

PRIVATE LIES

By Amy Eastlake



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Chapter 1

The minute he walked in the door, Heather Webb fell in love.

His suit fit him so perfectly that it had to be custom tailored. The white shirt still sparkled with newness, and small gold coins that Heather recognized as bearing the portrait of Maximilian of Mexico graced the cuff-links.

Even his shoes spoke of wealth.

If a man this obviously rich had to come to a run-down private detective agency without even calling ahead for an appointment, he was desperate--and she wouldn't let him walk out of here without a fight. A client like this could finance the agency for a month.

She slurped a swallow from her coffee mug then waved the mug toward a chair somehow managing not to send coffee everywhere. "Won't you sit down?"

He straddled the chair. "Are you the boss?"

The visitor's distrustful blue eyes personified danger and control. That didn't surprise her. In her experience, people didn't get rich without stepping on some toes.

His voice was deep and sexy, but in a carefully manipulated way, as if he had taken voice lessons to develop just that rasp of sensuality. He certainly didn't fit the normal government-worker model that most of Washington D.C.'s privileged copied in their efforts not to seem too elite.

"I'm Heather Webb."

He ignored her implicit invitation to introduce himself. "I understand you do computer break-ins."

She didn't want to scare him off, but suddenly he seemed just a little too perfect. "I run a general purpose private detective agency," Heather explained. "One of our services is computer security audits."

She'd put the ball back in his court and let him define himself through his words and actions. One of the best things about her job was that it gave her an excuse to be nosy.

"I'm looking for someone who can find out whether the computers at a company I'm interested in are secure."

She sighed. "We don't do third party work." In her circumstances she couldn't afford to take the risk, no matter how much money he might offer.

She should have known that having Mr. Rich Guy walk into her office was too good to be true. Especially a rich guy who looked like he'd be cool and collected in the middle of the Sahara desert. Despite Washington D.C.'s brutal August humidity,

Mr. Rich-guy appeared completely comfortable in his wool suit and perfectly knotted silk tie.

The man looked at her curiously.

"I'm Jack Eastland," he told her.

"Ah. Jack Eastland," she answered as if everything were suddenly clear. She didn't exactly hang around in D.C.'s high society, but you can't live in Washington without picking up some sense of who is doing what. His name meant exactly nothing to her.

His eyes widened slightly and she had the feeling that he had just run her through a cat scan and investigated every secret cranny of her being. The sensation was a little frightening, but it wasn't altogether unpleasant.

He was built better than most businessmen she had known. In fact, he probably had to have his suits custom made, since his broad shoulders would burst through anything he could buy off the rack. He was a little old to be a professional athlete, probably somewhere in his mid-thirties, but he moved with a grace that spoke of power and economy of motion.

He cleared his throat. "What makes you think I'm asking for a third-party search?"

"There must be some sort of convention going on," she told him. "Five minutes before you arrived, someone called asking for me to break into a major computer center.

Yesterday I got three calls. Everyone must want to find out what their competitors are doing. I don't blame them, but I can't help them. I don't do that kind of work."

"Aren't you walking away from a lot of business?"

She shook her head ruefully. "It's not worth losing my license over." More to the point, she couldn't afford to get her parents messed up in an investigation. Of course she wouldn't tell Mr. Eastland, or whatever his real name was, that.

"Well, Heather ..." he paused, "May I call you Heather?"

She smiled. "Of course." He could call her Fido if he wanted, as long as he paid his bills.

"Fine," he told her. "I'll get to the point. I've recently picked up a company. Since then, my competitors have been eating me alive. Before I go on a rampage and make accusations about an inside job, I want to make sure that my competition isn't stealing my secrets off my own computer.

What you said about what's going on out there makes me even more certain that I need to look into this. Somehow I'm not convinced everyone shares your morals."

He reached into his suit pocket.

Heather fought her instinctive urge to reach for the automatic in her desk. Instead she set a false smile on her face. When his hand emerged with a gold business card box, she let out her breath in a whoosh.

The card was printed on stiff linen stock paper that felt like money, only thicker. Jack Eastland, CEO, Wildfire Enterprises, the card read.

Everything appeared too easy. In her experience, companies the size of Wildfire, one of D.C.'s biggest private companies, didn't send their CEOs out to hire detectives. Still, why shouldn't things be easy for once? All summer, business had been so bad she'd stooped to serving summonses for a couple of the law firms she worked with. A major computer security audit deal could be the break that made her company. Her parents' work in computer security was pretty well known in hacker circles, but a high-publicity job would give her the chance to expand the agency.

"You understand I'll have to check on this?" she asked him.

Jack Eastland looked like he could be a CEO, or anything else he put his mind to. Then again, she'd met con men who could assume the same air of power and arrogance.

"Of course," he said smoothly. "I hope you understand that I am in something of a hurry."

A year and a half in business for herself had trained Heather to go for the jugular. "I'll put together a complete proposal. In addition to the computer audit, I recommend that you hire my agency to handle on-site surveillance. I can practically guarantee that you'll have holes in your computer security. That doesn't mean that's where your leaks are coming from."

"I'm only interested in the computers," he answered.

His quick rejection of her suggestion piqued her curiosity. Clearly money wasn't the issue. In her wildest dreams, she wouldn't charge enough to make a company of Wildfire's size notice. So why was he dead set on ignoring her advice?

"It's your money," she told him. "You want me to do only half the job, I'll do half the job."

"Fine." Eastland gave her a smile that showed a row of perfect teeth set against a deeply tanned face.

She almost choked at his smile. No man had a right to look that good. Maybe he really was an actor. She'd certainly stand in line to watch him.

Abruptly he ended his smile and nodded.

Heather felt like she'd had the wind knocked out of her. That wonderful, warm, confiding, smile had been a fraud, an act. If he wasn't an actor, he should be. And not just because he was pretty to look at.

He stood and looked to the door. "When can I expect the report?"

"I have no idea."

That got his attention. His eyes snapped back to her. "Exactly what is that supposed to mean?"

"I already told you, I've got to check you out. Once I do, I'll put together a proposal. I'll estimate how much time and how much money the job is likely to cost."

"Let me rephrase my question, then. When can I expect the proposal?"

Heather picked up her desk calendar and examined it closely.

As she'd suspected, her August schedule remained distressingly similar to September and July--nearly blank. "Why don't you come by tomorrow afternoon. I'll be able to give you an estimate then."

Eastland pulled a thin book from his suit jacket pocket and examined it closely. "I can get free between two and two-thirty."

"That should be plenty of time."

He nodded curtly. "I'll see you then."

Heather stood and held out her hand. A handshake wasn't a legal tie, but it tended to put people on more personal terms. The last thing she needed was for him to take his business elsewhere, especially since she was going to the trouble of putting together a proposal. Customers didn't seem to understand that a proposal is half the job.

Jack's hand swallowed hers.

At his touch, a tiny thrill went through her body, almost like static electricity, except it couldn't have been that since she felt certain Jack Eastland would never allow human things like static electricity into his life.

He tightened his grip enough to let her feel his controlled power, then released.

"If I have any questions--" she started.

"You have my card. I'll instruct my secretary to page me without asking you anything."

"That should do it. See you at two."

Heather watched as he turned and strode toward the door.

Something about him didn't quite fit. Sure, rich businessmen were dangerous. But Jack Eastland looked dangerous in a more active way than any simple executive should. He looked more like a man who'd take an enemy and break him in half than he did a capitalist out to exploit workers and customers.

Although he stood over six feet tall, Jack didn't move awkwardly. In fact, he somehow managed to step without a sound on the squeaky step she'd spent so much time installing outside her office.

She revised her initial thoughts about the man. He might be bringing in some valuable business, but she wondered what his business would end up costing her.

* * * *

Jack checked off Heather Webb's name from his list and grabbed a taxi. He had time to visit another agency before lunch. With luck, he could finish this grunt work this week and get back to his real job.

With her honey-blond hair, hazel eyes, and legs that didn't know where to stop, Heather had been nice to look at. Unfortunately, she also seemed to see too much. He wasn't certain she'd bought much of his story.

Still, she'd agreed to prepare a proposal--after she checked him out. He wasn't worried about her checkup. In his line of work, fail-safe paper trails were automatic.

He wondered how much Heather would try to gouge him for. Since he had no intention of actually buying anything, that wasn't much of an issue. Before she could put together a proposal, she'd have to do enough research to tell him what he needed to know.

Jack checked his notes on the next agency. This one was supposed to be even slimier than Heather's.

"Where too?" the driver demanded. His distinct Russian accent made him almost incomprehensible.

"Nineteenth and M," Jack answered, absently slipping into Russian to match the driver's accent.

The driver gave him a sharp look and floored the engine. He probably thought Jack was KGB, set to reactivate him.

* * * *

Heather took a yogurt from her office refrigerator and returned to her desk. Everything seemed to check, but it bothered her.

Jack Eastland was too perfect--a rich man who just walked in off the street to offer her a legitimate job.

Private detectives don't stay in business without learning to suspect everyone, especially anyone desperate enough to want to hire a detective.

She wiped her forehead and checked her desk clock. In an hour of intensive computer digging, Eastland came up clean.

His recently deceased father had supposedly left him more money than he knew what to do with, although the father had lived in a modest Texas suburb and left almost no computer record at all. With the new-found wealth, Eastland had bought a couple of companies. Wildfire was his latest and largest acquisition.

More interesting than what she found on Eastland was what she didn't find. After a normal high school and college career, he had almost dropped off the computer trace.

That might mean he was just careful. Or it might point at organized crime. His low profile father with all the money pointed at the same thing. Despite what her parents thought, Heather didn't consider all businessmen the equivalent of the Mafia.

Capitalism might be theft, as they claimed, but it was thievery without broken kneecaps and midnight executions.

The mob often took over and cleaned out mid-sized companies. If they had taken over Wildfire, they would put in an apparently clean front man. Eastland looked dangerous enough to lead a gang and tough enough to stay in control.

He'd be a perfect choice.

The job he'd hired her to do made some sense. In today's world, the mob would want to make sure their computers were leak free. The whole world knew how the FBI loved breaking into Mafia books and fingering the men with the money.

An organized-crime involvement could explain Eastland's unwillingness to let her extend the investigation to the rest of the company. He knew what she'd find. Still, wouldn't the Mafia have their own computer investigators?

The floorboard outside her office creaked and she looked up.

"Darling, we've finished the Andreson audit." Heather's mother, Karen, peered at her through Coke-bottle-thick glasses and handed over a neatly typeset report.

When she'd gone into business as a private investigator, Heather had been concerned about having her parents as employees. Things had worked out wonderfully. Karen and Pete had worked incredibly hard and asked for almost nothing. She knew she was prejudiced, but she had never managed to reconcile her feelings for them with the notion that they were most-wanted criminals.

"Anything special?" she asked. Andreson had been another bluebird, like Wildfire. They hadn't been able to pay much, but it gave her parents something to do and at least contributed to the outrageous rent she had to pay for her office and the two apartments overhead.

"You'd think that people would at least close up a few of the holes in their systems," her mother said with a sigh. "I guess this one is a little unusual because of the Middle-Eastern connection."

"What's that?" All she needed was the licensing bureau breathing down her neck about some international reporting requirement.

Her mother waved her hand vaguely. "It turns out that Andreson is owned by one of the countries over there." Then she brightened. "They've got a dedicated satellite link back to the headquarters and it's almost completely wide open. And the company has got to have government connections because you can go everywhere once you get there."

If Heather gave her mother a chance, she'd rattle for hours about her computers. For all Heather had told Jack Eastland about being a general purpose agency, her parents' computer skills meant that computer audits formed the bulk of their business. More importantly, the work let her parents do something they loved while contributing to the agency.

Heather preferred the part of the job hackers called social engineering. This hands-on side of computer security involved basic PI work--investigating, garbalogy, and tricking people into revealing what they didn't know they knew. Given her druthers, she let her parents handle the computer end and spend her time snooping.

"I'm glad you've finished that audit," Heather told her mother. "I need your help with a proposal for a company called Wildfire."

Her mother's eyes widened and she collapsed into Heather's office chair. She shook her head firmly. "Don't touch it."

Karen had as much business sense as a pussycat, and she knew it. She had never before given Heather advice on how to run her company.

"I thought there might be a mob connection," Heather suggested. "Still, I can't put a finger on anything." She looked her mother in the eyes. "What do you know about it? We could really use the money."

"I don't know if things are changed, but Wildfire was founded back in the eighties as a front to fund the Contras," Karen said.

Heather sagged in her chair. That could mean the Mafia, whom the CIA sometimes used as a cover. It could mean the CIA itself. And the CIA was far worse than a Mafia connection. If the government was on to her now, she might have to give up everything she had worked for and head back to the road.

Could Jack Eastland's interest have any connection to the audit her mother had just finished? Middle Eastern contacts, Contras, CIA. Odd that it should all turn up in her office at the same time. And that phone call she'd gotten just before Jack showed up--from a man with a faintly threatening voice and an exotic accent. Work as a private investigator had taught Heather to distrust coincidence.

Still, Heather left vast conspiracy theories to her parents.

"That Contra stuff was years ago," she said. "Our prospective client recently bought Wildfire. Surely they've gone legit."

Karen shook her head. "Possibly," she said. She didn't look like she believed it. Absently, she got up, stood in front of Heather's computer, and started tapping on the keyboard.

Heather pushed back her chair and observed. She never failed to learn something when she watched her mother work. While she couldn't even begin to imitate the Zen-like oneness her mother achieved with the computer, she certainly could learn a few of the basic tricks Karen used instinctively.

Rather than attempt the Wildfire system, her mother found a floating bulletin board where hackers hang out, and scrolled through the archives.

"Bern Nylands tried a hack on them about two months ago," she finally announced.

"And?"

"And he dropped out of sight about a week later. Nobody's heard from him since."

"I hardly think the government is going to hold someone incommunicado for two months because they try to break into a CIA company," Heather remonstrated.

"Besides, hackers are always disappearing. Weren't you telling me yesterday that half the hackers you know have dropped out of sight? Surely they weren't all stupid enough to try to break into the CIA."

Her mother crossed her arms in front of her chest. "You don't have to tell me I'm paranoid, sweetheart. My paranoia has kept us alive for a couple of decades on the run. Maybe I'm being overly cautious. Still, something about this just doesn't feel right." She paused and patted Heather on the shoulder. "Do we really need the money?"

"Not that bad." Whether Wildfire was involved with Mafia money as she'd first suspected, or with the CIA, she couldn't afford to expose her parents to the risk.

"Why don't you join us for dinner?" Karen asked her.

One drawback to living in the apartment adjacent to her parents, Heather thought for perhaps the thousandth time, was that it gave them far too much insight into exactly how free her free time was.

"No thanks, Mom. I've got some calls to make."

Dunning clients wasn't the most glamorous part of her job, but Heather was good at it. After turning down Wildfire, she'd have to be damn good if they were going to pay the rent next month.

"All right. Let me know when we get our next job." Her mother left the Andreson report on Heather's desk and headed back toward her apartment.

Heather waited until her mother had left, then dialed Jack Eastland's number. The ring sounded funny, as if coming from a satellite link rather than from an office down the street. While she waited for an answer, she yielded to her impulse and tapped her PC into the reverse listing phone directory, checking the number to see if it matched up with Wildfire.

It came back as unlisted. If it was a private line or an answering service, that could make sense. Still, it troubled her. Companies normally sought business, they didn't hide from it.

Finally a woman answered, repeating back the number Heather had dialed with no elaboration.

"I'd like to leave a message for Mr. Eastland," Heather explained.

"One minute."

The sharp click told her she'd been put on hold. Not exactly the type of response she'd expect from a CEO's secretary. But this was lunch hour. Maybe she'd gotten the reception desk.

"Ms. Webb, Mr. Eastland can meet you immediately. He's at the Columbia House coffee shop right now."

"How did you know who I--" the dial tone told her she'd been cut off.

Weird. She was certain she'd dialed the code to block Caller ID--it was an automatic gesture, like looking both ways before crossing the street, or making sure she knew where the back exit was before sitting down to eat. She must have dialed it. So how did Wildfire know who she was?

Money or no, she was feeling better about her decision to drop this job.

On impulse she typed out a bill for the time she'd wasted on Eastland's project. Maybe she shouldn't charge him for a proposal. Then again, she certainly wasn't in the business of giving out free samples.

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"Glad you were quick," Eastland greeted her. He'd already claimed the farthest booth from the door and taken the seat that allowed him to see anyone coming in. A couple of open cream packages on the table near his half-filled coffee cup made it clear he hadn't just arrived.

The slight bulge under his left arm hadn't been there that morning or she would have tossed him from her office without any discussion. It was there now.

No way would Heather take the seat across from a man with a gun. Especially a man who insisted on sitting where he could watch the entrances.

She sat beside him, pressing her shoulder lightly against his right arm. She'd been around guns enough to want to know if he started to move suddenly.

Unfortunately, she also found herself in contact with a hard mass of muscle. Eastland's scent didn't match the polished finish of his suit. Rather than an expensive cologne, he smelled like soap and man. It made him seem more human, somehow. Sexy, too.

What was she thinking about? She was about to turn down a job from a guy with a gun and she was suddenly fantasizing about his body next to hers. She plopped his case folder in front of him and called out for a decaf. She didn't need a caffeine high now.

"I thought we were going to meet tomorrow. What's the emergency?" Eastland asked.

"And I thought you were seriously interested in doing business with the Webb Agency. Which of us got fooled more, do you think?"

Did she only imagine that his muscled arm tightened against her side, twitching with his desire to pull his gun to seize control of a suddenly more dangerous situation?

"I think a computer security audit for Wildfire is a fairly serious piece of business, Heather," he answered.

"I've prepared a bill for the work I've done so far, Mr. Eastland," she replied, keeping it professional. "Do you want to read my report or have me summarize it for you?"

"I wasn't under the impression that I had a bill coming."

"You've got a lot of things coming if you think you can just walk into a place with a line like you pulled on me."

He looked positively mystified.

For a moment, she wondered if her mother could have been mistaken.

"Can you give me a summary of what you found, please?" he asked.

The moment dissipated. If he was really who he pretended to be, he'd get up and walk away now.

"Certainly," she told him. "Since you get the bill, you get the report as well. I've made the bill out to Jack Eastland but feel free to change it to whatever name you think fits."

She shifted slightly so her thigh touched his. She wanted to pick up on any body language he sent.

He didn't even flinch at her innuendo. "That's my name."

"Whatever." She picked up the report and flipped through it.

"Before I started, I did some background work to determine whether you were actually the owner of Wildfire. Then I did some preliminary work to measure the scope of the problem."

"I'm certain you found everything in order."

"Almost incredibly so. It's surprising, sometimes, how much work it is to piece together information that should be on file but somehow isn't. In your case, of course, the opposite was true."

"I take it you're going somewhere with this?"

"Your background is too clean, too perfect."

"You're refusing a job and giving me a bill because the computer did a good job reporting on me." He looked incredulous, but his tight muscles didn't match his light tone.

"That's one way to look at it."

His blue eyes took on an icy look. "Would you care to explain?"

"I didn't find anything unusual through college. Excellent grades through a joint economics and political sciences degree from MIT. After that, employment by a number of shadow companies."

"Hardly shadow companies. They were small companies that gave me a chance to make something of myself."

"Still, it is interesting that all of them quietly failed, isn't it?"

"I can hardly be blamed for that."

He sounded so reasonable she knew he was lying. "What I'm getting at, Mr. Eastland, is that I don't do work for organized crime and I don't do work for secret government agencies."

"What's that--"

"Don't mess with me, Eastland. I brought my bill and frankly, I'd like you to pay it now. In cash."

Jack shook his head. He had anticipated on having a bill thrown in his face. That was a standard gambit. He hadn't expected Heather to unravel his Agency-supplied cover story. Wildfire had been run as a legitimate business for years. If Heather could see through the program this quickly, she either had inside information, or she had instincts the Agency needed.

"I'm not with the Mafia," he told her.

"I don't care what you call it. I taped our meeting this morning. On the way here I dropped the videos in the mail to myself. If I'm still alive when they arrive, I'll reuse them. If something happens to me now, the police will find them. You might be able to work a cover-up, but I think it'll cost you more inconvenience than killing me would be worth."

"Aren't we getting just a little melodramatic?"

"I don't know, Mr. Eastland. Can you think of any reason I should think myself safe sitting with a stranger who lies about who he is and whose hand keeps twitching toward the gun he has in his pocket?"

He wanted to assure her that she was in no danger, but he couldn't make himself mouth the lie. "Let's take a look at the bill."

She reached for the folder. "I'm just getting out the bill," she explained in response to his unconsciously shifting his hand toward his shoulder holster.

"Go ahead," he told her as if nothing had happened. He hadn't realized he could be read so easily. No wonder she was sitting so close to him. It sure as hell wasn't because she wanted to be near him. Zero for two on reading Heather Webb, so far.

She flipped open the folder and slid a yellow receipt to him.

"Three hundred dollars?" he read. That made him zero for three.

"Two hours of research time, on line charges from the databases, and this meeting," she told him. "I round up."

When she'd told him about the videos, he had anticipated something closer to thirty thousand dollars. Then he could ask for her help on the real job as a way to earn the higher fee. Heather's low-ball charge didn't fit his expectations. Still, she was his best suspect right now. He'd just have to up the pressure.

"I don't have that much money on me."

"I'm sure a man in your position has an automatic teller card in his wallet.

What do you say we go for a walk?"

"You haven't touched your coffee."

She reached, slowly, into her front jacket pocket and pulled out a couple of singles, leaving them on the table. "I guess I'm not thirsty."

"Lead me to the nearest teller machine." He'd think of something while they walked.

Superficially, Heather came off as hard and brittle. He wondered what would happen if he pushed. Would she crack, or would her hard crust flake off and reveal steel underneath? He toyed with the idea of pulling her into the Agency for questioning but rejected it. He had to continue with the plan, even if it made him feel like a heel.

"This way." She stood and started toward the exit.

Jack cursed, tossed down a five for his own coffee, and hurried after her. His expense report would be all fouled up and he had no one to blame but himself. Top secret or not, the Agency was typical government when it came to money. It had no problem taking it, but pulling money out of it, without dozens of detailed receipts, could be a royal pain.

Heather stopped in front of a branch of Washington D.C.'s biggest bank.

"Three hundred seven dollars and nineteen cents," she reminded him.

"Right. He punched in the numbers with one hand, using the other to cover up the code he entered.

The money spit out in neatly ironed twenty dollar bills.

She didn't bother to count the stack of bills he handed her, but passed him the change.

"I think our association is now complete, Mr. Eastland. Tell me which way you're heading and I'll go some other direction."

Chapter 2

Jack wasn't about to let Heather Webb walk out of his investigation, or out of his life, quite so easily. He grabbed her arm.

"I think three hundred dollars should buy me a little more consulting services." Jack didn't know what he'd hooked, but it was moving too much to be just an old tire. He wanted to play it in and have a closer look.

"I've already told you that our association is complete, Mr. Eastland."

"Hey, are you working for me or not?"

"Not."

"Fine. Then call me Jack." In the Agency, younger agents had started calling him Mister. The token of respect went with a veiled, or sometimes not very veiled, inference that he should take a desk job and stay away from real work. At thirty-seven, he didn't feel ready for the retirement the agency seemed to have slotted him for. Admittedly, trekking around Washington was a far cry from Afghanistan. Still, anything was better than a desk at Langley.

Heather gave him an icy smile. "I'd feel better calling you gone."

Of all of the detectives that either he or his partner had visited, only Heather had cracked even the first layer of complexity. The others might be able to knock over guys with faked injuries, but they sure couldn't work with a computer.

He decided to play on her sympathies. "What you've told me is making me more worried than I was when we started this. If my company is being used by the Mafia or some spy organization, I think I have a right to know. You may be the only person who can help me."

"Mr. Eastland, get it through your head. I don't want to help you."

"I'll pay double your normal rate." He put on his anxious look.

"Go find yourself another sucker."

"Look, something is going on. Everyone who knows about computers seems to have vanished. Yours is the only company I can find that can do a halfway decent audit. No one else I talked to has even been able to find anything out of the ordinary. If the CIA or Mafia has taken over my company, I want to know for sure. Maybe I can get my money back."

"Mr. Eastland, you have exactly one minutes to vanish completely. After that, I'm going to call the police."

Damn, she was a touch cookie. "Hey, I just need some help."

"I don't know what you need, but I know I'm not it." Her voice softened just a little. He hadn't lost all his skill. Not yet.

"Maybe you're not," he said. "So far, you're the closest thing I've found. I'll tell you what. I understand you don't want to get into trouble. Maybe you could just sort of hint at what I should do."

Her face twisted with obvious indecision. Pretty clearly she knew how to break into the Wildfire system. Pretty clearly too, she was more afraid of him than hungry for his money. Did her reluctance hide a guilty secret?

"Are you a science fiction fan, Mr. Eastland?"

Something in her voice told him he had won. He let a little confusion show in his face. "I guess I read a little. Why?"

"Do you remember reading about the 'old gods'?"

He shook his head, more to clear it than in negation. "I'm not sure."

"Think about it and try to remember. If you do, you may be able to find help. If not, you're on your own."

"Now just a minute. Don't give me some hokey religion stuff. I've put everything I've ever had into this venture. You've got to help me."

"I've already said too much. Let me go, Mr. Eastland."

To his surprise he realized that he still held her arm. What had gotten into him? He wasn't above using physical force to get his way, of course. A decade and a

half in the Agency had cured him of civilian scruples. But he was holding Heather like she belonged to him, like she was a romantic interest, not at all like a threat to his country.

"Try to think about what I've asked." He let just the least amount of panic enter his voice.

At her eyes' answering gleam, he knew he had hit the right button. To his surprise, though, she shook her head.

"Trust the old gods, Mr. Eastland."

* * * *

Heather balled the stack of twenty-dollar bills Jack Eastland had given her in her fist and hurried back through the darkening streets of Washington's Capitol Hill. While the area housed plenty of gentrified homes, with darkness, a different civilization hit the streets: a culture of cocaine, prostitution, and blatant power. Too like the government that ran the city during the day, she thought.

She shouldn't have told Jack about the old gods. Still, would it matter? Even if he was familiar with the Internet, would he think to look for reference to the old gods far off the web, where the out-of-fashion, older technologies still reigned?

It had taken all of her will power to turn him down. Something about this man spoke to her. To her female side rather than to the detective. When he'd touched her, taken her arm, she had felt an irrational urge to throw caution to the winds and kiss

him. As it was, she'd put herself and her parents in danger, but she hadn't been able to help herself. Unlikely though it might be, what if he was what he said and had bought an old spy front from the CIA? Unloading that kind of baggage on a small businessman was exactly the type of trick the government would play.

She'd warn her parents. They would find some way to verify whether Eastland was a victim or part of the problem.

The unmistakable snick of a switchblade clicking into place stopped her in her tracks.

"Hey, babe. Looking for a little action?"

She spun slowly, then took a step back as a tall man stepped from a darkened stoop and stood in front of her. He tossed his knife into the air, then caught it.

The sound of another pair of footsteps halted her retreat. "Looks like you scored pretty good, honey," the new arrival commented.

Damn. Her fist wasn't big enough to hide the money.

"I don't want any trouble," she said.

"Maybe you should have thought about that before you hustled in Charles's turf," the man behind her said. His deceptively soft voice sounded like death.

She chanced a look behind her and wished she hadn't. The man had the telltale defined muscle of a recent prison release and two ten-year tattoos, indicating that he had spent twenty of his thirty or so years of life in jail.

"I'm not a hooker."

"Walks like a duck, talks like a duck, right Charlie?" the man in front of her said, laughing at his own attempt at humor.

She shifted her weight to the balls of her feet and waited. They hadn't asked for her the money; she didn't figure that they would settle for robbing her.

The man before her flipped his knife again. A big smile crossed his face as he caught the knife, point down, on the palm of his hand. "Beautiful pain," he whispered.

"Shut up, Bert," the man behind told him.

Where the heck are the cops when you need them? They certainly seemed to have enough time to continue chasing her parents decades past their mistake.

"I think I get to cut you," Bert said. He breathed heavily, almost licking his lips over the word 'cut.'

Heather inhaled deeply, suddenly aware of exactly how welcome Washington's hot, sticky air could be when she might be breathing her last of it. "How about I just leave my money here on the ground and walk away? You get what you want. No one gets hurt. No need to worry about it."

"But we're not worried," Charlie told her. "And don't worry about getting cut some. Johns like it."

The annoying rumble of a motorcycle kept her from concentrating, getting into the zone her self-defense instructors had worked with her to achieve. This had turned out to be an outrageously bad day.

The motorcycle noise got closer and Bert slipped his knife into a coat pocket. "Don't try anything stupid, girly-girl," he warned.

It would take him only a second to free the knife again, but that second might make all the difference.

With an abrupt shout, she threw the wad of twenty-dollar bills into the air and took off running.

The motorcycle's roar changed tone as its driver shifted gears.

She glanced behind her. Charlie didn't bother asking her to stop. He deliberately pulled a gun from his belt and leveled it in her direction.

Then, suddenly, his gun skittered off and his hand flopped to the side as the motorcycle driver rode by him. In an instant, Heather found herself in midair as the driver scooped her up and tossed her, sidesaddle, behind him on the extended seat of a Harley Davidson.

Despite the mirrored helmet and black leather jacket, she thought she recognized the cut of those tailored trousers and the male scent. Jack Eastland.

"What did you do to him?" she asked, shouting to make herself heard over the engine noise.

"You mean that man who was fixing to shoot at you?"

"Who else?"

Jack pulled over to the side of the road and cut the engine. "I thought I heard something so I picked up a chunk of concrete out of a pothole. He looked like he needed it more than I did."

Her stomach churned. If she had been more careful, no one would have been hurt. Now she had Charlie's injury on her conscience. "You didn't have to hurt him. I was doing fine."

"You were getting yourself killed."

"They wouldn't have killed me. They thought I was a prostitute hustling their turf. If I'd just hidden that stack of money you gave me they would have left me alone."

He grunted at her. "I didn't kill him."

Jack must think she was nuts. People just didn't seem to get it--that violence simply demeans both the victim and aggressor.

Jack pushed up his visor and twisted until he could see her face. This wasn't going according to plan. In the movies, women always throw their arms around their brave rescuers and reward them with kisses. Heather didn't look like she was going to reward him with anything.

Except maybe a fit of temper. She looked genuinely pissed.

"Violence never solves anything, you know," she instructed him.

He ignored the condescending attitude. Violence in Cambodia had solved plenty for him. Like having to grow up with a living father. "Actually, violence solves a whole lot of things. That man with the gun didn't look like he was joking and he didn't look like he was going to stop with a couple of cuts. He would have permanently solved my problem of whether I could change your mind about taking on my case."

"It would have taken a miracle for him to hit me with that Saturday Night Special he packed," she told him. "And that's assuming that the gun fired rather than blowing up in his hand."

It had been a piece of junk. Still, Jack had enough experience to know how easy it was to kill.

"I've never known anyone fast enough to outrun a bullet." The gunman had looked like he knew what he was doing. He'd even used the classic police stance. "Next time I'll let them shoot you."

"I'm sorry. Of course I'm grateful for you rescuing me from my own stupidity."

"Don't take responsibility for other people's evil, Heather," he told her. "You have a right to walk where you want to."

"Where have you lived all your life? The Vatican? Here in Washington, you learn to cope."

"I'll keep that in mind."

He waited a moment, hoping his silence would tempt her to say more.

She seemed to have no problem with the lull in the conversation.

"Do you want me to take you back to your office, or is it time for you to go home now?" he finally asked.

"You don't have to take me home. I can walk."

He grinned at her. "I saw what happened last time you went for a walk. If you won't let me drive you, I'll ride along next to you to make sure you're safe."

She nodded. "I live in the apartment just above my office. You can take me back there."

He started the motorcycle and Heather adjusted herself behind him, straddling the seat rather than riding it sidesaddle.

"Do you have an extra helmet?"

He opened the storage box and handed her his spare. Obviously she had ridden before. She looked quite comfortable sitting behind him, her thighs gently pressing against his hips.

Jack was anything but comfortable. Heather's skirt was cut at least four inches above the knees of her incredibly long legs. And that was before she had hiked it up

to sit on the motorcycle seat. He fought the almost irresistible urge to stroke those long muscles defined in her legs. Damn.

How could he be attracted to this woman? So far, all of the evidence they'd gathered, starting with their missing informant's brief message, pointed directly at her. That she'd found out about Wildfire so quickly proved she had the technical ability to serve as the contact between Middle-Eastern terrorists and computer hackers.

So why did he want to take her in his arms and tell her he'd protect her from the bad men of the big city? The one man he couldn't protect her from was himself. When it came to being bad, those two guys threatening Heather were pikers compared to Jack Eastland.

"Ready," she told him.

He pulled his Harley back from the gutter. Pulling his mind out of its own gutter wasn't quite so easy.

"It was brave of you to come after me." Heather pulled herself forward and spoke directly into his ear so he could hear her. Her breasts burned him through all the protection his leather jacket provided. He knew it was impossible to sense the warm caress of her breath through his helmet. Impossible, but he still felt it.

"Right," he answered.

"It's just that I'm a pacifist. I don't believe in violence, no matter what."

"Believe in it, honey. It's all around."

"That's not what I meant."

He didn't say anything else during the short ride, preferring instead to concentrate on ignoring how perfectly Heather's body fit against his as he cornered a little too fast.

Her three-story town home looked exactly like every other building on the Capitol Hill street. About half of them were apartments. The other half had offices on the first floor and living areas above.

With a little work, a cell could set up a fairly secure environment in a place like this. Between connected roofs, backyards overgrown with large trees, and passages cut between supposedly separate buildings, the whole thing could provide dozens of escape routes. With Washington's cosmopolitan population and the weird hours of politics, no one would think twice about late night departures and a few visitors.

He told himself not to watch as she slid off the bike.

Good plan. Poor execution. At least he still wore his helmet. Its mirrored visor just might keep her from getting a sunburn from the heat of his gaze.

"See you around," he told her as she dug a key from what he guessed must be a purse and unlocked her door.

"You think so, huh?" She tossed him his spare helmet.

He stood, staring at the door, for a long time before climbing back on his bike and heading south.

* * * *

The Agency never slept. No matter what the hour, eager kids picked right out of college could be found bent over their computer workstations or gathered around the coffee pot.

When he'd joined, computers did payroll and cryptography. Back then, agents would parachute behind the Iron Curtain to meet with freedom fighters, hand off missiles to Mujahidin, and spend money on those who would sell their country's secrets. Since he'd been back in the states, Jack had spent six months in computer training just to catch up with kids right out of school. Still, after Afghanistan and Nicaragua, the requirements for his type of agent had diminished. And there were always younger, faster, harder agents pressing to take his spot.

Barney, his partner, was talking to a redhead Jack hadn't noticed before. Barney pulled himself away when he saw Jack walk in.

"Mona tells me that all the bells went off after you hired the PI on Capitol Hill."

Barney had adopted the disguise of a typical bureaucrat: rumpled suit, shirt coming untucked, and a copy of the Wall Street Journal hanging out of a back pocket. Jack wasn't fooled. The two had fought their way across two hundred miles

of Afghan mountain a couple of years before; Barney hadn't missed a day in the gym since.

"She blew our cover story and stopped," Jack told him. "I thought Wildfire was supposed to be frigid."

