses, and gave one to his brother. “Celebration time,” he said, with a swagger. “To my beloved brother’s safety.”

“Safety? Celebrate? What’s up, Malcolm?”

“Your bodyguard. I found her. A live in bodyguard with Indian blood, sex female.” Malcolm grinned at his brother’s discomfort.

“You have an Indian agent? A girl?” Brian looked dumbfounded.

“Ah, Brian...a woman, not a girl. We don’t call women girls anymore. Yes. We have. She’s part Indian.” Malcolm took a deep drink from his glass. “You’ll have to adapt to her. She’s not accustomed to high society. She has different customs, a different wardrobe—minor things like that.”

“Minor? Explain, please.” Brian looked worried.

Malcolm continued to grin. “She doesn’t dress like a bodyguard, doesn’t move like one, doesn’t look like one—but she’ll do the job just fine.”

“Oh. I see,” Brian said, still looking slightly uncomfortable.

“She’s all you asked for, in every way. She’ll show up at your door tonight around eight o’clock. Live in, you said. Female, you said. Indian, you said.” Malcolm’s grin was so wide, it nearly split his face in two. “You got it.”

“Um. Malcolm, wait...”

“No, no, Brian. I know how much you appreciate what I’ve done for you. No need to thank me.”

“Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea. Maybe we ought to talk it over.” Brian’s face was a study in confusion and concern. “Listen, just let me have a few more nights of peace and quiet before this whole thing becomes permanent.” He didn’t beg well. It wasn’t something he was used to doing.

“One night,” Malcolm replied. “One night, then she’ll move in with you.” He waved his hands magnanimously. “One last night,” he said again.

Brian rose and started for the door, his shoulders slumped.

“Good night,” Malcolm said, still grinning.

“Yeah. Right. Good night. With Indians on my doorstep, you tell me good night,” Brian said and left.

The morning brought a sour faced Brian stumbling through the door. “Is that coffee I smell?” he asked. “I need to drink a pot of it.” He collapsed on the sofa with a groan. “I didn’t sleep a wink last night, Malcolm, and it’s all your fault.”

Malcolm laughed aloud. “Would you like to meet her?”

“Meet her? Is she here?” Brian sat straight and stiff on the edge of the sofa.

“Oh, yes. Yes, she’s here.” Malcolm lifted the phone, spoke for a moment, then turned and grinned at Brian. “She’s on her way.” Brian blanched white.

A soft tap on the door announced the female agent. She walked like a dancer, gliding more than stepping. Brian stood and stared. She smiled and crossed the room to him. Her black coat hung open to show a yellow blouse, open at the neckline, and a black leather skirt. Her knee high flat heeled boots gleamed with polish. Standing at least three inches taller than Brian, she offered him her hand with grace. “Hello. I’m Judith Abramson,” she said with a sweet smile.

“Uh...Brian. Brian Miller, Malcolm’s brother.” His mouth stayed open as he stared at Judith’s face.

“Actually, we’re not even related,” Malcolm said. “I was thirteen when Brian’s father took me into his home. My own father had just died and I had no family.”

“That explains the lack of brotherly resemblance,” Judith said. “I wondered. You two look so very different.”

“We are different,” Brian said. “Malcolm has all the talent. I have none.” He looked downcast, miserable.

“Yes, poor Brian. All he ever had was money,” Malcolm said, grinning. “His uncle left him a fortune.”

“I know about your company, Brian, the ‘Versifund.’ An investment corporation?” Judith asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Brian replied.

“Among others,” Malcolm said.

“Others?” Judith asked, a slight frown between her eyes. She glanced at Brian, who had not been able to take his gaze from her.

“He has several companies, but the one with the most investment money is the Versifund, the one you mentioned earlier.” Malcolm sat back and contemplated his befuddled brother. He couldn’t stop smiling.

Brian came alive. “I’m starving,” he said. “I didn’t have any breakfast this morning, no dinner last night... I need food now, or I’ll die. And, of course, I can’t go anywhere without my bodyguard.” He offered Judith his arm.

“At your service, sir,” she said, and linked arms with him.

As they started out the door, Brian turned to his brother. “Thank you, Malcolm,” he said. “I owe you one.”

Malcolm chuckled as the door closed behind them. “You win some, you lose some,” he said. “Sometimes the clichés say it just right.”

Although he would have preferred a more experienced agent for his brother, Judith was an accurate shot...and he totally enjoyed scaring Brian overnight. He knew Brian expected some kind of wild intruder. Instead, he got a soft, cool beauty. She would do the job well, he knew. Malcolm nodded. Yes, she'll do the job just fine.

With Brian taken care of, at least for the time being, the agency gained some badly needed time. Time to examine all of the facts, time to collect more evidence, time to link things together.

Before he left for home, he made a phone call to Tanya. He spoke at length to Charles Aldrin, briefly to Edda, and asked Tanya to stop in for her paperwork in the morning.

He hung up the phone and dusted his hands together, satisfied.

* * *

In the morning, Tanya arrived at the same time as the pet shop delivery. The man smiled and gestured for her to precede him into Malcolm's office, then entered with a large cardboard box containing many plastic bags filled with water and flashing colors.

"Tanya, I'm sorry. This has to come first, if you don't mind. I have the tank filled and ready, and I really am impatient to see what we have here." Malcolm checked the thermometer on the side of the tank and watched the filter send bubbles through the water. He strode and strutted. "Do we have to float them?" he asked the pet shop owner. "I really can't wait."

"Well, it's chancy. If there's too much of a difference in temperature, they could go into shock."

"No, I'm sure it'll be just fine. I have the water temperature just right for them. Please."

"All right, sir. They're your fish." It was clear the man didn't approve, but one by one, he tore open the plastic sacks and poured the fish into the tank. In moments, the tank flashed and gleamed with darting color.

Malcolm watched the fish for a moment, then turned to the pet shop owner and smiled. "They seem to be fine. Now, if you'll just come with me, I'll make sure you're paid for them. Tanya, I'll be right back. Enjoy the fish."

Tanya nodded. She stood there, fascinated by the flow and glide of the fish.

Several moments later, she heard a trill of unfamiliar sound, and saw a fax machine beside Malcolm's desk. It whirred and began to forcefully eject sheets of paper out a slot and onto the floor. Tanya hurried to pick them up and stack them on Malcolm's desk. The haphazard mass of paper continued to fall. Tanya began to stack them by page number when the open smile of an attractive man pictured on one of the pages caught her attention.

His name was Kevin Edward Matwin. The report had been requested by Mr. Clark. Along with the photo and name, Tanya saw the name of her own mansion, *La Mimosa*. Intrigued, she glanced through every page.

Kevin Matwin, age forty-two, owned a small publishing company which specialized in books of art. He traveled to London, Paris, and eastern countries to visit art collections. With a great deal of interest, she learned he stayed at the house adjoining her mansion while preparing the new books' drafts.

His private life interested her, as well. Married twice, the women in his life went from attractive to stupendous. His first wife had been an ethereal blond, his second, a beautiful heiress. Other pictures showed him at artistic exhibitions and the occasional opera premiere. Finally, the report showed his latest girlfriend, Vanessa White, an ex model and the widow of a diplomat.

Hearing Malcolm's voice in the hall, she finished stacking the papers just as he entered the

room.

“Tanya, I’m sorry to keep you,” he said, distracted. “Here are your papers—your new name, your bank accounts, your credit cards, your tickets—and those for Charles and Edda. Even your new passport.” He handed her a large envelope. “Have a wonderful trip and enjoy your stay in Italy.” He gave her a quick, brotherly hug. As she left, he sighed in relief. She would be safe for the time being.

He stood before his colorful new friends and watched as they swam in small schools around his tank. Already, they had formed groups. He hoped Tanya and her small group would as well.

Chapter 6

Tanya squirmed in her seat and slipped a pillow beneath her neck. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. A foreign country... She had never been out of her own country before, never flown for any distance. She shivered, remembering tales of horror flights and crashes, and refused to think about it.

She would think about her new home, she decided. Her new home on the Italian Riviera. She sighed. Thus far, all her attempts to find out more about *La Mimosa* had come to nothing. The responses from the Italian municipalities told her no more than that she owed a good deal of back taxes. The notices were intimidating. She rubbed at her nose, which always seemed to itch when she felt nervous. What was she flying toward, what would her new life be like? Tanya's stomach knotted with anxiety. It would be fine. She knew it would be fine.

Tanya stared in front of the entrance of *La Mimosa*, near Carmel, on the Italian shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea. She watched Charles unfold a complex series of chains from the majestic wrought iron gate. As they drove the road climbing toward the mansion, winding through the woods, Tanya's breath caught. The silvery leaves of the olive trees flashed and fluttered in the breeze; the umbrella pine trees, their bare trunks graciously bent, spread their spicy scents. At one last curve the mansion appeared before her. It looked like an enchanted castle ready to come alive—its red tile shingles glittering in the bright sun, its imposing, ornate portal eager to receive guests, its closed shutters ready to open at her magic signal.

Ah, how wonderful! Tanya stepped out of the car and wandered, half in dream over the property. Far different from what I've ever seen, she thought, taking deep breaths of the balsamic air.

A small orchard of peach trees and apricots grew on the eastern side of the mansion. Roped together, Cabernet grape vines grew on the ledges of rising tiers, each reinforced by stony walls. Tanya kept looking around, enthralled.

"Tanya?" Edda's voice broke into her reverie. "Tanya, you must come in. You must see! The pictures...there are so many!"

"Pictures, you said, Edda?" Tanya asked, walking back to the house.

"Oh, yes, many pictures. Portraits. Come see!" Edda sounded very excited.

The house had been closed for a long time. The air smelled dusty, although all of the windows were open to let in the soft sea breezes. She entered a big room, a reception hall, Tanya thought. The light, muted and glowing, stroked the walls and the myriad paintings covering them. Two long paintings dominated the large hall, life size. There were brass plaques attached to the bottom of each frame, engraved with a name. The left one read 'Michele,' the right one, 'Mafalda.'

"Edda, look at these," Tanya said, her voice no more than a hushed breath. "Look at the details of these life sized portraits. The lace around the lady's neck...it's vaporous, floating." Her eyes were huge, absorbed in the beauty of the paintings. "And the cross on the man's ornate vest...it shines, all in cobalt blue with silver inlays."

"There are so many fine paintings in this room, Tanya. It is like a museum, no? You should

feel at home here.” Edda looked satisfied.

“I’ll come back here and examine all of them later,” Tanya said, with reluctance. “Let’s go see the rest of the house. Where is Charles?”

“The basement. Or rather, the cellar. He is inspecting the heating system. I looked at the kitchen earlier. You must see it.”

“I bet it needs refurnishing,” Tanya said, following Edda into the kitchen.

A huge, rectangular wood stove stood in the middle of the room; one side was taken up by a granite sink and a small electric stove; the others by a refrigerator and a long, wooden table with benches. At least a dozen tarnished copper pots hung from the beams along the walls.

“We’ll need a few things,” Edda said. “A modern range, a dishwasher, a microwave oven and some small appliances, like a food processor and a blender.”

Tanya opened a row of cupboards, then pulled out one of the drawers. “We don’t need any china or cutlery. We can feed an army. With a good cleaning, everything will soon be in order.” She yanked at the drapes covering the window near the table and threw them on the floor. With a critical eye, she examined the fine old tiles on the floor. “Cleaned up, these are going to be fantastic,” she said, her voice awed. “They don’t even have any cracks.”

Together the two women mounted the stairway to the second floor. Tanya moved onto the terrace, which constituted the roof of the reception hall. She drew deep breaths of the tangy air, her eyes glowing, her cheeks flushed.

“Six bedrooms,” Edda said, joining her. “Two enormous, four of good size.”

“Bathrooms?”

“Three. Not bad. It appears the place is in good shape. Charles and I will make a list of things we need...”

“Approved already,” Tanya said. “I can’t go shopping, so order whatever is needed.” She leaned over the balustrade and glanced around, still awed by the countryside. On the eastern side, the terrace was sheltered on the top by a glycine, ready to bloom, on the western side by a pergola. Grape vines climbed from the backyard, occasionally winding around a wooden staircase which provided an external, direct access to the terrace.

“The setup is ideal,” Tanya said, her gaze traveling over the landscape. “I’ll use the big hall for storing sketches and painting. It has long, thick drapes to keep the light out, which will be great once we’ve cleaned the dust of years out of them. I’ll paint up here, on the terrace. It’s on the northern side. Perfect for my work. The light will be uniform throughout the day.”

Tanya’s days became filled with peace. She rose early, painted for a while on the terrace, then wandered her property with her sketching material. She walked the hills and examined the beauty of the land. Her favorite spot became the top of the second hill; it was surrounded by ancient defensive walls, and well protected from the prevailing winds. A natural balcony, she could watch the rage of the waves, the sun’s disappearance from the depths of the woods, a storm approaching from the mountains. The lands abounded with wild flowers and bushes already in bloom. Tanya felt continually inspired, not only by the sights, but by the feel of the air on her skin, the scents on the wind, the touch of the sun. More than anything, she felt the security, the peace of the land, and a timeless sense of wonder.

* * *

“Malcolm, I’m telling you. Everything is fine,” Tanya said for the second time. “Really,

Malcolm. No need to worry.”

Malcolm had been on the phone for at least twenty minutes, asking an enormous amount of questions, and fretting at her.

“You aren’t having trouble adjusting to the new environment?” he asked.

“No, not at all. It’s different, Malcolm,” she replied. “I know. At one time, I felt like a package, shipped from one place to another. Now, I have some control over the situation. I can do the work I want to do. I can finish my degree, paint... I’m surrounded by familiar faces...” She drew a deep breath. “Malcolm, I feel safe. I’m happy.”

“I see,” he said. “By the way, you’re about to get a neighbor. You know the property adjacent to yours?” He paused for a moment, as if he were unsure of what he was about to say. “That belongs to a Mr. Kevin Edward Matwin. He’s about to arrive there, fairly soon now. He’ll stay for a few months, then disappear again.” He waited for Tanya’s reaction. Where there was none, he continued. “What I mean to say is, you don’t have to worry about him. He’s a respectable person, not involved in any type of shady business. We check him out—thoroughly. Really thoroughly, Tanya.”

“I...um,” Tanya paused, stopping herself from saying ‘I know.’ “Yes. Um...I see,” she said.

“Well, I’m glad to know all is well. I’ll talk to you again soon, and you contact me if you need anything. Take care.”

“I will. Thank you, Malcolm.”

Tanya hung up the phone and stared out the window. Oh, yes, she knew a bit about her new neighbor. She shivered, remembering his good looks in the photos. She knew quite a bit about him indeed.

Chapter 7

The cedar hedge grew too high and too thick between her property and that of Kevin Matwin, as far as Tanya was concerned. She patrolled the hedge again, searching for any thin area of growth, pushing at the stubborn branches, looking for the smallest break. She braced herself and shoved, forcing through a tiny break in the growth, her face and hands scratched by the branches, her hair yanked by the leaves. With a final thrust, she pushed her body through and landed in a tumble of broken twigs on her neighbor's property.

She stood quickly and brushed herself free of the debris, then looked around to be certain she was alone. The elegant Italian villa before her seemed to be unoccupied. She slipped through the shadows of the bushes, feeling like a naughty child trespassing on forbidden grounds. She giggled.

The walk before her, paved in white marble streaked with rust and brown veining, encircled the front of the villa. She drifted closer to the building, watchful and nervous. Two Ionic columns flanked the portal in the middle of the facade, while small painted columns decorated each window, reproducing the motif of the facade. The ivory stucco walls provided the perfect backdrop for the rich color of the solid walnut doors. A stand of cypresses, all of the same height, bordered the villa on the left. On the right, a large pool shimmered in the sun, surrounded by a patio.

She circled the house, then, a wash of guilt flooding over her, she slipped back into the break in the hedge. On her own property once more, she sat back on her heels and stared at the hole. "I have no idea why I did that," she said, softly, "But I'm not going to lose this doorway." She placed several small branches against the broken hedge with the intention of using hedge clippers to keep the opening free of growth. She blushed. Why am I doing this? she thought.

It would be nice to meet her neighbor, her thoughts continued. If he's half as attractive as he looked in his picture, he'd be a good subject for my work. He'd be a great model. She could try a full-body portrait of him, her first.

A blush rose from the middle of her stomach and washed over her face. She hadn't trespassed on his land because she thought he'd make a good model. Nor was that the reason she couldn't get him out of her mind. His face... Tanya shook her head and forced herself to think of something else, anything else.

She forced her mind to the competition she had entered well before her troubles began—'Wonder in Children.' The deadline was fast approaching, just a few weeks away, and she hadn't chosen a subject as yet. The choices were narrowed to two: a black boy with big round eyes and a little, frail girl.

Tanya drew a deep breath and tried to concentrate, pushing Kevin Matwin from her thoughts. She sketched, forming the figures she saw in her mind on the drawing board. The child's eyes... she intended them to be full of surprise, wonder...but they came across as dull. Kevin Matwin intruded on her thoughts, distracting her from her work.

How can I meet him? she thought. I could make a lot of noise, letting him know he has a new neighbor. He's not used to having anyone nearby. Maybe he'll come to see who's living next door, after so many years... Her thoughts wandered, dreaming. Her second sketch failed to

satisfy.

“He probably wouldn’t even look at me twice, with all those beautiful women around him,” she said to her drawing board, and ripped off another failed sketch.

In the following days, activity increased on her neighbor’s property. Voices—talking, shouting, calling to one another—were the first change. The pool was cleaned and filled by milling workers, the windows washed to a sparkle, the grounds cleaned and planted with new flower beds. Tanya watched from her second floor aerie as the house slowly came awake. Finally, on Monday, she saw a black Alfa Romeo leaving the premises and returning with a passenger.

Chapter 8

“Edda, what’s going on in the villa next door?” Tanya asked, her eyes wide with innocent curiosity.

“Why do you want to know?” Edda said. Charles looked at her closely.

“Well, I just would like to know what’s happening in my neighborhood, that’s all.” Tanya’s eyes went wider yet. “Curious. I’m just curious.”

“Our neighbor arrived three days ago,” Charles said. “Mr. Kevin Matwin comes and goes with little warning. His caretakers, an elderly couple, live about ten kilometers away. The man takes care of the grounds and maintains the house, the woman, Marta, takes care of cooking and cleaning.” Charles raised an eyebrow. “Anything else you’d like to know?” He lifted his newspaper, *Il XX Secolo*, shook it slightly, and prepared to read again.

“Yes,” she replied. “I want to borrow your binoculars. Please.” She felt a flush spread over her cheeks and looked down, avoiding Charles’ eyes. She couldn’t explain her attraction, her almost obsession, with the Kevin Matwin. All she knew was that his elusive presence fueled her fantasies, more than she expected or even wanted. Charles was silent. She lifted her head and glanced at him.

“Tanya,” he said. “The neighbor is not for you.” His eyes looked deep into hers, as if he searched her soul. “His relationships with women can’t be counted, only classified: long term, short term, and instant.” Charles smiled.

“His presence could create a leak in your protection,” Edda said, her voice sharp with anxiety.

“I just want to give a look. A distant look,” Tanya said. “That’s all. I’m simply curious.”

Edda shook her head. “The best thing is to stay away,” she said. Charles nodded in agreement.

Tanya set her lips in a firm line. “I would like a pair of binoculars, please. I’m interested in the surrounding countryside.” She lifted her head, her chin set in defiance.

Charles closed his newspaper and left the room. He returned shortly with a pair of binoculars and handed them to Tanya. He shook his head.

Tanya ignored him.

From the terrace, Tanya had a partial view of the pool and surrounding area. She slid behind a veil of grape leaves and watched. She waited, and wondered at herself. It had been a long time between relationships, that was true. Jeff Leight’s attraction had weakened over time and distance long before she became involved in her present situation. But this strong attraction to an unknown man, trespassing on his land, spying on him from her terrace was nothing like her. The blush came again, but quickly receded when she heard a splash.

She adjusted the lenses of the binoculars and watched Kevin as he swam the length of the pool in a smooth front crawl. She watched him do laps for several minutes, her heartbeat thundering in her ears. He emerged from the water, slender and gleaming in the sunlight, and lay back on a lounge chair. She could hardly catch her breath.

Each day, at the same time, Tanya continued her snooping, confident the foliage on the

terrace provided a perfect cover for her maneuvers. And each day, she continued to wonder at herself and her actions. But she refused to stop, enthralled by the ripple of his muscles as he slid through the water, or the glisten of sunlight on his hair.

“Oh, my heaven, what a mess,” Edda said. She and Tanya stared at the trampled paints and paint thinner, spread across the terrace.

“It’s my fault,” Tanya said with a moan. “I didn’t put them away last night.” She began to gather her work as Edda called for Charles.

“It looks like a pack of dogs were up here,” Charles said. “Or some kind of animal. They had a bit of fun with your work.”

Tanya shook off dirt and dry paint from the easel and the portable drawing board and assessed the damage. She carefully unfolded her roll of sketches, then sighed with relief. “No damage,” she said. “I’ll have to be more careful from now on.”

After cleaning her tools, she set up once more. Edda and Charles left her to her work. She prepared a rich impasto with the palette knife, mixing the colors directly on the canvas, and let herself become totally absorbed in the unfolding painting.

Minutes or hours had passed when something caused her to look up from her easel. She looked into a pair of sparkling grey eyes.

“Oh!” She dropped her palette.

“I’m sorry,” he said, catching her palette on the fly. “I didn’t mean to startle you. It’s really rude of me.” He smiled, showing perfect teeth. “I’m your next-door neighbor, Kevin Edward Matwin.” His grin charmed her. “Kevin.”

“You did startle me,” she said, “But I really don’t mind. My name’s Tanya. Tanya—uh—Howard.” She extended her hand and shared his smile.

“I really wouldn’t have come in this way, up your stairs, if I had any idea it would startle you so much. I thought you could hear me. I clumped. I really did clump.”

“No, I lose myself in work when I’m painting. Nothing pulls me out of it, short of the end of the world.” She started to laugh at herself, then remembered an explosion that pulled her from her work, a lifetime past. Her smile faded.

“I really came over to see what was wrong. I heard a lot of commotion. What happened?”

“Oh, no real damage done. It looks like a pack of dogs trampled my paints. It was my own fault. I didn’t put everything away yesterday.” She watched the sunlight and shadows stroke Kevin’s face, pointing out a dimple in his cheek, a stroke of brow, a sparkle in his eyes. Her fingers itched to draw him.

“You’re an artist,” he said, the words a statement, not a question.

“Yes. I’ve been drawing since I was a little girl.” She felt like a child as she spoke to him, awkward and embarrassed.

“I wasn’t aware the house had new owners.”

“Oh. I’m just a guest. Yes, I’ll be staying here for a while, just for a couple of months or so.” She felt more and more flustered.

“Well, it’s nice to have a neighbor. Especially such a pretty one.” He grinned and leaned back against the railing, his hands in his pockets. “Have you been here long?”

“No, not really.” She started to clean her brush.

“What brought you here?”

“Umm... It’s a long story. Could I get you something to drink? Perhaps an iced tea?” she asked. Oh, God, she thought. How stupid.

“No, thank you,” he replied. He walked across the terrace and lifted her roll of drawings. “Do you mind?” he asked as he began to flip through them without waiting for her to answer. “Very nice. Not bad at all,” he said.

“I’ve been trying to capture the feeling of surprise in those,” she replied. “It’s for a competition. I’ll keep on sketching children’s faces until I come up with something really expressive, something that satisfies me.”

He nodded, then went through the sketches again, one at a time and with care. He said nothing as he returned them.

“Would you like to take a walk?” he asked. “I believe I should play host, and show you around the area.”

“That would be nice.”

“The scenery from the hills is spectacular. I expect you’ve discovered that for yourself. I know of one spot in particular. It was a lookout for pirates.”

“Pirates!”

“Yes. The Saracens—the Moors, I mean—scouted these waters. Some of the defensive walls are still up, and so are the lookout posts.” He brushed a lock of grey-flecked hair away from his forehead, and turned toward the hills. “The howl, *Mamma, Li Turki*, would alert the people. They would run into the hills to find refuge. The Saracens mainly raided the coast for fresh water and food. They stayed away from the hills.” He pointed to a distant part of the landscape. “The tunnels and shelters built at that time are still around. You can still walk through them today. Very solid. They were reinforced with stone walls.”

“How terrible for them, to have to hide like that,” she said, feeling empathy as she was reminded of her own situation.

Kevin glanced at her and smiled. “It was a long, long time ago. No pirates out there now.”

Tanya laughed, then gave a mock sigh of relief. “I’m so glad. You make me feel much safer.”

“Besides, I’d protect you,” he continued, with a grin.

“You would?” Tanya asked, going along with the fantasy.

“Oh, yes, indeed,” Kevin said, laughing. “I’d yell at you as loud as I could to make you run fast. Very fast.”

“Hmmm...some protection.” Tanya made a face at him, showing mock disappointment.

“Ah, but your swift feet would save you. The pirates would be slow, out of shape from months on the boats. They couldn’t keep up with you, and you’d be safe. Besides, that’s the best I could do.”

“And I’d be shot in the back.” She turned from him and walked to the railing, staring out over the hills.

“Not by them, you wouldn’t. They had no guns. This all happened before the year one thousand.”

He turned to face her, still grinning. “I couldn’t do any more than yell you to safety. I’m not in such great physical shape either.”

“But you swim every day...” Tanya realized her slip as soon as the words were out of her mouth. How dare she tell him she watched him each morning, swimming nude in his pool, invading his privacy as she had? Her hand flew to her mouth, then dropped to her side. “I mean, I hear the splash as you swim each morning.” She nearly stuttered.

He looked around the terrace, then smiled slightly. “But of course. And it is normally so quiet.” He paused. “Shall we walk now?”

Kevin walked in front of her, clearing the way along the narrow, steep path. As the way became wider, they walked side by side. Tanya felt the awareness of him like an electric current surging through her body.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Uh...Vermeil. Close to Toronto,” she managed, after clearing her throat.

“Small world,” he said, the cliché suitable. “I’m from Toronto. When did you arrive?”

“About three weeks ago.” His questions had begun to make her nervous. “I love it here. The countryside offers so much inspiration. I see all of the elements of nature around me—mountains, the sea, the trees and flowers—I never would have thought there would be so much in such a small area. The leaves on the trees, the flowers...and it’s only April.” Tanya realized she was babbling and flushed a bright red. She turned away from him, but not before she noticed his slight smile as he watched her discomfort.

“I’m certain you told me, so please forgive, but what was the reason you came here?” he asked.

“It’s a long story,” she replied, brushing at the air as if to brush away his question. “I’m in a...well, like a retreat, I guess you might say. Mister Aldrin and Miss Milton look after the place, and act as my guardians.”

Kevin stopped and turned to her. “Guardians? Are you some kind of dangerous criminal?” he asked, laughing.

Tanya placed her hands on her hips. “Don’t I look like a dangerous criminal?” she asked with a laugh.

“No!”

“I’m not. I just have to keep a low profile for a while, that’s all.”

They climbed for a while in silence. At the top of the biggest hill, they paused to admire the view. Kevin leaned against a low stone wall and looked out to the sea, his grey eyes dark. Tanya watched him, admiring his slender build. He was tall and slim. His grey eyes shaded from smoke in the sunlight to slate in the shadows. His nose had a slight tip tilt, and his dark hair was turning grey. He repeatedly pushed at a rebellious forelock.

“What do you do for a living?” Tanya asked. “Are you here on vacation, or here for work?” After all of the questions he had asked her, she felt it was her turn.

“I’m a publisher of arts books,” he replied. “And I’m here to work. I own a small company called ‘A Shoppe for the Arts.’ My father created it, I helped it grow and brought it into the twentieth century.” He laughed. “Now, I’m upgrading it into the twenty-first.”

“Maybe one of my pieces will find the way to your Shoppe,” Tanya said with a wistful smile. “Or maybe, better yet, in twenty years you’ll see me in one of your books.” She walked to his side and joined him in staring out at the sea. Never still, always changing, the sea entranced them both.

“You said you’re here for work. What can you do in this corner of the world?”

“I take short trips to expositions to look for ideas, then prepare the first mock-ups in my office at the villa.” He paused and brushed his forelock once more. “I do my most serious work here. It’s so very quiet.” He turned and looked into her eyes. For a moment, they were silent, each intent on hidden thoughts.

“We’d better be getting back,” he said. “My housekeeper gets upset if I’m late for lunch.”

“Certainly.”

“Would you like to see where I work?” he asked when they were part way down the hill.

“I’d be delighted.” Tanya felt a thrill course through her body. She would be inside his villa.

Things were progressing almost faster than she could have imagined.

They didn't talk until they arrived at Kevin's home.

The cool interior of the villa was refreshing after their hike. Tanya stared at the elegant furnishings. In Kevin's studio, bookcases covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Several of the shelves slanted forward to display in full the artistic covers of Kevin's productions. Tanya recognized the *Pink Dancer* by Degas for the series of French impressionists and *The Kiss* by Hayes for the Brera collection. The middle of the room was a sitting area. On the left side, a huge oak desk huddled amidst computer equipment.

"This is my study," Kevin said, stating the obvious. "I do my work here, early in the morning, then take a swim." He looked at her, his eyes crinkling in a smile. "But you already know that. Sometimes I walk in the hills, as we did today." His hand reached out and brushed a lock of hair from her face as he smiled at her.

An elderly woman appeared in the doorway. "Luncheon is served, sir," she announced.

"Thank you, Marta. I'll take Ms. Howard home and be right back."

Her mind in a whirl, Tanya played the scenes from their walk over and over again in her memory. He had been very polite. She had no idea if she would ever see him again, except in her little secret intrusions. She tried to put him out of her thoughts, but his image as he swam or sunned himself refused to leave.

He'd make a wonderful model, she thought. That's why I'm so interested in him. But denial didn't last for long.

He'd make an even better lover...

Chapter 9

How do you capture the icy feeling of shocked surprise she felt when Kevin appeared as if by magic, right before her eyes? Tanya fought to capture that feeling and put it on the face of the black boy in her portrait for the competition. She had less than three weeks to meet the deadline, less than three weeks to make the boy come to life on her canvas. She shoved the image of Kevin, his body sliding through the water in a smooth front crawl, out of her mind. She couldn't be distracted now.

With careful strokes, she sketched the boy's elegant face upon her drawing board. And again...and again. Each try was a bit closer to what she saw in her mind. She grabbed for her own feeling of shock from the day before, held it firmly in her mind, and forced it into her fingers. The boy's face began to show the look she wanted, a compelling, captivating glance to hold the viewer's attention. She made his expression more forceful by enlarging his eyes and keeping his lips slightly apart, sketched him from various angles, and finally gave a satisfied sigh. Yes. That was it.

Tanya collapsed into a lawn chair and closed her eyes. She had worked nonstop since early morning; it was now late afternoon. Her stomach rumbled slightly, nudging her with a dull hunger, but she didn't want to move right then. She sighed, pushed a sweaty lock of hair from her face, and drifted in a half-dream.

What would she tell Kevin? How could she intrigue him, without exposing herself to danger? She yawned. I remember reading once, she thought, of how most artists are either drug addicts or alcoholics. Some are mentally ill, with problems like bipolar disorder. I wonder if I could pretend to have a problem like that, a problem that sent me abroad for my own protection?

She shrugged the thought away. It was too farfetched, too impossible to bring across. She knew nothing about drugs, nor anything about mental illness. It would never work. Besides, no one is punished or cured by being sent to the Riviera. She stretched her arms above her head and shook herself like a puppy after a bath. She could play the part of a girl in trouble, but it would need a lot more work.

"Don't be afraid...it's only me," a voice said from nearby. Tanya bolted upright. "I found a hole in the cedar hedge. Perfect shortcut." Kevin's face came into view. "Hello," he said with a grin.

Tanya felt her usual blush start from her belly and flood her face. She pushed at her sweaty, tangled hair. Kevin didn't look at her. He picked up her sketches and examined them one by one.

"Busy girl," he said. "Amazing. You drew the boy from five different perspectives since yesterday?"

"Well, actually, more like six. I threw one away." She felt flustered, not at all ready to see him. She needed a shower and a good yarn to spin concerning her stay at the mansion, along with a plausible reason to keep him coming back. "It's been a productive day, that's certain. Now I can paint the boy on canvas, and with the deadline three weeks away, it's about time. Fortunately, the background is already finished."

"How about a break? Want to take a walk?"

"I'd love to, but let me tidy up a bit first. I feel as if I'm covered in paint." She grinned.

“Give me about fifteen minutes.” And she hurried off to get a shower before Kevin could reply.

“Much better,” she said a short while later. She wore snug jeans and a bright red tank top, her damp hair twisted into a tail at the back of her neck.

Kevin looked at her with appreciation. “Yes,” he replied with a smile. “Much better.” He reached up and brushed a lock of damp hair from her cheek. “Charcoal eyes and dark, curly hair. You fit in well in this countryside.”

Tanya shivered, his touch sending currents of sensation down her body.

“I know of the perfect place,” he said, starting to walk ahead of her. “It’s a little far, but very poetic. I think you’ll like it.”

She followed meekly, pleased to obey his suggestions. As they walked, she watched him. The sun caressed him as if it were his lover, stroking his cheeks, his hair. Her attraction to him grew with each step.

But the attraction wasn’t only physical. She felt a sense of comfort in his presence. His eyes sparkled with life, his body sent out a current of vitality into his surroundings, and into her. Close to him, she felt protected. He turned to check on her and smiled, his smile open and giving. She trusted him.

“Doing all right?” he asked. “Want to take a break yet?”

“No, no...I’m fine.” He could never fall for her. Whatever had she been thinking? This fine handsome man, the boyfriend and husband of glamorous women...how could she ever think he would want her? He was simply lonely, passing the time with the next-door neighbor. He couldn’t have any romantic interest in her. She sighed.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked again. “We’re almost there now.”

Tanya nodded. Maybe if she could interest him in some unusual way, something special—

“Ah. Here we are,” he said. They entered a clearing with two benches and a carved wooden table sprawled under a gigantic walnut tree.

“Although we seem to be in the blackest depths of the woods, there’s a little shop just around the corner where we can buy drinks and snacks. They make fabulous pies, baked in an open-fire pit, just about the best you’ve ever tasted.” He looked boyish, his eyes sparkling. “I eat here whenever Marta’s out of commission.”

“It’s lovely,” she said. “And so peaceful. I think I can smell the pies.” She grinned.

“So tell me about yourself, Tanya. You have me very curious. What is a Canadian girl doing in an isolated mansion on the Riviera di Ponente?” He sat at the table and rested his chin on his hand, looking up at her with interest. His perfect eyebrows were arched over the steel grey of his eyes as if in emphasis. He wasn’t going to let it slip by. “You’re not here just to paint. Am I right?”

Tanya sighed, looked away from him, her expression troubled. “I’m in a bit of trouble,” she said.

“What happened?”

“I’d prefer not to say.” She shot a sideways glance at him, her head down, her eyes lowered. The flush began again.

“All right.” He paused, his eyes intent on her face. “Tell me something else, then. Tell me about your family, where you grew up, where you went to school.” His smile was warm, encouraging. “That shouldn’t be too painful.”

She threw her head back and took a deep breath, her eyes closed tight. The words, spoken so often to acquaintances they were memorized, spilled from her lips. “I was orphaned at the age of

six. I grew up in foster homes, mainly farms. Fifteen different farms. I changed schools every year.” She turned to face him, her expression stony. “I won a scholarship and went to college. I study art, mainly drawing and painting.” She took another deep breath, then let it out slowly.

His hand reached out and touched her hair, twirling a lock in his fingers. “And who in your family gave you your dark coloring?” he asked.

“Mother, I guess. Even if I don’t remember Mother being as dark as I am,” she said with a slight stammer. “My father was fair, very fair. My little brother took after him, I believe. He was fair, too, from the photos I’ve seen.” She swallowed. Her eyes filled with tears for a moment. “He died with them.” She coughed, rubbed at her nose. “My father was in the import, export business. I don’t remember my parents too well. But I do remember we had fun all together. They loved each other, and they loved me and my brother.”

Kevin sat beside her. “How did you get in trouble?”

She shivered. He wasn’t going to give up. She had to come up with something, and she had to be quick. “Just bad company,” she replied.

“What does that mean, bad company?”

“On campus. There were parties in my sorority, parties with... uh...things that shouldn’t have happened.” She paused. “I was involved in a delicate case in which two people took an overdose.”

“What happened?” He sat straight beside her, his hands in his lap.

“I’d learned a bit of first aid. I helped them.” She paused again, her mind whirling. Would he buy her story? “The judge gave me leniency because of it, but I had to leave for at least six months. I had to go far away. I came here.” She set her mouth in a defiant line. Either he believed her or he didn’t.

He frowned. “What’s next?” he asked.

“They suggested I come here and help two retired policemen. I can’t socialize and I’m not to leave the premises, except for short walks in the hills.” She shivered. Her story was getting pretty deep. ‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave...’

Kevin leaned closer to her. “What did you do at those wild parties, besides drugs?”

“I didn’t do drugs.”

“What, then?”

Ohmygod, what do I tell him now? she thought, her stomach churning. No drugs...sex. Sex would do it. “Sex,” she said. His expression made her add, “Safe sex, of course.”

“A lot of it?” His voice was nearly a whisper.

She tossed her head. “Sure. You have to experiment a lot to know what’s good for you, who suits you best.”

“And what did you experience?”

“Hmm...lots of partners, lots of different ways to make love.” The conversation made her nervous as she added lies upon lies. He was looking at her in such a strange way. She decided to go all the way, why not? “The only thing I missed was a chance to make love to an older man.” Brazenly, she looked deep into his eyes. “Someone your age, for example,” she said with a provocative look.

Tanya licked her lips. Damned for a lamb, damned for a sheep, she thought, or however that’s supposed to go. Either she would lose him now, or she’d have him at least once. “Would you like to be my next experiment?” she asked, her voice soft and husky.

Kevin sat bolt upright, his eyes wide. He laughed aloud, shaking his head. “If that don’t beat all,” he said, and snorted. “I’ve been one hell of a lot of things in my life, but I’ve never been

close to being an experiment. An experiment, by God. I can't believe it." He chuckled. "No wonder you're in trouble."

"No, no," she said with a smug smile. "You have to find the right partner to be sure sex is enjoyable." She shrugged.

"Is that what your parents taught you?"

"I was orphaned at the age of six, remember? No one taught me anything in this area. I had to learn it all on my own." She looked away from him, her lips set in a stiff line, a deep frown between her eyes. "Of course, if you're not interested, we can always talk and walk. You're excellent company."

"Thanks," Kevin said with a touch of distaste.

She smiled at him. For a moment, she thought he would reach out and touch her. The moment passed. He remained still.

They returned home in silence.

Edda and Charles stood at the entrance of the mansion, reproach in their expressions.

"Malcolm called," Charles said. "We have to go to the police station in Carmel. It will be Monday, since it's so late now." He frowned at her, making her feel as if she were a naughty child.

"Why? What for?"

"They have photos of a man, faxed to them by Malcolm. The trunk of his car contained the same type of explosive used to blow up your Toyota. They want to know if you can identify him."

Chapter 10

“Well, that was a waste of time,” Tanya said in a fit of pique. “I’ve never seen that man before, never even heard of him—what was his name? Gregory Crowford? Never. What a waste.” She rubbed her nose, wondering what Kevin had been doing while she was gone.

“Yes, too bad you didn’t recognize him,” Charles said. “It would have been a big help. Headquarters in Vermeil hoped to finally have a substantial lead.”

“Absolutely nothing familiar about him. By the way, I didn’t know you spoke Italian. You handled those gendarmes as if Italian were your native tongue.”

“Of course I speak Italian,” Charles said, his attention fixed on the road ahead. “Why do you think I read an Italian newspaper each morning?”

“Oh, right, I forgot. Do you speak any other languages?”

“A few.” He laughed. “I speak French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, a bit of German...and, of course, English.”

“Interesting. I know so little about you, Charles. You know Malcolm, but you’ve never worked with him. You’re an American, but you live in Canada. You’ve traveled abroad...what else have you done in your life, besides protect weak little women, like me?” She grinned.

Charles didn’t respond immediately. He drove through the open gate at *La Mimosa*, closed the gate, then finally looked at Tanya. “I spent my life protecting people. Working for them. Risking my life for them...just as I did and will do for you.” His eyes, dark with emotion, stared into hers.

“I’m sorry, Charles, I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. Of course you take good care of me. You’ve proven that time and again.” Tanya looked down, abashed. “You’ve been wonderful to me. Without you, I’d be dead by now.” Impulsively, she reached over and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Charles.”

He smiled. “Well, we need to contact Malcolm, tell him the results of our trip. He’s not going to be too happy, but there’s nothing we can do.”

Malcolm’s reaction was as expected. “Damn. I had hoped...ah, well, not your fault, Tanya. We’ll keep searching.” He paused. “Charles, I’ve hired a new member at the Invicta. He’ll work on Tanya’s case, among others. He has a vast amount of experience in explosives—all kinds—so we can use his expertise.”

“Sounds good, Malcolm. What’s his name?”

“His name is Joe Halliday. He was a constable with headquarters in Vermeil. You can contact him, if I’m not around, or my right hand, Paul Brennon.”

“Okay, fine, Malcolm.”

“How are you all doing there? No problems?”

“Marvelous,” Tanya shouted into the microphone.

Charles paused and glanced at her. “Good. Everything is quiet.” He frowned slightly.

“Great,” Malcolm said. “Now, just a few more things. You need a separate line for a fax. How long do you think that might take?”

“It takes ages to get a phone line in here, Malcolm, you know that. Maybe by next month.”

“And another car. You have just the one, right?”

“Yes,” Charles replied, looking out the window at the car parked outside. “A Fiat 1445, equipped with a cellular phone.”

“You need a second car, just as a backup. A used car will do.”

“Fine. Anything else?”

“Yes. Tanya, are you still there?”

Charles handed her the receiver, but stood close by.

“Do you have only one lawyer?” Malcolm asked.

“Yes, Leslie...uh...I forget his last name. Leslie something.” She frowned in concentration.

“Leslie Hadson?”

“Yes, that’s right. Why?”

“And he has your will? The beneficiary is unchanged? It’s still the same charitable organization? Nothing important, just regular checking.”

“Yes. I haven’t touched it since I wrote my will a couple of years ago.”

“That will do it, then,” Malcolm said. “I’m pleased things are peaceful for you. Looks like this was a good idea.”

Again, Charles glanced at Tanya, then shrugged. “Can you tell us why they picked up this guy, Crawford, or is that top secret?”

Malcolm paused. “It is confidential, but I can tell you why. He was speeding, wouldn’t stop. He gave them quite a chase. Anything else?”

“No, guess not,” Tanya said, looking into Charles’ eyes. “All is well.”

“Take care, then. Talk to you soon.”

Edda’s wonderful cooking couldn’t distract from the tension around the dining room table. Tanya felt Charles and Edda’s disapproval like a wall erected between them. She sat silently and ate.

“Mr. Matwin was here this morning,” Edda said. “He waited for you for about an hour.” She glanced up at Tanya, then returned her attention to her meal.

Pretending disinterest, Tanya carefully selected a choice bit of lettuce from her salad. “Oh?” she said. “Did he say what he wanted?” She felt a flush begin, touching her cheeks with warmth.

“He wanted to see you,” Edda said. Charles watched the conversation, glancing first to Edda and then to Tanya.

“Did he say anything? If he was here for an hour, he must have said something to you.” Tanya’s exasperation began to show. She put her fork down and looked directly at Edda. “What did he want?”

“He asked a lot of questions. He asked about you, about me, about Charles. I gave him the story we all agreed upon. That we’re your guardians.”

“Anything else?” Tanya was on her feet, her hands grasping the table top. She regretted going with Charles to the police 1q23.

Edda lifted her wine glass and sipped. She sighed, then turned to Tanya. “He asked questions about the house, what the room with all the windows was. He wanted to see more. I showed him the reception room.” She took another sip of wine. “He was very interested in the art work.”

“I’m sure he was. He’s involved in the art world, too.”

Edda put her glass down upon the table with such force the wine slopped over and stained the white table cloth. “You’re creating a leak,” she said. Charles nodded.

“He has good references. Malcolm said he does,” Tanya said, then paused. She couldn’t let them know how much she really knew about Kevin Matwin. “He lives in Toronto. What kind of

ties could he have with a little town like Vermeil? He's been coming here long before I owned this house." She began to pace, anxious to calm the worries of her guardians.

Charles slapped his napkin down upon his plate. "Suit yourself," he said, then rose quickly and left the room.

"Did he say anything else?" Tanya asked, her voice a pleading whisper.

Edda seemed to take even longer to reply, her finger tracing circles in the small pool of wine. "Yes," she replied. "He'll be away until Wednesday night, late. He'll see you on Thursday."

Tanya slumped back on her bed, her stomach churning. She may have pushed Kevin too far, too fast. She hadn't seen him since Friday, and now she wouldn't see him until Thursday. Her strategy had been a fiasco. And it was all her own fault. She hid her face in her pillows and moaned. What would she say on Thursday? What would he say to her? She felt vaguely embarrassed by her own actions. How could she have said those things to him? What must he think of her?

If only he came to take her for a walk in the hills on Thursday, and not mention the 'experiment'... She would be completely happy, and never make a little fool of herself again. Then she immediately began to daydream about his golden-tanned body, his smooth muscles, the feel of him close to her. She sighed, frustrated, and closed her eyes.

If only she could sleep until Thursday.

Chapter 11

Thursday dragged itself into the week. The sun slipping through the missing wood strips on her blinds woke Tanya. Her eyes shot open. Kevin. He would be here today. She bounced out of bed with more energy than she had shown all week long.

She took a long shower. She lathered and soaped herself slowly, her eyes closed. In the shower's steamy embrace, she imagined Kevin's hands on her body, and shivered in anticipation.

Her long, wet hair usually dried into a floating mass of unruly curls, but today, she wanted something different, something enticing. She stretched each lock with a hot curling iron, pulling it smooth and straight. After an hour's work, she had straight, but totally shapeless hair. She gathered it and piled it into a cascade on the top of her head, then looked at herself critically. "Too sophisticated," she said, then let it fall loose. She pulled it off to one side, letting it fall over her cheek. "Too much," she laughed. "That doesn't suit me at all." Finally, she parted it in the middle and lifted each side with a tortoise shell pin. She nodded. "Yes, that'll do. Different, but natural."

She sprayed a touch of perfume behind her ears and at the hollow in her throat. The scent was soft, reminding her of spring time and gentle rain showers.

With a start, she realized she had been staring into space, thinking of Kevin's grey eyes.

The closet held only three dresses. She tried them all, then chose a turquoise outfit. It slipped over her shoulders and cupped her breasts, outlining them subtly, and fell in easy folds to her ankles. Her sandals finished her outfit, and she left her bedroom for a cup of tea.

The clock on the kitchen wall showed her the too-early hour. No one would be up and about yet, especially not Kevin, after arriving home so late last night. She sighed, gathered the portable phone, her tea, and a new book, and made her way to the terrace. Patience was not her strong suit, she decided.

She read for at least an hour, her eyes and mind drifting from the pages of her book at least every few minutes. Finally, the telephone rang.

She bit her lip and let it ring a second time. He mustn't think she was too anxious. "Hello?" she said, letting the word drawl.

"Tanya? Is that you? It's Kevin."

"Oh. Good morning, Kevin."

"I'm home between trips, and I'd like to invite you over for an early lunch today."

"Lunch?" she asked, pleased he didn't seem about to lecture her on her wild proposal. "Of course. I'd be delighted."

"Fine. Bring your bathing suit, we may swim afterwards. I'll pick you up shortly."

Tanya nearly flew back to her room to fetch her bathing suit. She felt as if her nerves had been wound tight and, shaken, she hurried back to the terrace just as Kevin came up the stairs.

He wore dove-grey trousers and a white shirt with borders of grey on the collar and sleeves. The grey of his eyes matched the distant hint of storm in the sky, far to the south. She shivered. With a smile, he moved closer to her and ran his finger along her cheek. "You look very lovely. And since we're old friends now, I think I can do this..." He bent and deposited a quick kiss on her mouth, just brushing her lips with his. He smiled into her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice a choked whisper, uncertain if she thanked him for the complement or the kiss. He took her hand and led her toward his villa.

A round table, sheltered by a huge umbrella, waited for them beside the pool. A delicate yellow cloth covered the table and made a dramatic background for the black china place settings. In the center of the table, a small ceramic vase held a nosegay of violets.

“Marta has prepared lobster bits with a *timballo di riso*, one of her specialties. I hope you’ll like them,” Kevin said. He drew a chair away from the table and held it for her. As she sat, his hand brushed against her breast as if by accident. A thrill of sensations shot through her body.

“Ah... Oh, I’m sure I’ll love it,” she said. Her heart hammered in her chest. She was certain he could hear it. “And everything looks so nice.” Afraid of silence, she began to babble. “I really appreciate the trouble you went to with the table, Kevin. The violets...they smell so wonderful. I had no idea their scent could be so strong.” She lifted the small vase and sniffed at the tiny flowers.

“Ah, yes. Wild violets. All things that are wild are stronger, don’t you think?” His smile mysterious, he touched her hand. “Yes, all wild things are stronger than the hot house variety.” He took the vase from her and clasped her hand in his. “I want this to be very special for both of us, Tanya, because we have so much to look forward to, so much to celebrate.” His smile deepened as he raised his eyebrows slightly.

“Celebrate?”

“But of course,” he replied, filling her plate with lobster and rice, the aroma intense. “I’ve decided to take you up on your offer. You know. The experiment. I’ve decided to become your next experiment.” His smile flashed at her, a brilliant grin.

Once more, Tanya felt the blush start at the base of her stomach and travel up to her cheeks. She felt her face flame hot and red. She grabbed her napkin and pressed it to her mouth, ducking her head.

“And, of course, since I am such an old guy, I really do need to make the occasion as romantic as I can. You see, I simply cannot just jump into bed and get on with it. You don’t mind, do you?” Again, his fingers touch her head, then traveled down to stroke a blazing cheek.

