



Merrick

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Undercover cop Margo Sullivan faces her toughest assignment yet: infiltrating the glamorous but deadly world of Merrick Pendergast, a CEO with mysterious pharmaceutical ties.

When young people start dying from a new street drug, Margo is tasked with getting close to Merrick, whose company is suspected of being the source.

Merrick, still haunted by the loss of his fiancée and unborn child, leads a life filled with fleeting relationships until Margo's fierce independence captivates him.

As they embark on a passionate affair, Margo struggles with her dual life, drawn deeper into Merrick's world than she ever intended.

As truths unravel and trust shatters, they must navigate through their personal wreckage...

Can their love survive the ultimate test of loyalty and deception?

Or will Margo and Merrick forge a new path without each other?

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Chapter 1

“You wanted to see me?”

“Come in and close the door behind you.” Commander Williams was going on seventy but was still the tough, no-nonsense leader of the precinct and there was no doubt as to his authority and his ability to run the squad.

His mahogany skin was stretched tautly across his face and his hair was almost white and shaved close to his scalp in a precise military style.

Margo sat on the single chair across from his scarred desk and waited until he had finished signing some sheets.

Pushing away the folder, he looked up at her and folded his large hands in front of him as he studied her face.

“You’re back.”

“I am, yes.”

“And I had to hear it from Michaelson.” His thick bushy brows lifted as he continued to give her his standard intimidating look that would have anyone else in his squad room in a puddle. But not her – Margo Sullivan was one of his best cops and as tough as they come.

“Michaelson talks too damn much. I had every intention of dropping by after I

finished the dreaded paperwork. Sir.”

He had to bite back a smile as they both knew she tacked on the last part as an afterthought. He had more or less adopted her since she came on a little over thirty years ago and everyone knew that she was his favorite. She had come fresh from the academy and proven herself from the very beginning.

But then, Margo Sullivan had been hungry and determined to prove herself. Having been brought up in the system, she had basically had to fight for everything she had and had grown up learning to depend on no one but herself.

She was tough and focused on her work. Getting the bad guys was the focal point of her career, leaving room for little else.

“How was it?”

She was about to say that it was all in the report but belatedly realized that this man was her superior and deserved her respect. Besides, he was much more than her boss. Over the years, she had reluctantly opened up a small portion of her heart to him.

“Productive.” She laid it out for him as concisely as she could. She was just fresh from an undercover stint that had taken five months to wrap up instead of the three she had estimated. Someone had been cutting open homeless people and performing unauthorized surgery on them.

The two sick bastards were brothers – one a disgraced medical doctor and the other just a freaking moron with an axe to grind. They both had the idea to rid the city of the ‘scum’ of the earth and harvest organs for the purpose of selling them.

“You were injured in the line.”

She shrugged it off, reluctant to get into it. “One of them had a knife. Tried to slice me open but was not quite successful.” She grinned fiercely. “He is now nursing injuries to his precious jewels and strapped down in bed with restraints on. The other brother is more practical. He is spilling his guts.”

Commander Williams gave her a steady look and knew she was downplaying her injuries.

“Go home Sullivan. You are off for the week.”

“I want to finish up the paperwork and I have some cases...”

“That was not a request. Take the week and regroup. There must be some personal things needing your attention.”

She struggled not to let him see the resentment. She had wrapped the case, but work was her justification for living. Without it, she was usually at loose ends with no idea what to do with herself. She was not in the least domestic. Her apartment was nice enough, but just somewhere she slept – sometimes.

Several nights she would just crash here at the precinct when she had worked herself to the bone. A week free was going to leave her with nothing to focus on and that was not good. She hated having nothing to do.

“Sir, with respect, I would prefer to spend the time...”

“No.” his face hardened. “You have been out for five months. The case was a dangerous one and you were injured. We have protocols in place for a reason. Take the week, go to a spa...,” he almost grinned at the look of horror on her lovely face. Even though she constantly tried to downplay her looks, it was undeniably there.

Her complexion was a flawless cocoa brown, and her lips were wide and full, giving her a sultry look that was not contrived and had men coming onto her at every turn. She had taken the time to clean up and was wearing faded denims and an old washed-out flannel shirt, which had seen better days.

She had taken out the braids she had worn for this undercover stint and her natural hair was brushed severely into a coil at the nape of her neck. Mahogany brown eyes were large and widely spaced with sooty lashes making shadows on her cheeks.

She was long and lean and solid with defined muscles. “Or just stay home and do nothing.”

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“I don’t know how to do that.”

“You are going to have to learn. Finish your report and get the hell out of here.”

He watched as she uncoiled herself from the chair, face carefully bland. “Sir.”

“Detective?” His voice stopped her at the door. “Good work.”

A nod was her only acknowledgement, but he suspected that she was steaming and not pleased with his order. Tough, he thought wryly as he pulled the folder towards him. Margo Sullivan was one of his best, but she was also the worst when it came to taking personal time.

Last year this time, he had to threaten to suspend her if she did not take some holiday days. She had gone down with the bug that was going around and instead of staying home, had crawled in, looking like death. And she had refused to go to the doctor’s. He had personally driven her there and sat until she was seen to.

Getting her to take the prescribed meds had been another warfare. The woman was a pain in the ass, but a damn fine cop. She carried the weight of the underdog and the helpless and oppressed with her, which made her exceptionally good at her job.

Shaking his head, he realized he was going to have to see for himself that she left the building before end of shift.

“Don’t talk to me.”

“He asked and I could not lie!” Detective Michaelson wedged his foot inside the door before she could slam it in his face.

“I have work. Get the hell out.”

“Come on, Sullivan.” Instead of doing what he was told, he sat on her ratty chair and crossed his legs at the ankles. “You just finished a major bust. You should be out celebrating.

Getting laid...,” he grinned when she glared at him as she went to get coffee from her pot. “How about offering me...,” he held up a hand as she simply went back to her desk and gave him a cool look.

“Okay, fine. I am just looking out for you.”

“Who asked you to?”

“You sustained serious injuries...”

“I’m still standing, aren’t I?” She grouched but felt the heat cooling. She could not stay angry with him. Brad Michaelson was a friend, and she knew he genuinely cared about her. At one point - early in their careers, they had hooked up, but she decided that it was better to keep things platonic, much to his disappointment. “What do you want?”

He grinned, picking up on her change of mood.

“Just wanted to offer my personal congrats and invite you out for beer later. Just the two of us...,” he held up a hand when she started to decline. “I have something I want

to discuss with you.”

She eyed him over the rim of her cup. “It better not be a ploy to get into my pants.”

“As if I could,” he murmured lightly. “I happen to have my pride, and you’ve turned me down enough times for it to take a beating.”

“Okay. Get lost so I can finish up my paperwork. We both know that the commander is going to present himself inside my office an hour from now to make sure I am gone.” The resentment was back and made Michael grin.