Barney shrugged. "That's what the kids told me. Anyway, she got further than anyone else. The detectives I visited were complete duds. They just wanted to get in their cars and go talk to people."

"Sort of like us in the old days?" Jack said.

"Hey, don't get sentimental on me. Who wants to crawl around getting shot at when we can sit around with a cup of coffee and play computer games?"

"At least when we were getting shot at, we were the only people in danger."

"Yeah, yeah. I sat through training too," Barney said. "I know what these terrorists are supposed to be trying. So did you learn anything we can use?"

Jack didn't think Barney needed to know how good Heather's body had felt nestled up against him on his motorcycle. "She says she's a pacifist."

"Freedom of religion, I always say. We haven't had trouble with that bunch since Viet Nam."

"Very funny. Oh, I almost forgot. She said something about the old gods."

Barney looked at him as if he had gone completely nuts. "Old gods? What's that, a Georgetown bar?"

"I don't think so. I think it's something related to computers."

"We'll see." Barney stepped into an empty cubicle and launched a web search engine. "The usual two thousand," he finally said. "Nothing that jumps out though."

"She seemed to think these old gods were important."

"Well if they're not on the web, they don't have much to do with computers."

Jack hadn't noticed the redhead's approach, but the agent Barney had been talking to when he arrived broke into their conversation. "Did someone say old gods?"

"What? Is this an echo?" Jack shot back.

"It's in Science Fiction. The old gods are dark and evil and don't like people much."

"That's a big help, Mona," Barney observed. "I'll stop by the library and check up on them. I'm a little behind on my pulp fiction."

"I could be wrong," Mona continued, ignoring his sarcasm, "but think about it from the computer angle. What is old and unfriendly?"

"DOS?" Jack ventured.

"I was thinking more in networking. Everyone is running the web, of course, but that doesn't mean the old tools aren't still out there. Why don't you try Veronica?"

"Why do I feel like I'm being talked down to by my teenage daughter?"

Barney asked. "If Veronica has need-to-know, I'll talk to her."

Mona giggled, reminding Jack that he really was almost a generation older than the younger agents. With what he had lived through, he felt even older.

"You know," she said. "It's like in Archie and Veronica. Comics, get it? Veronica one of the old tools from before the web. There's still a lot of stuff out there. Lots of the old hackers think that the web is too obvious to be cool. Like reading Cliff Notes rather than James Joyce or something."

"James Joyce?" Jack murmured to Barney when Mona swung her pert bottom around the corner. He hoped it wouldn't be too long before he could look at a woman and not compare her to Heather.

Barney followed his gaze. "No you don't. I saw her first."

It wouldn't do to tell Barney that he didn't date fellow agents. And Barney simply wouldn't believe him if he told the man that Mona's obvious physical charms didn't move him. He and Barney had spent, or rather misspent, too much of their twenties together for either to admit that the other had grown up.

Veronica turned out to be a list.

"So what do we look for?" Barney complained.

"Let's stick with the old gods," Jack suggested.

Veronica led them to a Gopher list which in turn pointed them to an ftp site.

"I think we took a wrong path somewhere," Barney said. "We're in University of Iceland of all places. They really do have old gods there."

"Iceland converted centuries ago," Jack answered. "I may not know my computers but I know that. Keep looking."

"Yeah, sure. Just what I need, an update on the Norse pantheon."

"I don't think Heather would have sent me out for a religion lesson."

Barney pulled off his glasses and gave Jack a stare. "Heather, is it?"

"Ms. Webb, I mean."

"Oh, sure. You always had a way with the women, didn't you?"

Irrationally, Barney's smirk bothered Jack. The man was right, after all. Jack had split his twenties between seducing attractive Soviet agents and infiltrating Irish and German terrorist organizations.

"Since Ms. Webb figured out there was an agency angle, I went for the 'I've got to know what I've gotten into' dodge."

"Yeah. I'll bet--oh, boy. Look at this!" Barney tapped on the computer screen with his finger, calling attention to a hidden directory.

"Old God's Lair," Jack read out loud. "Sounds promising. Can we download the files?"

"They don't call me 'the master' for nothing," Barney replied.

Master or not, ten minutes later, Barney looked stuck. Jack took the opportunity to grab coffee for the two of them, throwing a dollar in the collection jar.

"This shouldn't be so hard." Without even looking around, Barney held out his hand for coffee as Jack reentered his cubicle.

Jack grabbed a nearby workstation and logged onto the Icelandic computer. Maybe he could help.

Unlike the rest of the site which contained a combination of English, Danish, and Icelandic files, the hidden 'Old Gods' directory was all in English. Even without names like 'govthacks.archive,' the directory felt like an intrusion rather than a purposeful part of the site. He tried a download.

"I've done that twenty times," Barney told him.

"So what's the security?"

"Typical password protection. We should be able to figure a way around it."

"I think you're working too hard. Whoever put 'Old Gods' out there meant for it to be hacked."

"So you're saying I'm incompetent?"

"Do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"Find out the word for 'guest' in Icelandic."

Barney smacked himself on the forehead. "Of course, it's directory protection, not file protection. I spend so much time working secure systems that I forget how

stupid most computers are." He pushed Jack's hands out of the way and typed in a strange looking hodgepodge of letters and symbols.

A progress bar made its way across the screen as Barney's workstation sucked in all of the files.

Barney gulped down his coffee and passed Jack the empty cup. "More."

When Jack returned, Barney took the cup. "Wish I had a little something stronger to put in this."

"What have you found?"

"This has got to be the most complete hack of government installations I've ever seen," Barney said. "Should we notify the University?"

Jack wondered exactly what channels Heather had used to find this place. Was this really what she'd meant for him to find? It didn't make sense that she would tell him about it if she really was working with the terrorists. On the other hand, she knew too much to be a civilian.

"Sure," Jack replied. "We'll put it through channels."

Barney smirked. "Might as well follow the rules, huh?"

Both men knew that the Agency would take months to decide whether such a communication could risk the security of the United States. By that time, their intrusion would be untraceable, even to the hackers who maintained the site.

Jack glanced through the files Barney had collected. "Remind me not to go into the witness relocation program," he breathed a few minutes later.

"Why's that?"

"It's totally compromised. Look at this."

"Jeez, you're right," Barney answered. "I think maybe we should turn your girlfriend over to the FBI."

Chapter 3

"Heather, are you up?"

Heather opened her eyes and looked out the window. Still dark.

"Too early," she grumbled. Still, she reached for her robe. Her parents did everything they could to give her privacy. Her mother wouldn't be here if it weren't important.

"We don't have much time."

That brought Heather fully awake. The only thing her parents had was time. Since she'd bought the detective agency five years before, along with the old townhouse that housed it, they had rarely left their apartment on the floor above hers. Despite plastic surgery and the best fake IDs that computer hacking can provide, they retained the habits of a three decades as fugitives, living solitary lives and making contact with as few people as possible.

"What are you talking about?"

"The Old Gods site got hacked last night."

Relief swept over Heather. "Don't worry about it. I hinted to one of my clients that he should look there."

"It didn't just get searched. It got violated."

"You put it out there in plain view, mother. You meant for people to find it."

Despite everything she could do, her parents remained true to the anti-government philosophies they'd adopted during college. True to the legacy of the Pentagon papers of an earlier era, they maintained a continually floating database of ways to hack information from various government sites.

Her mother shook her head slowly. "It isn't so simple, Heather. We've never had trouble with the CIA before."

Heather's heart lurched, stopped, then pounded along as if she had run an Olympic sprint. "Are you sure?"

"We're sure," her father answered.

She hadn't noticed him come in, but her parents remained inseparable despite the difficulties that it had created during their years spent in safe houses and on the road.

Heather switched on her bedside lamp and gestured to her parents to sit down.

When they complied, she finished tying her robe and pushed the button on her bedside coffee maker advancing its timer by two hours. Already she felt the beginning of a beautiful headache.

"The CIA isn't allowed to do any domestic work," she reminded them.

Despite the grim look on her father's face, he graced that comment with a short laugh. "And the tooth fairy only leaves uncirculated coins. You know as well as we do that the CIA does what it thinks it has to and worries about the rules later."

"God how I wish you two had never gotten involved in that bombing."

"We were just college kids," her mother reminded her. "You have no idea what it was like in the sixties. We really thought we were on the verge of the revolution, that we'd bring on a utopian society."

"But bombing." Heather had learned her pacifism at her mother's knees. She had never been able to reconcile her parents' devotion to the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King with the crime that had sent them into hiding for three decades.

"We thought it was a fake," her father explained. "A warning against setting up a chemical weapons research institute on campus. We set up the electronics that monitored any intrusion while the others planted the supposed bomb."

Heather realized that she had avoided discussing this part of her parents' past despite the fact that it had totally redirected their lives. She had known that they were on the FBI most wanted list almost since she was old enough to talk, but she'd never learned the details of their crime.

"That was so long ago, I'm sure that no one is tracking you down over it."

"If they find us, they'll make the connection. It turns out that the chemical weapons project was funded by the CIA."

"So what are you going to do?"

Her father cleared his throat awkwardly. "I know it leaves you in a hard spot, Heather. Unfortunately we've left you in hard spots all of your life. But we've got to leave. Maybe we'll head for Canada for a while."

Heather shivered. They had spent two years in Moncton, New Brunswick when she was in her pre-teens and she still remembered the way the snow drifts would pile up so they could leave their rented house from the second story windows.

"When?"

"We're all packed."

"Can't you stay and see if it blows over."

"No," her father answered shortly.

"But don't worry about the security jobs," her mother told her. "We finished those when we found out about the CIA."

The reports are on your desk."

"I wasn't worried about that stuff."

"You should be. You've worked hard to build a legitimate business here. We wouldn't want to do anything to harm it."

"You guys seem to be assuming that I'll stay here. Why don't I go along. It would be like old times."

"They aren't after you, Heather," her father explained. "You've got your own life. Your mother and I made a decision and we've got to live by the consequences. You don't."

Heather poured her coffee and stirred in a stream of creamer. "I want to go."

Her mother smiled. "I know you're worried about us. We're all grown up, though. We've been on the run most of our lives. We'll stay in touch the usual way. And remember, you are totally innocent in all of this. If the police come, tell them everything you know."

"And let them track you down?"

"Sometimes I think you get things confused, Heather. We're the parents and you are the child. Even if you are twenty-nine, you're still our baby and it's still our job to take care of you as best we can, not yours to take care of us. Now give us a kiss and keep your fingers crossed."

Heather couldn't think of a thing to say as she helped them load their ancient Volkswagen van with a couple of changes of clothing, a portfolio she knew contained dozens of faked identification cards, and a collection of laptops, cellular modems, phone phreaking equipment, and dozens of the new ultra-high density diskettes. Her mother adjusted the police band radio, the radar detectors, and the CB.

"You'll be back if this is a false alarm?" She couldn't eliminate the plaintive note to her voice. Hell, she was plenty proud of herself for not grabbing her father's legs and kicking her legs against the ground until they agreed to take her. Of course if she thought it would work, she'd probably try it.

Her mother answered. "Keep your wonderful innocence, Heather. We lost ours too young. Remember, no matter what happens, we love you."

As the van bumped its way onto East Capital Street, the sun poked itself over the horizon.

"I thought they were supposed to ride off into the sunset, not the sunrise," she muttered.

Jack Eastland gave Heather a cheery nod when she finally struggled into her office. He lounged, apparently completely comfortable, in her chair, sipping coffee from her mug, and studying the reports her parents had left.

"Would you mind telling me how you got in here?" she demanded.

"Do you have a license for this?" he asked, pulling her automatic from the desk drawer and pointing it in her general direction.

She froze, then slowly raised her hands. "Of course I have a license for it."

"Strange toy for a pacifist to carry."

"Yeah? Well, getting through two supposedly pickproof deadbolts is a strange thing for a business CEO to do."

"I've gotten around."

Heather blamed her slow uptake on lack of coffee. Of course Eastland was the reason why her parents had run. "I never have anything to do with spooks, Mr. Eastland."

"I told you to call me Jack."

"Maybe no one has ever said no to you before, Mr. Eastland." With his looks, she could bet that not very many women would manage the will power to refuse him anything. Her parents' problems with the law kept her immune from any type of attraction to a CIA agent. "But I'm not interested in your business."

"You know, it's a funny thing, Heather." He paused to take a sip of coffee and made a face. "This is terrible. Don't you ever clean your coffee pot?"

"No." She couldn't control her curiosity. "What's a funny thing?"

"Lots of people tell me no. At first. Eventually I persuade them to come around." He gestured with her automatic, punctuating his words with the overt threat it represented.

"From time to time, I find it helpful to play tough, Mr. Eastland. The gun is part of the act. I wouldn't actually shoot anyone. Frankly, I don't think you'd shoot me either."

"You don't think so, but you don't know for sure, do you? Looks to me like it makes you nervous." He set the gun on the top of her desk, unfortunately still within easy reach of his long arms.

"This is the second time in less than twenty-four hours that someone has seen fit to point a gun at me. So, yes. I do find it a little disturbing. Now, I would like you to leave before I call the police. I've read the law. The CIA has no jurisdiction within the U.S. borders so you could well find yourself the star of another agency PR debacle."

Eastland actually laughed at her.

To her disappointment, his laugh was as sexy as everything else about this impossible man. Because of him, her parents were on the road again, after they had finally settled down to lead a semblance of a normal life. Because of him, her body ached like it had been run over by his motorcycle rather than merely swept up onto it. And because of him, she hadn't finished two jobs that would have actually gotten her paid yesterday, rather than leaving money on the ground for the likes of Charlie and Bert. Of course she hated him. So why did she find him so attractive?

"What makes you think I work for the CIA?" The slight edge to his voice told her he thought he had her in a trap.

"Let's see. I tell you about the Old Gods. The CIA hacks the Old Gods site. I put one and one together. Not too hard. You seem to forget that I am a private investigator."

His face hardened. "I'm not forgetting anything, Heather. So lets stop playing games and get to work."

"What do I need to do for you to leave me alone?"

He gave her a funny look. "I don't really know. If I'm right about what's going on, you're in more danger than you can possibly imagine."

"So what do you want to know?" Her parents had told her to tell everything. If she did, she'd never be able to see them again.

"Let's talk about how middle eastern terrorists can use the net to essentially shut down the economy."

Heather looked at him for a moment. Every word he'd said made sense. But it added up to nothing. He wasn't asking about the Old Gods, which was the name her parents had adopted when PCs came into the market and they'd brought their programming experience to the West Coast computer fair.

From somewhere inside, a giggle struggled to the surface. She did her best to keep it under control. But she couldn't.

Once she started to laugh, she found it impossible to stop. Tears rolled down her face, yet she continued.

"Stop it." Eastland had somehow left her chair and grasped her by the shoulders.

She sagged against him, sobs beginning to mix with her laughter.

Jack didn't like the way this was going. He had been completely in control, in the zone. Then suddenly, when he got to the crunch, he had nothing.

Nothing, that is, except two hands full of woman.

He had noticed her body, of course. Heather was certainly worth more than one double-take with her long slender legs, her sun darkened skin and jet black hair, and her startlingly blue eyes. Now that it was pressed up against his, though, he noticed that it wasn't all firm girl muscle. She had just the right amount of softness in just the right places.

"Hang in there," he told her.

"Easy for you to say," she gasped out. She sagged against him even more heavily, letting him carry her entire weight.

He slid his arms off her shoulder down to her waist where he could help balance her.

As he did so, she shifted her weight and her breasts pressed against his chest, then she brought up her hands to rest against his jacket lapels.

"I'm not carrying a gun," he told her.

Nobody could be that much of an actor, but he had no doubt that she'd tried to pick his pocket.

She pushed away from him and claimed her chair. "That was just about the funniest thing I've ever heard."

"Our entire economy depends on computer transactions. They're secure against ordinary hacker attacks, but even a relatively poor foreign government has resources that the average hacker couldn't accumulate in a million years. Agency analysts think it's the biggest national security risk we face right now."

"You honestly think that, just because I use computers to track down missing persons like every other private investigator in the country, that I'm involved in something like that. Check my bank balance. I barely have enough money for a couple of tacos. You don't think that I'd hold out for better pay if I were going to destroy the American way of life."

She had to be the best actor he'd met since the KGB went bankrupt. But she couldn't finesse away the facts.

"The Old Gods site was quite a find. There are phone numbers, trap doors, passwords, and user IDs for just about every major government system."

"Oh? Did you find anything about the CIA?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"What it has to do, Jack, is that you have no business investigating domestic matters." She held up a hand to forestall his protest. "Not even if it relates to a foreign threat. That's supposed to be handed off to the FBI. So show me an FBI ID card and we can talk." Although she used his first name, she made it sound like a curse.

"The CIA gathers information and turns that over to the FBI. That's all I'm doing right now. You aren't under arrest," he explained

"Oh, thank you so much. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you."

"Yeah, right." Sarcasm was a little better than that hysterical laughter. It made her seem tougher, less like she needed protecting from a cruel world.

"I don't do industrial sabotage. I suspect you overheard me tell a prospective client that before you arrived yesterday."

"But you do computer security audits. What better way to penetrate a company's defenses than running a full audit on them?"

From the look on Heather's face, his big cannon had suddenly turned into a popgun. "It could be, but it isn't."

"You don't work alone, do you?" He'd come back to the first line of questions later.

"I get help when I need it."

"And for computer security, you always get help."

"So?"

"So, suppose I told you that Pete Engles and Karen Guthrie were wanted criminals?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Is that why you've been harassing me?"

He dropped his grasp on her. He couldn't tell her anything but he'd have to tell her enough to find out if she could be the innocent dupe of others. Despite her tough act, he didn't see her as conscienceless. "Our sources indicate that a foreign power has funded extensive research into penetrating the computer systems of major U.S. companies with special emphasis on financial systems."

"So a few big companies get ripped off? They can afford it."

"Sure, penetrating one or two systems wouldn't amount to much. But if they could sabotage the financial systems of a major share of the largest U.S. companies, not to mention the U.S. government, they could shut down the economy."

"Which means what, exactly?"

"Which could make the great depression look like a tea party." At least that was what the Agency economists had explained.

"Well, all of that doesn't make any difference. I don't do espionage work. Neither do Pete and Karen."

"You seem awful confident of them."

"I am."

"Despite what I told you of their criminal past."

"I've known them a long time."

She was nearly laughing at him about some secret, but he couldn't see how anyone could be so certain about other people. "Why don't you call them here. I'd like to talk with them. And stay here. I don't want you working on getting your stories straight."

"First of all, I thought you said I wasn't under arrest."

"I didn't--"

"And second. I can't call them. They've left."

"What?" He managed not to shout the question.

"They finished the job they were working on and they left. It's very simple."

"Sure. So what was that job?"

"I'm not allowed to divulge client confidential information."

"We're talking about the safety of our country here and you're worrying about your private dick ethics?"

"I think that's why you went into the government. We aren't the same, you know. For you, maybe the country is about money. For me, what makes a society worth living in is ethics."

He wasn't sure where this conversation was going, but it wasn't going anywhere useful. Rather than continue arguing, he leaned forward and gathered up

the papers on her desk. "Maybe I can help you short-circuit your ethics. Why don't you close your eyes and pretend you're living in some perfect world?"

Her blue eyes stared into him like he was a skunk, stinking on the side of the road. "Be my guest."

He didn't like the way she caved in so easily but wasn't about to argue with success.

Most of the papers dealt with such important administrative details as ordering coffee and renewing her Private Investigators license. Two sealed envelopes looked more promising.

"Are you sure you want to watch?" he asked her as he slit open the first of the envelopes.

"I certainly don't want to watch but I truly didn't expect anything better so I'm not surprised. I'll live."

"I appreciate your cooperation." He had meant to sound sarcastic, but really he meant it. She could have pitched a fit, called the police, and really made things difficult for him. Instead, she had simply asserted her moral case then backed off and let him do what he had to do for the sake of the country. Ethically weak, maybe, but leading to the right results.

The report detailed an extensive investigation into a company's computer systems. In excruciating detail it laid out the firewall weaknesses, the social

engineering that its authors had conducted and provided samples of some of the company's most sensitive materials. "Where the hell is the company name?"

"We always work in code names. That way, if the security of my office were to be breached, my clients would continue to be safe."

"Damn." He opened the second report but found the same results. "Listen. You owe this country a lot and it's calling on you for a little payback. Is that too much to ask?"

"What, exactly, do you think I owe this country. I've worked for everything I've got. I never got any handouts and I wouldn't have taken one if I'd been offered."

He tossed down the second report and stood, then reached back for the coffee mug.

Heather's eyes followed him as he raised the cup to his lips. She looked hungry. The coffee was cold.

"I finished the last of your coffee," he told her. "It looks like you're not much use unless you get some. Why don't you let me buy you a cup, and maybe a donut?"

"Because I don't take handouts from sleaze," she suggested.

"Put it on my bill."

Heather shrugged. "Why not? I can't work without coffee."

"In the agency, only the computer jocks and analysts drink a lot of coffee. Guys that work in the field have to stay unimpaired."

"So which are you?"

"I'm certainly not a computer jock."

Heather was almost looking forward to having a cup of coffee with Jack and felt terrible about it. If it hadn't been for him, her parents would never have had to run. "I'll get my purse. Put away my gun and lock the drawer. All I need is for another client to break in her and get some crazy idea."

"I'd think one of those a day would be enough."

"No kidding."

Jack led her all of fifty feet to the 7-11 and ordered a couple of large coffees. He made his decaf, she noted. He might claim that he was doing investigative work, but he certainly seemed like an agent type to her.

She spent so long trying to decide between a chocolate éclair and a Napoleon that he bought both of them, as well as an enormous apple fritter for himself.

"I only want one," she told him.

"So throw one away," he answered. "Standing in line makes me nervous."

"Have you ever thought that you're stressed out working at a job that you can't really respect?" She felt a sudden sense of kinship with this man, almost as if she

would be able to explain things to him and put the two of them in a new age-y sort of mind meld.

"I think maybe I spent too many years worrying about a tap on the shoulder and the firing squad," he replied.

Strangely, his abrupt answer didn't eliminate the feelings she had. Instead, it opened another window into the soul of this complex man. The CIA might be an evil institution. That was certainly what her parents had taught her and there was plenty of evidence to back up their claims. That didn't mean that every man associated with it was evil, nor that their goals were opposed to her own.

They carried their donuts and coffee outside and sat on a small table just outside the store.

Jack's eyes looked far away as he bit into his fritter.

"Penny for your thoughts," she offered.

"There's a chess board built into the tabletop," he observed.

"I don't think I'm getting my penny's worth."

He smiled at her. His smile revealed Jack's youthful side, a side that too many years of field work had generally replaced with a haunted look of concern and caution. "That was the preamble. I'd generally charge a nickel for this but I'm afraid it will show up on my bill so I'll give it to you free. I was thinking that so far, our

relationship has been like a chess game. I led with a bluff, you countered, and I revealed the real attack. Except one thing."

"What's that?"

"In a chess game, all of the pieces are on the table. I feel like I'm playing a game where I can only see the pieces I've run up against. I think the major pieces are starting to move into attack position."

"And you think Pete and Karen might be major pieces."

"Right now I don't know whether they're major pieces or sacrifices."

"I think they're a red herring," Heather explained.

"You're so busy chasing after them that the real enemy is getting away. That's assuming there is a real enemy and this isn't just another case of your agency getting paranoid over nothing."

He shook his head. "In the bad old days, there were only two kinds of agents: Agents who trusted their instincts, and agents who died young. I didn't die young."

To Heather, he looked pretty young. Older than her own twenty-nine, of course, but certainly far short of forty. Maybe thirty-five. If the CIA thought of men Jack's age as old timers, no wonder it got in so much trouble for games that belonged in the frat house rather than in international diplomacy.

"What's that got to do with Pete and Karen? And me?"

Jack took a sip of his decaf. "I feel like you're the beginning of a thread. If I keep tugging on that thread, it's going to lead me somewhere. Somewhere important.

Heather finished the Napoleon and looked longingly at the eclair.

Jack finished his second apple fritter at about the same time and caught her glance.

"You'd better eat that quick," he told her.

"What's the hurry?"

"You really don't want to fight off a growing boy, do you?"

Since Heather had to run every day to stay relatively fit, she didn't even want to think about how hard Jack had to work to keep his hard body while scarfing down enough calories and fat grams in donuts to feed a Bosnian village. "You bought it for me," she told him and took a bite.

The eclair's soft cream melted enticingly in her mouth.

Jack watched her with a desire that she knew centered on the pastry.

She fought down the irrational notion that his desire should really focus on her. "What's your wife think about you being a CIA agent?"

"Marriage isn't practical in my line."

She nodded. With her responsibility to her parents, she had never even considered marriage as a serious possibility either. "You should know to be careful when you glare like that, then," she told him.

"What do you mean?"

"A girl might get the idea that the desire is for her rather than for her donut."

"I don't think--"

Jack launched himself across the table, scattering their half empty coffee cups and napkins. He caught her under her arms and continued his dive, forcing her to the ground underneath his nearly two hundred pounds of bone and muscle.

"Was it something I said?" Heather gasped. She had no idea he would react so strongly to her teasing.

The bang, which could have been a backfire but almost certainly wasn't, proved her only answer.

Jack rolled with her into the 7-11.

"What the heck--" the Asian store owner began.

"Police, now. Drive by shooting." Jack shouted.

Chapter 4

"No, I didn't see a face," Jack repeated for the hundredth time since the police had arrived. They weren't very happy with his answer but it was the only one they were going to get.

He had acted instinctively when the gunman had pulled by. Instinctively, but wrong. The failure tore at his guts like a weasel.

His jump to protect Heather had been spectacular, romantic, and totally unnecessary. The gunman hadn't been pointing at her. He had been firing directly at Jack. What had he been thinking? An agent whose instincts fail is a dead agent. It had to be a casual drive by shooting. Otherwise he'd be dead now.

"If you think of anything else, you will let us know?" the officer wound down.

"No problem," he lied. The Agency would button down security on a shooting involving a field agent so fast that this officer might never know what happened to him. A good cop wants all of the information, but this one would have a longer career if he'd butt out.

"There's something funny going on here," the cop persisted. "Maybe these are guys you're doing drugs with or something. I don't know. I do know that you'll be awful sorry if they catch up to you."

"Yeah? Maybe you should be my bodyguard."

"Get the hell out of here," the cop responded.

Jack hailed a cab and headed back toward Capitol Hill.

When the double agent had fingered a Washington D.C. detective agency as a key part of the espionage operation, he'd seen this as a chance to show the Agency that he still had the stuff. Not that the agency really cared about field agents any more. Now they were looking for operatives who'd sit in their desks looking at satellite pictures that might, possibly, show that the Russians were building treaty violating missile launchers. Pictures that seemed to end up showing new shopping centers, or changes in the grazing patterns of the local sheep.

Now he wasn't so certain. He'd risked Heather's life and his own. His reactions might still be quick, but quick doesn't help a lot if they are wrong.

One thing for sure, he thought as he paid the cabby, ignoring the man's whining demand for a bigger tip, he'd have to get to the bottom of whatever attraction Heather held over him. Once he understood it, he would be free of it forever. That might not be an especially romantic attitude, but it had always worked

that way for him. And after all, an agent needs a serious love interest the way a fish needs a fishhook.

He mounted the stairs to Heather's office, reflexively avoiding the creaky step, and opened it without knocking.

He caught the faintest shadow of movement in his peripheral vision and somersaulted into it. It might just be Heather, but after what had just happened, he didn't intend to take chances.

A hard boot slammed into his ribs as he rolled, then he smashed into the man's knees taking him down.

The man cursed in Arabic, then reached for his throat.

Jack feinted with a knee to the man's groin, then gouged at an eyeball. The Agency doesn't teach fighting fair. It teaches fighting to win.

"Enough," a second voice said. The snick of a shell being fed into an automatic stopped his attack. Instead he rolled, covering himself with the man.

"I suggest you let, ah, Mr. Smith go." The man's accent could have come from anywhere although his coloring and the friends colorful curse pointed toward the Arab world.

"Right now he's about the only leverage I have," Jack answered. Why don't you slide that gun across the floor and then I'll let him go?"

"Why don't you--" the man labeled as Smith began.

"Patience, my friend. He isn't important," the gunman said. "It isn't much of a gun at any rate. I found it in Ms. Webb's desk."

To Jack's surprise, he dropped the gun, then kicked it to a corner of the room about equidistant from the three men.

"Get up," Jack told Smith. He twisted the man's arm behind him and forced him upward careful to keep his body between Jack and the other man. It didn't take a genius to know which of the two was dangerous, nor that the man's casual tossing away of the weapon could mean only that he had other guns within easy reach.

"We're going to go out the door," Jack told the gunman, ignoring Smith. When we get to the door, you go out first. Take five steps. Then I'll push Smith out after you."

"That would be agreeable." The gunman nodded. "If you try to close the door and keep Mr. Smith, I'll kill both of you."

"But--" Smith started.

"No one's talking to you," Jack twisted his arm harder until he could feel it straining against its socket.

The gunman packed away from Jack, then stopped at the desk to pick up the two security reports that he'd looked through earlier.

"Leave those," Jack ordered.

"You're overplaying your bargaining position," the gunman answered. "Shall we continue?"

Heather's business operations were her own business, Jack decided. So long as they didn't contain national security breaches. He hadn't seen anything particularly dangerous in these reports, although they certainly did point the way into the computer systems of a couple of what sounded like mid-sized companies. Nothing worth getting shot over.

Jack urged Smith on, shoving him to the office door, then down the stairway.

"Would you like a bit of advice?" the cold voiced gunman asked when they reached the landing.

"Will it help me stay alive?"

"It may not be too late for that."

"All right."

"Ms. Webb appears to be something of a Typhoid Mary right now. Perhaps you should cool your hormones for a while."

"Perhaps I should," Jack agreed.

The gunman stepped out the door to Heather's building and reached into his trench coat, his forearm muscles tightening as he grasped what Jack assumed was another pistol.

"Now it's up to you to fulfill your part of our bargain," he told Jack.

"Right." Jack glanced down to make sure that the door was locked. It was. With as fluid a motion as he could, he pushed Smith out the door, giving his arm that final twist as he did so, then slammed the door and continued his motion by rolling into the umbrella closet next to the door.

A scream of pain from Smith was cut short by the hard crack of a large caliber pistol. Four bullet holes poked their way through the door, exactly where he had been.

"You could have killed me," he heard Smith complain to the gunman.

"Let's get out of here before the police come," the gunman replied.

"Aren't we going to check and see if you got him, Mr. Jones?"

"Who cares? He isn't important anyway."

Jack took the stairs three at a time, then called headquarters.

The Agency hated interfering with the police. It meant asking favors of the FBI which, from the Agency's perspective, was roughly equivalent to taking your sister out on a hot date. Still, if Heather were to walk into Smith and Jones, she would be in a heap of trouble. So far, Heather looked like the best lead available into whatever was going on.

* * *

The attempted holdup the previous evening had been an unfortunate event. The drive by shooting had been a strange coincidence. Three attacks in less than twenty-four hours could hardly be anything other than a concerted plot.

"Listen. I've got to get back to work," Heather explained for the twentieth time.

The policemen who had been assigned to work with her were extremely polite, seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say, and would do absolutely nothing to let her go. "Just a little longer."

"You know my number. Any time you have some mug shots or something, I'll come down. But since we're not doing anything, why won't you let me go."

"You had a concussion. It's important that you give it a rest," the officer told her.

"Right. Your police station is so restful. I know that my own bed would hardly compare, but it seems to me that maybe it would be a little easier on you. You know, you wouldn't all have to stand around staring at me."

Heather realized her heart was only half way into this. With her parents gone, she hardly had anything to run back to.

She'd asked about Jack, but the police didn't seem to know anything. Maybe Jack'd learned enough that he could go back to Fort Meier, or wherever the CIA's real offices were, and track down her parents.

"You can let her go now." Jack's voice sounded comforting until she listened to the words.

"What are you doing here?"

"Bailing you out, sweetheart."

Her heart fluttered at the endearment, even though he was probably just playing up his private investigator joke again. "Bailing me out? I'm not under arrest."

"We've got to talk. And I didn't finish my coffee this morning. Shall we go?"

"Yuck." Coffee was about the furthest thing from her mind right then. The police had plied her with more cups of the world's worst coffee than she normally drank in a month.

He gave her a look sugar-coated with mock concern. "I'll drink the coffee. You can eat mint-chocolate-chip ice cream."

"What makes you think I like ice cream?"

"Who doesn't? Let's go."

Still, how could he have known her favorite flavor? Things were a little too X-file for Heather's taste.

Jack led her to an official looking dark blue Buick.

Before he let her in, he pulled a small flashlight from his pocket and checked the back seat and trunk. Finally he held open her door.

"Trying to stay in practice for the spook Olympics?" she asked.

"That's it."

He passed her a pair of sunglasses, pulled a battered hat from under his seat, and slouched into the driver's side. Instantly he looked like an old and beaten man.

"Does it say in the rules that I have to play spy games too?" she asked him.

"Humor me on this, Heather. I'll explain after we get out of here."

He drove expertly, eyes seemingly in constant motion as he took in impressions from the mirrors, monitored the drivers on either side, and pressed ahead, always managing to make the lights.

On the flip side, he wasn't driving toward her place.

"I'm not interested in going to any spy hideout," she announced when it had become clear that he wouldn't start the conversation.

"Fine."

"Are you going to tell me what's going on or am I just supposed to figure it out?"

"You're the private investigator. Let me give you some clues and see what you come up with."

She strained for any hint of sarcasm in his voice but didn't hear it. "All right, shoot."

"A poor choice of words," Jack observed. "When I went by your office, a couple of men were waiting. They jumped me."

"That shouldn't be too hard. Whoever knew you were going there is your suspect. Can you take me home now?"

"Nobody knew I was going there. I didn't know myself until I realized that I could use those reports."

"That's one clue. What are the rest?"

"You know the rest. You got held up last night. This morning we got shot at. This afternoon--"

"*You* got shot at," she interrupted.

"I beg your pardon."

"You don't seriously believe that they were shooting at me, do you? They came from behind me. That's why you saw them. If they'd been shooting at me they would have hit me."

"I've only been back in the states for a few weeks now. Nobody but my partner and one or two others in the agency even knows that I'm home. If they were shooting at me, it's connected with you."

"I'm starting to see why the CIA has the reputation it has, Jack. That makes about as much sense as playing water polo with piranha. I don't think you could make it as a private eye."

He shook his head and pulled onto Memorial Bridge leading out of Washington into Virginia. "You have some pretty strange concepts about the Agency."

"I know. I can read."

He sighed but didn't look like he wanted to continue with that conversation.

Perversely, she wished that he would. Despite what she had said, he seemed like an intelligent man. Surely he could see that this paranoid spy vs. spy attitude created the very problems it was designed to fix. She knew better. This bizarre fascination he held for her had to be a forbidden fruit syndrome rather than any reality. If he did become a part of her life, her parents would be forced forever out of it.

"Never mind about the CIA. You took statistics. Calculate the odds that all three of these attacks are coincidental."

"That's not--hey, how did you know I took statistics?"

"I ran a check on you last night."

"You did what?"

"I suppose I'm supposed to fall for that shocked hurt? Come on, you do it all the time. I looked at your school records. Interesting how often you moved around growing up."