“Oh...uh...no. No, of course I don’t mind,” she said, her voice hoarse. Her mind whirled. What would he expect from her? She wasn’t a virgin, but she certainly wasn’t as experienced as she had implied. And suddenly her stomach felt as if it had been filled with ice. How could she go through with this?

She started to rise from the table, then looked into his eyes. They sparkled. His mouth set in a grin, he seemed to find it all just too amusing.

“I hope you aren’t backing out,” he said. “After all, I’ve been thinking of your proposal even during my trip. I’ll be very disappointed, Tanya, if you decide I’m not a worthy subject for your next experiment.”

“Oh, no. No. I haven’t changed my mind.” She settled in her seat once more, determined to see it through and lifted a forkful of lobster to her mouth. It tasted like dust and ashes, with no more flavor than a piece of cardboard. She swallowed around the huge lump in her throat and smiled.

Kevin nodded, and continued to chatter in a calm, easy manner. He discussed her paintings, his trip, the flowers...all manner of subjects except the one which pounded in her mind. Somehow, she managed to answer questions with a certain amount of sense, though she couldn’t remember either questions or answers. Somehow, she managed to eat enough of the fine luncheon in order not to insult Marta. Her mind whirled.

During coffee, Kevin suggested a swim. “The water’s heated, you know. Warm, soothing. The air’s a bit cool, but it will be bracing after a swim. What do you think?”

Anxious to postpone whatever he planned, she nodded. “Sounds wonderful.”

Nervous energy made her swim strong strokes from one end of the pool to the other without stopping. Kevin slid through the water, diving and swimming like an otter. He seemed to be ignoring her.

She never noticed as he left the side of the pool and dove deep, never felt him until his wet body came up under hers and clung to her. She inhaled a mouthful of water, then sputtered as Kevin turned her to face him.

His eyes were dark, far darker than she had ever seen them before. They seemed as deep as the farthest reaches of the sea, as if she could descend into them and never come up again. His lips moved across her eyes, his tongue gently wiping the water from the lids. He moved down her face until their lips touched. Again, he licked at her mouth, his tongue tracing her lips, touching the corners, then sliding within her mouth. Tanya shuddered and melted into his arms.

“Are you scared?” he whispered into her ears. “You swam as if a shark pursued you. Do you want to escape?” His fingers were sliding into the edge of her swim suit, stroking her in a way she had never been touched before. “Your heart beats so fast, my little frightened one. Do you flee from me?”

Tanya arched against him, her body burning. She shuddered again, as if his fingers held an electric wire sending current into her flesh. “No,” she said, her voice guttural. “Ah, no, no, never flee you...”

She felt him slide the bottom of her suit to the side, felt his fingers probe her. His mouth pressed against hers, his body...his naked body... Vaguely, she was aware he no longer wore a bathing suit. And then she felt him enter her, felt the rhythm as he rocked within her, cradled by the water. They slid beneath the surface as she arched to drive him deeper. With a sharp thrust and a deep moan, he forced them to the surface.

“Tanya,” he whispered against her neck. Still throbbing, she opened her eyes and smiled at him with delight.

Kevin climbed from the pool, reached into the water, and drew her dripping body to him. He held her close to his chest, his heart still beating a rapid drum. Again, he kissed the drops of water from her eyelids.

“Ah, Tanya,” he said, his voice a soft whisper. “The experiment isn’t over.” She could feel his readiness and her body began to respond again. “I have violets in the bedroom, violets, and more.” He turned and carried her into the house.

Chapter 12

Tanya stretched languorously like a young cat, extending her body and twisting, then rolling over onto her stomach. She twined a lock of her hair around a finger and thought of Kevin. The 'experiment' had been a success. She licked her lips, stretched again, and smiled, eyes closed in satisfaction. She then bounced out of bed, ready to see Kevin once more.

His studio window reflected the sun, but showed no light within. She shaded her eyes with her hand and peered inside.

"Hello, don't you know the penalty for snooping?" Kevin's voice said, mere inches from her ear. She jumped, startled, her heart beating a race inside her chest.

"Trying to scare me to death... Kevin, give warning, why don't you?" she said in a sputter, then laughed, threw her arms around his neck, and gave him a hug.

"I was on my way to find you," he said. "Marta's away, her niece had some sort of accident, and I was feeling lonely. When I saw you, I couldn't resist...nosy little thing that you are." He grinned at her, kissed her on the tip of her nose. "Come on, let's see what's in the refrigerator for lunch."

The kitchen, small and cozy, held an oval table in the middle and white-washed cupboards on every wall. Kevin pulled a large bowl of leftover chicken salad from the refrigerator, two forks from a drawer and a handful of napkins, and set them in front of Tanya. He sat beside her. He reached back once more and pulled out two cans of beer, popped the tops, and sipped the foam from one.

"Tell me about the women in your life," Tanya asked after a sip of her own beer.

"What women?" he asked with an innocent smile.

"You know. Wives, girlfriends, that sort of women."

He lifted the beer to his lips and sucked from the opening, the muscles in his throat moving as he swallowed. She shivered.

"There really isn't too much to tell. I haven't had very much luck with permanent relationships," he answered, looking across the room as if there were something he needed to see outside the window.

"But you've been married, right?"

Kevin turned his head to glance at Tanya. "Well, yes. Twice. My first wife's name was Jane. Party girl Jane, out for a good time. We met in college." He paused, took another drink from his beer, then slapped it down on the table. "Jane liked to live it up. She thought college was to party, not to gather knowledge. She lasted about a year, a year in which we partied together and went steady. Then we got married."

"Was she pretty?" Tanya asked with a slight lack of self-confidence. He smiled at her, touched her face with gentle fingers.

"Yes, Tanya, she was very pretty, blond and golden, slim and sleek. She had that glow, the elegant sheen the wealthy carry like a veil. She expected boys to do things for her, and they did. I did, too."

"And what happened?" Her voice was hushed, almost a whisper.

"She wanted to party all of the time, no time for real life. I had to work. I wanted to work."

We had problems.” He frowned.

“And your second wife?”

“Milena. She tutored me in the ways of a man and woman. She taught me the fine points of sex.” He smiled at her, then glanced down at the bowl of salad. “Look at you! You’ve eaten most of it!”

Tanya ran her finger along the edge of the bowl, licked once at the dressing, then slid the finger into her mouth, sucking softly. Kevin cleared his throat of a sudden lump. “Milena,” she said. “We were talking about Milena.”

“Hmm. Yes. Milena. She was very good to me. She brought business to the Shoppe, in fact, she still does after more than ten years.”

“So what went wrong? Good sex, good partners... what happened to the marriage?”

Kevin shook his head and looked away from her. “I couldn’t accept her ways.”

She leaned forward and caught his chin in her hand, then turned his face toward her. “Okay, who’s next in line? I mean, who’s important, not any of the fluff. I don’t have time for all of them.”

“Ha!” he said with a laugh. “Look who’s talking! But if you mean who meant anything in my life, I guess next in line would be Vanessa. She was my girlfriend until a few months ago.”

“And what happened?”

“I don’t know. We drifted apart. She found a job as a consultant for a travel agency, and started to travel. Then she found someone else and lost interest in me, someone with an exciting life style, she told me. But I don’t have a clue who he is or what he does.”

“Well, didn’t you ask her?”

“No. Why should I? I have more luck with casual encounters and...ah...experiments.” He lifted his beer and drained it, then thumped the can on the table. “Isn’t this enough? Haven’t you heard as much as you need to hear? I didn’t have half as many encounters as you did, at your little sorority parties.” He glowered at her. “By the way, how many ‘experiments’ have you had in your short life?”

Tanya looked away, her heart beating faster. “Not that many.”

“Ha! Not many. I thought so,” he said, his grin once more wide and mischievous.

“But they were meaningful,” she said, defensively.

“Meaningful, you said?” He laughed loud.

“Yes, meaningful.”

“How did you rate them? By performance? By staying power? By size? Tell me, do. I need to know where I might fit in.”

Tanya slipped from the table and crossed the room to the refrigerator. “I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it,” she said as she withdrew another beer.

His arms wrapped around her from behind. He took the beer from her and set it on the table, then slid his hand under her skirt, searching for her bare skin. “Let’s add another experiment to your collection,” he said. “I’m leaving tonight...for Prague.”

Chapter 13

The finished portrait glowed back at Tanya as if the child were alive, his eyes holding secrets even she couldn't foretell. She smiled, pleased. The beautiful black boy's face expressed the feeling of surprise, mixed with a touch of magic, just as she had planned and then a little more. She signed her entry, packaged it with care, and gave it to Charles for shipping to the competition. She felt a pang, like a mother sending her child off to school for the first time, then laughed; this child was a winner.

On the terrace, the glycine caught her eye. It seemed to shine with an inner light, the colors more brilliant than anything she could paint. Her fingers caressed the blossoms, cupping them in her hand like a bunch of ripe grapes. All the world seemed colored bright, with soft scents. She touched a single bloom, pale lilac, almost white, shading to dark lilac near the stem.

I hope one day I'll meet the Artist who designed this, and the One who gave us eyes to see its beauty, she thought. She brushed the velvet blossom against her cheek, and released it. Feeling wrapped in light and color, she skipped down the stairs and walked toward the front of the house.

"Good morning, Edda. Quite a project you have going there," she said. Edda sat beside one of two strips, each a foot wide, dug alongside the last curve of the driveway. She brushed a dirty hand across her forehead, leaving a smear of soil behind, and groaned.

"I've been here since early this morning, and I've accomplished nothing." She gestured at the meager row of marigolds planted a few feet from the entry. "I found these plants on sale." She glanced down at a dozen large flats and groaned again. "Really, I had no idea it would be so much work."

"Take a break. Let me help," Tanya said, taking the trowel from Edda. "I've done this kind of work many times over." She planted each small bloom one after the other, non-stop, humming happily.

"Tanya, there's something I'd like to discuss with you," Edda said, her voice tight with concern.

"Yes?" Tanya said, still digging, a smile touching her mouth.

"Charles isn't happy about the situation..."

Tanya sat back on her heels. "What situation?" Her smile faded.

Edda looked down and touched the petals of a marigold. "He's just concerned about your safety, Tanya. He feels there could be a security leak." She looked up into Tanya's eyes. "We know nothing about this Mr. Matwin, nothing."

Tanya shook her head. "Oh, Edda, Kevin is a nice person, a good man. He would never hurt me." She pulled another box of flowers to her. "Stop worrying. And tell Charles to relax, I'm fine."

"Tell him yourself," Edda said, sounding somewhat cross as Charles pulled the black Fiat into the driveway and parked. He crossed the driveway and regarded the plantings.

"Very nice," he said. "The flowers add color. Your painting is on its way to Montreal, Tanya." He set his mouth in a stiff line and didn't look at her.

"Thank you, Charles," Tanya said. "Charles, I just wanted to mention..."

"Excuse me," he said. "I needed to know if you would mind if Edda and I took a day off

together. We'd check in every few hours."

Tanya shook her head. "No problem. I'll start painting the reception room, give the walls a face lift. That should keep me safe and busy while you're not here."

Charles nodded, turned abruptly and left without any further comment.

* * *

Without Kevin, the days seemed to drag for Tanya. Her schooling was over, her deadline met. She felt restless, anxious. From her terrace, she watched a sleek grey cat stalk through the tall grass at the edge of the woods. The cat moved belly low, each forward motion a long, slow drift of paw and leg, then body inched ahead with exquisite stealth. Tanya couldn't see the animal's prey, but a sudden flash of the cat's body told her the hunt was over. She shuddered, her mind aware of the hunter and the hunted.

"Like me," she said in a whisper. "Stalked and hunted, like me." She shook herself and turned away, grabbed her portable sketching kit, and left for her favorite hill.

She moved into a familiar routine, spreading the image in her mind on the canvas with quick, sure strokes of charcoal. Gradually, she immersed herself in the work, her anxiety soothed.

A shadow fell across her canvas, a familiar scent tickling at her nose. Two firm hands grasped her head and turned her toward a hard body. She felt herself pressed tight against the man's chest, her arms limp at her sides. "Kevin! What are you doing here?" Her heart gave a skip, then began to beat twice as hard as if to make up for lost time.

"I missed you," he said, his voice warm honey and silk. She curled up against him, safe.

"How did you know where I was?" she asked.

"Nagged at Edda until she told me. Tanya, my dear, I'm afraid your guardians don't approve of me." Kevin released her and stepped back to look at her work. "How are you doing?"

"Not too bad. I shipped my painting for the competition, and decided to try a country scene." She looked at the drawing with a critical eye, then glanced back at Kevin. "So. You missed me, did you?" She grinned an impish smile at him.

He placed his hands behind his back and walked around her painting as if he didn't hear her, silent for a moment, then stopped and looked directly into her eyes. "More than you know, more than I ever thought possible." His eyes shaded deep and dark as the beginnings of a storm, the exact color she needed for her painting. "I thought I would be your next subject," he said. "What happened? What went wrong?"

Tanya shrugged. "I wanted to, but I couldn't..." She paused, struggled with words. "I needed you there, in the flesh so I could paint the real you, not the you of my mind." She felt herself blush and turned away from him.

"Tell me about your painting. Tell me how you choose a subject, how you begin to paint." He sat on a low stone wall and watched her while she began to gather her materials.

"First I decide on a subject. I chose a seascape today, to include that big cliff on the right. The sea is rough, the sky full of clouds." She paused and looked into his cloud-colored eyes, then drew in a deep breath and sighed. "That means I have plenty of elements to make a good composition. I'll add some boats and outline the mountains later. That's the first step: thinking, planning."

"And then, what? What do you do to get the image on the canvas?" He rested his chin on the palm of his hand, intent on her words.

Nervously, Tanya waved her paint brush at the far mountains. "Sketch. I do the sketch first,

fill the elements in with charcoal, then use this flat brush to scumble the colors. Sometimes I thinned them with turpentine. I just finished that stage. The technical part is over.” She cleaned the brush and lifted another. “I’ll add thicker layers of paint with this brush—blue and green for the sea, shades of mauve and midnight blue for the sky. That’s when the artist comes in.” She grinned at him, warming to the subject and to her listener. He seemed truly interested. “The artist needs inspiration to decide where to draw the viewer’s attention, how to give special lighting effects. And then, the difficult part begins: trying to give the painting a soul, by expressing emotions. Communicating rage, for instance, by making the surf and spray against the cliff the dominant part, or despair, by showing a boat struggling against the wind, or loneliness.” She paused and looked at the ocean. “Loneliness...” She didn’t finish. She knew that feeling far too well.

“How do you express loneliness?” Kevin asked.

“With a still, quiet ocean empty of life, the sky and mountains grey and remote.” She glanced up at Kevin, shyly. His expression was soft, gentle. “You know what you’re talking about, don’t you?” He gestured at the ocean, the mountains beyond. “Is this one of your favorite places?”

She nodded. “I love this place, especially in the mornings. Very early, dark clouds hang around the cliffs making them look like gigantic mountains. I call them ‘Mountains of Dawn.’”

“Did you know Claude Monet portrayed these very same hills?” he asked.

Her brow furrowed in concentration. “Yes. I’ve seen one of his pictures—contorted olive trees in the foreground and a village at the bottom of the hill—”

“That painting is called ‘Bordighera.’ Bordighera is a town only a few miles away from here,” Kevin said. “Perhaps someday we’ll visit it, if you’d like.”

He bent to lift her portable drawing board. “Finished already?” He grinned.

“Ah, yes. A sex object interrupted my concentration,” she replied with a laugh.

“Come have lunch with me,” he said.

“Eating? Is that all you ever think of? Is that all you have to offer?” She giggled.

“Yes. Exactly. I traveled all night just to have lunch with you,” he replied, and started down the hill.

Lunch was served in the dining room, far more formal than Tanya’s first lunch with Kevin. Marta placed platters heaped with salads and breads, along with small bowls of a rich peasant stock. Kevin pulled a chunk of dark bread from a loaf and smeared it with sweet butter, then dipped it into his soup. He seemed distracted, quiet. Tanya chattered nervously. Medallions of veal in a wine sauce, mushrooms and pearl onions followed, along with thin homemade pasta.

Kevin ate little and seemed to listen to an inner voice. After a few attempts at conversation, Tanya gave up and did justice to Marta’s meal. “Marta, that was wonderful,” she said as she and Kevin moved to the study for coffee and pralines. Marta ducked her head and smiled in appreciation, then left for the day.

Tanya curled on an ottoman and reached for a handful of chocolates.

“Don’t,” Kevin said. “You’ll get fat.” He glowered at her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Why are you angry with me?”

“I’m not. I’m angry with myself. Come here.” She rose, crossed the room to him. “Take off your clothes.”

Tanya frowned. “Here? Now? All of them?” She felt confused. What had happened to her gentle lover?

“Yes. All of them. Now.” His expression severe, he stared at her. She felt more than naked as

she slipped out of her jeans and shirt. She crossed her arms against her chest and shivered.

Kevin stood and drew her into his arms. He buried his face in the side of her neck, his hands running across her back in feather touches. He nibbled at her ear lobe, ran a series of small kisses across her cheek, then licked at her upper lip. His fingers unfastened the clasp of her brassier.

He held her away from him and examined her body, half nude before him. One finger trailed along the side of her neck, then traveled down between her bare breasts. Her nipples hardened, and stood erect as he traced small circles around her breasts and brushed their tips. He smiled, then bent over her and kissed the hollow of her throat. His tongue tickled at her skin as he ran a shivery line from her neck to her right breast. He took her nipple into his mouth, swirled his tongue around it, then pushed her away from him again.

Tanya's breath came fast and harsh. She reached for him. Kevin stepped back, his smile cruel. "What do you want, Tanya? Tell me."

"You know..." She said, her voice husky, harsh with desire. She slid her underpants down and stood before him. "Do you want me to pose for you?" She raised her arms above her head, then slid one hand down to stroke her sides, caress her own breast. She dropped the hand lower, stroking her stomach with soft, silken touches, then lower yet. Kevin licked his lips and came toward her again.

"Am I a toy for you, Tanya?" His hand slid between her legs, probing, then entered her. He groaned as her fingers stroked his belly and slid into the top of his trousers. She unfastened them, her breath again coming faster as he massaged her.

"Toy...yes, my bear, my big teddy bear..." Her breath came in short, sharp gasps as his fingers worked harder.

"Ah, Kevin...ah, now, please...please...please..."

As he entered her, he whispered in her ear. "Do you love me, my little minx? Do you love me, or am I just another sex toy?" And he thrust, hard and strong, as he felt her body shudder in release. She moaned.

Kevin withdrew from her body, then lifted her into his arms as if she were an infant and carried her from the room. Tanya snuggled close to his chest, smelling the masculine scent of him, licking his skin to taste of him. "That was just the prologue, my little one. But you must answer me...I need to know." With one hand, he reached down and grasped her chin, then turned her face up to his. He looked into her eyes. "Do you care for me?"

"I love you...always and forever, since I could think, I've loved you..." She replied. "I've seen you in my dreams, loved you before I was born."

Chapter 14

Gianci Olfrandi, the only grandson of Don Alfonso Olfrandi and the bearer of the family name, sat bored and lonely on the private beach several miles from Kevin Matwin's villa. He glowered at the rolling waves and sat further back into the shade of his huge umbrella.

No one to talk to, no one to play chess with...a thirteen-year-old boy shouldn't spend most of his life alone, he thought. He sniffled and ran his hand under his nose. Mother. Every summer since the divorce, he had to stay at the beach with his mother, Gina, at the Oleandro Rosso, the family retreat on the Italian Riviera. Most of the time, Mother was too busy to be bothered with him. He wasn't allowed to be with any of the other kids; beneath him, they were. His grandfather was too afraid of kidnapping— as if anyone could kidnap him. He was too tough!

Gianci flexed his flaccid muscles and examined his skinny upper arms. For thirteen, he looked as if he were really only nine or ten. Short for his age and painfully thin, he didn't get enough exercise to develop an appetite, or to develop his body. His thick black hair flopped into his eyes and he brushed it back with his hand.

Gianci hid from the sun and from the world, and played chess. He knew he was good, one of the best, but who else knew, and who else cared? He sniffled again and turned his portable PB Statesman computer on, determined to beat his own top time.

"Gianci," a voice said from across the sand, coming toward him. "I'll play you, if you want." Gianci looked up. Giuseppe, one of the waiters on duty at the beach, walked toward him with a wide grin. "I'm pretty good, too. I beat everybody around here most of the time."

"That's because you've never played anyone really good before, like me," Gianci said with his usual arrogance. "I'm so good I'm ready to beat Deep Blue. You wouldn't last five moves with me." Contempt dripping from his words, he turned away from the older boy. "Bring me a lemonade, and see that it's cold when I get it."

Giuseppe frowned, then left. He returned within ten minutes with the lemonade.

"All right, come and play," Gianci said. "I bet you a week's salary you can't make five moves."

"I don't bet," Giuseppe replied. "And besides, I have to work now." He turned and left.

Gianci dozed for a time, then drifted into the villa for lunch. He returned to the beach a few hours later.

"Gianci, Mrs. Olfrandi asked me to come play chess with you this afternoon." Giuseppe stood before him, hands clasped behind his back.

"Good," Gianci said with satisfaction. "I play the white, you play the black."

And the games began. Gianci won the first game, but Giuseppe won the next three. Gianci's teeth clenched in frustration. It was dusk when they finally stopped playing.

"Tomorrow, I'll go to play at a tournament," Giuseppe said with pride. "The junior club organized it."

"Where?" Gianci asked, interested.

"On the small beach west of the harbor. Twelve players in all. Most are schoolboys, like me." Giuseppe thrust out his chest, proud and arrogant. "I won the contest three years in a row."

"I want to play, too. Fit me in."

“No can do. We have the twelve players we need and you have to register three days ahead.”

“An Olfrandi doesn’t have to follow rules,” Gianci said, contempt again coloring his words. “I’m sure you’re more afraid to have me as an opponent.”

Giuseppe stood and prepared to leave without a word.

“Wait. I’ll give you three hundred dollars if you let me play in your place.”

Giuseppe paused, turned and looked at the smaller boy. “We play early. Nine o’clock in the morning. You’ll never be up in time,” he said and this time, the contempt was his.

Gianci pulled his Piaget watch from his wrist. “Here, take it. It’s worth more than one thousand dollars. It’s yours if you let me play in your place.”

Giuseppe considered the watch. “No,” he said. “People will think I stole it from you.”

“Too hard,” Gianci said in disgust. “Here, take this.” He pulled a sheet of paper off his score pad and wrote: “I give this Piaget watch to my friend Giuseppe. Gianci Olfrandi.” He thrust the paper at the older boy. “Is it all right now? Will you do as I ask?”

Giuseppe took the watch and paper, examined them for a moment, then thrust them into his pocket. “Okay. Saturday, tomorrow morning, at nine o’clock sharp. The little marina west of the harbor. Do you know where it is?”

“I’ll find it. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

Around seven the following morning, Gianci, who had not slept for the entire night, began to walk toward town. He was only a short distance from the Oleandro Rosso when a car stopped beside him. A burly giant of a man grabbed him and shoved him into the back seat. No one saw them. No one realized Gianci was missing until well past one o’clock, when he didn’t appear for lunch.

* * *

Days passed slowly for Tanya when Kevin wasn’t around. She missed him constantly, then worried she might slip and tell him the truth about her situation. He asked too many questions, refused to believe her lies, and taunted her with them. He seemed to test her. Fear and insecurity told her she could lose him.

To take her mind off her paranoia, she decided to paint his portrait. She drew several quick sketches, each one capturing one of his many mercurial expressions, then waited for his return with impatience. She needed the real thing, Kevin in the flesh, so she could make the portrait come to life.

As soon as she saw Kevin’s Alfa Romeo enter the driveway of his villa, she wrapped the sketches in plastic and hurried to him. A storm blasted through the hills, with the wind tugging at her plastic-wrapped package. Cold rain stuttered from the sky to wet her hair and run into her face. She ran.

Kevin yanked the door open and pulled her into his arms. “My Lady of the Lake,” he laughed, then kissed the raindrops from her eyelashes. “Look at you, little soggy critter that you are, soaked through. Come in here, I’ll dry you off. What’s that you have?”

Through chattering teeth, Tanya said, “The beginnings of your portrait. Here.” She pushed the package at him, and pulled the rain water from her hair with her fingers, working the curls back into place, and mopped at her face. “Wet...goodness, that was sudden.”

“That’s all?” Kevin asked, looking at her sketches.

“What?”

“I said, that’s all you’ve done, and in three whole days, too?”

“All? What did you expect?” She stood, wet and annoyed, her hands on her hips.

“Well, a complete portrait, of course,” he said, his grin wide.

She ran across the room and threw herself on him, dripping wet and making him equally wet, and pummeled him with her small fists. In between laughing, he hugged her tight to him and kissed her. “I missed you,” he said, as he always said on his return.

Wrapped in a big towel, Tanya sprawled on the rug.

“Tanya, we have to talk.” Kevin lay besides her.

“We are talking.”

“No, you know what I mean. We have to do some real talking.”

“Real? Do you mean we’ve been fake talking until now? Fun!”

“Tanya, stop, I’m serious. You have to tell me the truth. At first, it was a fun game,” Kevin paused and stroke Tanya’s back. “It was the best game I’ve even played in my entire life. But now, you mean too much to me. I have to know the truth.”

Tanya shivered. She knew he suspected her story was false, but had no real idea of how little he believed. She nodded. “But,” she said, “there are some things I can’t tell you. Really, Kevin, I can’t.”

Kevin frowned, perplexed. “All right, let’s go over some of the...um...small things, like your childhood, the overdose story, and the campus orgies.”

“True, false, and almost false, in that order.”

“Why did you lie to me?” Kevin leaned on one arm and stared at her. His cloud-grey eyes were almost black.

“I knew a bit about you, Kevin. Don’t ask me how, just know that I did. You fascinated me from the beginning. But I knew who you were and what you were doing, and especially...I knew about your women. I wanted to interest you.” Tanya could feel her blush as it spread from the pit of her belly, up and over her face. It burned. “I know it was stupid, silly. I made most of it up because I knew I couldn’t match those girls you dated.” She stopped, smiled slightly. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Kevin brushed the remark away. “What did you really do at those parties?”

She groaned, rolled over on her back and stared at the ceiling. “I was still a virgin at nineteen. That embarrassed me. That’s why I went to those damn parties, I wanted to meet boys. And that’s where I met Jeff, Jeff Leight. He was my first...and my only...lover. He was my steady boyfriend until he moved away two years ago.”

“What was he like?”

“Nice to me, spontaneous...no complications, no commitments.”

“What happened?”

“He won a sports scholarship in Colorado and moved. Long distance relationships usually don’t do too well.” She sat up and began to wind her hair into ringlets over her fingers. She still didn’t look at Kevin.

“Are you in trouble with the law?”

“No.”

“And did you know I knew you watched me from your terrace while I swam in the nude each day?”

Tanya jumped, shocked. She turned to Kevin’s laughing face.

“Little one, I didn’t need any special gadget to see the light reflected off your binoculars each morning while I swam. It made you all the more interesting to me.” He fell back on the rug, laughing. Tanya glowered.

“We’re not even, Tanya, not by a long shot. Just make a promise to me... Never again lie to me, no matter what. If you can’t tell me the truth, say so, but never again make up a story to mislead me.” He placed his hands on each side of her face. “Promise me,” he said, staring deep into her eyes.

“I promise.” She slid into his arms, wrapping herself around him. “Friends again?”

“Always and forever, friends.”

As she began to doze in Kevin’s arms, Tanya debated whether to tell him her latest secret, then decided it wasn’t the right time. She wasn’t certain if it would ever be the right time.

* * *

“Tanya, I have a request,” Kevin said. He adjusted the knot in his tie with a critical eye. “I have to leave on business again, but I’d feel much better if I knew where you were. At least some of the time.” He turned to her with a smile. “I know your so-called guardians have been gone a lot lately, no?” Tanya nodded, her arms wrapped around her knees, her chin on her knees, curious about the direction his request might take. “I’d like you to come work here, in my villa. It would be wonderful to have a real artist available when I needed her.” He grinned. “Yes, needed. I need you to advise me in the selection of the most important pictures, only the best, to include in my books. I’d need your advice on a regular basis.” He tilted his head to one side and gave her a whimsical grin. “The suggestions you gave me for the draft of my latest collection earned much praise from everyone who saw it.”

Tanya blushed, ducked her head, and grinned in return. “Sure, why not? I’ll talk it over with Edda and Charles, though I doubt if there will be any problems. I’m alone in the house a lot lately, anyway.”

He nodded, bent toward her and kissed the tip of her nose. “Good. That way, at least, I’ll know what you’re doing with your days.”

The telephone rang, startling Tanya. Kevin lifted the receiver. “Yes?” he said.

He frowned, glanced at Tanya quickly, then away. “What can I do for you?” He listened to the response, stood and turned his back on Tanya. He walked across the room, trailing the phone cord behind him. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I want to do that. There’s really no reason.” Again, he glanced at Tanya. “That’s right,” he said firmly. “I am.” He listened a moment longer, his frown deepening. “If you really insist.” He paused. “Yes, the usual. The Grand Palais.” He slammed the phone down and stared at it for a moment, then turned to Tanya.

“Business?” she asked.

“Sort of...” He smiled at her. “I have to leave now or I’ll miss my plane. I’ll stay in Paris only the time needed to deal with my business. I’ll hurry back.” He gave her a kiss and left.

Chapter 15

“The boy has no shoes,” Ugo said to the other kidnapers. “He threw them out the window while we drove up the hills. He can’t walk any distance.”

Gianci smirked. Though blindfolded, he had managed to toss his shoes and anything else he could lay his hands on out the window of the car in an attempt to attract attention. In any case, he wanted to leave some kind of trail for the police. He had no doubt his grandfather would find him, and quickly.

“Well,” Aldo, the nominal leader, said. “He can walk on his bare feet. He’ll learn.”

“I don’t think that’s wise. He’ll slow us down,” Ugo said, glancing at the soft, tender soles of Gianci’s feet.

Aldo frowned. “Well, we have one more delivery of supplies coming. Order a pair of shoes for him.”

“I wear only ‘Tacchini Super Affinity’ shoes. They cost two hundred dollars a pair.” Gianci threaded his fingers together behind his head and rocked back on his chair. Aldo slapped him across the mouth and caused his chair to fall over backwards, dumping Gianci on the floor.

“Tell the driver to add a pair of mountain shoes,” Aldo lifted one of Gianci’s feet and examined it. “Tell him size eight, and we’ll add the heavy socks to make them fit. Put the tape back on his mouth, he pisses me off.” Aldo spat, then stormed out the door of the tiny cabin.

Ugo yanked Gianci from the floor, wrapped his mouth with tape and tied his hands together behind him. He tossed the boy onto the upper bunk against the far wall of the small alpine shed. “Kid, you gotta learn to shut up. Aldo doesn’t have the patience I have,” he said with an ugly smile. “Do as you’re told and you’ll survive.” He reached over and pinched a small piece of hair beside Gianci’s left ear in his fingers, then yanked up, hard enough to make the boy scream. “Yes. Do as you’re told, and you’ll survive.” He chuckled, twisted the hair in cruel fingers once more, then turned away.

* * *

Gina Olfrandi’s first reaction upon learning of her son’s disappearance was to become hysterical. She knew her father-in-law, the great Don Alfonso Olfrandi, would blame her, even though it was hardly her fault. Gina threw a vase at the wall and watched it shatter. Silly twit of a child, she couldn’t imagine how he could be related to her. She paced, then gave in and called the local police. Her father-in-law would wait.

“I tell you, he’s missing. How do I know where he is?” Her voice, as shrill and piercing as any fishwife, echoed through the villa. “What do you mean, the entire force is busy with an election parade for the local beauty representative? Find me someone, or I assure you, you will wish you had.” Gina slammed down the phone, took several deep breaths, and gave in to the inevitable. She called her father-in-law in Catalbarro.

How could a human voice have the ability to calm, yet terrify at the same time? Gina’s father-in-law’s gruff voice assured her all would be well, but also assured her she would be made to pay. “Let me handle it,” Don Alfonso said. “But first I’ll call that idiot son of mine to see if,

by any chance, he may have taken the boy without informing you. If that is not the case, I'll fly there immediately. I'll be there before dark."

Commissario Caltabieni was piecing together the story of the missing boy when Don Alfonso arrived. He shuddered, then patted at the air before Don Alfonso as if putting out small flames. "I have interrogated all the staff," he said, his voice a high-pitched whine. "The only people missing are Giuseppe Rettori and Bettina Pertao. Giuseppe played at a chess tournament today, won, and left for the French coast to do some celebrating. Bettina left for her holiday." He paused, took a deep breath, and gauged the effect of his words on Don Alfonso. "I have alerted the local police about Bettina. They'll contact her when she arrives at her destination, which is, I believe, Tarvisio." He glanced down at his notes, then back up at Don Alfonso. "Giuseppe is another matter. We have asked for the assistance of the French police, and they are looking for him. He should, however, return by Sunday night at the latest."

Don Alfonso paced the patio, his face a thundercloud. "I demand immediate action," he said, again and again, each time a little louder. He whirled on Gina. "You're totally useless," he said with a sneer. "You're not fit to handle an Olfrandi. I don't know what my fool of a son ever saw in you. Get out of my sight." He turned away from the crying woman with contempt.

His second victim was the security guard, the next the local police, and finally Commissario Caltabieni. "Caltabieni—I want this operation handled swiftly and in silence. No one must know. It cannot seem possible to kidnap the name carrier of the Olfrandis." He glowered, seemed to grow larger. "I hold you personally responsible for the life of my grandson."

* * *

Monday brought a flurry of problems to the kidnapers. "Aldo, they've questioned Giuseppe Rettori and established a connection with you," Ugo said, his face twisted in fear. "They're looking all over for you...for us."

"What about the ransom note? Was it delivered?" Aldo said, his voice sharp.

"No."

"Why the hell not? Damn it, nobody can do as they're told." Aldo paced across the tiny shed's room and glared at Gianci, trussed in the upper bunk. "What are they waiting for, anyway?"

"Our connection is scared, Aldo. He won't deliver it. He thinks it's too risky. He's not afraid of the police, but Don Alfonso Olfrandi's men..."

"What about them?"

"They beat him half to death. He's still recovering. They said it was a warning. Scared our driver off, too. He took off for Limone until things settle down." Ugo paused, shook his head. "I don't think we're safe here, Aldo. We gotta move."

"But where?" Aldo asked. "I planned on using this shed as our headquarters. Everything's here."

"If we don't move on, I'm outta here, and I'm not kidding," Ugo said. "The Olfrandis are very rich, but they're powerful and mean, too. Either we move on, or we send the kid back and pretend none of this ever happened." He glared at Gianci. "Maybe we should send him back in pieces."

Aldo stared at Gianci, then sighed. "Okay, we move on. We go west, toward the French border. Ugo, Berto...get the boy ready. Give him a knapsack. Make him carry his own weight." He drew a deep breath. "We travel at an altitude of about 5,000 feet. There, bushes and trees can

cover our movements.”

* * *

“Kevin, you’re looking wonderful,” Vanessa White said. She glided toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Hello, my dear love. How are you? It’s been far too long,” she said, depositing a kiss in the air beside his cheek. “Your rather short response to my phone call at your villa confused me a bit, you know.”

Kevin unwound her arms and stepped back from her. Slender and elegant, she stood nearly as tall as he. Her hair shimmered with golden highlights, swept back with a jeweled comb on one side to cascade across her other cheek. She wore an ivory suit of a fine wool and silk blend with a bright multicolored silk blouse. As always, her shoes and purse, of supple, butter-soft leather, matched exactly. Vanessa touched his face with a long, ruby hued fingernail. “But Kevin, my love, whatever is the problem? Look, here’s a little gift for you.” She presented him with a small wrapped package.

“No problem, Vanessa. I must say you’re looking wonderful yourself. And what is this? Thank you.” Kevin took the package and removed the wrapping. “Santos by Cartier—my favorite cologne. You remembered, eh? Again, thank you.”

“Come have a drink with me, and we’ll discuss all the things I remember,” she said with a slight smirk. “We have ever so much to catch up on, my dear. Months of events to discuss.”

“I’m sorry, Vanessa. As I told you on the phone, I have a very full schedule. Appointments the entire time I’m here, starting this afternoon. I barely have time to breathe.”

“Yes, I know. But I don’t mind accompanying you...just as I did in the past. Come, have lunch with me and we’ll talk about life and love, past and present.”

Vanessa watched a reluctant Kevin sip his drink at the bar of the Grand Palais. “You said you’re seeing a girl. Tell me about her,” she demanded, twirling the ice in her glass.

“Yes, I am. She’s my new neighbor. A bit young for me.” He laughed self-consciously. “She keeps me on my toes. You remember the old mansion near my property? She’s living there—temporarily, I believe.”

“An Italian girl?” Vanessa curled her upper lip slightly. “A peasant?”

“No, she’s Canadian. But come to think of it, she could pass for an Italian girl.” He smiled. “Her name is Tanya. She’s an artist.”

“Well, well...what a coincidence.” Her voice was tinged with sarcasm.

“Coincidence?”

“Yes. That you are a promoter of the arts and she happened to be there, just like that. I bet she’s totally unknown.”

“Maybe so. But she is very talented. She just mailed an entry to a competition. Wonder in Children is the title, if I remember correctly.” He glanced at her across the small table. “But what about you? Aren’t you going on a big trip? Turkey and Turkomenia...something like that?”

Vanessa frowned. “I’m not sure I’ll be going,” she replied. “There’s been a delay. Besides, I’ve been feeling very tired lately.” She looked deep into his eyes. “Really too tired. I need a bit of a rest. I’d like to come and stay with you at the villa for a few weeks.”

Kevin hesitated. He pursed his lips, then sighed. “Vanessa, the timing couldn’t be worse. I have scads of trips I need to take, appointments all over the globe. I’ll be far too busy to pay any attention to you. No chance I’ll be even half a decent host.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll just rest, swim in the pool and the sea, take advantage of Marta’s

wonderful cooking. Kevin...are you trying to tell me your little neighbor friend might be upset by my visit?"

"It would be a bit difficult to explain you to her. She might not believe you're just a guest."

Vanessa's plucked and penciled eyebrows rose. "Explain me to her? You would need to explain me to her?"

"Well, in a way, yes," he said with a laugh. "She is my artistic advisor, you know. I wouldn't want her upset."

Vanessa patted her lips with her napkin, then dropped it on the table. "I see. Then we must make the most out of these ten days."

Vanessa accompanied Kevin to the parties following his day-long business meetings, as she had in years past. The days passed in rapid succession, a blur of work and parties, then drew to a close.

"We haven't had much time together," Vanessa said with a pout. "Not even for a stroll on the most famous promenade..."

"Vanessa, I think we've spent more time together this trip than on any other," he replied. He laughed. "Funny. When we were an 'item' so to say, we had so little time for each other."

"And now? You know I came to be with you, Kevin."

He looked at her. "I leave tonight, Vanessa. I'm sorry." He bent and kissed her cheek, then turned and left her standing alone.

* * *

A distinctive looking man fetched Vanessa at Kennedy airport. Luigi Amedeo, Count of Monteturro, enclosed her in his arms, then pushed her back and smiled at her. "Hello, *divina*," he said. "How was your trip?"

"Not a word," Vanessa replied. "I'm furious. Kevin acted as if I didn't exist."

"Well, my dear, you were there on a political mission, not a romantic one," he said, smiling. He took her arm and guided her from the airport. "Let me be the judge of how successful you were. Tell me all you gathered about the guest at the old mansion."

Chapter 16

Luigi Amedeo's time had come, he knew. No more would he suffer under the stigma of his father's mistakes. No more would he be made to live outside his birthright. He glanced at Vanessa White and smiled, his thoughts skipping back to that fateful trip several months before, when concerns wore worried rings in his mind.

So much to worry about, so much to concern him...he had been hardly aware of his seating companion on his return plane trip from New York. He had spread a series of folders and pamphlets on the drop-down table before him, and frowned.

"Is that Turkey?" his companion asked, pointing at the folder in front of him.

"Yes. Do you know of it?" he replied.

"Ah, and Turkomenia...do I see Afghanistan, as well? Are you planning a trip, sir?" she asked, her smile sweet and interested.

Luigi Amedeo folded his paperwork and replaced it in his briefcase. "Yes. I'm a travel agent. I own a company called 'Vacations with a Difference.' Each of my trips is designed to entertain and surprise my guests, leaving them always anxious to come back for more. This is my most recent endeavor." He smiled at her, intrigued. "Are you familiar with the countries? I'm more than slightly concerned, due to the political situation and the religious environment." It was a relief to discuss his concerns, especially with someone he doubted he would ever see again.

The woman nodded. "Oh, yes, I'm very familiar with the countries and their politics." Her mouth pouted in an attractive manner, then twisted as if she tasted something somewhat sour. "My late husband served as a diplomatic attaché in several Islamic countries. If you would like, I could suggest stops at various local attractions. I would be happy to send names and precise locations to you, after I return home." She smiled with slow elegance. "Of course, I would need to know your name and address."

"I'm so very sorry," he said, taking her hand in both of his. "I am Luigi Amedeo, Count of Monteturro." He kissed the back of her hand.

Surprised, Vanessa gushed like a school girl. "But how marvelous! How very interesting! My name is Vanessa White. I assure you, I would be delighted to help with planning your tour in any way I can." She paused. "But please...tell me about your family, Count. I'm fascinated."

"Ah, it is a long and boring tale, better told before a roaring fire with snifters of brandy at hand." His smile invited. "But tell me of you. You are a widow, you said?"

"Yes."

"Sorry to hear about that." Luigi Amedeo paused, tactful. His eyes quickly glanced at her hand and at the huge emerald in a white gold setting. "But you are not unattached, right?"

Vanessa looked away, then back. "I am involved with someone. We've been seeing each other for some time, but we've begun to drift apart lately." She glanced at him, then down. "My friend has a villa on the Italian Riviera, which, actually, is my destination."

"The Italian Riviera? Which one?"

"The Riviera di Ponente. His villa is near Ventimiglia, close to the French border."

"Tell me more." Luigi Amedeo's interest ignited. "But wait...join me for a drink, perhaps a glass of champagne. We could talk about your trips. Maybe discuss a consulting job with my

own agency.”

Luigi Amedeo sighed. She had told him so much, as she sipped one glass after the other, so much more than he expected. She told him the name of her boyfriend, Kevin Matwin. She complained of the way in which he left her alone for days, sometimes weeks, at a time. And then she talked of the mansion next door to her lover’s villa, the mansion unoccupied for years.

“This mansion...does it have a huge iron gate at the front? And an orchard on the eastern side?” he asked.

“Well, yes, it does. The orchard in bloom is a show piece. It looks like a carpet of light pink snow. How did you know?”

“I have been looking for the owners of that house for the last fifteen years,” he replied. “If you ever learn anything of them, could you please let me know?” He looked deep into her eyes, earnest and intense. Once more, he lifted her hand to his lips. “I would be so very appreciative.”

“Why, certainly,” Vanessa said, her pleasure evident. “I’d be delighted.”

Luigi Amedeo raised his champagne glass to her. “Let us toast our new partnership, Vanessa. I have a distinct feeling we’ll do great things together.”

Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro knew he had elegance, manners, and social graces, as well as an aristocratic appearance. Tall and slender, dark blond with delicate features, he brought prestige to the hosts of the most exclusive parties. He wore any kind of clothes with the same poise his most remote ancestors wore the family’s emblem, often exquisitely embroidered on their rich garments.

The coat of arms of the Monteturros carried two swords overlapping each other to form a cross, symbolic of the strength of the house behind the Pope and indicative of an ancient papal nobility. Inscribed within the coat of arms were the words ‘*Ludovicum Amidaeum puaperum defensorem Monteturri comitem Gregorius VII, Pontifex nominavit. A.D. MLIII,*’ the one Latin inscription Luigi Amedeo had been required to learn from the time he could speak: ‘In the year 1053, Pope Gregory VII bestowed upon Lodovicus Amadeus, the defender of paupers, the title of Count of Monteturro.’ Luigi Amedeo, and before him his father Michele, displayed the family coat of arms in any possible occasion, particularly to the simpering women of their wealthy friends.

Count Michele di Monteturro...his father. Luigi Amedeo dreaded being reminded of him. His father’s interests concerned only gambling, women, and painting, in that order. Michele’s greatest passion had been for the game, any game, any time, for any reward. He had sold most of his properties to offset his gambling debts, and was left with only the family house, the vineyards in the Piedmont region, and an old mansion on the Mediterranean shores. Near the end of his life his only income came from the sales of the prestigious *nebbiolo* wine his family had produced for generations.

After Luigi’s mother, Mafalda, died, Michele’s main goal became a marriage with a wealthy woman who would pay his bills and give him enough money to satisfy his cravings. Those were his greatest desires. Secondary to them, she would take care of his two children, Cecilia Maria, twelve, and Luigi Amedeo, eleven.

Luigi Amedeo had heard the story of his father’s misfortunes many times over. He had heard of splendid and desirable Carla, blessed with beauty as well as wealth.

Michele courted Carla assiduously and asked for her hand in marriage only a few weeks after their first encounter. Her parents, concerned over Carla’s youth and Michele’s reputation as a gambler, convinced the girl to postpone her engagement and take a cruise which had been

previously planned. Carla agreed, certain the delay would make no difference in her feeling toward the aristocratic Michele.

Luigi Amedeo knew the rest of the story so well, he might as well have been on the cruise with Carla. He frowned, remembering his father's embarrassment and rage when the announcement came: Carla was to wed Henry Caldwell, a man she had just met on a cruise. And that in the fall of the same year.

And then a second blow... Henry Caldwell, a clever business man, became wealthier every year as Michele drew further into discreet poverty. And that was not the end of the sad story.

Five years later, Henry and Carla traveled back to Carla's hometown to attend the opening of an ancient castle remodeled to become a hotel with an entertainment center. It held a theater for various shows, two halls for dancing, one for traditional music, the other for modern, and rows of slot machines lining the corridors. The pride of the castle, however, was the small gambling rooms built into the cells of the castle's dungeon.

And, of course, Michele di Monteturro wandered the halls, eager for a game of any kind with any person. He saw Carla and her husband, and neared them. Surprised, Carla introduced Henry to Michele, who promptly invited Henry to join him in one of the gambling rooms in the dungeon.

It is said Henry hesitated. If he did, it does not matter. It is also said he had never gambled before in his life. Again, it does not matter. Henry and Michele played for hours. At sunrise, Henry was the owner of both the Monteturros' largest vineyard and the mansion on the Riviera.

Luigi Amedeo had searched for the owners of the mansion for years, searched for a link which would bring him close to the Caldwells. He never stopped resenting the man who took advantage of his father's weakness. He would never forgive Henry or Carla Caldwell for taking away the mansion where he had spent so many hours in the company of rich friends.

* * *

Luigi Amedeo had been comfortable as a child due to his mother's forethought in establishing a special fund. Cecilia Maria, his sister, managed the family business while he spent many years simply roaming. He dreamed of a life with plenty of money, no hassles, no unpleasant work, and grew up resenting the aura of poverty he wore.

Like his father before him, Luigi Amedeo went to many elegant receptions where he met influential people. At one such reception, he was introduced to an elderly gentleman know only as Ismeen. Ismeen took an interest in Luigi Amedeo.

"I believe I have a job for you," Ismeen said. "It is the kind of job that will allow you to travel and make good money, with little effort on your part." The elderly man laid a finger alongside his nose and winked. He lowered his voice. "We need couriers from the east and South America to Europe. You would travel first class, stay in luxury hotels. Your only duty would be to wait for a call, pick up a suitcase or parcel, travel to a prearranged destination, and deposit the parcel."

Luigi Amedeo hesitated for a moment, then blinked and nodded.

Luigi Amedeo entered the world of international crime with the same style he entered a ballroom. Amiable but distant, prompt but meticulous, he performed each job efficiently and received his compensation with dignified tolerance.

By the end of the second year, Luigi Amedeo's enterprises had become extremely risky. The demand for his services was incessant, his compensation astronomical. The need for a credible

cover for his activities and a laundry for his cash came about along with his decision to open a travel agency, 'Vacations with a Difference.' He kept two residences, a permanent home in Anzio, near Rome, and another transient one in New York. Luigi Amedeo personally recruited his guests among the jet set; he was their guide, friend, and adviser. The business thrived, becoming more popular each year, and served him well as a means to launder his money.

He would book trips for five times the actual number of guests and deposit into his account the full payment for the phantom crowd, then later label the payments as 'late cancellations' with no refund. His long-distance deposits from currency exchange were justified as 'late payments' or 'reimbursements' from insurance companies for alleged damages.

Vanessa White had no need to know any of his real story, no need to see his balance sheets, nor have any knowledge of his 'sidelines.' He patted a hidden revolver, snuggled against his ankle in a special holster. He was a superb shot, with many hours of practice at both short and long range. He could fly helicopters and small aircraft. He was able to take off and land wherever possible, on land, water, snow, or in the tundra.

Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro felt nearly complete, his needs almost met. With Vanessa White as a friend he would know of all movements at *La Mimosa*. Sooner or later he would meet face to face with Henry Caldwell's heirs.

Chapter 17

Luigi Amedeo glanced at his sister, Cecilia Maria, lounging in a chair on the bridge of his yacht. "What do you think of the new paint, Cecilia? And your name on her prow in your favorite shade of blue?"

Cecilia Maria nodded and shaded her eyes against the sun's glare as she gazed at the beautiful view of mountains and sea. She sighed, smiled, and leaned back in her chair, her eyes closed.

Luigi leaned on the rail and stared out to sea. Peaceful, quiet. At times he needed that kind of peace in order to balance the occasional violence in his life.

The telephone rang, a strident intrusion. "Yes?" he said, slightly annoyed.

"Conte, please excuse my interruption of your day," a deep, masculine voice said. "I'm Commissario Caltabieni of the Genova police department."

"Yes? What is it you want, Commissario?"