“You know, Sullivan. You are the only cop I know who does not like to take personal time. The rest of us humans cannot wait to get out of here and hunker down over a beer and watch the games.”

“Crime never takes a day off.”

He rose lithely, passing a hand over his well-cut slate gray jacket. His light blue eyes twinkled as he stared at her. She was fifty-two years old and looked twenty years younger. Her thick dark hair had threads of gray running through the strands and she never once thought of getting rid of them.

Her face was unlined, her complexion flawless and smooth. He knew from the brief fling they had and the fact that they usually paired up in the boxing ring, that she was tough and competitive and not an easy mark. Quite a few felons had learned that the hard way.

“We should use that as a slogan.”

“Bite me.”

“I would, but I’m afraid of getting my teeth kicked in. See you at seven.”

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Kicking back in her worn leather chair, she raised her feet and crossed them on the desk, her coffee cup cradled in her hands. She would never admit it, but the knife had sliced her left arm and was hurting like a son of a bitch.

She had not required stitches, thankfully and the doctor had slapped ointment on it after cleaning the wound, but it was still throbbing like an aching tooth, which was pissing her off all over again.

She had dropped her guard for a second and that had given the sick son of a bitch to get close. Shaking her head, she finished the coffee and put away the cup. She would finish up and get out of here, before the commander came looking for her.

What she was going to do with the rest of the time, was beyond her.

Merrick settled back in the soft body molding leather chair and trained his intense gray eyes on the man seated across from him. His desk was an impressive redwood with carved legs and etchings and had been especially designed for him by a carpenter who he was friends with.

The stunning view at his back was that of the town, with its spears of buildings and the backdrop of a summer blue sky fading into fall. Everything about the man was impressive and intimidating.

The fifty-five-year-old had worked tirelessly to bring his company to what it was now. A giant in the pharmaceutical world with diversified holdings including real

estate, oil wells and a successful airline.

His face was lean and attractive, the pain and tragedy from his past giving it a haunting quality. His eyes were sharp and gave one the impression that he could see clearly through and into the soul. Thick black hair was heavily threaded through with gray.

His body was lean and muscular. He had shed his navy-blue jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his baby blue cotton shirt to his powerful forearms. He had also dispensed of his tie and unbuttoned the two top buttons to reveal a strong column of tanned throat.

When he was not chained to his desk or travelling for work, he was often at his private gym or working out at his club. He was trained in the art of Krav Maga and kickboxing.

His years in the service of the marines had honed his skills and given him much needed discipline. In business he was a shark with powerful reach, and nothing escaped him. But he had a weakness. When it came to family, he could not see beyond the surface.

“I will talk to him.” Maurice Pendergast was the younger brother by ten years but lacked his brother’s strength and character. Merrick had put him in a position of authority despite warnings from his board and the top management of the company. The man was steady but lacked any sort of initiative.

“No!” Merrick shook his head decisively. “I will talk to him.” He trained those intense gray eyes on his brother. “You cannot keep making excuses for him. Jason is a grown ass man who needs to take responsibilities for his actions. He keeps messing up.” Tamping down the anger and frustration, he firmed his lips.

“I did not work tirelessly to take this company to where it is for my nephew to tear it down. He has been absent from work for the past three days and messed up a negotiation of vital importance to the company. The board is recommending that we fire him, and I am inclined to agree and give into their demand.”

Maurice’s eyes, a shade lighter than his brother’s and without the intense light, opened wide. “You cannot do that. It would destroy him.”

Merrick made an impatient gesture with one hand. “I don’t want to go to that extreme, but he is forcing my hand. Michael is doing so well, and I do not like comparing the two brothers, but Jason comes up severely lacking. What the hell is going on with him?”

His brother, Maurice, hung his head in defeat. “We’re having problems at home.”

Merrick sent him a narrowed eye look. “So?”

“Janey and I have been fighting constantly.” His chin wobbled as he lifted his head to look at his brother. He had often envied the man, his tenacity and ability to make money at the drop of a hat. Merrick was the oldest, so he had inherited the company and turned it into a multi-billion dollar one.

He was also the better looking, the stronger and the one that was not afraid of anything. He was also the one that his wife had wanted and that was a constant source of unrest and argument between them.

“Jason takes it to heart.”

“What is it this time?”

“She wants a bigger house.”

Merrick's thick brows shot up and cynical amusement curved his lips. "Let me guess - a friend of hers has just moved into a mansion and she is dissatisfied with the current living arrangement. You are living in the manor that has been in the family for decades.

I obligingly moved out years ago when you got engaged. The place has eight bedrooms in total and has been redecorated how many times in the last few years?"

"Five." His brother held up a hand to show the amount of fingers, a bitter expression on his face.

His face hardened fractionally as he leaned forward. "That is going to stop. I approved the redecorating the last couple of times, but I am drawing a line in the sand. If you cannot control your own wife, that leaves me to do something about it."

Maurice tamped down his resentment at the autocratic tone. "You're not married, so you wouldn't know what..." his voice tailed off at the closed look on his brother's face and he could have bitten off his tongue. "Mer, I am, sorry as hell. I don't know..."

"Forget it." He waved a hand in dismissal. "I am calling a family meeting to set everyone straight. The company cannot keep footing the bill for some trivial and frivolous spending that has been going on. And Jason gets one more chance to prove himself.

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Am I clear?" His tone brooked no argument and had Maurice rising and straightening his jacket. He had a management position and a big office, half the size of his brother's office ofcourse, but everyone in the company knew that he lacked the necessary authority and his brother's word was law.

He was getting tired of playing second fiddle to the man.

"Of course." He forced a smile. "Whatever you say."

"That is right. And I will be reiterating that aspect of it at the meeting," he waved a dismissive hand. "I have a conference meeting in two minutes."

Maurice slipped from the office and gave a cordial nod to the dragon of an assistant who guarded his brother's office with such fierceness, no one would deign to just walk in, not even family. The woman looked like a dried-up old prune and behaved as if she was royalty.

"Thanks for fitting me in," he tried to butter up the old hag but got a cool nod for his effort.

"Mr. Merrick is a terribly busy man, and you just took up his valuable time. I suggest you think of that when you consider just dropping by unannounced."

The tone, the brittle professional lofty voice had anger coursing through his veins, and he wanted to tell the woman to go to hell and remind her that his name was Pendergast. But Olive Manners was more respected than anyone in the company and earned a goddamn executive salary.

She was also totally ‘unfireable’. His brother had once told him that she was more loyal than anyone he knew, and he had no idea what the hell he would do without her.

The woman wielded power and she damn well knew it. No wonder she behaved as if the place belonged to her. Without saying another word, he turned on his heels and left the office that was bigger than his. Another thing to contend with.