"My dad was a contract programmer."

"Where are your parents now? I couldn't find them anywhere on the search."

She forced herself to breath normally. "I sort of lost touch with them. They drop me a line now and again, but they're still traveling." Not a lie, exactly. Just that it had only been the truth since that morning.

His lips turned down at the corners. She could tell that her answer didn't satisfy Jack. He'd have to live with it.

"I can't imagine losing touch with a parent."

"I suppose you call your father every night, without fail?"

"My father died in Cambodia, during the Viet Nam war."

"I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me."

"I was pretty young. I don't remember much about him."

His hands clenched the wheel for a moment. Then, with an obvious effort of will, he relaxed his grip and exhaled deeply. "I didn't call my mother every night, but I definitely stayed in touch."

"Sounds like past tense."

"She passed away ten years ago."

Everything Jack told he made it more apparent that the two of them could never find common ground. He could hardly understand the tight bonds that she had developed when she and her parents could only trust one another. He certainly would

never understand the passion that had led her parents to rebellion against their own country, the country for which his father had died.

She reached out and touched his arm lightly. "Sounds like you've had it tough."

He glared at her for a moment, anticipating sarcasm that she certainly hadn't intended.

"Enough of the maudlin stuff. Let's camp out here."

He accelerated, then, at the last possible instant, swerved into the offramp.

"Is someone following us?"

"Keep your eyes peeled but I don't think so."

A couple of miles of twisting and turning through Arlington street traffic convinced them both that they had lost any but the most dedicated team of trackers. Finally he eased between two panel trucks in the parking lot of a cheap motel. The motel's marquee advertised hourly, daily, and monthly rates.

The two story brick structure had obviously stood for a number of years so it wasn't likely to collapse that night. Still, Heather didn't get any great sense of reassurance. Ancient window A/C units hung from the windows dripping condensation to the ground in oily looking puddles. Scattered shingles around the units indicated that the roofs could use some work. The parking lot was about half

filled with an interesting mix of rusted pickup trucks and recent model mid-priced sedans.

As she watched, a middle aged man wearing a suit held open the door to one of the units for a woman wearing the shortest skirt Heather had seen outside of movies from the sixties.

"Is this where you live?" she asked.

He gave her another look. "I'm really having a hard time figuring you out," he finally commented. "I can't believe that you are deliberately provoking me, but sometimes it's the only explanation I can come up with."

"You drag me away from the police station, ignore my questions about where we're headed, and pull up in a cheap motel I didn't even know was here even though I've lived in the area for the past couple of years. I think it was a reasonable question."

"No, I don't live here. I thought it looked like a reasonable place to go to ground for a day, until we've had a chance to decide what to do next. I don't figure they'll have a problem with cash here, and they certainly won't worry about our lack of luggage."

"You sure you aren't bringing me here for a cheap rendezvous?"

Foot in mouth disease, she told herself. Why don't you just beg the man to satisfy your cravings?

* * * *

The thought had crossed his mind. Hell, the thought hadn't left his mind since he'd first seen her. Not that he wanted anything cheap. A romantic evening with champagne at a darkened restaurant. Maybe an old guy playing violin in the background. And him slowly reaching over and running his fingers through her long dark hair.

He gave her a hand out of the car.

Almost certainly it was his imagination, but her hand seemed to cling to his for just a moment longer than absolutely necessary. Of course it could have been him holding on.

"I don't have any cash on me," she told him.

"I'll pay for the room."

"Room?" Her eyebrows arched, her brown eyes probing his with question.

"The rooms have two beds. Don't worry, I won't attack you."

"This place looks cheap enough that we can each afford a room of our own. I'm good for my share."

So much for his reading promise into her earlier touch. "Remember, we're trying to look inconspicuous. A couple asking for separate rooms would stand out."

"So we walk in separately."

"Too late. Places like this keep an eye on what's going on. If this really bothers you, we can go someplace else though." He let his voice trail off at that suggestion. He needed to start working on Heather now if he was going to unravel what was going on. The longer they spent driving around, the better the chances that something would happen. And he couldn't think of a single surprise that could be anything but bad.

"Oh, never mind. If you don't mind my snoring, I guess I'm game. Just so I don't have to dress like the woman who went into room 200."

"Actually a lot of secretaries come here with their bosses as well."

"Oh, thanks. So I'm going to be a slutty secretary now."

"I thought I'd be the secretary and you the boss. Twenty-first century, you know."

Hearing her laughter was worth whatever snores he'd have to listen to tonight. Frankly, sleeping only a few feet away from Heather wasn't going to be easy. Fortunately, his training had included learning to sleep in arctic conditions halfway up a mountain. Knowing that a beautiful woman lay just outside his grasp couldn't be too much harder. Could it?

"Let's go," she told him.

The manager swung his ponderous bulk into action, turning away from a Cricket match being played on the TV. The man spoke enough English to demand

his rent be paid in advance. Then he held out for a deposit on their towels. Finally he thrust the oversized metal key into Jack's hand and winked at him.

She took the key from him and opened the motel door, then hesitated, letting out a waft of disinfectant.

"Ugh," she told Jack.

Somehow the two of them managed to step toward the door at the same time and Heather found herself chest to chest with Jack.

He smelled of leather and soap, overwhelming the odor of disinfectant that had been so strong only moments before. She felt her breasts yield against the hard muscles of his chest. Lower, her abdomen nestled against his hips instantly answering her unspoken question of whether his body was responding to hers in the same way she was to him. His rock-hard excitement spoke every bit as loud as the gasp that escaped his lips--or was it her own?

She seemed powerless to step away, powerless to wrap her arms around him and complete what felt so natural.

Jack suffered from no such paralysis. He bent toward her upturned lips and kissed her as if she were an oasis he'd found after wandering for years in the desert. How her lips managed to be so cleverly upturned, she had no idea.

Her lips molded themselves to his and she returned the kiss, desperately ignoring the rational part of her mind that screamed that she was only letting herself

in for pain. When he discovered that Pete and Karen, his primary suspects, were actually her parents, he could only conclude that she had kissed him to distract him from the chase. She had to stop now, tell him what she knew.

Instead, she parted her lips.

Jack took her action for assent and deepened the kiss, his tongue reaching out, entering her mouth and demanding her own tongue in return.

The instant she gave him what he sought, he swept her off her feet and stepped into the motel room, kicking the door shut behind him as he entered.

For the first time in her life, she felt protected. Her parents loved her, of course, but their own problems meant that they needed her as much as she needed them. Jack was different. But he was different in a very dangerous way.

She nestled her hands against his chest. Finally, reluctantly, she pushed him away, breaking off their kiss.

"Well that was a surprise," Jack told her, his voice hoarse.

"I think you'd better put me down before we both do things we aren't ready for," Heather told him.

She willed him to ignore her words, to kiss him again. If he did, she didn't stand a chance. No man could be so exciting, she felt certain. It had to be a combination of the danger, fatigue, and maybe just a little bit of hormonal acting up. Still, what if it were more than that?

Jack set her on one of the two double beds.

The mattress folded around her like a hammock, strangely comfortable despite the sag. The starched white sheets reminded her of her babyhood dreams of a home before her parents went on the run.

"I think maybe we'd better talk," she told him.

He crossed his legs and leaned forward. "I got carried away for a moment but I'm under control now."

"That's not what I meant. I was as much responsible for what happened as you were. Let's just write it up to hormones and man's natural urge to procreate when faced with threat."

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"I wondered if you could tell me any more about the people you claim grabbed you when you stopped by my office?"

"Besides the fact that they looked like they were from somewhere in the middle east and that one of them was probably educated in Britain, not a whole lot. I'd recognize them if I saw them again."

"Since I'm always in my office, they wouldn't have to wait there. They could just call for an appointment."

"Maybe they didn't know that."

"Maybe. I've learned not to start out assuming my opponents are complete morons, though."

"That reminds me. They took the computer security reports from your desks."

Heather felt her forehead wrinkle in concentration. "Why would anyone want an unnamed company's security information?"

Bret gave her a half-grin. "You're supposed to be a pretty hot private detective. How long do you think it would take you to figure out what company they relate to?"

"So all of this is really about robbing a few medium sized companies? I guess that shoots your big foreign conspiracy theory to pieces. Maybe you should call the police and let them do their jobs."

"I know it sounds that way but I believe my informant."

"You didn't mention an informant before."

"And you haven't told me who the companies are. I think maybe we'd both better think about laying our cards on the table."

Comprehension dawned on her. She had assumed that he'd been telling her the truth about the men who had attacked him. But what if he wasn't. He was in the CIA after all. Lying was his business. Could everything, the story, the attack, even his kiss, be part of a plan to get her to open up?

"I'll have to think about it."

Jack frowned, then slid forward on his bed. Slowly he reached out and grasped her chin, turning her head until she looked directly into his face. "We don't have time to play games, Heather. Whoever is behind this is deadly serious. You told me that you don't know what happened to Pete and Karen? Let me tell you something. I'm suspicious of the way that they disappeared. I think maybe you were meant to disappear as well.

Chapter 5

The bed sagged under Jack, soft like a jellyfish and just as uncomfortable. The weight of the coverings cramped his toes although he'd already untucked the top sheet from the too-short bed.

The all night glow from a nearby shopping area shed enough light into the room so he could see the gentle rise and fall of the blankets covering Heather's breasts. The sight didn't make going to sleep any easier.

He should never have kissed her.

But even though he had, why did it seem to make such a difference? He couldn't count how many women he had kissed, and more than kissed, both in the line of duty and outside of it. Kisses and the rest were simple exchanges of body fluids. They meant nothing to him. So why couldn't he sleep?

He resisted the urge to wake Heather and share the misery he found himself in. By the time he'd finished with her the next day, she would be ready to sleep for a week.

Finally, he gave up. Walking softly so as not to disturb her, he pulled on his jeans and T-shirt, wrote her a note so she wouldn't worry if she woke, and headed for the motel's 24-hour coffee shop.

The waitress broke off her conversation with a couple of men who looked like salesmen and hurried over to take his order, her accent spoke of the nearby Appalachians.

He ordered a cup of decaf and grabbed a newspaper using it as a shield against whatever elements of the world might be up at this ridiculous hour.

"From around here?" The waitress rested her hip against his table oblivious to the signals that the newspaper was intended to convey.

"D.C." he answered shortly. As good an answer as any. His grandfather had worked for a big computer company and had pretty much moved between upstate New York, Minnesota, and North Carolina the entire time Jack had been growing up.

"I grew up a couple of hours west of here," she told him. "I like it better here though."

Between when she'd taken his order and now, she'd undone another button on her too tight blouse, exposing more than a hint of cleavage.

A couple of years ago, he would have risen to the challenge. Surely his irrational obsession with Heather stemmed from the fact that he'd gone without a

woman since his last assignment a couple of months before. Tonight, he didn't feel the urge.

"I've got to make some calls," he told her. "Is there any way I could use your phone?"

"Gotta let your wife know where you are?" Her face fell in disappointment.

He glanced back to the salesmen. No wonder she had taken to him so quickly. Neither of them could have weighed under two hundred and fifty pounds, none of it muscle.

"Something like that."

"I figured. By the time you get my age, all the good ones are taken."

"If only," he humored her.

"Yeah, right. Anyway, the phone don't dial long distance unless you use a credit card or something. Still want it."

He nodded. He hadn't checked in with the agency since he'd picked up Heather. By now, they should have a lead on Pete and Karen. With luck, they might also have identified the two companies that Heather had run security reports on.

"If she don't answer, I'm still here," the waitress said.

"I'm pretty sure she'll answer."

He dialed the agency through a blind drop in New York, using a credit card owned by a legitimate business that thought it was providing a service to an entrepreneurial startup.

"Where the hell have you been," Chuck demanded as soon as he dialed through the complicated code sequence needed to get a direct line into the agency.

"I told you, I've gone underground with Ms. Webb. Three attempts in twenty-four hours indicate that she's both endangered and important."

"Somebody's important all right. The crap really hit the fan. Someone leaked that we're running a stateside investigation and the fibbies are all over us like bubblegum."

"There's no way they could be onto this project."

"Tell that to the Director. You've got to come in."

"What about Webb?"

"Hey, leave her to the fibbies. It isn't like they are doing anything important anyway."

"I don't want to lose this one. I think she can tell us something."

"Look, she's blown. I mean it, man. The Director was in my cubical shouting at me so loud I might as well be standing in the shower from all the spit. He's hot, and it's about our project."

"That doesn't make sense."

Chuck was silent for a second. "You have been out in the field too long. This is the government, big guy. Remember? Things don't have to make sense."

"Tell them I'm taking a week of vacation time."

"Tell them yourself. You can bet they're listening in."

"That will be all, Mr. Anthony." The voice cut in, clicking Chuck out of the conversation.

"Who is this?" Jack asked. The Agency didn't bust in between two partners unless it suspected that one of them might have been touched.

"It's Gomorra," the voice answered. The code name for the leader of the project looking into international penetration of the U.S. financial computer system.

"So what's going on?"

"What's going on is that the Director is backing off."

"How come?"

"You heard Chuck. Half the country is paranoid about the Agency. Do you know how many votes it could cost if it comes out that the administration is allowing the CIA to run a job in the US?"

"Not as many votes as if the economy collapsed because the computers got penetrated."

"I'm not saying it's good policy. I don't make policy. I think it's insane to drop the job now. Especially since it turns out that the two companies the reports were on turn out to be owned by Middle Eastern companies."

"So you think they were a test, a mockup."

"That's the way I'd do it."

"What's the FBI planning on doing?"

"You know the Bureau, Diamond. They think it's the Mafia or the communists or the militia, or one of their pet demons."

"That doesn't help."

"Hey. It's not your job any more. I'm ordering you to come in. By the way, I heard your request for a week of vacation. I'm going to give it to you. I want to see you in one week."

Jack shook his head. Gomorra was being awful clear and he didn't like it at all.

"So what were the two companies?" If Gomorra answered this, he'd know for sure which way the wind was blowing and who was hung out to dry.

"I thought you'd be interested in that. For the same of completeness only, of course. They're Riverton Steel and U.S. Semiconductor."

"Check, Gomorra. Repeating back Riv--"

"No need, Diamond." Gomorra didn't try to hide the anxiety from his voice. He knew what he was asking.

"Got it. See you in a week."

"Don't call in, Diamond. You need your vacation time."

The agency didn't throw away agents if it didn't have to. Gomorra had done everything but instruct him to stay on the job and he didn't see any way to avoid it. Unfortunately, he didn't see any way to come out of this a winner, or even without a stiff jail sentence. Still, better that than letting some Middle Eastern terrorist destroy the U.S. economy.

He hung up the telephone and took a sip of his already cool coffee.

"Must have been bad news," the waitress told him.

She must have been watching him out of the corner of her eye because she was back at his table only seconds after he had completed the call.

"You know how families are," he told her. "Always asking you to make the hard choice."

"I could help you make the, ah, choice, a lot harder if you know what I mean. I'm off duty in an hour," she told him.

* * * *

Heather looked through the coffee shop window in complete disgust. It had been what, six hours, since he'd been kissing her like she was the most exciting woman in the world. Now he was busy picking up on some waitress who looked like

a cover model for Cosmo magazine, her D-cups nearly falling out of her top and into Jack's face.

Heather wasn't mad, of course. Disappointed, maybe. But not mad. Still, it pointed up the single fact in this whole sick experience. She simply couldn't trust Jack.

She'd noticed a Metro entrance as they'd approached the motel and set out for it now. In half an hour, she could be back at her office. Better yet, her trip would be concealed in the subway's early rush hour.

She hid behind a paperback on the way in and held her breath to avoid the stale odor of cigarettes that clung to several of her fellow passengers.

She got off at the Union Station exit and found a 24-hour drug store. There she purchased a can of hair dye spray, a cheap silk scarf, a small pillow, a mop and a pail.

Ten minutes in the rest room transformed her into a cleaning person. With bright red hair tied down in the scarf, more makeup than she normally wore, and the pillow tucked into her blouse, she looked at least twenty years older than her normal twenty-nine.

Although she would normally have walked up the hill, she didn't think her new persona would, so she caught a bus, riding it to the stop nearest her townhouse.

The sun leaped over the horizon in a huge bloody ball and she tried to remember whether a red sunrise or sunset was supposed to be bad news. It didn't matter, she finally decided. Weather was the least of her problems.

She had decided Jack was a liar, but that didn't keep her from checking every shadow.

Before she'd opened her own agency, she'd spent three years with a larger company. Her first manager had stressed getting a feel for the area. Right now, Capitol Hill felt queasy.

Her imagination told her that every face had the complexion of a Middle Easterner, every laptop bag or purse held a gun.

Somehow, she reached her office without incident.

At least Jack hadn't been lying about everything. Somebody had been in her office. At least she thought that was what the string of bullet holes meant.

She swallowed hard. Somebody was playing hardball, or trying to scare her. Heather wondered if Jack could have set this up.

She knocked loudly on the door and shouted, "Cleaning. Anybody home?"

She didn't expect an answer and wasn't disappointed when she didn't get one.

With as much jingling as she could manage with the four keys on her keychain, she opened the door and stepped in.

Jack hadn't made this entire mess himself. Her small bookshelf had been full of books on self-help and detecting skills. Now it lay on its side like a lovesick teenager, the books scattered over the room.

Her desk drawer hung open. Her gun was nowhere in sight. Whatever had been on the desk was either scattered on the floor amongst the books or missing.

The computer security reports were missing, just as Jack had promised.

She'd bought her computer with her first big check from a job she'd taken tracking down a runaway teenager. It had been her pride and joy as well as one of the most important tools in her professional repertoire. Now the monitor hung off her credenza by its electrical cord, a jagged crack ran through the glass.

Her apartment had also been violated, but less obtrusively. Someone had scattered her underwear and bras on the floor and gone through her beloved mystery collection. But her laptop computer looked untouched in its fake cereal box in the pantry. Either the searchers were complete amateurs or they weren't trying very hard. If she could believe Jack, these guys were professionals. Despite her inclination, it was starting to look like she should give him the benefit of the doubt. Unless, of course, he'd done this whole thing himself.

She'd been gone for over two hours now and Jack had to be finished with his love interest by now. She owed him a call. Not an apology, of course. Still, it was possible that he might be worried about her.

To her surprise, information knew the number of the motel and the manager picked it up in only two rings. The same could not be said for Jack. She let the phone ring in his room until the motel manager came back and asked if she wanted to leave a message.

She set down the phone firmly. She needed to find somewhere safe to hole up. Someplace where she could log onto the net and see if her parents had any advice. Someplace neither Jack nor any hypothetical terrorists would find. One thing she felt confident about. Her office was a trap.

The complete silence from within her house didn't reassure her the way it should. Then she realized why. The floor hadn't squeaked when she'd climbed the stairs. Someone had fixed it. Anyone could have entered the house after her.

She knew she was being paranoid, but her parents had taught her that lesson early. Even paranoids have enemies and it was beginning to look like she had some big ones.

She locked the door to her apartment and stepped into her closet.

Thankfully, her parents hadn't changed the combination when they left. She opened the trap door to their apartment and crawled through into complete darkness.

Then a light hit her in the face, temporarily blinding her.

"Welcome, Ms. Webb," a cool voice greeted her.

"What's going on here?" she demanded.

"You are a devoted daughter, are you not, Ms. Webb?" She still couldn't see who owned the voice, but it sounded too calm, too cool, to be any insane terrorist.

"My parents are dead."

"Not yet, they aren't. Still, that can be arranged."

"What on earth are you talking about and what are you doing in this apartment?"

"A good question, Ms. Webb. A question I could ask you as well. After all, I had a key and came through the front door. By the way, I got the key from your parents."

She wouldn't admit that Peter and Karen were her parents no matter how certain they were. Still, things didn't look good right now. It was certainly fortunate that her parents had split when they did.

"I don't really see what this has to do with me. If you really want to know, I stepped in to make sure that the plants got watered while Karen and Peter are out of town."

"Come now, Ms. Webb. This game is getting tiresome. I need you to give me a little assistance."

Finally she remembered where she'd heard the voice. His was the voice on the phone. The call right before Jack had entered into her life. Could he be CIA, as well, or was he on the other side? For that matter, what side should she be on?

"I still don't do industrial sabotage, Mr. whatever your name is."

Her statement was met by mocking laughter. "We have dozens of programmers far more talented than you, Ms. Webb. The assistance that I need is very much within our power."

Her eyes had finally adjusted to the light but were shining from behind the speaker, hiding his face from her view.

Was he armed? If not, she could probably make it to the window before he got out of his chair. Even if he had spent the past day exploring the place, he probably hadn't discovered the way the entire window structure would fold into an escape slide like those in commercial jetliners.

"I do need you alive, Ms. Webb. But not necessarily healthy or even in one piece. Please try to cooperate."

She edged toward the window. "You keep saying that but you haven't told me what you want me to do."

"It's very simple," he explained. "I have already told you that we don't need your rather limited programming talents. What I need is your parents. So far, they haven't been very cooperative."

"My parents are dead."

"That's just slightly premature, Ms. Webb. I do wish you would stop insulting my intelligence."

She filed the man's sensitivity away as a weakness. Not that she had any way to exploit it now. "I think you're just talking."

For the first time, he moved, stepping out of his chair and toward her in a smooth motion that looked almost like a dance step. "No, Ms. Webb," he hissed. "I'm not just talking."

She backed away from him, trying to keep moving in the direction of the window, but he grabbed her arm, gripping it with a powerful grasp.

"I think your parents will be much more cooperative when they see you in my control," he hissed into her face. "I've been reluctant to be too persuasive with them. Can't kill the golden goose, I think you Americans say. There's nothing in the rules against squeezing the goose a little, though."

* * * *

Jack looked at Heather's bed for a second time. It didn't do any good. She had arranged her pillows under the covers into something approximating a human shape, and disappeared.

With a sigh, he pressed his hand to dent in the mattress her body had left.

Some indefinable scent that combined spices and human essence of woman met his nose, distracting him again. He cursed as he forced his attention back to the matter literally at hand.

His searching hand found no tell-tale warmth to indicate that Heather had been here within the past hour or more. By now she could be anywhere.

As of right now, he had no assignment, no job, and no suspect, or witness, or whatever Heather was supposed to be.

He wasted a few minutes giving the room a thorough check for any sign of struggle. Negative.

In a few more moments, he had his few possessions back in the car and headed into the city.

Surely Heather wouldn't be dumb enough to return to her offices after what he'd told her, but he had no place else to start. Of course, he also hadn't thought she'd be dumb enough to leave the, admittedly dubious, protection he offered. Unless she feared him more than she feared whoever was trying to kill her.

Rush hour traffic had already built up on the surface streets. He decided to take advantage of an old Washington tradition and picked up a couple of the dozens of passengers, or slugs, who wait to fill out a car, enabling it to enter the high occupancy car pool lane. The stop could save him twenty minutes.

"Haven't seen you around," the lawyer-looking man who climbed into the front seat told him.

"Just got back in town," he replied. "I'm going to Capitol Hill."

"Perfect," one of the secretarial types told him. "We all work at the Library of Congress."

Jack let an idea crawl around in the evil recesses of his mind for a few moments as he drove.

Unconsciously, he kept his eyes open for any possible tail but the car pool lane concept made any such efforts impossible. Until he exited to a surface street in the city itself, he was stuck with both his short-term companions, and the cars in front and behind him.

"Are you going to be working on the Hill?" his front seat passenger asked.

"Maybe. I've got a friend who owns a detective agency there. I was thinking I might go into business with her."

"Ohh. A detective. That's so romantic," chirped the back seat secretary.

"It can be," he answered. "Of course, it can be dangerous as well."

"Have you had a lot of cases," the secretary asked.

"A few," he lied. He'd had far too many over the past decade. Not enough to be more than a pawn in the games the agency played, however.

"I'll bet you're working on one now," the lawyer observed.

"What makes you think that?"

"Your arms are tanned, but your face isn't as dark. Since you don't look like a construction worker, I'm betting you drive a motorcycle. It's a perfect day for a bike, yet you're driving a car. So, you must be working."

"Brilliant observation," Jack told him. "I am working on a case. If you guys can help me, I'll take you all to lunch when it's over and tell you about it."

"Will it be dangerous?" He had figured the silent woman in the back to be the cautious one.

"For me. I'll work it out so you guys are safe."

"Is it legal?" the lawyer queried.

"I think my girlfriend is in trouble and I've got to spring her," Jack told him. Nothing he did could exactly be considered legal right now but he didn't feel like trying to draw a moral distinction.

"Oh, that's so romantic," the secretary cooed.

He sketched out his plan as crossed the Potomac bridge, then cut across Washington's busy streets.

Today was not his lucky day. The gaping door to Heather's office proved that. A mini-van, its windows mirrored over, sat outside. Tiny wisps of cigarette smoke crawled upward from the nearly sealed window and proved it was occupied.

If Heather's office was still under surveillance, either he'd beaten her here, or she was still inside her building. He didn't think he had beaten her.

"Make sure you count slowly," he told his passengers. The shy one, he let out at the 7-11. The secretary and the lawyer, right around the corner from Heather's office.

Gravely he shook hands with each of them, then passed the car keys to the lawyer. "Just in case," he told him.

"Right." The lawyer stared at the keys, then climbed into the driver's seat. "I don't know what this is about, friend. But call the Library and ask for Brad if you make it."

"I will."

He counted in his head, forcing himself to slow down to the rate they'd practiced.

At a count of thirty, he was directly parallel to Heather's door.

At that same moment, the secretary slipped on a wet patch in the pavement, falling on her backside.

Her short skirt slid up almost to her waist, exposing her stockings, garter belt, and whatever else she wore. Jack didn't stick around to check carefully, but it didn't look like she had much else on under the skirt. If that didn't distract whoever was in the van, nothing would.

He was inside the row house at the count of thirty-five, skipping over the squeaky step and glancing into Heather's office.

She wasn't there. She also wasn't in the apartment upstairs of her office. Its door hung open. The stakeout crew was unlikely to have left it open so he figured Heather must have been there.

The count was one hundred. He'd have to move fast.

The sunlight from Heather's windows almost drowned out the faint light coming from under the closet door.

He ran to it, careless of the noise his feet made.

The light came from an opened trap door and he headed through it.

"Ah, yes. Our CIA agent again," came that cool voice with the vaguely upper-class British accent. "Or should I say ex-agent."

"Give it up," Jack told him. You don't have a chance."

"I hardly think things are quite so serious. After all, the CIA has dropped the probe, hasn't it? The FBI is hardly likely to pick it up for some time. And I'm quite sure that I would know if the local police were on their way.

In the distance, Jack heard the phone ring. The count was two-fifty.

"Who are you?" Jack asked.

"You can call me Mr. Jones," the well-dressed man replied. He pulled an ugly looking pistol from his pocket and gestured with it.

"Ms. Webb and I are leaving now, Mr. Eastland. I'm afraid you will be staying."

From downstairs, he heard Heather's voice as her answering machine pick up the phone.

"Kill me and the Agency will be all over you like a linebacker," he said.

Jones obviously didn't catch his reference and gave him a puzzled look.

"A real big rugby player," he added helpfully.

"This is Briggs Alarm," a voice said into the answering machine. "We are dispatching the police. If you have accidentally set up the alarm, please call us immediately with your password."

Jones looked totally emotionless as he pointed the gun at Jack. "That is your good-bye, Mr. East--"

The sound of sirens interrupted him.

"This doesn't change anything," he said.

Jack hid his smile as Jones tried to keep his calm over the sound of the alarm.

"Perhaps you're right. It *would* be messy to leave your body here. I'll give you a choice. Come along with me quietly. Otherwise, I'm afraid I'll have to kill both of you." His face hardened. "I'll kill the girl first, Eastland. Now out that door."

Jack hadn't counted on leaving by a different door than he'd entered by but arguing didn't feel like a good idea. Not right now.

Jones twisted Heather's arm behind her back until the pain contorted her face. "Move."

He moved.

"Not too far in front, Eastland. Unless you think you can beat a bullet. And unless you don't mind leaving Ms. Webb behind."

Jack slowed down. So far, he was winning. So far, he was still alive.

More sirens blared out.

"Move," Jones repeated.

A man, sweat dripping from his face, waited for him downstairs, a submachine gun cradled in his arms. They were pulling out all of the stops now.

"Handcuff them and throw them in the back," Jones told the man.

Sweatface looked at his gun, then back to the van, clearly undecided on what he should do.

"Give me the gun, idiot," Jones told him.

Sweatface tossed his gun to Jones then opened the back door to the van.

Jones managed to catch the gun without killing himself. Unfortunate.

Jack found himself still counting. Five hundred. Not long enough.

Sweatface didn't let the count go much higher. He clicked a pair of handcuffs on Jack and pushed him into the van. Seconds later, Heather joined him.

"That went pretty well," he told her.

Chapter 6

"Here I was thinking maybe the CIA would do something right," Heather said. "I can see things haven't changed."

Jack almost looked smug. "I'm not dead, am I?"

She drew a deep breath. "You weren't dead before you pulled that incredible rescue attempt either. You were trying to rescue me, weren't you?"

"That was the idea. Of course I wasn't the one who went back home after somebody warned me."

"Yeah. Who asked you?" When she'd heard that floor-board squeak, she'd actually thought maybe something good would happen. Seeing Jack's face through the trap door had been a breath of sunshine until she realized that he was alone. "Can you tell me what you were thinking?"

He actually laughed. "I was thinking that if you had just stayed in bed, I would have brought you breakfast, then we would have plotted out our next steps like grown-ups."

At least Jack couldn't see her blush in the dark. So that made both of them bone headed idiots. Maybe they deserved each other.

"Once you'd finished your little reconnaissance with Fifi, right? All right, I'm sorry. I should have trusted you. Now, is the CIA going to help us?"

"You heard Jones. The CIA is out of it."

"So what are you doing?"

"I thought I would rescue you."

"Any other good thoughts?"

"I've got the bolt cutters. Can you reach them?"

The sharp pressure of metal handles convinced her that he wasn't kidding.

"If you kind of sit on the top handle, I think it'll work," he explained.

She struggled to her feet just as the van lurched ahead, knocking her down.

"Try again," he told her, readjusting the lever.

This time she almost judged the van's motion. She fell again, but directly on the cutter.

"Bet that leaves a bruise," he told her. He reached back and snipped off her own handcuffs.

"What kind of idiot would put a pair of bolt cutters in a van they intended to take prisoners in?" she asked.

"Actually I thought it was pretty good planning. Mary-Helen taking off her panties was an extra bonus."

"I think you'll have to tell me about this later," she said. "In the meantime, I think maybe we should make our exit."

"We can't."

For the first time since he'd made his entrance, he sounded nonplused. "That was an Uzi," he explained. "It could cut us into bite sized pieces."

"They have my parents."

"I thought you said your parents were dead."

"Well they're not. They're also the best crackers I know. If I wanted to deliver on your CIA delusion, I'd get them on my team."

Jack held the cutters to the latch at the back of the van and snipped.

"The van is slowing. On three."

He took her in his arms and dragged her to the door, rolling out.

They hit the road, rolling.

Jack managed to fall underneath, although whether that was through plan or mistiming she wasn't prepared to assume. Every time she'd assumed anything, he'd surprised, shocked, or disappointed her. Of course not all of the surprises were bad.

A familiar looking Buick pulled up and a stranger got out.

"Look, we're running a little late for work," the stranger said.

"Next stop," Jack told him.

The stranger slid over to the passenger side and Jack got in, pointing Heather to the back seat.

"I think this is the most romantic thing I've ever heard of," gushed an attractive woman of twenty-three going on eleven.

Jack squealed out a 180-degree turn and sped back toward the Capitol.

"We've got to follow them," Heather argued. "They're probably taking the van to where they have my parents stashed."

"Heather, I'd like you to meet Raymond, Barbara, and Mary-Helen. They just saved both of our lives and right now, we're going to save their jobs."

"Are you guys agents?" she asked. They certainly could blend into a crowd.

Mary-Helen giggled again. "I'm just a secretary."

"You aren't just a secretary," Jack corrected her.

You're a woman who took a risk for a friend."

"Actually, I lost my pants for a friend, the girl told him." She turned to Heather. "I think you're sitting on them."

Heather reached around and pulled a tiny thong from where it had gotten wedged under her seat.

"You should have seen their faces when I fell down," Mary-Helen told her as she struggled back into the tiny scrap of material.

Heather glared into the rear view mirror. If Jack watched the peep show, she would pull a second car jump right now.

Jack's eyes met hers and he shrugged his shoulders. "It was her idea, but I wasn't about to dissuade her."

"We're here," Barbara said as Jack pulled up in front of the library.

Heather looked at Barbara. She knew that voice, but couldn't place it.

"This has been a real adventure," Barbara continued.

Of course, she'd been the caller from the supposed alarm company.

Jack's three deputies piled out of the car and hurried for the library entrance.

"We'd better ditch the car and find something new," Jack suggested.

"Why don't you tell me what's going on first," she answered. "You just left my parents in the hands of those creeps and played taxi driver. I'm not sure I trust you."

Of course, watching Ms. D-cup in the restaurant followed by Ms. Secretary with no panties in the car made it more than unlikely that she'd ever trust Jack with anything personal again. What was she thinking when she had kissed him?

"How did you get here?" he asked her.

"Don't ignore my questions. I took the subway."

"Right. I should have figured that out."

"So if those guys weren't CIA, who were they?"

"Who? Oh, you mean Barbara, Raymond, and Mary-Helen. I picked them up so I could take the HOV. Lots of people do it."

"You mean you trusted both of our lives to three slugs, complete strangers."

"Actually, I figured that your life was shot if I didn't. Mine was the only one I was risking."

That did put things in perspective. "I guess it would be appropriate for me to thank you about now."

Jack looked at her. "Is that it?"

"What?"

"If that's your idea of gratitude, I think I'll stick with pissed off."

"Fine--"

"Get in the front," he ordered, cutting off her comeback.

Making him drive her around like he was a chauffeur wouldn't be particularly inconspicuous. Besides, Heather figured she could argue with Jack from the front, so she complied with his request.

"All right," she reached for the seat belt.

He grabbed her hand away from the belt and pulled it, and her toward him.

"I had in mind you saying thanks with your arms around me and your lips pressed to mine," he murmured into her ear.

He didn't give her a chance to tell him what he could do with what he had in mind. Instead, he took what he wanted, pulling her body next to his, his lips seeking and finding hers.

Heather's anger, frustration, and distrust didn't go away, exactly. It was more, she decided, that she pushed them to the back of her mind. She'd worry about that later. Right now, she was still alive, with the man who attracted her more than any other man she'd ever met, and who had saved her life. She let her hormones and ragged emotion take control of her lips, her arms.

"Kiss and ride is at the bus stop, bud." The cop tapped his night stick against the window, waving Jack to move along.

Jack pulled the Buick into the road and headed north. He didn't know what to make of the kiss. He had been half-kidding when he had demanded a kiss as payment for his rescue. But now the joke was on him. He'd let this woman get under his skin and he had no idea what to do about it.

"Where are we going?"

"I told you, I've got to get rid of this car."

"If they'd seen the car, they would have stopped and killed us."

"It's an Agency car."

"So?"

"Don't you get it? Jones, or whatever his name really is, has to have penetrated the agency. He knew my name. He knew that the Agency had pulled me back."

"Could he have gotten into the computers?"