"Conte, I am in need of the ah...services...perhaps, expertise..." The man's words stammered off in confusion. "You have been recommended to me by a mutual friend. He is... Oh, I can't remember his name just now. He claims you might be able to fulfill my needs." He coughed, cleared his throat, and continued, "If it would be permitted, I would like to meet with you."

"But certainly, Commissario. Please. Drop by at any time. My yacht is anchored at..."

Caltabieni laughed. "I know where to find you, Conte. If it's agreeable, I'll be there in half an hour."

"That is fine," Luigi Amedeo replied, his voice and manner distant. He frowned slightly as he replaced the telephone receiver and turned to his sister. "We are about to receive a social visit from Commissario Caltabieni," he said.

Cecilia Maria greeted Caltabieni, then left the men to their discussion.

"It is an honor to finally meet you, Conte. There aren't many gentlemen like you nowadays," Caltabieni said, shaking Luigi Amedeo's hand. Caltabieni was from southern Italy, where higher social status was acknowledged by ceremonial expressions.

Luigi Amedeo gestured him a lounge chair. "Please, Commissario. Be seated, make yourself comfortable."

Caltabieni slid his bulk into the chair vacated by Cecilia Maria. "Beautiful yacht," he said. "Do you sail often?"

"Short trips, just for pleasure." Luigi Amedeo smiled with his lips, the smile never reaching his eyes. "From time to time I visit the Elbe Island or Sardinia." He nodded at a waiter who served chilled vermouth and savory hors d'oeuvres. "But if I may...what is your interest in me, Commissario?"

"Mr. Ismeen speaks very highly of you. He admires the way you conduct yourself in your... missions." Caltabieni's mouth twisted. "Um...rather, perhaps, your delicate assignments?"

"Go on," Luigi Amedeo said, his face expressionless.

"I was told you're an expert in horizontal helicopter flying? A rare talent, that."

“Yes. I learned to fly at low altitudes following the terrain’s reliefs. Along the glades, mostly. It is quite exciting.”

“And you’re also an expert in tracking motion using infrared cameras?”

“No. No, I would not say that,” Luigi Amedeo said with a negative shake of his head. “I would not say expert. I have an understanding of how it works and of its potential.” He smiled slightly. “I find it fascinating to track an animal on a hunt, sometimes in the most complete obscurity.” He smiled again, remembering two very spectacular enterprises he had conducted, one in Bolivia, the other in Corsica. Each made clever use of infrared technology. Neither had anything to do with tracking animals.

“Conte, I’ll get right to the point. I have a problem I can’t solve. I need your help.”

“I do not work with the police,” Luigi Amedeo said. He turned away from the other man and looked out to sea.

“You wouldn’t work for the police. You would work for me.” The Commissario rose from his chair and stood beside Luigi Amedeo. “Just for me.”

Luigi Amedeo turned to him and raised one eyebrow. He waited in silence for Caltabieni to continue.

“Three men have kidnapped Don Alfonso Olfrandi’s grandson, Gianci. They probably have taken him out of the country. Gianci is the carrier of a most powerful name. Don Alfonso wants the boy back. Now.” He crossed to the serving tray and helped himself to a quichette with mushrooms, then another.

“Interpol,” Luigi Amedeo said, brushing at the air as if to brush aside Caltabieni’s request. “You need Interpol. Kidnapping is a serious crime anywhere in the world.” He shrugged and turned once more toward the sea.

“No. The Olfrandis do not want publicity. They want this handled in a quiet manner, let us say, in a private fashion.”

Luigi Amedeo turned toward Caltabieni again and considered the man. “I don’t believe my talents would be of any particular service.”

Caltabieni sipped his *Cinzano*. “Please, my dear Conte. Please consider the possibility of at least a coordination of a rescue operation.”

“I work alone. Such an operation would require more than a few people.”

“Please. Even mere suggestions would be a great help.” Caltabieni sipped again, then ate another mushroom stuffed with caviar. “The kidnapers are continuously on the move. We occasionally find traces where they’ve passed through, but we never gather enough information to predict their next move. They cover a vast area.” Again he paused and sipped his vermouth. “For the last two weeks, we’ve combed the area thoroughly. We have reason to believe they started approximately from right here, passed the French border, and are now doubling back to this location.” He waited for a response from Luigi Amedeo. He received none.

“My dear Conte,” he said, his tone authoritative as he played his trump card. “I have a folder concerning your activities which is much thicker than the one Interpol used last May.”

“Yes, I thought you might have. Please continue.”

“We’ve learned the whereabouts of our men, but we don’t have enough resources to operate a successful rescue.”

“Ransom note?”

“No, none,” Caltabieni replied. “That’s what has the Olfrandi family frantic. If there has been no request for ransom, then what do the kidnapers want?”

“Something doesn’t fit. I need to know more.”

“At one time, the police had a tip about an alpine shed on the hills of Bordighera. When they arrived, there was warm food on the table, but no sign of the occupants. I suspect they fled into the hills. It has been more than two weeks now.”

“Does the Olfrandi family suspect a vendetta?” Luigi Amedeo leaned on the rail and watched a small sail boat struggle against the wind.

“No, or the boy would be dead by now. We know, or at least, we suspect he isn’t. Something must have gone wrong on their part, something to keep them on the run and away from all requests for ransom. If it were a vendetta, the boy’s body...or parts of his body...would have been sent to Don Alfonso.”

Luigi Amedeo refilled the other man’s glass. “And you’re asking me to locate how many people?” he asked.

“Four. We believe there are three kidnapers, plus the boy. The boy is small, much smaller than the average thirteen year old.”

“You’re asking me to locate four people, three large men and one small boy, in the mountains over an area—” Luigi Amedeo made some mental calculations. “Over a one hundred by fifty mile area. Something like that.” Luigi Amedeo smiled his quiet, mirthless smile. “And I assume the situation is a bit...delicate?”

Caltabieni nodded, his expression dour. “More than you know.”

“Ah, but I do know. But let us consider the situation. The kidnapers are stranded, and, with a ‘small boy,’ cannot move as fast as they might like. They must feed him, keep him healthy, shelter him. It’s a very difficult situation.” Luigi Amedeo yawned and stretched, his gaze on the distant mountains.

“I’m offering you three hundred thousand dollars for a successful rescue of the Olfrandi heir. We’ll cover all expenses in addition to that.”

“Perhaps you should give me a profile of the kidnapers before making any plans.”

“They aren’t, from all I can see, professionals. The three of them are alone in this, with one of the three as the leader. The Olfrandi boy left home to see a friend he met on the beach a few days before, according to our sources. Somehow, this friend came across a few individuals who decided to make easy money once they discovered the boy’s identity.” He paused to retrieve another canapé, carefully selecting a biscuit with smoked salmon and capers. He smiled, then sighed in pleasure. “Exquisite,” he said, his eyes half closed. He cleared his throat. “We believe the kidnapers are local people. This would explain their familiarity with the hills, their preference for hiking, and the fact no ransom has been asked.”

“Going by your assumptions, the kidnapers must be tired,” Luigi Amedeo said. “They must be ready to let the boy go, or, perhaps...”

“To kill him. Yes. That is what the Olfrandis fear. I have a great deal of pressure to find the boy, and I can’t afford to use any more of my men in the search. I’m at the end of my rope.”

“I understand.” Luigi Amedeo stroked his chin with the fingers of his right hand, his expression thoughtful. “I could do some detailed air reconnaissance over the area, if I decided to take the case. I could... The weather is excellent.” He glanced at Caltabieni. “I’ll navigate, as well as set up and operate the instruments. I’ll need two other people to help me.” He paused, still thoughtful.

“I can count on you, then?”

“Yes, I would say so...in principle. Four hundred thousand, you say? Plus expenses?”

“Actually, I said thr... Yes, four hundred thousand plus expenses. That’s exactly what I said.” He exhaled a slow, contented sigh and took another canapé from the tray, then lowered

himself back into the lounge chair. He finished his vermouth, as did Luigi Amedeo.

“I have one other request,” Luigi Amedeo said. “I would like information on *La Mimosa*, or rather, on the occupants of that mansion. It is located in Carmel, north of the *autostrada dei fiori*, near Ventimiglia. I would need information on where they come from, on their habits, their lives in general.” He paused, looking intently at the Commissario.

“Delighted, Conte. I have no problem with your little request. When do you start on the search for the boy?”

“As soon as I can locate my aircraft. In the meantime, I will plan a good strategy.”

“Ah, Mr. Ismeen was right on all counts about you...timely, efficient, expensive...” Caltabieni laughed. “But look, my glass is empty. I’ll have another, if you don’t mind, and perhaps a few more canapés. It’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Don’t make a habit of it,” Luigi Amedeo said. “I prefer to operate outside the country and far from the authorities, if possible.”

“Beppe, the aircraft *Il Falco*. Is it available?” Shortly after his meeting with the Commissario, Luigi Amedeo set up a teleconference with his two long-time friends, Beppe and Mario. Beppe was a pilot, Mario an expert in reconnaissance. “I’ll need your help, Beppe, as well as Mario’s. I have a reconnaissance job in the maritime Alps.”

“Il Falco is all yours, as always, my friend. But...you said a job in the maritime Alps? That may not be simple. Air currents change direction constantly in those deep valleys. What are you searching for?” Beppe asked.

“Three men and one small boy, thirteen years old. Your infrared imaging system may be useful once more. Mario could handle the evaluation of the physical parameters—size of projections versus altitude, heat dispersion versus temperature—”

“Whoa, my friend,” Mario interjected with a laugh. “Don’t make it sound so simple. It is not. We have access to average weather conditions for every day of the year, but there is always the rogue. We have accurate cartographic data of the region, too, but flying over those mountains creates irregularities in the data acquisition. Plus, you would need to take into account the cattle. They are there this time of year. Some may be stranded or lost in the woods.”

“We have a unique configuration to search for, Mario—three sizable spots, though smaller than cattle, and one small spot—the boy is quite small for his age. It makes a pattern, don’t you see? You just have to count four spots of known size,” Luigi Amedeo said.

“My system cannot count,” said Mario.

“What? You have a computer that cannot count?”

“My computer can count. Of course it can count! What it can’t do is count spots on the fly, and I’m sure those spots will be moving.”

“How quickly could it identify the given configuration?”

“In fifteen...ten minutes, maybe.”

“Good enough, Mario. The three of us are in business.”

“I assume you have some precise information on the region we’ll be searching? At the least, some idea where to search for these people?” Beppe grumbled his words, though he sounded a bit more interested.

“Yes, I do have some idea of the location,” Luigi Amedeo said with a small laugh.

Mario’s attitude was definitely more positive than Beppe’s. “Okay, we’ll give it a try,” he said. “We’ll take a first flight around the area and exclude all large regions for which the infrared detection is negative. We’ll keep records of the covered areas, marking those areas where the

infrared is positive. We can enlarge these by an amount corresponding to the walking distance on flat ground, just to be safe, then..." He paused and took a deep breath.

"Then? Then what, Mario?"

"Then we use the total area of three adults and one boy to identify possible candidate regions. Once we get one of these, we fly low to get detailed pictures." He drew a deep breath. "As I said, we can give it a try, but expect it to cost more than a bit. It will be expensive."

"Fine, no problem. Expenses and your usual fees will be covered."

"Be at Nice airport by six o'clock tomorrow morning, and we're off," concluded Beppe.

Chapter 18

Gianci Olfrandi shivered and settled as far from the arguing group of men as he could. The cloth covering his eyes, almost glued against his face, had caused some of his skin to peel off. An infection was setting in, causing him pain. He couldn't even think of touching the blindfold's edge; if air penetrated underneath the cloth, he had been told, the blindfold would change color, letting his captors know they had been seen. And that would be the end of poor Gianci. He sighed. He wondered where his grandfather was, what he was doing, why he hadn't come to his rescue. Did he not care about him? He was the carrier of the family name, after all. He sighed again, harder.

He huddled with his knees pulled up to his chest, his arms wrapping around them, and sniffled. He swiped his hand across his nose, then wiped it on his chest. A cold. On top of everything else, he was getting a cold, he thought. He sneezed violently and Aldo glanced over at him.

"Damn kid sounds like he's getting sick. I don't like any of this, not at all."

"He's been pretty quiet lately, Aldo," Ugo said. "Actually, I think he's been a bit too quiet. Maybe he's up to something."

"Nah, he's just learned his lesson. It's taking him long enough. He's just learning how to be obedient," Aldo said, his grin exposing his yellowed teeth. "Leave him alone."

The men returned to their discussion as they huddled inside a small tent, slight protection from the weather. At the rear of the tent, Gianci shifted with care. He didn't want the men to notice what he was doing.

"At the least, we should be able to have a camp fire," Ugo said, annoyed. "I'm tired of cold food, and I want some good hot coffee."

"No fire. Didn't you hear the airplane? I noticed it yesterday, off and on, all day," Aldo said. "It flies east-west, then west-east. Regularly. Did it this morning, too. Like I said, I don't like it at all." He frowned. "I think it's a reconnaissance plane. I know how they operate. We've been spotted. Maybe we ought to start thinking about getting rid of the kid and splitting up. We'd be harder to find if we were separated."

"No. Not after all we've been through!" Ugo shouted and jumped to his feet, hitting his head on the top of the tent. It listed slightly. Ugo turned toward the rear of the tent with a frown. "Where the hell's the kid? He was there, right there at the back of the tent. Now he's gone." He bent down to where Gianci had sat. He looked closely, as though the boy had shrunk down to the size of a grain of sand, and only close examination could find him. He brushed the floor with his hand. "Warm," he said. Then his fingers reached the back wall of the tent, which slipped up under his touch. "What happened? No! Oh no!" he screamed. "The little shit has slipped under the tent!" The blindfold lay a few feet away. "He's gone! He can't be too far. All out to chase after him!"

* * *

"Mario, you said the infrared images from the last group of passes show our men?" Luigi

Amedeo asked.

“Yes. It looks like they’re camped right there, under a grove of pine trees.” He pointed in the direction of the camp.

“Beppe: keep Il Falco circling over the area, but drop lower. We want to make sure.” He contacted Caltabieni on the plane’s radio. “I think we got them. Three men and a boy. I’ll give you the exact location.”

“I have a problem here,” Caltabieni replied. “Two forest fires have developed in the region. You probably see them.”

“We can see one. It doesn’t threaten our men. Not yet, at least,” said Luigi Amedeo.

“There are two. Don’t trust them. They’re expanding quickly. One is blowing in the direction of the village of Albena, from the northeast. The other is in the mountains, north of the village.”

“Now, I see them both.”

“The largest mountain blaze covers an area of approximately four by ten miles, and is gaining force. Three aircraft have been called in for support.” Caltabieni paused. “I can’t get to you, Luigi Amedeo. I can’t move. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Don’t worry, our men are behind the fire line by a good ten miles. There’s a clearing in front of them, a valley with only two stands of vegetation, at a higher altitude. If the wind doesn’t change direction, they’ll be fine. We’ll do a loop around the coast and come back.”

“Keep an eye on the Olfrandi boy until the rescue helicopter can get there...” Caltabieni said, his voice strained. “Please, Conte...I beg you, as a personal favor, protect the boy.”

“It will be done,” Luigi Amedeo assured, his voice a breath of calm.

Gianci ran, his eyes half closed against the smoke. He coughed, uncertain if it were the air causing the irritation or his cold, and brushed his hand across his tearing eyes. He stopped to listen, certain his kidnapers were close on his trail. He doubled over, coughing, then jumped, alert to sounds. He heard an airplane, but couldn’t see it through the smoke. His kidnapers didn’t seem to be behind him, but he couldn’t trust his own instincts. He had to run, had to escape, had to find his way home.

Gianci closed his eyes tight and pressed his right hand over them, then ran with his left arm thrust before him. He had plenty of practice to walk without seeing... He crashed through the underbrush, then ran headlong into a large, isolated pine. He fell, his hand punctured by a small branch, and lay panting at the foot of the pine.

“Beppe, did you see that?” Luigi Amedeo asked, peering through binoculars into the swirling smoke. “I think it’s our boy. Swing lower, can you?”

While Il Falco dropped lower over the terrain, three aircraft swooped over the raging fire. They had filled their pontoon tanks on the fly, a plunge into the sea just deeply enough to scoop water, and risen again into the air. It took only seconds to fill their double tanks, and minutes for the pilots to fly back to the mountains. It was a nonstop operation, an aerial ballet conducted with perfect timing. One after the other, the planes dumped their precious cargo of water on the blaze, then returned to sea to refill their tanks.

“There’s too much smoke, Beppe. I still can’t see. Just a bit more, can you? Turn just a bit more and dip down,” Luigi Amedeo asked. “I need a better view.”

Beppe dove, but came up rapidly.

“Can’t do any better than that, Luigi Amedeo. I can’t see either, and I don’t want to fly us into a tree.”

“That was good enough. I saw.” He reached for the radio, his movements hurried. “Caltabieni. The boy escaped. He’s on the ground, perhaps unconscious. He’s close to Albena, in a low spot.” Luigi Amedeo paused, drew a deep breath. “Listen carefully—the fire is heading right toward him. There’s been a wind shift to north-northwest. The fire will reach the boy if you don’t come right away. Hurry.”

Minutes later they watched as a helicopter flew toward them. Beppe banked his wings, to show the helicopter the boy’s location.

“Circle around,” said Luigi Amedeo to Beppe. “I want to see the final act of the rescue.”

Three days later, the newspapers quietly reported Gianci’s abduction, but stressed his return to his family within a short time. Crime against the rich, it seemed, did not pay.

“The Olfrandis want to congratulate you on the splendid job you did in the rescue, Conte,” Caltabieni said over the phone. “I should have thought of you at once.”

“I hope you won’t think of me too often,” Luigi Amedeo responded. “Have you taken care of my requests?”

“Your expenses and fee have been deposited into your Swiss bank account.” Caltabieni paused. “About *La Mimosa*—by the way, you’re one of the few people who know it by its original name—” Again he paused, waiting for Luigi Amedeo’s response. Silence greeted him.

“I went well out of my way to find the information you requested, Conte. I wouldn’t have done it if it weren’t for the brilliant operation you conducted.” He paused again, as if waiting for praise, a word of gratitude.

“And the owner?” Luigi Amedeo asked coolly. “Tell me of the owner.”

“Yeah. Well.” Caltabieni cleared his throat. “Her name is Tanya Caldwell, also known as Tanya Howard. Interpol is keeping an eye on her, but I don’t know why. More information, classified ‘level-2 security’ will reach you by special courier tomorrow morning.”

Chapter 19

Tanya yawned and stretched like a cat, her senses filled with summer. She smelled the sweet scents of flowers, trees, the many grasses. The world seems to blaze around me, alive with color, she thought. And so many shades for each color. I wonder if I can ever come close to capturing even half of them. Tanya bent and pulled a strand of grass from the base of the nearest tree and nibbled it.

Kevin...she smiled as she realized he was again in her thoughts, never far from them, always close, as close as the touch of sunlight on her face.

She gathered her art supplies and glanced toward Kevin's house. Kevin's portrait was underway and coming along well; her landscapes had a faerie quality, as if laughing elves and dancing gnomes might appear at any time. The Bachelor Degree in Visual Arts she had just received pleased her, but not nearly as much as the peace and pleasure of this summer.

Kevin... She headed to his villa, as anxious to see him as always. It seemed the more they were apart during his frequent trips, the closer they became when they were together.

"Kevin?" she said as she entered the villa.

"Back here, love," he replied. "In the studio."

"I was lonely," she said. "Edda and Charles are away and it was much too quiet over there. I started to paint, but my mind wouldn't stay on the work." Tanya lifted her arms over her head and spun around like a small child, laughing.

"I'm nearly done here," Kevin said, watching her impromptu dance with a smile. "As soon as I close down here, I have something I need to discuss with you."

Tanya dropped onto the sofa. "Serious? I hope it isn't too serious. I feel too playful to be serious today."

Kevin stopped his typing for a moment, walked over to her, bent, and kissed her on the tip of her nose. "No. Not serious. Now, be still and let me finish this chapter, then I'll give you my full attention." His hands brushed up her body from her toes, slid under the edge of her shorts, then up and across her T-shirt to the top of her head. She shivered.

Tanya watched Kevin work, his head bent over the keyboard as he typed. Her fingers traced the line of his nose in the air, then his strong jaw line, drawing his features again and again into her memory. His brows creased as he concentrated, then cleared. He had finished. He lifted his head and looked at her.

"What were you doing?" he asked with a laugh.

"Putting your face in my mind, the details of your face, the way you frown and smile and... just you."

He came over to her and drew her into his arms. "Why bother, when you have the real thing right here?"

"But I don't always." A small tabby cat jumped from the floor onto her lap. She gathered it in her arms and drew it close to her face, stroking it under the chin.

"Marta's cat. That's another inconvenience of not having any air conditioning. With the doors open, the cat comes in and out as it pleases." Kevin rose from the sofa and gathered the freshly printed sheets of his manuscript. "Darn critter, you'd think it owned the place."

Tanya cradled the cat and listened to the sweet song of its purr. "Poor baby, it's lonely. Marta spends so much time at the hospital with her niece. Tobia is often with me, sitting at my feet while I paint, keeping me company. I don't mind. Tobia needs attention."

Kevin grinned. "So do I!" He reached out and rubbed the cat's head. "My competition. But now let's talk about something else, something pleasant," he said, his smile strained. "Let's talk about your upcoming birthday."

"Birthday?" Tanya dropped the cat to the floor and stared at him.

"I must admit, I had to give Edda the third degree to get the date, but I didn't manage to get the year." He grinned at her. "How old will you be, my little Tanya?"

For a moment, Tanya was puzzled. Then she remembered the date of birth is often encoded as part of the key to access personal files. It could be used to break into a database to obtain confidential information. She stared blankly at Kevin.

"What's wrong? Are you really an older woman who's had cosmetic surgery to look young? Are you really forty or fifty years old?" He dropped to his knees before her and took her face in his hands. "Let me check," he said, his voice a husky whisper. He ran his fingers over her face with a feather touch. He cupped her chin, drew her toward him, and kissed her mouth with a delicate brush of his lips, then pulled her into his arms and kissed her long and deep.

Tanya gasped, nestled her head against his chest. "No, no..." she said when she could catch her breath. "I'm not forty or fifty. I'll be twenty-three."

"Good. I certainly wouldn't want a woman who was close to my age. But what do you want to do for your birthday? I could have Marta prepare a sumptuous dinner for you. Complete with pralines."

"And a movie? Could we watch a movie together?"

"Of course! What kind? Action, adventure, suspense..."

"No. A love story," she said. She sounded like a little girl, her eyes closed tight, her face pressed against his chest.

He laughed. "I should have known," he said, and lifted her face to kiss her mouth again.

* * *

Tanya felt like an excited child as her birthday arrived. She could hardly sleep the night before, wishing the hours away until she could be with Kevin again. He had a secret, something he hinted at and teased her with, but wouldn't tell her. Whatever it was, she had no doubt she would love it, if the suspense didn't kill her first.

She dumped half of her scented bath salts into the tub, sending waves of floral steam throughout the house, then pinned her long hair up and slid beneath the bubbles. She tried to relax, but her mind continued to betray her. She needed to be with Kevin and know his secret.

Her bath was far shorter than usual.

Tanya bound her hair into a twist at the back of her head, letting a few stray strands curl about her face and neck. She slipped a gauzy white cotton dress over her head and watched as the folds of her skirt skimmed the tops of her feet. The delicate lace at the neck framed her face while the glistening white of the fabric offset her deep tan. A touch of scent in the bend of her elbow, her usual pair of white sandals, and she was ready. She left to join Kevin.

"Close your eyes."

"Kevin! Is that all you have to say to me, after I tried so hard to look beautiful for you?"

"You never have to try to look beautiful for me. You always look beautiful to me. Now close

your eyes.”

Tanya complied. Kevin took her hand and led her to the middle of the dining room.

“Now,” he said, sounding like a gleeful little boy. “Open your eyes now!”

A big, shiny easel stood alone in the middle of the room.

“Happy birthday, Tanya. I wish you the happiest twenty-fourth year of life.”

Speechless, Tanya walked toward the easel. Her fingers ran down the frame, stroking the velvet feel of the wood. “Oh...” she said. “How very beautiful.” Her hands felt along the edges and across the back, smoothing and stroking. “Oh, Kevin, it must have cost a fortune!”

“Cherry wood,” he said. “It’s been polished and burnished until it’s as smooth as silk. I had it made for you. Expressly for you.”

Tears ran down Tanya’s cheeks. She brushed them away, not even aware they were there. “Gadgets,” she said. “Look at all the gadgets. Kevin, what do they do?”

“Let me show you,” Kevin said, eager to display his gift’s many functions. He pressed one button and the easel turned right; another, and it tilted forward.

“And lights... Kevin, it even has its own lights!” Tanya pressed the switch for the halogen light on the top, then for the two on each side.

“And it slides, Tanya. Look, you can move it around to catch ‘that special light.’” Bursting with pride, Kevin demonstrated.

The tears flooded Tanya’s eyes and flowed down her face again. “Oh, Kevin, how can I thank you? It’s marvelous, fantastic! And so is the man who gave it to me...”

Almost bouncing in eagerness, he pulled her by the hand. “But wait, that isn’t all. Wait... wait...come and see.” He pushed the easel outside. “Look there,” he said, pointing to a large metal box on the patio beneath the marble column. “It hides the electrical switches and outside connections. You just plug it in, and you can work just as easily outside as in.”

Tanya stared, speechless again and flooded with emotion. Kevin beamed, pleased with the result of his surprise.

At dinner, Tanya could hardly eat. Her eyes flitted from the easel to the man seated across the table from her. Her vision was hungry for him, anxious to fill itself with his image. He had been gone for several days and would leave again soon.

“Where are you, little one?” Kevin asked. “You seem a million miles away.”

She smiled, shook her head, and pushed the food around on her plate. She looked up at him. “I’m curious...why did you decide to be my ‘experiment’?”

“You provoked me,” he replied, lifting a forkful of lobster in a bisque sauce into his mouth. “And then I decided it’d be appropriate to teach you a lesson.”

Shocked, Tanya placed her fork beside her plate and dropped her hands to her lap. “Lesson? What are you talking about?”

Kevin looked deep into her eyes. “Yes. A lesson. I used all my charms to make you fall in love with me, to make you want me so much you’d stop breathing each time you thought of me.”

Her breath caught in her throat for a moment in a soft gasp. She lifted her wine glass and sipped, then coughed. “You were pretty sure of yourself.”

He laughed. “I’d say women, in general, appreciate me.”

“Well,” she said, standing and pushing away from the table. “I can still breathe most of the time, but now I can’t eat, so you came fairly close to your goal.” She started to leave the table.

Kevin came close behind her and slid his arms around her, trapping her close to his body. “Yes, it seems I did.” He paused. “I know I did, but there’s a problem. You see, I fell in love with you, too.”

Tanya turned slightly in his arms to look up into his face. “You did?” she asked, her voice no more than a breath.

He bent and kissed her with his softest kiss and lightly ran the tip of his tongue over her lips. “You know that.” He hugged her close to him. “The one thing I don’t like about you, Tanya, are your little secrets.”

Chapter 20

Kevin put the finishing touches on the special edition dedicated to the religious paintings of old Czechoslovakia and cleared his work area. “Tanya, would you mind staying? I’d like you to meet my guests.” He smiled, a gentle, proud smile. “I want my closest friend, Jeff Moore, to meet my artistic advisor.” He laughed. “Oh, yes. Jeff manages my Shoppe, as well.”

Tanya frowned and started to clean her brushes. Kevin’s portrait stood before her, still only half way done. “I’d prefer not to meet anyone,” she said. She didn’t look at Kevin.

“Please?” he said, coming around in front of her and lifting her chin. He looked deep into her eyes. “I’m proud of you, Tanya. Please let me introduce you to my friends.”

“I don’t particularly like to meet strangers. And besides, you said you had important business to discuss. I would just be in the way.”

“Never in the way! My God, Tanya, I’m proud of you...as an artist, as a person.” He twisted a strand of her hair in his fingers, a confused frown on his face.

She sighed. In no way did she want to risk her safety, her hidden identity, to strangers, but in no way did she want to disappoint Kevin. She took a deep breath and turned from him. She didn’t want to meet anyone. Unexpected news had come from Malcolm earlier that day. It alarmed her. A rumor on the streets reported a contract on her—for half a million dollars. Malcolm recommended she be cautious while he intensified the investigation. She sighed again, and turned to him, about to refuse his invitation, but the expectant look on his face changed her mind. “All right. One drink, and then I leave. I’ll stay for a few minutes only, no more.” He grinned, hugged her. “But I have to go home and change first. Look at me, old jeans and a paint-covered smock, to say nothing of my hair.” She hugged him back and left.

“This is not wise,” she said aloud as she hurried to her mansion. “I know it isn’t wise. Malcolm would kill me.” She bit her lip and entered the empty building. Edda and Charles were due to return late in the afternoon, but they hadn’t appeared. Worse than that, they hadn’t called to tell her they would be late. Now, she was about to meet two strangers, strangers with curious questions she didn’t want to answer. She shook her head, berating herself for foolishness. Please Kevin, and risk exposure...perhaps risk her life.

Tanya showered quickly, then dressed with care. She removed her metal cross and replaced it with a locket which had belonged to her mother. She pressed the locket between her fingers, caressed it with a nervous touch—the smooth feel of it a comfort.

Kevin waited for her on the patio.

“Tanya! I’m so glad you were able to return. I was just telling Jeff and Eleanore I wasn’t certain if you would make it.” Kevin beamed as he drew her onto the patio and toward a serious looking man in his forties.

“Tanya, this is my good friend and general manager, Jeff Moore. Jeff, this is Tanya Howard, my artistic advisor.” Jeff nodded. “And this is Jeff’s wife, Eleanore,” Kevin said, turning her toward a sophisticated blond in a stunning white cotton dress with big black buttons decorating the front. The woman nodded without a smile.

“Would you like a drink?” Kevin asked.

Tanya nodded, her mouth dry. “Yes, a soft drink, please.”

“Not old enough to drink yet, dear?” Eleanore asked with a slight smirk.

“I prefer a soft drink,” Tanya replied, smiling in return.

“Kevin said you wouldn’t stay for dinner. Important engagement?” Jeff asked.

“You might say that,” Tanya said, and cleared her throat.

“What brought you here?” Eleanore asked, with one raised eyebrow.

“I believe Tanya came here for the peace and quiet, Eleanore. She escaped the noise and confusion...and curious questions...for the beauty and inspiration she’s found here.” Kevin smiled and handed Tanya a soft drink.

“That’s true. The Thyrreanean Sea can be spectacular.” Jeff nodded again, reminding Tanya of the small dolls some people placed in the back windows of their cars. She grinned at the thought.

Tobia rubbed against Tanya’s ankles, winding around and between her legs. She bent and lifted him into her arms.

“We were admiring Kevin’s portrait. How long does a work of that sort take you, Tanya?” Jeff asked.

“It really depends on the subject. I have to capture those features which are unique to the person.” Tanya buried her face in Tobia’s soft fur for a moment and listened to his purr. “It takes time, from a few weeks to a few months.”

The phone rang. Kevin moved to answer it while watching Tanya.

“Where did you study, Tanya?” Eleanore asked. She ran her fingertips along the rim of her glass; her long nails gleamed silvery white in the sunlight.

“Um...MacKenzie Academy, Ontario.” Tanya shifted nervously and tried to swallow her paranoia. Just questions, she told herself. Nothing to be afraid of, they’re just being friendly. She glanced at Eleanore. Friendly, she told herself again.

“Any expositions?” Jeff asked.

“Just one, local,” she replied. She didn’t mention she had sold each and every one of her works. “At the moment, I’m in no rush to chase after fame. I may have a few more pieces by the fall.” She shrugged.

“How did you and Kevin meet?” Jeff asked.

“It was my luck,” Kevin answered as he hung up the phone. “We bumped into each other, you might say. I found an artistic advisor on my doorstep.” He grinned at her. “Inexpensive, too.”

Marta appeared in the doorway, the white of her apron gleaming against her black uniform. She frowned, then hurried to Tanya. “Is Tobia a bother?” she asked, concerned.

“Oh, no, Marta. He’s become my little friend. Yesterday he came to my place. He hid above the trellis on the terrace and jumped directly onto my shoulders when I went outside.” She stroked the cat, gave him a quick hug, and handed him over to Marta. “He needs a bell, so he doesn’t scare me half to death.” She laughed.

Marta smiled as she gathered Tobia into her arms. “Mr. Matwin, dinner is ready. I can serve it any time.”

“Thank you, Marta, we’ll be seated shortly.” He looked at Tanya. “Sure you won’t stay?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No, thank you, Kevin, I really must be leaving. It was a pleasure meeting you, Jeff...Eleanore.”

Her empty house awaited her return, with no sign of Edda or Charles.

Kevin merged his last write-up with the illustrations into a single file, then mailed it electronically to his Shoppe using the usual File Transfer Protocol. He heaved a sigh of relief,

glad the editorial portion of his job had been completed. With this piece scheduled to appear early in the fall, he could now relax and follow the printing cycle upon his return to Toronto.

Jeff Moore contacted several banks concerning financing on their new laboratory. The concept of reproducing works of art on compact disk would be an expensive endeavor. Kevin left the Riviera to join Jeff to discuss the terms of each proposed loan.

* * *

“Eleanore,” Vanessa White said, “I’m so glad I caught you at home. It’s Vanessa, dear. How are you?” She smiled into the phone receiver.

“Oh, Vanessa! I was just about to call you. You’ll never guess who we just saw.” Eleanore’s voice sparkled with delight, prepared to share a bit of gossip. “And he has a new girl, too. Just a child...”

“All right, now. Don’t tease. Who did you see, and who is the girl? Wait, let me guess,” Vanessa said. “You’ve seen Kevin Matwin, haven’t you? I know you’ve been to Europe.”

“Well, you know, I don’t think I’ve seen him since you two broke up,” Eleanore continued. “We used to be together, the four of us, all of the time, didn’t we?” She sighed. “Now only Jeff sees him, and that’s for business reasons.”

“Yes,” Vanessa paused. “Yes, we were, weren’t we? Those weekends at your cottage were wonderful. I must say I miss them at times. But tell me, Eleanore. Tell me about this child...this girl. And how is he?”

“Quite well. He was preparing a collection of religious subjects from the former Czechoslovakia. He was in a rush. Some of the masterpieces have been smuggled out of the country to resurface later, spread over different places.” Eleanore paused and waited.

“And now tell me about his personal life, Eleanore. You know I’m dying to hear all about it,” she laughed as if she were joking.

“Actually, I think I’ll disappoint you. I think she’s simply a good listener. I don’t believe she could keep Kevin’s interest for even an afternoon. I wasn’t impressed.” Eleanore sniffed. “Not much to her. She’s just a baby, at any rate. Early twenties, at the most.”

“Does she live at the old mansion? The one next door to Kevin’s villa?”

“Yes, yes, she does. She has a couple with her, I think, though we didn’t meet them. From what Kevin said, she has some sort of problems, though I couldn’t begin to tell you what they were. I have no idea.” She sniffed again, as if Tanya’s problems were very far beneath her interest. “I think she’s in a type of retreat. She avoided our questions very neatly. Maybe she thinks she can get Kevin by being a mystery woman.” Eleanore laughed.

“Did you find out anything else about her?”

“Why do you care?” Eleanore asked with a touch of scorn. “Silly chit that she is... Yes, she studied at some MacKenzie Academy. It must be one of those small colleges in rural Ontario. That’s about all, Vanessa, though I really can’t see why you would care.”

“Oh, Eleanore, just curious! You know I left him out of sheer boredom. I wondered if there was a little life in the old boy yet.” Vanessa laughed. “By the way, I’d love to have you and Jeff over for dinner some night next week. Would that be all right with you? Good, then I’ll see you in two days.” She smiled softly. “But I must go now. Talk to you soon.” She hung up the phone and tapped a finger on it thoughtfully.

Vanessa poured a delicate Chablis into long-stemmed black glasses and placed them

alongside the white place mats trimmed with deep red poppies. Off-white ironstone dishes were centered on each mat, and contributed to the cool aura of the room. She turned the dimmer switch on the wall down, lowering the light in her dining room, and flicked an imaginary speck of dust from the glass top of her dining table.

With a critical eye, Vanessa examined the room, the heart of her Toronto apartment. The soft light gave it a warm ambiance. Her white pine table and chairs were complemented by the deep forest green of her carpet, and the small vase of poppies in the center of the table repeated the motif of the place mats.

Cold poached salmon and a huge Caesar salad served in a wooden salad bowl, along with a basket of fresh-baked whole wheat bread and a platter of chilled asparagus spears were on the menu. Suitable, she thought, for the summer heat. Fresh fruit and a wine sorbet would follow. She nodded, satisfied. Her guests would be pleased.

When the knock came at her door, Vanessa tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and hurried to welcome her guests.

“Darling, do you need help with anything?” Eleanore asked as they entered the dining room.

“No, no. Everything’s ready,” Vanessa said. She served the various dishes quickly, anxious to join her guests.

“Now. I must admit,” she said, passing the platter of salmon, “I’m a bit curious about Kevin. I called him last night. When I told him I’d like to see him while he’s in town, he seemed a bit reluctant. He made it sound as if his relationship with this Tanya is—serious?”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Vanessa. I know Kevin. When he doesn’t have a stable relationship, he flits from girl to girl. Most of the time it’s nothing,” Eleanore said.

“I guess I’m just curious, though. This girl, Tanya. The mansion where she lives was empty for a very long time. Is she the new owner?”

Jeff frowned. “I really don’t know. I could ask Kevin when I see him.”

“And is she good looking? You said she was very young,” Vanessa asked, sipping her wine.

Jeff helped himself to several spears of asparagus. “She’s a bit plump, medium height, nice big brown eyes and a disarming smile,” he said. He smeared a slice of bread with sweet butter.

“Plump. Really? But Kevin disliked fat women, and he always preferred blonds.” Vanessa smiled and patted her own hair.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jeff said. “His second wife Milena wasn’t blond.” He bit into the bread, and continued, “and she certainly wasn’t skinny. At least, she wasn’t skinny on top.” Eleanore’s frown stopped him from commenting further.

“Ah, well, perhaps you could invite Kevin to the cottage for the next weekend, as you’ve done so many times in the past.” She smiled softly and lowered her eyes. “Then I’ll have time to talk to him in a relaxed atmosphere. I really do miss him.”

Chapter 21

“Jeff, I want to be one hundred per cent sure the proposals for the installation of the Compact Disk Lab are right, that we’ve included everything,” Kevin Matwin said. He glanced around the Surf and Turf Restaurant in downtown Toronto as if anxious he might be overheard. Preoccupied, he drummed his fingers on the table while they waited for their lunch to be served.

“But of course,” Jeff replied. “So do I.” He took a sip of his white wine.

“We have to be certain we’ve included everything we need, and only what we need. No splurging. The cost is prohibitive enough for even the most minimum of our needs.”

“As I said, but of course.” Jeff sounded slightly annoyed. “Maybe we should consider contracting out the reproduction of the CDs. At the beginning, I mean. It’d be more expensive per item, that’s true, but we wouldn’t have to come up with all the money in one shot.” He looked at Kevin, weighing the effect of his words. “Besides, we could get a feel for the market, see if there is any interest out there for your collections in this new format.”

Kevin shook his head. “No, even though what you say makes perfect sense, I’d still like to have everything done in-house. I need to have full control on the quality of the production.”

“Again, of course. But remember—any equipment we purchased in the past was a minor investment. This one is major, and I still choke when I think of it—one million dollars.” Jeff buttered a small, warm roll and bit into it. He smiled as the waitress came to their table with a tray filled with plates.

The waitress placed a lobster tail swimming in melted butter before each of them, then added a chafing dish of brandy, warmed by a candle underneath. Baked potatoes with sour cream and chives and a garden salad completed their meals.

“Fantastic,” Kevin said, taking a forkful of lobster and dipping it in the warm brandy. “The brandy’s at the perfect temperature to bring out the best flavor in the lobster.” The two men ate in silence for a few moments, savoring their meal.

Kevin patted his mouth with his napkin and sipped ice water from a tall crystal goblet. “Tell me about this new lawyer, Jeff. Leslie Hadson. Is he reliable?”

“Yes. He’s a corporate lawyer, recommended by the director of The Peoples’ Helping Hand. Ron, an old friend of mine, knows him very well.” Jeff paused to eat some of his potato and a forkful of salad. “He’s a fox, the best legal adviser we could have. He got us a real sweet deal.” Jeff grinned, then turned his attention to his lobster.

“I don’t know how sweet a deal it is,” Kevin said, folding his napkin and placing it beside his plate. “He proposed to use my entire estate as collateral on the loan. I’m not happy with that. Not at all. I risk everything if things don’t work out right.”

“Take it easy, it’s just a proposal. You don’t have to make a decision until you come back in September. By then, I’ll probably have a few more people interested in using the lab for their own productions. That would give us some ready cash and offset the maintenance costs.”

Kevin sighed. “Yes, you’re right. I still have some time before I need to make a commitment.” He folded his hands in front of him, pushing his plate to the side, and frowned at Jeff. “What about the sale of the French impressionists collection in Hong Kong? How is that going? Any cash flow there?”

“Not yet,” Jeff replied.

“Maybe we should stop shipment on the remaining stock,” Kevin said, his frown deepening.

“We can’t do that. We have a contract,” Jeff said firmly. He tossed his napkin down and turned to Kevin, his eyes wide.

“And so? The contract says each successive shipment is conditional on the payment of the previous shipment. I remember that clause.”

“I don’t remember it. I don’t think it was included in the final contract.”

“What?” Kevin’s face flamed with anger. “I asked for that clause, the safety clause, my way out of a deal gone bad. I stressed that it had to be included. What do you mean, it wasn’t in the contract? Don’t you understand?” Kevin pushed back from the table as if to leave, then leaned toward Jeff. “I can *not* afford to lose any money right now! Do you understand me?”

“Yes, of course I do. Calm down, Kevin. I’ll check it out as soon as I get back.”

“Check it. And hope that the contract protects our business. The loan from the bank is based on the cash in our accounts and on the forecast cash flow.” Kevin slapped his hand down hard on the table top. “I don’t have to explain that to you, Jeff. You should know all of it, and you should have protected us right down the line.”

“Kevin, don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

The two men were silent, sipping the tea brought by the waitress during their discussion.

Kevin drew a deep breath and shook his head, then adroitly changed the subject. “How was your stay in Monte Carlo and San Remo?” he asked.

“Not too good,” Jeff replied. “Eleanore likes to gamble. She wins a bit, and then—well, then she can’t stop.” He shook his head. “It’s a problem.”

“I thought she was trying to get it under control, that she’d made a resolution not to even enter a casino,” Kevin said.

Jeff shrugged. “You know how these things go. Promises made by a gambler are no better than promises made by an alcoholic.” He glanced up at Kevin. “How’s Tanya, by the way?”

“She’s the same,” Kevin replied. “I’d like our lawyer to see if he could help her, maybe direct her to a legal counselor, someone who could advise her concerning her problems—whatever they are.”

“I’ll check for you. Anything specific?”

“Not that I know of. She seems to think her stay out of the country will solve all of her problems.” Kevin shook his head. “I have my doubts.”

Jeff laughed. “I’ve never seen a problem solved by going on vacation. But that’s just my opinion, after all.” Kevin was silent. “It will be difficult to help the girl if we have no information about her. Do you have anything else, anything at all?”

“She recently shipped a painting to someplace in Montreal for a contest,” Kevin said. “The contest was called Wonder in Children. I remember the painting well. It was breathtaking, a study of a young black boy staring at something spectacular.”

“Wonder in Children,” Jeff repeated. “Sounds familiar. Montreal, you said? I may ask around. I have some contacts over there.” He finished the tea in his cup and pushed it aside. “Anything else you can tell me about her?”

“Not much. She didn’t talk about herself very often. Her parents were in the import-export business, with dealings in Europe as well as the Americas. They traveled extensively, and usually took the children with them. They died in an air crash, along with Tanya’s younger brother.” Kevin paused, considering. “That’s about all I know, except she won a scholarship to MacKenzie Academy. She studied there.”

Jeff nodded, then stood. "One more thing, Kevin," he said as he gestured for the waitress to bring their check. "Vanessa misses you. She seems restless, in search of something. She keeps asking about you." He paused, glanced at Kevin. "If you don't mind, I'd like to invite her to the cottage next weekend, when you're there."

"Jeff, how could I mind? It's your cottage."

* * *

At the cottage in Wasaga Beach, a cool breeze lifted a lock of Vanessa's hair and played with it, winding it across her cheek. "Any news of Tanya?" she asked. She brushed the hair behind her ear and leaned back on the blanket she shared with Eleanore Moore.

"No, not really. I haven't had a chance to talk to Kevin, and I didn't ask Jeff if Kevin talked about her."

"You wouldn't, by any chance, know her astrological sign, would you? I'd like to check and see if they're compatible."

"Since when have you been interested in astrology, Vanessa? But anyway, I think Kevin said her birthday was in the first week of June. The seventh, if I remember right."

"Ah, a Gemini! I wonder if a Gemini and a Virgo go well together. I'll have to look it up." She stood and brushed the sand from her shorts. "Guess we should be getting back. Sunday morning breakfast sounds wonderful to me about now." She smiled, picked up the blanket from the sand and shook it. "Astrology: an interesting subject, really. I feel as if I've missed out on so much, not knowing about it in the past—"

The two women left the beach and headed back to the cottage.

"Brisk and beautiful," Vanessa said with a glance outside. "I really enjoyed our little jaunt on the beach this morning, but I still need a walk to work off some of this breakfast. Any takers?"

"No, I think I've had enough, thanks. Let me settle in with my novel and digest my breakfast," Eleanore said.

"Not me," Jeff said. "Sunday is a day of rest, and that's just what I have in mind."

"Kevin?" Vanessa asked. "I'd really hate to go alone. It's too beautiful not to be able to share it with someone."

Kevin shrugged. "Sure, I'll come." He watched her as she removed the multi-patterned scarf from around her neck and tied it over her corn-silk hair. She looked cool and elegant to him, the sensuous silk of her pantsuit whispering against her long legs as she walked, the lavender color a compliment to her deep blue eyes. She gave Kevin a coy glance from beneath her thick, dark lashes, then left the cottage to descend to the beach. He followed.

She slipped her sandals off and dug her toes into the sand, then skipped toward the gentle roll of the surf. "I've missed you more than I ever thought possible," she said with a faint smile. She stared out to sea and watched the gulls dip and dive into the water to come up with small fish.

"Life can take strange turns," Kevin said. He watched the waves break against the shoreline, aligned in rows and scalloped with lacy foam. One by one, they rose and broke upon the sand, then slid bubbling back. Vanessa glanced at him, her eyes a piece of the sky.

"We've had a lot of wonderful times together, at this cottage," she said. With one bare foot, she carefully drew a heart in the sand, then wrote 'Kevin' within. "I remember our first weekend here. You drew a heart in the sand with my name inside." A small wave broke over her sand drawing and erased it.

“You gave me a blue scarf, to protect my hair from the breeze by the sea. You said, ‘It will match the color of your eyes.’” She slipped in front of him, the water rising over her ankles to wet the bottom of her pants. “You were always a sensitive lover,” she said, looking into his eyes.

“Was I?” Kevin asked. “I’m glad you have good memories of me. I have so many of you. You were an important part of my life for more than eight years.”

“Could we light the flame again, Kevin? Ignite the passion we knew in the past?” Kevin remained silent.

“Let me try,” Vanessa said, slipping closer.

Chapter 22

“Ah, *divina*, come in,” Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro said as he lifted Vanessa’s hand to his lips. “Come in, make yourself comfortable. I will prepare a drink for you.”

“How was your flight to Toronto?” he asked as he opened the left side of an ornate armoire in the seventeenth century Venetian style. The grace and charm of the elegant antique were accented by floral patterns repeated on the two off-white doors. The legs and sides were slightly curved. Its right side held a small refrigerator. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “Did you gather any useful information during the weekend?” He poured a flute of Dom Pérignon for Vanessa and handed it to her with a bow.

Vanessa sipped and murmured her thanks. “Yes,” she said. “I found quite a bit of information about Tanya...um...Howard. First, and most important: her birthday is June seventh, 1976. She has access to Kevin’s villa at all times. She has a small workshop for painting at the entrance, where she can catch the best light.”

“Good work, my friend,” Luigi Amedeo said with a smile.

Vanessa stretched her legs and slid them along the smooth leather of the off-white chesterfield. “What did this woman do to you?” she asked.

“If she is who I think she is, then...”

“If she is what?”

“The offspring of the people who deprived me of my birthright. The people who cheated my father and drove him to ruin, to suicide.” He stood stiff and quiet for a moment, his eyes looking inward, his lips drawn back from his teeth in an unconscious snarl. He blinked, looked at Vanessa. “What did she do to you, that you should hate her as you do?”

“She stole Kevin from me, replaced me in his heart. She had no right to do that.” Vanessa sat straight, both feet planted firmly on the floor. Her hands grasped each other in her lap.

“But Vanessa, my *divina*, you told me you left him. You said you left Kevin because he bored you, not the other way around.”

“No. Well...yes. Yes and no. I told him I needed a break, not to break up with him, just...just a temporary interruption in our relationship. He had no right to replace me.” Her fingers grasped each other with such force, the tips were white.

“Ah, I see. And so, you will help me to get close to this Tanya?”

“Yes, and fine, if Kevin gets hurt in the process. He rejected me. Me! He turned away from me as if I were no one, as if I were nothing. He deserves to suffer.” Vanessa grabbed her glass and swallowed her champagne in two long gulps, then thrust the empty glass toward Luigi Amedeo.

He smiled, opened his antique bar, and refilled her glass. “So. Let us continue, then. What else did you gather over the weekend?”

“Kevin is involved in a new scheme, one which might cause him financial problems. Jeff is handling it for him, but it sounds risky.” She told him of the Compact Disk Lab and Kevin’s difficulties finding a convenient loan.