“Cancel my 2.00 pm.” He said without looking up from the contract he was perusing. “I have decided to take Jackson up on his offer to take a look at the gallery.

And call Mendez and let him know that the work on the Inns Wood apartments is lackluster at best. I need something different.” He continued to reel off more instructions in his own precise and rapid-fire manner, knowing that she would have everything done in the way he preferred..

Making a notation in the corner of the legal document, he finally put it aside and concentrated on the woman seated on one of the cushioned chairs with her knees demurely pressed together and her ever present iPad in her hands.

Olive Manners was in her sixties, with her snowy white hair combed back from her head in a perfect and neat bun, with not a hair out of place. Her glasses were perched on the bridge of her nose, and she looked exactly as she was – completely efficient and a professional in every bone of her body. And she was infallibly faithful and loyal.

She had been with him for the last thirty years and even when she lost her husband ten years ago, still managed to come in and see to it that things were running smoothly. Merrick had no idea what the hell he would have done without her. It was sad to note that she was more valuable to him than his own brother. And more loyal and committed.

Her salary was considerable, but he could not buy that kind of loyalty and could only repay it by any means he could. She kept odd hours because he did, and never once complained about her workload. He could leave everything in her more than capable hands with the assurance that it would get done.

He did not have to worry about hurting her feelings. He never celebrated birthdays and had been precise about that. She never delved into his personal life and most of all, she had never looked at him with the idea or thought of landing in his bed.

A few support staff had tried that and received strong reprimands. He was not into hunting in his own pool. Besides, after what happened in his past, he was not looking for anything permanent. He had a sort of arrangement with a woman who understood that there was nothing going on but the physical and he was fine with that.

“I would like a meeting with Calvin.”

She made a few notations on her device. “You have an opening in a very tight schedule for end of business day.”

He nodded. “That’s fine with me.” Picking up a gold tipped pen, he slid it between his fingers. “Jason has become a problem.” He knew he could say that to her without fear of his views leaving the room. And he valued her opinion. She also had the uncanny ability to know what’s going on in the entire building.

“He is a lazy young man and an entitled one. His father makes excuses for him which makes it even worse.”

She was not being judgmental but simply stating a fact. He respected honesty.

And because he did, he nodded. “I intend to straighten him out. Once and for all. No more excuses.”

Olive nodded and jotted down a few more notes. “He needs to have an eye kept on him!”

“Precisely. Now back to the contract.”

Chapter 2

He had arrived before her and already placed the order. He knew her enough to anticipate her needs. She would need red meat, bloody and disgusting by his estimation and icy cold beer.

He also knew that she would appreciate the booth at the back and closest to the window. Margo Sullivan was a cop through and through and preferred facing the room.

Even though it was a ‘cop shop’, with other cops milling around, shooting the breeze after clocking out or eating whatever the menu had to offer and drinking beer, she would not be comfortable sitting in the middle or up front.

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She was also more comfortable with less crowd. His smile came as he watched her stride into the darkened space, her cop eyes flickering around the room, giving brief nods to those who called out to her.

And she was a woman who captured eyes. He often thought that it was because of the fact that she did not give a rat's ass about fashion and that was mainly the appeal.

But it was much more than that. Margo had the long lean and hungry look of a feline. He privately labeled her as a panther or a tiger. Her jeans were faded as was her shirt. She had on an old jacket that was used to cover her shoulder holster, and her hair had several tendrils escaping the tight bun.

Unlike other females, she had not seen the need to tidy up and slap on makeup. Not that she needed it. He was once again bowled over by the fact that she was in her fifties. She had the looks and grace of someone twenty years younger.

"I ordered for you!" He just managed to anchor himself down as he started to rise to pull out her chair. She would not appreciate being treated like a damsel in distress and such niceties were lost on her.

Her tapered brows lifted as she turned the chair around and straddled it, hooking her feet on the rungs. "Aren't you a little presumptuous."

"Cold beer and a sizzling burger." He sent her a charming grin as he nudged the beer towards her.

"You think you know me." She accepted the beer and twisted the cork off.

“I would like to think so. You are not so complicated.”

“If you say so.” Her eyes roamed the room restlessly as if searching for someone. “I see Jenkins is back from his stint at the Federal office.”

“Yeah.” Michael took a sip of his own beer. “And much more of an asshole than before.”

That made her smile. “So, nothing has changed.”

“Not much. You look good.”

She eyed him as she sipped her beer. “If that’s your feeble way of trying to get laid, you’re not doing a bang-up job.”

He shrugged an impatient shoulder. “Christ woman! Can’t you take a frigging compliment?”

“You know how I feel about those.”

He was saved from responding when their meals were brought to the table.

“Hey superstar. Welcome back.” The owner of the bar, a middle-aged black man with an ample girth, beamed at her.

“Thanks, Bert. How’s the wife and kids?”

“Perfect. The new baby is like a charm. Sleeps through the night.”

“How many kids in total?”

His smile widened. “Four.”

“Ouch. My sympathies to Maureen.”

“She loves it. Meal’s on the house. No, arguments.” Without waiting for any, he ambled away to serve someone else.

“Good man.”

“His place was robbed three weeks ago.”

She frowned at him and picked up her burger. “Did they catch the assholes?”

“With the cash and liquor in their possession. A silent alarm went off and every cop within a five-mile radius responded.”

“They were either morons or new to the area. This place is always crawling with cops.”

“Precisely. It is good to have you back.” He looked over at her and shook his head.

“There’s nothing sexual about the damn comment, so take it at face value.”

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She grinned at his exasperated expression. “Am I that much of a pain in the ass?”

His brows lifted. “We are thinking of making a sign and hanging it outside your office.” Brad grinned at the dirty look she aimed at him. But he was happy to see that she looked relaxed and rested. “What are you going to do with your time off?”

“Nothing. Try and do a bit of cleaning and visit a gallery or two.”

He gave her a contemplative look. “It always amazes me that you like that kind of stuff.”

“Why?” She demanded. “Because I was brought up in a group home?”

He gave her a pained look as he took a sip of his brew.

“No, it’s because of how bloody tough you are. Jesus! Lighten up. Being brought up in a group home obviously made you who you are. And I happen to admire the package.”

“Package?” Her sultry voice had gone ominously quiet.

“Package, yes.” He grinned. “And we have too many cops present for you to even consider kicking my ass.”

“Don’t be too sure of yourself. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“You heard of the new street drug?”

She nodded, her expression going sober. “Even under, I heard whispers. It is hitting the clubs and causing a hell of a lot of damage. Combination of meth and speed. Mostly college kids and a few high schoolers getting hooked. It’s like a damn epidemic.”

“Enough to have everyone getting concerned. Including the mayor.”

“And we all know he is gunning for the White House. It is more of a political thing for him.” The bitterness seeped through her voice.