Jack shook his head. "I think our computers are more secure than our agents. Either way, he'll know that this is my car. We've got to ditch it before he traces it to us."

He headed toward Maryland's P.G. County.

"Look, are you going to help me do something about my parents, or am I going to have to go after those jerks on my own?"

"Are you sure he's got them?"

Her brow furrowed as she obviously tried to remember everything Mr. Jones had said to her.

"Pretty sure. I can't think why else he'd want to bother with me."

"All right." He had been pretty sure too. "How long has it been since you saw them or heard from them?"

"Yesterday morning at about five."

"You've been doing early mornings lately, haven't you? At any rate, it doesn't seem likely that he'll do anything to hurt them. At least right away. After all, he wants to use them, right?"

"Maybe. On the other hand, there are other people who can do the same thing. If they won't cooperate, he'll make an example of them."

Heather was just too smart to fall for any comfort he had to offer.

"At least we should have a little time. Time to make up a plan."

"Like your plan to rescue me?"

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?"

"I don't know. I still don't understand Mary-Helen and her panties."

"That was her idea. We needed to distract the guys in the van while Raymond slipped in the bolt cutters. I suggested that she fall and hurt herself. She added the Sharon Stone act."

That seemed to quiet Heather for a few minutes, so he drove in silence, careful to observe the seemingly random changes in the speed limit that characterize Washington.

"If Jones has penetrated the CIA, we're going to be careful calling for help," she finally said.

"It's worse than that," he told her. "I've been ordered off the case."

"What?"

"You reminded me that the CIA isn't allowed to do domestic work."

"So what are you doing?"

"You think I'd let them take you? I don't think so."

Heather gave him a brave smile. "You may not be too bright, but you do have a certain something going for you, Jack."

He filed that mixed compliment away. "My control told me to take a vacation. The Agency is still worried, but it can't take the political heat of directly violating the law."

"As if that's ever bothered them before."

"It bothers them if they think they'll get caught. At any rate, if this thing blows up, I wash up and maybe spend some time in jail. If I work some miracle during my 'vacation,' I get to come in and I'm the hero of the day. Either way, I'm finished as a field agent."

"I'm sorry."

He must have let his depression seep into his words. "Hey, I'm getting too old for this kind of stuff anyway. How much do you weigh, anyway. I thought I'd lost a couple of ribs when you fell on me."

"I don't--oh, you idiot. Give me a break." She hit him in the arm and smiled at him. "I don't suppose you want to go back for my laptop. I left it in my parent's apartment."

"Why?"

"If they want my parents to work, they've got to give them access to computers and the Internet. With that, my parents could send me some kind of a signal. We might be able to track them down."

"It's worth a try." He'd grabbed all of the equipment he could think of when he'd picked up the car. Unfortunately, he hadn't thought of a computer. The Agency was still stingy with its laptops. "Let's get ourselves a new car first."

A couple of hours in a run down shopping mall netted them a low end laptop, a sack of food, a couple of pair of jeans assorted T-shirts, underwear, an ancient Ford pickup, and a seriously depleted cash stock. He had Heather follow him in the pickup until he found a parking lot outside an abandoned grocery store that had been turned into a spontaneous car lot. With a marker, he scribbled a phone number on the 'For Sale' sign he'd bought, and stuck it in the inside windshield.

"What's next," she asked.

"I think we should hole up, again," Jack answered. He stripped the insurance and registration papers from the Buick and gave it a last lookover.

Finally he got in the car. "Make me a promise," he asked. "This time, ask me before you go off half-cocked."

"Any chance we could spend the night at someplace more comfortable than last night."

"You're a good one to talk. The way I remember it, you slept like a rock."

Now what was that reaction all about? Heather wondered. "So long as they have air conditioning and hot water, I'm happy."

* * * *

Her body felt sore all over, almost as if she'd been manhandled, jumped from a moving car, then had a handsome no longer a stranger kiss her so hard her lips still tingled a couple of hours later. It was just as well that she kept to herself. Nobody would ever believe this story.

To her amazement, Jack managed to find even worse accommodations than the previous evening. These cabins had probably been cute when they were built in the nineteen thirties. They didn't look like they'd been refurbished since being used on the set for *It Happened One Night*.

The manager could have stepped from *Psycho*, and the cleaning crew would have been at home on the *Night of the Living Dead*. Those were some of her favorite movies, Heather noted, but she'd never thought any of them would have this much direct impact on her life.

Jack paid the manager from his rapidly dwindling stack of bills. The manager tossed over a key, gave them a leering wink, and pointed them in the direction of their cabin.

"It's off the highway and it's cheap," Jack explained as he opened the door.

"At least I know you're not planning anything romantic," Heather shot back as she surveyed the bare wood floor, the sink with no toilet or shower, and the two single beds. "Do you want me to get a blanket to make a wall down the middle."

"I'm not Clark Gable," Jack shot back.

Heather didn't know quite how to read that. Jack didn't seem the type to let a woolen wall, or even a brick and mortar one, stand between himself and anything he wanted. Was he telling her that he wouldn't wait, or that he wasn't interested?

For a wild instant, she considered throwing her arms around him and finding out for sure. She suppressed the notion.

"Well, obviously," she told him. Let him stew on that.

He sat on his bed and patted the blanket next to him. "No chairs," he told her.

She sat, careful not to sit too close.

"They may do some driving around to trick us so we can't rush this," Jack said, all business again.

It was a good thing she hadn't thrown herself at him when she'd thought he was propositioning her. He would probably have thought she'd flipped from the stress. "I suppose you're trying to tell me something."

"Yeah. We have these tracking devices you can put on a car. A couple of satellites triangulate and you've got it."

"I know. We private investigators use those all the time. They're cheaper than tailing. Are you telling me that you planted one of those on the van."

"I figured we'd want to know where it ended up. I didn't know that it would be to help with your parents, though."

He sounded so sympathetic, so understanding. She wondered what he'd do if he found out that the FBI was a lot more interested in tracking down her parents than they were in watching a bunch of Middle Eastern terrorists who wanted to play with computers.

"That was quick thinking. Why don't you call and find out where it is?"

"The agency computers send a report with its location every half hour. If the transponder moves, we'll know that they found the bug and they're setting a trap."

Almost as if the sun had suddenly emerged from behind a cloud, all of a sudden the day looked a lot better.

"So all we can do is wait?"

"Well, maybe not all we can do."

He lowered his voice. Suddenly she was aware of exactly how small their room was, and how little distance separated their bodies.

"Of course we've got to figure out what to do when we find where they're being held." Heather wondered if her voice sounded as squeaky to him as it did to her.

"Of course," Jack agreed.

She started to her feet but didn't get far.

Jack grabbed a belt loop and pulled her back down.

"We've got to get my parents," she told him.

"When it's time."

He slid his hand from her belt loop down the curve of her hips, cupping her buttock and pulling her toward him.

She put both hands against his chest. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"You're probably right," he whispered into her ear. "But I don't give a damn."

Heather wasn't just playing with fire, she was walking out into the volcano. Still, despite her proper intentions, her hands on Jack's chest stopped pushing him away and started stroking his hard pectoral muscles.

Heather could almost feel Jack's reluctance as he pulled away.

"I'm normally more in control of myself," he explained. His rough breathing and the stunned look on his face, a look she figured had to match her own, convinced her that he was telling the truth.

"Well I'm not," she replied.

Tomorrow, they would find her parents. Maybe she'd be dead. Just as likely, she'd go into hiding with her parents again. Obviously they needed her, at least for a while. But not tonight.

His eyes widened and he flinched slightly as she slid her hands up his arms, brushing them over the soft cotton of his shirt.

Then she grabbed big handfuls of shirt and pulled them up out from where he had tucked it into his jeans.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Jack warned her. He seemed intent on giving her more and more chances to back out. But he wasn't backing out himself. Instead, his actions belied his words as he reached for her again, crushing her to his chest.

"Not so fast," she told him.

Instantly he backed off.

"Not that slow, either," she murmured into his ear, finishing with a little nibble.

This was fun.

She finished pulling his shirt off, then let her fingers wander over his chest.

Three deep scars cut deep into the hard muscles of his chest and she touched them, wondering at the different sensations his body managed to combine.

"Does this hurt?" she asked.

"Yes. Sometimes. Not right now," Jack answered. Then he laughed. "I guess I'm a little flustered. I don't know what's happening."

"You plan everything, don't you Jack."

"I try. It's how I stay alive."

"Nobody is going to kill you tonight. Just try to relax."

"Easy for you to say," he replied significantly.

Without meaning too, she glanced down at his jeans. Sure enough, at least one part of Jack's body seemed completely unwilling to relax.

"We'll get to him a little later," she promised.

Jack reached for her top and slid his fingers between the buttons of her denim work shirt.

"Uh-uh," she told him.

"Is it fair that I have to loose my shirt and you keep yours?" he asked.

"Did I tell you I was going to be fair?" Unfortunately, she was being unfair in more ways than one. Jack had saved her life today. She should open up, tell him the whole truth about her parents. But if she did, this magical moment would end and Jack would be gone from her life forever. Soon she would have no choice.

Tomorrow, maybe, she would tell him. In the meantime, she was stealing the minutes and hours. It hurt, but she was willing to pay the price.

"So what do I get to do?" he asked.

"If I were you, I'd lose the jeans," she said in her best throaty voice.

"But--"

"Did anyone ever tell you you talk too much?"

He looked stunned. "I am, aren't I. Maybe they're right about me being too old to be in the field."

He had to be what, maybe thirty-five?

"I had a bed in mind, but if you insist on the fields, I guess I can manage that."

"Now who's talking too much?"

Jack struggled out of his jeans leaving him naked except his black boxer briefs.

"I'll take care of those," she told him.

Slowly, she slid her hands down his chest feeling every ridge of his hard abdomen.

When she reached the top of the briefs, he gasped slightly, then grinned.

She could spend hours running her hands all over his body. She hadn't even gotten to his broad back. The muscles in his thighs bulged out, calling for attention. Even his bare feet looked sexy. Hours? She could spend days, weeks, who knew? It didn't matter. They didn't have days. Because of her lies, they only had tonight. She couldn't wait no matter how much fun it was to watch him squirm.

Still, Heather stopped her downward motion, sliding her hands behind his back, running them down his buttocks.

Until now, she'd never really understood the fascination some women have with men's buns. Of course she'd never had the chance to play with Jack's before.

Finally she relented, for Jack and herself, and stroked the bulge his erection forced in the fabric of the boxer briefs.

She shrugged off his second attempt to reach for her breasts, but then took pity on him and stripped off her top and bra.

Jack's pupils dilated as she turned back to him.

"I didn't know better, I'd say you were on drugs with eyes like that," she told him.

"I think I am," he answered.

She knew she wasn't that large. Nowhere near as oversized as that waitress Jack had been making eyes at that morning. Of course Jack had already proven that he was a little crazy.

She let him reach for her, stroke her nipples between her fingers until their tips stood at attention.

Jack trailed kisses down her neck, her breasts, her stomach, and to the heavy cotton of her pants.

"Let me just fix this," she told him, slipping off her slacks.

Then, with a shrug, she lost her panties as well. "Are you waiting for anything?"

His look of puzzlement lasted less than a second. "No," he told her, tossing his boxer-briefs across the room.

Then he seized her again, fiercely, yet not quite roughly. Possessively, somehow. And her urge to continue their teasing conversation was washed away in a tide of desire.

"Are you--"

"Shut up," she told him fiercely, reaching for the excitement between his legs.

He groaned deeply, then slid his hand against her mound, gently probing her slickness.

"I'm ready," she whispered.

He continued stroking her, his mouth teasing her lips, nibbling at her neck, licking and caressing her nipples.

Then she really was ready. "I didn't know it could be like this."

"It gets better from here."

Slowly, giving her another chance to back off, he shifted his weight to her.

She ran her hands up his strong body, then wrapped them around his shoulders while pressing her hips against his.

He groaned again, then slowly slid into her waiting passion.

"Yes," she whispered. At least she meant to whisper. She had no idea how loud it actually came out.

Jack purred softly into her ear, sending shivers of excitement down her spine to joint the larger spasms of desire coming up.

The two of them found a rhythm to their lovemaking. Slow at first as her tightness gradually accepted him. Then faster.

Black whirling circles formed inside her closed eyes, expanding until they exploded, until her entire body exploded.

Heather knew she'd lost the rhythm, her body quivered in response to her orgasm rather than with Jack's urgent thrusts. She tried to regain the synchronization. Then it didn't matter.

Whatever she did seemed to bring Jack to the edge. He shouted out her name, until she pressed her hand over his mouth. Jack's whole body tightened, then finally relaxed.

"Think we can do that again?" Heather murmured into his ear.

Chapter 7

Bedding your prime suspect is considered a major coup in the spy business, Jack told himself. So why did he feel like a complete heel?

They had made love all night, then awakened to make love again.

It was after nine when he finally forced himself out of the cabin and into the shower facility that all of the cabins shared.

In the light of day, Jack didn't feel too great about his choice of a resting place. For one thing, everyone else there looked very much like they were on the run from the law. A run-in with the local police was low on his priority list.

He twisted the hot water tap all the way open and got nothing for his pains, finally settling for a cold shower.

To his surprise, he actually needed it. He was in his thirties, for goodness sake, yet he felt ready to go again after a night of lovemaking.

While Heather finished her shower, Jack loaded the car then found a pay phone. 'Vacation' or not, if Gomorra found anything helpful, he would find a way to leave word for Jack. Unfortunately, the only message on his machine reminded him of the Agency blood drive coming up.

After that fiasco, he dialed into the satellite service and wrote down the Mapsco coordinates.

Heather emerged from the shower. She looked beautiful even though her hair still dripped and the fabric of her jump suit stuck to her body. The humidity of a D.C. summer never lets you get completely dry; Jack figured he didn't mind at all.

He fired up the truck's engine. He wished that he could forget this whole business and spend a real vacation week with Heather. Maybe in a nice hotel in Europe or Skiing in Colorado. Something. He had a pretty good idea, though, that she wouldn't be vacationing with him anywhere if he didn't get to work.

"Time to look for my parents," she announced.

"Time to eat and plan," he fired back.

"I thought you planned last night."

She sounded awful serious but he couldn't tell for sure.

"Is that what it's called."

Heather blushed.

At least he hadn't been the only one affected by their night of lovemaking.

He knew that the private investigator business is rough. Heather didn't exactly look tough, but she certainly looked like she could hold her own. Still, he didn't sense that she viewed lovemaking as part of the job. Although sex had always been a part of his job, last night had been something different.

"I got the satellite coordinates. We can go over those while we eat," he said.

She buckled up and he put the truck in gear trying to put as much distance from the low rent cabins as he could.

He switched his view between the traffic around them and Heather.

Unlike him, she was totally professional, her eyes always on the traffic around him, never wasting time looking at him.

"I think we've picked up a tail," she told him.

"Where?"

"The white Dodge."

The car seemed designed to be inconspicuous. It was just old enough, and just common enough, and just dirty enough, to look like every other car on the road.

"I see it." He tossed her the map. "We've got to lose it. I'm not ready to take on guys with Uzi's except on my own terms. See what you can find on the map."

Heather studied the map briefly. "There's a turn-off in two miles. Take it."

Jack slowed until the cars that separated his truck from their ghost got frustrated and went around.

"Tinted glass," Heather murmured. "I can't see anything."

"Great. Let's just hope they don't have their guns out."

"How could they have spotted us? We paid cash for the truck."

"Someone could have seen us checking into the cabin."

"We were completely exposed in the cabin," Heather reminded him. "They could have killed us there."

"You're right." He paused. "You didn't call anyone, did you?"

She frowned. "No."

That left him. Except if they'd tracked his call to the Agency, that meant worse than a leak. It meant a hole so wide you could drive a Skud missile through it.

"Turn now," she told him.

He veered off the highway.

The white car whizzed past him, staying on the highway and left the two of them on a two-lane highway in the middle of nowhere.

"You're sure about that car?" he asked.

"So they're professionals," she answered. "Trust me, that car followed us."

He trusted her. "That means they're part of a team. Well, what's next?"

"It doesn't look like much on the map but there's a turnoff up ahead. Go about a quarter of a mile, then turn left."

It looked like even less in real life. Still, Jack swung his truck off the road and onto a dirt track that led between two dairy farms.

"Go straight," she told him. "This should come out on a highway in about two miles."

For the next half hour, she directed him through a maze of country roads, suburban streets, and a couple of cross-country jaunts.

Finally he saw a turnoff under where the road climbed a bridge over a shallow looking stream. Might as well end this now," he said, heading off the road and splashing into the stream.

"We can't just wait for them," she said.

"We've got to get another vehicle."

She looked at him. "Unless you magically generated some money last night, we're going to have a hard time doing that."

"I was thinking that it might be Dodge's turn."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It won't fool anyone who really knows trucks, but I think it should get us past most everyone."

He opened the truck door and stepped into the shallow stream.

"Shouldn't we smash up the truck and make it look like we've been here for a while?" She bent to the streambed and picked up a large and dangerous looking rock.

"Let's not get hasty." He dug around in the back of the truck until he turned up a dirty scarf which he wound around his head in a do-rag."

"Are you trying to be some kind of football player?"

"I appreciate your sparkling sense of humor, but it would help me a lot more if you'd work on changing your appearance as well."

* * * *

He knew he wasn't being fair, but he hadn't had time to deal with the reality that his own agency was at the center of his problems. Sure they'd had their share of leaks in the bad old days of the cold war. After all of the witch-hunts they'd been through since then, though, it didn't seem right that they should have to deal with this now.

Heather didn't bother to reply. Instead, she went through the sack of supplies they'd bought at the drug store the previous day and pulled out a spray can. "Think you can stand a brunette?" she asked him.

"If she looks like you, I'll manage," he replied. "I know I overreacted a--"

"Don't worry about it," she told him. She bent over and began to spray the darker color into her blonde and red hair.

* * * *

Jack seemed devastated by his discovery of problems within the CIA. Heather was actually happy about it. From her parents' experience and from the hacking they'd done, she knew how insecure that agency could be. Jack seemed to be settling down to the reality and making practical decisions.

Heather assured herself that she was happy about that. A practical Jack Eastland was a lot easier to deal if he had gotten all emotional after their lovemaking.

"You look good," he told her.

"Thanks." Jack looked pretty good too, if you like the 1950s gangster look.

He found an old pack of cigarettes from somewhere in the truck and rolled them into his shirtsleeve. "Let's go," he told her.

He led her about half a mile back the way they had come.

The little country hardware store looked like it survived by offering a little of everything. Barrels of tulip bulbs had spilled into sacks of screws and nuts.

"Get a couple of axes," he told her as he headed toward the back of the store.

A few minutes later he joined her pushing a shopping cart that contained a compressor, paintbrush, and several gallons of paint.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"I already told you. We're about to become a Dodge."

She shook her head. "You're the most peculiar man I've ever met."

"Any other kind of man and you'd be dead or a captive of our friends," he reminded her.

She shuddered. As a private investigator, she'd gone into a number of dangerous situations. But those had been temporary. No matter how she and Jack

twisted and turned, they seemed only to sink more deeply into a quagmire. "You know, I didn't have any of these problems until you came along."

Jack inhaled sharply but stopped himself before he responded. He wheeled his cart to the checker and dug into his pockets for enough cash to make their purchase.

Once they had left the store, he loaded her down with the brush and a couple of gallons of paint while he carried the rest of the paint and the portable sprayer.

"You raise a valid point."

"What's that?"

"Doesn't it seem like an incredible coincidence that the day after the Agency starts looking at your business, your parents are abducted?"

"I've been running around so much that I haven't had a chance to think about it." Now that she did think, the coincidence seemed strong.

"They left when the CIA invaded their ftp site. After I told you where to look."

Jack continued walking back toward the truck and she scurried to keep up.

"We need to find out a lot more. Still, there's got to be a connection. I hope I wasn't the one who set it off."

She threw down the paint and brushes as they reached the streambed. Jack waded to the truck, then pulled it into a tree-shaded area they'd spotted off the road while they'd been walking.

"So now what?" she asked.

"So now two things," he said, smiling. "First, I've got to figure out what's going on at the Agency. If there isn't a leak there, I'm going to turn in my Sherlock Holmes secret decoder ring. Second, we've got to turn this piece of junk into a Dodge.

Working quickly, he hooked the portable compressor to his car battery and filled the cartridge with paint.

"Do you think changing the color will make that much difference?"

"You tell me." He sprayed a layer of bright green paint over the hood.

He didn't seem to be asking rhetorically so she answered.

"Of course it would for a casual observer. The city police are pretty busy so they might miss it too, except that they'll run the license on their computers so the color won't make any difference.

"And there aren't that many federal agents around," he added. "One thing for sure. There aren't likely to be enough terrorists around to check out every pickup truck in P.G. County."

"But that doesn't get around the basic problem. When we turn up on the local police computers, they'll know about us."

"I agree. So that's our next step. First, though, let's get this thing taped before I make a bigger mess."

He stripped off his shirt and tossed Heather a roll of masking tape which she barely managed to hold on to. Seeing him without his shirt reminded her of last night, and the fact that she'd have to tell him about her parents soon.

"Don't worry about the little things," he told her. Just the chrome and lights and stuff."

He took another roll and set to work taping over the grill area.

She'd painted her office and town house when she had bought the run down building where she and her parents had lived so she thought she'd be an asset.

Compared to Jack, though, her efforts were nearly insignificant. He slapped on tape as if it were going out of style.

When he'd finished the front, he moved around to the back of the truck and taped over the brake lights.

"Shouldn't you cover the Ford logo?" she asked.

"That goes next."

He reached into the back of the truck and unloaded the equipment that they'd been carrying around. In one of the boxes he found a hammer and chisel.

"Typical spy equipment?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It wasn't anything my instructors told me about but basic tools always come in handy."

Heather smiled. Her father was the same way. Flower children or children of the establishment, men seemed to have this special affinity for tools. She had always been a lot more interested in clever disguises than she had in figuring out how to use a hammer on a job.

She finished taping the chrome while Jack systematically knocked off the mounted references to the truck's manufacturer.

"You aren't going to try to knock down the raised letters on the tailgate are you?" she asked.

"We'll just disguise them a little," he answered.

"When I was in an accident a couple of years ago, the paint shop took over a week to paint my car. How long do you figure this will take?"

"Your paint shop wanted to do it right. We just want to get by some creeps. It makes a difference."

He pulled on a baseball hat, then fastened a mask in front of his face. Finally he signaled her to back away. As soon as she was far enough to meet with his approval, he fired up the sprayer.

The compressor whined and hissed, sending a cloud of green streaming at, and adhering to the truck.

He wasn't kidding about not being perfect. Little rivers of paint left messy tracks down the truck's body. Still, in almost no time, he had coated the car with a moderately smooth layer of ugly green paint.

* * * *

"I must look like a Martian," Jack said when he had finished.

"I'm not sure green is your color," Heather agreed.

He wet a rag with paint thinner and whipped off his body and face.

He'd bought them both coveralls at the hardware store and he tossed her the smaller pair when he was clean enough to pass a preliminary inspection.

"You seriously think this invisibility trick will work with the terrorists?" she asked.

"It isn't perfect, but it'll maximize our chances. What do you say we take a walk to the junkyard?"

"You do know how to show a girl a good time."

Her joking couldn't hide her anxious look. He'd been assuming that her tension flowed from concern for her parents and for their own safety. Certainly these were plenty for anyone to worry about. Now, though, he wasn't so certain. Something in the way she looked at him told him that he was the cause of her anxiety. "So much for being a white knight to the rescue," he muttered.

"What?"

"Think of it as a scavenger hunt," he told her.

"I don't see how hitting a dump can help save my parents. The car is painted. Let's go."

He held up a finger. "First, the paint isn't dry. If we drive now, it will peel back and make it pretty obvious what's going on. Second," he held up another finger, "we're not going to a dump, we're going to a junkyard. Third--"

"No more fingers in the air," she told him, sighing. "I give in. Let's go."

He dug through the boxes he'd unloaded from the truck and pulled out a socket wrench set. He'd noticed the junkyard on the way in and it had given him the idea for this changeover. Not that he had enough cash to continue buying cars every time they got spotted.

"Let me guess," Heather told him. "You're going to try to bolt the front end of a Rolls Royce to the truck. Sort of like some people do with their Volkswagens."

"Better. I'm going to find one of those ugly goat's head figureheads and screw it on," he told her.

Her eyes suggested that she didn't believe him. Frankly, he found it a little hard to believe as well. Still, it was the only plan he had.

He sent her off looking for a recently wrecked truck with current tags while he unbolted the ram from an old truck he found near the front of the junkyard.

She trotted back just as he was unfastening the head and pointed at her find.

"Perfect," he told her. It's even a Dodge."

"I figured that they might go beyond the normal stolen car report and actually run the tags against the model," she agreed.

"With the computers they have here, I doubt it," he told her. "But it's better safe than sorry."

He unscrewed the plates and stuck them in her handbag. No point letting the junkyard's owner know what they were doing. Tags were worthless to an honest man, so he didn't feel any guilt over stealing them.

The junkyard manager struggled out from his shack, the odor of beer and chewing tobacco emerging ahead of him like scouts before an army.

Heather wrinkled her nose but Jack kept a straight face.

"How much for the goat head?"

"Ten bucks." The man punctuated his demand by spitting a stream of tobacco juice on the muddy ground.

"I'll give you three."

"You'll give me five."

Jack counted out the five singles from his rapidly diminishing stash, then he and Heather skedaddled.

The ram's head didn't look any uglier on his truck than it had on the wreck in the junkyard so he decided he'd done all right.

During their walk, the paint had dried to a sticky consistency. Good enough, he decided, opening the small can of white paint and taking the brush in his hand.

"Don't tell me you are planning on painting a sign," Heather said.

"With luck, no one would notice it wasn't exactly perfect."

"With luck you could spell it right. Come on, give me the brush."

He handed it over. If worst came to worst, he could spray paint over her mangled job.

Fortunately, Heather seemed to have a knack for this. At least in the shadows where they'd parked, her hand lettering looked professional enough to fool anyone who wasn't looking too closely.

She licked her upper lip, gave the 'D' one more touch with the brush, then handed him back the brush and paint.

"Looks good."

She smiled at him. "When your parents are hippies, you get lots of chances to be arty. I just never thought I'd put my skills to such a practical purpose."

Jack's stomach growled. "Shall we get something to eat?"

"Shouldn't we be getting to work?"

He looked at the sun. "No workmen come this late in the day. We'll wait until after quitting time and pretend to be maintenance people."

Heather looked concerned but nodded.

He could certainly understand her concern. If he had any family, he imagined he'd want to keep them alive. The longer they waited, the less likely they'd have anything left to rescue.

He drove through a fast food place. Heather ordered french fries and a chocolate shake while he got a couple of quarter-pounders. "You don't like fast food?"

"I'm a vegetarian."

Oh, great. So much for his feeling that they had some wonderful mental bond. "Does it bother you that I eat meat?"

"I'm not religious about it. I just prefer to avoid meat myself."

The teenage girl working the drive up window smiled at him until she noticed Heather sitting in the passenger seat. Then she got suddenly professional.

"I guess the coverall makes me look younger," he told Heather.

"I don't think you could pass for eighteen," Heather answered. "Maybe she just liked the truck."

"That's got to be it." He pulled into a parking space and they ate their food.

Heather sucked at her shake then looked at him. "Do you have a plan or should we come up with one now?"

He grinned. "You got it right the first time. I always have a plan. They may not be any good, but I've always got something. For a start, I thought we'd make sure there really is something at Adelphia and East-West Highway."

"I could have guessed that. Then what?"

"If the reports we got were right, they've got to have a bunch of cyber-terrorists at work. It shouldn't be too hard to find that kind of an operation. They'd need a place where their programmers could work and live around the clock. I think we should be looking for a warehouse or something like that. Someplace without many windows."

"Agreed. I can't believe that they'd fall for a maintenance worker stunt, though. I've played that a few times when I was serving papers. Maybe ordinary people don't notice the cleaning crews but people with guilty consciences notice everything."

"Yeah. I was more thinking that we could use the uniforms to get close. Once I go in, I'm on my own." He spoke as softly as he could hoping to sneak that one by her. Not a chance.

"You're going in? I don't think so. What am I supposed to do, pull down my pants and cause a distraction like your blonde friend?"

"That was her idea, not mine." He paused for a moment trying to find the right words--words that would work. "Actually, I thought I'd have you phone in a fire

alarm about ten minutes after I went in. I'd have a lot better chance of making it out if they had something to worry about other than me."

Heather nodded. "The fire alarm is a good idea. But I'm going in with you. You don't know my parents. Even if you could spot them based on my description, they wouldn't trust you."

"I'd tell them I was from the government."

Heather sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of. Have you noticed that I'm a little suspicious of your CIA?"

"Sure. I thought I might tell them I was from the FBI. Do I look like a lawyer?"

That bought him only a hint of a smile. "My parents don't like the government and they don't trust government employees. In fact, they don't really trust anyone. Except each other and me, that is."

If Heather dreamed he'd let her go in instead of him, she could dream a different nightmare. "We need the alarm. That means only one of us can go in. With my training, I stand a better chance of coming out alive."

She shook her head. "We'll both go in. I'll program the computer to handle the alarm for us."

"A human voice gets a lot better response than an electronic warning. Besides, its almost impossible to hack into the fire department system from a normal phone line. You'd have to hook up to the alarm system. We don't have time for this."

"I didn't give you a hard time about the car because I figured you knew what you were doing," Heather told him. "So why don't you trust me on the computer stuff."

She fired up the laptop they'd bought, then plugged a small plastic dongle into it.

"What's that?"

She put her finger over his lips and mouthed "quite" at him.

When the system booted, she selected a program, double-clicked an icon, then spoke to the dongle--"I'm at a payphone. There's a fire at the corner of Adelphia and East-West Highway. I think someone's hurt. Hey, look--" she interrupted herself by clicking the button again.

"Cute microphone," he told her.

"Actually, it's a headset," she told him. "I'll program the PC to call about ten minutes after we go in."

He nodded. He didn't like the idea of risking his life with an untrained partner, but at least Heather could watch his back.

He checked his watch. Five o'clock. "Good enough," he told her. "Let's go."

He started the car and pulled out of the parking lot onto Highway 1.

* * * *

"Oh, look, its the Dairy," Heather told him. "Did you ever come out here?"

He glanced at the University of Maryland landmark. "I got my masters in International Economics here," he said. "I probably ate there half a dozen times."

"I would have eaten there every day," she confessed. "I hope you won't use it against me, but now you know. Ice cream is my downfall."

He gave her a deep chuckle. "I'll remember that when you least expect it," he told her in his most ominous voice.

As they got closer to the intersection, Heather's banter dropped away to nothing. He glanced at her and saw her leaning forward in the seat, her eyes wide open as she checked out the buildings looking for anything suspicious.

Since Heather was handling that part, Jack kept an eye out for any familiar cars.

The police were out in force in both marked and unmarked cars. Even in unmarked cars, he couldn't miss the fresh scrubbed but dangerous look that spoke police the world around.

"We've got to be getting close," he said.

"But why would they have so many police around?"

He didn't have an answer for that. No matter how deeply the police might be in the terrorists' pockets, they wouldn't want cops wandering around the premises.

"It doesn't look good, does it?"

"That's got to be the place," she interrupted, pointing at an abandoned looking building that had once housed a grocery store.

Chapter 8

Jack looked puzzled. "Why that building?"

"Isn't it obvious. It's an abandoned building but the air conditioners are working? With utility prices as high as they are? Not likely."

He nodded. "I'm surprised that they are so concerned about the comfort of their, ah, guests."

"I suspect they're for the benefit of the computers rather than the programmers. You can make people work anywhere but computers will just go flaky on you."

"I guess I've spent too long in countries where computers are kept hidden in underground vaults," Jack told her. He pulled around behind the store.

The back of the abandoned grocery store was concrete blocks and a metal loading dock secured with a large lock.

"Got it," he told Heather. "Now let's find a pay phone somewhere."

He drove around the block a couple of times until he found a phone that looked secluded enough.

"Better make it fifteen minutes," he said.

"Right." Heather booted up her notebook computer and changed the time setting, then handed it to him. She wasn't sure whether this really was the worst idea of her life or whether it just felt like it. With all of the attention going on around the building, things just didn't look very safe. It didn't matter, though. Her parents would have a lot better chance of surviving if she went in with Jack. Jack would have a better chance of surviving as well. To her surprise, that meant a lot to her.

He hung an 'Out of Order' sign on the telephone, then used his alligator clips to hook the modem to the handset.

"I get to say 'I told you so,' if that gets stolen and we get killed," he told her when he returned to the truck.

"Deal," she answered.

"We'll go in through the toy store two doors over," Jack said.

"Right," she told him. Her detective agency hadn't called for a lot of breaking and entering but she was familiar with the concept. Don't hit your target head on if you don't have to.

He parked next to the toy store and handed her a tool belt while fastening another on himself. "You're a plumber now," he instructed.

"Does that mean I have to let my jeans fall off and show half my butt?"

For a second, he looked like he was considering her suggestion. "It is one hell of a butt, but I'd rather keep its viewing to myself."

"I guess I asked for that." The belt must have weighed twenty pounds but it didn't so much as chink when she walked. "What's in here?"

"Basic spy stuff."

Standing on the truck's cab, he reached to the roof and pulled himself up.

"You're next."

Even after what they'd been through, his strength surprised her as he pulled her to the rooftop.

"I hope you aren't planning on going through the roof," Heather said.

"No," he answered shortly.

She followed him to a large turbine vent.

He crouched down and took a screwdriver from his belt.

The bolt resisted for a moment. Jack's biceps bulged as he twisted. Then, with an audible snap, the first screw broke.

Four other screws followed.

"I'm going to need your help lifting this," he said. "It shouldn't be heavy but it is awkward."

To him the thing might not be heavy. It had to weigh over a hundred pounds and her heart was pounding hard enough to tenderize a tough bull when they set it carefully down.

"I'll go first," she said.

"How do you figure?"

"I'm smaller and you're stronger. If I get stuck, you can pull me out."

"And if I get stuck?"

"It's my job to figure out whether you'll get stuck or not."

Increasingly, she was beginning to recognize his look of frustration as a sign that she had won.

"I guess I'm going to have to trust you," he said.

Damn. Why did he have to bring up the issue of trust just when they were starting to get along? When Jack found out the truth about her and her parents, he would remember this. The closer they got to her parents, the further she felt from the relationship she wanted with this man.

He handed her a flashlight. "Don't step on the ceiling tiles," he told her. "You'll fall through. There should be a walkway or something that we can use."

Heather held the flashlight awkwardly then switched it on.

"I'm going to lower you head first," he said. "If you can't find anything or reach anything secure, I'll pull you out."

"This was your plan?"

"Actually my plan was to drive the truck through the front door. When I got here, this seemed like a better idea."

She clambered into the vent opening and shined the flashlight into the darkness. "I don't see anything blocking me."

"Right. Down you go."

Jack slid his hands down her derriere before reaching her knees. "No matter what happens, don't kick."

"Do you think I want you to drop me?"

Slowly he lowered her into the vent.

Outside, the air had been hot, still, and humid. In the attic over the stores, those qualities seemed to have concentrated themselves into an inferno. In seconds, her face was covered with sweat.

"I need to go down," she called.