Luigi Amedeo paced, his fingers stroking his chin as he thought. “Interesting,” he said. “You could introduce me as a potential investor, with an offer he can’t possibly refuse. I could beat the

bank's loan rate, and ask for less collateral."

"But... Kevin said he could go broke, if it failed. Would you be willing to take that risk?"

"I said 'potential investor,' my dear. In that way, I can establish a lot of preliminary contacts before I have to commit myself." He paused. "And at the moment, I happen to have a bit of 'loose' money to invest. I need to make some form of investment, and soon."

"I don't understand," Vanessa said, slightly lightheaded from her rapid consumption of alcohol.

"I prefer it that way, my friend," he said, his eyes sparkling with laughter. "My business is, shall we say, very special. But I need to meditate, to plan a strategy to contact our girl Tanya." He rose and inserted a compact disk into his player. The uplifting strains of the Nabucco's overture came from the speakers.

Vanessa leaned back and closed her eyes, letting herself drift with the music on the waves of wine.

What seemed no more than seconds later she felt a rough hand shake her shoulder. "Vanessa? Asleep, are you? Wake up, I need your help."

She sat up slowly, rubbing at her eyes, and looked at him.

"Call Kevin. Call him right now and tell him you have an investor for him. Tell him you have a friend who is interested in making an investment in his new project."

"But he's leaving to return to Europe—"

"I'll be there in two days. Call him, now, before he leaves. Right now, before he gets a chance to accept a loan from the bank."

Still half asleep, Vanessa picked up the phone and called Kevin at his Toronto apartment. "Kevin, I just wanted to wish you a safe journey," she said, stifling a yawn. "And I wanted to tell you about a friend of mine who might be interested in investing some money in your new laboratory."

"Do I know this friend of yours?" Kevin asked.

Vanessa turned her face from the phone and gave a deep yawn, then wrinkled her nose at Luigi Amedeo. "No, I don't think so. His name is Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro. He'll be in Europe next week," she replied. She waited a moment, then continued, "I could give him your address at the Riviera, if you're interested."

"Of course, I'm interested. Give him my phone number." She heard him draw a deep breath. "Thank you, Vanessa. Thank you for thinking of me."

"Oh, you're very welcome. Goodnight, Kevin."

"Did he bite?" Luigi Amedeo asked.

"Yes," she replied. "With no hesitation. You'll have no trouble seeing Mr. Matwin, but I doubt if you'll be able to see Tanya. She avoids strangers, and Kevin is very protective, very mysterious, about her."

"Don't worry, I'll find a way to see her." He smiled and took Vanessa's hand. "You could get the Academy Award for your acting, divina. And 'divina' is the appropriate word for you." He kissed her hand, then turned and handed her jacket and purse to her. "Now let's go to the library and get some information on compact disk technology as applied to artistic reproduction. I don't have a clue about any of it."

Chapter 23

Tanya splashed through the cool waters of the brook bordering the vineyard on the north of the property. She followed its meanders as it looped to the east around the backyard of the house to finally cut across the orchard. She climbed from the water to look at the trees, each baring ripe, juicy fruit, too much of a temptation to resist. Each tree she passed gave up an apricot, sweet with the tastes of summer. She nibbled as she strolled, and chose several fruit from another group of trees. These seemed somewhat different, although the color was the same. She bit into one, and stared at the cluster of four pits in place of the single pit she had expected. She gathered a few more, then headed home.

“Edda, look here, look what I’ve found,” she said, holding the fruits before her. “Strangest fruit I’ve ever seen, and growing on the trees with the apricots.”

“They’re medlars,” a voice said from behind her. “Medlars, from the Orient—Japan, I believe.”

“Kevin! Oh, you’re back!” Tanya glowed, delighted. She reached for him, then stepped back, suddenly aware of Edda’s presence. She blushed. “Welcome back,” she said, letting her eyes tell him of her happiness.

“Came looking for you, to discuss my portrait,” Kevin said, with a quick look at Edda, “And I couldn’t find you. Wandering around, eh?” He leaned toward her and whispered, “Let’s go home.”

As they crossed the cedar hedge, Kevin drew her into his arms and hugged her. “God, I missed you. I missed you so much—”

“Kevin!” Tanya said. “I missed you, too, but you’re squishing me. I can’t breathe.” She giggled.

Kevin pushed her against the wall in the villa’s entry. “I can’t wait. No time to go upstairs, no time to lie down.” His mouth moved over her face, her neck, down to her breasts as he unbuttoned her blouse. “Let me feel your body, all of it. Now. Right here.”

Two days later, Kevin received a phone call. “How do you do, Mr. Matwin,” a smooth, elegant voice said, a voice that immediately proclaimed the speaker to be someone of aristocratic heritage. “My name is Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro. I am a friend of Ms. Vanessa White. She told me of your laboratory for the reproduction of artistic material using compact disk technology.”

“Ah, yes, Ms. White told me about you,” Kevin said.

“If I understood correctly,” Luigi Amedeo continued, “this would be for your own use, as well as for the use of other interested publishers.”

“That is correct,” replied Kevin.

“I was recently involved in this field and believe it has great potential. I’m an investor, as you know, and as such—”

“You want to make money,” Kevin finished.

“Yes. I hope you don’t mind if I speak frankly.”

“Not at all. I believe we can discuss this issue at length whenever you have the time,” Kevin

said.

“I’m in Nice today. I could see you tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, whichever you prefer.”

“Tomorrow would be fine. What time?” Kevin asked.

“Three o’clock? Would that be convenient for you?”

“Yes. Let me give you the directions to my house.”

Kevin and Luigi Amedeo spent the afternoon discussing the laboratory, with Kevin explaining all the phases of his work while Luigi Amedeo asked appropriate questions.

“I have another engagement tonight, unfortunately, but I’d like to speak with you again tomorrow, perhaps a bit earlier?” Luigi Amedeo said.

“Any time.”

“One o’clock?”

“That would be fine. Perhaps you would stay for lunch?”

“That would be very nice.” Luigi Amedeo paused as he reached the villa’s entrance. “The portrait...very nice. The resemblance to the original is striking.” He looked at Kevin, comparing him to his image. “I hope you don’t mind my asking— who is the artist? What is his name?”

“The artist is a she. My neighbor. She’s very good, isn’t she?”

“Good indeed. I was just thinking of having a portrait made for my residence in Rome.” Luigi Amedeo stepped back from the portrait, then admired it from several angles. “Do you know if she might be interested in the job?”

“I really couldn’t say. Actually, she’s just finished school.”

“I see,” Luigi Amedeo said with a faint smile. He shook hands with Kevin and left.

“Do you really have to leave so soon?” Kevin asked, watching Tanya as she gathered her materials.

“Yes, soon, but not yet,” she replied with a smile. “I have to clean my brushes. Then I’ll go and leave you free to entertain your guest.” She went to the washroom and drenched each brush with paint remover. Twenty minutes later, she returned. While she arranged the brushes into the proper holes in the right-hand side of the easel, she heard Kevin open the main door of the villa. She froze as if she were a deer caught in a car’s headlights.

“Tanya, I’d like to introduce Luigi Amedeo, Count of Monteturro. Luigi Amedeo, Tanya Howard,” Kevin said as he entered the room with a tall, aristocratic gentleman.

“Please forgive me if I’ve interrupted your work,” Luigi Amedeo said. He bent slightly, lifted Tanya’s hand to his lips, and kissed the back of it. “I am so very pleased to meet you. I have admired the portrait you are making for Mr. Matwin—”

Tanya shivered, only half listening. She had never been greeted with a hand-kiss before, nor met a count. And she was more than aware of the paint remover fumes drifting from her fingers. The odor would not go away with a simple hand wash; it would stay for hours and hours. What a first impression, she thought, and shuddered.

“I was in the vicinity and thought to drop by earlier,” Luigi Amedeo said, still holding Tanya’s hand. “I hope I didn’t cause any inconvenience to either of you.”

“Not to me,” Kevin replied, “And Ms. Howard was about to leave.” He looked to Tanya, who was staring at her hand, still held by Luigi Amedeo. “Of course, she could stay, if she wants. Would you like to stay for lunch, Tanya? It’s a light lunch, since we have a great deal of work to do.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tanya said, retrieving her hand and clutching it to her chest. “I’m still in my work clothes.”

“Ah, but you look simply wonderful in your sports outfit,” Luigi Amedeo said.

Tanya searched for Kevin, anxious to be freed from the responsibility of a response. Her heart fluttered in her throat. What would Malcolm think, what would he say? And she had no idea where Charles was, though Edda waited back at her house.

“Ah, I can see that I don’t deserve Ms. Howard’s attentions,” Luigi Amedeo said with a contrite look. “Although I’m only a business man, Ms. Howard, I’d greatly appreciate your company.”

Tanya took a deep breath. She had little choice. If she were rude to this man, she would be rude to Kevin. “I guess I could stay for lunch,” she said with reluctance.

“Wonderful,” Kevin said. He took her arm and drew her into the dining room.

Marta had prepared a delicious cold salad of clams and calamari, with her homemade bread. Tanya nibbled, and watched Luigi Amedeo from the corner of her eye.

“Ms. Howard, Mr. Matwin tells me you’re a recent university graduate. I find that hard to believe. Your portrait of Kevin is very—very expressive, very professional.”

“Thank you,” Tanya said, her eyes lowered to her plate. “Kevin is a good subject.”

“Does he pose well? Or often?”

“Thirty seconds at a sitting,” Tanya said, laughing. She glanced up at Luigi Amedeo. “He’s very impatient, and tires much too easily.” She noted Luigi Amedeo’s elegant looks and refined manners. His eyes seemed to cover everything in the room, and in particular, seemed to cover her.

“As I mentioned to Kevin yesterday, I would like to have a portrait made for my Roman residence. I wonder if you would be interested in painting it,” Luigi Amedeo said.

“I really don’t know,” Tanya said, anxiety coloring her words. “I’ve never worked for hire before.”

“Ah, but you don’t have to give me an answer now. Here’s my card. Contact me at your leisure, when you feel you might have the time.” Luigi Amedeo gave her a business card decorated with the coat of arms of the Monteturros on one side, and on the other, his name and the address. “In my house in Rome, I have an entire wing for guests. You would be very welcome, free to come and go as you please. I could be your guide to visit the city.” His deep, mysterious eyes searched hers. “There is so much to see over there.”

“Thank you. For the invitation, and for the job offer. I’ll consider them both.” Tanya looked from Luigi Amedeo to Kevin, then looked down into her clasped hands, folded in her lap. Her anxiety caused her to shake slightly. She glanced quickly at Kevin again as Marta entered to announce a telephone call.

“Will you take the call here?” Marta asked.

“No, I’ll take it in the studio,” Kevin answered. Tanya’s throat tightened. She would be alone with Luigi Amedeo.

But he showed himself to be an interesting and interested guest, discussing wines and local vineyards. When Kevin returned, Tanya showed her relief.

“Kevin, I really must be going. I’ll leave you gentlemen to your business.” She smiled at Luigi Amedeo, who stood and smiled in return. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. di Monteturro.”

“The pleasure, Madam, was indeed mine,” Luigi Amedeo said. He bowed slightly.

“I’ll see you to the door, Tanya,” Kevin said. At the door, he kissed the tip of her nose and gave her a hug. “Thank you for staying, little love. I’ll call you after he leaves.”

Tanya had settled into bed, pillows piled high behind her, a small pot of tea on her bedside table. The novel in her hands couldn’t hold her interest, each page and paragraph read several times, then read again when she realized she had no idea what had happened in the book. It was after nine o’clock when the phone rang. She jumped, startled, although she had been expecting Kevin’s call. The house seemed too quiet, too empty, and her nerves were on edge.

“Hello?” she said, suddenly afraid the voice that would answer her would be the voice of a stranger.

“Tanya? I hope you weren’t upset by my guest’s behavior?” Kevin’s voice asked.

“He was a bit strange,” she replied, “but really—he flattered me.” She laughed a slightly nervous laugh.

“He never stopped looking at you, and that job offer—along with the offer of his guest wing, and himself as a guide—” Kevin’s voice nearly sputtered. “How can I say it? Forward? Daring? He nearly made a pass at you, and in my presence!”

Tanya giggled. “Why, Kevin, you do sound jealous. And really, Kevin, he couldn’t know that you and I are a couple, now, could he?”

“No, he couldn’t. Did he try anything while I was on the telephone?”

“No. No, he talked of wine and vineyards, and asked questions about this area. It seems his family had vineyards somewhere around here, a long time ago.” Tanya yawned. “And you are, aren’t you? A little bit jealous?”

“Yes. You know I am. I’d never share you, never give you up. You looked gorgeous today. Any man would enjoy looking at you, having you to hold—” Kevin’s voice whispered in her ear, sending chills down her body.

“You aren’t planning to go to Rome to paint a portrait, are you?” he asked, a tinge of anxiety behind his words.

“Oh, Kevin, I wouldn’t know what to do without you,” she said, no hesitation in her voice. “I wouldn’t go there in a million years, not unless you were with me.”

He was silent for a moment. She listened to his soft breathing and felt comforted, safe. Again, she yawned.

“My little sleepyhead,” he said with a chuckle. “Good night, Tanya.”

“Good night, Kevin. I love you.”

Chapter 24

“Luigi Amedeo, the drawings for the new house are ready,” Cecilia Maria’s voice said over the telephone. “I’d really like your opinion before I tell the construction company to go ahead and demolish our family home. Could you possibly come down sometime this week?”

“Yes,” he replied. Luigi Amedeo stood and walked to the bow of his yacht. “I’ll be there for supper. Probably late.” In his mind’s eye, Luigi Amedeo saw the sprawling building where he was born, the house where he had grown from child to man. It stood at the end of a large vineyard in the southern part of the Piedmont region. Mentally, he wandered down the wide gravel road and examined the tall, ancient poplars standing guard on either side. He shook his head, pushing the image from his mind. Cecilia Maria was talking to him.

“Luigi Amedeo? Are you still there?” she asked.

“Yes, of course, Cecilia Maria. I’m sorry. My mind was elsewhere.”

“I know you’re attached to the old place, but we’ve discussed it in the past. You know how many repairs the old building needs. You know it will be less expensive to tear it down and rebuild, rather than try to remodel.”

“Yes, Cecilia Maria. I know,” he said, but his mind played with scenes from his past, showing him the main floor with the many activity rooms, the small, restricted sleeping quarters on the second floor. He knew the four precious arazzi, each thirty feet long and fourteen feet high, would be removed with care and reinstated in the new building. Each pictured different popes addressing or blessing a religious crowd; one showed Pope Gregorius VII conferring the gentle blazon to Luigi Amedeo’s ancestor. He drew a deep breath.

“That place is very dear to me, that’s true. But you’re more important than an old mansion, and you deserve a functional home.” He paused, stared out over the water and watched the gentle waves as they flowed toward the shore. “Do not worry, Cecilia Maria. I will come to look at the drawings, since you want me to do so, and then you can go ahead with your project.”

After dinner in the drafty dining room, Luigi Amedeo settled in what had once been his father’s den. He sat before the huge roll-top desk, drawers, shelves, and pigeon holes overflowing with papers, pictures, envelopes, and old bills. He went through each item with care, separating those to be saved and those to be burned. Near midnight, he came upon a letter which began ‘Caro Michele,’ and was signed ‘Carla.’ He read it once, then again. Finally, he carefully folded it and slipped it into his pocket.

His mind racing, he was unable to sleep that night.

* * *

Tanya examined the sitting area close to the entrance of *La Mimosa* with critical eyes. A waiting area for guests, it had a closet for coats, and wicker chairs along the walls that were badly in need of re-upholstering, the fabric discolored and torn. She frowned and touched a piece of material, mentally covering the chairs in something bright and vibrant.

The fax machine on the corner table held two sheets of paper. Curious, she read them. They

were from Paul Brennon of the Invicta, asking Charles to call him back. They had arrived the night before. She decided to call and check in before she left for Kevin's villa.

"Tanya, how nice to hear your voice," Paul said with enthusiasm. "I've been looking for Charles. I called three times yesterday. Where are Charles and Edda?"

"Oh, they're away on a short trip."

"That's what you told me the last time I asked where they were, Tanya. They aren't on vacation, you know. They work for you." Paul's voice was tight, angry. "And they should never both be gone at the same time. That was the agreement."

Tanya sighed. "I know," she said. "But Edda begged me, and I'm rarely home, in any case."

"What was the reason they gave you?"

"No special reason, actually. I think they're with Charles' uncle, who lives in Nice."

"Why did they stay away overnight the last time, without telling you they would be gone?"

"Oh..." Tanya was silent for a moment. "Yes, I remember. They said their car broke down in the mountains—the Jura Mountains. The phone didn't work."

"Tanya. You pay a small fortune for their services. You should not let them take off like that." He sounded flustered, upset. "Well, I'll talk it over with Malcolm. It can't continue in this way. You'll be at Matwin's villa, if not home?"

"Yes. But Paul—Charles and Edda seem to enjoy each other's company so much, and it's such a little thing, to make them happy..." She took a deep breath. "Paul, it's been so quiet. Maybe I can return home in the fall?"

"I'm not sure, Tanya. Maybe. We didn't hear of any contract anymore. However...Malcolm feels you should stay over there for a while yet." He cleared his throat. "Tanya, have Charles call me as soon as he returns, no matter what time it is."

"Yes, Paul. I will. Bye for now." She hung up the phone and frowned, slightly uncomfortable, but unsure why.

"Tanya, is everything all right?" Kevin asked, gathering her into his arms when she arrived at his villa. "You're later than usual, and when I called, the line was busy."

"Yes, fine. There was a message for Charles on the fax machine, and I made the call for him."

"But where are your guardians? They've been gone for a while now."

Tanya shrugged. "Away for a few days. Vacation."

Kevin turned her to face him. He held her by the upper arms and looked intently into her face. "Are you sure you don't want to tell me what your problem is? At this point, I'm a better guardian for you than Charles and Edda, or anyone else, for that matter."

She shrugged free of Kevin's grasp, then laughed. "What problem? I have no problems." She giggled and hugged him.

Kevin caught her arms again. "You can't socialize, you live in seclusion...you can't even go out for dinner once in a while."

"That's going to change," she said, lifting her hand to stroke his cheek and run her fingers along his jaw.

"When?" he asked, catching her hand.

"Soon."

"How soon?" He kissed each finger, then the palm of her hand.

"Very soon."

"Right now?"

Tanya laughed. "Yes, now. Where do you want to go?"

Kevin frowned and clasped her hands to his chest. He raised one eyebrow. “Whatever shall I do with you?” he said with a deep sigh.

“You do very well with me, indeed. Where do you want to go? I’m ready to live again!”

“Well—” Kevin paused. “You know I have business with Luigi Amedeo. What about dinner on his yacht? It’s anchored in the bay of San Remo. He invited us both for dinner tonight.”

She frowned, turned away for a moment. No dinner at a fine restaurant, no dancing? No romantic hideaway for two? Onto a yacht, with someone Kevin barely knew—that was a surprise. “I thought you were a little jealous of Luigi Amedeo,” she said.

Kevin caught her hands in his again. “I am. I’m jealous of any man whoever looks at you. But I’m also sure of the love of my woman.” He kissed her hands. “Shouldn’t I be?”

Tanya sighed. Again, it seemed as if she had no choice. “Let me go home and change.” She turned, drawing her hands from his, and hurried to her bedroom.

She chose her only silk dress, butter soft and luscious against her skin. The sleeveless pale yellow fabric clung and slipped away from her body, enhancing and flattering her. The high neckline framed her face and added golden highlights to her hair. Her only jewelry was the family locket dangling on a long gold chain between her breasts.

Kevin gasped when he saw her, then smiled. “You look very elegant, my little love, quite fit as a guest for a count. In fact, you could visit a prince or a king, and still be suitable.” He bowed from the waist, and kissed the back of her hand, in imitation of Luigi Amedeo.

Tanya still shivered in spite of his mild attempt at humor. “Do you think anyone else will be there?” she asked when they reached the San Remo harbor.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “But don’t worry, I’m with you. I won’t let anything happen to you. I give you my word.”

Kevin parked his Alfa Romeo and opened the door for Tanya. He took her hand and helped her from the car.

“Thank you very much for coming,” Luigi Amedeo said, climbing from a small motorboat tied at the dock. He clasped Tanya lightly and kissed her on the cheeks, then shook hands with Kevin. “I am so very pleased you’ve accepted my invitation.”

From the motorboat, they boarded the *Cecilia Maria*. Luigi Amedeo escorted Tanya and Kevin to the lower deck, where a tall, regal woman welcomed them.

“This is my sister, Cecilia Maria.” The woman resembled her brother. She wore an expression of sadness like a veil, her soft blond hair a halo arranged in a smooth chignon. Her dress was an understatement in off-white which only served to magnify her aristocratic bearing while adding a touch of innocence.

Luigi Amedeo talked about his family, his love of music, his many interests, and drew each person into the conversation with the smoothness of the experienced host.

“Cecilia Maria, what is this?” Tanya asked, dipping a crouton into a thick, warm yellow mixture in a heated chafing dish. “It tastes wonderful.”

“It’s a fondue, Piedmont style,” Cecilia Maria replied. “It’s made with eggs, cheese, and spices. The special flavor comes from truffles.”

“Truffles?” Tanya asked. “I always thought they were a sort of chocolate sweet.” She laughed, then sipped her white wine.

“No, these are a fungus, but a fungus that grows below the ground. Our family has trained dogs to hunt for truffles. We have three of them, our truffle dogs.” Cecilia Maria laughed as well. “That is all they’re good for, too. It’s not a very profitable operation.”

“It’s easier to buy the truffles in specialty shops nowadays,” Luigi Amedeo said. “Cheaper, too, when you consider the cost of the care and feeding of the dogs.”

He turned to Tanya and gestured at her locket. “That’s a very old piece, is it not?” he asked. “It’s a refined piece of Florentine craftsmanship, perhaps from the eighteenth century?”

“I really don’t know. It belonged to my mother. I remember her wearing it on special occasions.”

“Does it open?” he asked. He rose and walked behind Tanya. “May I?” he said, and touched the side of the medallion. It sprang open. Within were two pictures, one on each side, a young boy and a young girl.

“The girl must be you,” Luigi Amedeo said with a smile. “She looks just like you.”

Tanya smiled back and relaxed. Luigi Amedeo seemed like an old friend. He had been a thoughtful, considerate host. He had done nothing to concern her. She enjoyed the remainder of their visit.

“Kevin, I had a very nice time. How did the business part go?”

“It went well, too. We agreed, in principle, to a joint venture. Our lawyers will work out the details.” He sighed and smiled down at her. “And Luigi Amedeo didn’t make a pass at you, did he?”

“No. Nothing out of the way at all, no mention of a portrait, no mention of a guest wing.” She frowned, puzzled. “Why do you think that might be?”

“I have no idea. Maybe he knows you’re hopelessly stuck on me.”

Chapter 25

Vermeil, Ontario

Judith Abramson toured the grounds of Brian Miller's house each night and once in the early morning, just as Mike Harrison had shown her the first day of her assignment. The two-story residence sat close to a ravine at the edge of the Sports and Hunt Club. Judith strode close to the fence and examined the ground leading to the house, her sharp eyesight missing nothing.

"Mike, if you have bodyguard training, then why did Mr. Miller want another bodyguard?" she had asked him during their very first tour.

"I think it was his brother's idea. Malcolm is pretty protective of him," Mike replied. "But I'm not a full bodyguard. I took a course in civil protection, after I was in a pretty bad wreck." He paused, glanced at her. "See, I used to race. Formula Uno. That wreck laid me up for about four months, but I still drive. The protection course just made me more employable."

Judith had nodded, and asked him if he would show her the interior of the house.

Mike laughed. "No, that's Brian's job. I'm surprised he didn't follow us out here."

And Brian had been anxious for their return, pacing in the solarium, waiting for them. He showed her the entire house, his hand clasping her arm. The size of the building had impressed Judith then, and still impressed her today.

She entered the house and glanced toward the solarium, adjoined by the kitchen. The main floor held the dining and living rooms, as well as Brian's den. The long bamboo-covered wall had a hidden door which opened into the fitness room. Judith used it each night after her rounds.

She glanced up and examined the monitor for the two infrared cameras in front of Brian's bedroom. Nothing moved.

Judith wandered into Brian's den and sighed. He seemed to be more concerned with her as a woman than that she was his bodyguard.

"I asked Malcolm for a female agent," Brian had said. Indeed, Judith thought. He believed Malcolm couldn't come up with one, especially not one he, Malcolm, would trust with his brother's life. Brian was wrong.

As a bodyguard, Judith took her responsibilities seriously and set a daily routine. She accompanied Brian to his office each day and waited in the hallway for him to conclude his business. Brian usually went to see his partner, Jack Benweiser, or to discuss issues with the chief accountant of the Versifund company. After leaving, Judith would report to Malcolm, either by phone or by electronic mail, then join Brian and Mike Harrison for dinner.

"Why are we stopping here?" Judith asked as Mike parked outside a woman's boutique.

"I thought perhaps you could advise me on a purchase, Judith," Brian said. "Would you mind? I need a present for someone special to me."

Judith shrugged and followed him into the store. The smell of money scented the air with the finest perfumes. Soft, pale pink lighting muted the daylight and added an aura of elegance. Hidden speakers, faint chimes and tinkling bells added to the impression the buyer had entered an enchanted world.

A smiling woman descended on them with the grace of a sleek jungle cat. "May I be of

service?" she asked.

"Yes," Brian said. He turned to Judith. "I need you to help me choose."

Judith frowned. "Well, I don't know...I'm not an expert in this field."

"Well—maybe you can advise me on the color?" Brian asked.

"Uh...yellow. Yellow is my favorite color." Judith replied. She fingered the hem of a wispy skirt which seemed to be made of cobwebs. "Everything looks very nice, in here. Whatever you choose, she'll love it," she said. She returned to the entrance and stood there, waiting.

"Mike, what size do you think she is?" Brian asked.

"Size? I would guess a size six, sir," Mike replied, glancing at Judith's waist.

"Seems small to me..." Brian said, frowning.

"Oh, no, sir. She has her clothes tailored to hide her gun. She told me."

"Gun? Does she wear a gun all of the time?"

"Only when she's on duty, sir. Like now." Mike grinned, then joined Judith.

Mike tapped on her bedroom door a short while later and handed Judith the yellow dress. "Mr. Miller would be very pleased if you would consider wearing this when you join us for dinner," he said.

Judith stared at Mike, then took the dress and touched the floating fabric of the skirt. "For me?" she asked, her voice catching in her throat. "But I thought he needed it for someone special..." She swallowed the words, took the dress, and closed the door.

For a moment, she simply looked at the gleam of the dress hanging in her hands. She squeezed a handful of the fabric; it felt the way she knew moonlight would feel, if you could clasp it in your hands. She slipped it over her head.

Judith walked to the floor-length mirror, feeling as if she were floating. The fabric of the skirt swirled around her legs, stroking her skin. In the mirror, her reflection stared back at her in shock. Her shoulders gleamed naked above the bodice, which opened low, almost exposing her breasts. The skirt exposed more of her legs than she cared to show. She was about to remove the dress when a knock came again at her door.

"Judith, Mr. Miller is expecting you," Mike said.

She opened the door. "Perhaps Mr. Miller should dine without me tonight," she said, her voice trembling.

Mike smiled. "Judith, the dress fits you perfectly. You look lovely."

"That's the problem. I don't look like a professional. I look like I'm ready for a party...for a wild party," she said, and felt a blush spread across her breasts and into her face.

Mike's smile broadened into a grin. "I assure you, Judith, Mr. Miller is accustomed to beautiful women. No wild thoughts will enter his mind..." He chuckled.

"...at least, not until after dinner," Brian said, appearing behind Mike. He took Judith's arm and led her to the dining room.

Judith felt even more uneasy when she realized she and Brian would dine alone. Mike had vanished.

The awkward feeling wouldn't leave her. She felt naked, exposed before her client. Brian looked suave and relaxed in a three-piece dark suit with a yellow tie decorated with little blue sailboats.

"Do you sail?" she asked.

"Less now than in the past. The partner I sailed with moved out of town. I don't like to sail alone and it takes time to find a partner you really feel comfortable to be with—for hours and

hours.” An intimate, warm smile touched his mouth.

He cleared his throat. “My mother called earlier today. She’s concerned about my confinement, as she calls it. I reassured her, explaining I’m in good company.” The smile returned as he looked into Judith’s eyes. “Very good company indeed. She’d like to see me soon. I told her we’d arrange a visit in the next week or so.”

Judith nodded and looked down at her plate. The food seemed tasteless, though she knew it was probably very good. With an effort, she swallowed.

“Tell me about you, Judith. Do you plan on being a bodyguard all of your life?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Are you worried about being assigned to difficult people?” he asked, with a wry grin.

“No,” she said, shaking her head and laughing. “I worry about a weapon. You see, when I carry a weapon, I’m bothered by the thought I might hurt someone, either intentionally or unintentionally.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I managed a sort of ‘date’ with you,” Brian said, his expression wistful. “I know so little about you, Judith. You work all day and then all night, managing your computer network and checking the security system. The evenings should be your time off, your time to relax.”

Judith smiled. “I don’t mind,” she said. “About the ‘date’ or about the security system. I like what I’m doing, and it was fun to learn about the alarm system. You seem well protected inside your home.”

“What are the most vulnerable and the most safe areas in the house?”

“The solarium isn’t safe at all. Your den, with its large windows on the front of the house, is the second least safe, and this room is third. The sleeping quarters are the safest, especially your bedroom; it’s surrounded by a big hallway with two motion detectors to monitor the entrance in alternate directions.”

“Ah,” Brian said. “Now I know where to take you in case of an attack.”

“You don’t take my job seriously, do you?”

“I do, but things have been fairly peaceful, at the office, here, and on the road. No mad drivers, no bombs, nothing.” He grinned.

“Maybe I’ll be out of a job pretty soon,” she said. She was surprised to feel a pang of regret.

“That would be a pity,” Brian said.

“Thank you, Brian. You’ve been very considerate, very pleasant. More than pleasant. You’re caring.”

Brian reached across the table and touched her hand. “Tell me about you, Judith. I know nothing about you, except you have a sister.”

“She’s actually my only living family. I have no one else.” Judith drew her hand away from his, but slowly. “My brother-in-law, a detective with Toronto Police, is the one responsible for my job choice. He took me out shooting. One day, he suggested I consider entering the Police Academy. And I did.” She pushed her plate away, no longer able to eat. “Target shooting is my favorite hobby. I have a few awards in it.”

“Perhaps we should go there, some afternoon.”

“Oh, no. No, Mr. Miller, I don’t think that would be a safe place for you. Accidents have been known to happen there.”

Brian tilted his head, his expression pained. “Brian, please, Judith. I thought we had passed the ‘Mr. Miller’ stage.” He rose from the table and offered his hand. “But let us go into the ‘dangerous’ solarium for brandy and coffee, and continue our conversation.”

They discussed the past, both his and hers. Brian told of his worry-free childhood, and of his three wives and two sons, both with their mothers now.

“Don’t you miss them?” Judith asked.

“No, not really. My ex-wives didn’t like my interference in raising them, and since they’re both good mothers, I didn’t object. I ‘interview’ my boys each week when I see them at the Sports and Hunt Club. Sometimes they stop by here and watch a movie with me, but most of the time we play ball together.”

“Unusual.”

“I’m not a family man, Judith. I like to be free to pursue my own interests.” He stared at her for a moment. “It took me three wives to find that out.”

He lifted Judith’s chin and looked into her eyes. “Disappointed? You may think I’m not a nice person...”

“No, you’re the same as you were a short while ago, Brian, and a much nicer person than—” She stopped abruptly.

“Than Malcolm led you to believe?” he asked with a laugh. “Malcolm never approved of my life style. He thought I should have become a lawyer, like my father. But I didn’t like school.”

“What grade did you reach?” Judith asked, her head tilted quizzically.

“Secret,” he said, pressing one finger to his lips. “My uncle left me with money and I invested it wisely. No need to work hard, just with skill.”

Judith glanced around the room. “You must be very rich,” she said. “Just look at the pictures on the walls, the Persian carpets, the collection of antique Chinese vases. Each item is worth a fortune.”

“Judith,” he said, his expression intent. “I know my money means little to you. Are you as insensitive to the man as you are to his position?” His voice trailed off into a whisper.

Judith stared at him with her huge eyes. “I enjoy my job.”

He rose and crossed the room, then pressed a series of buttons set into the wall. Soft music came from hidden speakers. “Will you dance with me?” he said. “Please.”

Judith stood, uncertain. “I’m not a good dancer.”

“Then let me teach you,” he said, his voice a soft whisper against her neck as he drew her into his arms.

Judith closed her eyes and swirled in the rhythm of the dance.

“Mr. Miller? Excuse me, sir?” a voice said from the doorway. “Sir, it’s your chief accountant. He said it’s urgent.”

Brian stepped back from Judith with a frown. “I’ll try to be back shortly, though this may take a bit of time.”

Moments later, he returned. “Judith, would you please come with me to Versifund? It’s important.”

“Let me leave a message with the Invicta.”

Her heart pounded as they drove the deserted streets of downtown Vermeil. She had no idea of what they might be getting into, no idea if there would be danger, though she could feel the tension coming from Brian. Mike parked the car close to the back entrance, in a reserved spot. At the tenth floor they were met by the chief accountant, who took Brian into his office without saying a word.

Judith and Mike sat in the hall and waited. She just had time to grab a coat and her gun before leaving the house. She worried. Mike’s expression was grim.

When the sound of the elevator reached her, she tensed. She pressed her finger to her lips and

slipped to a spot beside the elevator door, her gun in her hand, the safety off. She waited. The elevator seemed to take hours to descent to the main floor; it stopped for a few moments before rising from the lowest floor, each light on the gauge blinking into life as the car reached it. Eight...nine...ten...

Judith pointed the gun at the elevator doors, both hands holding it steady, her finger on the trigger.

The doors slid open and Malcolm stepped out.

"It's me," he said with a quick glance at the cocked gun. "Sorry you didn't have any warning. I thought I'd come check, after your message. What's the problem?"

Judith lowered her gun. In her mind's eye, she could see the trigger being pulled, see Malcolm dropping in a spray of blood, see it all...then know it didn't happen. She shuddered.

"Don't know," she said, her voice a mutter. "Brian is with his financial manager. That's all I know."

The door opened and Brian waved Malcolm inside.

When they reappeared, the morning sun shone through the window at the end of the hall.

At noon, Malcolm set up a teleconference with Judith and Paul. He said, "The attempts on Brian Miller's life could be related to his business. His partner, Jack Benweiser, has made transfers of money which can't be justified. Only two transactions have been traced, but they're for huge sums, and outside the country, where Versifund has no business."

He paused. "Judith? Are you there?"

"Yes, Malcolm. I'm listening."

"Brian is going to question his partner as soon as he returns. Two others are involved, both Duncan Ross, who actually authorized the two operations, and Leslie Hadson, a consultant for Versifund."

"I still don't see the link," Judith said.

"There may be none, but..." Malcolm paused, took a deep breath. "The transfers were made to two banks in Central America. Benweiser is there now. And—" Again, he hesitated. "And the Shredder is expected in town."

"The Shredder! My God, he's an—"

"He's the best paid assassin on the market. He likes to hit on the road. I want you to follow the most restricted procedures when you're on the move." Malcolm's voice was cold, emotionless.

"You mean the 'Road Procedures' listed in the document of the Invicta?" Judith asked.

"Exactly," Malcolm replied. "I'll send you an M22316. Are you familiar with that weapon?"

"Yes. Very familiar."

"Good. Any questions?"

"No. But Malcolm..."

"Yes?"

"Brian wants to go visit his mother, one week from Saturday."

"If things don't worsen, you can go. But be careful, Judith. Be extra careful."

Chapter 26

“You’re not wearing your new dress, Judith. Don’t you like it?” Brian asked with a little-boy pout.

“I sent it to the cleaners,” she said, a small grin on her face. “I certainly do like it.” She wore a pair of black pants and a long-sleeve yellow top.

“Well, I thought we’d take up where we left. The rugs are rolled up, the floor is polished... perfect for dancing, and I need more than just one dance with you.” Brian took her hand and led her toward the center of the sitting room.

“You know I shouldn’t mix business with pleasure, Brian.”

“Thank you for that. Pleasure, eh? But must I suffer because you follow the ‘rules’ so closely?” He turned on the stereo, then, holding his arms out before him as if he held a partner, he began to whirl around the floor. “If you won’t dance with me, then I’ll have to dance alone.”

Judith hesitated, then, with a laugh, joined him. She slid into his arms as if she belonged there.

“You’ve probably guessed I think of you as more than a bodyguard,” he said, his voice a tickle of a whisper in her ear. “I’d like you to be my girl, whether the rules of the Invicta allow it or not. I’ll use any means to achieve my goal.” He pulled her closer, then drew back and looked at her. “Any means, that is, except hurting you.”

Judith drew a deep breath and stepped away from him. “I think it would be a good idea to call it a night.”

“All right. Good night, sleep well.” He kissed her on the forehead.

The following day, after supper, the music turned on automatically; Brian rose and so did Judith, ready to leave.

“Judith, are you trying to avoid being alone with me? I just want to dance. Please, you don’t need to be worried. We’re just exercising. Good for the body, good for the soul. Even Malcolm would approve.” He laughed as he drew her closer, then spun her around in a twirl. “Listen to the music, enjoy it. Move with it, and move with me. Relax. Think of me as your teacher, not your client.”

The music spun her into the dreamy waves of the waltz, then the dizzy spin of the polka. Judith began to enjoy herself, appreciating the total absence of advances. For each of the next five nights, he simply kissed her forehead at the end of the evening.

“Malcolm, any news about our man from Central America?” Judith asked the following morning in a phone call to the Invicta.

“Yes. We’re certain he’s arrived. We expect something to happen at any time now. We’re preparing a strategy, just in case.” He paused. “I’ll let you know as soon as things are more definite, but in the meantime, I want you to keep your eyes open and be prepared for the worst.”

“I went to practice with the semiautomatic you sent. Just in case, and to be prepared,” she said.

“Good. And how is my brother doing?”

“He’s fine, though a bit bored. He claims he has cabin fever. He still wants to go visit his

mother this weekend.”

“That will be okay, as long as you’re prepared for anything. How is he, otherwise? Reasonable?”

“Oh, yes. He’s teaching me to dance.”

“How very nice of him,” Malcolm said with a touch of sarcasm. “Watch out for his...ehm, lessons.”

“Are you ready?” Brian asked Judith from across the table at dinner on Friday night. He grinned at her expression of confusion, then turned his full attention to his ice cream. He spooned it as if the whole of his being was devoted to the flavor.

“Ready? Ready for what?” Judith pushed her dessert aside.

“Why, your exam, of course,” he replied. He didn’t bother looking up and continued to eat slow spoonfuls of ice cream with a great deal of relish.

“Brian, what exam?” Judith stood.

Brian stood as well. He bowed low from the waist and waved her into the sitting room where the music had already begun. “Student Judith Abramson, you must show your expertise in all of the steps you’ve been taught. There will be a penalty for each mistake.”

“There will be no mistakes,” she said, her chin tilted up with pride. She grinned. “I don’t make mistakes.”

The slow waltz began with smooth dips and whirls, her skirt swirling around her legs. Then the polka blasted from the speakers and sent them spinning around the room, followed by the elegance of the Viennese waltz. Judith’s smile resembled that of the Cheshire cat. “I told you so,” she whispered into his ear.

Brian slid into the sensuous rhythm of the tango. He leaned against her, his body hard and heavy. Judith slipped and fell backwards onto the sofa. “Penalty,” he said, pulling her against him. He kissed her long and deep, his mouth hungry. The music swirled her deeper into the kiss. As the music ended, she gasped for air, dizzy and flushed.

“No more exams, Brian,” she said, her voice husky. She disengaged herself from his arms. “We should do some work.”

Brian signed. With one finger, he traced her lips and brushed against them gently. “Okay, let’s stop here. Come with me, then,” he said. “Let’s check out our route for tomorrow.” He rose from the sofa and left the room.

Judith took a moment to pull herself together and slow her breathing. She rose and brushed down her skirt, then followed Brian.

On the floor, the road map was spread out before him as he traced the route with one finger. “This is what you wanted to know, right? Mike knows it like the back of his hand.”

“Tell me about the property. How large is it? How close is the nearest police station? Are there any nearby neighbors?” Judith’s voice was still slightly husky.

She knelt beside him and examined the map, then began to fold it, leaving the highlighted area on top. Brian pushed the map from her and pulled her into his arms. “Judith,” he said, his voice low, a deep, sexy murmur. “I want to make love to you.”

“Brian...”

“No. I can’t take it any longer. I see you all of the time, and I have to behave. I know you like me, think you want me, too.” He kissed her, his mouth devouring hers. “Forget I’m your client, forget the rules, just for tonight.” His lips brushed her cheeks, her eyes, her hair. “I want to touch you, to lie beside you. You have no idea what you do to me, Judith.” He pressed his body against

her, pushing her onto the rug. His hands moved over her breasts, then slipped to the hem of her skirt. He slid it slowly upward, his fingers trailing along the tender skin behind her knees and along her inner thighs.

“We shouldn’t—I can’t let you do this— Please stop...” Judith’s breath came in short gasps as his fingers trailed along her skin. “Stop...” she said again, but didn’t try to move his hand from her body.

“I like to look at your legs,” he said, sitting up slightly and staring down at her body. He slid her skirt up to her waist, then ran his fingers around the waistband of her underwear. “Look at you, you’re so very fine. You keep your knees so close together when you sit, as if your knees guarded a precious treasure.” His hand brushed the crotch of her underwear. “Very precious...”

Judith gasped, then relaxed under his touch.

“I take all responsibility, I don’t care. Just let me love you, let me feel your body under mine... Ready for me...” Brian kissed her. “Ready for me...”

Chapter 27

“Funny. You’re acting slightly nervous, Judith. Is meeting my mother that intimidating?” Brian asked. “You could at least sit by me. I feel very alone back here.” Again, he gave his little-boy pout.

“If that’s supposed to make me feel motherly toward you, Brian, forget it. And I’m staying up front. On duty.” She cleared her throat. “As for nervous, of course not. I’m just excited about seeing the two newborn foals. A filly and a colt, did you say? Really looking forward to it.”

“But I like company, and it’s a long trip. My mother lives close to Wasaga Beach. I need company.”

“Sorry, Malcolm’s orders,” Judith said as she buckled up her seat belt and turned away from Brian. “I need to be in position to spot potential trouble from all angles. And I do not need distractions.” She grinned, her gaze on the road ahead.

“But you should guard my body, close up, like beside me. I’m lonely.” He whined a bit, then gave up and slumped on the seat. “You’ll pay. Just wait until we get back home...”

Judith laughed.

Jessica Norton, Brian’s mother, waited with open arms and open heart for their arrival. A widow at fifty, she had remarried Samuel Norton and helped him raise his own children, as well as devoting her time to breeding thoroughbred horses. Born with the proverbial silver spoon, Jessica had married within her social class and increased her wealth. She had never been bothered with financial worries. The sun and time had touched her face with life, giving her a deep tan and a few wrinkles, but she looked far younger than her sixty-five years. Judith appraised the tall, slim, blond woman and saw warmth as well as beauty. Jovial and easy to please, she seemed much like Brian.

“Mother, I kept my promise. Now you keep yours—no riding!”

Jessica laughed and hugged him. “How any son of mine could hate horseback riding as much as you do is beyond me, Brian.”

He scowled, then hugged her back.

“You’re lucky, in any case. Bad storm coming. You’re always lucky.” She turned to Judith and offered her hand. “And look at your bodyguard! Brian, how did you manage to get such a cute bodyguard?” She clasped Judith’s hands in hers and winked. “As I said, Brian’s always lucky.”

Jessica regarded Judith’s outfit, which consisted of a dark blue uniform with gold buttons trimming the jacket. “Would you like to take off your jacket? It really is too hot today for much of anything.” She fanned her face. Jessica wore a wrap skirt and short sleeved blouse embroidered with gold and red trim.

“Actually, I look better with my jacket on. I have a bulletproof vest underneath.”

“Brian. Is it really that serious?” Jessica’s expression showed her concern.

“Mother, Judith Abramson works under my dear brother, Malcolm, for the Invicta. And you know how Malcolm is, don’t you? He tried to convince you to wire the entire house.”

“Ah, yes, my sweet Malcolm. He would put us all in prisons, just to protect us. He is a

wonderful son, though. But please! You must come visit the stables and see our new little ones. I'm so pleased with them, really. Their dam is doing well, and the sire is one of my finest stallions. Come see!" Like a little girl with a wonderful new toy, Jessica dragged Brian by the hand toward the stables. Judith and Mike followed.

The stables sent out aromatic waves of hay and warm animal bodies. Soft nickers greeted them as they entered. "Oh! Oh, Brian, look! They're precious." Judith crooned over the tiny foals as they nursed, their mother's elegant head low to nuzzle them. She reached between the rails of the stall and stroked a small, sleek flank. "Oh, Jessica, how wonderful..." The foal, a roan filly, turned and mouthed her fingers. Judith laughed.

"Well, we better get back to the house and dinner. We're eating early so you can leave before dark." Jessica paused. "Judith, you must come back again and see the babies grow. Perhaps you could even help me train them." She glanced at Brian, then smiled softly.

Samuel, Brian's stepfather, had prepared Brian's favorite dishes: cold rice with various vegetables, along with pasta shells filled with ricotta cheese and a cream sauce. The group sat around the big well-worn table, laughing and talking as they passed bowls and filled their plates. It felt to Judith as if they were a big, happy family sitting down to Sunday dinner. She moved in waves of comfort, a slight smile on her mouth.

"And so, Brian...what about that last school you attended? Which one was that? I couldn't keep track." Jessica smiled fondly. "He changed schools, Judith. Often."

"Oh, yeah. I wasn't one of the best students, you know. Once, I remember, I was kicked out because we lifted a teacher's car onto the roof of the school's garage. They didn't find it for days, even though we told them it hadn't been removed from the premises. No one ever looked up... And another time..." He paused to glance at Judith. She hadn't touched her food or wine, nor had Mike.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing, Brian. Mike and I need to take a look around the property. Mr. Norton, if you wouldn't mind..."

Samuel left with Mike as soon as dinner was over.

"Brian, we really have to leave now. Jessica, I'm sorry our visit was so short. Perhaps another time..." Judith said with a smile for Jessica when they returned.

"Come again, Judith. Perhaps your friend Brian will bring you again, when all these problems are over." She glanced at Brian. "And I promise: there will be no riding requests, Brian, so you're perfectly safe."

"Well, I may as well be good and lay down on this seat and take a nap," Brian said in a grumble as soon as they were in the car. "I know I won't get any company."

"Good idea. First, give me your shirt and grab a hat from the back of the car. Give me one of those ten gallon beauties you took from Jessica and Samuel, with the wide brim."

"What for? My shirt? Sure you don't want my pants, too?" Brian laughed, but sounded slightly worried. He reached behind him into the back of the car and brought a well-worn Stetson from the pile of hats and equipment tossed there.

"A hanger, too, please." Judith said.

Brian handed her a hanger. Judith slipped his shirt on the hanger, then placed the hat on the hook. She pushed the hook through the brim, then again through the lining on the roof of the car. She hung the shirt and hat from the tear she made in the lining. "Sorry about that," She said. "I'm sure Malcolm will pay to repair it. Now you lay down and take a nice nap. The 'scarecrow' will do its job."

Judith turned to Mike. "Brown car still there?" she asked in a whisper. "I guess it was a Ford Mercury. What nerve, not more than 200 yards from the gate!" Her voice rose slightly, then quieted.

"We'll leave by the side exit," Mike said.

"It will still see us, but we'll have a chance to build up some speed. I'll radio ahead to the local police station, and have a car waiting to give us a hand, if we need it. Could be, no one's out there to cause any trouble, anyway. They might just be sightseeing," Judith said calmly.

"Could be..." Mike's voice oozed doubt.

They moved fast, and didn't see the car as they passed the spot where it had been earlier. They hadn't been on the road for more than five minutes when a brown car appeared in the rear view mirror.

"It's keeping back," Judith said. "Not too close. Could be something else entirely."

With a rumble, the sky loosed its burden of water as the threatened storm arrived. Sheets of rain obscured their vision in spite of windshield wipers, falling as hard as if they had taken the car into the tunnel of a carwash. They slowed, driving at a speed to suit the weather.

"I got the local police station. They've sent a cruiser. In fact, I think I see it..."

A police cruiser passed them from the opposite direction, then turned and followed close behind. The strange brown car disappeared.

"We can relax," Judith said, consulting the local map. "It'll never catch up with us now."

Their escort left them at the border of the next town.

The swish of the windshield wipers sent a metronome beat through the car. Judith glanced out the rear window, but couldn't see much through the wash of rain.

The thunderstorm increased its fury at the entrance to Brian's house, sending sheets of wind-blown rain and streaks of lightning crashing to the ground. Mike stopped the car. Judith opened the door and walked to the doorway. From the control panel, Mike hastily locked all the car doors. Judith stood in the pelting rain, water dripping from her face, waiting.

"What's she doing? Why don't we use the garage?" Brian asked. "And why are the doors locked? I can't get out!"

"Precautions, sir," Mike replied. "Malcolm's orders."

"What are you talking about? What is Judith doing, standing out there in the rain like that?"

"Procedure, sir. If there's an ambush, the first person to be a target is the bodyguard," Mike said, watching Judith. "That's why she went out first. She's watching for anything unusual, any strange movements or sounds. When she gives the signal, I'll rush you into the house. If anything is wrong, I'll take off right away, keeping you out of harm's way."

"Unlock the door," Brian hissed. His voice wore anger and determination. "Immediately. That's an order."

Brian jumped from the car, grabbed Judith by the arm, and dragged her into the house. Mike followed.