“That’s beside the point. Have you also heard the rumors?”

“About it being linked to Medtech? Yeah. The investigation is stalled because – that company is a pharmaceutical giant with top lawyers on retainer. Without solid proof that it comes from their house, we are dead in the water.”

“We are!” He polished off his burger and meticulously wiped his fingers on the napkin. “The commander is pulling you in for the undercover work.”

She nodded. “The reason why he wants me to take some time off.”

“Are you serious about it being your last undercover stint?”

She nodded. “I’m getting too old for the streets.” She grinned as he scoffed. “It is true. The last one was wicked. The two brothers had me tuckered out and I was not on my guard. I was almost killed.” Her smile faded.

“I spent months under, some of that time, sleeping on the streets to get a feel of things and it was pretty rough.” She put down the rest of her burger and picked up her beer.

“I met some people and talked to them and realized they are not insane. They just

don't have anywhere to live. Some are down on their luck and just plain down. I managed to recommend some of them to homes where they can take the chance to recover and make a fresh start. It was damn depressing.

Hell, we take so much for granted – a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs and food to eat, that we forget there are people suffering.” She shrugged. “I have decided to set up a regular soup kitchen for the homeless.”

“Isn't that already in place?”

“No. For the area I was involved with, it's only once a week. People need to be fed every damn day of the week. There are restaurants dumping leftovers, every single day. I've reached out to a couple of them for assistance.”

“You don't fool me, Sullivan. You have a heart of gold,” he grinned at the look on her face.

“It's common decency to care.” She flicked a glance over his immaculate suit. “You should sell some of your expensive stuff and give the proceeds to the cause. Remind me again how a guy who earns a living as a cop can afford to dress like you do?”

“Smart investing and savings. Also having a wealthy aunt who thinks the world of you.”

“The woman is a damn fool.”

“She adores me.” His smile faded. “You need something other than the job.”

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Her frown came again. They had had the same discussion over the years with the same results.

“I am not sleeping with you again.” That is over and done with.”

He gave an impatient movement with his hands. “This is not about me trying to get into your pants.

You are a very good cop, no scratch that – you are an excellent cop and part of it is your focus and determination to stand for the victims. That’s admirable. But you don’t have a personal life. You are all about the job. I am surprised you are not facing burn out.”

Leaning back, she eyed him appraisingly. He was a solid cop himself and aside from the fancy threads and the well-groomed ash blonde hair, he was good at what he did and was steady. She had no hesitation of walking into a building with him because he always had her back. He was also a friend, whether she wanted him to be or not.

“How did the personal life work for you?” She pointed her bottle at him. In the last half hour while they had been seated, several cops had departed and more had strolled in.

The noise level was considerable, competing with the game on the big screen television in the center of the room. It was a cozy setup and a familiar one and she had missed it. “You have been divorced twice – the second marriage lasting only two years.”

He grimaced. “That’s because I’m still hung up you,” he said, half teasingly.

“We are cops and we make lousy bed partners and even lousier spouses. Our hours are insane. We see our partners at work, more than we see our partners at home. That has got to put a tremendous strain on any relationship, no matter how solid.”

“Is that why you never considered matrimony?”

“That among other things.”

“Life’s about taking risks.” He pointed out and had her laughing.

“Where the hell did you pick that up?”

“It’s true,” he insisted, “I don’t know how you do it. Being alone all these years, never having a solid relationship.”

“I happen to like my own company. And being alone is not the same as being lonely.”

“Now, who’s being philosophical?” He scoffed.

“I’m just being real. Oh, crap.” She groaned. “We’re about to be invaded.”

“is this a private gathering or can anyone join in? Hey Bert, another round for this table.” Detectives Holland and Willis pulled out chairs without waiting for an invitation.

Her place felt strange and incredibly quiet. She had taken on a mortgage twenty years ago and never regretted setting down roots. The first apartment she had called home

was in a downtrodden area and had had more than a few complaints.

But as she was hardly ever home, it had not bothered her very much. It had been just a place to hang her clothing and crash whenever she was off and that was rare. She was a workaholic and after leaving the academy, she had been determined to make her mark.

Shaking her head at the idealistic person she had brought into the 'cop shop', she closed her door and engaged the alarm. Since then, she had bought the house in a very nice neighborhood, but she wasn't taking any chances.

She was a cop and even though she did not announce it to her neighbors, because of how sensitive her position was, she was still cautious.

Taking off her boots, she tucked them away inside the hallway closet and unhooked her weapon harness. She had spent the greater part of the evening shooting the breeze with fellow cops and had forced herself to stay for the conversation and a few more beers.

Brad had cast her amused looks as he realized that she was dying to leave.

But she stuck it out and enjoyed herself. She had a week to recuperate, adjust to being back where she belonged before she took on another assignment. And this one was going to be a biggie.

Making her way through the hallway and past the entrance table, she went into the kitchen that she rarely used.

She was not domestically minded and in fact hated anything to do with housework. She was set up in a way that she could afford employing someone to come in and do chores. But she hated anyone in her space. And the fewer people she had around her,

the better for her.

She bought paper plates and cups and ignored what Brad always said about adding to the pollution. She hardly ate at home, but when she did, she preferred to have fewer things to wash up.

Heading straight to the machine, she programmed coffee and sat at the dining table while she waited.

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She had come a hell of a long way. Being brought up in a group home had been lousy. Not knowing why her mother had left her there, had been worse. She had learned to defend herself since she was six years old and had grown tough over the years. Had to. It was eat or be eaten.

It wasn't until later that she discovered the truth about her parentage. Her mother had been a junkie, and her father was unknown. Her grand aunt had spent years looking for her and when she finally found her, the woman had told her the truth.

It had taken a hell of a long time for her to accept the woman's open devotion, but she finally accepted that Aunt Sybil loved her. The woman genuinely cared.

Rising, she went to pour a large cup of the brew and took it with her upstairs. A long bubble bath and maybe some cleaning up before crashing for the night was in order.

She had told Brad that she was going to be taking in some art and make a stop at the museums and that is exactly what she planned to do. In between, she was going to visit her aunt and maybe spend a night.

After she had failed to convince her niece to live with her, she had extracted the promise that Margo come and see her as often as she can.

"Like it or not, I am your only remaining relative and I happen to love you. Please don't make me beg."

So, she had succumbed, and the visits were not so awful. Aunt Sybil was in her nineties, but the woman was as spritely as someone much younger and did everything

for herself.

She only had someone come in twice a week to take care of the household chores. She did her own shopping and cooked her own meals. She also loved to garden. Margo had a feeling she had inherited that aspect from her aunt.

Gardening relaxed her and whenever she was at home, she would dig in the dirt. Her flowers were blooming, and her vegetables were lush and thriving. She had herbs planted in pots on her windowsill.