He complied, lowering her until Heather was vertical, his strong grasp on her knees her the only thing that kept her from crashing through the drop ceiling in a headfirst dive to the floor.

In the yellow beam shed by the flashlight, she made out a narrow walkway that evidently provided access to the vent. "I can't reach it from this angle. Move me about two feet to the right"

"Right." His voice was perfectly calm, as if he felt able to hold her like this for hours. She could feel the slightest hint of strain in his grip as he moved her.

If she could just grab that pipe. "Damn."

"What happened?" he asked.

"I found a fricking hot water pipe."

"Be careful."

Now he told her.

A heavy electric cable hung loose near the pipe. She could easily grab it and pull herself upright. Still, despite all of the electricity she felt between herself and Jack, she didn't think he'd appreciate a sudden power jolt. More to the point, she didn't know whether he'd drop her.

Finally she twisted herself almost horizontal and grabbed one of the overhead beams.

"Let go," she instructed.

To her relief, he complied instantly and she lowered herself onto the walkway.

"Looks pretty easy," she told him. "I'm not sure that we can take my parents out this way, though."

"We're running late because of those screws," he said. "We'll have to try to get them out the front door in the confusion when the fire department arrives."

"So which way is the old grocery store."

Even in the gloomy attic, the look he shot her was distinctly odd.

"All right, so I don't have a perfect sense of direction. At least I don't mind asking for help."

"Follow me, then."

Jack picked his way along the narrow walkway.

The strip shopping center must have been built in the seventies when construction companies were just throwing buildings up as fast as they could. They hadn't even put firewalls between the toy store and whatever was next to it.

Unfortunately, they weren't so lucky with the grocery store. A cinderblock firewall completely obstructed their path.

"We'll have to go through it," Jack said.

"All right, superman." It wasn't his parents there and he didn't have to risk his life to help them, but she still didn't understand the casual way he approached serious problems. "I guess you have a plan."

"If you mean, I might have guessed there'd be a firewall, you're right."

He dug around in his toolbelt, finally coming out with a hammer. "I thought I had a chisel."

"How long has it been?"

"He spared a glance at his watch. I know it seems longer. We've got three more minutes before the call. I figure it will take about five minutes for the fire department to get here, assuming that they're at the station. If they are out getting dinner, all the bets are off."

Without any hint at his intentions, he suddenly reached for her sliding his hands around Heather's waist.

"Um, don't you think we should wait?" she suggested.

"Just looking for my chisel," he told her.

She kept the flashlight pointed away from her face so he wouldn't see that blush. What did she think she was, Madonna or something that no man could resist her charms no matter what the danger?

"Got it." He pulled the tool from her belt.

He unzipped his coveralls and stripped off his T-shirt.

"Time for Rambo?" she asked.

"He's not here," Jack answered, wrapping the shirt around the hammer-head.

"It still won't be silent, but it gives us a chance.

To her surprise, he didn't even bother with the cement between the bricks. Instead, he attacked the blocks, smashing through the concrete like it was so much stale bread.

The hole looked too small for his shoulders when he stopped, but he dropped the hammer and chisel into his tool belt and took the light from her. "This time, I go first."

The grocery store attic wasn't much different from the others in the strip center. Hot, humid, and dark. Jack wriggled through the hole he'd made and pulled Heather after him.

"The computer should be calling right now. We've got five minutes to find your parents and get out of here.

"What's your plan?"

"Um, I thought we'd sort of lift the ceiling tiles and see what was underneath."

"You don't have an optical fiber based camera system in your bag of spy tools?"

He could have sworn that he heard a hint of sarcasm in her voice that time. All right, maybe a whole lot more than a hint. "I'm pretty much out of toys," he told her. He didn't think a pacifist like Heather would want to know about the three knives he carried. And they certainly weren't toys.

"You lift, I'll look," she said.

He didn't argue with that. After all, she knew what she was looking for.

He lifted the nearest tile, let her look for a second, then dropped it lightly back into place.

"Empty."

"How far could you see?"

"Just the one room. About fifteen feet in each direction."

"Damn. I was hoping for open cubicles." He led Heather about twenty feet across the shaky path, holding her hand because her eyes hadn't adjusted back to the dark in the attic.

The scent of cigarettes and coffee grew stronger as they moved across the floor. It had to be a good sign.

"We should be near the corner of three offices," he told her in a whisper. "I'll lift each of them in turn. Be ready, we're running out of time."

Heather crouched as low as she could and he lifted the first tile a few inches. She shook her head and they moved to the next.

"Ah, Mr. Eastland," Jones's cold voice said. "We were wondering when you would drop into our trap."

Jack pushed Heather out of sight, then lifted the tile the rest of the way.

Jones, along with a couple of junior terrorists, sat on comfortable looking lawn chairs smoking cigarettes. The Uzi submachine guns didn't look at all comfortable.

"Won't you join us, Mr. Eastland?" Jones said.

Enough fingers tightened around triggers that Jack figured that Jones was in the drivers seat.

He grasped the edge of the walkway and swung himself over, slowly lowering him into the room. If she had any sense at all, Heather would get out of here before Jones could search the attic. He'd buy her every second he could. He should have

known the whole thing was too easy. Why had he let Heather talk him into letting her come with him?

"How did you figure my plan?" he asked when he reached the floor.

"Surely you didn't think your homing device was undetectable, Mr. Eastland. When we got here without you or the lovely Ms. Webb, we searched the van quite carefully."

"So where are the programmers?"

"Do you really think I'll tell you? Not that I anticipate you having a chance to share the knowledge. Suffice it to say, they're a long way from here, but only a short distance from your country's economy. Or should I say, late economy?"

Of his four captors, only three carried Uzis, although Jones might well have a weapon of some type. Jack figured that the odds were maybe twenty percent that he could get one of them before they blew him away. He'd take those odds if any started to show any interest in the ceiling. So long as they kept their attention on him and didn't start shooting, he'd play along.

"That's what I don't understand. Why mess with banks and shampoo companies? I'd think you'd go after the military computers."

"Napoleon once said that an army marches on its stomach," Jones told him.

"The American army marches on your economy. Cripple that and the army becomes

a mob. We can free our country from your grip and that of your Zionist puppets while you cope with starvation."

"I hardly think a couple of sick computers will cause starvation."

Jones shrugged his shoulders. "Who would think that a country would leave its most vital resources totally unprotected? Still, I am told that this is the case. Many of my country's economists have worked on this problem."

Jack could have compared notes with him. When he'd been assigned to the case, he had spent some time with agency economists who had made similar estimates of the damage that a total collapse of the nations computerization could cause. Starvation was possible. Of course, Jack wasn't here to compare notes.

"Very funny," he told Jones. "You think a bunch of terrorists can actually outsmart the people that run America's computers."

"That would not be too hard, Mr. Eastland. But we do not have to do so. We hire hackers to do it for us."

A siren's shrill scream had been growing over the past minute but Jack had pretended to ignore it. As if someone had cranked up the volume level on an oversized boom box, suddenly the siren became impossible to ignore.

"What the--Mo, go and see what is happening."

One of the machine gunners reluctantly stood and headed for the door.

"I suppose that this is your doing, Mr. Eastland." Jones sounded weary and bored. "Unfortunately for you, our operations are safe from your interference."

The sound of splintering glass informed Jack that Mo hadn't made it to the front door before the firemen decided they needed to check things out on their own.

"I'd better see what trouble you caused." To the others he added, "If he moves, shoot him."

"The firemen will hear the shooting and investigate," Jack warned.

"If the firemen come here, shoot them too." Jones gave Jack a nasty smile.

"Surely you didn't think there would be a rescue, Mr. Eastland?"

Jack checked out the situation. Unfortunately, the two remaining gunmen had enough sense to sit in the northeast and northwest corners of the room. They could catch him in a crossfire without any risk of shooting each other. Real life is never quite as cooperative as the movies.

"Any chance for a cup of coffee?" he asked.

"Die thirsty," one of the gunmen answered. The second looked like he might have stood up and gotten it. When his comrade spoke, he sat back down with a sheepish look.

* * * *

Heather edged around the walkway trying to judge distance and direction. If she got lucky, she might have a chance.

Without luck, she'd get herself and Jack killed. She didn't like the odds but didn't think they'd ever get better than they were right now.

When she heard Jack ask for coffee, she let her hopes rise for a moment. His captor's reply cut that hope off.

She stripped off the heavy tool belt, took a deep breath, and stepped onto the flimsy ceiling tile.

For a fraction of a second, she thought it would hold, then it collapsed under her weight and she crashed through into the room.

She had planned to drop directly onto one of the gunmen and throw the belt at the second. Unfortunately, her uncannily bad sense of direction came through. She was going to miss the man by three feet, at least.

In for a dime, in for a dollar, she thought. Jack would just have to take care of his man. In mid-flight, she heaved the belt at her target, then kicked out at him.

Her foot connected, then she stopped worrying about her aim and started worrying about surviving the impact. A ten-foot drop isn't much when you have a nice soft gunman to land on. Falling head-first because your foot is stuck up his nose is another.

Her judo instructor would have been proud of her slap as she landed. That made one of them. Her lungs kind of wheezed as she hit. She told her muscles to

move, to get up and see what was happening to Jack, or even to the man she'd kicked.

She couldn't move.

Then she was moving. Except, instead of standing, she seemed to be floating in midair. She knew she couldn't be dead, though, because she still hurt like the dickens.

"Hang on," Jack breathed into her ear.

Oh, her mind said. *Jack has me*. Then everything went black.

* * * *

Coping with an unconscious Heather and two gunmen who needed about half a second to recover from their shock and start shooting wasn't Jack's idea of a good time. On the flipside, it was a whole lot better than before Heather had dropped in through the ceiling

His captor's faces would have been comical. He had a sneaking suspicion that his own expression might not have earned a place of honor in the inscrutable category. Still, he reacted first.

Heather had neatly wrapped her toolbelt around one of the men. Jack had flipped one of his knives from his sleeve and pinned the second gunman's arm to the wall. Then he'd turned to deal with the first.

Heather's belt had caught the terrorist in the face and his nose was bleeding heavily. Jack followed up by grabbing the gun from his weakened grip and belting him in the ear with the barrel.

Then he scooped up Heather from where she had landed. Time to leave.

He kicked the Uzis out of immediate reach, slung Heather over his shoulder, and jogged out the door, which Jones had neglected to lock.

The abandoned grocery store was almost completely dark, except where flashing red lights showed the Prince George's County Fire Department at work. Next time he got a call from one of those fireman donation things, he'd cough up some serious bucks. Always assuming, of course, that he managed to get out of this place alive.

He headed for the lights, whispering curses as he tripped over unseen obstacles.

Jones had sounded absolutely convincing when telling his men to kill the firemen if they got too close. Jack had enough on his conscious already without adding a bunch of firemen who were trying to do their jobs.

Heather moaned and wiggled against him and he was suddenly conscious of the softness of her breasts against his back and the firmness of her derriere that his hand held for balance.

"Stay still," he hissed. If she started moaning now, they were all dead.

She relaxed against him, quietly.

"Good girl."

"I think I proved I'm a woman," she whispered.

"I hope we'll be able to talk about that later."

"I can walk." Her voice didn't sound as confident as her words.

"As soon as we get out of here, we'll find out. Now let me think."

"Right. A plan." She didn't have to sound so dubious. Admittedly, this last plan hadn't worked out exactly according to schedule.

A thrashing sound behind them warned him that at least one of his gunmen had recovered from the little fiasco they'd left and was after them.

The fire door was exactly where he remembered it from scoping out the place before they'd entered. Unfortunately, someone had violated the clear fire department warning that the door should be left unlocked. A large lock held a latch closed.

"Did your private investigator training include lock picking?" he whispered.

"Sure. Did you bring a pick lock set?"

"Ah, no."

"Then I can't help."

He bashed the lock a couple of times with his hammer. That accomplished a slightly dented lock and shouts indicating that someone had heard.

It made sense that Jones would have gunmen in other rooms. Unfortunately, Jack didn't have a plan handy to deal with them.

"Where are they, you fools?" Jones's unmistakable voice called out.

"I heard something this way," one of the gunmen answered.

"Not a word," Jack breathed.

To his relief, she complied.

He backed away from the door--for about six feet, stopping suddenly when he, and Heather, hit the back wall with a muffled thump.

It had to have hurt, but Heather didn't make a squeak. He could get used to a woman like this. At least he hoped he'd be around long enough to have a chance to get used to anything.

"I don't see anything," one of the gunman complained. Jack had spent enough time in the Middle East to recognize the distinctive accent of a Palestine native. Typical. Like the CIA's use of exiled Cubans, just about every country in the region employed Palestinians to do their dirty work.

Bright flashlights cut through the gloom.

"Look at the lock. Someone must have gotten after it with a hammer."

Jones's voice cut through the chatter. "He's already shown he's dangerous. Go in parties of three. Find him and kill him. Don't let the escape. If you have to, kill the girl too."

Jones detailed them off in teams of three. As he did so, Jack slid toward the hallway entrance and looked out.

Since he had no idea how many gunmen Jones had gathered, he couldn't tell whether they were all there but it didn't seem likely. Jones might not be much as a fighter, but surely he wasn't stupid enough to leave the front door unlocked. On the other hand, anything was better than waiting to get shot.

Jack snuck back the way he'd come hoping that all of the terrorists who were planning on heading for the side door were already there.

"You've got to be getting tired," Heather whispered. "I can walk. Set me down."

Oddly, he didn't feel tired at all. Instead his body seemed to be floating on air yet, at the same time, he had that sense that he sometimes got in his dreams where he would run as fast as he could yet never get anywhere.

"It won't be long," he whispered back.

The fire department must have left while he was at the back door but the entryway was still brightly lit. Three guards remained.

He approached until he was just outside of the circle of light and shouted in his best Arabic "There's someone outside."

One of the guards stepped outside and Jack sprinted into the entryway, tossed Heather at one of the remaining guards, then made like a linebacker and tackled the second.

He stood in time to see Heather lock her thighs around the second guard's neck and squeeze.

Jack's heart stopped for a few seconds while the guard clawed at her legs. Then the guard's eyes glazed over and he collapsed.

Heather slapped the ground as she hit and rolled. It figured that she would learn Judo rather than one of the martial arts that concentrates on hitting and kicking. Still, it was a handy skill.

"Back in here," Jack shouted in Arabic.

For once, they had a little luck. The guard that had fallen for his call the first time fell for it again and came rushing back.

"I didn't see any--" the guards voice trailed off when he saw the two of them, Heather casually holding the Uzi that had once belonged to the guard she'd taken out.

"On your knees," Jack ordered.

The man complied, blithering something about his wives.

Jack wrapped a few strands of electrical tape around the man's wrists and more over his mouth.

"Let's get out of here," he told Heather when he had finished.

"Right." She started off in the absolutely wrong direction.

"This way," he hissed. "I think it's time we found the truck and tried something else."

Heather veered.

She was limping but didn't seem to be too badly injured despite all the chances he had given her.

"What was the big idea throwing me at that guy?"

"It was the best idea I could come up with, and it worked."

"I thought you always had a plan."

"Yeah. The plan was to get out alive. It worked."

"All right. We did that. Now what?"

He rounded the corner and saw what was left of his truck, another pair of guards still at work taking pieces off of it with chain saws.

"Time for a new plan."

Chapter 9

"Maybe we'd better take the bus." Heather tried not to let despair seep into her voice. They'd managed to keep alive through good luck and skill but the terrorists always seemed a couple of steps ahead. The truck had held all of their equipment. About all they had left was what they wore and what they carried in their toolbelts. Correction, what Jack carried in his. Hers was back where she'd tried to jump on the gunman with the Uzi.

"I'd better lose the toolbelt," Jack told her as if reading her thoughts. "We're too easy to spot."

She nodded. At least he wasn't giving up. If her parents hadn't been in danger, Heather wasn't sure she could continue. "Is there anything we should keep?"

He shook his head. "Who knows? Unless you can think of something you want to stick in your pocket, I might as well lose the whole thing. I don't see pretending to be air conditioning repair people again on this job."

He unslung his belt and held it out to her.

She shook her head. No, she didn't want to paw through his things.

With a shrug, he slid it into a sewer opening.

"We've got to get some money," he told her. "I'm down to about twenty dollars."

"Since they know about where we are, this is probably a good time to find an automatic teller," Heather told him. "It can't help them too much." She paused. While she loved her job as a private detective, it wasn't the most lucrative field. "Except, I'm not sure I have a positive balance this month."

"I do," Jack said confidently. "Did you see a bank?"

"There was one about two blocks from the grocery store," she told him. "It's that way."

He looked at her pointing finger then turned and began walking in the opposite direction.

"Hey. I thought we needed money."

"Yeah. I just remembered the bank you're talking about."

She followed Jack glumly. She knew she didn't have a great sense of direction. Still, it galled her that he would assume that she was completely wrong.

It galled her even more when Jack found the bank, almost exactly two blocks from the grocery store, and almost 180 degrees from where she was certain it had to be.

Jack slid his card into the ATM slot and punched a button sequence.

It beeped.

"Odd."

Something in his voice made her very nervous. "What is it?"

"It says it's confirming my balance. It doesn't usually take this long."

"Let's get out of here."

"But it still has my card."

"Forget your card. Someone has been messing with the database." She tugged at him.

For a second, she thought he'd refuse to come, but then he followed her lead and ducked into a poorly lit alley.

Less than a minute later, three police cars pulled into the bank parking lot, lights flashing but sirens sinisterly silent. Six officers, all carrying shotguns, burst from their cars and tore toward the ATM machine.

Jack shook his head. "Thanks."

He led her deeper into the alley.

"Here I thought you were the big CIA agent. How come you didn't know what was happening?"

"None of the countries I've worked in have been very computerized. I studied the books but I haven't spent much time in the U.S. since college."

"When they find your card, they'll know we're only a few minutes away. What are we going to do?"

"In the movies, I'd steal one of their cars and lead them on a high speed chase," Jack said. "Since I don't feel like getting killed, I suggest that we keep walking."

The strip mall quickly yielded to a residential neighborhood.

Jack found a vacant lot and stripped off his coveralls. Somehow he'd recovered the shirt he'd wrapped around his hammer and he put it on.

"Trying to look suburban?" she asked.

"That is one of the points of the coveralls. People see them and they never see anything else. Unfortunately, Jones knew our names. He'll have a good description of us over the police radio within the next hour."

Heather couldn't match the casual jogging outfit that Jack stripped down to, but she pulled off her coverall as well.

"Perfect," he assured her. "We look like a couple of yuppies out for a walk."

She thought they looked like a couple of hoods casing the neighborhood but thought better of saying it. She had always been proud of her disguises. A pair of jeans and an old T-shirt were a long way from what she was used to.

"Are we looking for anything in particular, or are we just going to walk until it gets so late that the police will stop us on general principle?"

"You mean you don't need the exercise? Walking is supposed to be good for everything."

"Very funny. Don't tell me you've finally run out of plans." Even though none of them seemed to work out exactly like he'd planned, Heather had come to count on his plans and didn't like the feeling that she was on her own."

"I wouldn't say that. I'm looking for a convenience store."

"What? Why?"

Jack changed direction slightly and they walked closer to where a couple of teenagers were making out in their car, the radio blasting the news.

"Here's a strange one," the commentator read. "A man and a woman described as white, twenties to early thirties, she with black hair, hazel eyes, he with dark hair and blue eyes, apparently held up a software programming shop in Tacoma Park, Maryland. They disguised themselves as plumbers and made off with the payroll and are armed and dangerous. I don't know about you guys, but I'd give the programmers their money. The way they mess with my bank balance, I want to make sure they aren't hungry."

"Have you ever thought of becoming a redhead?" Jack asked.

She decided not to tell him about some of the stranger disguises she'd taken. "I look better with dark hair."

"We can get whatever we need at a convenience store. By the time anyone asks, we'll be long gone."

On cue, he turned a corner and a 7-11 appeared.

"How did you manage that?"

"You mean make the store appear or trick you into asking about it just before we got there?"

"I mean--never mind."

"Right. There's also a bus stop handy. I think we've walked far enough to be outside of any likely police roadblock."

Fortunately they were far enough out in the suburbs where gas stations left their restroom doors open so they didn't have to explain how a dark-haired woman and a man in his early thirties managed to transform themselves into a redhead and a man old enough to be her father.

They caught the first bus that came along and rode it to the subway.

* * * *

Heather stared at the large poster-maps that form much of the decor of Washington's expansive subway system. "So we're in the clear now. What's next up on your plan?"

Heather's confidant assumption that he had everything under control would have been ego-inflating for Jack, except he knew he had bungled the entire day. He had called the office after Gomorra had as good as warned him to lose all contact for a week. He had wasted too much of the day in an effort to disguise the truck. They might as well have taken a taxi for all the good their work had done. And now he was

down to about twenty bucks and a couple of Metro farecards that would take them just about everywhere the subway ran. Not much with which to protect the woman he found himself increasingly drawn to, rescue her parents, save his own hide, and somehow keep the U.S. economy from being undermined.

"We still need money if we're going to do anything. I think we should head for my place."

"That's brilliant," she observed. "They'll never think of looking there."

"Sarcasm isn't your most attractive asset, you know," he fired back. "I said toward my place, not all the way there. I left my bike at the shop the other day. It got a little scratched when I broke up that first attack."

"I don't understand. Surely you don't think we can ride around, incognito, on that hog."

"You'd be surprised. It really is true that people tune out the loud and obnoxious. But that wasn't really what I was thinking. It should sell for enough to let us assemble whatever equipment we need, get another beat up junker-car, and still have enough to set up a safe house.

"I kind of thought you were attached to that bike." Heather sounded confused.

"Well yeah." It had taken him two years of scrimping and saving his entry-level salary to purchase the bike. On the other hand, with luck, they'd survive and he could save money again. Without money, they were both dead.

"I appreciate what you're doing for me, especially since you haven't even met my parents."

"I was hoping we'd be over that problem by now."

They rode down the escalator, slid their farecards through the reader, and stood in the station.

Jack had never paid much attention to the honeycomb shape of the huge concrete blocks that make up Washington's subway stations. He appreciated the way the transit authority kept it clean, carefully using a concrete colored paint to cover over any graffiti the moment they found it. As a result, unlike any other subway he'd ridden anywhere in the world, the Washington subway looked and smelled pleasant.

Floor mounted lights started to flash indicating a train's imminent arrival. Moments later, a subway screamed into the station and pulled to a stop with considerable squeal of brakes.

Jack looked around at the typical Washington subway crowd of college students on their way to class, professionals from the beltway bandit companies, struggling home after a long day lobbying the government for special favors for whatever constituency they represented that day, a group of deaf youths from the city's famous school for the deaf, and a few passengers Jack had a hard time categorizing.

Heather stood patiently as the train doors hissed open, disgorging the mob who was exiting at their stop, the waiting passengers giving way for a moment, then pushing on as soon as they could.

They waited until the warning bells chimed then, in unspoken accord, simultaneously jumped between the train's closing doors.

No one that Jack saw on the platform paid any particular notice to them. A couple of passengers already on the train scowled at their behavior, but Jack thought it more likely that they were angry that he had risked holding up the train rather than because they were tailing him.

Nevertheless, the two exited and reentered a number of trains, taking a roundabout trip that led through the Maryland suburbs, under Washington, out to National Airport, then back into the city.

Jack finally led Heather up the long escalators at Dupont Circle into the dark of night.

Heather looked at her watch. "It's almost midnight. There's no way your repair shop will be open."

"Bike people are different."

She shook her head.

He couldn't blame her for a distinctive loss of faith in his forecasts. Still, he wasn't worried that Fred would toss them out.

"My man." Fred greeted them at the door to his combined house and shop. Then he did a slow double-take. "Whoa. Heather, are you hanging around with bikers now?"

If an earthquake could be arranged to open a hole into the ground right then, Heather would happily have jumped into it.

"Hi, Fred. Long time."

He hadn't changed over the past ten years since she and her family had stayed with him. He had been living in New Mexico then, and been just one of many stops in the peculiar underground railroad that crisscrosses America and that had pulled together to protect her parents and herself all of her life. He was the same bear of a man, at least six foot six, and almost as broad. He still wore his hair down to his waist. Even ten years ago, that hair had been shot with gray. There might be a little more gray now, but not much.

If Fred hadn't changed, she certainly had. She'd been a skinny teenager who dyed her blonde hair green partly out of teenage rebelliousness, and partly because it helped her parents with their identity changes. She couldn't believe that he could still remember her now with her hair a peculiar mousy reddish tinge.

"Are your parents all right?" Fred asked.

She thought she'd seen all of Jack's expressions during the few days they'd been together. This was a new one. Could he actually be jealous? Fred was old enough to be her father. In fact, he was older than her father.

"They're in trouble. Jack's with the CIA. He and I are trying to see what we can do to help."

"Well you've come to the right place," Fred assured them. "Get in here off the street and we'll figure out what to do next."

Jack didn't appear to notice Fred's tiny hesitation before inviting them in. Even if he had, Heather hoped he'd see it as a normal reaction to finding that someone you know is a spy. At a minimum, she had to warn him. Fred might not be actively involved in shielding fugitives any more, but if Jack found out about that part of his past, he could spend the rest of his life in jail.

Fred led the two of them into a huge kitchen and plopped a bowl of chili in front of each of them.

"Don't go all weird on me," he growled at Heather. "It may look like meat but you should remember I never touch the stuff either. Or aren't you a vegetarian any more?"

"I could eat a horse right now," she told him, "vegetarian or not. But no, you remember right." She picked up the spoon Fred laid out for her and took a taste. Heavenly.

In seconds, she was scraping the bottom of the bowl and casting covetous glances at Jack's bowl.

Jack circled his arm around his bowl protectively but then winked at her. "I've been thinking about your offer for my bike. I need some cash right now so I've decided to sell it."

Fred frowned at him. "Just a couple of days ago you told me that it was your baby."

"A lot has changed in just a couple of days."

"I want to tell you right now, I've always had a soft spot for little Heather. If you boy scouts are after her or her family, I don't want to have anything to do with it, not even to get my hands on that honey of a bike."

Jack frowned. "They don't call us Boy Scouts any more, and why should I be after Heather?"

"After the time I spent in Laos, I'll call you Boy Scouts or worse."

Heather tried to will Fred to silence. Jack was no fool. He didn't need to have his nose rubbed in it to realize that the connection between herself and Fred had to do with illegal operations.

Jack shrugged. "That was a long time ago, Fred. Don't worry about Heather, though. She can take care of herself."

Yeah, right, she wanted to tell him. *Like getting captured by Jones and his cronies and needing to get rescued, then knocking herself silly when she tried to jump through the ceiling and missed her man.* With an effort of will, she kept her mouth shut.

"I don't know," Fred answered slowly. "Somehow this doesn't feel right."

"My parents may be in real trouble." Heather figured that since her CIA comments had gotten them into this mess, she might as well do her part to get them out of it.

"I know that, Heather. What I don't want to do is get them in even more trouble."

That was the danger, Heather knew. Right now they were safe. Sure they were being held captive, but at least they were alive and valued. If she turned them over to Jack, they could be subjected to the death penalty. It didn't seem right and it certainly wasn't fair but for all of his helpfulness and for all of the times he'd come to the rescue like the Lone Ranger or something, he was at least as much the enemy as the terrorists who held her parents.

"I'm not asking for a loan," Jack interjected. "You named the price and told me you thought it was fair for both of us. All I'm asking if for you to follow through on the offer you already made."

Fred shook his head as if thinking about Jack's words. Heather knew it was only an act. Before he had been blackballed out of his job he had been a University math professor. The man might like messing with motorcycles, but he was no fool.

Finally he nodded. "I'll do it, Jack. But I want you to remember this. You owe me one. Some day you may have a chance to think about that."

It was Jack's turn to look puzzled but he nodded. "Fine. Do you have the money here?"

"You think a guy like me does business with banks? Of course I've got the cash here."

Like the underground that he dealt with, Fred believed in untraceable cash. Heather wasn't surprised when he led them through his shop, then entered the washroom and closed the door behind him.

* * * *

"There's something strange about this whole thing," Jack whispered. "How well do you know him? Do you think he could be in the pay of--"

She pressed her finger to her lips.

Jack's instincts told him to run. Since his instincts had kept him alive more than once, he tended to trust them. They could run now, leave before Fred came out with his guns blasting.

"Fred is basically harmless." Heather was reading his mind.

Harmless or not, Fred had plenty of time to make a phone call or two before he emerged, a stack of worn looking twenty dollar bills in his hand. "People notice bigger bills," he remarked as he saw the direction of Jack's gaze.

"Fine."

"I don't suppose you have your papers with you?"

Jack shook his head. "I'll mail them to you."

"Do that. In the meantime, why don't you sign this quitclaim." He pushed over a printed sheet of legalese.

Jack looked it over quickly, then signed, reaching into his pocket and removing the key from his keychain.

Fred reviewed the paperwork as if worried that Jack might somehow have altered something while signing, then tucked it away into his belt.

"Go ahead and count your money," he told Jack.

Jack's instincts were screaming. Rather than count each bill, he flipped through the stacks to make sure that Fred hadn't substituted any ones for the twenties.

"We'd better be going," he said as soon as he had finished.

"What?" He couldn't tell if Heather or Fred had objected first.

"I figured you would stay the night," Fred told him. It isn't anything fancy, but a lot of my biking buds stop here when they're traveling so I'm used to it."

"Appreciate it," Jack said. "But like Heather said, we've got a lot to get done and frankly, anyone who gets involved is likely to be in danger. The sooner we get out of your hair, the better I'll feel about bringing you in."

Fred looked ready to argue but Heather cut him off.

"I'll come back and visit now that I know where you are," she told Fred. "But I suspect Jack is right about this."

Jack's sense of urgency was so strong he was almost afraid that Heather and Fred would hear it when he finally led Heather down the steps and out into the street.

"Quickly," he urged. "We'll head for Dupont Circle and double back."

Her long legs let her keep up with him as he hurried. He could get used to having a woman like her around. Not that he'd ever likely get the chance. The Agency preferred its agents stay single or marry stay at home types.

Heather didn't seem like the kind of woman who would put up with sitting at home waiting for him to come home from whatever international hot spot had caught the Agency's attention.

"Are you going to tell me what you got so weird about?" she asked. "All of a sudden I thought you were going to go down Fred's throat."

"He was stalling," Jack answered.

"He's a little nervous about government people. He isn't violent, but I think he's a bit of an anarchist."

Even well after midnight, Dupont Circle was far from deserted, Jack noticed. Hookers looked him up and down but backed off when Heather glared at them. He had to admit that he would cheerfully stomped anyone who had propositioned Heather. Still, they didn't look out of place despite their disheveled appearance.

"All right, you got nervous. So why are we going back?"

"They wouldn't have kidnapped your parents if time wasn't essential. And right now, I don't have a single lead on where they might be holding your parents and any other programmers they've gotten their hands on. Frankly, I'm hoping for a break."

"Why did you go to Fred if you didn't trust him?"

"I never told him I was with the CIA. As far as he was concerned, I was just another weekend biker with some government job during the week."

"Listen, I wanted to--"

He held up a hand. "I know you were trying to warn him about something. But don't you realize, everything I'm doing, I'm doing as a private citizen. The CIA isn't allowed to perform domestic work, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. And there really were three Billy Goats Gruff. Come on, Jack, I liked you a lot more when you were being straight with me."

He spotted a specialty store. "Do you smoke cigars?"

"Don't chew and spit either."

"Well fake it." Jack opened the door to the cigar bar and snagged a seat near the window. "We've got a great view of Fred's place from here."

A waitress wandered over and he ordered a couple of cigars off the menu.

"You aren't actually going to smoke those, are you?"

"One is for you so you can do what you want with it, as long as you fake enjoying it. And yes. Normally my cigar smoking is confined to celebrating when colleagues have babies, but I'll smoke one in a crunch."

Jack had reconciled himself to never having children. With assignments that kept him out of the country for months at a time, what kind of father would he be? For the first time, he realized what a sacrifice he was making. Waking up in the morning and sending a group of little Heathers off to school sounded a lot more like real life than trying to uncover a plot to overthrow a U.S. friendly dictator.

Heather looked at him in silence for a moment, then broke out laughing.

"Sometimes, you are too yuppie for me."

"Hey. Where else can you go where you can linger as long as you want, but no one thinks it's strange if you just hop up and go?"

"Whatever."

The waitress came back and passed Jack the two cigars. She waited while he rolled the hand rolled tobacco between his hands and inhaled the aroma. Like coffee, he decided, the scent was a lot more pleasant than the actual experience.

Finally he nodded and paid the waitress, adding a generous tip.

"Knock yourself out." He handed Heather one of the cigars.

They waited.

* * * *

"There's something happening." Heather came to full alert.

Jack pushed aside his daydreams and brought all of his attention to the present.

A dusty maroon van sat, engine running in the street in front of Fred's house.

Although the driver had turned off the headlights, he must have been resting his foot on the brakes because they completely illuminated the area.

"Get the license number."

"Teach your mother to suck eggs," she shot back. "This is my job."

He stuffed the still unlit cigar in a pocket and headed for the door.

"Let me guess," Heather said as she caught up with him. "You've got a plan?"

Chapter 10

Heather could think of a hundred reasons why a couple of guys in a van would pull up to Fred's house in the middle of the night. Ninety-nine of them had nothing to do with the case. Probably the most likely was that a visit by a CIA agent had spooked the always-reclusive Fred and he had called friends to help him move.

Surely Fred would leave town before he took a chance on trusting Jack. Frankly, she wasn't sure Fred wasn't right on this one. She admired Jack for his loyalty to his job, but it made everything more difficult.

"Impossible, actually," she murmured to herself.

"What's that?"

Oh, great. She'd get Jack thinking she was some kind of a loon who talked to herself.

"Nothing," she answered. "Are you going to tell me your plan?"

"I don't suppose you want to fall down on the ground in front of the van?"

"I'll leave that for Mary-Helen. What's the idea?"

"It took about twelve minutes for the van to get here. That gives us a hint about how far away they started. If we can get a direction, that'll narrow things down even more."

"That's your brilliant plan?"

"Hey, you're the private eye. Tell me what you would do."

"First of all, I wouldn't be here with no equipment and no car, chasing geese so wild we don't even know if they honk."

"What about second?"

Heather shook her head. Second of all, she would do pretty much what Jack was proposing. As leads went, the van was as likely as anything else they had to go on. That wasn't saying a lot but detective work is pretty much tying up loose ends and pursuing unlikely clues until you find one that connects. "There isn't much off-street parking around here. If they really are nearby, make sure you can identify the van and we'll have a good clue."

"Twelve minutes at thirty miles an hour gives us about a hundred square miles to search for a missing van."

He stopped abruptly and stared out the window.

She followed the direction of his gaze and saw three men run from Fred's house. Each carried their hands close to their chests and all wore jackets despite the

muggy Washington heat. Jack's theory that Fred had called in the terrorists started looking a lot better.

"What next?" she asked.

"I suggest you go to the bathroom."

"I beg your pardon?" Admittedly they had spent the previous night together, although right now it seemed like a million years ago. Still, he was stepping way over the line with that comment.

"They're going through the motions," he explained. "I doubt that they really think we'll be hanging out here. Still, they're looking for a couple. If they see a man sitting alone, they aren't likely to investigate further."

"That would go as well for me. Why don't you be the one who leaves?"