"Look at you," he said. Water poured from Judith's hair and down her nose to pool in the hollow of her throat. Even her shoes squelched with each step she took. "What were you trying to do? Drown, or catch pneumonia?" Brian's voice shook with emotion.

"Neither," Judith said. Her eyes flashed and she pushed his hands away. "I was doing my job. I'm supposed to protect you, remember?"

"I don't want you to risk your life for me. I don't even know what almost happened back there on the road, but I don't think I like it." Brian's face was red and a vein in his temple throbbed. "I'm going to ask Malcolm to relieve you of your duties. I can't have you in danger

because of me.”

“You can’t do that!” Judith shouted. “You have no complaint against me. I’ve done my job well.”

“I won’t have you, a young woman, taking risks for me.”

“You asked for me,” Judith said, her voice cold with anger, each word snapped with sharp fury.

“That’s changed. Now, go upstairs and change.”

“You have no business bossing me around. If you ask for my dismissal and Malcolm agrees, it will belittle me before my colleagues. I’ll resent you for the rest of my life.”

Brian touched her cheek, wiping the rain and tears away. “Please go and dry off, Judith. I prefer your resentment to your death.”

An hour later, Malcolm informed Judith her assignment had been changed. She was to drive back to the Invicta in the morning for a new line of action. He refused to be more specific and didn’t comment on her report of the day’s activity. Judith slumped on the bed, wrapped in a short white terry cloth robe.

Brian tapped on the open door, then entered. He sat beside her, his expression sad. He looked at her.

“Are you happy? I leave in the morning,” she said, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Judith, I’m sorry to have caused you so much pain. Don’t you know I love you?”

She propped herself on one elbow and stared at him. “You always get everything you want, just as Malcolm said. You wanted a live-in bodyguard. You got it. You wanted a woman. Here I am. Not only that, you wanted an Indian woman, and I’m that, too. Now you want to be rid of me.” She turned away from him. “You use people, make them do what you want by money or power or charm. There’s no escape from you.”

“Please, please, listen to me. I care for you.” He stroked her wet hair, then her back. “I never thought I was in real danger. I thought it was amateur stuff, easy to spot, something Mike could handle on his own. And Malcolm’s always been so overprotective of me, I thought most of his precautions weren’t necessary.” He paused, began to massage her shoulders. “This time, he made it clear he was going to ‘impose’ some sort of surveillance on me, and I decided to make it hard for him. When you came into his office...” Brian stopped speaking, his voice choked. “You looked like...my dream of all women combined into one perfect body. You looked happy just to be alive. I decided to try to make you love me, to become your boyfriend. In my environment—” Again, he stopped speaking.

“In your environment, women flock to you,” Judith said, finishing his sentence for him. “I know that. You’ve never needed to court anyone before. I was a challenge.”

“No...no, that’s not it, or at least, not all of it. But I never thought I was in great danger. I’d never have agreed for you to be my bodyguard if I knew you could get hurt. I never wanted to put your life in danger because of me. Please, Judith. Please understand. I really care for you.”

Judith covered her head with her pillow. “I won’t listen to you, Brian. No use to fight you. You win anyhow. But at least I’m not going to listen.”

“Judith, please, don’t hate me. You don’t know how much I admire you—it’s just that...”

“You’re a male chauvinist and you can’t change. I heard that before. Many times over.”

“Maybe so. But there’s more to that. I protect what’s dear to me. And you are. Very dear. Nobody has touched me so deeply as you have. Please, Judith—” Brian bent to kiss her hair. “Please—”

Chapter 28

Loneliness. It creeps into your head and washes all the colors out of life. Tanya sat in waves of self-pity, feeling abandoned by Kevin, who was across the Atlantic again, and by Edda and Charles, who continued to take day trips, and even by Marta, who left to visit her niece in the hospital. Restless, Tanya tried to force herself to work on Kevin's portrait. At five o'clock, with the light at its best, she couldn't bring herself to pick up a brush and begin to work. She stared at the portrait. It pleased her. Kevin's smile, complete with dimples, flashed from the canvas. His vivid, joyful grey eyes sparkled. He added so much to her life, a dimension she never thought existed. Without him, the dullness she felt now would be a forever thing, something she couldn't escape.

She looked down, searching. Even the cat had abandoned her. Tobia usually wound himself around her legs and climbed into her lap. He was even known to jump on the easel's control panel, just to get her attention. No Tobia.

Tanya leaned back in her chair and surveyed her surroundings. As usual, peace flowed around her. Portulacas, petunias, redbeckias and geraniums created splashes of color around the pool area. Umbrella pine trees gave plenty of shade, while a beech tree broke the monotony of the green foliage with a spot of dark red. On the left, technology prevailed over nature with a thirty-thousand-volt tower overlooking the property.

"I'd give a million dollars to get out of here," she said to Kevin's portrait. "To go to the beach, swim in the waves, walk on the sand. What heaven that would be." She stretched in the chair, raising her arms over her head. "Heaven. For just a couple of hours." She wrinkled her nose at Kevin's portrait, and laughed. "And who would know?"

Tanya bounced from the chair, set the color palette and the paint remover on the easel ledge and covered her paints with her smock. She grabbed her bathing suit. With a glance around to be certain no one was anywhere near, she hurried to the beach.

Swimming in the salt water had never felt so good.

She swam until shortly before seven o'clock, then, with reluctance, returned home. She felt free, if only for a short while, free as if she were a normal person after so many months of confinement. She giggled like a schoolgirl cutting classes as she climbed the steep pathway toward Kevin's villa.

A low cloud surrounded the trees, far too dense to be anything less than smoke. She hurried.

Dark smoke obscured the front of the house between the two columns. Tanya entered from the side door, her heart hammering in her throat, and headed for the foyer. A body lay sprawled, covered with blood, in the entrance.

"Edda! Dear God, what happened?" Tanya cried. She hurried to Edda's side, then reached for the telephone.

"No, I've called for an ambulance. You must get out of here. Away... This—this was meant for you. You are in grave danger." Edda's voice gasped the words, each sentence punctuated with gulps of air as she fought to breathe.

"But what happened?" Tanya asked as she slipped a pillow under Edda's head. Stunned, she looked around, as she expected somebody to show up or something else to happen. Her heart

pounded; her breath came in short spurts.

“They are going to kill you,” Edda whispered. “Get out. Now.” Her eyes closed with the effort to speak.

“Who? And where’s Charles?”

“Don’t know,” Edda said with a cough.

“Is he dead?”

Edda seemed to nod and mumbled something Tanya couldn’t understand. Smoke invaded the room making her eyes burning with tears.

“You have little time. Listen...” Edda’s voice faded.

Tanya bent closer.

“Take one of the cars and pass the French border. When you are in France, abandon it and rent another...something totally different. Drive to Cannes.” A fit of coughing racked her body.

“Cannes? Where is that?”

“Go west. Use a map. Just keep going on the road along the sea. Take my passport and my driver’s license...” Again she stopped speaking while she coughed, her body convulsed. Blood spilled from her mouth.

“Use them. We are the same height, just disguise yourself to look my age.” Her eyelids fluttered. “Go now, hurry. Be careful. You’re in great danger.”

Tanya nodded, bent and kissed Edda’s forehead, then rushed from the villa. She went to the old mansion and fetched her purse, her own documents, cash and credit cards, Edda’s documents, and some of Edda’s clothes. She stayed alert for anything unusual around her.

With the Fiat missing, along with the cellular phone, she took the second car. She drove slightly below the speed limit, her mind racing. What had happened? Who hurt Edda, who wanted to hurt her?

When she arrived in Cannes, she immediately booked herself into the closest hotel in order to call Malcolm.

After a frustrating attempt to use her French, Tanya discovered that the hotel’s desk clerk spoke a flawless English. In no time Malcolm was on the line.

“Malcolm? I’m in France. Cannes.” She briefly told him about Edda, but soon discovered that Malcolm already knew of the accident.

“Is Charles with you?”

“No. I think he might be dead.”

“Dead?” Malcolm asked. “Did you see him die?”

“No, but when I asked Edda if he was dead, I think she nodded. How is she? Is she going to be all right?”

“Edda is in critical condition. She was shot at close range. Now—” Malcolm paused. “Tell me what happened. Start at the beginning, and leave nothing out.”

Tanya sighed, certain Malcolm would be angry. “I was bored and lonely. I packed up my things, and went to the beach around five o’clock. I swam until close to seven, then came back.” She waited for Malcolm’s reaction.

“The beach! Alone... Never mind, it saved your life. Continue.”

Tanya told of finding Edda, and then again of leaving for Cannes. “And that’s where I am. Now it’s your turn. Tell me what’s happening. I want to know why Edda was hurt, and why you said the swim may have saved my life.”

Malcolm was silent for a moment. “Tanya, please excuse me. I’m somewhat confused. No one can find Charles, dead or alive. The Italian police received a fax from your house from

Charles, saying there were serious problems at the mansion and he was going to fetch you from the villa and leave town. The message seemed incomplete.” Malcolm paused. “You never saw Charles? He didn’t come to get you?”

“No, haven’t seen him since around noon.”

“Anything unusual around the villa or the mansion? No strangers in the area?”

“No, nothing. Wait.” Tanya paused, thoughtful. “A man came to the villa, earlier. He said he was from the air conditioner’s, and wanted to check on the repairs, but the repairman was in last week. The system worked just fine ever since. This was someone different, not the same man who came to do the repairs.”

“Had the company been called? Was there another problem?”

“No, not that I know of. Marta’s been gone for most of the day, and she never said anything about expecting a repairman.”

Malcolm drew a deep breath. “Okay, here’s what’s happened, according to the local authorities. Your easel was connected to an electrical source. Pressing any one of the keys on the panel would have electrocuted the person who operated it. The police found a transformer with a remote control. It was programmed to trigger the flow of high current from 5:00 pm on, the time you were known to prefer for painting.” Again, Malcolm paused and took a deep breath. “Today, for whatever reason, you decided to go swimming. That saved your life. Your guardian angel was pretty busy, it seems to me.” He laughed, a laugh that sounded more like a cough, then cleared his throat. “You were lucky to be on the beach. Incredibly lucky.”

“What do I do now?” Tanya asked in a small voice.

“You come back home. I’ll arrange to fly you to Paris and then back here. Give me the address of the hotel where you’re staying, and the phone number.”

“Can I call Kevin? He’ll be worried sick.”

“No. Call no one. It isn’t safe, not until we find out what really happened and who’s involved. Somebody is out to kill you. Leave it up to me to call Mr. Matwin.”

Again, Malcolm paused. “Now listen carefully, Tanya. You may not like it...but this is what I’d like to arrange. To say you were injured—then,” Malcolm hesitated. “Then announce your death.”

“My death! What do you mean?”

“It will give us the time we need to prepare a counter strategy. Of course, they’ll find out the truth, but in the meantime, they won’t be after you.”

“Malcolm, then you must tell Kevin at once. Abso-lu-tely.”

Malcolm hesitated. “I promise to talk to him today, Tanya.” His voice sounded cold, distrustful. “Yes, no matter what, I intend to speak to Mr. Matwin today.”

Chapter 29

Vermeil, Ontario

Inside the Invicta there was an atmosphere of alertness. “Two actions will take place simultaneously,” Malcolm said, his expression impenetrable. He glanced at Judith. Her face held no sign of emotion. “Two cars, a police cruiser and Brian’s limousine, will move from the Versifund Tower Building five minutes apart. Two plain clothes policemen will sit in the back of the police car, while the limousine will have agent Carl Finney, disguised as Mike Harrison, driving. Jim Cramer, disguised as Brian Miller, will be sitting in the back seat with you, Judith.” He paused, drew a deep breath. She nodded. “I’ll keep Brian in the building after Mike drives him there,” he said. “He wants to talk to me, and suggested I come over after his business meeting today. Judith, you’ll have to behave as you have in the past when you rode with Brian and Mike, make everything look completely normal.” Again, Judith nodded.

“The second operation involves Mr. Miller’s partner, Jack Benweiser. One of his employees has identified Benweiser as the mastermind behind the assassination attempts on Miller. For that, we need proof. Detective Warner and I—want to catch both parties in action, the killer and Benweiser.” He paused, rubbed his hands over his face as if to wipe off the stress of the coming actions. “The first action is probably going to take place on the streets. The arrest of Benweiser will follow immediately thereafter. His communications network is under surveillance.” Malcolm stood, walked around his desk, his hands clasped behind him.

“Questions?” he asked.

“No.”

“Nervous?”

“A little,” Judith replied. “But not much. For the last four days, you gave us similar instructions, and nothing happened. Who knows? Maybe nothing will happen today, either.” She grimaced.

“Judith, you know how Brian feels about you, don’t you? Anything on your side?” Malcolm looked at her with an avuncular smile, one eyebrow slightly lifted.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Judith said. Her cheeks flushed red and she avoided Malcolm’s eyes. “Nothing much, just being in such close proximity, I think. That’s all it was.”

“Maybe. Or maybe not. Brian seemed quite definite about his feelings for you. And for the first time in his life, he’s shown a great deal of commitment.” Malcolm shook his head. “Not like him, not at all. Not a selfish thought there.”

“I was a diversion for him, something different, that’s all.”

“Perhaps.” Malcolm looked doubtful. “By the way, he knows nothing of our plans. I’ll brief him as soon as I see him and they’re safely underway.”

“Malcolm—” Judith hesitated. “Were the plans for these operations made a good deal in advance?” Again, she avoided his eyes.

“Long enough so we’re all well prepared, if that’s your concern,” he said. “And much longer than a day or two ago—if that’s your real question.”

Judith still refused to meet his eyes. Her cheeks blazed red.

Malcolm stood taller than his six feet ten inches. “Agent Judith Abramson, you should know

me better than that.” Malcolm’s voice was sharp, but there was a slight hint of hurt in it. “Much better than that.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Clark,” she said, looking into his eyes at last. “But I had to be sure. And thank you.”

They arrived at the Versifund Tower Building just as the meeting came to a close. Malcolm immediately walked into the conference room while a police officer took Mike Harrison aside and explained the planned strategy.

From across the room, Brian saw Judith standing in the corridor. He jumped from his chair and tried to go to her, but Malcolm held him back. “No, Brian. Judith is on assignment right now. You have to wait.” Brian glowered at his brother and tried to yank his arm free. “Brian, I said no. I’ll give her some time off later, but this is urgent. Sit down. We have to talk. Please.”

Judith sat next to Jim, impersonating Brian in the back seat, laughing and joking, her M22316 at her feet. Carl, impersonating Mike pulled away from the building, followed a block away by a cruiser with two officers headed for Highway No. 165, the same road the limousine would take.

“Malcolm is pretty sure today’s the day,” Jim said to Judith with a big ‘Brian’ smile. “I’m not too fond of what I’ve heard can happen, but it looks like Malcolm covered all the bases.”

“Tell me all you know,” Judith said. “All I’ve heard is what Malcolm told me this morning.”

“The idea is they’ll think Mr. Miller’s in this car. If not, then they’ll think he’s in the cruiser with his driver, and we’re exactly what we are...a setup. There’s a helicopter no more than ten minutes away from us at all times, though a hell of a lot can happen in ten minutes.” Jim continued to smile and wave his hands as if he were telling Judith a huge joke.

“What’s this hired killer’s specialty?” Carl asked from the driver’s seat.

“Of the Shredder?” Judith said. “He flies in from Central America, does the job, then returns right away. So far, he hasn’t made any mistakes and he’s covered his tracks well. He seems to have access to the newest and deadliest assault weapons. He has the ability to fire and hit with precision. In other words, our boy don’t miss—at least he didn’t so far.” Judith smiled brightly at Carl, pretending he was Mike and they were having a cheerful chat. “What he leaves behind is a mixture of human limbs and metal pieces, with no way of telling what went where. His favorite pastime is to fire at cars in motion.”

Carl chuckled as if he just got the joke. “What a beautiful prospect for the afternoon!” he said.

A smile still pasted on her face, Judith leaned back and considered the prospect for the afternoon. Kill or be killed. That would be her question, today. She, Judith, would have to choose to kill in order to survive and to protect the people who counted on her, and she hated it. Jim chattered on beside her and she nodded in response, but she didn’t hear a word of it. The thought that she would have to kill sent waves of ice down her spine. Death was so final.

“Bogey coming up on the right,” Carl said, his voice tight. “Hang on.”

Judith glanced up and dropped back down, flat upon the floor, as a brown sedan with heavily-tinted window glass came up beside them. Carl slammed the gas pedal to the floor and the limo leaped like a horse out of the starting gate. They left the sedan behind, but not before gunfire raked the left side of the limo.

“I’m hit,” Jim said. He slumped down on the seat beside Judith. The limo’s speed increased, seeming to fly. Carl wavered in his seat, his head slightly slumped forward.

“Carl? Are you okay?” Judith asked.

“No. Hit, but still functional.” His driving wavered along with his body.

The brown car increased speed and a rattle of gunfire showered the limo with bullets. Two of the tires blew with a noise like the end of the world. The limo went into a skid and an injured Carl rode the wheel like a bronco buster at a rodeo. He swung the car onto an overpass, then back around and under.

The brown sedan, with no time to slow down enough, drove several yards further down the highway. It came to a stop, then reversed and followed.

Under the overpass, Carl slumped at the wheel, his wounds winning out over his consciousness. Judith slid out of the limo, bent low, and crawled over to the shelter of the overpass. The brown sedan screamed under the overpass, stopping just a few feet from the limo. Gunfire riddled the limousine, then silence.

Judith held her breath, waiting. She could see a pool of gasoline beneath the limo from a ruptured gas tank; she could see the two unconscious men inside.

“Check it out,” a voice snarled from the brown sedan. The door opened and two men climbed out, their guns held ready. One held back by the sedan, the other, crouched low, crept toward the limousine.

“Looks like they bought the farm,” he said, peering into a shattered rear window. “But I don’t see the bodyguard...”

From over his head, the M22316 rained death on him and his partner. Judith jumped from the I-beam support in the roof of the overpass and dropped beside the limousine, keeping the car between herself and the killers. The two men lay in pools of blood on the ground.

“No one looked up...” Unconsciously Judith echoed Brian’s words. She opened the driver’s door and pulled Carl out and away from the car. The smell of gasoline drifted inside the vehicle, and threatened fire. As she returned for Jim, she saw motion in the brown sedan; the driver. She dropped to the ground beside the limousine, the M22316 no more than three feet from her, lying where she’d left it when she pulled Carl from the car. Slowly, she began to inch her way toward the gun.

“Judith? What’s happening?” Malcolm’s voice came over the radio, clear and welcome to her ears. “We should be there in about two minutes.” She heard the scrape of gravel under boot heels, then heard them turn. The Shredder. He always covered his tracks, was never caught.

Judith reached up and grabbed her gun, then slid under the car, into a pool of gasoline. A spark could set it off, blowing up both her and Jim, lying on the back seat of the car, but the Shredder was on his way back to the brown sedan and freedom. She couldn’t allow that, she couldn’t allow a vicious killer to make more victims. She hesitated no more.

She fired a shattering round and rolled, nearly at the same time. The pool of gasoline caught with a whoosh and engulfed the limousine. Jim never had a chance, but neither did the Shredder, who lay dead a few feet away.

Brian Miller returned home around 5:00 pm, after his partner Jack Benweiser had been arrested and charged. His anger still fumed concerning Judith’s part in the plans when he turned on the television for the local evening news.

A smiling news anchorman beamed his copy into the world with all the joy of a man who had wondrous things to share. “A complex police operation, carried out in collaboration with the well-known agency Invicta, led to the arrest of Mr. Jack Benweiser, and the deaths of the Shredder, a well-known assassin, and two of his accomplices. In the course of the shootout agent Carl Finney was seriously wounded and agent Jim Cramer killed. Agent Judith Abramson, a

member of the Invicta, is particularly credited for the success of the operation.”

The camera pulled in for a close shot of a pale, filthy Judith, wrapped in a grey blanket. Malcolm Clark had his arms wrapped around her, holding the press back.

“Agent Judith Abramson has no comments at this moment,” Malcolm said. “You may interview her at length tomorrow.”

“Brian, she’s alive,” Mike said. He had been watching behind Brian while he also watched Brian’s face. Mike clamped his hand onto Brian’s shoulder. “That’s what’s important, only that.”

“She wouldn’t have been there if it weren’t for me,” Brian said, his expression blank. “I caused it, all of it.”

“No. No, you did not! She chose to be there. It was her job, Brian, her job. She was doing that kind of thing long before she met you.”

Later, the news went into depth on the killings, dwelling like a lover on each item. Brian felt as if he might vomit. “She killed. Because of me, she killed. And she caused a fellow agent to die when she fired her gun under the car. She’ll blame herself. Even if she had no choice. I know her. She will bleed for the victims. Forever.”

Chapter 30

In the semidarkness of Malcolm's office, at the Invicta, Paul took a seat. "I came prepared. Here's dinner, plus a midnight snack," Paul said. "I know something's up." He began to count the points he made on each finger. "One: You didn't go fishing as you said you would. Two: You called me in on my baseball night. And three: You left a message saying it was urgent. Malcolm, you never say things are urgent. This has to be a beauty." Paul smiled and set three boxes down on Malcolm's desk, rested his chin on his hand and looked up at Malcolm quizzically.

"What's with all the food, for just the two of us? And wine, no less," Malcolm said, avoiding answering Paul's questions for the moment.

"Two of us? Where's Joe? He should like pizza, too. And it's just two pizzas. The third box is the snack—a just baked strawberry pie I picked up at the Farmers Market."

"Joe's kid got hurt. He had to take him to the emergency room at the hospital, though I don't think it's too bad."

Paul popped the cork on the fiasco of Chianti and took a swig from it, then opened a pizza box and pulled a slice free. He waved the bottle at Malcolm.

"You drink from the bottle?" Malcolm asked.

"Hey, you got pizza delivery from the pizza boy. You don't have a butler. Get your own glass." He took another sip. "Besides, I like to discourage people from drinking my wine. I hate to share." He grinned.

Malcolm closed the file in front of him and took a slice of pizza, then gestured for Paul to pass the wine. As he did so, Paul lifted the cover of the file. "Tanya. Something happen to her? Is she hurt?"

"No, she's fine. She was incredibly lucky, but Edda wasn't."

"What happened?"

"An electronic device was set to go off on Tanya's easel at a certain time. Someone knew that, around five o'clock, she would start her afternoon painting session. Outside, in front of the main entrance." Malcolm paused and sipped from the fiasco, then passed it back to Paul. "She gathered her paints, sketches and thinner on the easel and left. Went to the beach. Swimming, for God's sake. Left by herself." Malcolm scowled as if Tanya were there and he could scold her for being a naughty child. "If she had pressed any button of the easel, a spark of thirty-thousand volts would have blasted out, killing her instantly. Something—we don't know what yet—something triggered that blast: it ignited the thinner and paints. Edda—she can't talk yet—probably saw smoke and rushed there..." He took a deep breath. "Then, another mystery. Edda was shot. By somebody in the house. At close range."

"How is Edda?"

"Not good. She's in critical condition, unconscious. We can't get her story, at least, not for now."

"And where's Tanya?"

"Right now, she's in Cannes. The police let it leak out about the accident, but made it seem Tanya was injured, not Edda. In fact, they made it seem that Tanya was killed." He wiped his

mouth as if to wipe away a bad taste. “Tanya made me promise to call and tell Kevin it was a lie, so he wouldn’t worry.” He frowned, shook his head. “Well, at least with the media claiming Tanya’s dead, we have a little time to think things out. We can’t stay still, but we can plan. We have more suspects than before, with clues spread all over.” He stood and began to pace, a slice of pizza in his hand. As he talked, he took small bites.

“I thought Charles had taken Tanya to safety. The police received a fax from him, claiming something was wrong and he was taking her away. Then Tanya called me and told me she was alone and hadn’t seen Charles. No one has seen Charles, dead or alive. And the Fiat 1445 is missing.”

“Did you ever get Charles on the phone?” Paul asked. “You were going to do that before you went on your vacation.”

“Yes. He told me all was well, that Tanya spent most of her time at Kevin’s villa. He expressed concern over her relationship with Matwin and the people she came in contact with through him.” Malcolm rubbed his temples as if to press back the beginnings of a headache. “One was Jeff Moore, Matwin’s Shoppe manager, another was one of those aristocrats from Europe, a count or something. Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro, a new business associate of Matwin’s. Charles was concerned this could cause leaks in Tanya’s security.”

“Did you find out why I couldn’t contact him? Why he was never home?”

“He said he’d taken some short trips in the country with Edda to visit an uncle. He said he had Tanya’s approval, and that she was always at Matwin’s, in any case.”

“Yes, that’s true. But she doesn’t pay Matwin to be her bodyguard,” Paul said sharply. “Let me get Charles’ file, check on him a bit.”

“Later, Paul. First we need to find out a little more about Kevin Matwin. I think he’s a suspect. I have no desire to contact him and tell him Tanya’s alive, but I can’t make decisions for my client.” Malcolm sat down behind his desk, grabbed the fiasco and took several gulps. “It would be stupid of Matwin to plant the supposed accident in his own house when he could have done it personally dozens of times, but I can’t be sure. Tanya’s in love with him, which makes it easy, except...” He paused, tapped a pencil rapidly between two fingers. “Except if he couldn’t bring himself to do it in person, or if he were used to set her up by a third party. We could learn a lot by letting him believe she’s dead.”

“You can’t do that, Malcolm. If he’s innocent, that’s just cruel.”

“I didn’t get where I’m at by being kind or softhearted, Paul. Sometimes softhearted is more like softheaded, in my opinion.” He glowered.

Paul shrugged and picked up another slice of pizza.

“But I can’t do it that way. I promised Tanya, and if I don’t contact him and tell him she’s fine, she’ll find a way to do it herself. Besides, she’s my client and I promised her I’d call him. Let’s see what happens.”

Malcolm picked up the phone and called Kevin’s home. No answer. He called the Shoppe next; Kevin answered.

“Yes? You say you’re Malcolm Clark, and you’re a friend of Tanya Howard’s? Do you know where she is, and if everything’s all right?”

“Yes, Mr. Matwin, that’s correct. I’m a friend of Tanya’s.”

“I’ve tried to contact her, but there’s no answer. I was about to call the police, just to be sure.” He paused. “Do you know the reason, Mr. Clark? Who are you, anyway? And who are you to Tanya?”

“Mr. Matwin, I must tell you there’s been an accident. There was a fire at your villa.

Injuries...”

Malcolm heard the phone clank to the floor and a sound like a thud. There was silence for a moment, then a rattle. “Tanya!” Kevin’s voice was strained, hoarse. “Tanya, my dear God, Tanya! Is she all right?” The man’s voice choked silent.

“Mr. Matwin, I’m so sorry to have upset you in this way. Tanya is fine. Edda was injured, but Tanya escaped. She wanted you to know she’s fine and for you not to worry.”

There was silence for a moment. “Why didn’t you tell me right away? Who the hell are you, Clark? I want to know, and I want to know now! I have your phone number here on my Caller ID. I can trace you.”

“Mr. Matwin, again, let me apologize. I’m the director of the agency Tanya hired to supply her with personal protection. We also carry out special investigations. Edda Milton and Charles Aldrin—you met them at *La Mimosa*—were Tanya’s bodyguards.”

“But...why did Tanya need protection? From what? From whom?”

“We had reason to believe her life was in danger. There had been at least three attempts made to kill her.”

“Where is she?”

“We’re taking care of her safety, Mr. Matwin.”

“I want to see her. When can I see her?”

“Again, I must apologize, Mr. Matwin. We’ll let you know when and where you can see her, but I can’t tell you anything more at this time.”

“You’ll let me know! Do you really think I’ll just sit back and wait, let you do what you think you need to do, and do nothing myself while my woman is in danger? I’ll start some action myself, and find her. I won’t give up until she’s safe again, with me.”

“We’ll keep you informed, Mr. Matwin. Good night.” Malcolm hung up the telephone.

“Gut feeling?” Paul asked as he finished the last slice of pizza.

“Not much, really. It’s hard, over the phone, but I did get a feeling of intense concern from him. He sounded very protective, so that’s in his favor. However, if he’s involved, he had plenty of time to work on his little ‘concerned’ act.” Malcolm glanced at the phone as if he could see Kevin. “Charles talked about two other people who met Tanya, the Shoppe manager and the business associate. Paul, we need to find out all we can on both of them, and fast. Split the work with Joe.”

Paul nodded, made a few notes, and popped open the third box. “Time for our snack since it’s nearly midnight,” he said with a grin. “And let’s polish off that wine. Can’t let it sit and go stale, now, can we?” Malcolm laughed.

The pie never made it to his mouth before the phone rang, startling both of them. Malcolm lifted the receiver and listened, then quietly hung up the phone.

“They’ve found Tanya’s Fiat 1445. It had been driven off a cliff into deep brush, near Cannes. It looked more intentional, than accidental.” He paused. “The gun used to shoot Edda was of the same make as that registered in Charles Aldrin’s name.” Malcolm stood, walked around the desk, and started out the door. There was work to be done. “The French and Italian police are looking for Charles Aldrin as a suspect in the attempted murder of Edda Milton. All airports, harbors, and railway stations have been alerted.”

Chapter 31

Charles Aldrin sipped his Pernod in a cafe on the Croisette. He waited, his face hidden by the brim of his straw hat and dark glasses, for his contact.

“Charles Aldrin?” A young man wearing sports goggles stood beside him.

“Yes.”

“Come with me,” the young man said. He turned and left the cafe, walked to the parking lot, and entered a Lamborghini. Charles joined him.

“Did you get rid of the car?” The young man asked. His tone dripped arrogance, his attitude superiority.

“Yes. Everything’s in order.”

“No loose ends?” The man glanced at Charles, then back to the road. He drove with a casual disregard for other traffic.

“Absolutely none.” Charles swallowed his lie. “Where were you yesterday? I waited. It isn’t too smart for me to hang around here, you know.” Charles glowered. His fingers brushed at his new moustache; it itched.

“There was no news of Tanya’s death in the newspapers yesterday.”

“Things move slow on this side of the Atlantic; you know that. The work is done. Pay me my other half.” Charles drew a deep breath and turned in his seat to face the driver. “I said pay me, and pay me now. I took a lot of chances with this one, did a lot to cover my tracks, but the police might not believe me. I suspect they’ll come after me as the killer soon enough.” He leaned closer to the driver. “The money. Now.”

The man reached beneath his seat and drew out a briefcase, then handed it to Charles. “Here’s your money,” he said, his voice dripping contempt. He dropped it onto Charles’ lap as if it were dirty.

Charles quickly opened the case and examined the contents. “Now take me to the airport,” he said, snapping the case shut.

“I assume the assignment was carried out as agreed, in all aspects? I don’t tolerate sloppy work.” The man said, his gaze on the road ahead.

“You mean, like a stick of Telgex, stuck close to a car?”

The man turned to Charles, his eyes blazing fury. “That... That is none of your business. Close your fucking mouth.”

* * *

At the Charles De Gaulle Airport, Tanya ate as if it were her first meal in weeks. She glanced up occasionally and watched the waiters coming and going, taking orders, bringing dishes and collecting money, then dipped her head for another mouthful of food. The airport was a busy place. The noise level in the restaurant was high, people talking, plates and flatware clanking, laughter, mild grumbles from the long line waiting to be seated. Tanya sighed and began to eat her second mousse au chocolate.

“Tanya.” A voice behind her was accompanied by a heavy hand clamped on her shoulder.

Tanya jumped and dropped her spoon, spilling mousse in her lap. She recognized the grip on her arm.

“I finally found you. I suspected you would disguise yourself as Edda, just as we planned a long time ago. It was so smart of you to remember,” Charles said as he sat beside her. Tanya smiled slightly. Edda had reminded her; she wouldn’t have remembered on her own. “But you’re not home safe yet,” he continued. “You’re still in danger. See those two men sitting over there? They’re after you. We have to get out of here, and quick.” He tugged at her arm as he placed a bill on the table. “Come on, move!”

Tanya didn’t move. She looked at Charles, frowned, and said, “Malcolm told me to catch this flight.” She waved her boarding pass. She grasped her bag with her knees, holding it close.

“Yes, I know. I spoke to him just minutes ago. The plans are changed. There’s danger.” He again tried to pull her up. “Don’t you remember? I’m your bodyguard.”

“But Malcolm couldn’t find you.”

“Of course not. I was searching for the bastard who shot Edda. Now come on, before those two come after you.”

The two strangers had risen from their seats and were heading toward them, one on each side of the people waiting in line.

Tanya looked at Charles and then at the approaching men. “Move. Fast. Now.” Charles pulled her up, grabbed her bag, and shoved her toward the exit. “Excuse us, we’re late for a flight,” Charles said to the people he pushed aside. The two strange men continued to follow them.

Charles dragged her to a taxi and shoved her inside. “Gare de Lyon,” he said to the driver. “Triple fare if you lose the blue car behind us.”

Tanya glanced back. The two men were, indeed, behind them in a blue car which had been stationed in front of the main entrance. She turned back to Charles, appraising him. He now wore a well-trimmed moustache, and his blond hair had turned a deep shade of brown. She glanced back at the blue car, and saw the taxi was succeeding. The driver would earn his triple fare. Casually, she lifted her bag and placed it on her lap, then glanced out the window as if she were interested in the scenery.

The taxi stopped at the entrance to the railway station and Charles leaned forward to pay the driver. Tanya jumped from the door.

Charles followed her. With all the force she could muster, Tanya swung her bag and threw it at him as he exited the cab, hitting him in the face. Blood gushed from his nose and he stumbled. She raced around to the other side and re-entered from the opposite door. “Go!” she said to the driver. “Move, and fast! Take me to a police station!”

Tanya flew up the stairs to the police station two steps at a time, her breath hitching in her throat. Trying to stay calm, she asked to speak to an English-speaking officer. She sat and waited, her heartbeat gradually slowing.

Half an hour passed when an officer approached her, smiling. “Ma’am, everything’s going to be fine,” he said. His smile widened into a grin. “Your husband explained everything. He told us about your little disagreement.” The officer chuckled. “You really shouldn’t take your family arguments to the station, unless there’s a good reason, Ma’am.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not married.”

“Ah, yes, your husband said you would tell us that. Could you show me your passport, please, Mrs. Milton?”

“But that’s not my name...” Tanya stopped speaking as Charles walked into the room,

carrying her bag. He smiled as he handed the officer the passport listing Tanya as Edda Milton.

“And I have these, as well,” Charles said, handing the officer a pair of airline tickets made out in the names of Charles and Edda Milton. “Now, Edda, dear...you didn’t take your medication this morning, and you know what the doctor said will happen to you if you don’t do that. Come with me, dear, and we’ll make everything all better.” He grinned a feline grin and reached out to stroke her head.

“I demand to be put in contact with Malcolm Clark, the director of the Invicta,” Tanya said, her voice shaking.

“Malcolm Clark...your husband told us you would say that, too, Ma’am. Sorry, but why don’t you just go along with him, and he’ll take care of you?”

He turned to Charles and shrugged, then winked. “How’s this?” he asked. “Your husband will take you to the Canadian Embassy, in one of our police cars, escorted by one of our officers. Would that do?”

She looked from one man to the other, confused. “Yes, I suppose so,” she said. “I won’t be alone with him?”

“No, Ma’am, you’ll be perfectly safe.”

Tanya nodded.

She sat in the back seat of the police van, Charles beside her. Her heart pounded, sending waves of heat throughout her body. She removed her jacket, folding it on her lap. Her head spun with thoughts and fears, vast uncertainties. Was Charles the killer who had been after her for all this time? Why had he been her friend? How could he have hurt Edda?

She felt a sharp jab in her arm and turned to face Charles, shocked. A syringe, with the plunger pushed all the way in, jutted from her arm, held by Charles.

He smiled at her as the world went away.

Chapter 32

A fist held Judith's heart and squeezed with each word of praise she heard during the awards ceremony. She felt no pride in her part, no joy at the deaths of the Shredder and his men. Jim's life had been a part of it; Jim's widow, Donna, sat beside her. Carl sat beside Donna, his arm bandaged and strapped to his chest. A quiet tear rolled down her cheek.

Brian Miller sat, elegant in a grey suit with a red carnation in his lapel, and watched her. He could see her pain; his guilt washed over him in waves.

Following the ceremony, a long line formed of well-wishers, eager to shake the hands of the heroes. Brian waited his turn, slowly moving toward Judith.

"Congratulations, Agent Abramson," he said, his voice tight with emotion. "I hope you'll see me soon. I care."

Judith stared at him with big eyes, eyes which seemed to see further than his face. "Thank you, Brian," she said. "Thank you." Her eyes slid off his face and toward the next person in line.

Brian sighed. "Malcolm, she refuses to speak to me. She acts as if I don't exist."

"Give her time, Brian. She's been through a lot. Give her time to heal."

"But I want to help her heal, want to hold her, give her the support she needs. I know how she feels," Brian said, a moan at the edges of his words, "I know how she feels about killing. And I'm sure she feels guilt over the death of the agent who played my part." He took a deep breath. "Malcolm, I almost wish that agent really was me, that I was in the car with her that day. Then I wouldn't have to face her this way."

"Brian, don't be ridiculous. I don't want to hear you talk that way ever again. Jim was aware of the risks he took, and he took them all the same. He was a great agent. It's part of the job. Judith takes the same risks every day." He frowned at his brother. "What are your intentions toward her, anyway? Is she just another conquest for you?"

"God, no, Malcolm. I want to take care of her. I want to marry her."

"Well, I hope you remembered to divorce your previous wife," Malcolm said with a touch of irony. "Last time, you forgot."

"No, I didn't, and you know it. It was just a mess-up with paperwork. Everything was straightened out."

Malcolm laughed. "Well...Maybe you have changed. Perhaps you do really care for Judith. This would be the first time you show some commitment. It surely would be a change. In the past..." He looked at his brother with a veil of reproach. "In the past you didn't show much commitment in either your family life or in school." He shook his head. "School. You were impossible in school."

"C'mon, Malcolm, lay off, will you?" Brian said. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and slumped. "I got all the training I ever needed for my life's work by the time I was eight years old."

Malcolm raised one eyebrow. "And that was?"

"Writing my name on a check."

Malcolm laughed loud enough to cause several people to stare at them. He grinned back.

"So you want to take care of Agent Judith Abramson, eh?" he asked. "Do you realize she's

one of my best people? She's always very concerned, but if there's any danger, she shuts herself off from outside influence and concentrates on what needs to be done. Psychological tests show she isn't afraid of death. That's what makes her shine. That's also why I chose her for the Benweiser operation."

Brian drew a deep breath. "I never realized how difficult your job must be, how you must send people out to risk their lives, and sometimes lose them, in order to save someone else. It has to be hard." He paused. "And you're damn good at it."

"Coming from you, Brian, that compliment really means a lot." After moments of silence, Malcolm asked: "Your business: did you figure out the entire story?"

"Yes. But it's a sad story. I never suspected anything was going on with Jack Benweiser. He started embezzling after the last audit, six months ago. He acted fast, very fast. He had been deeply in debt, and had to keep on going back to the well to steal more, in order to cover his tracks. That created a chain reaction." Brian shook his head as if denying what he knew to be true. "We had each bought mutual life insurance policies, with the other as beneficiary. He needed to cash mine in, in order to survive."

He paused, watching Judith, a deep frown on his face.

"The chief accountant started to question certain after-hours transactions, transactions done without due procedure. He became more and more suspicious as their numbers increased. We both spent hours checking and rechecking, watching several operations carried out through different accounts rather than directly, with no real reason." He glanced at Malcolm. "Do you remember when you told me to report anything unusual occurring in the business?"

"Yes. It was only a hunch. I didn't have anything else to go on, at the time." Malcolm shrugged. "Lucky hunch, too. At the beginning, I related your accident to those of another of my clients. Same explosive, same way of bundling the bars—the touch of the amateur, not the professional. Then I started to look in other directions; your business became the best candidate."

"Yes, your hunch played out nicely, especially after Duncan Ross came forward."

"Ah, yes," Malcolm said with a smile. "Duncan. If it weren't for him, we would still be wandering around in a fog. Things had gone well beyond what he would tolerate, beyond what Jack had told him at the beginning. He walked into Warner's office to make a deal. His information, as accurate as it was, was vital to our plans."

"Lucky. Yes, I was lucky," Brian said. He watched Judith, the frown deepening. "I was lucky..."

"And he's implicated this new legal adviser your partner hired six months ago. Leslie Hadson. The police have interesting documents in regard to him."

Brian turned back to Malcolm. "I never liked Hadson. He was never willing to talk to me directly. Slick, too slick."

"With this new information, the police might be authorized to interrogate him," Malcolm said. "In the meantime, you go through any documents you might have on him."

Brian nodded, watching Judith. "Why didn't you tell me about the operations, especially after you knew how I felt about Judith?"

Malcolm glanced over at the receiving line and watched Judith for a moment. "The two operations were already planned when you called me about changing Judith's assignment." He looked into Brian's eyes. "I realized how you felt about her and decided not to worry you. How could I tell you I planned to send her out on the front line, to be directly in the line of fire?"

"I'd have fought you, tooth and nail." Brian scowled. "But I'm grateful for all you've done. You saved my life. And I forgive you."

“Forgive me?”

“For risking Judith’s life.” He gripped Malcolm’s shoulders, his hands clamped tight. “For this time only. Never again!” He shook Malcolm slightly, then let his hands drop. “Now you have to help me with my romantic life. Convince Judith to talk to me again.”

Malcolm laughed and rubbed his arms. “A little setback might teach you some humility—and that’s pretty good medicine for you. But you don’t need my help. So far, you’ve done just fine on your own.”

Chapter 33

The dream held Tanya, pulled her down into its depths. Edda's face appeared, covered with blood, then Charles with flashing eyes and an evil grin. Fire. Smoke. She pushed back and fought her way to consciousness.

The ground swayed and dipped, the seat holding her moving with it. A droning roar filled her ears. Where was she? She couldn't see, couldn't distinguish anything around her. For a moment she considered fighting, then let inertia drag her back and dozed again. Nearly an hour later, the twilight of her sleep let her drift once more to the surface. She peered through her lashes. Things were still hazy, but she could see the seats in front of her and Charles beside her. She was on an airplane.

She held still, afraid to let Charles know she was conscious, and took stock of the situation. Finally, struggled to sit upright. "Please..." she said, her eyes half closed. "Please, I need to go to the washroom."

Charles grasped her arm and pulled her from the seat, then shoved her down the aisle. His balance was not much better than her own. In the restroom, she splashed water on her face. Gradually, she felt more normal...and more frightened.

Charles rapped on the door. "Hurry up in there." His voice sounded more like a snarl. Tanya hurried. Charles pulled her back to their seats and shoved her against the window as if she were a rag doll.

"I gave you a shot of the good stuff before," he said. "The drug I have in my pocket is a new, strong spray that would put you to sleep for a long, long time." He giggled. "There's no smell. Everybody would think you were asleep...but you might never wake up completely. Not ever."

"Charles?"

"What do you want?"

"Why are you doing this? We've been good friends..."

"Friends? You little tramp, at twenty-three you have everything, all you'll ever need or want. And...and you have to fuck the first man you meet." His mouth twisted with contempt. "For me, you have nothing. Did it ever occur to you, when you wagged your plump little tail at me, that I might want you? That I'm a man, too?" He coughed, turned his face from her. "Friends. I hate you..." His face blazed red and furious, his eyes, enormous, blinked nervously. He seemed more than slightly unstable.

"Charles, I can offer you a lot of money in exchange for my life." Her only chance was to reach him on some level, a place where she could improve her chances of survival.

"I have money. I just need to get rid of you." Charles smirked. "Much simpler that way. Final, too. It will give me great pleasure to know you won't be going off to fuck Mr. Matwin in any position or place, ever again. Disgusting bitch. You make me sick." He turned away from her, racked with a cough. "And I'll be in sunny Rio de Janeiro for the rest of my life," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Charles, what happened to Edda?" Tanya asked, keeping her voice soft and low.

"Can't you figure it out? I shot her." He roared with laughter, as if at the funniest joke. "I had to shoot her, even though she didn't know much. I told her to keep quiet and we'd both come

into a lot of money.”

“And the villa? What happened there?”

“Edda, the damn little fool...she saw the fire and rushed to rescue you. She was a great idiot. I shot her just before she called for help. She didn’t even realize who shot her. She kept calling my name, begging me to help her.” He paused, then began to whimper in a high, pain-filled voice, “Charles...Charles, where are you? Charles, please help me...” He coughed again. “Damn fool. She was the one who got the plane tickets for Charles and Edda Milton.” He giggled again. “Those tickets sure came in handy at the police station.”

Ice filled Tanya’s chest and threatened to choke her. “Who’s paying you to kill me?” she asked through the cold fear.

“I don’t know and don’t give a damn. I’m a professional. Professionals are told what to do, not why it needs to be done or who’s paying.” He coughed once more, and gasped for air. “In your case, it just needs to be done. Now stop talking! Shut up, or I’ll make you shut up for good.” All of a sudden he reached toward his pocket, the upper jacket pocket nearest her.

Charles signaled the stewardess. “Water. I need a glass of water,” he said. He extracted a container from his pocket and withdrew two pills. The bottle, labeled ‘Dilantin,’ was shoved back into his pocket. He didn’t look well. The red in his face had gone pale, his skin almost ghostly white. Dilantin. Tanya recognized it. One of her foster parents had to take Dilantin for a seizure disorder. She distinctively remembered the tragic affect that medication had when the man soon after had taken a stiff drink.

She had never seen Charles make use of it before. She went back to think at her predicament. He can’t eliminate me while we’re in flight, she thought. He’s too much of a pro to leave any loose ends. She glanced at him. His eyes blinked, closed, then opened quickly, then slid closed once more. He seemed to fall asleep.

A sudden idea took form in her mind.

Now, which pocket...Tanya’s hand eased into Charles’ pocket with gentle care. Her reward was the feel of a tiny container at the very bottom.

When the flight attendant came around with drinks, Tanya murmured ‘whisky’ and signaled her to deposit the glass on the table before Charles. Keeping her eyes on the man she dropped half a dozen pills into the glass, hoping they would dissolve quickly without substantially altering the flavor of the drink.

She lay back, feigning sleep. Half an hour later Charles, still in a half-awake state, stretched his arm and sipped from the glass in front of him. Slowly, incredibly slowly he finished it all. He then reclined his head on the headrest.

Charles didn’t move as the plane began its smooth descent. Tanya checked her bags to be sure her documents were intact, found all to be as she had left them, including her clothes. Charles didn’t budge as she slowly rose from her seat and grabbed her bag. She left the plane, went through the passport check point, entered the first restroom she saw, and assumed her own identity. She quickly boarded a cab.

“To the Canadian Consulate, and hurry, please. It’s an emergency.”

Chapter 34

“Malcolm, let me do it, would you, please?” Paul said, gently removing the hammer from Malcolm’s hands. He took careful measurements around the existing Stanley Cup champions on the wall, and marked a spot for the picture of the Dallas Stars.

“Thanks,” said Malcolm.

“No trouble. Actually, I do it for myself. I can’t stand to see crooked pictures. Makes my skin crawl, it does. When they aren’t crooked, they don’t align. When they align, they’re not in the middle of the wall...” Paul’s voice drifted off into silence as he shifted and aligned the pictures.

Malcolm laughed. “And here I was complimenting myself on my previously unknown decorating ability.” He smiled at Paul. “I bet you were a wonderful son.”

“Uh oh...could you repeat that, please? I want to be certain I heard it correctly.”

“No time, no time...” Malcolm glanced around the room. “Where the hell is Joe now? He’s always late. I’ve begun to suspect it was a mistake bringing him into the Invicta. In fact, I suspect Detective Warner sent him to us as a subtle form of revenge.” As Paul looked at him quizzically, he added, “Down in his heart he never forgave me for having founded the Invicta.”

A noise surprised both.

“Looking for me?” Joe said aloud as he entered the room. “Where’s the coffee?”

“Sit down,” Malcolm said, annoyed. “Let’s get started. Tanya Caldwell.” He cleared his throat. “Joe, you were in charge of digging into Tanya’s past. Get your file. Paul, you were to gather information on Tanya’s close friends and neighbors. Sum up, please.”

“Nothing special about the girl,” Paul said. “While attending college, she lived in a rental unit close to campus. She was described as being quiet, absolutely nothing wild. She was well liked at school.” He shifted his papers, drew one from the stack. “She had a boyfriend, Jeff Leight. I talked to him a while back, when he came home for the Christmas holiday. He said he was very fond of Tanya.” Paul glanced at Malcolm. “He said she appeared very shy and quiet at first, but as their relationship developed, she became free and alive. His words were, ‘She can be a lot of fun.’”

“What happened? Why did they break up?” Malcolm asked.

“He got a scholarship, pretty far away from her. Somewhere in Colorado. They kept in contact for a while, until about a couple of years ago. They weren’t able to get together too often, and the whole thing sort of died a natural death.”

“Anything else?”

“Not much. Ms. Caldwell seems to have a ‘very private’ personal life.”

“Joe? What do you have for me? You had the more difficult job, digging into a past that even Tanya couldn’t trace.”

“I checked with five of Tanya’s foster families. They described her as a normal child, no real problems.”

“What about her parents?”

“Henry Caldwell, her father, was already a successful businessman when he married a wealthy Italian girl. After the death of his in-laws, Henry managed his wife’s business, together with his own. It was a good combination. Henry owned an import-export company. His wife’s

family had investments in a maritime corporation, with an international fleet. Commercial ships—small for the Mediterranean, large for travel across the Atlantic.” Joe paused, took a deep breath. “On this side of the Atlantic, there was a lot of cash. Some of that went into the Caldwell’s trust fund, to be split in equal parts among the surviving children.”

“And the investments made in Europe? What happened there?” Malcolm asked.

“It looks as if Henry Caldwell had a run of bad luck and financial difficulties in Europe. Two ships sank, problems came up with the insurance, things went sour. In the last trip, father, mother, and younger brother died in a plane crash in the mountains. Those between Spain and France.”

Malcolm frowned. “Who took care of liquidating the assets?”

“A legal firm in Montreal which no longer exists.” Joe shut his notebook with a snap. “That’s about it.”