Whenever she had a yield, she would take it to the precinct and hand it out to her fellow cops who would always tease that she planted all these vegetables and did not cook.

Taking the cup with her, she pushed the door open to her suite and just stood there in the small sitting room.

It was always a marvel that she had a home of her own after her inauspicious beginning. She worked hard, harder than most of the men in her squad. She was a woman and had come in with nothing and realized that she had to prove herself.

She worked out religiously, both at the precinct and at home. She had transformed one of the bedrooms into a fully equipped gym and sparred mostly with Brad. She ran almost ten miles every day and kept her body well-toned and fit.

She was not crazy about working out, but she was aware that as an older woman, she had to be on the ball.

Sweeping her eyes around the lovely green and blue room with its tan leather sofas and big screen television hooked to the wall, she stepped out and into a bedroom, she had designed herself. She wasn't at home too often, but when she was, she wanted to

be comfortable.

The blue and green theme continued in the bedroom. The windows were large, giving the room an illusion of extra space and there was a window seat with plump pillows that overlooked her garden.

She liked the view a lot and had the idea that it soothed her nerves whenever she was on an exceedingly difficult case. Her queen-sized bed was in the center of the shiny parquet floor and the quilt covering it had mixes of green, blues and yellows.

Her closet doors were thrown wide open, revealing that she did not do much shopping. The few items of clothing were woefully inadequate, reminding her that she need to order some more clothes online.

She was certainly not going to torture herself by deliberately going to a damn mall and searching for bargains. After all, she was not insane.

Walking over to the window seat, she took pleasure in sitting down and looking out at the beautiful view.

Unwrapping the gauze after tugging off his workout gloves, he stared at the bruising and reluctantly realized that he had overdone the hit on the punching bag. But his mind had been in a disarray. The meeting with his brother and family had not gone as well as expected.

Jason had been resentful and disrespectful, two things he did not tolerate. And his brother had compounded the problem by apologizing effusively. Janey had been annoyingly predictable, with her simpering.

It always sickened him that his brother's wife did not show the slightest hesitancy about coming onto him. She had tried to lure him into her bed several times and he had skillfully avoided it without having to resort to anything drastic.

But the woman got on his nerves. He had no idea what on earth Maurice saw in her. But to each his own and he had no intention of getting between a married couple, even though Maurice was his brother.

Michael on the other hand was a welcome change. His other nephew was steady and a hard worker and was involved in a monogamous relationship with a lovely young woman. Merrick was proud of him.

Stripping off his sodden clothing, he stood in front of the mirror and ruthlessly studied his lean body. His shoulders, chest and forearms rippled with muscles when he moved, and his stomach was taut and flat. Sprinklings of dark hairs dusted his tanned chest.

He might be approaching his sixties, and that always took him aback – but he did not look it and was in exceptionally good health. His sex life was active and whenever he had the time, he indulged.

Moving away from the double mirrors in his green and gold bathroom, he bypassed the massive tub in the center of the room and headed for the large shower install. Having it out with his brother's family had put a pall over his evening. He had had plans to take in a musical but instead had to run interference.

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Touching the button that dispensed soap liquid, he filled his palm and used the forest green liquid to rub over his body. And could not stop the memories from crashing back. It has been twenty years ago. The coming fall would officially make it the twentieth anniversary of the most painful day of his life.

His fiancé and unborn child had perished in a plane crash and had changed his life forever.

Pushing some more buttons, he ducked his head beneath the spray and closed his eyes as the water sluiced over his body and washed away the suds. Laura had been six months pregnant.

And they were having a son. He should have married her before, but they both wanted to wait. And he was supposed to have accompanied her on the trip to Paris to do some shopping, but something had come up at the last minute.

A freak storm. The bitterness surged into his throat and lodged there. A storm that had come up out of nowhere had ended the life of the woman he loved and his unborn son. It had been crippling, so much so that it had taken a hell of a long time for him to function. Work had been his savior.

He had plunged himself into building the business to block out the nightmares and guilt. He had gone through therapy for months before it finally registered that he was not to blame. That he could think of it without breaking down. But sometimes, like now, it would hit him, reminding him that he was not fully healed.

She did what she was particularly good at. She jogged. Outside of her neighborhood there was a very large park erected and maintained by, ironically, Medtech, the very corporation she would be investigating.

It had been built in the last two years and was a state-of-the-art recreational area, complete with enough entertainment for kids and their parents. Slides, swings, and other equipment, she could not identify at a glance or did not care to.

There were several ponds with ducks floating in the clear water. A sign - 'Do not feed the ducks!' had not stopped sneaky children and adults from doing it.

The fact that the park was in a renovated area of downtown had not prevented a pervert or two from lurking. She had busted one who had his pants down and his private in plain view of the children playing. He had not expected her and had been surprised when she whipped out her badge and had him arrested.

Her badge and side piece were always with her. She was an expert at hand to hand, but she ran in the early hours of the morning. Being jumped from behind tends to take one by surprise, even for a seasoned cop like her.

And she was not going to stop enjoying communing with nature, just because perverts and criminal elements tend to do their best works at this hour of the morning. An unlucky bastard had tried to jump her with the intention of raping and robbing her one morning in the height of winter.

But had gotten the surprise of his life and blue balls and several cracked ribs for his effort. He had cried police brutality when she whipped out her badge, but that had gotten him nowhere.

The area was nice enough and the corporation had done a credible job of maintaining it. It was almost six in the morning on a weekday, and she was not the only one who

thought of getting some exercise.

Her curious cop's eyes took in the middle-aged man wheezing his way past her to stop at the fountain to gulp down water as if his very life depended on it.

And the woman, sleek and blonde wearing a bold red body suit who was barely breaking a sweat.

Probably out to pick up a mark, she thought cynically. She was too well dressed, her jogging suit too pretty and too new to be a serious runner. And she was wearing makeup for Crissakes. Just begging to be assaulted, she thought in disgust.

Stopping at one of the set of swings, she did her breathing technique and felt her blood pumping. Rivulets of water were running down her face and between her small breasts and making the clothing stick to her skin.

Dragging out the bottle attached to a contraption around her waist, she took a healthy swing and watched in amusement as the middle-aged man, she judged him to be about her age or a little older – watched as he staggered on and stopped, placing a hand over his chest.

A frown touched her brow as she continued to stare at him, wondering if she was going to have to call an ambulance. But before she could decide on that, he was met by the pretty brunette, who placed a hand across his shoulders and helped him towards one of the benches.

Good, that's covered. She thought as she finished the bottle of water and tucked it back in place. Placing a foot on the bench, she did her stretches and felt her muscles protesting.

She had pushed too hard today, because she had been away from the whole scene for

a long time. She would forego the usual weightlifting when she got home and go straight to doing some laundry. She has been home for three days and it felt like fricking weeks.