He looked uncomfortable. "How about because within two minutes of me leaving, you wouldn't be alone?"

Heather stood and headed for the washroom. Despite her bedraggled appearance, or maybe because of it, she'd attracted the attention of several of the men at the cigar bar. Jack was probably right. Naturally Heather wouldn't actually admit it to him. He'd never let her live that one down.

In contrast to the stuffy cigar bar, the woman's room was a hotbed of social activity. She was able to borrow an eyeliner and a hairbrush and managed to repair some of the damage that had been done by the too-long day.

"Your boyfriend is a real sweetheart," a tall platinum blonde told her. "I wouldn't let myself get so run down around him if it was me."

"Thanks," Heather said through clenched teeth. All she needed was advice from some woman who had probably majored in cheerleading and minored in making other women suffer.

"It's all right. And I've never seen such a bad color job. Want me to give you the name of a decent hairdresser?"

Heather shook her head. "I don't think I'd want anything that brassy, myself."

"Ooh, catty. I was trying to help."

"Yeah, right." Trying to help herself to Jack was more like it.

"Darling, are you almost finished?" Jack's voice sounded through the door.

"Almost," she called back sparing a wicked smile to the blonde.

"A couple of them walked in and looked around," Jack told her when she emerged.

"I don't suppose they mentioned their address and phone number."

"I overhear them saying that they thought this was a waste of time, and that Jones is in trouble with the big bosses."

"They were just talking about it in public?"

"I guess they didn't think anyone here could understand Arabic."

She nodded. She had to get out of the habit of underestimating Jack. It figured that a CIA agent would have some language skills. "Does that help us?"

He shrugged. "My college professors always told me that knowledge is good. I can't see how this one will help us but who knows?"

"So what's next?"

"I figure they'll head for Connecticut Avenue. I'll head for Dupont Circle and you can go north and see if they go that way."

"Right."

"Only one thing."

Something in his tone made her turn toward him. "What's that."

"Take care of yourself." Before she could react, he put his hand behind her head, pulled her to her, and kissed her so hard that her lips kept tingling even after he pulled away.

"You too," she finally said, glad that her voice didn't completely betray her rampant emotions.

* * * *

Jack meandered toward Dupont Circle, window shopping at the stores that seemed to feature European style suits that a man wouldn't be caught dead in and leather goods that a man could only fantasize actually talking a woman into wearing.

A couple of women caught his eye and smiled but he shook his head. It was a good sign though. Wherever prostitutes appear, taxis are close behind. With luck he might actually be able to do better than just note the direction the van went.

A large truck hid the van as it drove by, its headlights on dim and its tail lights strangely darkened.

Fortunately for him, the van stayed on the circle three quarters of the way around. Still, by the time he caught a cabby's attention, it had vanished into the night.

"Go north on Connecticut," he told the driver wearily. "I'm looking for a woman with dark hair and--"

"Hey, don't mess with these girls on the street," the driver urged. "If you're lonely, I know a place you can go. Meet some girls won't rip you off."

"Just drive north," Jack repeated. "I'll tell you when to stop."

The driver muttered something about people who don't know what's good for them but followed Jack's instructions.

Jack decided he'd be better off paying attention to what was going on outside the cab than listening to the driver.

Heather seemed to blend in with the surroundings. Unfortunately, those surroundings were women of the night and Heather seemed to be attracting her share of attention, mostly from hookers concerned that she had intruded into their space.

"Over here," Jack called.

Heather gave a little wave to her competition and sashayed to the cab. "Want a date, sailor?"

He opened the door. "Let's get out of here."

"Where to?" the driver asked as Heather got in.

Jack frowned. "Is there anyplace affordable around here?"

"Ask her. She's probably got a place where she gets a kickback."

"I'm asking you."

The cabby snarled but put the taxi in gear. "Tell them that Bernie brought you and they'll give you ten percent off," he told them as he pulled up in front of what looked like an apartment building rather than a motel.

Jack noticed that the driver had managed to find a place right outside the pickup zone so he could jack up his fare. He decided that now was not the time to quibble. For once, Heather seemed to agree.

"You're sure we can stay here?" she asked.

"Sure, sure," the driver replied. "They always seem to have room."

Jack looked at his watch, surprised to see that it was only two in the morning. Years before, he had gone fifty straight hours in a job in Afghanistan. He didn't remember feeling nearly as tired then as he did now. Maybe he was getting old.

After paying the driver, he and Heather entered the building.

Evidently the driver had steered them straight in this dimension, at least. A man sat at a desk in front of a pegboard covered with keys.

"Twelve dollars an hour," the woman said.

"How much for a night?"

The woman raised her eyebrows. "There going to be other women or just the two of you?"

"Just the two of us."

"Right. Fifty dollars."

"Forty," he argued. The ten dollars didn't matter, but the woman was likely to get suspicious if he was too willing to pay. The only way a place like this could stay in business was with at least tacit support from the police. In exchange for that support, the police would expect a report on anything that looked suspicious.

"Forty-five."

He frowned, but dug into his pocket and paid the woman.

Heather stumbled as she stepped into the room, then headed for the shower. "If I'm not out in an hour, wake me up," she told him.

He gave the room as careful a search as he could without any equipment, looking for any bugs or hidden cameras. Just because he didn't find anything didn't mean they weren't there. It could mean this place was a lot more important than it looked.

"I'm coming in," he called.

"About time," Heather answered.

That sounded like one hell of an invitation so he popped open the door and stepped into the steamy bathroom. To find Heather tragically decent. Even though she'd left the shower on, she had wrapped a towel around her hair and another around her body.

"If we speak softly, we won't be overheard," she told him.

"They have equipment that can electronically remove the sound of the shower."

"They aren't going to use that on every room in every two bit hooker hotel in the city. So what are we going to do next?"

"I was thinking about sleeping for a week," he answered. "But first, I wanted to try this."

After the day they'd been through, he wasn't certain how Heather would react to his touch. They'd spent the day running from one threat or another and neither of them had really been able to find a moment alone to think about what last night's lovemaking had meant, whether it was just a reaction to danger or something real. Certainly things felt real to him.

Her lips met his and she wrapped her arms around him. Then she pushed gently away. "If you expect me to kiss you, you'd better shower."

"Hey, you're pretty tough for a pacifist," he said.

She gave him a funny look. "I know you're kidding, but I suspect you really think that."

He stopped. Despite himself, Heather's foibles, her vegetarianism and pacifism had let her categorize her. She always seemed to surprise him partly because she really was a surprising person, but also partly because he had allowed his reactions to her beliefs cloud his judgment.

"You caught me," he admitted. "So often I'm stuck having to make decisions at a moments notice on totally incomplete knowledge. I've done that with you even when I didn't have to."

Heather waved aside his apology. "It's no big deal."

"It is, though. We aren't going to be able to pull this thing off if we don't put everything we have into it. One thing I should bring is unimpaired judgment."

"Now there's an impossible dream."

She seemed totally comfortable talking to him while wearing nothing but a damp towel that seemed suspended as much by simply sticking to her wet skin as by the loose knot at the top. Jack decided to follow Heather's advise and take that shower. He'd make it a cold one.

"Would you mind helping me with my hair?" Heather asked as he stepped out and wrapped the last, too-small, towel around his midsection.

"What's the problem?" Other than looking wet, with the sprayed in red and black washed out, her hair looked totally normal to him.

"Sometimes I wonder whether guys really are a different species. My hair is a wreck. I can't even get a comb through it."

He took the comb from her and started in.

Heather drifted between sleep and waking. Jack's strong hands and gentle touch gave her a peaceful feeling that she craved more than anything in the world. Certainly her parents had done their best for her, but their circumstances left them dependent on her for protection as much as they were able to protect them. Even before she had started school, she had known to watch every word, every gesture. Jack made her feel that she could be herself, that she could say or do whatever she wanted. Jack would protect her.

His hand trembled slightly as it rested against her cheek and she realized how hard it must be for him to resist the obvious desire that he felt for her and simply touch her.

She didn't intend to be a tease, but right now she needed his comfort more than she needed his desire. She ignored her own body's response to him, concentrating on the warm feelings of caring and cherishing that washed from him to her and, she hoped, back again to him.

"That should do it," she finally admitted, many minutes after he'd untangled the last snarl.

"Now what?" he asked, his voice husky with a desire he couldn't suppress.

"Now we sleep," she told him. Much though she wanted to make love to him, she needed to be sure that she wasn't just responding to his nearness and the dangers that they'd escaped. She had come to care for him as a person and wanted to protect him from what she knew she eventually must admit to him. More complications, more physical involvement, would only make things more difficult.

"Sleep?" he repeated, making it a question.

"You know, when you lay still and nothing happens."

"Oh, sleep." Jack sounded sad but not surprised.

She took his hand and led him to the lone bed, a double, that filled most of the tiny bedroom.

The mattress was lumpy and sagged like a hammock when she sat on it. It was the most comfortable thing she'd ever experienced.

"And I paid good money for this," Jack complained.

"Tell me about it in the morning," Heather told him, rolling over so her back was to him.

Jack took her advice. In less than a minute, the sound of his soft breathing informed her that he had drifted to sleep.

Heather needed sleep so badly she couldn't find it.

Jack shifted in his sleep, one of his arms curling over her, his hand gently pushing aside the towel she still wore and seizing one of her breasts. He gave a sigh of satisfaction, then breathed deeply again.

Obviously he was having pleasant dreams because she felt the growing hardness of his arousal press against her hips.

Finally she drifted off to sleep--and dreamed of making love to Jack.

* * * *

When she awakened the next morning, she had lost all will to resist. His whole body cupped hers and his arm, casually slipped between her own arm and her body, brushed against her breasts. Right then, if Jack had even hinted, she would have jumped his bones. She couldn't even decide whether to be relieved or angered when he stepped directly into the shower.

He had left the bathroom door slightly ajar, probably because the warped wood wouldn't close all the way, but no clouds of steam emerged. She enjoyed a grin. If he had to take another cold shower, he wasn't finding this any easier than she was.

She picked up the comb where he'd left it and ran it through her hair.

Her body tingled from where Jack had touched her as they slept, her breasts felt swollen from where he'd caressed it.

The sound of the shower cut off abruptly, Jack's curses indicating that the sudden stop wasn't his idea.

"What's the problem?"

"We're out of water."

He emerged from the bathroom, lather still dripping from his soaking body that his thin towel barely covered and glared at yesterday's clothing.

"If we can find something to change into, we will. But we've got to get going. I have a feeling that today is our last chance," she told him.

"You mean because it's Sunday?"

"They'll want to unleash their sabotage on a Monday. That will give the longest period before a weekend when most business shuts down anyway."

He nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. At least I was while the water lasted."

"Just as well I got cleaned up last night," she told him. "Not that a long soak doesn't sound good right now."

The fire in his eyes indicated that his idea of Heather in the shower involved a lot more than just a long soak.

He grabbed his T-shirt and shorts and headed back to the bathroom leaving her a few minutes of privacy to put on her own overused jeans and top.

"You look perfect," Jack told her when he emerged a few minutes later.

"I take it that means you have a plan."

He laughed. "I'm beginning to regret ever telling you that I can always come up with a plan. It's coming back to haunt me a few times too many."

"Come on," she coaxed. "Let's hear it."

"Are you sure you don't want to play it by ear?"

Heather shuddered against her will. Too much of her life had been running without a plan as her parents pinballed from safe house to safe house without any concept of where they would end up or how they could stop running eventually. "I think I'd better hear it."

"I don't suppose you want to tell me what's going on in your head?" he asked softly. Obviously he'd seen her instinctive reaction.

"I'm just the kind of person who likes to know who's going to be shooting at me from what angle," she told him.

"Sure." He didn't look like he believed she was telling the whole truth, but he also didn't look like he'd push it. "All right, then, here's the plan. Step one, we change our look again. Odds are, Fred blew our disguises. Step two, we find the van we spotted last night. There isn't much off street parking around here so I'm betting that we'll find it in a parking structure. Step three, we survey whatever places the van is near. Step four, we call for help."

"I have a problem with step four." Last time Jack had called for anything, the shit had hit the fan and it was still flying.

He shrugged again. "I have to admit the plan breaks down a little. Still, I'm not going to try another James Bond stunt and do it all myself--" he held out a hand to cut off her objection, "even with your assistance."

"Why don't we change step four to just figuring out what to do about next, once we find the van?"

"I was thinking about putting it more like that but I didn't know whether that would meet your definition of a plan."

"It doesn't. Now let's go."

Sometime during the previous twenty-four hours, they had slipped into a camaraderie that was deeper and more meaningful than any of the relationships Heather had ever been in before, even though they had barely exchanged a kiss since the previous night when they'd made love.

Going back on the run would be worse than ever, she knew, when she remembered this brief interlude of an incredibly special relationship. She almost wanted to forget everything. There were other agents, after all. Surely someone else was working on the case. After all of the news about hackers and viruses, the information systems establishments of the large companies targeted by the terrorists should have implemented firewalls that would protect at least their core systems.

Only none of that mattered. She couldn't let Jack rescue her parents. They'd face the death penalty for the stupid kids' prank committed almost thirty years before. Equally, she realized, it wouldn't work. Jack could hardly continue a woman who would use their relationship to keep him from doing his job.

They headed out of the building dropping off their key at the front desk and headed for Dupont Circle.

* * * *

"We'll change twice," Jack told her.

"Right," she agreed. As a private investigator, she had only rarely gotten into a situation where she couldn't just go back to whatever base she had created and change costumes or regroup. Jack, on the other hand, must have spent plenty of time in unfriendly areas. Multiple clothing changes were probably helpful in throwing off the scent if anyone was continuing the search they'd abandoned the previous night.

He found a dime store and picked out a pair of painters pants and a polo shirt for himself and an incredibly ugly dress for her.

"You don't seriously expect me to wear this?"

"It's only the start," he said. "Next stop, we go all out."

She didn't like the sound of that and looked around to see if she could find shoes that would keep the outfit from becoming a total disaster. Before she had any luck, Jack thrust a pair of clunky white pumps at her.

"I've never worn anything that ugly," she complained.

"Do you think I want to wear these?"

She figured he would look like a rather handsome and well built preppy in his polo shirt so she didn't understand what he was complaining about but she'd agreed to his plan so she might as well go along with him.

He grabbed a can of brown hair spray and a package of disposable razors as he headed for the cash register.

"Should we buy any tools?" she asked.

"I already told you I don't plan on going in myself."

She scooped up a couple of cans of Mace and added them to his collection, letting him pretend to ignore them. She'd lived through enough of Jack's plans, barely, to realize that betting on the contingencies was taking the safe gamble.

He tossed a couple of packages of donuts on top of the pile and paid out of the stack of bills Fred had given him.

"We won't have time to sit down and eat," he explained when they left the store, loot in hand.

"I've eaten worse on stakeouts," she told him reaching for one of the donut packages.

"I don't suppose you're interested in coconut?" he asked.

"Chocolate."

"Damn."

He handed over the package of chocolate donuts with such a pitiful look that Heather couldn't help herself. "I'll go halves with you."

"Thanks."

He wolfed down his donuts like a, well, like a wolf, she decided. Like a predator over his kill, enjoying what he had while still keeping an eye out for any potential danger or anything that promised better fare than what he had.

They changed in a bookstore and he handed her both her clothes and the can of hair coloring.

"I thought you were going to change your hair," she told him.

"I wish," he muttered.

She stuffed her jeans and top in the trash, covering the lot with a couple of paper towels so no curious eyes would see anything suspicious. Then, after looking under the stalls to make sure no one would come out at the wrong time, she closed her eyes and let loose with the brown spray—on top of the red and black she'd put on earlier. She'd be lucky if her hair didn't just quit and fall out before this mess was over.

Her hairdresser, she decided as she studied the effect in the mirror, would never forgive her for what she was doing to her hair. Still, the coloring looked natural enough, at least compared to the garish, if muddy red it had been before.

Unfortunately, the shade Jack had selected could only be termed mousy.

Still, she poofed her hair out as much as she could and decided that she didn't look terrible.

"That won't do," Jack's voice behind her said as she emerged from the rest room.

She started to turn but felt Jack's hands on her back. He pulled her hair back and used rubber bands to knot it into pig tails.

"Nobody wears pig tails."

"Shut your eyes."

She obeyed and he turned her around, then started dabbing at her face with what felt like makeup.

"What, are you my makeup consultant now?"

"Don't move," he coached, finishing his hurried job.

He pushed her forward, then, "Open your eyes."

She didn't recognize either of the two people she saw in the mirror.

Chapter 11

The woman in the mirror opened her mouth at the same time as Heather, confirming her worst suspicions.

"What in the world are we supposed to be?"

With her pony tails and the makeup job Jack had applied, she looked like a college girl from a school that had never bothered to leave the nineteen fifties. Jack had given himself a crew cut and looked like a football player from the same era.

"We aren't completely there yet, but the look is your basic religious-kids-on-mission."

"Where'd you come up with that bizarre idea?"

"Shoot, you see them everywhere in the world. No matter how bad the neighborhood, no one thinks it odd to see a couple of kids on mission."

"I don't know if anyone has mentioned it to you lately, but it's been a few years since I was college age."

"People never look at kids on mission. If they look them in the eye, they're afraid they might get converted."

It made as much sense as anything had lately.

In fifteen minutes, Jack found a store that seemed to make a living selling outfits for nerds, a sort of so out its cool type of place, and he selected himself a pair of straight legged slacks, a thin leather belt, white socks, clunky wingtips, and a white shirt.

"No tie?" she asked.

"Huh-uh, but I'll button the shirt up all the way," he answered.

He replaced her already clunky shoes with penny loafers and knee socks, but left her in the boring dress.

"Satisfied?" she asked, as she stepped out of the gas station.

"Not quite." He handed her a black leather-bound book.

"What the heck is this?"

"Actually it's a dictionary. Don't let anyone look at it and we'll pass it off as a Bible."

"Right." If she could pretend to be a door-to-door makeup saleswoman to serve papers, she could play Jack's angle too.

"And I have these." He pointed at two of the most ancient looking ten speeds she'd ever seen.

"Where did you turn those treasures up?"

"I rented them for the day. Don't complain: they definitely fit the image."

"How am I supposed to ride wearing this?" she asked gesturing at her dress.

"The girls model is for you." He lifted a bike on each shoulder and headed toward the M Street.

She trailed, wondering whether anyone would buy his nerd act. The funky white shirt didn't hide his broad shoulders or the solid bulges of his muscles under it. His unlined face could have belonged to the college jock he was pretending to be, but his eyes held too many memories of ancient pain to belong.

He handed her bike over to her, mounted his in a smooth motion, and headed back toward Dupont Circle.

Heather wobbled after him wondering when she had last ridden a bike. The most recent memory she could dredge up involved training wheels. The results had been ugly.

Jack suffered from no such limitations. He pedaled steadily, somehow not leaving her behind no matter how slowly she followed.

As they rode, the neighborhood transformed from the highly renovated and gentrified neighborhood around Dupont Circle to cheaply thrown up housing build during World War II and not extensively repaired since then.

"I'm open to suggestions," he told her.

"How many programmers does your agency think they'd need to pull something like this off?"

"Even a couple could do a lot of damage."

"They don't want to do a lot of damage. They want to shut down the economy. The CIA is supposed to be good at looking at contingency plans. How many programmers do they think they'd need to do the job?"

That was need-to-know, of course. He decided that Heather had a plenty valid need to know right now. "At least fifty, working for an average of two months."

"I started getting calls about six months ago so let's assume that they started small and grew. They'd have to have at least seventy-five now with any type of growth curve, even with the extra time."

His agency had calculated something along those lines but management had rejected the possibility that such a large operation could be kept secret.

Heather dismissed that conclusion when he shared it with her. "Keeping it secret wouldn't be that hard. Lots of programmers are here on student visas anyway, and they're a pretty migratory bunch. No one would think twice if a group of them vanished."

"All right. So we're looking for a place big enough for seventy-five or so programmers."

"And at least twenty guards," she added.

"I was going to say thirty. The only one I've seen twice so far is Smith."

"Let's say a hundred people in all. That's a lot of people, a lot of food, and a fair amount of space."

“Maybe they’re scattered all over the world. Sort of virtual terrorists.”

She considered, then shook her head. “It could work, but security would be a nightmare. I think they’ll want to keep their eggs in one basket and watch the heck out of that basket.”

Jack looked at the low density housing they were riding through. “It’s a sure bet they wouldn’t spread out over a neighborhood like this. There’s no way they could keep the programmers from talking.”

He picked up the pace.

Once Heather retrieved her balance from her long forgotten youth, she found she actually enjoyed bicycling through Washington. She banished a stray thought that, under different circumstances, this type of an outing could almost be termed a date. Circumstances weren’t different. Despite the passion they had shared, she and Jack could never date, never spend purely social hours together. Why couldn’t he have been a plumber or something instead of a government spook?

Jack grinned at her. “We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

She gritted her teeth and pedaled harder. “I can keep up.”

Despite her words, she knew that Jack was holding back for her. As a PI, she felt she owed it to her clients to keep herself in shape. Still, bicycling seemed to hit muscles that her normal workout routine ignored. If she was lucky enough to survive the day, she might regret it when she got up tomorrow.

* * * *

Jack thought Heather made a pretty good missionary. He hadn't expected her to complain. She'd die first. Still, she was doing a good job keeping up with him even though he bicycled a couple of times a week.

He should have uglified her up a little, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to do so. Now, though, the exercise was bringing color to her face, making her look ever more wholesome, but just a little too sensual for a supposed missionary.

"That one's a possibility." She pointed at an abandoned strip shopping center. Build in the death throes of the Savings and Loan Industry, these shopping centers seemed to litter America like pigeon droppings litter New York's Central Park.

"Remember the cross streets," he told her. "I don't want to break into anything until we're sure we've checked all the likely spots."

Minutes later, they spotted an ideal situation. The city had bought up an entire city block of row houses, then typically ran out of money before they were able to do whatever they intended with the property. The houses sat, boarded up and taped off. Yet as they passed, they saw clear signs that someone had taken up residency in the condemned buildings--piles of smashed beer bottles underneath the open windows.

"That's a second possibility," Heather commented.

"The beer bottles surprise me. Drinking is against the Moslem religion."

"It certainly isn't against programmers religion. Now if we found a few thousand empty pizza boxes, we'd know it was them for certain."

They rounded the complex but didn't see any more definite signs of life and certainly no mountain of pizza cartons.

"You think that's it?" Heather asked.

He looked upward at one of the ugliest buildings he'd ever seen outside the old Soviet Union.

It towered at least fifteen stories tall, making it the largest building in the neighborhood and one of the highest in the city where traditionally no structure can rise above the Capitol building.

"Do you have any idea what this is?" he asked.

"I know exactly what it is. I've had to serve papers here."

"I'll bite."

"It's a housing project."

"I should have guessed. Only governments can build this ugly."

"It's a third possibility," she told him.

"Wouldn't the administrators make sure that only legal residents live here?"

Heather laughed. "You're kidding, right? These places are regularly taken over by gangs and drug dealers. And that was before the government cutbacks."

"All right, it's a third possibility," Jack admitted against his will. Still, it was difficult to believe that terrorists could take over an inhabited building without anyone noticing.

Another half hour of pedaling through the streets of Northwest Washington didn't yield any more possibilities.

"Let's do some detecting," he suggested.

"Great." Her face lit up like he'd told her it was Christmas. "Let's start at that boarded up block of row houses. It should be the easiest."

She pushed herself a little harder, getting some velocity out of that ancient ten-speed. Already she looked like she'd ridden all of her life.

* * * *

Heather felt like she'd been riding forever. She had to force herself to keep pedaling because her legs shook so hard she didn't know whether she'd be able to stand up if she stopped. Jack, of course, looked as fresh as he had that morning. Despite the heat, he hardly even seemed to be sweating. She didn't think he was breathing hard, although she couldn't hear much over the roar of her own pulse in her head.

She'd suggested the row houses because they were closest rather than for any detective reasons and felt a little guilty about it. Still, although Jack seemed enamored about the shopping center, she didn't think Jones and company would have

set yesterday's trap in something so similar to where they actually headquartered.

The row houses really were the best guess.

Jack rang the little bell on his bike and she looked to see what was happening. Somehow they had arrived while she concentrated on how miserable she was.

"Remember, lots of smiling and a breathy excitement about how you are saving the world," Jack told her.

"Sure. And I'll wave the dictionary. Who knows, we may find someone who needs spelling help." She could manage breathy and that would have to do. Woman's style bikes made it possible to ride in a dress: they certainly didn't make it comfortable.

Jack led the way to a Cape Cod style brick house across the street from the boarded up row houses and locked their bikes to a light post. "We'll start with the neighbors."

He waited for her, cleverly not saying anything about how slowly she was moving or about the fact that her smile probably wasn't the world's most convincing.

She reminded herself of Jack's smooth assurance that no one paid any attention to missionaries. What if they ran into someone who really wanted to talk about religion? Everything she knew about being a missionary had been scanned from magazines she'd read in the dentist's office. If only she'd had a few more cavities she might have a fighting chance.

No one answered at the first home and they trudged to the next, then the next. Finally, just as Heather had decided that the entire world was at work, a woman opened her door a couple of inches and peered at them.

"I'm not buying anything," she assured them.

"That's good," Jack told her. "Because we're giving, not taking."

Heather tuned up her smile a little. Normally she was as good with the gab as the next person. Normally she hadn't been killing herself on a chain driven torture machine.

"Yeah, sure. Lot's of people come knocking door to door and then give things away."

"What we're giving away is much better than mere things."

The woman glared at him.

Jack shifted his weight slightly, somehow making himself look a little smaller and less threatening. Like a grown-up teddy bear, Heather thought. No woman, not even a suspicious woman like the one they faced, could resist him.

"This looks like a wonderful neighborhood." Jack's gesture took in the entire surroundings.

"Yeah. It used to be. Then the city moved in. They were going to build some sort of recreation center across the street, then they ran out of money. Typical."

"Does it cause many problems? We're thinking about moving nearby to set up our mission. A dangerous neighborhood wouldn't bother me. Still, I've got to be responsible for Heather."

"Get a few homeless people coming and going, I guess."

For the next ten minutes, Jack put on an impressive display of interviewing technique, uncovering a dozen facts about the neighborhood that Heather was certain the woman didn't know she was revealing. If he ever went into the detective business, she would have a tough competitor, she decided, wondering if he could be the only effective member of America's insanely inefficient CIA.

Unfortunately, despite all Jack's skills, all he learned about the buildings across the street was that she hadn't noticed any 'foreigns' in the complex. Or anyone else except a few government inspectors.

"Bless you for sharing your time with us," Heather told her as they left.

"Now you all come back and visit me after you're settled in," the woman told them. "I like to think I'm as religious as the next body, but it never hurts to have someone to put in a good word upstairs, does it?"

"Indeed it does not," Jack agreed.

He seemed to slide into a disguise naturally. Heather had always enjoyed that part of being a detective, but for her it was work. She had to profile her new

character, what they would say or do in common circumstances. Jack would change his personality as easily as a couch potato would change a channel.

"That doesn't look likely," she told him after the woman shut the door.

"No," Jack agreed. "We can come back to it if we have to. For now, though, let's see if we can cross off the housing project." He mounted his bike.

When they reached the project, Jack secured their bikes to a cast iron fence and held the doorway open for her.

The entire project smelled of disinfectant, stale cigarettes--both tobacco and otherwise--and sweat.

Jack and Heather went up and down the hallways knocking on doors.

Blaring music and TVs indicated that someone was at home; no one seemed inclined to answer their knock.

They were about to climb to the second floor when a large man dressed in baggy jeans and an African print shirt stepped out into the hallway and confronted them.

"You with the government?" he demanded.

Heather stared at his gang tattoo, then shook her head. "I try never to have anything to do with the government," she told him honestly. These last few days with Jack were an aberration. An aberration soon to end.

"We're sharing the good news," Jack told the man. "Have you given serious thought to the state of your soul?" His voice was so earnest that Heather almost fell for it herself.

"My soul is fine. I'm just wondering whether your soul might be planning on making an early detour." He stepped closer, until his face was only inches from Jack's.

Heather knew that Jack could take care of himself under normal circumstances. Still, the man was pretty clearly a member of a gang. They might never make it out of the building if Jack offended him.

Before she could interrupt, Jack answered him.

"You don't sound very happy with your sinful life, brother."

"You're right about the sinful part. So sinful I don't really think beating the crap out of two kids is going to add much when judgment day rolls around."

"It's coming sooner than you think," Jack told him.

For once, Jack was telling the truth. If they didn't find the terrorists, the entire country could find itself in a world of hurt.

"I'll worry about that when it happens."

"Even though you may feel alone, you should know that someone cares," Jack explained, his voice painfully earnest.

"You've never lived in a project if you think feeling alone is a problem. We're knee deep in people here."

"Why is that?" Heather broke in.

"You let her lip off like that?" the man asked Jack, not even bothering to look at Heather.

"Any mouth can testify the truth," Jack told him. "Even a woman's."

"I don't believe this." The man turned to leave.

"Has anything strange been going on here?" Jack probed. He dropped his sweet boy on missionary voice and used one that their new friend might have heard a thousand times--the voice of authority.

"Who are you guys anyway?" He spun back around and looked at Jack closely. Then he laughed. "Sometimes I get a little paranoid. I'll tell you, lot's been going on. The key is that the Reds have taken over here. Things should get better now."

"I beg your pardon," Heather interjected.

The man ignored her.

"Reds?" Jack asked.

"You know, the gang I'm in. Why do you think I'm wasting my time with you. I'm supposed to figure out what you are doing. The gang doesn't like strangers walking in and disrupting business."

"So you haven't got a lot of strangers?"

This time the man actually looked at Heather. "Of course we get strangers. We're running a business here. And a couple of whites who look like they were pulled right off the police academy line aren't helping business."

"I think we should take this nice man's hint," Heather told Jack. They weren't going to get a lot more out of him and pretty clearly he was the only person they were allowed to speak to.

"What's your name, brother?" Jack asked.

"Around here they call me Razor," the man replied. "But you ain't no brother of mine."

"Think about the good news, then Razor."

"I hear some, I'll think about it," Razor told them. He held up his hand to forestall Jack's response. "Don't give me any more of this sin stuff. I heard it all my life and it hasn't done me a lick of good."

Heather grasped Jack by the arm and physically dragged him from the project.

Outside, broken chains lay where they had left their bikes.

"Now what?" Heather asked.

Jack wasn't surprised that the bikes hadn't survived the visit to the project. They were another casualty of this mess.

"I'll have to deliver the bad news to the rental guy," he said. "Any suggestions on what we do next?"

"We could catch a cab."

Jack laughed. Even though Heather lived in Washington, she didn't seem to have a concept of what this type of place meant. The chances of catching a taxi this near a housing project were zero.

"Now we walk," he told her.

Heather was limping by the time they reached the strip mall. He had selected her shoes for the disguise value rather than for comfort and poor Heather had to pay the price.

It was, he decided, an apt metaphor for this entire experience. Why hadn't he sent Heather to someplace safe when he had the chance? That first night, before the crap really hit the fan, he could have dropped her at a CIA safe house.

His feelings toward Heather bounced around like a pinball. She was one of the best partners he'd ever had and she'd saved his life. Yet, even though he'd worked with female partners before, he felt more protective of Heather than he had with them. Of course she didn't have the benefit of agency training, nor was she being paid to put her life at risk.

He headed toward a gas station kitty-corner from the strip mall. While Heather tried to repair her feet in the rest room, he bought a couple of sandwiches and sodas. One thing for sure, he hadn't gained any weight over the past few days.

Heather returned, took one look at the sandwich, and pushed it back to him.

"Vegetarian, remember?"

That limited her choices. On the bright side, he wouldn't have any problems managing the second sandwich himself. He was starved after a day on bicycles.

"Any place good to eat around here?" Heather asked the service station manager.

The man cowered behind his Plexiglas shield, looking as if no one had ever spoken civilly to him before. "No," he finally rasped out.

"There's got to be someplace," she continued.

"You don't like what I've got, get lost," the man told her.

"That shopping mall across the way," she waved vaguely in its direction, "it have anyplace I can get something a little healthy?"

Jack wouldn't have undertaken the questioning this way, but it seemed effective. The attendant was getting positively riled. If she could get him angry enough, he just might tell her things he wouldn't normally say just to prove how wrong she could be.

"You hard of hearing or something," her nemesis ground out. "I tell you, there's no place."

"I saw a place there that said it has a Chinese buffet."

"Look, lady. That mall is closed. I mean everything."

"That's hard to believe. One or two stores may go out of business but not an entire shopping center."

"You think I'm crazy, look out the window."

Heather walked to the window and stared out. "There are cars in the lot," she announced.

"Get a grip, lady. Those cars all have for sale signs on them. People use vacant parking lots to sell their cars."

"I'd think it a place like this be a good location."

"You'd think wrong. As soon as I turn sixty-five, I shut down this service station and there's nothing left."

"I can't believe all those buildings going to waste. Maybe people could use them for office space or club meetings."

"Maybe, lady. And maybe I'll win the lottery. Except I won't and they don't. No one wants to come here. It's not close enough to downtown and it's not out in the suburbs."

"I'll bet people use the buildings for something, though. Come on, tell me you haven't seen lights on over there at night when no one was supposed to be there."

"All right, I'll tell you. I see lights all the time. Flashing lights when the police check it out. Any more, they're there every night. Ever since a couple of fires got

started there a few months ago. Now if you don't want anything, why don't you get out of here?"

It would have taken Jack twice as long to get the same information from the man and even then, he would have had to double-check. Heather had twisted the attendant around her finger, ending up with exactly what she needed while making him feel like the big winner. Jack could get used to a woman like this.

Sometime over the past day, he had stopped thinking of Heather as purely part of the case and started thinking of her as someone he wanted to be part of his life after it was over. In fact, for the first time, he let himself consider the possibility winning back his overseas job might be a mixed blessing. He didn't want a boring desk job here, but he didn't want to be ten thousand miles away from Heather either.

Heather gave the man a sweet smile. "I'll take a Snickers."

Jack would have to remember Heather's look. If she ever tried it on him, he'd know to count his fingers to make sure they were all still attached.

He paid for Heather's Snickers bar and led her across the street.

"I think we struck out here," Heather assured him. "He really dragged my nose in the fact that no one could use this place."

"Right. But I thought we'd check out the cars. Being without transportation makes me feel naked."

"We wouldn't want that, would we?" She looked him up and down, then licked her lips suggestively.

Why couldn't this whole thing end and let him sneak away for a couple of months of vacation with Heather?

He found a pay phone and called the phone numbers posted on the cars until he got an answer he could live with. The owner could be there in ten minutes, keys and all.

Twenty minutes later, Jack was the proud owner of a broken down taxi.

Heather looked at the sky and he followed her gaze.

The sun had faded into a red fireball through the Washington haze.

"I guess that's it," she told him.

"You're not giving up," he said. He couldn't reconcile what he knew of Heather with the idea that she'd surrender, no matter what the odds.

"We might as well drive around and see what we can find," she answered.

"But it's too late. By this time tomorrow, my parents will be dead."

Jack was never certain whether he could really remember his father, or whether all he had was false memories created by looking at the few pictures he had of himself and his father. Strangely, he felt that he could understand Heather's sense of loss more because of what he had lost, and how it had affected his life, than if he had always enjoyed a 'normal' upbringing.