“That’s it? No names? What about the assets in Europe? Who was in charge of that?” Malcolm asked, his frown deepening.

“Well, it isn’t easy digging out information spread out over different countries. Seventeen years have passed, you know, it didn’t all happen yesterday. And foreign countries have different ways of operating. Some of them simply refused to supply any information.” Joe waved his hand at Malcolm as if to brush aside any objections. “You can check with police headquarters, if you like. They went through the official channels and don’t have much more than we have.”

“That leaves us with a big void,” Malcolm said. His frown appeared to be forever engraved on his face. “Who became responsible for Tanya after the judge who set up the trust fund died?”

Joe shrugged. “Ms. Caldwell didn’t know and I couldn’t find anything, either.”

Paul filled three mugs with coffee and served Malcolm and Joe.

“The two parallel investigations—on the manager of Kevin Matwin’s Shoppe and the Italian count. Who is doing what?” Malcolm asked. He sipped his coffee and nodded his thanks to Paul.

Paul glanced at his notebook. “I was responsible for the investigation into the financial situation with Mr. Matwin and his manager, Mr. Jeff Moore. A Shoppe for the Arts: The business is doing well. Solid clientele, excellent work. The reproductions are of the highest quality. Mr. Matwin wants to set up a new lab. Pretty expensive lab, too. He’s having difficulty raising the cash at a reasonable lending rate. The only downside—the sale of a series to the Pacific Rim countries showed a loss. I couldn’t find a reason.”

“Cookies?” Joe asked. “Don’t you have any more cookies, Malcolm?” He sipped his coffee, ignoring Paul.

“You ate them all yesterday,” Paul said, and continued, “Mr. Moore. He’s been the manager of the Shoppe for the last ten years. He’s a close friend of Mr. Matwin. He has a good income, but rumors state the good income is sifted through a gambling wife. She mainly gambles in Europe. Difficult to check how much or how often and who pays the debts.”

“Interesting. I’ve never seen a family free of problems when gambling is involved.” Malcolm glanced up from his notes. “Joe? Where’s he gone now?”

“Probably to the snack machine,” Paul said.

“Oops, sorry,” Joe said as he returned to the room. “My turn?”

“The count. What do you have on him?” Malcolm asked.

“His family produced quality wine for generations. He owns two travel agencies, both quite profitable, a yacht, anchored in San Remo for most of the year, no girl friends, no close friends... He avoids publicity.” Joe paused. “I have a contact in the States who promises to talk to me about Mr. di Monteturro, but only on a face-to-face basis. I’ll leave for New York tonight, if

that's okay with you, Malcolm."

Malcolm nodded. "Yes, we need as much information about Mr. di Monteturro as we can find. He had just appeared on the scene when the accident at Kevin's villa occurred." He shifted in his chair and turned away from Joe. "That's all for the moment, Joe. Paul, I have something else for you. Please stay."

Paul raised one eyebrow and waited until Joe left. "What's up?"

"Someone has to escort Tanya from Rio de Janeiro back here. I may send you, if you promise not to—if you assure me that you won't—" Malcolm coughed, scowled at Paul. "I don't want you to get involved with Tanya Caldwell."

"Involved?" Paul said, all innocence. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Malcolm." He grinned.

"Paul, you know what I mean. Don't—don't use your charm on the girl."

"You mean you think I can be charming?" Paul asked. "Why, Malcolm, you're just full of compliments tonight." He laughed. "But that's a hard assignment. Here she is, a single, attractive, wealthy woman, and she can be a riot, too...and you tell me to keep away."

Malcolm's frown returned, deep and angry. "She's our client, and I expect you to behave like a professional."

Paul shrugged. "I still like her."

"So do I. I also want you to organize a new search into the death of her parents and Tanya's Power of Attorney. She believes there wasn't any, just some kind of uncle living in Europe. Strange. Legally speaking, impossible, even seventeen years back."

"I'll start the investigation before leaving," Paul said. His pen skipped quickly over the sheets of paper in his notebook. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he looked directly at Malcolm. He raised his right hand. "I solemnly swear to be the most boring travel companion Ms. Caldwell ever had."

Malcolm stifled a laugh. "Just bring her back in one piece."

* * *

Tanya paced the office of the vice-consul from one side to the other. She glanced out of the large window: even the stunning beauty of the huge bay, dominated by the statue of Christ, didn't attract her attention. She fretted to leave. She tapped her foot against the floor nervously, turning to stare at each person who entered the room. She had an anxious feeling, a fight-or-flight reaction to the past few days, and she found it difficult to sit and wait.

The hand that rested on her shoulder caused her to jump several inches, gasp, and clutch at her chest.

"God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Remember me?"

"Oh, Paul Brennon. It's okay, I'm just really uptight." Tanya heaved a sigh of relief. "It's more than nice to see a familiar, friendly face." She grinned and slumped into a chair.

Paul swept her an elegant bow. "Miss Tanya Caldwell, your worries are over. I am here to escort you safely back to Vermeil. No more will you have to fret, your champion has arrived." He grinned back at her.

"I wouldn't be too certain of that." The consul attaché entered the room as Paul finished speaking. His expression was grim. "We have just been notified that Charles Aldrin has escaped from the hospital, in spite of the strictest security."

Tanya yelped like a frightened pup, and jumped to her feet. "But how could that happen?"

she said, her eyes wide with disbelief. “Escaped? What kind of security would let a half-drugged man escape?”

“Miss Caldwell, please! Calm yourself.”

“Calm myself? How could anybody let Charles escape? He attacked one person, he kidnapped me, he tried to kill me...” Her voice choked on tears, she turned away from the attaché, her hands clenched into fists.

“Yes, ma’am, I am aware. I have just spoken to Mr. Malcolm Clark concerning the situation.” The attaché took a deep breath. “He approved my suggestion that we charter a private plane to return you to Vermeil.”

“A private plane?” Paul asked. “You are aware that it’s a ten-hour flight, and that’s with a commercial aircraft—”

“Here is the name of an excellent company, the Amado Company. We use it all the time.” He handed a business card to Paul. “They have a fine reputation, superior. They have a new fleet of planes, both props and jets. You’ll need to refuel only once or twice—”

“It’s crazy!” Tanya said. Hysteria skirted the edges of her voice. “You’re all crazy! First you let Charles escape, now you want to charter a small plane to fly across an entire continent...” Tears filled her eyes, though she forced herself not to cry. Again, Paul placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Let me check on this idea of a charter—if the trip’s feasible, if the company really is reliable, all of the above. Then I’ll contact Invicta headquarters myself,” he said, and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“These things happen,” the attaché said with a shrug. “Please remember that Mr. Charles Aldrin has a number of connections. He was a former CIA agent, as well. And, from what I know, an excellent one. Those of us who have worked abroad for the last fifteen years know how canny he can be.”

* * *

Monday morning, Tanya sat beside Paul aboard a brand new Piper Cherokee. Their flight home had begun. Tanya, too tired and upset by the situation, took her escape in sleep; for most of the flight, she dozed.

Above the Amazonian forest, near Blem, the pilot announced the need for a landing. The plane had to be refueled. It also needed some minor repairs, nothing serious. Nothing more than a precaution.

“How long will it take?” Paul asked.

The pilot shrugged. “An hour? Maybe two, at the most?”

“This aircraft was supposed to be the gem of your fleet,” Paul said, helping Tanya from the plane.

“It is,” the pilot said. “Nothing to worry about. Minor. This is our usual stop.” He smiled, a broad, toothy grin. “This station is one of the fire fighting centers of the Amazonia. You can find food, drink, even take a walk along the nature trails.” He paused. “Be sure to stay on the trails, though. We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

Tanya shivered in the heat, her heart racing. “Ridiculous! Refuel and repair, in ‘the middle of nowhere’ in this day and age. I thought the Invicta was going to take care of me. And look! Look what’s happening, and in the midst of an emergency!”

Again, Paul rested his hand on her shoulder. “After I talked to the charter company, I called

Malcolm's office. Joe Halliday checked out the Amado Company, and forwarded the official approval." He smiled at Tanya and once more gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Let's not make a big deal out of it. Let's take our walk, then come back for a meal. The exercise will be good for us."

They walked for an hour, following a path that wound around the airport. Tanya glanced back at the airport. The building sat in the middle of the forest like a child's toy plopped down among the weeds. The main construction stood two-story high, in white stucco, with a flat roof. Off to one side of the roof, a huge cistern waited for the rains. A big tent served as a hangar for small aircraft. On the left side of the building, one of the supporting pillars bore a big red flame; at the extreme right, there was a red cross. Two sheds stood open and displayed tools and machinery. A dark tent held the quarters for technical assistance. The Piper Cherokee had been taken there, and stood half under and half outside the protective roof.

Tanya and Paul watched a small plane land, followed by another and another again.

"Tanya," Paul said. "Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?"

"No." Depression and anxiety warred with her. "You're very kind, Paul, but I just need to see this through and get my life back to normal."

"No request? Not even a little one?"

Tanya laughed. "No, not even a little one. Just stay by me, and be just as you seem to be. Don't be anything else."

"I wouldn't leave you alone for anything in the world," Paul said, his voice intense. "If you ever need me, I'll be there for you, even after we return to Vermeil." He grinned at her. "I'm a nice person, especially if I want to be."

Tanya glanced at him from the corners of her eyes. "How can I be sure? You may have killed thousands of people." A small smile, the first in several days, appeared on Tanya's lips.

"Yes. I've killed, but it was one of those kill or be killed situations. But I did what I needed to do, with no hesitation. And I'm proud to be a good shot. You should feel well protected, Miss Caldwell. Well protected indeed."

When they returned to the station, the pilot approached them, his expression grim. He took Paul aside. "Bad news. We will have to stay here longer than I thought. There's no choice. They need more time to test the engine." He glanced at his wristwatch. "At best, we'll leave around midnight."

Paul's temper flared. "This charter cost a fortune! I, personally, asked for your best aircraft..." He paused. "I'm going to check with my superiors and with your company. I don't like what's happening." He turned and hurried for the main office.

"Tanya," he said when he returned. "I finally spoke to Malcolm. I think Joe gets confused or something, maybe he just doesn't quite know what's going on, but I spoke directly to Malcolm. He assured me that if we're not in the air by three o'clock in the morning, a military plane from a nearby base will pick us up. It will be here before seven o'clock."

Tanya shivered. "My God..." she said, her voice a whisper. "Why can't they send a military aircraft right away? I'm frightened, Paul. I don't like this, not at all."

"Damn government red tape...I asked Malcolm the same question. He's moved all the heavy guns he could reach just to get us this arrangement. They're doing it as a special favor for him." His hand rested on her shoulder again, squeezed. "Nothing we can do, Tanya. We're stuck here for the time being, but I'm with you. You're not alone." He grinned. "Let's go see what there is to eat in this godforsaken place."

Tanya sat by the window looking out on the landing strip. Her appetite was gone. She sipped

iced tea and nibbled on a few bread sticks. She watched as another small aircraft made its appearance from above the forest and floated to a perfect landing. She watched as the pilot stepped from the plane and looked in her direction.

The pilot was Charles Aldrin.

Chapter 35

“No! Oh, no! A Mac-10!” Paul said, his voice a whisper. “Up. But slowly, Tanya, and stay low. Don’t let him see you. We have to get out of this building. We’re sitting ducks up here.”

Paul guided her from the room, dodged into a stairwell, and then outside. Across a narrow alley stood the storehouse for the firefighting equipment. Paul pulled Tanya into it.

Tanya’s breath came in short hitches like a child who has nearly cried herself to sleep. “I don’t think I can take it anymore, Paul,” she said and whimpered like a frightened puppy. “Too much, too much... It just keeps on going, no matter what I try...what I do...” She sobbed. “Deadly explosions...murderous bodyguards...I solve one problem, another pops up.” Tears ran down her cheeks in a salty river. She swiped her sleeve across her face and stumbled into Paul.

“Look, we have to hide from him. It’s our only chance. Don’t fall apart on me now, Tanya. Tanya!” He shook her shoulders. “Charles will be on our trail in no time.” Paul glanced at her, steadied her, then looked around the shed. “Grab those two jackets and I’ll look around for an axe,” he said, pushing her towards a pair of heavy quilted fire fighters’ jackets. “My semiautomatic pistol can’t compare to his fire power,” he said in a wavering voice.

“Maybe I should just give up,” Tanya said. She hadn’t moved. “He wants me, not you. If I just give in, it will all be over, and I won’t have to fight anymore.”

Paul straightened. “Tanya. We have to hide in the forest. Don’t quit on me now.” He stepped toward her. “We don’t have the time for this, not now. Look, you have to know he’ll hunt me down and kill me, too. He can’t have a witness. You know that.” He grabbed one of the jackets and tossed it to her. “If you won’t do it for yourself, then do it for me. I’m not ready to die yet.” She caught the jacket and Paul tossed her the second, then pushed her toward the exit.

They skirted the second shed and slipped into the forest behind the buildings. “It will be dark soon,” Paul said. “We need to find a good spot to hide, and fast.”

After nearly fifteen minutes of pushing through the underbrush, Paul stopped. “We’ll settle in here,” he said. “Charles won’t make a move until daylight, and we won’t be able to see for much longer, at any rate. Let me clear some of the brush, and we’ll have a place to rest.” He used the machete he’d found in the shed to cut down the brush, and piled some of it on the ground. “There you go, your green bower, my lady.” He gestured at the pile of brush. “Better than nothing. Lay the jacket on top, and you’ll be comfortable enough.”

Still sniffing slightly, Tanya lowered herself onto the brush. “Bit bumpy,” she said, and moved a branch from under her back. “But it’ll do fine, I guess.”

“And you? Are you okay now?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine, too, Paul. I’m sorry I lost it back there.” She looked around, still confused. “It seems like one of those horror movies, where the killer just won’t die, and keeps on coming back, no matter what happens to him. Sometimes I feel as if I want to end this mess in any way I can.”

Paul nodded and sat on the brush beside her. “That’s understandable. You’ve been through more than hell so far, and we’re not out of the woods yet.” With that, he waved his arms over his head and around them. “Nope, not out of the woods at all.”

Tanya sighed. “What are our chances, Paul? I mean, really. Can we get out of Brazil alive?”

“Always a chance, to coin a cliché. To weigh the positive against the negative, I’d say, on the positive side, the airport staff is aware of the situation. Also, Charles can’t do anything until dawn, and he can’t come up on us without my being aware. On the negative...” Paul pondered. “Charles could corrupt the airport staff, but they don’t know where we are, either.”

“Any more positives?”

“Yes, the biggest one of all: if Malcolm doesn’t hear from us that we’re in the air before three in the morning, a military plane will be dispatched. It will arrive here before seven o’clock. Our dangerous period will be from six, when the sun rises, to seven, when the plane should arrive. Charles will probably be hunting for us during that time.” Paul was silent for a moment, the darkness a velvet cover over them. The sky was alive with sparkling pin pricks of light, though the moon still hadn’t risen. “Once it’s daylight, I’ll show you how to use this,” he said, and placed a small gun in her hand. “It’s pretty simple. If you see Charles and he’s within thirty feet of you, take aim and shoot.”

Tanya looked at the gun, cradling it in her hands. She shivered. She cautiously placed it very close to her bed of brush. She then lay down and closed her eyes.

A very faint glimmer of light showed the beginnings of dawn. Tanya yawned, then jerked awake, confused. She sat up and looked around her. Gradually, she remembered the happenings of the past few days. Her eyes began to search for Paul.

“It’s okay, Tanya. I’m over here. Did you sleep?” Paul asked. He sat across from her, his back against a tree, his gun nestled in his hands. “I have a plan. Not the greatest in the world, but I think the only one we have going for us. Ready?”

“Yes.”

“...and we have to start moving together. It’s important.” Again, Paul asked, “Clear?”

The day slipped into their hiding place. They moved toward the border of the air field, directly across from the forest. They stayed in the shelter of the trees and watched the planes as they landed and took off, searching for any sign of Charles.

“Remember,” Paul said. “The plane will land, then the stairway will descend. Only after the stairs are in place do you move, not before. When I say *go* you leave the edge of the forest, skirt about thirty steps to your left, then walk toward the aircraft.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I have to stay here, to cover you. I’ll be fine.”

At 6:45 am, an FS18 landed. The stairway dropped and four men in uniform descended. Two of the men headed for the terminal building. The remaining two stood guard beside the stairway.

Carefully, Tanya began to follow Paul’s instructions. She began to walk toward the aircraft as Paul took partial shelter behind a rubber tree within the forest’s borders. With the corner of her eye Tanya saw him to become part of the woods.

Charles Aldrin appeared like a magic trick near the forest’s borders. He remained still for a few moments, cautious and alert as a wolf about to go on the hunt. He parted the branches of two trees in front of him and peered into the open area, where Tanya walked.

Her gaze straight ahead and settled on the aircraft, Tanya continued to walk with steady steps.

Charles lifted his Mac-10 and checked it, then pointed it in Tanya’s direction. Paul moved behind him, his gun ready. He aimed at Charles’ neck. Charles sensed his danger and swung the Mac-10 toward Paul. Paul fired. Twice. And again.

Charles Aldrin dropped to the ground, silent and dead, taking Tanya’s terror with him.

Chapter 36

“Tanya, Tanya...wake up!” Kevin said, giving her arms a gentle shake. He knelt close to her. “It’s me, Kevin. Your Kevin.” Pushing Malcolm aside, Kevin had climbed aboard the aircraft to see Tanya, still asleep. “Wake up, girl! Wake up, Tanya.” His fingers ran across her face in feather touches.

Tanya opened her eyes slowly, then struggled to keep them open. Finally, she said, “Where am I? Kevin? Kevin!” She looked around, her eyes out of focus. She sat up straighter. “Is it true? I am safe?” She looked at Kevin, and then at Malcolm and Paul, and then back at Kevin. “I’m safe!” she shouted, and nestled her face against his chest.

“We’ll leave you two alone,” said Malcolm. “Happy to see you back, Tanya.” He grabbed Paul’s arm and left with him.

“See you later,” murmured Tanya. Then, raising her voice: “Thank you, Paul. Thank you both.”

Kevin sat close to her. “Oh, Tanya, what you went through—I’m so happy to see you again. Alive.” He pulled her close to his chest again and kept her there, gently stroking her back.

“I didn’t think I’d survive. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” Tanya said. “I was so scared, Kevin. So very scared...I did nothing wrong, but so many people want to kill me. It’s terrible.”

“Poor Tanya...I hope the police sort out this mess. It’s incredible that this company, the Invicta, recommended people who made an attempt on your life!” His voice wore anger and contempt.

“Apparently there’s a sizable contract out on me. That can lure people into becoming criminals. I don’t have a clue why or who’s behind all this.”

“Neither do the police. They can’t figure out what’s happening. Why—” Kevin paused. “Now—first things first. I told Mr. Clark you’re going to stay with me tonight. I’ll take care of you.” He buried his face in her hair. “I missed you. I missed you so much... Let’s get out of here,” he whispered. “Let’s go to my place. I’ll wait on you hand and foot. I’ll take care of all your needs.”

As soon as he let Tanya into his Toronto apartment, Kevin said, “Make yourself comfortable, Tanya. I’ll prepare something to eat.” He put his arms around her and kissed the tip of her nose.

“A bath first?” Tanya asked as she glanced around.

“Sure. Come, I’ll wash you, little minx—”

“No, no. I’d feel embarrassed,” Tanya said in protest. “I prefer to take my bath alone.”

“Bashful, eh?” Kevin said, taking her to his bedroom. A king-sized bed with a brass headboard took the central stage. The yellow bedspread, with gigantic arabesques in the middle, was matched by the long curtains, topped by wide balloon valances. A dark mahogany triple dresser, two chairs, and a side table, all in Louis XV style, completed the furnishing.

The room isn’t crowded. Everything’s in good taste, nothing’s cheap. That’s Kevin’s style, Tanya thought. She entered the bathroom and eagerly plunged in the bathtub letting the water flow on her body.

Soon after, Kevin walked in to offer her a dark blue housecoat.

“Big,” Tanya said as she got out of the tub. “Long. Don’t you have anything for girls?” She teased him.

“No, ma’am. I got rid of your predecessor’s stuff last week.” He looked at her tenderly. “You’ll be in charge of refilling that department. Soon, I hope.” He cuddled her in his housecoat. “I love you,” he said as he massaged her body with soft, slow strokes.

Tanya melted in his arms. “I love you, too, Kevin,” she said after several moments. “I feel so safe in your arms...”

“We have time for all of that,” he said, slightly pushing her away from him. “Let’s go to the kitchen. You didn’t touch any food for twenty-four hours, Paul told me. He recommended that I feed you—first thing on the list. Come. I’ve prepared one of your favorite dishes—smoked salmon on rye bread. And plenty of fruit. The bottle of Moët & Chandon may not be too cold, but it will do for tonight.”

Malcolm found Paul staring at an empty aquarium. “No time to think or talk about fish and the like,” he said as he entered his office. “Let’s sit. I’d like to ‘argue’ with you, about Tanya’s case—the pros and cons of it. What went wrong, what she did wrong, what we did wrong, if any—” He sat behind his desk and gestured Paul a chair in front of him. “First of all: What do you think are her feelings for Kevin Matwin?”

“She’s in that state called ‘being in love,’ the closest state to dementia.”

“You’re an expert, from what I gathered,” Malcolm said with a grin.

“You may say that,” Paul replied placidly.

“Let’s analyze the case. Her faults. She didn’t follow instructions too well.”

Paul looked straight into Malcolm’s eyes. He said, “No, she went to the beach once—and that saved her life.”

“She established a relationship with a stranger. That may have created serious leaks.” Malcolm began tapping a pencil between two fingers.

“That’s true.” Paul became pensive. “She must have felt lonely...”

“Let’s leave out the reason, Paul,” Malcolm snapped. “The reason is immaterial. The facts are what count.”

“She didn’t do much wrong, considering—”

“Okay, I know what you mean. Let’s consider our own doings, then.”

“I’d say, Malcolm, that we have been—that—that we haven’t been adequate. Now I found the correct word. We recommended two people who, after months of protection, were lured into a conspiracy to eliminate her.”

Malcolm sighed. He rose and began pacing his office. “We don’t know about Edda. Not for sure. She helped Tanya to get away. That’s a fact. But there were two tickets to Rio de Janeiro. Two air tickets. So—she may have known, or agreed, to some extent. Then Charles Aldrin—I still can’t believe Charles would do anything of that sort.”

“He was a former CIA agent. That was no recommendation at all,” Paul said.

“Tanya needed an experienced and resourceful bodyguard.” Malcolm stopped in front of Paul. “I had little choice. I had to find somebody in less than five days. Charles and Edda had worked together, they made a good team.”

“I understand. Nevertheless—Oh, Edda. Is she still alive?” Paul asked.

“No. She died without regaining consciousness. This morning. That’s why I was late.”

“No leads there, then.” Paul said sighing.

“No. End of the line. Who can have contacted Charles?” Malcolm asked. He leaned against his desk, in front of Paul. “Charles and Edda were in contact with us, the Italian police, and Mr. Matwin. Basically, nobody else.”

“There must be a connection, somewhere.”

“Do you think this ‘connection’ may have something to do with Tanya’s past? Or with Mr. Matwin?” Malcolm seemed to be questioning himself more than questioning Paul. The pencil between his fingers swung faster and faster.

“Mr. Matwin showed up only recently. The attempts on Tanya’s life started before. But we can examine both possibilities. Any hunches about Kevin?”

“I don’t trust that lover boy. He’s a suspect in my book,” Malcolm said gravely. “And not a minor one, either. There’s something in his attitude toward Tanya which doesn’t convince me.” He raised his eyebrows. “He’s accustomed to classy women. Very classy. He falls for a girl with no sophistication at all. The way she dresses, her hair style, the speed at which she gobbles up food—she would never fit in his social environment.” The pencil flew off Malcolm’s fingers, tumbling on the floor. Nobody bothered to pick it up. Both Malcolm and Paul were busy pondering.

“You may be right. I haven’t thought of that,” Paul said.

“Mr. Matwin counts on a wealthy and refined crowd for his business.”

“Tanya is a warm girl. She doesn’t fake things. He may have fallen for that.” Paul glanced at Malcolm, concern over his face. “But you’re right. Kevin fell for her almost instantly. That is strange. She isn’t his type.” He paused. “Yesterday, I looked at his file again. There’s a parade of beautiful women around him.” Paul sighed. “You certainly have a point there, Malcolm. A big one, too.”

They both kept silent for some time. Then Paul rose and moved around the room. He glanced at the empty aquarium for the second time. “You should get a new fish tank,” he said. “There are real nice ones out today—blue lights in the corners, automatic release of food, incredible imitations of the ocean’s bottom.”

“I know. I went to see them. I’m going to buy an expensive one as soon as I have some time. Besides, it appears that’s the only way I’ll ever see any fish this summer.” He turned at a soft knock at the door. “Come in,” he hollered, annoyed. Joe Halliday walked in the room. “You finally show up,” Malcolm said with annoyance. “Sit down.” He gestured at a chair near the coffee table. “Did you find anything about Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro?”

“Yes. A lot,” said Joe smiling at Malcolm. He took his notebook from his briefcase. “He’s been investigated twice by the IRS. Nothing serious turned up. Interpol had some suspicions about drug smuggling. They gathered enough evidence to question him, but not enough to press charges.” He turned a couple of pages, shaking his head. “Not much here,” he murmured. “Oh, now, that may be interesting.” He read from his notebook. “About the sites where that drug smuggling occurred. He justified his presence very well. In each case he was the guide—guide, interpreter, advisor—for an organized trip. His agencies—he has two of them—organize tours all over the world.” Joe looked at Malcolm, expecting some comments. As he didn’t get any, he continued reading: “There was also a big sum of money deposited overnight in a bank. He claimed it was a win from a private gambling house in Istanbul. That couldn’t be verified or disproved.”

“Anything else?” Malcolm asked, his tone sharp as a blade.

“Ah, here,” Joe replied. “About Mr. di Monteturro’s family: his father was a gambler. There

was a rumor he committed suicide.”

“You haven’t told me anything substantial,” Malcolm said, his annoyance replaced by anger. “Clearly, the man is a loose end. He may have some criminal connections, but there is no convincing evidence of any wrong doing. One thing is clear, he doesn’t need money. His bank accounts and his investments are solid.” Malcolm looked at Joe. “Anything else?” he asked again.

Joe quickly leafed through his notebook once more. “Ah, here. Another rumor. Luigi Amedeo’s father, a widower, was engaged to Tanya’s mother, Carla. The engagement was called off and Carla married Henry Caldwell.” Joe paused and glanced at Malcolm in triumph. “That’s a connection,” he asserted with pride.

Malcolm waved his hand in annoyance. “Children don’t go around avenging unsuccessful love affairs of their parents,” he said. “More substance, please. Keep investigating Mr. di Monteturro.”

Chapter 37

Downtown Toronto

Malcolm Clark and Judith Abramson rode the elevator of the ‘New Belvedere Tower’ together. “Our man doesn’t live in poverty,” was Malcolm’s first comment as they reached the penthouse. The atrium was small, floored with pale pink ceramic tiles. Two bronze statues flanked the only door to Kevin’s residence, with one a reproduction of Rodin’s Thinker and the other, Cellini’s Perseo. The door stood ajar. Malcolm and Judith were expected and had been let into the elevator by Kevin.

“You’re right. Mr. Matwin has very nice living quarters,” Judith said. She wore a sleeveless pale blue dress, its soft fabric flattering her model-perfect figure. “Do you think that Tanya will come with us?”

“I hope so. In my opinion, she should feel more protected by staying with you than in this place. But, of course, we have to convince her of that.” Malcolm sighed. It was a big sigh. “Knowing the girl, that isn’t going to be easy.”

“Hello,” Malcolm said as they entered. “Hello,” he repeated, louder.

“We’re on the balcony,” Kevin shouted. “Please come in.” Elegant in his dove-grey trousers and matching T-shirt, Kevin welcomed his guests.

“Come look at the wonderful view,” Tanya said with enthusiasm. She was still in Kevin’s blue housecoat. “You can see the harbor, how big it is, and the little island in front of the city.” She turned toward them. “Hi, Malcolm,” she said. She hugged Judith and kissed her on her cheeks. “Hello, stranger. Nice to see you again. I’ve missed you for these past months.” She whirled around. “I’ll go get dressed. My clothes should be dry by now.”

When she returned, Malcolm, Kevin, and Judith were all sitting in the living room. “Look at me!” Tanya said. “All nice and clean. All in one piece.” She pirouetted like a ballerina. “And a-li-ve!” she sang. No one reacted to her show. No one said a single word. “What’s the problem?” she asked, still full of cheer. “My best friends are all here, but everybody looks sad. What’s the reason?”

Kevin’s expression showed love and anxiety. “They came to take you away from me,” he said. His tone conveyed even more concern than his face.

“To take me away? Why? Where to?” Tanya stood in front of Malcolm.

“Tanya, I strongly suggest that you go to stay with Judith,” he said. “For protection.”

“It’ll be wonderful, Tanya. I need the company, and you’re such a good listener,” Judith said.

“But I feel safe here,” Tanya said, confusion all over her face.

Malcolm rose from the gold-and-green striped sofa and stood before her. “Twice, I went along with your suggestions. They didn’t work out very well. Please follow mine this time.”

Kevin joined them. “I don’t think that you or your company have much credibility,” he said. “You recommended people who turned into criminals. You put Tanya at risk. Your agency approved of a flight with a corrupted pilot. You endangered her life. And you speak of protection! I’m disgusted at your arrogance.” Kevin’s face flamed with anger.

“Kevin, please—” Tanya said, her voice soft. She stared at Kevin, her anxiety washing over her in waves.

Calmly, Malcolm replied, “You’re right, we haven’t been equal to the task. I admit that. Not at par with our name, either. It’s true. But believe me, Mr. Matwin—Kevin, I mean—this is the first time it ever happened, in almost three years. Tanya’s case is difficult, with ramifications spread in several different countries. It’s complicated by things which happened almost two decades ago. At times, we can’t find records. At times, they’re incomplete.” Malcolm stopped. His eyes turned toward Tanya and made a secret appeal to her.

Kevin placed his arm around Tanya’s shoulders. “The decision whether or not to go with Judith lies with Tanya, of course. However—explain to me why Tanya would be safer at Judith’s place in Vermeil rather than here, in my apartment, where nobody can control the penthouse elevator without a special code. Explain that to me.”

Malcolm paused, deep in thought. He glanced at Kevin. “Mr. Matwin: the last accident occurred at your place, in your villa, using the easel you gave to Tanya. Would it be unreasonable of me to think that you may have unintentionally provided a potential killer with an easy access?”

Kevin removed his arm from Tanya’s shoulders. “But we all knew that it was Charles Aldrin who orchestrated all that. He lived at Tanya’s place. It was one of your connections. I never met him before. How can you think that I have been an instrument to what happened to Tanya?” Hurt, more than anger, filled his words.

“I didn’t say that,” Malcolm said, his tone calm and firm. “And I take responsibility for Charles Aldrin. It was a terrible flaw in my judgment. It’s just that your presence in Tanya’s life had...” Malcolm struggled for words. He continued, “had altered the environment we planned for her. At times, we couldn’t find her at the mansion. We didn’t want to call her at your place. Other times, we felt as if we were intruding.” Malcolm glanced at Tanya. “Please, Tanya. We have new leads. Two weeks. Just give me two weeks.”

Tanya looked around the room, then lifted her gaze to Kevin. “Two weeks isn’t an eternity. Right, Kevin? Vermeil is only eighty miles from here. You can visit me at any time.” She cleared her throat of a sudden constriction. “Kevin? Kevin, do you mind?”

Kevin glared at Malcolm, then turned toward Tanya. He rubbed her back up and down. “Of course I don’t mind, love. You’re in charge,” he said. “I just spoke my mind, but your decision is fine with me.”

When they were all ready to leave, Kevin stood before Tanya and took her hands in his. “I’d like to come along, if I may, and see where my woman is going to stay.” He turned toward Malcolm. His look was icy, but his words were polite: “Would you mind if Tanya and I followed you in my car?”

“I’ll do better than that, Kevin,” Malcolm replied promptly. “I’ll drive you and Tanya in my car. Judith will drive your vehicle.” He glanced at Judith with a smile of complicity. “I’m sure she won’t mind driving a Porsche.”

“A Porsche!” Judith said with a huge grin. “I’d be thrilled. If Mr. Matwin doesn’t mind, of course.”

Chapter 38

In the small den at Judith's apartment, Tanya prepared herself for the night. She doubted she would be able to sleep. There was a maniac around, one who was determined to see her dead. He was probably planning another of his deadly tricks as she lay there, tossing.

That's not all, she thought. Kevin hadn't snapped out of his awful mood for the entire afternoon. Even his goodbye kiss had been a cool, absent touch.

"Maybe you should give me a list of what I need to buy for you tomorrow morning," Judith said as she walked into the room. "Malcolm would rather you didn't show your face around town."

"I know. He told me so. Thanks, Judith." She dug into her bag, pulled out a sheet of paper, and handed it to Judith.

"Aren't you feeling well?" Judith asked.

Tanya shook her head.

"Sad?"

"Yes. It's Kevin, among other things. I've never seen him so upset, so belligerent. He seems to hate Malcolm."

Judith nodded. "And vice versa, I think. There's a clash of personalities between those two. That's most of their problem."

"Well, you're the expert in psychological profiles," Tanya said with an impish grin.

"Actually, I got a kick out of their confrontation, especially since the reason for it—you—stayed in the background most of the time."

"But I made the final decision," Tanya said. Her grin widened.

"That's true, and you surprised me again." Judith sighed. "I guess your profile will never be finished." She grabbed Tanya's pillow and fluffed it, then tossed it back on the bed. "Here you are, Tanya. Sleep well. See you tomorrow."

"Okay, what do you want to do with the afternoon?" Judith asked. She sat sprawled in a white wicker chair, Tanya in another.

"First, I want to see all the newspapers and clippings you collected about your heroic action. The action against the Shredder, I mean. Then I want to see the medal ceremony—the movie—all of that stuff. I couldn't get much information when I was on the Riviera, just what Malcolm sent me."

Judith fetched a big album and a roll of newspapers. "Let's sit on the floor," she proposed. "I'll have more space to spread out all the articles about me. Then I'll show you the videotape with the award ceremony."

They sat on the soft, light green carpet for hours, first sipping iced tea, then munching on a bag of microwaved popcorn.

"I learned a lot about myself in that action," Judith said. "I'm against inflicting pain, and definitely against killing. Any killing. Of any kind. But when the lives of people around me were in danger, I didn't hesitate."

"It was a wise decision, or you wouldn't be around to tell of it," Tanya replied promptly.

“You know what I’d love to have?” Judith asked abruptly.

“No, what?”

“I think I’d like to have a portrait of me in my official suit, with my medal. That would look great in my den.”

“I certainly have the time,” Tanya said. “It will be my belated way of congratulating you. But, this time, you have to pose. Pose still, I mean.”

“You certainly fooled me the first time,” Judith said, laughing.

Ten days had passed and Malcolm’s office seemed to have made little progress on Tanya’s case. At times, she had the impression Malcolm wasn’t telling the full story. He was always brief, evasive. She had the strange feeling he was closer to the killer—or the instigator, maybe—than he openly admitted.

The two weeks will be over soon, she thought. That’s something to look forward to. Then she will be reunited with her man.

Kevin had visited her only twice, both times fairly late at night and in Judith’s presence. He talked briefly about his new lab, the loss of money he had incurred in selling the collection of the French impressionists to three oriental countries, and the sudden, mysterious illness of his lawyer. He always appeared concerned, tense, and tired—very tired. It was a Kevin she hadn’t known before.

It was a blessing to have Judith around, she was very good company, Tanya thought as she watched her friend fill a big ceramic vase with lukewarm water.

Judith took flowers from a long carton, read the note which came with it, and put the note in her pocket. She carefully arranged the flowers in the vase and set them on the side table.

“We’ve talked about nearly everything that’s happened in your life in the last six months,” Tanya said, watching Judith touch a flower with gentle fingers, “but you didn’t mention your romance with the man who sends you roses.”

“Oh, old story,” Judith said. Her gaze dropped to the carpet. “Long story, too.”

“I have plenty of time. That is, if you want to talk about it.”

Judith glanced at her. “I do, if you promise not to laugh at me.”

“Oh,” Tanya said. “Is it that juicy?”

“See? You already started.”

“Well, it can’t be a sad story, considering the results. Long stem, beautiful yellow roses...a symbol of friendship.”

Judith lay on her stomach and pulled a pillow under her chest. She propped her elbows on the floor and rested her head in her cupped hands. Tanya imitated her and lay in front of her friend.

“So—this phantom boyfriend. I’m curious about him. Besides, I want to know the name of the person who’s poisoning us with all this strong perfume. It’s a good thing we aren’t allergic to roses.”

“Tanya, be serious, or I won’t be able to talk about him.”

“I see that the roses aren’t without effect. Looks like the man isn’t without effect, either, judging from your sensitivity.”

Judith tossed a pillow at Tanya’s head.

“Okay, okay...I’ll be good. Promise,” Tanya said. “Start now. You made me curious.”

“I was assigned some special duties concerning Brian Miller. Brian is a brother to Malcolm. They grew up together after Malcolm’s parents died. I stayed at the Miller residence for five weeks. Brian is rich, fun to be with, and he is—he has—he is—” Judith stopped speaking,

flustered.

“He’s a good toucher,” Tanya said with a smile.

“Um...yes, he surely is that.”

“And so...?” Tanya asked.

“In short, I fell in love with the wrong man.”

“Oh, I never thought that would happen to super-agent Judith Abramson. You always looked in control: neat, precise, courteous, with a solid sense of mission. Sexy enough to attract men and cold enough to shake them off.”

“I couldn’t shake this one off. At least, I didn’t make it yet.”

“Maybe you don’t want to shake him off.”

“Yes, I do. He’s been mean to me. I took the job of protecting him seriously and he made a mockery of it.” Judith gave a quick report of her days at the Miller residence. “He was mean,” she repeated as she finished her story.

“And he made you fall in love with him, another big crime,” Tanya said, laughing softly. “Don’t you think his interest in you is sincere? He may have fallen for you, too, you know.”

Judith rose to cut a raspberry-rhubarb pie she had baked earlier. “That’s what he says. That’s what he repeats in his notes. Every Friday he sends me roses. Friday is the day we first made love.” She gave Tanya a piece of pie and helped herself to another.

“So, let’s recap. What are his big crimes again?” Tanya asked. She quickly ate her pie. “He wanted you around for fun and not for work. Well. Look at it from another point of view. You’re good for both. He chose the one he preferred.”

“But I was there for work.”

“But you’re fun, too, from what I gather. Considering the total number of weeks you spent in his company and the six hours of combat, I come up with—” Tanya made some calculations with the help of her fingers. “Only three percent of the time was heavy duty. The remaining time, only light duty.” She rolled over to lay on her back, her hands behind her head.

“What do you mean, light duties? I had to look over his shoulders, all of the time.”

“But that wasn’t all you did,” Tanya said with a laugh. “You didn’t just go to his bedroom to check and see if somebody was hiding on top of the tester, did you?”

“No...”

“...or dress up in high uniform to carry out a patrol around his bed.” Tanya laughed harder, doubled over on the floor. “Be honest. At least, with yourself.”

“Well...” Judith grinned. “You may have a point there, but just one minor point. But he...he made love to me the same night he tried to get me out of my assignment. And I let him. And I’m still mad at myself for that.”

“This pie is exquisite,” Tanya said. She helped herself to another piece. “He must have done something right, too, or he wouldn’t be on your mind so much.”

“He’s not.”

“Sure looks like it... He may not be the ideal partner for you in all aspects, but in others—he probably is.”

Judith was silent for a while. “I built his psychological profile. Do you want to read it?”

“Sure. I’d be happy to look it over.”

Judith and Tanya sat at the kitchen table, eating their chicken soup in silence.

“How are things with Kevin?” Judith finally asked.

“He was very sweet on the phone. He apologized for not giving me much time. His manager,

Jeff Moore, was sick, on top of his lawyer being ill for more than a week. Kevin had to hurry to finalize the set up for the new lab. The discounts for the equipment are valid only until next week. That's why he was so busy."

"Everything ready with the lab, then?" Judith asked.

"The technical part is. The financing of the lab, over the next five years, is not. But Kevin thought that wouldn't take too long."

"Good," Judith said as she stood. "I'm happy for him. Would you like some iced tea?"

"Please."

Judith deposited two tall glasses on the table. "So. What do you think of Brian?" she asked casually, as if the answer meant nothing to her.

Tanya dropped a slice of lemon into her glass and slowly sipped on her tea. She tried to gain time. "I believe his profile was prepared by a rather partial observer," she finally said.

Judith sighed. "I know."

"The only relevant fact I gathered is that he had three wives, and he's only forty-two. It doesn't take much insight to figure out that the man doesn't believe in commitment." Judith looked at her questioningly. Tanya thrust her hand in front of her. "Don't look at me for advice," she said. "There's a good chance that the relationship between the two of you won't last, either. But the guy wants you. You know that." She looked around to count the number of roses that arrived recently. "Thirty-six in one shot. A record."

"I'm concerned that he won't respect my work," Judith said, a twinge of anxiety washing over her.

"Well—by now, he's probably learned that your job is important to you. I personally believe what he claims, that he acted out of concern alone, that he had no intention of hurting your feelings."

"So, what's your conclusion?" Judith asked.

"There is no conclusion of any sort. It's up to you to accept his explanations, or reject them," Tanya said. She shrugged and finished her drink.

When Brian called, the next time, Judith had the answering machine turned off. She picked up the phone when it rang. "Yes?" she said. There was a moment of absolute silence.

"Just checking to see if Agent Judith Abramson had recently received flowers sent by a mysterious admirer," Brian said.

Judith had forgotten how soft and melodic Brian's voice could be. "Yes. Thank you, Brian. The roses were splendid, as usual."

"Glad you liked them." He paused for several seconds. "Would you like to have supper with an old friend?"

"Yes."

After several seconds more, Brian said, "Tonight, maybe?"

"Tonight," Judith replied softly.

"Mike could pick you up at five o'clock."

"Five o'clock?" Judith looked at her wristwatch. "It's almost four o'clock now!" She had also forgotten how quickly Brian rode on the rising wave.

"I'm so anxious to see you..." he said, his tone deep and intense.

"Five o'clock will be just fine."

Mike, the chauffeur, greeted her warmly. "That old yellow dress looks fabulous on you," he murmured as he held the car's door open for her.

“You’re here, too!” Judith said as she spotted Brian sitting in the left corner. Slowly, she removed the silk scarf from around her neck, exposing her naked shoulders.

“Yes, it’s me. Hello, Judith. I was eager to see you,” he said, his expression intent.

Judith sat on the edge of her seat, her knees tight together. “Hello, Brian.” As the car started moving, she leaned against the back seat.

“So,” Brian said without changing position. “Have you decided on the punishment to inflict on me for my mischievous actions?”

“What you did upset me, very much,” Judith said softly. “But no penalty.”

“I know you warned me you would hold it against me. And you did. But what I did, Judith, was stronger than... What I mean is that I felt compelled to do it.”

For a moment, neither spoke, they just looked into each other’s eyes.

“I tried to understand,” Judith said. “I think I might be able to let go.”

“You mean you can forgive me?”

“Something like that. I think I can—I can leave it alone. That’s what I can do. Start fresh.”

Following the meanders of the Murex River, the Cadillac proceeded smoothly toward Brian’s residence.

“I’d like to hold you, Judith,” Brian said, finally. He hadn’t touched her, yet.

Judith moved close to him. In no time Brian’s arms wrapped around her, his mouth on her hair and neck.

“You’re dearest to my heart,” he murmured. “There was no decent life for me after you left.”

Chapter 39

Malcolm stood in front of a window reading the morning newspaper. Three financial institutions had suspended five of their executives. No specific reasons given. More citizens had given details of what they judged to be clever financial scams. An editor's note stated: "More complaints are being received as the paper is about to go to press. They will be printed in the next issue." Malcolm took the newspaper to his desk to copy the names of the three institutions: 'The Peoples' Helping Hand: Mutual, Loans, and Deposits,' 'The Franco-American Institute for Overseas Investments,' and 'Le Crédit Canadien pour l'Amérique Latine.' Malcolm flipped his pencil between his fingers, staring thoughtfully into space, as Paul entered the office. "I wonder what makes those banks act so quickly," he said, almost to himself.

"Fear," Paul replied, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Pure, simple old fear."

"But fear of what?"

"I just got some interesting news," Paul replied. "From an unofficial but reliable source. A young chartered accountant who had worked in the past for The Franco-American Institute offered testimony about several scams. Each followed an accurate, sophisticated pattern. The targets were seniors, or people who couldn't take care of their financial affairs, like minors and the handicapped. Often, these people depended on others for their investments, making any control or reaction slower than normal."

"Source?" Malcolm asked.

"I didn't get the source, but I got the name of one of the big fish...Leslie Hadson."

"The super-consultant? He's on the advisory board of a half dozen banks!"

"Right. It isn't official, of course. Money was invested in fake companies, phantom charitable institutions, at a face value of fifteen to twenty per cent interest. These companies—often in foreign countries—would default. The money would disappear." Paul paused. "This accountant resigned when it became clear to him that fraud was being committed."

"How is that possible? There are controls upon controls—" Malcolm asked, puzzled.

"And controllers upon controllers, and several rules and regulations. Apparently the fraud was based on shuffling the accounts from bank to bank, different branches of the same bank, back and forth. It would take months to follow each and every one of the transactions involving different banks and several foreign countries."

Malcolm nodded. "I see."

"Coffee?" Paul asked.

"Yes, please."

"The entire testimony will appear in the evening edition of the 24-Hour Bulletin. They got an exclusive." Paul came back with coffee.

Malcolm grabbed the steaming mug without looking at it, still lost in his thoughts. "So that explains the dismissal of the executives and the absolute silence of the bar association. Three of the executives were lawyers."

"Right," Paul said. "We may learn names and details by tomorrow morning."

"Any news about Tanya's case?"

"Zilch for today. Nothing new."

“You go on home, then, Paul. It’s already late.”

As Paul closed the door behind him, Malcolm decided to contact Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro. Maybe he will learn something of substance if he spoke to him directly. He dialed the number of the count’s New York residence.

“I have a problem,” Malcolm began. He introduced himself to Luigi Amedeo. “I’d like to talk to you about someone you came in contact with recently.” Malcolm paused, waiting for a reaction from Luigi Amedeo. There wasn’t any. He continued, “I wonder if I could fly down and talk to you. Perhaps you can help me.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Luigi Amedeo asked, “May I ask you who this person might be?”

“Mr. Kevin Matwin. I would like to see you tomorrow, if possible. I could take an early flight...”

“Tomorrow is fine, but I’ll only be available in the late afternoon,” Luigi Amedeo said.

“Just name the time.”

“I’ll be at home after 4:30 pm.” Luigi Amedeo paused. “And I’d appreciate it if you came alone.”

At precisely 5:00 pm, Malcolm was ushered into the count’s den by a tall, silent butler. He didn’t talk: he only bowed and gestured.

Luigi Amedeo invited him to sit in the off-white leather chesterfield as he turned on a floor lamp. He sat in a companion chair, crossed his legs and waited for Malcolm to initiate the conversation.

“I heard that you’re a possible investor in Mr. Matwin’s new CD laboratory,” Malcolm said, casually.

“Yes,” Luigi Amedeo replied. “I am.”

“Excuse me, but it appears you aren’t really an investor. You’re the owner of a travel agency in the States. Do you have any other business?” Malcolm waited silently for an answer.

Luigi Amedeo appeared flustered. “I have another travel agency in Italy.” He paused. “You must excuse my poor grasp of the English language. My understanding of the word ‘investor’ is that of a person who has money and is willing to invest it in a business. Please correct me if I’m wrong.”

“No, you’re not wrong.” Malcolm cleared his throat “However, you certainly don’t fit the description of the usual investor.”

“Perhaps, as you say. But I do not know what a ‘usual investor’ might be. Right now, I have some money available and an interest in Mr. Matwin’s new laboratory.”

Malcolm cleared his throat again and looked casually around the room. “You’ve probably read the newspapers. They carried the news of Ms. Tanya Howard’s death.”

Only Luigi Amedeo’s lips moved to utter the sound, “Yes.” No other muscles did.

Malcolm watched him intently as he said, “She really isn’t dead.”

“Yes.” Luigi Amedeo nodded, his face impenetrable.

“She’s really alive,” Malcolm said. “Someone has been making attempts on her life.”

Luigi Amedeo tilted his head and raised one eyebrow.

“You met her on the Italian Riviera. Do you have any suspicions, any suggestions that would help point us in the right direction?”

“No,” Luigi Amedeo replied, shaking his head. “I was very happy to hear Ms. Tanya Howard was alive and well.”

“Ah, then you knew before I told you? Knew she was alive?” Malcolm shaded his eyes with his hand as the light coming from the floor lamp hit him face on.

“Oh, yes. Mr. Matwin told me. When I read the news, I called Kevin, and he informed me of the truth.”

“What is your interest in Ms. Howard?”

Luigi Amedeo shrugged. He waited while his butler served coffee and a few cookies on a silver tray, then left as inconspicuously as he entered. “Please. Help yourself to coffee,” he said. “Or would you prefer something stronger?” Luigi Amedeo poured coffee from a tall silver pot into an exquisitely decorated cup.

“No, thank you. But please—do you have any interest in Ms. Tanya Howard?” Malcolm asked.

“Yes, as my business partner’s beloved friend and artistic advisor, I certainly do.” Luigi Amedeo sipped the thick, dark brew from his cup.

Malcolm would have paid a vast sum if he were able to read Luigi Amedeo’s expressions, but he sat against the light, Luigi Amedeo beside it. “So you really aren’t able to help me with any information...”

Again, Luigi Amedeo shrugged. “I’m afraid not. I know little about the life of Ms. Tanya Howard.”