But they had been productive days. She had attacked the laundry that had piled up and attended to her gardening. Her rosemary plant had started dying. Brad had stopped by every now and then to air the place out and water the plants, but that had not been enough.

She had taken in a show at the theater and gone to one showing at the local gallery. She would put some shopping in the mix and go to visit her aunt. The woman had called and complained that she was back three days now and had not taken the time for a visit.

“I know you are doing important police business, but I need to see you.”

So, she had promised to be there today.”

“And spend the night. One night will not kill you, Margo. And it has been ages.”

So, she had resigned herself to spending the night.

Stretching some more, she resumed her run, only this time slowing it down to a jog.

“You’re too thin.”

“Good day to you too,” she murmured wryly as she stepped up onto the porch. Aunt Sybil wore her age well and had lines crisscrossing her worn face.

She walked without the aid of a walker or a cane and had an erect bearing. She had told Margo that she been highly active and as a black woman in the early nineteen hundreds, had worked ridiculously hard indeed.

“What, they didn’t feed you wherever you were?”

“No.” She braced for the fierce hug and tried not to feel awkward about it. She was not accustomed to intimate touches, unless it was in the act of making love and even then, she only allowed certain things.

Patting her aunt’s back, she stepped back and allowed the scrutiny.

“It is good to see you. Come on in. I made lunch. Your favorite.”

Margo entered into the warm and cozy hallway and followed her aunt to the bright yellow and white kitchen with its yellow and green curtains fluttering in the slight breeze.

“Is that chili?” She asked in delight as she sniffed the air.

“What else? Sit.” Sybil gestured towards the comfortable and slightly worn dining table tucked under the large bay window.

“What can I do to help?”

The woman looked at her in surprise. “Why nothing. Just relax. I’m certain you must be tired.”

“I’m fine, actually.” Margo remarked but sat there watching as her aunt ladled out the delicious chili. “You didn’t have to go to this much trouble.”

“No trouble at all. I am just so happy to see you.” She beamed as she brought over the bowls and set homemade biscuits in the middle of the table. “I have iced tea with lemon wedges.”

“You’re officially spoiling me.”

“You deserve it.” Sybil bustled away to get the jug of juice and glasses. Taking a seat, across from her niece, she dipped her spoon in and started eating. “Will you be going on any more dangerous assignments?”

“It is kind of what I do. I happen to be a cop.”

“I know, honey, but I was thinking that it’s time you stopped and did something less dangerous.”

“Such as?”

“Riding a desk as you call it.”

Margo laughed and felt the discomfort and reluctance draining away.

“I will be considering that pretty soon. This is so good.”

“Isn’t it?” Sybil beamed. “I used to make it all the time for your mother.” She hesitated as her niece stiffened. “She was a good girl growing up.” She added quietly. “She lost both her parents at a very young age.”

“You already told me that.”

Sybil winced at the coldness of her tone but decided to plunge on anyway. “I’m not making excuses for her...”

“It seems as if you are.” Margo stabbed the spoon into the chili angrily. “If you’re going to discuss the woman who abandoned me and left me at the group home, I would rather not.”

“Okay, my dear,” her aunt said soothingly, “I don’t want to offend you and introduce a topic that makes you uncomfortable. Shall we talk about your relationship?”

Margo’s tapered brows lifted. “What relationship?”

“Precisely.” She gestured with her spoon. “You are a beautiful woman. I have lived alone for most of my life and do not recommend it. I could have gotten married when I was in my thirties and foolishly drove the man away. He was such a sweetheart,” Her eyes glimmered a little. “Solid and dependable.

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But I wanted my independence and kept telling him to wait. Finally, he decided to go with someone else. Mary-Jo was just hovering in the background, waiting to scoop him up and she did.” She dug her spoon in and scooped up chili. “I lost my chance.”

“I am perfectly all right with my single status.”

Her aunt nodded. “That is because you have your job and a very demanding one at that. There will come a time when you do not and then what?”

“I will travel the world. I have always wanted to.”

“Without a man at your side.”

Margo laughed softly. “Aunt Sybil, I respect the idea of you trying to look out for me, but I am fine. Let’s talk about something else.”

She studied the man. She wanted to know everything about Merrick Julian Pendergast going in. His photos gave her a bit of a pause as she stared at the sober face, the lines of pain that even the camera had not been able to hide. She knew that he had suffered a terrible loss at the peak of his career and that had set him back somewhat.

He did not look shady, but what the hell! That did not mean a damn thing. She had once busted a businessman who looked as squeaky clean as a whistle and was secretly transporting minors across state borders in his delivery trucks.

Looks don't mean a damn.

He was fifty-five, she read in surprise. Yes, there were lines around his eyes, but his body was that of a younger man. She read that he was an expert in martial arts and had studied Krav Maga. He was also a marine.

Very interesting. He wasn't just a pampered rich guy, but an active one. She felt a frisson of something as she stared into his gray eyes and found herself trying to decipher the exact shade. Simply gray did not cover it.

What on earth does one call that color? Smoky? Ash? Storm cloud? Slate? Shaking her head, she resumed reading his bio and found a twinge of sympathy when she got to the part about his fiancée and unborn son. He had been unable for comment, then and even now, not that she could not blame him.

The media had a way of feeding on peoples' grief and making a damn livelihood out of it. Merrick Pendergast would be definite fodder for a story.

He was an extremely attractive man and incredibly successful. He was still single, and it appeared that he would remain as is. He must have loved her very much and she wondered what that was like.

Her conversation with Aunt Sybil had been nagging at her, much to her disgust. It wasn't that she had chosen to be single at her age, but she had been loath to enter into any form of relationship.

Her past, the fact that she had been abandoned by her mother who had chosen drugs and the easy way out, had deterred her. Not to mention she had no idea who the hell her daddy was.

He could be a pimp for all she knew. So, she had decided long ago to stay clear of

anything permanent. There had been suggestions, declarations of love, an emotion she did not believe in of course, but she had laughed them off.

Then her job had become so time-consuming that it left little time for anything else. And relationships take work and considerable time.

She was a cop, an undercover one at that and for months she was under. At times, she would not see her place for months. Who in the hell would want to put up with that? Another cop? The only person in her squad, she had been involved with briefly was Brad and that had not lasted long.

She was a female, trying to make it in a predominantly male world and people were watching. She had heard them talking about other female cops who slept around and stayed away from having that kind of talk about her. She wanted to be noticed for her work and what she brought to the table.

Not for spreading her legs to get where she was. The double standard was glaringly obvious. A man has no qualms about sleeping his way through the damn squad room and his reputation would remain intact. But that is the way it is.

Getting back to her reading, she picked up her wine and kicked back in her comfortably worn leather chair. Placing her feet on the desk, she continued reading. Surprisingly, Merrick Pendergast had taken a million-dollar company and turned it into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise.