"Don't give up," he told her.

"Your idea sounded so logical. I was certain we'd find something. As it is, we've done everything, checked everything. It's completely impossible."

The word 'impossible' clicked a long buried memory and Jack worried at it until it came clear.

"That's it," he shouted.

Heather jumped like she'd been bitten by a snake.

"What?"

"Remember what Sherlock Holmes said?"

Chapter 12

"Sherlock Holmes? I'll admit I'm not tracking," Heather said.

Jack had almost given her a heart attack with his shout and now he was talking about hundred year old fiction. Her taste in mystery ran more toward V.I.

Warshawski and Kinsey Malone than Sherlock Holmes anyway.

"I'm not sure if I've got it exactly right, but he said that if you eliminate the impossible, what remains, however unlikely, must be true."

"I guess that's why I never liked Sherlock Holmes much. Eliminate the impossible and almost everything remains. It's not very useful advice to a practicing detective."

"Maybe not usually," Jack said. Her words hadn't put a damper on his enthusiasm. "In this case, though, I think Sherlock is the answer."

"I'll bite. What does Holmes tell us?"

Jack turned north onto Twenty-second Street. "Last night, the terrorists showed up only minutes from the call.

It's impossible for them to be outside the area we checked."

"Maybe." She wasn't sure where this was going, but she wanted to believe in him, no matter where he drew his inspiration.

"And the only places that a group large enough to do any damage could hide in were the strip shopping mall, the housing project, and the block of condemned housing."

"I'm listening."

"The man who worked the gas station and the woman in her house had both been watching for a long time. But our friend back there said his gang had only recently taken up residency in the project."

"So, eliminating the others as impossible, that leaves the housing project."

"Exactly." He pulled up in front of it.

She couldn't fault his logic. Couldn't, or didn't want to. He might be wrong, but if he was, they didn't have a chance. And she wasn't prepared to believe that her parents were dead until she had seen it with her own eyes.

"Then what are we waiting for?" She opened her door and swung her legs out.

"Let's not get carried away," he grasped her arm and tugged her back into the cab. "We've got to come up with a plan."

"I was sure you already had one."

Jack looked aggrieved. "I do have an idea; I thought you might want to put in your two cents worth."

"All right," she sighed. "Let's hear it. If it involves any stupid heroics on your part while I sit out here in the car, though, you can just forget it."

Jack looked uncomfortably like he had planned on suggesting just such a plan. Heather appreciated his concern for her safety, but she was having a hard time getting through to him that she didn't care about her safety. She cared about getting her parents out alive and safe. If Jack died trying to do her job while she did nothing, she would never forgive herself.

"See, I told you you'd want to contribute to the plan." He smiled as he said it. Maybe he was learning.

"I propose that we go in together and see what we can find. They'll have to be concentrated somewhere. My guess is they'll take over an entire floor. If we can find out where they are, we can call in the police and stay back." And during the excitement of a police raid on a major housing project, she and her parents would be able to slip away. After all, the police weren't going to be looking for her.

She told herself that even Jack's supervisors wouldn't be too hard on him if she and her parents slipped through their fingers. Eventually they would connect her parents' fingerprints with their supposed crime, but Jack would already be a hero for what he had done to stop the terrorists. He'd find himself a woman who could appreciate his positive qualities and forget about her.

The idea wasn't as comforting as it should have been. She knew she'd never find a man to replace him in her heart. Still, blood had to be thicker than water. No matter how much she loved Jack, her parents had brought her into the world. They were her responsibility now, and Jack had proven able to take care of himself.

"That isn't much of a plan," Jack told her.

"You don't think it will work?"

"I mean, it's not detailed enough. We need to plan our escape routes, contingency meeting places, and fallback sites."

The last thing she needed was to tell Jack her escape route. "We'll have to play it by ear," she said.

Finally Jack nodded. "We can plan the rest after we find them, while we wait for the police."

"If we find them," she added under her breath. But they had to find her parents.

Jack pulled up to a Radio Shack and led her to the back where they keep their electronic components.

"How does this fit into the plan?" Heather asked.

"I thought we'd test the telephone drop cables. At least we could get an idea of which floor they're on."

"Let me," she told him. She snatched up a test box and butt set. Spending two hours assembling what they could buy didn't make a lot of sense.

Jack looked slightly peeved. "I keep forgetting where I am. In most of the countries where I've worked, you could get arrested for trying to buy that type of equipment.

He paid for the tools and they headed back toward the cab.

"I don't think our friend Razor is going to be too happy when we come back," Heather told Jack.

"Let's worry about that when the time comes. Maybe he'll be off duty by now." Jack's plans seemed more and more like desperate leaps. Still, he didn't show any signs of backing down.

He pulled past the project, then left the cab in the parking lot of a fried chicken restaurant.

"Here goes nothing," he told her. He grabbed a pen from the visor and scribbled down a phone number. "If something happens to me, first dial 911, then dial this number. Don't let the police keep you on the 911 line. They'll try if they think you're up to something."

"You want me to call the CIA?" Even the thought sent a shiver down her spine.

"You've been working with me for days now. You should be able to trust me by now."

Except she had fallen in love with him. She didn't think the rest of the CIA would care about her emotional mistakes.

"Nothing's going to happen to you," she assured him. Her voice sounded a lot more confident than she felt, but that wasn't saying much.

Grab the funny looking phone and I'll get the rest of this stuff."

She picked up the orange butt set. Designed for telephone technicians, they let them butt into calls and make sure the lines were still working. They can also be handy for calling the police in an emergency, even if you don't have change for a pay phone.

For once, luck seemed to be going their way. They made it down to the basement and to the utility closet without meeting anyone. Using bent wires from the Radio Shack that were close enough to her professional picks, Heather opened the locked utility closet door in just a couple of minutes.

They ran the tester over the phone lines and listened to its squawk. Unfortunately, she heard nothing that resembled the high-speed modem or DSL links she expected.

"Eliminate the impossible, I think you said," she told Jack.

Jack stared at the test equipment. It was working perfectly. The little beeps it produced sounded like a time bomb, set and ready to explode.

He wracked his brain, but his logic still seemed sound. "How else could they communicate?"

"I don't think anyone would give them a tie line. We would have seen a satellite uplink." Heather answered.

"That's it. They must have a link to one of the office buildings nearby.

Heather's face fell. "With one of those little infrared jobs, they could be anywhere."

"So this part of the plan didn't work out. We'll just have to check out the building. My bet is, we'll find a floor we can't get off at."

Jack scooped up the butt set but left the rest of the equipment where it lay. He'd long since abandoned any notion of getting reimbursed for all of his expenses. Now all he wanted to do was survive this job and make sure the entire country didn't get sent into an economic tailspin to match his own.

Well, he wouldn't mind Heather telling him what a hero he was and throwing her arms around him. That didn't seem likely to happen, though. She seemed more and more distant as the day went on. Almost as if their lovemaking had never happened, or meant something different to her than it did to him.

He discovered the elevator and pressed each of the twenty buttons. "Thought so," he told her.

"Top two floors?"

"They're probably using the top floor for programming and the lower floor for the guards and as a buffer space."

"So now what?"

"So now we bring in the cavalry." The CIA could cook up some explanation for their involvement. Most likely, he'd suddenly find himself a temporary member of the Secret Service or Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. None of the agencies liked the FBI so all were willing to cooperate with the CIA when its mission required it to step over the national boundaries.

"Sounds good to me." Only she didn't sound enthusiastic.

Of course, her parents were about to get caught in a fire zone. From what they'd seen of Jones, Jack didn't suspect Jones and his cronies would give up without a fight.

"I'll go ahead and see what I can do," he told her.

"And get yourself killed. What advantage is that supposed to offer?"

"I'm betting they have enough programmers that they don't recognize them off the top of their heads. Once I get up there, I can warn the programmers that the police are coming and save a few lives."

He could also see what he could do about her parents. His mind had swung toward fantasies of himself and Heather spending the rest of their lives together. Getting her parents killed wouldn't be the most romantic beginning to their marriage. *Marriage*. The word sort of popped up in his mind, but it felt so right.

"Why don't you make the calls? You're the CIA agent, after all. I'm just a private investigator with a reputation."

"I've got a lot of experience with commando-style raids. From what I saw of your record, you can handle yourself well, but you're still a civilian." He wondered if his feelings toward her entered into his decision. Maybe they did, but he would have made the same decision even if she hadn't been the most exciting woman he'd ever met.

Heather looked doubtful, then nodded. "I'll call the police and your CIA cronies, then I'll be up to see what I can do to help."

"You'd be safer if you just waited for the cops."

She shook her head firmly. "Don't push your luck."

She turned, took two steps away, then whirled back around and launched herself into his arms.

He loved her kisses, yet somehow this sense of urgency felt different—as if she were kissing him good-bye.

"Hey, I'll be all right," he told her when she finally pulled her lips away from his.

"Yeah, sure."

He watched her go back to the elevator, then turned to his own task.

The stairwells were completely blocked off. Trashed furniture, dressers, old sofas, and mattresses plugged the stairs so completely he doubted a small monkey could sneak through. If he tried, he'd make so much noise he'd attract a crowd.

The elevator shaft appeared to offer more promise.

He pulled one of the drawers out of a dresser and knocked it against the wall until the wood broke away leaving him with a metal bar that had served as a runner.

He went back to the elevator and wedged his bar between the closed elevator doors.

Finally they wheezed open.

He risked a glance down then wished he hadn't. The only light came from the murky hallway behind him. From his angle, the shaft looked like it descended forever.

He put his metal bar between his teeth, grabbed the elevator cable and hoisted himself up two floors. Then he wrapped his feet around the cable and slid the bar between the elevator doors.

When the doors opened about a quarter of an inch, he leaned against the door and peered out the slit. With a whole lot of luck, his legs would hold, no one would get into the elevator and send him flying, and the terrorists would leave the elevator lobby unguarded.

Two out of three wasn't quite lucky enough. He thought he recognized one of the three gunmen who sat playing cards in the hallway. The other two looked like strangers. How many of these terrorists were there? At any rate, he wouldn't make it far if he opened the elevator door all the way.

He lowered himself back down a floor.

He had been certain that this floor would be more heavily guarded but decided to take that chance. Again he wedged the elevator door open a fraction of an inch.

Empty.

He pushed against the door forcing it open just as the cable gave a lurch and began to move.

He gave another desperate tug on his impromptu lever and held on to the door as the cable fell away beneath him.

Slowly he forced the doors open and crawled into the hallway.

From somewhere close by, he heard shouting and recognized Jones's voice.

The man was haranguing his troops in a dialect of Arabic that sounded like it came from North Africa rather than from Palestine. Interesting. He needed to capture

Jones rather than let him get killed when the police arrived. His gunmen were unlikely to know anything about who the ultimate paymaster for this project might be.

Jack gave his best impression of a terrorist who knew what he was doing as he walked away from the elevator shaft toward the stairwell.

He had wasted too much time already. By now Heather would have spoken to the police. He had precious few minutes to get to the programmers and help them prepare for what could be some extremely ugly fighting.

He anticipated the stairwell being open. There had to be some path between this floor and the one above. Obviously, though, it wasn't the stairs. Old furniture and trash spilled out of the stairwell into the hall.

One look was enough to persuade him to abandon that approach.

He walked along the hallway testing doors until he found one that was unlocked. Half a minute with his ear pressed against the door told him that the room was either empty or he was in a whole lot of trouble. His vote would be for empty.

He threw the door open and rolled through brandishing his little metal crowbar as if it were a weapon.

Empty except the stench of unwashed human, a litter of empty pizza boxes, and a row of cots against the wall.

Sheepishly he closed the door, locking it behind him against a sudden entrance by a gunman. He took a deep breath and rubbed his shoulder where he'd landed. A black belt in Judo meant that he could fall without breaking anything. It didn't keep him from getting pretty banged up, though.

A sliding glass door led out onto a narrow balcony.

He looked around, then spotted the bathroom.

It only took a second to pull the bathroom mirror off the wall, slide it under the blankets on one of the cots, then step up onto it.

The blanket muffled the crack of breaking mirror.

Like all of the agents he knew, Jack believed in superstition. Preparation, quick thinking, staying in shape, all could help. In the final analysis, though, who lived and died was decided as much by luck as by anything the intellect could understand. He was superstitious enough not to like breaking a mirror. It didn't stop him, though. He needed a shard if he was to have a chance.

Under the blanket, he found a sliver of mirror about two inches wide and an inch tall. It would do.

He stepped onto the balcony and took a minute to look down.

No sight of the police. Not yet, at any rate. That meant he wasn't too late yet. Once the police showed, the terrorists were more likely to shoot first than try to verify whether he really was one of the programmers.

Climbing onto the balcony railing, he took the mirror shard and slid his hand up, forming a makeshift periscope.

By angling his bit of mirror, he could see the balcony above him as well as he other balconies on either side.

As he'd hoped and suspected, they were empty. Jones wasn't dumb enough to leave his men out and exposed. What might be behind the sliding door was another matter. He couldn't see a thing.

Waiting wouldn't improve the odds, so he swung himself up, climbing the unit above his own steel balcony railing.

Just when he thought he had it, the steel gave, throwing him off balance.

As he wobbled on the top of the railing, the only thought that came to his mind was that some contractor had gotten some extra money supplying substandard components for this project.

Then the railing collapsed and Jack toppled.

* * * *

Heather resisted the temptation to throw the butt set across the room.

She had planned to let the police do their job and leave the CIA out of it. Unfortunately, the police had heard too many stories coming from this housing project already. They would dispatch a squad car when they got good and ready.

Heather had seen policemen at donut shops trying to look down the waitress's cleavage and ignoring their radios, so she didn't have much hope that anyone dispatched would arrive in time to save Jack.

Instead, she dug through her pocket until she found the phone number Jack had given her. Jack was risking his life for her and for her parents. No matter how hard she found it, she would call his agency and ask for help.

A cold female voice answered the call. It wasn't the same voice that had answered when she had called for Jack a million years ago when this horrible adventure had begun, but it was alike enough that it could have been a clone.

"I'm working with Agent Jack Eastland. He asked me to call this number and report that we have discovered a group of terrorists here in Washington. You've got to send help."

"I'm sorry. There is no Jack Eastland at this number." The woman's voice went cold. "You should know that it is an offense to threaten the CIA. I recommend that you go back to whatever fraternity party you are doing this for and tell them that they may all end up in jail."

"Can I talk to Chuck Anthony?" Jack's partner should be able to straighten out this mess.

"I'm sorry. We have no agent of that name currently assigned to the Washington area." A buzz told her that the CIA operator had finished with her.

The cavalry wouldn't be coming, which meant Heather was on the spot. Because she wasn't going to leave Jack strung out alone. She looked around the basement for something she could use as a weapon. Fighting might be futile, but doing nothing wasn't an option.

A male voice cut into her thoughts. "I thought I told you to get lost."

"Oh my gosh, you scared me out of my wits."

Razor looked at her as if she really had gone bonkers. "You should be scared, lady. You're messing in gang property and it's after dark. Why shouldn't I just cut you and dump you." He pulled a small automatic from his belt and pointed it at her.

Heather stared at him. "Do I look insane?"

"You're here, aren't you?"

"Yes I'm here. And since I'm here and not insane, I must have a good reason. Do you want to hear it?"

He rolled his eyes. "Make it quick."

"The funny thing was, I believed you when you said your gang had taken over this project." She forced out a fairly credible laugh.

He stepped close to her, invading her private space. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She couldn't back away so she stepped even closer until her chest brushed against his. "What's it sound like, Razor? You've got a couple of floors here full of

terrorists with Uzi's and you say you're in control? I'll be they're laughing pretty hard when they see you walking around with Saturday night specials as likely to blow off your hand as actually shoot someone."

She shouldn't be talking to him this way. Still, she didn't have time to plan everything out. She was pissed and Razor got to bear the brunt of it.

"Nothing wrong with our guns. But what are you talking about, terrorists? I think you've been watching too much TV."

"What you've got is a case of denial. You don't believe me? Try to go up to the top floor. I'll bet you can't. I'll bet that if you were to try, you'd get shot before you could even take the safety off that toy gun you're so proud of."

Razor put away the gun, then grabbed Heather by the arm, pushing her in front of him. "Health inspectors shut down the top couple of floors."

"Oh, sure. Like the rest of this building is so sanitary. Get real. If health inspectors closed off the top couple of floors, they did it for money."

"If anyone was up there, we'd know." Razor was weakening, but she needed more to persuade him.

She shoved the butt set in his direction. "Maybe it's nobody, then. But they sure are making a lot of phone calls."

He obviously didn't recognize her test equipment. Her apparent willingness to let him test it proved persuasive. Thank goodness. If he turned out to know anything about technology, she was doomed.

He pushed her up the basement stairs and onto the elevator. "We'll just see about who owns this building."

At the seventh floor, he stepped off, continuing to push her in front of him like a human shield.

The seventh floor was definitely a gang hangout. Gang signs had been scrawled on the wall with spray paint. The odor of Marijuana almost choked her.

"What have you got there?" one of the biggest men she had ever seen asked. "White girl looking for some grown-up fun?"

"I sent her away this afternoon, but then I found her snooping in the basement with some electronic equipment," her captor explained.

"She's a cop. Kill her." The man's voice held exactly the emotion he would have used to order a large milk shake.

"You don't think I'd wander around here if I was planting bugs, do you?"

The big man shrugged. "Why should I care?"

"Because you're about to lose your entire establishment here."

"Big threats. You've got five minutes to convince me." He sat on a large couch set out in the middle of the hallway and put his arms behind his head. His face told

her that she'd have to be awful convincing if she didn't want to have to fight her way out.

"Razor tells me you haven't been to the top couple of floors in the building. I can prove gunmen have taken over those floors. They are planning to sabotage U.S. computer networks. When they do, the police, FBI, and National Security Agency will be all over this place like honey on Cheerios. If you're lucky, you'll just go to jail for what you did. If I know the FBI, you'll also go to jail for whatever the terrorists did since they'll be long gone. You know they like to lock people up, and they'll settle for who they find."

"That was an impressive speech."

Heather couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or serious but at least he didn't tell Razor to take her out and shoot her again.

"I don't know about you, but I wouldn't say I ran a building if I'd never bothered to check out two of the floors and they just happened to be full of gunmen."

"She's got a point, Angel," Razor broke in. "We never bothered to check what was going on upstairs."

"I want your opinion, I'll give it to you," the big man replied. "Supposing you're right, white girl? What do you propose we do?"

"Don't kill me, for a start."

"For a start maybe I won't. If you're lying about this, you'll wish we gave you the easy death."

"Then I have nothing to worry about because I'm telling the truth. What I think you should do is send up your men, rescue the prisoners, and capture as many of the terrorists as you can."

"You want me to risk my men taking on a bunch of guys you already said are better armed than we are?"

Since Angel was taking her warning seriously, she knew she had him. So long as she could reel him in. "You'd be a hero."

"Yeah, right. Like anyone cares what happens to a bunch of computers."

"All right, try this one. You may survive by selling crack, but what do you think your life would be like if the economy broke down so no one was working, no one earning money, and nothing but a bunch of unemployed people wandering the streets. I'll give you a clue. You're as dependent on the economy as anyone else even if you deal in the illegal part."

"An economics lesson," the big man laughed. "At least we know she isn't police. Nobody in the D.C. police department could have put that many big words together if we gave them a week."

"So what are we going to do?" Razor demanded.

Angel sighed. "Round up the guys. I gotta see what's going on."

"What about her?"

"She goes first. If it's a trap, I want her blood splattered before any of us get hurt."

Chapter 13

The little stars that had surrounded Jack's head after his fall were fading but they were definitely still there. At least he had managed to throw himself forward rather than topple backward to a twenty-story drop. As it was he had banged his head against the concrete wall.

He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, then instantly regretted the rash decision. The stars hauled out their brothers.

He looked around for his friend the metal bar, finally finding it wedged under the sliding glass door that led inside.

The door presented another problem. Not a problem getting it open, it took him less than twenty seconds to force the door. The problem came from the black construction paper taped to the inside of the glass. Obviously intended to prevent light from escaping the windows and possibly attracting questions. The sudden sunlight when he finally opened the door would attract the terrorists like a lamp attracts moths.

He looked down, but saw no sign of the police. Either they were running late or they weren't going to show. If they weren't going to show, he had to figure that

Heather would make some sort of attempt to invade them single handedly. She might exasperate him with her weird ideas about the government, but he certainly couldn't fault her courage.

The few wispy clouds didn't offer much promise of suddenly snuffing out the sun. He'd have to wing it.

He closed his eyes firmly and took a few breaths. Acclimating his eyes couldn't hurt and had saved his life on more than one occasion. When he calculated he'd waited long enough, he flung the door opened, stepped inside, then spun around and shouted out, "I can't stand it."

"Shut up and get back to work," an electronic voice ordered.

From what he could see in the murky darkness broken only by the glowing light from a couple of hundred cathode ray tube computer monitors, the terrorists had torn out all of the walls on the floor, leaving the entire area an open bullpen.

The man shouting at him stood on a platform raised about four feet above the floor. In one hand he held a battery-operated megaphone. In the other, an Uzi submachine gun.

Jack nodded, shut the door, then opened his eyes and looked around.

For the first time, he had positive proof that he and Heather had been on the right track. At least seventy-five humans and probably twice that many computers littered the single room.

He headed toward an unoccupied computer, sat in front of it, then scanned the programmers.

A few women were sprinkled among the mostly male, mostly young, mostly overweight and under exercised programmers. They might turn into effective recruits, but few of them looked like they could actually be much help when the terrorists started shooting. Jack had no doubt that the terrorists would start shooting.

"Hey, who are you?"

While a terrorist could have picked up the unmistakable California accent, Jack thought it unlikely. He turned slowly.

The man confronting him wore faded and ratty jeans that looked as if they had been on the losing side of a food fight. Despite the stifling heat in the room, thrown off by too many people and too many computers all going at the same time, he wore a baggy sweater that did nothing to disguise the gut that hung out over his belt.

That said, the man was close to seven feet tall and had to weigh well over three hundred pounds. He could certainly be a valuable ally.

"Just another programmer," Jack told him.

"Yeah, sure. So why haven't I seen you before?"

"They just brought me in a few hours ago. Said they needed some last minute help with the high security stuff."

"That's crap. I handle the high security stuff. They haven't brought anyone in since Pete and Karen Webb. Not that those two have lived up to their billing. I could do more in five minutes with my eyes closed than the two of them have done since they got here."

Jack followed the big man's gesture and spotted a couple who had to be Heather's parents. They had aged considerably from the photo she'd showed him.

They, along with most of the other programmers, were studiously avoiding any interest in the minor confrontation Jack found himself in. Minor, that is, for the time being.

He hadn't wanted to blurt out his mission before having a chance to talk with Heather's parents, but the big man was likely to draw unfriendly attention if he didn't calm him down.

"We're pulling a raid on this operation. I'm the lead man. I need your help making sure the programmers get out safely."

"You're what?" The man's eyes bulged, then he raised his hands and stepped toward Jack. "You're not doing anything."

Jack's heart sank. The man had slipped into a fighting stance that showed years of practice. While Jack had led his class in hand to hand combat while in training, he preferred to use a weapon whenever he had the chance, and to make sure he had a chance. The programmer looked angry enough to take his head off.

Even if Jack could take him, there was no way the terrorists could miss a fight. He certainly couldn't avoid their bullets and didn't think they'd worry about killing a few programmers as well. They had to be just about ready.

Jack rolled back and stood, but couldn't get far before running into a wall.

The big man inhaled deeply and Jack gave up all thought about retreating or worrying about the guards spotting a fight. He was obviously getting ready to call for help.

Jack tensed his muscles, but before he could launch himself, the big man collapsed in a heap.

"I've been wanting to do that since I met that creep."

The older man dropped the computer keyboard he'd broken over the big man's head.

"Pete Webb, I presume," Jack said. He looked around to make sure they hadn't been observed and saw Karen Webb talking to the guard and gesturing toward her computer. Whatever she was saying distracted his attention from his other charges.

The two of them took the opportunity to drag the big man out of sight between a couple of computers.

Pete produced a roll of duct tape which Jack used to secure the peacefully sleeping giant.

"I guess you've finally found us," Pete agreed.

The sad look in his eyes didn't click with what should have been good news.

There was something going on here that Jack needed to figure out. Something, he felt certain, that could dramatically affect his relationship with Heather. But he didn't have time to figure it out right this second.

"He acted like he wanted the terrorists to win," Jack whispered.

"They've promised everyone on the project five million each, in gold."

Jack shook his head. All the programmers would get from the terrorists was a few grams of steel coated lead.

* * * *

"There's trash like this everywhere," Razor told Heather. "It doesn't mean someone put it here on purpose."

The gang had fielded its entire force of thirty men and a couple of rough looking women. Armed with a mishmash of weapons that could only have been picked up at swap meets or through years of burglary, they looked tough. Unfortunately, they didn't look as tough as the Uzi-armed terrorists had.

"Uh-uh," one of the females reported. "Check it out. This is set up as a trap. Pull anywhere and it'll collapse on you. Make a lot of noise too."

Razor frowned at Heather. "I find out you had something to do with this, you're going to wish I shot you."

"I'll worry about that when the time comes," Heather answered. "Look, my parents and my, uh," she stammered for the word, "well, my boyfriend, are there." What was the right word for the relationship she and Jack had developed? The word 'husband,' popped into her mind. Not that he'd given her any indication that he would ever consider anything permanent. Not that she could accept even if he did. Damn, why did it have to be so complicated.

"Look lady, how many did you say there were?" All of a sudden the gang members seemed a little anxious.

"I don't know for sure. There are probably at least fifty programmers up there. I've seen maybe ten gunmen but there may be more. And they've got Uzi's. Maybe heavier stuff too."

"Maybe we should get the cops," one of the older gang members suggested.

"Maybe you should keep your mouth shut," Angel replied. "We're going in like Rambo. If it's got a gun and it's not us, shoot it. If it doesn't have a gun, figure it's a programmer. Unless Heather here tells us otherwise."

"Can't you just disarm them," she asked. She knew it sounded stupid. After all, they were taking on an unknown number of heavily armed men with nothing but old pistols, a couple of shotguns and hunting rifles, and one Viet Nam era M-16.

"Yeah, right. We'll just shoot the guns out of their hands like the Lone Ranger. Get real, girl."

Closer inspection of the stairwell didn't offer any help. They could get through, but not without making enough noise to bring every terrorist in miles over to investigate.

"If there was some other way to get in, we could use this as a diversion," Heather suggested.

"Say more," Angel commanded.

"Move the furniture and it makes a lot of noise. If it sounds like someone's trying to get up, they'd gather around to see who was coming. We could come in behind them."

"Right. We'll do it." He deputized three of his men to stay and fake the invasion.

"But we need some other way to get in."

"Hey, we live here. We can get there."

They might live here but they hadn't noticed that the top two floors were secretly occupied. It didn't exactly give her a warm feeling.

"Trash tunnel?" Razor asked.

Angel nodded. "Remember, if this is a police trap, Heather gets it first. Now move. You three, I'll call you when it's time to start."

He tossed the three men tasked with the stairwell a cellular phone. "And shoot anything that moves. We won't be coming that way."

"But the programmers might," Heather reminded.

"So don't let them," Razor told her.

The trash tunnel turned out to be a two-foot wide chute down the middle of the building. From its stench, it was used to dump all matter of trash to a receptacle at the bottom. Also from the stench, it hadn't been cleaned for a long time.

"We're going to use this?" she asked.

"Climbing is supposed to be all the rage, right. So climb."

Heather tried to remember what she'd learned in the one day seminar on rock climbing she'd taken years before. Nothing came to mind except that chimneying was supposed to be fun and easy, and that you were always supposed to wear your ropes.

No one offered her any ropes.

"You first," Angel ordered.

She had hoped he would change her mind about her leading when he found out she was telling the truth. An obviously forlorn hope.

Her palms were already sweaty and she dried them on her skirt.

She took a deep breath and tried to control her trembling and whispered a mantra. "This will be easy. A ten-foot climb is nothing."

It might have helped. She couldn't tell.

Still, Angel didn't seem inclined to wait and she'd rather go under her own power than see if he'd really push her.

She stuck her head into the access door and looked around. The concrete had been roughened by years of trash banging against its sides. It should be possible.

"Are you going to move already?"

Heather took another deep breath and turned around, then backed into the chute.

She grasped the top of the lintel, supporting as much of her weight as she could with her arms, then sent her right foot searching for a support.

Unfortunately that didn't take long.

A few seconds of desperate flailing with her left foot left her upright, her weight fully supported on both feet.

She let go of the lintel and found fingerholds. Now what?

It took all of her will power to inch one foot upward, all of her weight bearing down on the other. Then she did the same thing on the other side.

Underneath her, a head peeked in, then looked up. "Hey, nice."

Damn that Jack anyway. If she'd been wearing jeans and running shoes, this would be a whole lot easier. Still, her modesty was the least of her troubles right now.

Just when she was certain she couldn't force herself an inch higher, her searching hand caught the doorway. The entire climb had been less than six feet.

She pushed against the door. It didn't budge.

She pushed harder, desperate but trying not to lose her balance. By now she had another climber underneath her. A fall wouldn't kill just her.

The door opened with a suddenness that almost undid her. She slid down a couple of inches, then dug the outer edges of her feet into the wall and braced herself with her arms.

"Hang on," encouraged Razor beneath her.

She did, then painfully reclaimed the inches she'd slipped.

Although she'd opened the chute door, the only light still came from the floor below. Feeling, rather than seeing the open hole, she clambered over the ledge and stepped once again on firm ground.

Rock climbing, Heather decided, would *not* be her new sport of choice.

When she had started to catch her breath, she turned, in time to give Razor a hand up.

Angel emerged next, then he dropped a rope and hauled up their weapons.

"If you had the rope the whole time, how come you didn't use it on us?"

Heather whispered.

" Didn't think of that," he replied. "It's a good idea, though."

He tied the rope around a pipe and dropped it down the chute. "This should speed things up."

When the trash closet started to get crowded, he flipped open his cellular phone and dialed a number. "It's me," he said. After a brief pause, he continued, "make a lot of noise. We're going to need all the distraction we can get."

Less than a minute later, the muffled, but distinct, sound of collapsing furniture invaded their hiding place.

Instantly afterwards, the sound of running feet told Heather that their distraction had been at least partially successful.

"Now," called Angel. He threw open the closet doorway and pushed Heather out.

Heather hadn't watched cop shows all her life for nothing. She performed a shoulder roll that would make Chuck Norris proud, then kept rolling along the floor, trying to find someplace she could hide until her eyes adjusted to the brighter light.

"Go, go," Angel whispered and the remainder of his gang streamed out.

Angel commandeered the bulk of the men toward the stairway, obviously hoping to take the terrorists from behind.

Heather agreed with his tactics, but didn't feel any particular desire to join him. Unarmed, she would quickly become cannon fodder at best, and a dispensable hostage at worst.

Once her eyes adjusted to the fluorescent lights, it was obvious that the programmers didn't use this floor. On the other hand, obviously Arabic language newspapers and half assembled weaponry made it clear that she and Jack had, indeed, discovered the mother lode.

She wasn't here to chase terrorists. She was here to rescue her parents, and possibly even Jack. She set off in search of them.

* * * *

Karen Webb continued to argue with the guard so long that Jack got nervous. He needed to get Heather's parents to safety so he could figure out what to do about the others.

Harold's irrational response when he had discovered Jack made it clear that he couldn't simply wander around and tell them to get ready to take cover.

"I'll get her," Peter told him.

He was definitely starting to like Heather's parents. They did what needed to be done without needing a lot of instruction. Obviously Heather had learned her independence from them.

As Peter returned with his wife, Jack noticed the glance between them. After all these years, they still shared a passion that he found refreshing. Could he and Heather hope to achieve this same type of lasting affection and sensual awareness?

"You're with the government." Karen made it a statement rather than a question. Like Peter, she didn't seem particularly pleased by this turn of events.

"I would think you'd be pleased that someone is coming to your rescue."

"Don't get me wrong, I'd rather go to jail than be killed by a bunch of mad-men. Neither is an especially good choice."

Jack could have smacked his head against the wall. For the first time, everything made sense. Heather had known Fred because he was a contact point for people on the run. Her parents had been on the run. They were still on the run and expected to be arrested.

The sound of crashing furniture, followed by a flurry of shots, told him that he'd have to worry about this discovery later.

"How many guards on this floor?" he asked.

"There's the one on the tower and another one who wanders around. There used to be more but Mr. Jones noticed that the programmers got nervous when guys with machine guns came too close," Peter said.

"Also he got disgusted with the way the women refused to dress according to his rules," Karen added.

"Right. I'll take the one on the tower. Do you think the two of you could disarm the other one?"

Peter nodded firmly. "No problem."

Karen looked worried but didn't disagree.

The plan would have to do. He couldn't take both guards at the same time.

With luck, he'd be quick enough that he could help the others.

The guard on the tower was speaking into a portable radio and staring in the direction of the stairway as Jack approached him.

"I've got to reconfigure the FTP client for autonomous operation," he said, hoping that the guard didn't know more about computers than he did since he had no idea what he was talking about. "You've got to give me permission—"

He vaulted the railing around the central tower and continued his motion, kicking the guard in the head.

The guard fell like an overcooked soufflé, his Uzi skidding across the platform.

A hail of bullets stopped Jack's instinctive effort to grab the weapon.

He rolled off the platform, then looked back.

The second guard came running toward the tower shouting something about the wrath of Allah.

As he neared Jack, a female leg stuck out in front of him and he stumbled over it.

Before he could regain his balance, Webb hit him in the back with a heavy computer monitor.

Jack didn't know how good a programmer Webb was, but he certainly had a knack for computer-fu.

The sound of continued shooting continued from below. Obviously the police were not having everything their way. He could hear only occasional shots that sounded like they might come from police automatics or from the shotguns the police use.

He scooped up the guard's Uzi. "How do they move between the floors?"

Karen pointed to the corner opposite the main stairwell. "There's a fire exit. They use that."

So much for his brilliant climb outside. He turned and headed toward the fire escape. "Tell everyone to stay down," he shouted to Jack and Karen over his shoulder. "And don't let them launch any of their virus programs."

His first impulse was to run down the stairs, save Heather from the hundreds of terrorists who were, doubtless, menacing her, and win the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The pure stupidity of this plan shook him. Right here, there were more than fifty people whose lives depended on his keeping a level head.

Jones, at least, was no fool. If he didn't already, he would quickly realize that the programmers were his last best play. Taking them hostage and threatening to kill them could buy him time and give him some negotiation space.

As he neared the fire exit, Jack looked for someplace where he could cover the entryway, keeping the terrorists trapped between himself and the police, yet where he would have at least some protection. It wouldn't be much of a trap if they could blow him away in a few seconds.

The terrorists had left a fair amount of construction material laying around when they had torn down the walls and he found a pile of materials about twenty feet from the fire exit.

It wasn't comfortable, but he lay down behind the pile and set the Uzi in front of him, switching from automatic to single shot.

Just in the nick of time. The fire door swung open and an Uzi poked out, followed by a head.

Jack squeezed off a shot, hitting the door only a few inches from the head.

The head vanished from sight. A few moments later, the gun barrel peered out again, this time without a head.

Jack waited. Time was on his side.

The Uzi fired five or six shots randomly, then stopped.