Malcolm stood. “Thank you for your hospitality. But if you think of anything, anything at all—a suspect, a suspicion—would you contact me?”

Luigi Amedeo nodded. “Most certainly,” he said, and rose to escort Malcolm from his home.

* * *

Back at the Invicta, Malcolm glanced at his desk, piled high with papers, memos and notes. On top of his workstation was a yellow post-it from Paul: he was flying to Montreal, following a lead on the Caldwell’s investments in Europe. Malcolm sat in front of his empty aquarium, looking for inspiration.

One of his men was dead, another was still recovering from his wounds. Judith was stuck with Tanya, his only other female agent was about to get married. Paul was away, and Joe, as usual, was nowhere to be found. Malcolm sighed and felt slightly sorry for himself.

He considered Tanya’s case: he had two suspects, the Italian count and her lover. The police had no more than he had. The situation wasn’t one of the best, he thought, then decided to give his weekly call to Detective Warner of the Vermeil Police Station.

If we have nothing else to chat about, he thought, I can tell him what I think of the last man he recommended to me.

“Malcolm,” Warner said. “I was just about to call you. This very moment.”

“About the Caldwell case?”

“Yes. The police in Genova knew her real identity late in the spring. We both agreed not to pass that information to anybody. Correct?” Warner paused, cleared his throat. “Only our offices knew, correct?”

“Right,” Malcolm replied. “Right. We need to discover how the leak came about, if it were accidental, or if—”

“I’m already digging on this side,” Warner said.

“I’ll do the same.” Malcolm hung up the phone and sat staring into space.

Chapter 40

Paul entered the Sorrento, a restaurant only a five-minute drive from the headquarters of the Invicta. He brushed passed the line of waiting diners and briskly reached the table where Malcolm sat, eating his dinner. “Sorry to interrupt your meal, Malcolm, but I have striking news about Tanya’s relatives.” He sat in front of him.

“You’re going to have to speak up,” Malcolm said, his mouth still partially full of fish. “With all this noise, I can’t hear a word.”

“That’s music, Malcolm, not noise. They’re Neapolitan songs,” Paul said with a laugh. “I have bad news.” He enunciated each word with care, exaggerating the syllables with his lips.

“Let’s hear it.”

“Tanya had an aunt, Jo Anne Withley, as you know. She was a half-sister of Tanya’s father, Henry. She became Jo Anne Crowford with her first marriage...”

“...she then married Ron Withley and had a daughter, Susan. Why are you telling me something I already know?” Malcolm frowned at Paul and took another forkful of food from his plate.

“Finish your fish while I finish my story,” Paul said, brushing aside Malcolm’s complaints. “In between her two marriages, she married Leslie Hadson—”

“Leslie Hadson? That Leslie Hadson?” Malcolm’s fork lingered in mid-air.

“Yes. There’s more. The father of Leslie Hadson was the director of the Montreal firm which handled the Caldwell’s investments in Europe—the firm that defaulted.”

Malcolm put down his fork and stared at Paul.

“That firm liquidated all of Tanya’s parents’ assets here and in Europe. They split them into three deposits that we know of: one in France, one in Switzerland, and one in Italy. Ron Withley was nominated Tanya’s Power of Attorney through a Canadian Consulate in Italy.”

“Legally?”

“Legal enough to authorize financial transactions. Conspicuous amounts of money were withdrawn systematically for Tanya’s needs—enough for a princess.”

“Is there more?” Malcolm asked, his gaze intent on Paul.

Paul nodded. “The fund consisted of more than two hundred million dollars.”

“Two hundred!” Malcolm nearly jumped from his seat, and yelped with such force, his voice carried over the entire room. Diners at the closer tables turned to stare at him. Malcolm, not at all disconcerted, focused on what Paul had to say.

“Yes. Two hundred, originally. Only two and a half million can be traced now. Traced, mind you, not found. It was a scam.” Paul leaned back, more at ease, now.

“Where are these people?”

“They’re in Europe. They kept changing residences and addresses. Right now, they can’t be located.”

“Joe had problems too. He couldn’t find any information,” Malcolm said, pensive.

“Well, it wasn’t easy. But some of the records, such as those of the associations which defaulted, are of public domain. All Joe had to do was to consult the archives.”

“I see. You’ve worked hard, Paul.”

“Yes, I did. And I also went without food all day. Okay if I join you?”

“By all means. Go to the buffet. It’s excellent, especially the fish: breaded shrimp, grilled halibut, stuffed trout...”

“Too bad I don’t care for fish. I’m sure they have some meat up there, too,” Paul said, and rose.

“Don’t rush. I need a good break now, since I have to go back to my office after I leave here,” Malcolm said with a soft groan.

“So late? It’s ten o’clock now...”

“There’s something I need to do myself, and I want to do it when I’m least likely to be interrupted.”

Paul nodded, but frowned.

With his plate heaped high, Paul sat in front of Malcolm again. “You worked late every night last week,” he said with concern.

“Yes, but there’s a job I need to do myself, one that takes a lot of thought. I can’t delegate it to anyone else.”

“Super confidential, eh?”

“Absolutely top secret,” Malcolm said, nodding.

“All right, then I don’t want to know any more,” Paul said, cutting into a slice of rare roast beef. “By the way, you said you were close to finding more evidence about Leslie Hadson before I left. Any luck?”

“Plenty. Brian went through papers and calls of his ex-partner. He traced two calls made to Central America, and five financial deposits routed over there via Hadson’s office. Enough evidence to get the police out looking for him.”

“Is your super-secret project involved with that, Malcolm?”

“No. It isn’t for his case I have to stay at the office. I have something very nasty on my hands.”

“I’m too tired to be curious.” He yawned. “You may not go home at all tonight, Malcolm, but I will. Good night.”

“Good night, Paul.”

Back at his office, Malcolm logged into the workstation reserved for receiving and sending confidential messages. Each data transfer occurred through special channels and was encoded with one of the newest ciphers. He looked at the log of the incoming messages. Five faxes had been forwarded from Interpol over the previous days. They had not reached him, though. They contained photos of Luigi Amedeo di Monteturro and Caltabieni. The first group showed the two men leisurely lying on the deck of the yacht Cecilia Maria. The second showed Caltabieni hugging Luigi Amedeo at the bottom step of the aircraft Il Falco. The enclosed text gave the information gathered by Interpol. Caltabieni was a prominent figure, professionally and socially. He was actively involved in helping young artists through aggressive fund-raising campaigns. He has been investigated twice because of his life-style, but cleared each time.

Malcolm thought for a moment, then decided to send a message back to the network’s nodes of origin, the first in Paris, the second in Rome: “In relation to the recent attempts on the life of Ms. Tanya Caldwell, alias Tanya Howard, I suspect a link between her and Tomaso Caltabieni may exist. Any connections Caltabieni might have or be suspected to have within North America would be extremely useful information.” He signed it ‘Malcolm Clark,’ and sent a carbon copy of it to Warner at police headquarters.

Malcolm stretched and yawned. He logged off, started a new pot of coffee, and fetched the

dossiers of all employees hired by the Invicta. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 41

“Are you sure it’s okay? Going to your cottage? I mean, don’t you think we should let Malcolm know where we’re going?” Tanya asked. Kevin had convinced her to leave Judith’s place for his apartment, just to be with her. She had agreed, but thought it would be for one day only.

Kevin brushed aside her concerns. “If nobody knows where we are, then nobody can find us, right? The situation was starting to drive me crazy. Every time I came to see you for the past two weeks, we were never alone.”

Tanya stroked his cheek with gentle fingers, tracing his features. “I wanted to make love to you, too, Kevin. It wasn’t good for me, either. But I did try to do what Malcolm suggested.”

Kevin kissed her with tiny butterfly kisses, starting at her nose and covering her entire face. “My girl’s as spontaneous in sex as she is when she paints or talks. When I can’t be with you, I feel like I’m deprived of a part of myself.” He paused, shook his head. “It’s difficult to explain. I don’t work well. I’m nervous, shaky like an addict coming down from a high.” He smiled at her. “You’ll love my cottage. It’s very nice, near Mont Tremblant. And I know you’ll find lots of artistic inspiration. That is, if I leave you alone long enough.” He nibbled on her ear. “Now. Do you need any new clothes? You don’t have much in your bag.”

Tanya shook her head. “Enough to go to a cottage.”

“I’ll fix a thermos of coffee to take with us in the car,” Kevin said, and swiftly moved toward the kitchen.

“How about a snack before we go?” Tanya asked.

Kevin grinned. “I forgot having sex makes you hungry. Coffee with a muffin coming up.”

“You have nice photos of your women,” said Tanya nearing the walls of Kevin’s living room. “I didn’t know Jane was so beautiful. The picture I saw didn’t do her justice. And Milena...she had lovely eyes, very much alive.”

“Not as alive as yours,” said Kevin as he returned with two steaming cups of coffee.

“Thank you, Kevin. And this is Vanessa, right? I wouldn’t have recognized her. She doesn’t have a sweet look.”

“Tanya, you’ve seen pictures of the women in my past: where?” Kevin’s inquisitive eyes were all over her.

“A little secret...”

“Another secret?”

“Yes. It’s a super-secret.” She giggled.

“No, no...no super-secrets allowed from a future husband. Out with it, Tanya.” Kevin tried to look stern.

“Malcolm received a long fax on my neighbor-to-be, Mr. Kevin Matwin. The office was empty, except for me. I read it all.” Again, she giggled.

“Tsk...bad girl! Had you seen pictures of me before we met?”

“Oh, yes, a few photographs, along with several newspaper clippings about your work.”

“That proves it: you need someone mature to keep you out of trouble.” He gulped the remainder of his coffee. “Can you get a move on? Hurry it up a bit? I really want to get going.”

The phone rang. Kevin moved into the den, but Tanya could hear him distinctly.

“Yes, Jeff.” Pause. “No, I couldn’t return your call immediately.” Long silence. “No, no. Don’t jump to conclusions. Things didn’t work out as planned, that’s all.” Kevin sounded calm. “It will happen. Don’t worry. I have faith in our new man.”

A short pause followed. “I’ve already told you, there has been a change of plans. I’ll call you when it’s done.” Another pause. “I have no time to discuss it further, Jeff. Trust me. I’ll call you real soon. Goodbye.”

Near Mont Tremblant, Quebec

“Oh, Kevin, it’s beautiful!” Tanya stared at the wood cottage with cathedral ceiling and windows all around. “And the interior—” she said as she walked inside. “Rustic style. Very nice.” Soft white sheepskins covered the wide-board floor; alpine reproductions hung on the walls, each representing a site where the Winter Olympics had taken place.

“It looks exactly like a ski resort,” Tanya said. “Unique and very, very classy. Nice pictures...Garmisch, 1936. And this of Innsbruck, 1964—well, incredibly picturesque with all those snowy peaks...” She turned toward Kevin. “You were right. I’ll love it here.”

“This cottage was a wedding gift from my second wife. She decorated it especially for me. After the divorce, I never came back to stay.”

“Regrets?”

“Not really. Milena was very exuberant and generous, both with her money and her body. Not much anyone could do about it.” He glanced at Tanya. “You can’t fight nature, or fate.” He looked deeply into Tanya’s eyes, his expression somber. “That holds true for us, too, Tanya.”

Chapter 42

Jeff Moore arrived early at the appointment with Kevin's company lawyer, Leslie Hadson. Hadson's head office, located in the old headquarters of The Peoples' Helping Hand, was a one-story construction with an ample entrance, a waiting area with colorful chairs in the left corner, a receptionist's kiosk in the middle and a row of offices on the right.

The receptionist wasn't at her desk and the sliding door giving access to the offices was locked. Surprised, Jeff pressed the button on the internal speaker.

"We're closed. Come back next week," a voice said.

"Leslie? Is that you? Jeff Moore here. We set up an appointment for today—before I left for France."

"Oh—it's you, Jeff. Right. Come in." A prolonged beep signaled that the door was unlocked. "Make sure the door closes behind you, Jeff. I'm in the old bank vault. I have some business to do back here."

Jeff entered and descended into the basement, where the old safety deposit boxes and the time-vault were located.

"Leslie? Are you okay? There's a lot of smoke around here. How come the smoke detectors aren't working?"

"It's okay, Jeff, I shut them off. Don't worry, just follow the smoke. I'm burning a few papers."

Coughing repeatedly, Jeff descended the stairway, his steps uncertain. Two large metal containers, one blue and acting as an incinerator, the other green and still empty, stood in the middle of the vault. Leslie, in a grey suit with a shiny yellow tie, was feeding paper into the blue container.

"Leslie, what are you doing? And where's everyone else?"

"Not much time to explain, Jeff. I've laid off all of my employees and closed up the practice." Leslie's movements were precise, and yet frantic.

"What? Why?"

"Oh, just a little trouble I seem to be in," Leslie said with a smirk. He continued his work.

"What kind of trouble?"

"The people who were supposed to back me up aren't working any more. They've been dismissed." Leslie didn't lift his gaze from the fire in the container.

"Dismissed?" The place was getting hot, and very smoky. He coughed. "Who was supposed to back you up, and for what?" Jeff asked, coughing again.

Leslie raised one eyebrow and glanced at Jeff. "Where have you been?" he asked in a sarcastic tone.

"France. Personal business. But tell me about these people who were supposed to back you up—"

Leslie paused, glanced at Jeff, then continued to toss paper into the blue container. "Some people were supposed to cover for me, justify what I did, one way or another. But they've been fired. They were directors of influential banks." Leslie continued to toss paper into the container, unperturbed. "Inquiries are under way... in each of the financial institutions where I acted as a

consultant for domestic or foreign investments. I'm afraid I'll be blamed for every loss they encountered."

"Leslie, if you haven't done anything wrong, then there's no reason to run."

Leslie burst into laughter. "If I haven't done anything wrong? How do you think I managed three ex-wives, a girl friend, a yacht, and three residences? I'm in up to my neck, dear friend. I have to disappear." The flames licked out of the top of the container and Leslie slowed the pace at which he dropped in papers.

Jeff stared, his mouth slightly open. He waved his hand to clear the smoke in front of him.

"Don't look so surprised. You must have suspected that the last deal I cut for your boss was shaky."

"No. No, I didn't. Neither did Mr. Matwin." Jeff said. "That's why I asked for this appointment: to clarify the entire matter."

Leslie laughed aloud. "Then he has a surprise in store." The blue container was now full of ashes. Leslie began to use the other, still empty.

"Fill that flower pot with water and dump some into my new incinerator, Jeff. It's pretty hot, and I want to cool it down some." He laughed nervously. "Thank God, there's no technology available to recover written text from ashes."

Jeff didn't move. "I'd better be going."

"You can't get out, Jeff. Don't be an idiot. Do as I tell you."

Reluctantly, Jeff fetched the water and poured some into the green container.

"Now get me those files," Leslie said, pointing to a jumble of folders in the corner. "That's the last batch. Then I'm finished with the paper."

"How much is Kevin going to lose?" Jeff asked as Leslie began to drop folder after folder into the container.

"I paid you twenty thousand, right? And the deal was for three hundred thousand. Kevin got fifty thousand as a deposit for the order. He won't see much more than what he already has."

"But why? The companies—" Jeff almost shouted. He began to shake, the smoke bothering not only his lungs, but also his stomach.

"The companies are phantom companies with fake addresses. They'll undersell the books and keep the money. No way to trace them. One is in Thailand, one in the Philippines, and one in Hong Kong." Leslie dusted his hands together; all of the papers were burned.

"Now I have to deal with diskettes and the like. For each client—each victim, that is—there's a safety deposit box. I have both keys. Each diskette contains backup material. Basically a copy of what I've just burned."

"Leslie. Did you do unlawful things?" Jeff shivered, his nerves stretched as tight as a watch spring.

"Unlawful?" Leslie snorted, then laughed again. "Nice term. Yes, I'm afraid I did. And I managed to involve a lot of the people around me, so they wouldn't talk. But one fellow—just one fellow—blew the whistle. I have to disappear or, sooner or later, they'll catch me." He continued, "Actually, I'd like to take off before they think of looking for me. And that, knowing how the law works, will take at least a week."

"But your customers...don't they have enough evidence to trace what you've done? To expose you?"

"Sure. But most of them won't be able to understand what's going on. I chose seniors, the physically disabled who wouldn't admit to their inferiority, the ones who believe I'm a benefactor, giving away money for legal business transactions. The simple of mind, I mean. I

personally selected all of my clients.”

“So,” Jeff said, disgust coloring his words, “I’m either a crook or an idiot.”

“No, yes. Well...you weren’t a candidate right away. At the beginning, when we considered the loan for the CD lab, I thought you were okay. Pretty honest. The boy scout type. I didn’t dare to do anything too much out of place at that time. But then I discovered a few interesting facts—that your wife gambles, and that you were the friend to whom Ron Withley delegated the shuffling of a little girl named Tanya Caldwell.” Leslie laughed again, a raucous, ugly sound. “And I thought you were an honest guy!”

“Well, yes, Ron gave me the money to pay the families who hosted her. The girl had nobody left. I though Ron was pretty decent to do that—”

Leslie’s laughter hurt. “You mean you didn’t know?” He stared into Jeff’s eyes, then took a big bundle of keys from his briefcase.

“What? Know what?” Jeff felt a big pang in his stomach.

“Nothing. I’m sure Ron Withley paid you for your services.”

“Yes. He paid me five hundred dollars a year, plus expenses.”

“I see.” Leslie gave Jeff a master key and twenty other keys. “Take the left wall. Unlock each box. You need to insert the master key and one of the others, both at the same time. The keys are ordered top to bottom, left to right. Move!”

“What will you do with these boxes?”

“They contain special tokens which I’ll leave where they are. But the floppies, the tapes... they have to disappear. This material basically duplicates what I just burned.”

“Leslie,” Jeff said, slowly unlocking a box, “I didn’t know the deal for Kevin was a—a—”

“A fraud? But think about it, Jeff. Why would I pay you twenty thousand dollars for that transaction?” Leslie dropped all the contents of the boxes into a big suitcase. He moved to Jeff’s side and helped him finish.

“It was the amount my wife, Eleanore, needed for her—for her problem. For her gambling debt. I thought you were being tactful in helping her—us.”

“Please! You make me laugh. Do I look like a charitable institution? For God’s sake, Jeff... wake up.” He closed his suitcase. “Let’s go now. I’ll tell certain people to be generous with you in the next operation.” Together, they exited the vault.

“What next operation?” he asked. Leslie hurried up the stairs, but Jeff didn’t move.

“It’s better if you don’t know. It seems to work extremely well that way,” Leslie shouted.

Jeff darted for the washroom.

Leslie rushed outside carrying the all-important suitcase with professional composure. He had just descended the few steps in front of the building when two officers approached and stopped him.

Detective Warner arrived at the scene, the brakes of his car squealing as he came to a stop in front of the building. One of the officers had just finished talking to Mr. Hadson. Warner approached the group and gently removed the suitcase from underneath Leslie’s hand. “I’ll take this, and relieve you of the load, Mr. Hadson. It won’t be too useful where you’re going, but it will be very, very useful to us, I’m sure.”

Malcolm was sitting in the back of Warner’s Crown Victoria. “Satisfied?” Warner asked as he returned to his car.

“Not bad,” Malcolm replied with nonchalance.

“Malcolm, come on, I know you all too well. Hadson’s arrest was the highlight of your

week,” Warner said. He laughed. “Of mine, too, I must admit.”

Malcolm gave him a sidelong look. “Well, I admit it. The operation lifted my moral—something I very much needed.”

The unmarked car took the Gardiner Express at full speed, heading for Pearson International Airport. “Are you sure you want to go alone to pay another visit to Mr. di Monteturro?”

“Yes. I just want to do some digging into his relationship with Tanya. I have the feeling there’s more there than it appears.”

“Well, good luck, then, Malcolm. I’ll put a tail on our other suspect.”

Chapter 43

It's going to be difficult, Malcolm thought as he left the Boeing 757. His meeting with Luigi Amedeo would take some careful planning. He wanted Luigi Amedeo to cooperate, which meant he would have to speak of Tanya. He didn't want to reveal too much about her situation, however. Still undecided on how to handle the upcoming encounter, he headed toward the exit of Kennedy Airport.

"Mr. Clark? Malcolm?" a voice behind him said.

As he turned, Malcolm saw Luigi Amedeo. "I didn't expect to see you here," he said.

"You told me it was urgent, and that it concerned Tanya Howard Caldwell. I thought we might touch base on our way to my place." The tone of Luigi Amedeo's voice was unusually warm.

"Thanks, though you took me a bit by surprise."

"I realized that. Do you believe Tanya's life is still in danger?" Luigi Amedeo asked.

"Yes, I do."

"So, you think I can help you?" Luigi Amedeo unlocked the doors of an anonymous black Olds 88. Both men entered the car and buckled up. "What are the 'new elements' you mentioned on the phone?" He began to drive.

Malcolm opened his briefcase and spread pictures of Luigi Amedeo with Caltabieni, the first set on the yacht Cecilia Maria, the second set near the aircraft Il Falco.

"You know Caltabieni," Malcolm said with a twinkle of reproach.

"Yes," replied Luigi Amedeo calmly. "I do."

"You helped him in a special operation, back in June." Malcolm paused, one eyebrow raised.

"Correct. I helped the authorities with the rescue of an abducted boy."

"A mafia Don's boy," Malcolm said with contempt.

"I didn't ask the boy if he was related to the mafia, I just rescued him."

Luigi Amedeo concentrated on the traffic, heavy at that time of day. He wove in and out of lanes. Within twenty-five minutes, he was in the underground parking lot of his apartment building. He invited Malcolm into his den and switched on an antique brass chandelier.

"Make yourself comfortable, Malcolm. Would you like a drink?" Luigi Amedeo asked.

"A glass of water would be fine," Malcolm replied. He took a seat on the off-white chesterfield.

"So...I can help Tanya, you said?" Luigi Amedeo asked as he poured ice water into two cut crystal glasses. He sat in front of Malcolm and crossed his legs.

"I'm following a lead," Malcolm replied, accepting the glass of water. "No one except the police in Vermeil and my people at the agency knew Tanya Howard's real identity. For reasons we're still investigating, a leak occurred on the other side of the Atlantic. Sometime in June the office of Caltabieni learned of Tanya's identity. It's my guess you may have had something to do with it." Luigi Amedeo drank his water in a few quick gulps. Malcolm continued, "We also have evidence of Charles Aldrin taking trips to Genova around that time and continuing until the accident at Mr. Matwin's villa."

"Evidence? What evidence?" Luigi Amedeo asked.

“We believe Charles Aldrin took the toll freeway, entering at Carmel. On the ticket, which must be returned at the station of exit, the size range of the car engine is recorded. Carmel had only two cars of that size: Kevin’s Alfa Romeo and Tanya’s Fiat. The local police have a record of six trips to Genova.”

Luigi Amedeo refilled his glass with water. “I can’t help a great deal there,” he said, sounding each word slowly. “I was interested in learning the identity of the new owners of *La Mimosa*. Your guess is correct. I asked Caltabieni if he knew where the new owners came from and when they bought the mansion, but that was all.” He stared into Malcolm’s eyes. “Just an interest, per se.”

Malcolm cleared his throat. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Yes.” Luigi Amedeo brushed off a nonexistent spot from his trousers. “Yes, I do,” he repeated firmly.

“And why is that?” Malcolm leaned toward Luigi Amedeo.

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Luigi Amedeo—I believe in facts, hard evidence. I don’t take ‘the truth’ at face value.”

Luigi Amedeo sipped at his water, his expression pensive. “I spent wonderful times at *La Mimosa* when I was a kid. For a long time, I searched for the new owners.” He looked out of the window, ignoring Malcolm.

“You mean to tell me that you asked Caltabieni for information on Tanya, simply because you were interested in the ownership of that estate?” Luigi Amedeo did not respond. “If you were interested in that property, you could have simply contacted the people living there.” Malcolm paused. He stared at Luigi Amedeo. With a sharp, metallic voice he then asked: “What interest do you have in Tanya Caldwell?”

Luigi Amedeo looked into Malcolm’s eyes. “I had a great deal of interest in Tanya then. And now, I have even more. I’m concerned about her. I care.”

“Why?” Malcolm asked with intensity. “Why?”

Luigi Amedeo was silent for several seconds as he appraised Malcolm. “Do I have your word none of this will pass beyond these walls? That you will not reveal what I’m going to tell you to anyone, for any reason? It’s very important to me.”

“I understand. I promise. It will remain a secret between the two of us.”

“She is my half-sister,” Luigi Amedeo said in a whisper.

Malcolm sat back abruptly and drank the remainder of the water. He drew a deep breath. “Your sister! What proof do you have of your kinship to Tanya Caldwell?”

Luigi Amedeo rose and went to his desk. He withdrew a grey envelope and handed it to Malcolm. “This is a letter Tanya’s mother wrote to my father. I discovered this letter and became aware of its content only recently.” Luigi Amedeo stopped, as he found it difficult to utter words. “Only recently, I said, I found out of my kinship to Tanya.” He looked at Malcolm. “Would you like me to translate this letter for you?”

Malcolm took the envelope and extracted the letter. “That won’t be necessary, Mr. di Monteturro. My mother tongue is French and I read Italian.” He was silent as he read the letter. “It appears that your father, Michele, and Tanya’s mother, Carla, stayed in contact with each other. Your father...” Malcolm hesitated. “This letter—your father knew that Carla was pregnant with his child. What else do you know?”

Luigi Amedeo shrugged. “Not much more. One night, at the opening of a new casino, my father challenged Henry Caldwell at gambling. My father lost the largest vineyard and the property on the Riviera. If we believe what this letter implies, the Caldwells wanted to return

both the house and the vineyard. My father insisted the mansion should go to his child. Carla accepted.” Luigi Amedeo paused. “My father was very, very sick at that time. He died shortly thereafter.” Luigi Amedeo refilled the glasses with water. There was no other sound for some time.

“Yourself, Luigi Amedeo—you believe Tanya is your half-sister?”

“Oh, yes, I’m certain she is. She wears a locket that belonged to my family for generations. My father wouldn’t have given that medallion away except for a very special reason. When I saw it on her neck, I recognized it immediately.”

“Your father could have given it to Carla as a token of his love.”

Luigi Amedeo shook his head. “Not likely. The legend behind the locket is that it would protect pregnant women. Tradition called for the woman of the titled male to wear it as soon as she was with child. My father, Michele, would have respected the tradition, I’m certain.” Luigi leaned back and rubbed his temples. “She looks very much like my father—her big brown eyes, for example. You see, both my sister and I resemble our mother, who was fair.”

“Could I see a picture of your father?”

Luigi reached for an album on a top shelf and handed it to Malcolm.

Malcolm leafed through it intently, then close it. “Thank you, Mr. di Monteturro. You’ve been most helpful.”

“You’re welcome.” Luigi Amedeo relaxed. “By the way, how is Tanya?”

“She’s well, considering what she’s been through. She’s stashed in a very safe place. That’s all I can tell you right now.” Malcolm rose.

“Wonderful. Can I help you in any other way?” Luigi Amedeo asked.

“Well,” Malcolm said with a grin, “I have information you’ve chartered a plane to fly to Toronto this afternoon. I wonder—I’d like to ask you—would you have room for one more passenger?”

“Delighted to be of assistance, Mr. Clark,” Luigi Amedeo replied, bowing slightly.

Chapter 44

Nice, France

The director of the *Hotel Le Negresco* approached Ron and Jo Anne Withley immediately after they had finished their scrumptious dinner. “Mr. and Mrs. Withley, I’d like a word with you,” he said, his attitude professional and his expression severe. “Would you please come to my office?”

Ron Withley sat back in his chair and frowned. “What is it? Can’t you discuss it here? There’s no one around.”

The director joined them with reluctance. “I’m very sorry, Mr. Withley, but I must ask you to leave. You no longer have a line of credit remaining, and your outstanding expenses are growing rapidly. In view of the fact that you have been an excellent customer in the past, we will not involve the law if you leave immediately.”

Ron stared at him in silence, then turned to Jo Anne. “Let’s go upstairs,” he said. “I want to make a few calls.”

A few moments later a furious Ron slammed down the phone for the fourth time. “No credit! Also the Grand Hotel in San Remo refuses us, claiming we have no credit. In the past fifteen years, we’ve spent hundreds of thousands of dollars there, and they treat us as if we were thieves. No credit, indeed. It’s an insult.” He tossed his suitcase on the bed. “Come. Pack. We have to leave.”

“Pack? But where will we go?”

“To our chalet.”

“To our chalet in the mountains? At this time of year? You must be kidding! Can’t you just ask to have the money transferred? I just received a letter from Susan and Greg. They need money to go on a cruise.”

“Nothing we can do about that now,” Ron said. “Ask them to join us. We’ll stay at our chalet in the French Alps, for a while.”

Jo Anne slammed her suitcase on the bed and began to pack. “But that’s our ski residence,” she said with resentment. “Nobody’s there this time of year. Nobody who counts, at any rate.”

“Do as I say,” Ron said in anger. “It’s the only place we can afford.”

“Don’t tell me...”

“That’s enough! Move. We can’t withdraw any money. There’s no money to withdraw. We have to wait until a certain operation is concluded.”

When they arrived at the chalet in Megève, Ron Withley called Commissario Tomaso Caltabieni. “I need to see you,” he said. Caltabieni did not respond.

“Tom. It’s urgent.”

“All right. Tomorrow, one o’clock, as usual. Lunch at *Il Bosco*,” Caltabieni said and hung up the phone.

Shortly after they were both seated, Ron turned to Caltabieni urgently. “I’m in hot water,” he said. “I need your help.”

“You’re in hot water!” Resentment filled Caltabieni’s voice. “I gave you the information on

the whereabouts of Tanya Caldwell, alias Tanya Howard. I thought you'd be satisfied, and I thought you'd be cautious. At the least, I thought you'd be discreet." Caltabieni turned away from Ron Withley, contempt in his eyes. "But no. Oh, no. You had to contact Charles Aldrin and invite him here, at headquarters, no less. You had some nerve..."

"I never brought him into your office, though..."

"Well, thanks for small favors! You had no way to enter my office. Of course, the meetings weren't in my office."

"Try to understand. At the beginning, everything had to look legitimate, or Charles Aldrin wouldn't have come." They stopped arguing and briskly ordered their lunch.

Caltabieni glanced at Ron with suspicion, after the waiter left. "Now what's wrong? What's your big problem?"

"Wait. Do you remember a sketch you admired, a beautiful sketch by Modigliani? The last time we were in Paris together? At the little gallery near the mosque?"

They were both silent as a waiter promptly served them each a dish of *funghi trifolati*.

"Do you remember?" Ron asked again.

"Vaguely," said Caltabieni glancing around.

"It's called 'The Picture That Could Never Be,' because of the death of the model. Do you remember it now?"

"Do you mean 'The Woman in the Blue Veils'? It's almost as good as a finished picture!"

"Yes, that's the one. I'll be glad to offer it to you, simply because you're my friend, and for the previous favor you did for me."

"Well...perhaps we should forget the past," Caltabieni said. He concentrated on the mushrooms freshly picked from the mountain, savoring each forkful.

"Great. Consider The Woman in the Blue Veils hanging on the wall of your living room," Ron said.

Caltabieni dabbed at his lips with his napkin. "What did you want to see me for?" He pushed his plate, completely empty, away from him.

Ron shook his head as two waiters came toward their table with coffee and trays of pastry. "There's a crowd around us, Tom. The restaurant is packed, and yet, the waiters seem to have plenty of time for us. There is someone near our table at all times."

"I noticed," Caltabieni said, finishing his glass of Rosatello Ruffino. "And this isn't the first time it's happened, either. We have to choose another place for our meetings." He glanced around the room. "Not safe enough. Let's get out of here."

Nearly out of the restaurant, Caltabieni grabbed Ron's arm. "Don't turn and don't look. Someone is taking our picture. Just walk down the street. Act normal. Don't rush."

The two men strolled down the walkway, peering into the occasional shop window. After a few blocks, Caltabieni turned to Ron. "Talk now," he said. "But make it snappy."

"I need a killer. Expert and reliable," Ron murmured.

"What's in it for me?"

"The usual: five million dollars."

Caltabieni walked briskly now, trying to see if anyone in the street imitated his fast pace. "I'll give you instructions on how to contact my nephew. He's been helpful on a couple of occasions, and he's also in the right place, at the right time." Caltabieni paused and looked up at the sky, his expression thoughtful. "If we succeed, or rather, when we succeed, I may retire, both from my job and from my 'connections.' Finally free!" He looked at Ron with satisfaction. "Of course, you'll have to run the operation well, without leaving any trail."

“Don’t worry, I know the system and how to make it work. I’ve been practicing for the last fifteen years.”

“Fine,” Caltabieni said, and glanced around. “We better show that we have a goal for today’s meeting. There’s a retrospective of Modigliani two blocks from here. Let’s go there. *Modi* is one of my favorite artists, as you well know.” Caltabieni eyes took on a dreamy glow. “I like the way he paints his women, with those long, delicate necks, and a look in their eyes of anticipation and surrender.”

Chapter 45

Paul walked into Malcolm's office without knocking. "You won't believe this," he said sharply. "Tanya has disappeared and so has Kevin. They didn't tell anyone where they were going. Tanya just left a note to Judith saying she was going to be with Kevin for a while." Paul snorted and shook his head.

"Why would she do that?" Malcolm asked, turning his head away from the computer monitor. "I expected to hear from her, since I asked her to stay with Judith for two weeks, and the two weeks are long past. I thought she would at least talk to me..."

"But Malcolm...aren't you worried about her? I thought Kevin was a suspect?"

"He is. And I am worried. I've been worried about Tanya for the last three weeks." He looked at Paul, his expression full of dismay. "But I can't control my clients."

"Right..." Paul said with a sigh. "You're right."

Two days later, Paul again entered Malcolm's office without knocking. "We're in trouble, I'm afraid," he said. "Jeff Moore, Kevin's manager, was the person in charge of passing monthly payments to Tanya's foster families. The families received a cash payment and issued a receipt. That's why we couldn't trace them. Except that—in just a few cases, Jeff Moore wrote a check. I have a copy of them." Paul tossed two photocopies onto Malcolm's desk, then slumped into one of the easy chairs. "This means that Jeff Moore was in contact with Ron Withley during all those years."

"Ah, another snare," Malcolm said, looking at Paul above his reading glasses. He rose and slowly paced his office.

"Jeff Moore may not have recognized Tanya at first. Her name, when he met her at Kevin's, was Howard. But it's hard to believe he could ignore her real identity now."

"Tanya may be in danger," Malcolm said. He stopped pacing and looked out of the middle window.

"Not if she's already dead."

Malcolm's head jerked back and he stared at Paul. "How many residences does Kevin Matwin have?"

"Well, not counting the villa on the Riviera, he has two. An apartment in Toronto and a winter cottage in Quebec, near Mont Tremblant."

"And you have the address of the winter cottage?" Malcolm didn't wait for an answer. "Call the local police. Have them run a check on Kevin's residence. The man doesn't like hotels. My guess is that the two lovers are at the cottage. Get Tanya out."

"How?"

"I don't care how, just get her out."

"You're not coming?"

"No, not right away," Malcolm replied. "I'm expecting an important call."

Two hours later, Malcolm received two phone calls. One was from Paul, telling him that Kevin was, indeed, at the cottage. He would be driving there immediately. The other was from Detective Warner urging him to come at once to police headquarters.

Chapter 46

Kevin's two-story cottage, set back against the trees, blended in as if it had grown there. It was made entirely of black cherry logs with a second floor balcony nestling all around it. It appeared to be empty, no sign of Kevin and Tanya, although Kevin's Porsche, a remake of the famous 911 model, was parked in front of the entrance. The main door was locked.

Paul walked around the cottage, looking for an entry. A maple and a spruce competed for the total occupancy of the southern wall. Stepping from branch to branch as if he climbed a stairway, he reached the balcony. He opened a window and entered, quickly memorizing the setting as he wandered from room to room. When he was finished, he quietly slipped from the balcony onto the branches and climbed down the trees. Clearly, the place hadn't been looked after for quite some time, Paul concluded. He strolled down the hill. At the second turn down the gravel road, he met Kevin and Tanya returning home.

"It's Paul," Tanya said cheerfully. "Hi, Paul! How did you find us?"

"The same way a killer would find you," Paul replied. "Hello, Kevin." Paul shook hands with both Kevin and Tanya, then turned to Tanya. "I'm here on a mission. Mr. Clark would like you to come back. He strongly recommends that you be under professional surveillance."

"Why?" Tanya asked. "It's been quiet for the past three weeks, very peaceful. No problems."

"True. But we believe you're still in danger. That's why I'm here." Paul's expression was serious, almost somber.

Slowly, they walked back to the cottage, Tanya and Kevin holding hands.

"Why don't we talk about it over supper?" Kevin asked amiably. "I plan to barbecue a few sausages and have supper on the back porch. It's going to be a nice evening, probably one of the last. Summer will soon be over."

Paul hardly repressed a sigh. "Fine," he replied. "But I'd like to be on the road before dark."

Tanya served a green salad, fresh bread, and the smoked sausages on the picnic table. They sat and began to eat, chatting about the nothings of life while they enjoyed their meal.

Kevin pushed his empty paper plate away and turned to Paul. "So, you plan on taking Tanya away from me again," he said with a deep sigh. "Maybe you should give us some good reasons. I just got her back." He reached for Tanya, slid his arm around her shoulders, and hugged her.

"Well," Paul said, and cleared his throat. "It's obvious that until the instigator is found, Tanya is not safe. Whoever it is, he or she may still be active."

Kevin raised one eyebrow. "And so...?"

"We just received information on the death of Tanya's parents. It was no accident. The technical report speaks of explosive aboard their plane."

Tanya gasped, drawing in a deep breath and holding it. She stared, wide-eyed, at Paul and shivered.

Kevin gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Whoever killed Tanya's parents may be very close to the people who want Tanya dead now," Paul said, staring intently into Kevin's eyes. "That's what we believe. That's why we want Tanya properly protected."

Kevin frowned. "It certainly took your company a long time to dig out facts about Tanya's past, facts that shouldn't have been too hard to find. You've been at it for six months!" Kevin paused, his breathing rapid. "However, no one knows that Tanya is here. You know of this cottage because you had gathered information on me before—when Tanya left for the Riviera, I mean."

"That is true...but both Malcolm and I feel that Tanya should be in a safer place."

For a few moments, there was silence, then the silence was broken by the sound of a car approaching the cottage.

Paul jumped to his feet. "Stay here," he said and darted to the front of the house.

Joe Halliday opened the door of his car and stepped out.

"Joe!" Paul said with a sigh of relief. "Malcolm sent you, too? Might be a good idea. I'm having a really rough time trying to get Tanya out of here."

"Malcolm thought you might need some reinforcement," Joe said softly.

A few hours later, Joe, Paul, Kevin and Tanya were seated before the fireplace inside the cottage. Kevin went outside to fetch some wood, then cleaned the ashes from the fireplace and lit a fire. He cradled Tanya in his velour jacket and rubbed her shoulders.

"You'll be warm in no time flat," he said smiling at her. He sat beside her on the sheepskin rug, their backs to the flames.

"I have a suggestion," Joe said. "Why don't we all sleep here tonight? Then Tanya can leave with us in the morning... That will give the two of you a few extra hours together. I don't think the situation is too dangerous for Tanya, not with three men inside the house."

"Oh, great!" Tanya said in response.

"That's an excellent idea," Kevin said. "Let's retire now, and meet for breakfast in the morning." He rose and drew Tanya's hand through his, pulling her along. He almost pushed her toward the stairs. "Good night, gentlemen. You can find a bed, I'm sure. There are plenty in the house."

Paul was still recovering from the rapid sequence of events when Joe began to walk across the room. "Come on, Paul. Let's go around and check out every part of the house."

"I did that already. I was here alone for almost two hours earlier today. I entered through an upstairs window."

"I think it's better to do it again," Joe said firmly. "Just in case. I'd like to get familiar with the premises, too."

Paul shrugged. "Let's start, then, by going around the house and checking all the entrances. Then I'll contact Malcolm. He may not like the arrangements." He paused, shrugged again. "But I must admit I don't feel Tanya's in any immediate danger with the two of us here to protect her."

Joe nodded. Together, they covered the downstairs area quickly. "Let me use your cellular phone, would you, Joe? Mine isn't working, and I want to touch base with Malcolm."

"Certainly. But I'll do you one better than that. I'll call Malcolm for you. I have some things in my car I need to get, anyway."

Kevin closed the bedroom door and slid his arms around Tanya's body. "Finally," he said, his voice a husky sigh. "It was so difficult to be polite, to not tell them to leave us the hell alone." He stroked Tanya's face with gentle fingers. "Not that I'm not concerned about your safety. But I've waited weeks to be with you, and now they're taking you away again." He buried his face in

her hair, breathing her scent.

“Paul is acting a little strange,” Tanya said. “He never mentioned where he wanted to take me, and why ‘there’ would be better than ‘here.’ I don’t understand.”

“It has to be Malcolm’s idea. He sees criminals all over. I have a personal dislike for the man. He actually treated me as if I were a suspect at one time.” He released Tanya. “Oh, well, let’s enjoy our time together,” he said. “But first, you should give me back my jacket,” he said smiling mysteriously.

Tanya removed his velour jacket. About to toss it to him, she felt an object in the pocket. “What’s this?”

Kevin pulled the coat from her. “No fair. You can’t go through my pockets.” He laughed.

“It has to be that mysterious little package you got at the post office,” she said, trying to grab the jacket from him.

“Uh uh...no fair! Hands off!” Kevin laughed harder, holding the coat high above his head. “Patience.”

Tanya jumped high, trying to reach the coat. “It’s for me, I know it! It’s a present, a surprise...” She giggled like a small child.

“Yes. A surprise. So, close your eyes and go sit on the bed. And don’t peek!” As Tanya complied, Kevin sat close beside her. He took her hand and slid a silver bracelet around her wrist. The bracelet was square, flat, and rigid.

“Can I open my eyes? I still don’t know what it is!” she joked.

“Not yet,” he said. He kissed each eyelid tenderly. “Now you can.”

Tanya removed the bracelet and examined it. Engraved inside, it said, “Yours forever, Kevin.” She threw her arms around him. “Oh, Kevin, thank you! It’s lovely.”

“Tanya, I want you to know that you’re the best partner I could ever dream of.”

She nestled her head against his chest. “I love you, Kevin. I’d give up everything I have to be with you.”

He began to kiss her as he gently removed each item of clothing from her eager body, then lifted her into the middle of the bed.

Chapter 47

For the third time since the chopper had left Vermeil, Malcolm asked, "What is the problem with this relic? Is that all the power it has? Can't it go any faster? It's already two in the morning!"

"Maximum speed, Mr. Clark," the pilot replied for the third time, in the same calm tone.

"How much longer until we get there?" Malcolm asked.

"One hour. Calm down, Malcolm," Detective Warner replied. "Unfortunately I had to clear out our operation with the local police. It took some time."

"Yes, yes, I know. I can't contact Paul through his cellular phone. Something must be wrong with it." Malcolm groaned. "And Kevin never had the phone hooked up at the cottage."

"You can't imagine I bad I feel, Malcolm. We've had a tail on Joe Halliday for two days, but we lost him yesterday afternoon. We wanted to catch him in action."

"I understand. You needed more evidence against him than simply the fact that he's Caltabieni's nephew."

"Well, we do have that. The company in France, the subsidiary of the Norwegian plant which produces Telgex and sells to individuals, has confirmed three shipments of material to Joe. So, Joe is involved in criminal activities. Let's hope whatever or whoever his target might be, it isn't Tanya."

Kevin woke around three o'clock in the morning, a strange sound echoing in his ears. The noise seemed to come from downstairs. He reached across the bed, between the sheets, until he felt Tanya's warm body beside him. She slept deeply with a soft, intermittent snore.

He slid from the bed and opened the door quietly, then descended the stairs on silent feet. He followed the feeble light coming from the kitchen. Someone was arranging dynamite sticks on the kitchen table. As quietly as he could, Kevin retraced his steps into the bedroom.

"Tanya! Wake up!" he murmured. He lifted her from the blankets and off of the bed. "Up, up, girl! Quickly! We're in danger."

"What...? What's the matter? What's happening?" Tanya struggled to keep her eyes open.

"Out. Out of the house, now..." Kevin pulled her and shook her to be certain she would stay awake. "Someone is going to blow this place to splinters. Be very quiet..." He put his velour jacket over her shoulders and dragged her onto the balcony. "Sit here," he said in a whisper and placed her on the balcony's edge, her legs over the side. "You have to jump slightly to the left. There's a shed underneath us. Then you have to drive away from here..." Tanya tried to protest, but he wouldn't listen. "Let go. I have you. I'll lower you to the shed."

"I'm scared..."

"Hush. Can you reach the shed roof? Stretch your legs, you can't be any more than an inch or so away. Can you feel it?" Kevin asked, concerned.

"No. Wait. I just touched something."

"Both feet on it? Okay, I'll let go now."

"No! Where are you going? Why aren't you coming with me?"

"I have to wake the others. I can't leave them behind to die. I'll come later. You drive away

now, as fast as you can, understand?”

Tanya took a deep breath. “Yes,” she said, and dropped onto the shed’s roof. She hung from the side and then jumped to the ground, just a few feet below her.

Kevin doubled over and crept along the balcony, brushing past the building’s wall to avoid a squeak of the wood beneath his feet. He peered into each room until he found Paul, lying completely dressed, on top of the bed’s quilt. Kevin tapped on the glass.

Paul was up and at the window immediately. “Kevin? What’s wrong?”

Kevin entered the room and gestured for quiet. “Someone’s in the house, setting up an explosive in the kitchen.”

Paul drew his Glock 20, opened the door, and worked his way to the top of the stairs and a view of the kitchen. He returned to Kevin.

“It’s Joe. Joe Halliday. He’s working on the detonator. Get Tanya out of the house.” Paul’s words came out in short, hurried gasps.

“She is out. I told her to drive away.”

“I haven’t heard an engine. Check up on her. She has a habit of not following instructions,” Paul said and headed back toward the doorway. “Go. I’ll take care of Joe.”

Joe Halliday stood near the entrance to the house. He deposited the flashlight and the control for the detonator on the nearby console, then quietly unlocked the door and opened it wide.

Paul, in his stocking feet, managed to creep directly behind him when Joe abruptly turned and faced him. Joe bent, then surged back with an uppercut, hitting Paul’s chin and sending him to the floor. Before Joe could move away, Paul wrapped his legs around Joe’s ankles, pulling him down. They rolled on the ground until Paul had Joe underneath him—one of Joe’s arms bent backwards. Paul swiftly recuperated his handgun and took aim. Then Joe, with a sudden, powerful twist, wrenched free, throwing Paul out of the door and down the stairway. Joe darted back inside.

Kevin and Tanya were about to drive away when they saw Paul lying on the ground. They rushed to him.

Paul’s words came out in spurts. “Joe has the remote control. He’s going to blow the place up as soon as he’s far enough away to be safe. He doesn’t know Tanya isn’t inside.”

“We’ll get you into your car, Paul,” Kevin said. “We’ll all drive together.” He lifted Paul while Tanya opened the back door of the car. Tanya bent to push Paul’s legs into the vehicle while Kevin tried to start the engine. It refused to start. He tried, and failed, a second time.

“Take the Porsche and leave,” Paul said in a whisper.

Kevin tried to start the car a third time with no success. “We’ll take you in my car.”

“There’s no room for three people in that toy of a car, Kevin. Just get Tanya and get the hell out of here, will you?”

“Yes, there is.” Kevin said calmly. “Tanya, turn my car around so I can move Paul directly into the passenger seat. Then lean the back of the driver’s seat forward, and sneak behind it.”

Tanya moved toward the car. She had gone no more than a few feet when a huge bang shook the air, followed by a rain of debris. The cottage lit with a fierce glow. The big spruce tree on the side of the house, with all of its bare and dry limbs, became an immense torch aimed at the sky.

With Paul and Tanya safely inside the vehicle, Kevin closed the door on the passenger’s side and hurried around the front of the car, sheltering his face from the flying objects. He attempted to step over a clump of flaming branches. When that failed, he began to remove them one by one. He had opened a passage through the blaze when the tip of the spruce gave way, crashing to the ground with myriad sparks. Kevin arched his back abruptly, bringing both hands to the nape

of his neck. He collapsed.

Tanya was out of the car almost before Kevin reached the ground. The flames continued to ignite anything dry around them as she dragged Kevin beside the Porsche. She was trying to lift his inert body into the vehicle when she felt a strong draft behind her. She turned.

Malcolm's helicopter had arrived, almost unnoticed—the rumble of its blades overcome by the furious crackle of the fire.

Chapter 48

Clouds of dark smoke, combined with floating ash, made the air hard to breathe. Tanya coughed repeatedly, her throat dry and raw. She could barely distinguish the white uniforms of the paramedics. She stayed close beside Kevin's stretcher, but she was pushed aside as they lifted Kevin into the air ambulance.

"No! No, I want to stay with him. Take me too." A paroxysm of coughing wracked her chest. She couldn't speak above the racket of helicopter blades, motors, and raging fire. She bent and slid beneath the paramedic who was about to close the chopper door. "I must go with him," she said and jumped into the helicopter to squat close to the gurney.

Another accident, Tanya thought. Why? Why was the world angry with me? She watched the paramedics attend to Kevin, checking his IV line, adjusting the leads on the EKG.

I've done nothing wrong, she thought. Why did Kevin have to be injured, maybe die? She glanced up at the monitors attached to Kevin. The signals were intermittent, at times disappearing entirely. Tears ran down her face unchecked.

Half an hour later, Kevin was rushed to the operating room of Saint Gilbert General Hospital. The automatic doors closed behind the stretcher, nearly brushing Tanya's face. She stood there, incapable of moving.

"How is he?" Malcolm asked when he joined her a short while later.

"He didn't move. He just lay there," Tanya said, her voice distant. "His hand was heavy, so very heavy, like the one..." Her voice cracked and she broke into tears. "He's dead, Malcolm. My wonderful Kevin is dead." The tears washed down her face and dripped from the end of her nose. "I bring bad luck. It's all my fault. First my roommate, then my love. I think I've lost him."