They were not just into pharmaceuticals, but had diversified into real estate, oil and a charter airline that was doing exceptionally well.

“Jesus!” She muttered. “A fucking vineyard in Italy.” She stared at the pale amber liquid in her glass intently. She wasn’t drinking his vintage, that much she was sure of. She usually bought her wine and other liquors at the local Walmart. The most she

ever paid for a bottle was less than sixty bucks.

She would not dream of trying to guess what one of his bottles go for and was probably served in some fancy restaurant. She stayed clear of those like the proverbial plague.

Not that she could afford to eat in places like Soho, Kelly's or Kane's and the others of course. Brad had suggested that they tried for a reservation at one of Kelly Takahashi's restaurant and had been told by that lofty reservation clerk that they were booked up to six months and do not accept walk-ins.

She had laughed at the confounded look on his face.

"Serves you right. What sense does it make to blow a month or two salary to just have a meal?"

"It's the ambiance," he muttered.

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“We have loads of ambiance at Bert’s and not to mention The Saddle Tramp.” She said referring to one of their usual haunts.

Shaking her head, she went back to her reading, her gaze sharpening as she reached the part about his family. A younger brother, Maurice Pendergast. They had similar coloring, but the brother looked like a pale carbon copy.

Similar gray eyes, but the older brother’s had an intensity to them that was unmistakable. And Merrick was several inches taller and more leanly built and certainly more attractive.

“Hmm, Interesting.” She murmured as she stared at the two men. The photo had been snapped at some movie premiere the company had sponsored. Maurice was all smiles, but Merrick had a sober look about him that clearly showed that he had not enjoyed having his pic taken.

And the reporter harped long and detailed on the fact that it was Merrick’s company, and his brother was just along for the ride. It was Merrick this or Merrick that. Maurice was just a footnote. That would not sit well with the brother. Maurice Pendergast was definitely in his brother’s shadow.

She read that the younger brother was married with two grown male children. Jason was twenty-eight and Michael was twenty-six. The two young Pendergasts had inherited the family coloring- dark hair and gray eyes as well as the lofty height. And they were also working at the company.

It was interesting to know that Jason Pendergast had a ‘sealed record’ and had gotten

into some scrapes along the way. DUI, driving without a license, drunk and disorderly, while the brother was squeaky clean. He had gotten off with a slap on the wrist because of his family's money and that pissed her right off.

No doubt they had judges and several law enforcement officials in their pockets. She strongly believed that if you do the crime, you should serve the time.

Allowing a person to get off with a hand slap was usually a big mistake. She had seen too many rich and entitled kids go down a destructive path because they were never forced to pay for their mistakes.

Shaking her head in disgust, she shoved her laptop back and took a sip of her wine. She was going to have to lay out her strategy to the commander and it was going to have to be a foolproof one.

Medtech had a slew of very expensive lawyers on retainer, and she certainly did not want to slip up and have them suing the entire goddamn city. She was going to have to come up with an ironclad plan.

Finishing her wine, she pushed back from the desk and walked to the window to stare out at the encroaching darkness. A few miserly stars had come out and the sliver of moon was a pale shimmer piercing the clouds, barely. The beginning of the fall season had started with rain, relieving the unending summer months and the cloying heat.

This was going to be her last undercover sting, and it had to count. She was going up against a giant and felt like bloody David in the Bible. But David had won in the end, hadn't he? Ignoring the frisson of fear making itself known, she turned away from the window. It had to be done, and she was not going to allow fear to get inside her.

People were dying and rich company or not, if the investigation proves that the drugs

were coming from their house, they were going down. And that's that.

“What have we got?”

“Overdose on what seems like the new strain of drugs.”

“How many fatalities?”

“Two so far. Others on their way to the ER to be pumped.”

“How old?” She snapped it out quickly, even though she already had an idea.”

“Male Vic- twenty and the female nineteen. The sweepers are already here.”

“I'm going to need a minute.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Brad fell into step next to her as they walked into the almost empty club.

“I'm a cop.” She slid him a flat eyed look that warned him that she was already in the ‘cop mode’ and would not welcome an editorial. “And when the call came through, I hustled.”

“You are on vacation- “He held up a hand as her gaze sizzled. “Not my call.”

“Good, we have a crime scene to tend to.” Sealing up, she hunkered down where the two victims were lying side by side. “Same symptoms as the others, frothing at the mouth, bodily excretions and sores around the lips.” She frowned at that new addition.

“What the hell?”

“Something new.” Brad confirmed, checking with his own device. “It’s safe to assume that the drugs are stronger.”

“And therefore, more lethal.” She agreed. The girl was a beauty, with thick blonde hair and bottle green eyes that death had leached of life. The guy was tall and muscular, probably a jock. Even in death, there was a smile on his lips.

Lifting her head, she looked around the fancy club and it was fancy. With gold and white wallpaper, padded stools and the wide sweep of the bar. A quick glance at the labels showed pricey liquors.

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“Who owns the joint?” Oh, never mind.” She muttered as the former lingerie model swept in, wearing a cloud of expensive jewelries and cashmere.

“Officers...,” she began.

“Detectives.” Margo tapped at her shield and already decided she did not like the woman.

“I apologize.” The smile came and green eyes zeroed in on Brad as she quickly assessed the situation. “I just want you to know that we have a ‘no drug policy’ here. Sensations is one of the leading clubs in the state and we run an exceptionally clean house.”

“I’m sure you would like to think so or have us believe it.” Margo did not allow the enraptured Brad to say anything. “These are rich kids and in my estimation, where there is a lot of money, there is going to be lots of illegals running around. We want to take a look at the cameras.”

“Oh, but...”

“Or we could come back with a warrant and if you make us go through the hassle of getting one, we’re going to tear the place up. Your choice.” She aimed a smile at the woman and had her bristling.

“I have nothing to hide.” She turned her limpid gaze at Brad as if seeking assistance. “I am Selena Dupre...”

“We know who you are, Ms. Dupre, and it does not make a hell of a difference to us. Now...” She rose. “Do we get the cameras or go for the warrant. Think fast.”

Selena Dupre sulked and then with a haughty toss of her gilded blonde head, she led the way to the office.

Chapter 4

“You were pretty hard on her.”

“And you were pretty soft. For a minute there, I thought you were going to put your arms around her and let her cry on your shoulder. She looked like she needed a big strong man to get through it.”

He cast her an exasperated look. “I was just being polite.”

“That’s one way to put it,” she said snidely. They were back in her office after processing the crime scene and updating the rest of the team.

She had missed getting her jolt of caffeine because of the early morning call and felt it clear to her bones. Moving towards her tiny table, she programmed coffee and stood there tapping her feet impatiently while it brewed.

“Want some?”