From below, the sound of gunfire had begun to taper off. Either the terrorists had beaten off the first round of attackers or they were on the run.

The fire door opened again and Jack peered down the iron sight.

A white handkerchief waved briefly, then pulled back.

He didn't think Jones was ready to surrender, so what was going on?

His worst fears were confirmed when Heather, or at least Heather's head and one of her shoulders peeked around the firewall.

"Don't do it," Heather called to him.

She vanished.

"The two of you have spent quite a bit of time together." Jones's voice was cold. The terrorist stepped out, still holding his white handkerchief.

"If you shoot me, my men will cut off pieces of Ms. Webb and toss them out to you."

"You know you've lost," Jack said with all of the conviction he could muster.

"Do you really think so? I need another half hour to complete my work here. I think I can buy that. After that, I'll be proud to allow my capture. Prison and torture do not frighten me, and death means only a release to paradise. Of course, that's assuming your taxpayers can still afford prisons. Not likely once this attack takes place."

"I stopped the programmers," Jack told him. "It's over."

"Mr. Eastland, you're right. It is over for one of us," Jones agreed. "I suggest you throw down your weapon."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because we have your woman."

"Kill her and you have nothing. I think we're at a standoff."

Jones laughed with a cold and humorless tone that didn't give Jack any hope at all.

"I wouldn't think of *killing* the beautiful Ms. Webb," Mr. Jones told him. "On the other hand, does she really need two hands? I could cut it off one finger at a time. Just until you agree to throw down your weapon, of course."

"Do it and I'll kill you."

"You don't have any bargaining room, Eastland. And I'm rather in a hurry." He turned and looked back toward the fire door.

"Shave her head," he called.

Seconds later, hunks of Heather's hair started flying through the open door.

Jack threw down the Uzi and stood. "Stop them," he ordered.

Jones looked as if undecided, then gave Jack a bitter smile. "You have a lot of nerve asking for favors after what you've done to undo my life's work. Kick your gun toward me."

Jack complied slowly. He was counting on the Webbs to prevent any sabotage in the time before the police got here. Maybe Jones would decide that he could be useful as a hostage as well. It was a lot to hope for, but right now, Jack didn't have a lot of hope.

"Thank you, Mr. Eastland." Jones stepped forward and picked up the Uzi.

He waved his arm and two of his men dragged Heather out. They were followed by three more terrorists, one bleeding profusely. Below, the sound of firing had tailed off to sporadic shots.

One of the uninjured terrorists walked over to Jack, looked him in the eye, then swung his gunbutt at him like a baseball bat.

Jack barely managed to block the blow with his shoulder.

"Tie him up when you're finished," Jones ordered.

The other uninjured terrorist grinned and pointed his gun in Jack's direction.

"It's up to you," he told Jack in Arabic. "Fight us, you die. Give up, who knows, you may live. You might even get to keep the girl. If you still want her after we've finished with her."

Chapter 14

"You moron, you could have stopped them," Heather told them.

She had a sense of *deja vu*. How did she keep getting thrown into these bizarre situations with Jack?

"Oh, right. I should have let them cut pieces off of you."

"You don't really think they're going to stop, do you?"

"Well--"

"I sure hope you have a plan now."

"Shut up, you two," the injured guard told them. He pushed both of them forward.

The dark of this floor was relieved only by the glow of computer CRT tubes.

"We've taken care of the invaders," Jones announced to the programmers.

"They are merely a gang of local criminals. We have no fear from the police."

Jack shot Heather an incredulous look. She could only nod sadly. It wasn't her fault the police hadn't believed her story.

"We're about ready to launch the attack," one of the programmers reported.
We're waiting for you to give the go-ahead."

Heather's heart dropped another couple of notches. At a minimum she'd hoped that her parents and Jack would be able to persuade the programmers to delay this moment. Apparently they had failed.

"Excellent. All of you have earned your pay."

She recognized a few of the programmers from her youth, back when her parents had tried to stay in touch with the underground for which they had sacrificed so much of their life. Heather couldn't believe that they would work to destroy the economy on which so many people depended, but knew that some, at least, cared more about the people in abstract than they did in the individuals who made up the world.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing," she called out.

"I said shut up," the guard told her. He aimed a slow roundhouse punch toward her jaw.

She could have blocked his punch, or turned it into a Judo hold and tripped him to the ground. Except, she never had the chance.

The guard's attack triggered something within Jack that she had never seen before.

His eyes glowed with more light than should have been possible in the reflective glare of dozens of computer monitors as he launched himself into the air, his foot smashing the guard's fist in mid-punch.

Jack continued his flip, ending back on feet right beside Heather. "Get down," he hissed into her ear.

Later, if there was a later, she'd discuss how he could ask for her assistance rather than assume she needed help. On the other hand, starting an argument right now would only get the two of them killed. Already the remaining guards were shifting their weapons' aims from the programmers to Heather and Jack.

Heather went down, but continued to roll toward Jones's feet. Without Jones, the rest of the terrorists seemed an enthusiastic, but not especially clever, bunch of gunmen. With Jones, they were a danger for everyone.

The sound of a shot slowed her for the instant it took for her to be certain she wasn't hit. She'd have to make sure of Jack later.

"Somebody's got a gun," one of the guards called to Jones.

It proved enough of a distraction to let her complete her roll, taking him down like pins at a bowling alley.

"This time I'll kill you," he hissed as he fell on top of her.

The image of a smoking gun in her mother's hands, and the shock on her face as she held it, did almost kill Heather. Her mother didn't believe that anything could ever justify violence. Even her talk about the revolution was always couched in the rhetoric of a non-violent uprising.

Jones didn't ask questions about her mother's apparent conversion. His clutching hands reached toward Heather's throat.

She twisted, but his weight on top of her reduced her leverage and his hands found their target and tightened.

Gasping for breath, she found one his baby fingers, bending it back until she felt it pop.

His scream barely registered on her blackening consciousness. His grip loosened for long enough to give her one gasp of breath, then squeezed even tighter.

She knew she had bought Jack extra seconds, at least. Maybe more. She hoped it would be enough because she could feel her efforts to escape become ever weaker as Jones squeezed all resistance out of her.

* * * *

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Jones choking Heather.

He fought down his instinctual reaction to drop everything and rush to her. Heather had a good minute of life after losing consciousness and he had a lot to get done during that minute.

Fortunately, Karen's shooting, despite the fact that she was shooting at the roof rather than at anyone in particular, had attracted a lot of attention, distracting the terrorists and sending the programmers scurrying for cover where they would be a lot harder to hold hostage.

He grabbed a reinforcing bar and clipped another of the guards with it, throwing it at a third as he turned to see what was going on.

By now, Peter had waded into the fight, another piece of computer equipment in his hands as a weapon.

Finally, Jack let himself come back to Heather.

The kick he aimed at Jones owed nothing to his years of training in the martial arts. Instead, he owed it to his high school football days. He gave his best shot at kicking a fifty-yard field goal.

Jones collapsed, falling across Heather's unmoving body.

Dread shot through Jack. Had he waited too long? He had never told Heather how much she meant to him, how he hoped that, somehow, they could spend more time together. Hell, he wanted to spend his life with her.

He dropped beside her, completely forgetting about any other terrorists who might be about, and felt for her pulse.

Her neck showed patchy white and red where Jones's hands had squeezed.

At first he felt nothing. She didn't seem to be breathing. Had Jones broken her windpipe?

He fumbled with her buttons for a moment, then abandoning that he ripped open her top and slid his ear over her heart.

The faintest lubb-dubb proved her heart continued to beat.

Jack forced open her mouth, quickly cleaning it with his finger, then pinched her nose shut. He pressed his lips into hers, then exhaled.

Her chest rose.

Good, her trachea wasn't broken.

He continued his mouth to mouth resuscitation while Peter rounded up a couple of the programmers who had military experience, armed them, and set them off to disarm the terrorists Jones had left to guard the fire exit.

He lost himself in the rhythm: exhale, breath, inhale, exhale. Lost himself in the sensation of Heather's still warm lips pressing against his. He couldn't, wouldn't give up.

Finally she coughed, sputtered, then opened her eyes.

"Are you all right," he asked.

She pointed to her throat, "Hurts."

"I'll bet. It's over now."

For the first time, he heard the distant sound of police sirens. It figured that they would arrive after all of the work had been done.

"What happened here?"

Her hand fumbled toward her torn top in a hopeless effort to pull it together.

He hadn't realized that he'd been quite so destructive when he'd ripped it open. Good thing she hadn't liked that dress much anyway. He'd really be in trouble.

"I had to open it up to feel your pulse."

"And you just left me exposed like that for the world and his brother to take a look?" Her throat might still be hurting, but she managed to put a fair degree of volume into that reaction.

A sensible man would beat a quick retreat. Jack knew that. Right now, he wasn't feeling particularly sensible.

"I had things on my mind."

"I'll just bet. I just wish you didn't let everyone else see what you had on your mind."

"That isn't what I meant."

Karen bustled up with a blanket and wrapped it over Heather.

"Your friend wouldn't let me near earlier," Karen told Heather, effectively ignoring Jack despite the fact that he was only inches away from the woman.

Heather's accusing eyes turned back to Jack.

He vaguely remembered someone fussing around him while he'd been giving mouth-to-mouth to Heather.

"Probably."

"You are an idiot, aren't you?"

"Almost certainly."

Heather pushed herself to a sitting position, ignoring his protests that she needed to rest.

The sirens were louder now, and Heather appeared to hear them for the first time.

"For God's sake, mother. You and dad need to get out of here. The police are almost here."

"We needed to make sure you were all right, Heather," her father answered.

Jack hadn't noticed him earlier. Unusual for him, he hadn't really noticed anything around him when Heather had been unconscious. Time to face facts. He no longer had the emotional detachment it took to be an effective Agent. Heather had cured him of that.

"Well get out of here now. If you talk to Angel, he'll help you."

"Who?"

"Angel. He's the leader of the gang that handled the terrorists on the floor below. You can't miss him. He's a real big guy."

"I guess we'd better be going, then," Karen said.

Jack should keep his mouth shut. He had everything to look forward to. He could retire from the Agency, marry Heather, and raise little baby Heathers. All he had to do was let her parents walk away.

No one could prove he'd put the obvious together and come up with the certainty that they were fugitives from justice. No one could blame him if he, an unarmed man, hadn't tried to stop dangerous criminals who were either armed or at least in control of others who were armed with automatic weapons.

"Don't try to leave," he said.

Heather pushed him away. "Don't listen to him. Get out of here."

"I'm sorry, Heather." He remained on his knees holding onto Heather for dear life, but he knew what he had to do. "I'm placing both of you under arrest for being fugitives from justice."

"He's just a CIA agent," Heather protested. "He has no more authority to arrest you than I do. Just go down one flight of stairs and Razor will help you. Tell him and Angel you're my parents."

Jack didn't want to know how Heather had become such good friends with a gang whose lookout had threatened to kill them if they didn't get off the property. He didn't figure that he had a lot to worry about, though. Heather was talking past him rather than to him. The cold look in her eyes didn't give him any reason to think that might stop any time soon.

"I'm a citizen of the United States and the District of Columbia. I am placing you under citizen's arrest," he insisted.

Heather shot him a disgusted look.

She was disgusted at herself and at Jack. Sure she had known from the beginning that their relationship was doomed. Still, they could have parted on a happier note. He didn't need her parents to make this job a success. No one would question him if he said they had escaped. Most likely, no one would ever even guess that her parents were anything other than two more programmers taken in by Jones's mad scheme.

"Citizens' arrests went out with Barney Fife," she said. "Come on, guys, get out of here. I'll follow after as soon as I can."

With their computer expertise, her parents would have no problem getting her a fully encrypted message. If they wanted to waste all of their supercomputer cycles on it, she had no doubt that the CIA could eventually break it. By then, though, she would be back with her parents and in a new identity.

She hated the idea of giving up her detective agency. Certainly, with the qualifications that most states were putting on licensing, she didn't have much hope of being able to restart that business. Still, her parents would be free.

Karen shook her head. "We've talked about this a lot."

"We're giving ourselves up," her father concluded for her.

"Are you guys nuts?" From below, she heard the sounds of tromping boots. Either the police had arrived or her new friends had decided to check on the twentieth floor.

Razor peeked his head around the corner, saw Heather, then stomped over.

"You're not hurting this little woman, are you?" he shouted into Jack's face.

She had to give Jack credit. He might be a pain in the rear, but he was no coward. He didn't back down at all.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Well she's too good for that. I think you'd better apologize to her."

"Good idea." Jack looked into her face.

* * * *

He could be so beautiful, when he wanted to be. Here she was, so angry at him that she could spit nails, and she was having fantasy thoughts about kissing him and dragging him off by the hair.

"I've been a lot of trouble for you, Heather, and I've almost gotten you killed a bunch of times. But I've never wanted to hurt you."

"Yeah, sure. So long as that didn't interfere with your precious honor."

"I draw a salary, Heather. When you take a job for the government, you swear to uphold the Constitution. I wouldn't be living up to that oath if I just let criminals walk away."

"Want me to kill him, Heather?" Razor asked her.

Jack didn't look particularly worried about that idea.

"No, of course not. Just help me stand up."

"She's still recovering from being strangled," Jack protested. "Let her rest."

"I figure if she's smart enough to take on a bunch of guys like you two set us up to fight, she's tough enough to stand up and walk away. Come on sweetheart."

She hadn't imagined Razor having such a soft heart. She leaned against him and pulled herself to her feet.

When Jack tried to follow, Angel gestured at a couple of his men who simply sat on Jack.

"The police are here," Razor whispered to her. If you need me to, I can get you out of here. Just say the word. By the way, I'm not so sure about that man of yours, he has the look of cop written all over him."

Despite the pain in her throat, Heather couldn't stop herself from laughing. "I'll stay. Take me to my parents."

Beyond all doubt, she knew that the next few moments would be the last time she would be able to share with her parents unfettered by bars and cold prison cells.

"Don't feel so bad," her father urged. "We're tired of running."

"We wouldn't let them take you away from us, that's what kept us from turning ourselves in a long time ago," her mother said. "Then we figured we were safe. But now, why not?"

"Because you have your whole lives to lead. What kind of life do you think you'll have in jail?"

Her mother shrugged. "It won't be much fun. Still, you're all grown up now. We can't have you throw away your life just because we made a mistake when you were a baby."

"Helping you guys get away would certainly not be throwing my life away."

"Why don't you let that man of yours explain," her mother urged. "He's a very brave man. Without him, a lot of us would have been hurt."

"Sure. He's a wonderful guy. All he's doing is sending my parents to jail for the rest of their lives."

Shining flashlights announced the arrival of D.C.'s finest. The weapons Angel's gang had been displaying only seconds before vanished like summer snow.

Jack pushed aside the two men who were holding him down and walked over to the police sergeant.

Heather couldn't hear what he was saying, but his gestures, which took in the bound terrorists as well as her parents, made it clear.

The sergeant picked up an electric bullhorn lying on the floor. "I've sent for reinforcements. In the meantime, I want everyone to remain here. Don't talk to each other and don't move around more than you absolutely have to."

Two of the cops parked themselves next to her parents, effectively separating Heather from the only people she really wanted to talk to.

The next several hours were a nightmare of bureaucratic incompetence. The first load of reinforcements went to the wrong building so the Police Department dispatched a second group. By the time they had arrived, however, the first group found their way as well and, as a result, the project was overwhelmed with police.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their numbers, the police didn't seem able to do anything quickly. Every interview seemed to take longer than the next.

Jones and the other terrorists were quickly singled out and led away in the suddenly working elevator.

Heather spent three uncomfortable hours talking to a female officer about the terrorists and her role in apprehending them, and ignoring questions about her parents and their crimes.

After about twenty minutes, Jack was pulled away from all of the other prisoners and whisked away.

She told herself that this, at least, was good news. She hadn't wanted to see him again and now it looked as if that wish would be granted.

At least the cops offered her a ride home when they had finished questioning her, an offer she gratefully accepted.

She had forgotten the wreck Jones and his terrorists had made out of her office and apartment.

She wandered through it, picking up a few papers, straightening an article of clothing or an overturned piece of furniture, then forgetting what she held in her hand and dropping it randomly.

Finally she made herself leave to get something to eat and a cup of coffee.

The brief walk between her office and the 7-11 reminded her of Jack. The large chunks Jones's bullets had dug into the sidewalk near where she and Jack had been sitting reminded her of Jack. Every distant roar of motorcycle engine reminded her of Jack.

Every time she thought about him, Heather got madder.

Chapter 15

Jack stared at his control. Clearly the man had lost his sanity. "We can't just let the man walk. He did his best to destroy the American economy."

"The President has decided that there should be no further punishment. He's been allowed to resign his post and return to teaching."

"That figures."

"He's harmless now. We've got to think of the Agency's reputation. Although we weren't able to make your heroics public, rest assured that the rest of the Security agencies know about it. The FBI will lay a little lower after this, I think. But if we acknowledged that a Deputy Director was on the take, we would be the laughing stock of not just the Washington establishment but the entire world."

"That's it, then?"

"No. There is one other thing." His control's eyes narrowed as if trying to read into Jack's soul.

"I'll bite. What?"

"I know you've wanted to get back into action. We don't intend to let Jones's paymasters mess with us like they tried to do on this caper."

Jack nodded. "So?"

"We were thinking about a major operation. Up to twenty field agents, all with fluent Arabic, as well as a pretty fair war chest."

"I'm looking for need to know here."

"I know you're looking to get back into field work, and I need an experienced man to act as lead. The Director doesn't trust his own judgment any more so he's prepared to listen to me. I've been telling him that you're the man."

He'd dreamed of jobs like this all his life. With twenty agents and enough money to bribe and buy, Jack would be a player. A job like that was the capstone of a career. Most agents waited their entire lives for the chance and came up empty.

He wouldn't be honest if he pretended not to be tempted.

Jack considered, then shook his head. "Not interested."

"That doesn't make sense. You don't want to sit out the rest of your career here in Washington, do you? Do a good job on this assignment and you'll be able to name the next. Hell, they'll build a section around you."

The past three months had been among the worst in Jack's life. Working with his control and a small group of agents he could trust with his life, he'd gone underground in his own agency, finally smelling out the man who had betrayed the organization and the nation. In doing so, he had learned too many of the Agency's dirty secrets.

"I'm not looking for a buy-out."

Control frowned. "I can see how it would sound like that. It isn't. You're a field man. I voted against bringing you in in the first place and now I'm doing what I can to send you back where you belong."

That, Jack knew, was exactly the rub. He knew where he belonged, but he had precisely no chance of ever getting there. He wanted, needed, to be with Heather. His life had a big empty hole right in its center. No foreign assignment could fill it.

"I've prepared my resignation." He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out the envelope.

"People don't just resign from the Agency, Eastland. Especially not when they're less than a year from retirement."

"Look at me closely, then," Jack told him. "You're looking at an exception."

"Is it the money? I've already put in for a merit step for you. Plus a couple of GS grades when you take the job."

Jack dropped the envelope on Control's desk, then followed it with his identity card. "I came back to clean up the mess. Now I've done all I can."

He stood, then walked out the door.

"If you change your mind, let me know." Control stood and hurried after him.

"Don't count on it."

The man shook his head. "I know your type, Eastland. You're so stubborn you'll never admit it even when you know you're wrong. So you keep working at it until somehow you make it right. That's why I wanted you for lead. That's why I'd take you back. And that's why I know I don't have a chance."

Jack figured that Control's reading was only about a hundred and eighty degrees out of true but he didn't bother correcting him. Instead he shook the younger man's hand. "Whatever you say, Control."

"For Pete's sake, call me Roger."

Jack was a civilian now, he could do that. "Right, Roger. Give me a call in a few weeks and I'll buy you a beer."

"I'll have your back vacation pay sent to your home. And I'll make sure they get your retirement right. They always mess up on adding military experience."

Halfway through the internal investigation, Jack had discovered that a CIA Deputy Chief had actually played an active role in smuggling the terrorists into the country, helping them get weapons, and finding them a place in which to do their work.

The rest of the investigation had consisted of making sure they had enough evidence to convict in a court of law. Now, while Peter and Karen were going up the river, this jerk was going to go back to a comfortable teaching job with a CIA stint looking good on his resume.

It offended Jack's sense of decency as well as his need for balance. It wasn't the reason he'd resigned, however.

Jack glanced at his watch. He still had time to make the trial.

* * * *

Heather sat in the courtroom as the lawyers concluded their arguments.

Thankfully a left wing foundation she'd never heard of had funded the astronomical bills the lawyers generated. The lawyers managed to put the best possible spin on everything. They even made her parents sound like red blooded American heroes in the John Wayne tradition for what they'd done against the terrorists. The Assistant DA, however, had simply presented the case.

Her parents' statement, fully admitting to the role they'd played in the long-ago anti-Viet Nam War bombing, formed the basis of the evidence against them. Certainly the prosecution had been able to provide precious few witnesses who could testify to her parents' involvement. If they'd just kept their mouths shut, they could have walked from this entire thing.

She was trying to hear the prosecutor's finishing arguments when someone sat down beside her, so close that she felt warmth radiating from his body.

She slid away, but he followed.

She turned toward this intruder, a scowl ready to warn him to back off—or else.

Jack.

She hadn't figured that he would stoop low enough to come and gloat at her parent's trial.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Your side is winning," Heather admitted. "Thanks to my parents confessing."

"They had more evidence they could have brought forward if your parents hadn't confessed," Jack explained.

He had an annoying habit of needing to be right all the time. This time he wasn't.

"That's very comforting. Now would you go away?" She'd ignored his calls and letters over the past three months. Now she didn't feel like ignoring him, she felt like letting him know exactly how miserable he had managed to make her life.

"I think they're doing the right thing."

"Of course you do. You're a CIA Agent. The CIA is famous for the stupid things it thinks."

"I resigned from the CIA today. I'm a civilian."

"Decide to turn your boss over to the police or something?"

Something in his reaction told her she'd hit too close for his comfort. "Sorry. It's good to know even the CIA has some standards."

"I said I'd resigned, not that I'd been fired."

"As if you'd admit the truth."

"Have I ever lied to you?" He looked so hurt she wanted to laugh.

"Have you ever told the truth. You've been lying to me since we first met and you told me you were some rich businessman."

"I mean besides that."

"Besides that and all of your other lies, no."

The Judge's sharp rap with her gavel warned Heather she'd gotten a little too expressive in her dismissal. So why couldn't Jack get the idea.

It wasn't that she wasn't interested in him. He was a wonderfully interesting man. But she was enough of a realist to know that they had no future together.

Jack sat beside her, apparently oblivious to the effect that his body heat had on her.

After what seemed like hours, the Deputy U.S. Attorney finished his case.

"I'll recess this court until ten tomorrow morning," the judge announced.

To Heather, the Judge's gavel sounded like it was hammering a tomb shut.

Tomorrow, her parents would be sent to some far-off federal prison. Thanks to the flurry of court-building over the past several years, they couldn't expect to be released before they'd served the bulk of their term. Even with a minimal sentence, they'd be old by the time they were set free. Too old to start a new career.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

No matter how hard she had tried, she hadn't been able to forget Jack by her side.

"Haven't you done enough?"

He gave her an evil grin. "Not recently."

"That was not exactly the type of comment to get me agree to anything."

"Hey, I'm just asking whether you want a cup of coffee. I've got a lot going on in my life and I wanted to share it with you. If you've got other plans, I can take a rain check."

He had to know that she didn't have other plans. The trial had winded up hours before her lawyers had predicted. Her only plans were to wait until she learned exactly how tough the judge wanted to play it.

She couldn't find a convenient out. After all, she could hardly tell him that she didn't want to have coffee with him because she was afraid that she might throw her body over his and demand that he make love to her one more time. That was hormonal stuff and she certainly could control that.

"I've got time for a quick cup."

"Terrific. I noticed one of those upscale bookstores on my way here. Let's go there."

His little motorcycle didn't compare with the hog he'd ridden when they had met.

"Couldn't you buy back your bike?"

"Not hardly. The bidding went way out of my price range."

"I'd think the government would reimburse you."

He laughed. "I was lucky the government didn't throw me in jail. For a while it looked like they were going to." He handed her a helmet, put on his own, then mounted the bike.

"I can drive behind you."

"I'll bring you back here. Weather is perfect for a motorcycle."

Washington D.C. did have its moments. While spring generally got messed up with late snows or the early arrival of a muggy summer, its Autumns tended to be long and beautiful.

"Right." She mounted behind him.

A flood of memories washed over her. The sensation of her legs against his, the feel of his hard waist where she rested her hands, even his male scent all reminded her of the exhilarating days they had spent together. Before she had been forced to shut him out of her life forever, for her own survival.

The bookstore was only a few blocks away, but traveling those blocks seemed to take an eternity. Still, when they arrived, it seemed too soon.

Jack ordered an Espresso. Heather chose a cappuccino, delaying the inevitable moment when she would have to sit with him and talk.

Finally, the two had their coffee and she had no more excuses.

"So," she started brightly. "What's new in the exciting world of spies and exploding cigars."

"Besides I resigned, you mean?"

Hope flared in her for a moment, then died. It didn't matter. She would never be able to trust him again. Anyone who put crazy ideals ahead of basic loyalty to his loved ones couldn't be trusted.

She forced herself to be sympathetic. "I know you were hoping for a good foreign assignment after your success here."

"They offered me one. I can't figure out whether they wanted to reward me or to get me out of the country."

"But that's what you were looking for."

"I thought it was. After I finished with the Jones case, though, I was burned out. I can't really do what they're paying me to do. Too cynical, I guess."

"Yeah, sure. That's why you stayed on this last three months."

"I stayed on because someone within the agency had set us up. I didn't want to leave him in place where he could do the same to some other less lucky agent in the future."

While she might despise the CIA, she certainly understood that type of loyalty. In fact, it was painfully close to the type of loyalty that she demanded, and that Jack had been unable to deliver.

"Did you get him?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"What does 'sort of' mean?"

"It means that I'd be shot if I told anyone what really happened."

"Oh."

"They let the bastard retire. No prosecution, nothing."

"You said they could shoot you if you talked."

He gave her a quizzical look. "You going to tell anyone?"

"Of course not. But--"

"I think you have a right to know. He was trying to get you killed as much as me."

"Oh."

He looked down at his coffee. Neither had so much as touched the steaming cups.

"Well, I've got a job interview," Jack told her. "How about I pick you up tomorrow morning. We'll go to the courthouse together."

"I guess." A foolish decision, she knew. A decision she'd regret the moment he left her. Still, for just a moment, her hormones had spoken for her. Surely it wasn't a fatal decision.

Jack awoke, showered, and put on his best suit.

He'd rented a car the previous evening so he wouldn't have to cart Heather around on the little Honda. He'd have to buy a car, he supposed. Since he had spent so much of his life outside the country, he hadn't actually owned a car in years.

His job interview had been a lie. He had his goals set on one particular job. While he'd have to interview for that one, he couldn't do it until all of the pieces lined up.

Finally he set off for Heather's Capital Hill office.

She came to the door wearing khaki slacks and a sweater that molded her to her figure like it was painted on.

She stared at him for a moment, then glanced at his rental car. "I've got to change."

"You look fantastic, and besides we're in a hurry. Let's go."

She wavered. To his surprise, she almost looked disappointed that he'd ditched the motorcycle for the car.

"It's a rental," he told her. "I've still got the bike."

His reassurance didn't appear to be what she was looking for.

"It's fine."

"I thought it would be nice to ride in comfort rather than get to the courthouse with helmet hair."

"I said it was fine."

Only it wasn't. His CIA training had taught him to be aware of subtle nuances, but he certainly didn't need that now.

For an instant, he let himself dare think that she might be regretting the bike for the same reason he'd almost dumped the car that morning. On the bike, their bodies would be pressed together in an embrace very similar to lovemaking.

He dismissed the thought. Women don't let their hormones rule their reason the way he had through much of his relationship with Heather. She was probably just regretting that she'd agreed to let him drive.

Still, that sweater did funny things to his heart.

She buckled her seatbelt and sunk into the passenger seat, waiting passively for him to start the car, for him to re-start the conversation.

"I've been thinking about us," he told her.

"That must not have taken long," she answered.

One gambit down the drain. Still, he had fifteen minutes that it would take to get to the Federal Courthouse and he intended to use them all.

"I looked into the D.C. requirements for becoming a private investigator. With my CIA experience, I qualify automatically. I'd have to take the test, of course, but I think I could become a registered private investigator in a couple of months."

"Just what I need. More competition."

Gambit two, shot to heck.

"Have you thought about what you can do for the rest of your life, now that your parents don't have to hide behind every bush."

She stared at him for a moment, then her chin began to tremble.

"You really think I should be relieved? That's got to be the difference between you and me. I don't care about whether they are running or not. I only care that they are my parents and I want them near me."

Strike three, he was out.

Heather's quiet, wracking, sobs didn't exactly encourage Jack to blurt out his case. Not that he had much of a case.

He hadn't thought fifteen minutes would be long enough to let her know his feelings. He realized that fifteen years might be more like it. When he pulled up to the courthouse, both of them seemed relieved.

The courtroom was nearly empty. The Deputy U.S. Attorney, the defense attorneys, the Webbs, and a couple of bailiffs rattled like beads in a basket. He and

Heather were the only onlookers. Public interest in long-forgotten Viet Nam protests was close to nil.

Heather didn't exactly invite him to sit beside her but he did anyway.

His plans weren't going anywhere fast yet, but he didn't intend to give up. Not yet and not ever.

The judge sat, an impressive stack of papers before her. "Let me begin by saying that this is an unusual case."

* * * *

Heather closed her eyes. She didn't want to hear, but couldn't stop herself from listening.

"The facts of the case are stipulated so I need not spend any time reviewing them. Since the defendants have entered a plea of no contest, and since they have waived the right to a jury trial, my only requirements are to determine whether a crime has been committed, and if so, what punishment should be levied.

"Clearly a crime has been committed."

Sitting beside her, Heather felt Jack exhale wearily. She felt the same way. Couldn't the judge see that they had been kids, that their role in the bombing had been accidental?

"I therefore find both Mr. Peter Engle, and Mrs. Karen Unruh, alias Peter and Karen Webb, guilty of one count each of felony bombing."

Heather felt herself wilt. She hadn't realized it but she must have been holding out for a miracle. She and Jack must have used up their lifetime supply of miracles just staying alive during the Mr. Jones case. There didn't appear to be any miracles left for her parents.

"I thereby sentence each of you to twenty years."

It was the end, Heather knew. How could her parents survive without each other? How would she survive without the only family she had never known?

The Judge looked sternly at Heather's parents.

"Although your crime cannot be mitigated, I do recognize that subsequent to the bombing, you have not been involved with any known criminal activity."

She opened a large manila envelope. "I also have received this letter from the Director of the CIA."

Heather's eyes flew to Jack, but he continued to stare straight ahead as if mesmerized by the Judge.

The woman was attractive in a dignified way, but Heather didn't think she was quite that interesting.

"The Director urges leniency in light of your services to the country during a recent crisis which, for some unknown security reasons, cannot be disclosed to the court.

"In light of this extraordinary plea, I will set aside my sentence." Her face hardened. "Each of you will be placed on probation for the next five years. If, during that period, I hear of your involvement with any illegal activity, any at all, you'll find yourself breaking rocks in a federal prison before you can say Jack Robinson. Court dismissed."

Heather stared at Jack, but he stood as if suddenly unaware of her presence and rushed to the front of the courtroom where her parents still stood for their sentencing.

"I can't tell you how grateful we are to you," Karen told him.

"For what?" Heather asked.

"You don't think the CIA Director wanted to write that letter, do you? Mr. Eastland made it happen. He also arranged our lawyers."

"I thought there was some charity."

"The charity is named Jack Eastland."

Jack had the decency to blush, just a little. If anything, the color in his cheeks made him look even more appealing.

"Stay out of trouble," he urged. "I'll be in touch, but I imagine you need a few minutes to yourself." He tossed his car keys to Heather. "I'll be around to pick up the car later."

Heather watched him disappear and tried to figure out what had happened.

* * * *

Jack ticked off the errands he'd run. Printing shop, jewelry store, licensing bureau. All seemed in order. He'd give Heather one last shot.

Karen Webb answered the door when he knocked. She ushered him in then gestured to her husband.

Without saying anything to Heather, the two disappeared. At least somebody was on his side in this whole mess.

"So what shall we have for dinner, Mom?" Heather called out.

She stepped out from her bedroom and spotted him. "What are you doing here?"

Not an auspicious beginning.

"Do you remember that job interview I had?"

"Do you ever answer questions or do you just talk in riddles."

"Mostly talk in riddles. I learn more that way. How about you?"

"You're incorrigible." She sighed. "What about the job interview."

"I decided what I want to do."

"How nice for you."

"I thought you'd be happy." He handed over his new business card.

"Eastland, Eastland, and Webb? What, you're planning taking over my agency?"

"Actually, no."

He fumbled in his pocket. "I'm not old fashioned about this. I sort of thought you might want to take my name since yours is just one your parents picked up while they were on the run."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm asking you to marry me." He felt a little awkward about dropping to a knee and all of that, but when he caught her glare, he decided that awkward was the least of his problems.

He did the knee thing and held out the ring he'd selected. "Of course we can always get a different setting."

"Oh." Her voice was small. "It's beautiful."

"Do you mean--"

"Jack, you darling. I know I've been stupid. Here I've been saying that you have to believe in the person rather than in some abstract notion, but I haven't let myself believe in you. I can't believe you still want me after how mean I've been to you."

"I liked the Darling part. I'm not big on anyone calling you an stupid, even yourself. But I'd like a definite yes or no answer."

"Of course I'll marry you."

He pried himself off his knee. "Good. I wasn't sure how much longer that knee would last. So when do you think we should do it."

"I think we should wait until after we get married," Heather told him.

"What I meant was--"

The mischievous look on her face told him that she had known exactly what he meant.

"In that case, let's get married today."

Epilogue

The doorbell's chime interrupted Jack's last attempt to shovel a spoonful of strained carrots into Claire-Elaine's mouth.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Heather asked.

Her mother's voice was as cheery as ever. "We're looking forward to it. You know we wouldn't do anything dangerous."

"Yeah, right," Jack agreed. He took off Claire-Elaine's bib and used it to wipe off the carrots which, despite his best efforts, seemed to end up everywhere but inside her stomach.

"All right," Heather agreed.

Jack scooped his baby from her high chair and carried her out to the living room.

The stroller was already unfolded and ready to receive the baby, a blanket ready to fold around her. Heather's parents had lavished the care and attention on their granddaughter that they had once showered on Heather.

He noted their hand-lettered signs protesting U.S. policy supporting some far off dictatorship.

"We'll bring Claire-Elaine back after supper," Karen told him. "You two have a good time."

He looked at Heather in time to catch her big wink. So much for catching up on their Agency paperwork. On the other hand, it hadn't been a very good idea after all.

"Just one second," he said. Carefully he set Claire-Elaine in the carriage and wrapped the blanket around her. Finally, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the two small American flags he'd bought for the occasion. They looked beautiful on Claire-Elaine's sparkling white carriage.

Peter looked at the flags and laughed. "Between us, we'll raise a well rounded kid all right."

They wheeled the baby out the door.

"Between us, I think maybe we should be working on her well rounded brother," Heather breathed into Jack's ear.