"You can't say that yet. Give the doctors time. They can do miracles, nowadays." Malcolm pulled her close to his chest and held her. "Let's go to the waiting room." He gently maneuvered Tanya into a long, empty hall. The dim lights and cheap upholstered chairs gave the room a somber tone.

"I don't understand," Tanya said in a little girl's voice. "I don't understand what's happening around me."

"I was afraid an accident was bound to happen," Malcolm said. "There was a leak of information at the police station. As soon as we became responsible for your safety, it became our leak at the Invicta. Recently, that leak became a killer. Mr. Joseph Halliday is the last link in a chain of people hired to kill you. He'd have done the job at Kevin's apartment or at Judith's place if he failed at the cottage."

"Joe? Who in the world hired Joe?" Distressed, she stared at Malcolm.

"He's linked to a *cosca mafiosa* in Italy. They sent the order."

"Where is Joe now?" Tanya asked.

"I received news he was found in the woods, seriously injured. He seems to have pulled the trigger too soon for his own good."

"And Paul? How is Paul?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Look at how many people had to suffer because of me..."

“Paul’s conditions aren’t serious. He has a concussion, a dislocated shoulder, two broken ankles.” Malcolm smiled at Tanya. “He’s a strong boy. He’ll survive.”

* * *

In the French Alps

Ron and Jo Anne Withley sat on lawn chairs just outside their small cottage in Megève. A barrage of sharp words and mutual accusations filled their conversation.

“Look at these bills!” Ron Withley’s voice dripped contempt. “A new outfit for every month! And shoes! And purses!” His temper at the breaking point, he threw the bills toward his wife. “You spend a huge amount of money on unnecessary things.”

Jo Anne picked up the bills and thumbed through them casually. “You don’t provide well enough.”

“For fifteen years, I did pretty well, considering the help I got from that idiot—that son of yours who bounces the Lamborghini across the Atlantic as if it were a ping-pong ball.” Ron drew a deep breath. “Now I need a bit of luck.”

“You claim you have no more money,” Jo Anne said, sharp fury behind her words. “Yet the most recent bank statement shows a balance of three thousand dollars.”

“There are investigations underway right now. Your ex, Leslie Hadson, is in trouble. Every single withdrawal or transfer we ever made could be traced, maybe not since we started, but for at least five years back. The last transfer from Tanya’s parents’ funds occurred around that time.”

“It would have been better to transfer everything immediately after the death of Tanya’s parents.” Jo Anne turned her back on Ron in disgust.

“Stop complaining, for once! What has been done is done. We have to cope with the present situation, which isn’t bad at all. I’m just waiting to hear if my next move has succeeded.” Ron walked around in front of Jo Anne and looked into her eyes. “Meanwhile, we have to keep a low profile. I don’t want you to touch any funds—it might sound an alarm instantly.” He paused. “So be patient and help me out. Call Greg. I have a job for him.”

“I hope it isn’t as dangerous as those you had him do previously.”

“No, he just has to take The Woman in the Blue Veils to Commissario Caltabieni. A four, five-hour drive, that’s all.”

Ron stretched his arms above his head. He looked around. The profile of the mountains loomed sharply against the clear sky of September. On the further hills, the shepherds were taking their cattle back to the valley after a summer of rich, high-mountain pasture.

“Mother said you wanted to speak to me,” a young man said, standing in front of Ron and fidgeting with a pair of goggles.

“Yes. I have a simple job for you this time. Take that picture to Caltabieni.” Ron pointed toward the inside of the cottage. “It’s the painting on the sofa in the living room.”

“What am I now, a courier?” Greg stood straight and haughty, and glowered at his stepfather.

“Do what you’re told. It’s an expensive piece of art, an original. Its value is over half a million dollars. Be careful. Only the four corners are protected by corrugated cardboard.”

Greg entered the cottage and returned with the painting. “Half a million dollars for a few blue lines on paper?” he asked, totally astonished.

“Yes. Precious lines, drawn by a famous artist. I won’t bother to tell you who the artist is, you have no knowledge of art. Anyway—take your mother’s car. I mean the BMW. Don’t touch

the Lamborghini! Don't speed, don't drink on the road, and don't play with explosives. We've discovered you have no talent for them."

"Fuck you!" Greg said, kicking the chair closest to him. "You're always so hard on me. Look at yourself! You hired an expert, that Charles Aldrin, and with what results? Tell me. Tell Mother with what results."

"Things didn't go right with him," Ron said, his head down, his voice soft.

"Didn't go right, huh? Is that what you say?" Greg turned toward his mother. "Do you know what this fucking genius has done with our last half million dollars?"

"Shut up, Greg. I don't want your mother involved. You know that."

"I don't give a damn what you want or don't want. Mother, do you know how he spent our last half million?"

Jo Anne looked at Ron, a question in her eyes, then glanced from her husband to her son.

"He spent it—all of it—to incinerate a cat! A poor, little tabby cat!" Greg threw the picture in the air and caught it, as if to defy his stepfather's authority. "Charles Aldrin was a CIA man. I'm only a novice!" He ran off, making the wooden deck squeak with each step.

* * *

For more than two hours, Tanya waited anxiously for news on Kevin's prognosis. She was asleep now, stretched across two easy chairs in the waiting room, a red and green afghan cast over her body.

The chief surgeon entered the room and spoke to Malcolm. "The surgery removed several slivers of wood from Mr. Matwin's neck and head," he said. His expression was grave. "We did everything we could for him. The man is alive...his body breathes on its own, his heart beats... but..." The doctor paused.

"But..." Malcolm repeated, almost mechanically.

"There's substantial brain damage. He may never regain consciousness." He stroked Malcolm's shoulder. "We should, of course, always hope for the best."

"Of course. Thank you, doctor." Malcolm turned and looked down at Tanya, still sleeping. He fetched a glass of water, then gently fingered her cheeks. "Tanya," he said, softly. "Tanya..."

Tanya's eyes flew open and she sat up abruptly. "Kevin...is Kevin dead?"

Malcolm shook his head. "We can go see him now. He's resting." He handed her the glass of water. "I know you're a brave girl. Let me stand by you."

Tanya snapped her head around to face him. "Is he okay?"

"They don't know, Tanya. We have to wait and see. Several slivers entered his head from underneath the skull, at the neck. The brain—there's some damage."

"I understand. I thought it looked bad. He's not going to be okay, that's what you're saying, right?" Her face, white as paper, showed no emotion.

"It doesn't look good, but he's alive."

Tanya rose and followed Malcolm into Kevin's room.

"Would you rather be alone?" Malcolm asked. Tanya nodded.

She pulled a chair close to the top of Kevin's hospital bed and sat beside him. His head, wrapped in white bandages, rested on a nest of thick, spongy towels; his arms were crossed on his chest. Tanya took one of them and held it between both of hers. Tears flew from her eyes as she kissed it.

Not one angry word has ever come out of his mouth, she thought. She couldn't even

remember a look in his eyes that expressed resentment toward her.

Tanya sighed and rested her cheek against Kevin's hand. She thought about his teasing moods, his way of getting to know her by probing and gentle questions. She remembered his efforts to make her feel secure and yet free, his attentive wait for her to respond to his passion. She looked at his face again and again, memorizing it, each line, each crease. She touched his lips and thought of his smile, so full of cheer, of his vivid eyes, like two windows wide open to capture the world's beauty. Her fingers caressed his face and then his famous rebellious forelock, which now fell softly in line with his other hair.

Feeling as if her heart would explode, Tanya burst into sobs. "Oh, Kevin...!" she said. She howled his name again, then put her head on the bed—her chest shaken by long, spasmodic contractions.

Malcolm entered the room, unnoticed. "Tanya," he said, resting his hand on her back. "You've been here for more than an hour. Perhaps you should get some rest."

Tanya rose slowly, her eyes red and swollen from tears. She unfastened the chain with the metal cross she always wore, slid it around Kevin's neck and closed the clasp. "This is a miraculous cross, Kevin. It protected me all of my life. Now it has to work for you." She kissed him on the forehead, lightly, as if afraid to wake him.

Chapter 49

Greg Crowford left Megève early in the morning, heading to Caltabieni's residence on the Riviera. He drove, in spite of his stepfather's warnings, the forbidden Lamborghini. Twenty miles from the Italian border, the French highway patrol signaled him to stop. Partly because of his speed and partly because he arrogantly felt they could not catch him, he accelerated. As he approached the border between the two countries, a new sign warned him to stop—a long string of nails across the roadway appearing before him. Greg Crowford slammed the Lamborghini to a halt.

Two policemen approached the car from the front and two from the back.

"Driver's license and car registration, please. You were signaled to stop for speeding several miles back. Why did you attempt to outrun our patrol car?"

"I didn't see any speed limit signs. I didn't see a patrol car," Greg said with arrogance.

"Get out of the car, sir."

Behind the driver's seat, the officers saw the painting of *The Woman in the Blue Veils*. One of them returned to the car and radioed headquarters. He glanced at the Lamborghini several times while speaking into the microphone.

"This car is supposed to be repossessed," he said, when he returned to Greg's side. "And the painting in your car was fraudulently obtained from the manager of a Parisian exposition a few weeks ago. Both the car and the painting are officially classified as stolen." The officer withdrew his handcuffs and pulled Greg's hands behind his back. As he clasped the handcuffs around Greg's wrists, he said, "You're carrying stolen goods, Mr. Crowford, and driving a stolen car."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Greg said, outraged. "The car belongs to my stepfather, Ron Withley. Call him. Check it out. I'm bringing the painting to its rightful owner, a member of the Italian government, Mr. Tomaso Caltabieni of the Genova police department."

The officers ignored him, pushing him into the back of the patrol car.

They brought him to headquarters where he was fingerprinted. A quick check with the records transmitted by Interpol showed that his fingerprints coincided with those found on Mr. Miller's car. The charge of attempted murder was brought against Greg Crowford.

A day later Detective Warner informed Malcolm Clark that extradition papers were being processed for Greg Crowford.

Ron Withley attempted to call Caltabieni as soon as he heard of Greg's arrest, but each of his calls received the same response: "The Commissario can't come to the phone, he's very busy."

* * *

Tanya stopped, puzzled by the sobs coming from Kevin's room. She checked the room number—two hundred fifty-two—it was correct. She hesitated, wondering if Kevin had been transferred to another room. Uncertain, she stood outside.

"Mr. Matwin has a visitor, Ms. Caldwell," a voice behind her said. "She went in more than half an hour ago." One of the floor nurses smiled at Tanya as she walked by. Tanya thanked her.

Making the least possible noise, she entered Kevin's room.

The area seemed covered in flowers. Vases, baskets and pots were on the night stand, on the window ledge, even on the floor. Kevin lay still and pale, an IV inserted into his right hand and oxygen tubes in his nose. A woman, dressed in black, knelt beside his bed with her head cupped in her hands. She turned and rose as she heard Tanya approach.

She wore a satin dress which adhered to her like a second skin, outlining a slender waist, well-shaped hips, and generous breasts. A white cameo on a pink background peeked from the open high collar of the dress. Her hair, long and brown, had been hastily gathered at the nape of her neck, though loose locks framed her beautiful face. Her warm brown eyes held tears suspended in her thick lashes. She parted her small, sensual lips and smiled.

At once, Tanya felt like a duck in the presence of a swan.

"Milena Simpson," the woman said in a soft voice, offering Tanya her hand. "I was..."

"Kevin's second wife," Tanya said, extending her hand in response. "It's nice to meet you, Milena, even though I wish it were under different circumstances."

In silence, Milena hugged her. "It's terrible," she said in a whisper.

Tanya nodded. "Yes. But now, at least, Kevin has begun to make a few movements with his arms and legs. Actually, he jerks his body." Tanya smiled ruefully. "I was lucky. I saw him move a couple of times."

"Do the doctors have a better idea of his status now?" Milena asked, her soft voice trembling.

Again, Tanya nodded. "They found two more slivers. They hadn't seen them at the time of the surgery."

"Can't they operate again?"

"They've been debating that for two weeks. I've been praying they would, that they would try—" Tears appear in Tanya's eyes. "I'm afraid they won't go ahead with a second operation." Her voice broke. "The odds of Kevin dying are too high. They have been explicit."

Milena glanced toward the bed. "Wouldn't death be better than to leave him like this?" Tears raked her face.

"No! Oh, God, don't say that!" Tanya shouted. "Death is the ultimate end. Right now, there's still hope. Maybe he can improve on his own. Perhaps they can operate later."

Milena wiped her tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, she nodded and hugged Tanya once more. "I'll wait for you outside, Tanya. I'd like to talk to you, if you..."

"I'd love that. Please, just give me a few minutes with Kevin. My two visits to him make my day. It's all I have, now." She gave Kevin a look full of love. "I'll join you in the cafeteria."

The two women sat in silence, sipping their herbal tea.

"I feel so guilty," Milena said, finally. "I always feel guilty when I think of Kevin. I hurt him, deep inside, by doing something I couldn't repair. I feel so terrible, especially now." Tears came into her eyes once more.

"I'm sure he's forgiven you," Tanya said. In this particular moment, the last thing she wanted to hear was Milena's relationship with Kevin. Not now, please, she prayed silently.

"Kevin found me in bed with another man," Milena said, staring into her tea cup as if the answers to life's problems could be found within. "I didn't care about the man. I was bored. Kevin spent long hours at his Shoppe. I felt neglected." She paused, looked up at Tanya. "He told me I killed something inside him that day. He never said one single angry word—just that, for him, it was over. Nothing and nobody could do anything about it."

Annoyed, Tanya tried to be patient. She realized Milena needed to talk, to purge herself

through confession. She tried to think of something to say. Nothing came to her mind, nothing appropriate.

“Your tea must be cold,” she finally said, rising from her seat. “Let me fetch some more hot water for you.” Tanya lingered at the counter, giving Milena a chance to regain her composure.

“I’ve heard of an excellent brain surgeon,” Milena said briskly as Tanya returned to the table. “He’s operated on patients no one else would touch. He lives in Cape Town.” She patted her lips with her napkin. “I’ll dig out his name for you, if you want.”

“Certainly. I was going to ask for a second opinion on Kevin’s case. I’ve waited until now to give the doctors all the time they needed to evaluate his case.”

Chapter 50

Malcolm looked out of the window, down into the road leading to the headquarters of the Invicta. The foliage of the tallest maple trees had started to turn orange—a sign that fall was near. “I wonder why Tanya is so late?” he asked himself. “She’s generally punctual to the minute. Maybe I should have gone down to Montreal instead of asking her to come down here to see me.”

A white Olds Aurora stopped in the parking lot. Tanya stepped out, a leather bag with long, worn straps on her shoulder.

Malcolm met her at the entrance. “A new car, I see.” He took her arm and led her inside.

“Yes. That’s the reason I’m so late. I went to pick it up this morning. Lots of paper work, since part of the payment came from the insurance on my old Toyota.” She entered Malcolm’s office. “I wanted a comfortable car, since now I might have to commute between Montreal and Vermeil.”

“No permission to move Kevin?”

“No. Not at the moment.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” Malcolm said, gesturing at a chair. He examined Tanya with a concerned glance. “I was worried when you didn’t show up this morning, since I know you haven’t been well.” He looked at her sunken cheeks, the dark circles under her charcoal eyes. Her eyes looked larger, but duller. “Are you taking care of yourself?”

Tanya waved her hand in the air as if to brush off Malcolm’s concerns. “Yes, yes...I try. It isn’t easy, but I try. I’m more concerned about Kevin, what can be done for him.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t be alone.”

“Judith is coming to stay with me for the weekend. I’ll pick her up on my way back to Montreal. She told me she has a number of recipes ready, guaranteed to fatten me up like a turkey for Thanksgiving.” She paused, a small smile on her face. “Will I see Paul?”

“He should be here any moment. You’ll stay in Vermeil tonight, right?”

Tanya nodded. “You asked me for some documents. I need a few hours to gather all of them.”

The door to the office opened and a wheelchair appeared in the doorway.

“Paul!” Tanya rushed to greet him, then wheeled his chair into the room, close to the coffee table. She knelt close to him, and kissed his cheek. “Nice to see you again. I didn’t expect you to be in a wheelchair. Malcolm, you didn’t tell me he was this serious!”

“He wasn’t,” Malcolm replied, frowning at Paul.

Paul smiled. “It’s not really serious. It’s just that I put too much weight on my ankles too soon. The doctors got tough. I have to be a good boy for a while.” He grinned at Tanya. “I’d like to see Kevin. He saved my life, you know.”

Tanya nodded. “He saved mine, too.”

“How is he?”

“He moves occasionally. Yesterday, he made a few sounds. I have hope. That’s all I can say.”

Malcolm looked at his wrist watch. “Too late to talk business now. Let’s take Tanya out for an early supper, since tomorrow I have a business lunch with Mr. Monteturro.”

“You have a business lunch with whom?” Paul asked, surprised.

“With Luigi Amedeo, Kevin’s recent business partner.” He gave Paul a look full of tease.

“What kind of business do you have with him?” Paul asked. He appeared stunned, almost angry.

“Private matter,” Malcolm said, brushing the questions aside with a smirk.

“Excuse me,” Tanya said, rising from her kneeling position on the floor. “If we’re going out to supper, I need to freshen up a bit.”

As soon as she left the room, Paul pushed his wheelchair closer to Malcolm. “Mr. Monteturro is a suspected criminal. He looks for different legal activities to cycle his dirty money. We don’t know how he brings it into this country. Everything looks legitimate at this end, but his presence where drugs and money are exchanged, has been proven many times.” Paul’s mouth was set in a tight line. He glowered at Malcolm.

“Paul, I’m aware of all that,” Malcolm said calmly.

“Sorry, but I can’t understand why you’re so friendly with him.”

“I like the man. I can’t deny it.” He looked at Paul. “That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t go after him, if necessary.”

“I’m worried about Tanya. She might have the impression that Luigi Amedeo is one of your friends, someone it’s okay to have around and trust. He wouldn’t be good company for her.”

Malcolm laughed softly. “Our girl is a big girl. I don’t think too many people could fool her, or at least, not for long.”

“No! I said no!” Tanya slammed the folder onto Malcolm’s desk. “If these papers are not sufficient for your new investigation, that’s too damned bad. You’ll have to wait. I’m not going to stay here another day.”

Malcolm had never seen her so angry. “Please, Tanya. Try to understand. Joe is dead. Charles Aldrin is dead. Edda Milton is dead...”

“And my roommate Kathy Alcin is dead,” Tanya said sharply. “What are you trying to do? Compile an obituary update?”

Malcolm closed his eyes for a moment and leaned back in his chair, pondering. He needed Tanya’s cooperation. “What I’m trying to say, Tanya, is that your life is still in danger. I need information that only you can give me. I need it to protect you.”

“Protect me? Protect me from what, Malcolm? Don’t you understand? If Kevin doesn’t make it, the only thing I want for myself is death.”

“Don’t say that!” Malcolm banged his hand against the desk.

“But it’s true. I don’t care about anything. And you—you don’t care about people.” She paused and looked at Malcolm. “No, that isn’t true. You care about people. But what’s most important to you right now is to catch the crook who outsmarted you. That’s why you’re so obsessed.” She turned from him in distaste.

Malcolm stared at Tanya. It was true. He had been haunted, obsessed with finding the missing link, the reason why so many people had died. He hadn’t been able to sleep more than a couple of hours each night. He knew now that only Tanya had the key to the puzzle, even if she wasn’t aware of it. He slumped into his chair behind his desk. “It’s true. I’m an old fool. You hired me to protect you and all I’ve done is to surround you with corpses.”

Tanya, calmer now, looked at Malcolm. “What I mean is that the most important thing for

me right now is to take care of Kevin. Nothing else is important.” She paused, tossed her hair away from her face. “I have the name and address of a doctor who has operated in cases where the patient was in a coma—cases even more desperate than Kevin’s. His name is Justin Vander Groote.” She paused again and forced a smile on her face. “I want to find out if there’s a chance for Kevin to recover. That’s my first priority. Contacting this South African doctor is very high on my list.”

Malcolm stared at her intently, a frown between his eyes.

“Yes, yes,” Tanya said. “I know I have to go through all the papers I signed or approved after I became a millionaire. I’ll do that. I promise.”

Malcolm rode on the rising wave. “Promise?”

“Yes, I said so, and I do. Promise. I’ll go back today and return here next week.”

“That will be too late,” he said, pushing his luck. Tanya could be dead in a week, and she was very dear to him. “Two days,” he said with authority.

Tanya drew a deep breath and let it out in a sob. “All right. Two days.”

“And you don’t think of dying. There are people who love you, besides Kevin, and need to have you around.”

Tanya smiled, reached for his hand and tapped on it. “I know. It’s just that Kevin is so important to me. I can’t imagine going through life without him.”

Malcolm nodded. “I understand.” He took the folder and placed it in front of him. “While you’re gone, I’ll go through this material once more—just in case.”

Malcolm’s secretary announced Mr. di Monteturro. “Yes, let him in,” Malcolm said. The door opened and Luigi Amedeo entered, soberly elegant in his grey linen suit. He moved swiftly toward Tanya.

“Oh, Tanya... As I said in my note, you can’t imagine how dreadfully sorry I am about Kevin’s accident,” he said, looking deeply into her eyes.

“Thank you, Luigi Amedeo,” she said. She gathered her belongings and rose.

“Leaving already?” Luigi Amedeo asked.

“Yes. I’d like to arrive early enough to pay a visit to Kevin.” She turned and smiled. “See you soon, Malcolm.”

“Tanya?” Luigi Amedeo grasped her right hand and held it between both of his. “If you need anything, anything at all, remember that I’m only a phone call away.” He kissed her hand. “I would be greatly honored if you would call upon me. Any time. For any reason you may think of.” Again, he stared intently into her eyes.

“Thank you.” Tanya stepped forward and hugged him as if it were the most natural thing to do. “Thank you, Luigi Amedeo.” She left, dragging her hand bag behind her.

“It was nice of you to accept my invitation to lunch,” Malcolm said. “Perhaps we could have a drink before we leave. What would you like? My refrigerator is small but well stocked.”

“Yes, thank you. Do you have a low-alcohol beer?”

Malcolm laughed. “Yes, of course I have. Before a meeting you don’t drink much alcohol, right?”

“Right.” Luigi crossed his legs and brushed off a nonexistent spot from his trousers.

Malcolm handed him a foaming beer mug. “You like the foam, right?”

“Right again.” Luigi Amedeo lifted the mug, turned it around and looked at it. “Nice. Hockey players in action, painted by hand, I assume.” Luigi Amedeo barely touched his drink.

“Yes. These mugs are a recent gift from my brother. He was thankful for a number of

things.” Malcolm drank his beer in a few quick swallows. “I thought we could exchange some ideas.”

“I see,” Luigi Amedeo said. He glanced at the reproductions of the Stanley Cup winners hanging on the walls. “About hockey?” he asked, a veil of sarcasm in his voice.

“No, of course not.”

“About what, then?”

“I’ll keep the subject of our informal meeting a secret until lunch time,” Malcolm said with a serene smile. “At that time you will be served some of that old nebbiolo I ordered especially for you. The *cru*, on the label, reads ‘Monteturro Castle.’ ”

Seated comfortably at a corner table of the Sorrento restaurant, Malcolm and Luigi Amedeo had talked for more than an hour about Tanya, the Monteturro family and their wine production, the exquisite lamb cutlet with mint sauce they had just finished—they had even chatted about the opening of the new hockey season.

“What is your relationship to Commissario Caltabieni?” Malcolm asked, casually.

“A minor acquaintance.”

“So, Caltabieni isn’t a friend of yours, you say, in spite of the visits to your yacht. And you still won’t help me with any useful information.” Malcolm poured the last bit of wine into Luigi Amedeo’s glass.

“I don’t have any useful information to give you.”

“Is this some code of honor?”

Luigi laughed. “No, code of ignorance. I know nothing.” A smile blinked in his eyes.

Malcolm changed his approach. “Caltabieni, or someone close to him, is likely responsible for the corruption of Edda Milton and Charles Aldrin, and of my own agent Joseph Halliday. If you had been outfoxed as I have been, wouldn’t you seek some action?”

“Probably.” Luigi Amedeo’s eyes brimmed with tease.

“What do you mean, ‘probably’? Wouldn’t you make him pay for his crimes? Bring him to justice?”

Luigi Amedeo laughed. “No! I’m not a man of the law. I don’t believe in justice. It’s slow, it catches only a few—those least fortunate—seldom the worst criminals.”

“What would you do, then?”

Luigi Amedeo leaned toward Malcolm and whispered, “If I were sure of his guilt, I’d kill him. I believe in revenge: natural, pure, direct. Effective.”

Malcolm stifled a laugh. “Killing isn’t in your book, Count of Monteturro.”

“Ah, but you see, that’s because I’m never sure. In the case you’re talking about, you have only suspects and some coincidental facts.”

“You could help me with gathering more evidence.”

Luigi Amedeo shook his head and pushed back slightly from the table. “Sorry, Mr. Clark.”

Malcolm sighed. “So,” he said and paused. “You’re sure you don’t want Tanya to know that she has a brother?”

“Positive. She worships her parents. I wouldn’t take that away from her for anything in the world. It’s the only decent past she has. She can’t count on much from cleaning pig barns. No.” Luigi Amedeo shook his head. “I’d like to stay in the background. In any case, my lifestyle wouldn’t be one of example.”

“Well, that could certainly change. She could be the motivation for a better—” Malcolm paused and coughed. “Let’s say a more transparent life?”

Luigi Amedeo refrained from laughter. “I didn’t know preaching was part of your job, Malcolm.”

“It is not,” Malcolm said, struggling to keep his expression serious. “In general, I make sure I don’t convert criminals, since I want them convicted, not saved.” He drew a deep breath. “Your case is somewhat different. First, I know I can’t catch you or, at least, nobody has caught you in the wrong, so far. Second, you have class, style. Great style. And some principles I admire.”

“Much obliged.” The Count of Monteturro bowed his head.

For a long moment, no one spoke. “This is another item I’d like to discuss with you, a way in which you could help Tanya,” Malcolm said, seriously. “She has heard of a top brain surgeon in South Africa who operated in three cases similar to Kevin’s—all with success. The problem is that Kevin cannot be moved, and the surgeon doesn’t go abroad.” Malcolm paused and looked at Luigi Amedeo. “You were his guest a couple of years ago, at his house near Cape Town. His name is...”

“Justin Vander Groote. I know him well.” Luigi Amedeo looked thoughtful and finished his wine. “I can give it a try. I should have thought of that myself, actually.” He turned to Malcolm with a smile. “Thank you, Malcolm. That’s an excellent idea. I’ll work on it.”

Chapter 51

The big banner hanging on top of the window of Paul's office blazed with the words: 'We love you, Paul. Welcome back!'

From the moment he entered his office again, Paul Brennon had frantically reviewed the pile of documents regarding Tanya's case. He spent endless hours stuck to his seat in front of the workstation. Through the new channel of the RCA digital satellite reserved for classified transmissions, Paul contacted domestic and foreign institutions to obtain more records concerning the case.

He worried about Tanya's safety, but he was also concerned about Malcolm. The man hardly slept at night, torn by guilt, pride and anger.

"Anything really new?" Malcolm asked, leaning against the back of Paul's chair. "The official report of the accident that killed Tanya's parents, issued by the Spanish government...did you finally get it translated?"

"Yes." Paul laid a thick dossier on his desk, full of photographs taken at the scene of the crash in the Pyrenees. "I highlighted the most relevant paragraphs of the translated document. First: 'Insurance experts insist on further investigation. Parts of the aircraft reveal signs of an explosion.' Second: 'Traces of dynamite were found in the pilot's cabin and in the luggage compartment. A criminal investigation was conducted by the Spanish government.' The final notation on the report states: 'No charges. It was ascertained sabotage occurred, but no suspects could be found. The Caldwells left a female child, age six years.'" Paul closed the dossier.

"The Withleys probably expected to clean up on everybody, Tanya included," Malcolm said. "For the first year, Tanya was left behind. They couldn't risk going after her immediately following the accident." He slumped into his chair. "If the Withleys are to be blamed, there must be a reason why they went after Tanya now. I need to talk to Tanya, once more."

Paul looked closely at Malcolm. He looked like a heavy bag of potatoes abandoned in the field. Only his two brown eyes were alive, almost feverish. "Let's go to your office where we can be comfortable, and have a bite to eat," Paul said.

"I'm not hungry." Malcolm said with a pout.

"I know, but I am. I also need to stretch my right leg for a while. Up high. Take all of these folders, please." Paul grabbed his crutches and moved into Malcolm's large office.

He pushed aside a pot with a blooming anthurium, then stretched his sore leg onto the coffee table. "Much better," he said. "I'll order a couple of sandwiches, if you don't mind."

With a grilled cheese sandwich in one hand, Paul thumbed through a stack of twelve faxed papers with the other.

"About Tanya's funds...I know we don't have a record of all transactions, but now we may have more of an idea to where they were transferred." Malcolm nibbled on his sandwich. "It tastes like rubber," he said, and tossed it onto the table.

"It isn't the best sandwich in the world," Paul admitted, biting into his. "The statements from Tanya's accounts in Europe—there's just one more that's new, from Genova." He handed Malcolm the stack of faxed pages. "When a foreign country is involved, it's complex to access bank records. You know why."

“Yes, yes. We have to obtain permission via the courts, one here and another in the foreign country.” Malcolm sighed. “It’s a long, painful procedure.”

“Right. Some requests never went through when Joe Halliday was working under Warner. Others were stopped when he came to work here.” Paul finished his sandwich, neatly folded the wrapping paper and placed it under the potted plant.

“How many were there, in total, that we know of? Five? Is that correct?”

“Correct,” Paul replied.

“And we have the full record relative to the bank accounts in Montreal and Paris?”

“Yes. The scam was very clever. If you keep transferring funds from one bank to another financial institution, an investigator has to follow a long trail. It takes plenty of time, to start with. And then, each time, he has to forward a new request to the local authorities.” Paul shook his head. “No one could help speed things up for us before, and no one can speed them up now, either.”

“Maybe Tanya can help.”

“How? She had no idea of what was happening with her money. In fact, she had no idea she even had any money at all.”

“True. But they didn’t touch Tanya when she was in foster homes, only after she became a millionaire. Then accidents started to happen around her. Leslie Hadson doesn’t talk. He didn’t keep any records on Tanya. Greg Crawford seems to know nothing.” Malcolm closed his eyes, his arms hanging on the chair’s armrests.

“Malcolm, you can’t continue like this. You’ve lost at least thirty pounds since the accident at the cottage. You’re pale. You look exhausted. Why don’t you go home and get some rest?”

“Impossible. I’m waiting for Tanya.”

“Tanya? Today? Do you think she’ll come? Kevin deteriorated yesterday. His brain activity was at its lowest level since the accident. He hardly moved. And that, after a few days in which he actually articulated a few full words.”

“I know. She told me. But she said she would come. I want to see her will. The original has disappeared. She is the only person who has a copy.”

“Warner’s office saw it and thought it didn’t contain anything out of the ordinary. They said it was to benefit a charitable organization, and all of those are carefully investigated.”

“But we’re not sure Warner saw the real thing, if it was Joe who gave it to him...”

A few hours later, Tanya entered the office. Her blue jeans seemed a size too big for her, and so did her long sleeved shirt. With her hair cut short, she looked like a teenager. She kissed Paul, hugged Malcolm, and then sat quietly.

“Thank you for coming, Tanya. I know that you’re under pressure, with Kevin, the arrival of the brain surgeon, and all that’s happening over there. But we need your help,” Malcolm said with an exhausted smile. “Your wealth is estimated to be around twenty million dollars, is that correct?” Tanya nodded. “In the event of your death, who are your beneficiaries?”

“A nonprofit organization for young artists,” Tanya responded. She immediately dug into her purse.

“Not a charitable foundation?” Paul asked sharply.

“No, it’s not. That’s what I originally believed, too. I really didn’t grasp the difference between nonprofit and charitable at the time I made the will. I thought it was a charitable institution—then I couldn’t find my copy of the will, as you know.” Tanya gave Malcolm a sheet of paper. “But this morning, to keep myself calm, I reorganized my old sketches and drawings. The day before I left for the Riviera—I was scrambling for time, I remember—I hastily piled up

all the papers I saw flying around in a corner of my room.” Tanya paused. “There I found the copy you kept asking me for.”

Malcolm and Paul looked at the document.

“The police in Vermeil check it out, and thoroughly, I was told,” Tanya said.

“I’m sure they did. I can guess who was the person reporting to Warner for that investigation,” Malcolm said, rubbing his forehead. “What kind of institution is this ATF—what does it mean?”

“It stands for *Ars tenebras fugat*, which means ‘Art is immortal,’ or something like that. The main office is in Paris, with a branch office in Genova.”

“How did you decide on that particular foundation?” Malcolm asked.

“Well, actually, it’s a simple story. When I took control of my funds, four years ago, my lawyer suggested I designate a beneficiary, in case of my death. I didn’t think I had any relatives, and hesitated. But my lawyer...”

“Leslie Hadson, of course—” Paul and Malcolm said at the same time.

“Yes. Mr. Hadson. He pressed. Then he suggested that particular organization. They do fantastic things for young artists. He showed me several reports, pictures of young artists, some of whom are physically impaired.”

While Tanya was speaking, Paul limped across the room to Malcolm’s workstation and began to perform a search on the Web. Malcolm paced the office with his usual large strides.

“I can find nothing on this ATF,” Paul said.

“Tanya, I need all the material you have on it, please,” Malcolm said urgently. “On the double!”

Startled, Tanya said, “Is it that important?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go with Tanya,” Paul said. “We’ll be right back.”

Two hours later, Paul returned alone. “Here’s all the material Tanya had on the ATF organization, Malcolm. You don’t need me to dig out what this is about. I’m going to Montreal with Tanya. The big guy arrives tomorrow.”

“Are you sure you want to go?” Malcolm asked. “You might be in the way, with your crutches. You can hardly walk and you stand like a crane, one leg up all the time.”

“I’ll be fine. I want to be with her, especially if the count is there, bragging about his connection with the great surgeon.”

“Luigi Amedeo has something to be proud of. The doctor never left his country before, for any reason whatsoever. He is coming to operate on Kevin because Luigi Amedeo asked him to do so.” Malcolm spoke with a conciliatory tone.

“Yes, yes...” Paul said with sarcasm. “We all know what a great man the count is.”

Malcolm laughed softly. “No need to be jealous, you know. There’s really no need at all.”

“Oh, is he gay?” Paul’s face lit up.

“No. Not that I know of. It’s just that an involvement with a woman would represent a risk for him. She would know his habits, movements... As it is now, everyone knows what he wants them to know, but no one knows what he wants to conceal.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I have a few friends in high places. They’re well informed.”

Paul gave him a suspicious look. “Since you know so much about him, how come Luigi Amedeo knows this doctor Vander—whatever? Is he a count, too?”

Malcolm leaned toward Paul as if he were going to share a big secret with him: “No. It’s a question of grapes,” he said smiling mysteriously.

“Grapes?”

“Yes. The doctor’s hobby is to experiment with wines and grapes. He wanted to create something spectacular, a new quality of red wine which could rival the Grange Hermitage of Australia. Most of his experiments failed, until he imported some quality vine-tendrils from the vineyards of the Monteturro Castle. Luigi Amedeo personally followed the process of transplanting, drafting, and spraying the plantlets.”

“You mean—his connection with the doctor is clean?”

“Absolutely.” Malcolm gave Paul a radiant smile. “Totally legit.”

Paul scowled and gave Malcolm a look that seemed to scan Malcolm’s brain like the most powerful X-rays. “Ah. Ah, if so, I’m happy for Tanya.” He turned around, ready to leave.

“Paul? Be sociable when Luigi Amedeo is there. No allusion to—you know what I mean. As a personal favor, Paul.”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “Since he’s such a good friend of yours...”

Chapter 52

“One month?” Malcolm stared at Judith and then at Brian. “But it’s more than four weeks!”

“I knew you were always good at counting...” Brian said, unconcerned. “Sit down, brother. I’ll get some of that champagne you keep for special occasions.” He opened the refrigerator in the far corner of Malcolm’s office and came back with a bottle of *Mumm Brut*.

“So when did you two get married?” Malcolm asked.

“Yesterday. In a small chapel which belonged to the missionaries, in the heart of Midland.” Wrapped in a soft pink jump suit, Judith looked radiant. “It was so beautiful, Malcolm. Brian had the inside walls covered with camellias. The red carpet—you had to see this and walk on it, Malcolm—was made of red carnations. Outside, the Assembly of the Six Nations had prepared the reception. One tepee for each kind of drink, and typical Indian food...”

“Well, that wasn’t really what I ordered. They had all kinds of meats, even squirrel and skunk.”

“Skunk?” Malcolm sniffed.

“Yes. They were quite gracious about it, though. They didn’t insist we try everything.”

“And then the dances.” Judith’s eyes shone with pleasure as she remembered. “It was wonderful. Special. Something to remember forever. You have an extraordinary brother, Malcolm.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to admit—Brian is good at that sort of thing.” He made an effort to conceal his affection for his younger brother, but his eyes gave him away. “So...you’ve asked for a one month vacation, have you?” He twisted in his chair and turned to Brian. “The way your business is going, Brian, you can’t afford such a lengthy absence.” He grinned.

“True. We’ll be gone for only two weeks, but Judith needs an extra two.”

“Why the extra? To recover from the first two?” Malcolm couldn’t resist asking.

Brian set three glasses on the coffee table with a flourish. “No. Two for the honeymoon. The second two are for Judith to get familiar with the house and property, suggest the changes she wants made, things like that.” With a bang, the cork sprang loose, hitting the ceiling. Brian quickly poured the wine. “To my bride. To my wonderful woman.”

Judith tasted the wine. “It’s delicious. Thank you both.”

Malcolm looked suspicious and alert now, as he often did when his brother was present.

“No thanks from my brother?” Brian asked.

“For what? For pouring my champagne? Or for drinking it?”

“Well, thanking is a matter of style,” Brian said, a small-boy’s pout on his face.

Malcolm sipped from his flute. “There’s so much work to do,” he said as if he were following a line of inner thought. “Judith, do you really need those two extra weeks?”

“Yes, Malcolm, please. I’d like to spend some time close to Brian. To know him better.”

“That may cause serious problems,” Malcolm said, with a grin. “I’ll tell you what kind of a person he is. He doesn’t admit defeat. He’s domineering, arrogant—”

“Don’t start with the usual list of my bad qualities, please, Malcolm.”

“But those are your good qualities...”

The phone rang. Malcolm picked up the portable extension from the coffee table. “It’s Paul.

From the hospital,” he said, covering the receiver. He gestured for Judith to take the other phone on his desk, then listened carefully. “Thank you, Paul. Thanks for calling right away.” He listened for a moment more. “No. I didn’t get any information on the organization named in Tanya’s will. I expect a report any day.” He paused. “Same here. Bye, Paul. Give my love to Tanya.”

“The operation—Done?” Brian asked anxiously.

Judith nodded. She replaced the receiver slowly, looking worried.

“Tell me,” Brian urged her. “Tell me what happened.”

Judith hesitated. “Technically speaking, the surgery was successful. The doctors didn’t want to say any more.” She went to sit close to Brian. “I’m afraid...”

“We can’t afford to think negatively,” Malcolm interjected right away. “The team of Vander Groote operated this morning. All of the slivers they were worried about were removed. Kevin is still alive.” Malcolm paused, as if to encourage himself. “Kevin was in the recovery room when Paul called. They made a big exception and let Tanya be with him, just to calm her down.” Malcolm sighed. “That poor girl—what she’s gone through in her life.”

* * *

Chased from the Intensive Care Unit, Tanya opened the door of the waiting room and silently sat close to Paul.

“Tanya. You’re finally back. How’s Kevin?”

She shook her head. “He just lies there. He lies there just like he did before—” She began to cry. “There’s no difference. No difference whatsoever.”

“You can’t judge by that. He’s still under sedation. We just have to wait.” He lifted her chin up. “Let’s go have a bite to eat.” He grabbed his crutches and began to leave the room.

“But...but I told the nurse I’d be here, just in case...” She got up just the same, though, and followed Paul. Her dark grey dress was full of wrinkles. The long skirt and high collar made her look thin, almost incorporeal, like a shadow in search of its own body.

Hotel Château Margaux was, externally, a replica of the homonymous French castle. The structure of the main hall vaguely resembled its illustrious predecessor’s, but the remainder of the interior was modern and exquisitely elegant. The ‘Winery,’ on the left of the entrance, was really a restaurant. It was encased by two glass walls on the south and east sides and by tapestries of bottle racks on the others. From any seating place in the Winery, a guest could admire the incessant flow of lake tankers and private vessels moving along the Saint Laurence waterway.

Luigi Amedeo had rented the entire top floor to host Vander Groote’s team. Not without resistance, he had convinced Tanya and Paul to move there also, as his guests.

Paul has just stepped from the shower when Luigi Amedeo knocked at his door.

“Come in,” Paul called from the bathroom. “Be right with you.” He dressed quickly and left the bathroom, still barefooted. He smiled and greeted Luigi Amedeo. The count stood before him, an empty expression on his face.

“Oh, no...” Paul said. “Don’t tell me...”

“No. No, he’s not dead. They had to return Kevin to the operating room. Internal bleeding.” Luigi Amedeo slumped into the chair closest to him. “Where’s Tanya?”

“In her room, sound asleep. She sat on the recliner for a moment, and instantly fell asleep. I didn’t move her or touch her. I didn’t even take her shoes off. She needed rest. Badly.”

“I know. She went some forty hours without any.” Luigi Amedeo rubbed his forehead, then lay back and closed his eyes.

Paul didn’t know what to do or what to say. He looked around. Pictures of vineyards, of castles with vineyards, and grapes, hung on the walls. “This hotel—its owner must be obsessed with grape juice. That’s all that wine is, after all.”

“Obsessed is the right word. Mr. Epernay belongs to a dynasty of wine makers—they began to produce wine commercially since early last century, in France. Mr. Epernay lives here. I thought Vander Groote would have something to talk about in his spare time.” Luigi Amedeo paused. “He probably knew something could go wrong with Kevin. That’s why he didn’t leave. No one in his team was allowed to leave, either.”

For the first time, Paul felt empathy for the man. He cares about Tanya, he thought. He went to a lot of trouble and expense to help Kevin. Malcolm might be right, after all. The man is not all bad.

“What do we do?” Luigi Amedeo asked without opening his eyes.

“There’s nothing Tanya can do, nothing at all. If we wake her, she’ll go through another wave of anxiety. Let’s wait.”

“You read my mind,” Luigi Amedeo said. “Let’s pray, too.”

* * *

Malcolm stared at the fax he had just received from detective Warner of police headquarters. It read:

Organization: ATF

Registration Number: 103-FX275/82

Address: Caselle Postale 2034, Paris IX

Assets: None

Activities: Support for young artists

Chairman of the Board: Ron Withley

Members of the Board: Jo Anne Withley,

Tomaso Caltabieni

*Note: No office in Paris, just a postal box,
and a one-room apartment in Genova full of
printing equipment and advertising material.*

“The pet shop is here,” Paul said, entering Malcolm’s office without knocking. “They’ve come to take your old wreck away.”

Malcolm paid no attention to the two men dismantling the fish tank nor to Paul. He kept pacing his office with his heavy, large steps.

“You’re going to need a new carpet pretty soon if you don’t stop abusing it with your nervous pacing.” Malcolm still ignored Paul. “Look at me,” he said. “Don’t you see anything different?” He lifted up the legs of his jeans and showed Malcolm his ankles.

Malcolm finally stopped in front of Paul. “No cast. No crutches. I see. Happy for you, son.” He handed Paul the message about the nonprofit organization mentioned in Tanya’s will, and went to sit behind his desk.

“Any comment from Warner about Caltabieni? He must know more than that.”

“Yes, but only a bit. Apparently Caltabieni resigned from the ATF a year ago. His resignation was not registered, but Caltabieni could point to a document dated a year before. If that document is authentic—well, it would be difficult for us to know. Actually, impossible. Caltabieni was very convincing in motivating his relationship to Mr. Withley: common artistic interests, their desire to help young artists. Regarding Joe Halliday, no one could really prove any connection other than the one from an uncle and a nephew abroad. No frequent calls, no special messages, no visits either.” Malcolm paused. He began his usual nervous habit of flipping a pencil between his fingers, faster and faster. “The man is smart. A fox. A very clever criminal. One of the worst kind.”

Paul sat on a corner of Malcolm’s desk, swinging his legs. “What about Ron Withley? The entire scheme to eliminate Tanya points to him.”

“No news. Nothing. They can’t find the man anywhere.”

Chapter 53

Kevin's room was illuminated by a soft, indirect light. Tanya walked around, looking for things to do. She moved a bouquet with birds of paradise to a corner of the window ledge, then paced the room some more. She rearranged the bouquet of sunflowers she'd bought for Kevin, to remind him of his favorite painting by Van Gogh. She felt exhausted, tired of waiting. She sat close beside him and stroked his bare arm. She examined his nails, now more colored than in the previous weeks. He'll wake at any moment, she had been told. But that was two hours ago. She should be patient. A few minutes more or less wouldn't matter anymore. Kevin spoke. He said her name, many times over. Her Kevin—he had come back to life, at last. Tanya relaxed. She laid her head close to his arm and fell asleep.

She dreamed. She heard a big bang, followed by dark, thick smoke. Tanya startled. Her roommate Kathy appeared, dispersing all of the smoke like magic. She was waving at Tanya, happy, shaking her long hair poking through a baseball cap. Slowly, she vanished, too, like the smoke. Tanya could hear herself sobbing. She tried to wake up, but couldn't. The dream continued. Another bang, this time followed by fire. A huge fire. She could smell the burning of the wood. She could see trees becoming immense torches, so tall they seemed to want to light up the entire sky. Embers, ashes, brands were all over, a deadly fireworks display. The air became thick. She could hardly breathe. She gasped.

"Tanya? Tanya?" The call was soft, the hand rubbing her neck, gentle.

She lifted her head, her heart racing. "Kevin..." She grabbed his arm and brought it to her chest, as if to control her heart beat. She looked at him, her face flooded with tears. Her voice died in her throat.

"I like to have you close to me, Tanya." Kevin propped his pillows high and moved onto one side of the bed. "Tell me what you're going to do with me when I leave the hospital." He was recuperating, his strength slowly but steadily increasing. The last surgical intervention had removed a dangerous blood clot.

"We'll stay in your apartment until the doctors give you the okay for a long trip."

"And then?"

"Go to the Riviera. To our love nest. With the help of Marta, I'll nurse you back to health." She climbed into the bed beside him and lay sideways, her body facing his.

Kevin stroked her chest. "I can count your ribs. I can almost touch the ones on the other side." He leaned forward and looked at Tanya's legs. "It looks as if I am the one who has to take care of you. I'm not kidding. You must have lost forty pounds, at least."

"Maybe," Tanya said, kissing him on the forehead, totally unconcerned by her weight.

"What did you do? Starve for weeks?" Kevin asked. His usual teasing mood was back.

Tanya shrugged. "Almost. But I did it because I knew you liked slim girls. Just because of that."

"That was before I met you. Now I'd like you to go back to your former shape. I got accustomed to a bit of padding here and there."

Tanya propped herself on her elbow and looked deeply into Kevin's eyes. "You scared me

half to death, did you know that?"

"Did you really think I'd abandon my most beloved little critter on this earth, all by herself? And let her continue with her dangerous experiments?" Kevin caressed her shoulders. "I feel only bones here, too. I scared you that bad, eh?"

"Yeah. Real bad."

"I don't remember a thing. My recollection stops at getting Paul into the car, then—a big black hole."

Tanya caressed his hair. It was gray at the root now, but his forelock still bent capriciously forward, like in old times. She bent to kiss it.

* * *

Paul kept the door open for the two men to carry out a gigantic aquarium. "What happened? Why are they taking it away?"

"Too expensive. We can't afford it. The work at the Invicta is piling up. Its income is getting smaller and smaller." Malcolm looked relaxed, happy, in contrast to the negative words about his company's finances. His desk, usually covered with binders, files, and memos of any size and color, was neatly arranged. He looked at Paul and gave him a big smile. "Tanya is out of danger," he said.

"She is? What happened? Tell me..."

"I just received a message. They found Ron Withley in a valley of the French Alps. He had three bullets in the back of his head, shot close to each other to form a sort of triangle." Malcolm twirled his chair around, grinning. "It's wonderful, at times, to see how criminals take care of each other, saving honest people trouble and money. Those bullets, so close together, are the signature of the *cosca* headed by Don Alfonso Olfrandi."

* * *

"So, are you sure you want to sell *La Mimosa*?" Kevin asked. Hand in hand, Tanya and Kevin scouted around the orchard and the vineyard. At the end of their stroll, they stood underneath a grove of medium-size trees, their buds a shade between green and yellow.

"Yes. It means little to me, and for some strange reason, it matters a great deal to Luigi Amedeo." She looked up into the trees. "It's also the only way I can ever show him my gratitude. Without his help, I probably wouldn't have my man standing by my side, close to me." She stood on tiptoe to kiss Kevin. He responded by ruffling her hair.

"These trees and these buds...what are they?" she asked.

"Mimosa. They're mimosa trees. They'll be in full bloom pretty soon. They make beautiful canopies of yellow buds." He fingered those in Tanya's hand. "They are minuscule fluffy, round buttons. All together, they look like a velvet umbrella, a show in its own right." They reached the hedge separating Kevin's land from Tanya's property. "Should we use our shortcut?" Kevin asked with a smile.

"Sure." Tanya went through without effort. Kevin had to bend to use the opening. On the other side, he stopped to look at some new growth. "Strange," he said. He glanced at Tanya, a slight suspicion on his face. "Somebody snipped the branches right here." He extended his hand from the hedge's opening to the top of Tanya's head. "The cut fits my woman's height exactly."