“Yeah. And for your information, I was just buttering her up. She is not my type.”

She smirked as she brought him a cup. “She is every man’s type. Big boobs obviously bought and paid for and thin as a rake with that smoldering look going on.” She sat on the front of her desk and crossed her legs at the ankles. “Men always lead with their dicks. And she was jerking you around.”

A frown touched his brow. "You did not have to tell her to stop sniveling like a damn idiot."

"Someone had to."

"Just because you're not human, doesn't mean the rest of us aren't," he shot at her. It stung, but she would never give him the satisfaction of knowing it did.

"Well, this android is going to dig a little more into the club and its owner. If you are up for it and you're done feeling sorry for that moronic bitch, you can join the party. In the meantime, we have two more DBs to add to the ones already in the morgue."

"Look, I'm sorry..."

"For what? Saying that I don't have blood running through my veins? I happen to stand for the victims, always."

"And I don't?"

"When your glands are not involved, you're a hell of a cop."

"You are a piece of work, aren't you?" He shoved up from the uncomfortable chair and marched over to the stingy window. "How the hell are you going to play femme fatale when you don't know the first thing about seducing a guy?"

That stung as well, and she struggled to play it cool.

"I am assuming there are books that highlights those very attributes. I intend to pick one up. And for your information, the subject is not the type to fall for batting eyelashes and silly smiles. I am going in as myself and playing it by ear."

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He came around and let out a breath at the look on her face. He knew her enough to realize that he had hurt her with his thoughtless comments. But dammit to hell! He hated the fact that she could be so cold and focused. He would not be panting after other women if she would...

He reined in his thoughts abruptly and walked over to sit back down. "How soon?" He was not going to apologize, because she would not accept it.

"This weekend." She went around her desk and opened her laptop. "There is a showing at Le Galleria and I managed to finagle an invitation to the event. It is a Jackson Colby showing which makes it a pretty sweet deal.

Pendergast and family will be there as they are major sponsors and he is a patron of the arts. We have a few things in common." She smiled grimly.

Which makes it all the easier."

"Margo."

She looked over at his sober expression curiously. He never called her by her first name unless it was something meaningful and personal.

"What?"

"Be careful."

"I have my piece..."

“This is something new for you. Your usual is infiltrating a gang or pretending to be a victim in order to close a case. This is entirely different. You will be dealing with a giant – a man of immense means and it could blow up in your face.”

“Aww, you care.”

“I am serious.” And he was. “Merrick Pendergast is a formidable opponent and did not reach the status of multi-billionaire by being a moron. If he finds out...”

“He won’t.”

Brad eyed her closely. “How far do you intend to take it?”

She pressed keys and avoided his eyes.

“As far as possible.”

“Does that mean sleeping with a suspect?” He asked tightly.

Her head snapped up as she glared at him. “I will not grace that with a frigging response.”

“He’s an attractive man.”

“So? You think I’m some goddamned rookie who cannot keep my libido in check?”

“No. I think you are an excellent cop who sometimes goes the extra mile to get to the meat of the case. I am just saying that you should be careful.”

“Noted. Thanks, mother.”

“Joke all you want, but this could end up blowing up in your face.”

“Your vote of confidence is inspiring.”

“Just be careful,” he muttered.

Brad’s comments and concerns had raised some of her own. Damn him to hell! She was going in and getting chummy with the man himself and find out what she can and then get out again. Simple. It should be simple. Then why was she having second thoughts? She had mapped out a plan to her commander.

She had a cover of course. She was using her own name to avoid confusion. She was an author – she grimaced at that. Who the hell would believe she could write anything.

She was a romance novelist and before that she had been a photographer. Well, she was an amateur one, wasn’t she? She loved taking pictures of still life. And she loved the arts.

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She could embellish if needed. Decline to talk about her book. She had once busted a novelist who turned out to be innocent and they had become friends of sorts. Charmaine could give her some pointers.

All she needed was for him to notice her. And why the hell would he when he was used to beautiful women? She was going to be herself. He was accustomed to women falling all over themselves. All she had to do was be aggressive and loud, when a guy came onto her. Simple. She keep thinking that as if saying it enough was going to make it so.

And her wardrobe was woefully inadequate. Sliding through the clothing there, she contemplated a simple black dress and cast it aside. Too simple. She was digging through the rest when she pulled out an electric blue romper. She had bought the damn thing in a moment of weakness and never wore it.

It was dipped low in the front and had fitted her like a second skin. She had braided her hair for the meet, the long black and white braids, going all the way to her ass.

And she would wear makeup. Not much of course, because she was not that type of girl. Taking a deep breath, she set about getting ready.

“Darling, I thought you were going to check out the collections upstairs?” He felt the touch of her fingers on his arm and forced himself not to move away. He was bored with the entire scene and most of all with her.

He had been seeing Jennifer for the past four months and she was beginning to think they were exclusive. He need to break things off.

Pasting a smile on his lips, he handed the glass to a passing wait staff as he turned to her. She was in her forties and well preserved.

She was a judge, and they had met some time ago when his company had come under investigation. Her ash blonde hair was cut in a chic page-boy style that suited her small face with its pointed chin. They were good together, but he was not interested in taking things further.

“Why don’t you go ahead?”

“Are you certain?”

“I am, yes. Go on.”

“Don’t blame me if I see something I cannot live without and put it on your tab.” She remarked with a pity smile.

“Please feel free.”

With a wave of one hand, she drifted away. He had to get out of here. He needed a proper drink and some brooding time. His brother and family were here, pretending that they were united. He was about to turn and go into one of the private rooms when he noticed her.

It wasn’t that she was the most beautiful woman in the room, far from it. But she was the most striking. He leaned back against the wall and watched in amusement as she turned her head and stopped a guy who was approaching with just one look.

Merrick's eyes flickered briefly over the man and realized that it was Barry Stavros, a very wealthy and entitled owner of several shipping lines.

Plucking another flute from the passing waiter, he settled back to watch the show. Several men approached her, and one was brave enough to move in closer for a conversation and was brave enough to touch her. He did not get a second chance.

Her hand snaked around and gripped his wrist like a vice and had the man backing off. He just had to meet her.

Tossing back the rest of the drink, he made his leisurely way towards her and stood at a distance in case she gave him the same treatment.

"Is it just men in general or the ones who approached you were just not good enough to strike up a conversation?"

She turned her head to look at him and he felt a jolt right through his heart. She had mahogany brown eyes and the sexiest lips he had ever seen. Her gaze was direct and bold as they slid over his face.

"They were morons."

His thick brows lifted. "You could tell from a distance?"

"I have a feel for that sort of thing. I know who you are."

"You do?" So far, he was not getting the stone cold eye. "You have me at a disadvantage."

"Margo Sullivan." She did not simper or extend her hand but just turned back to examine the painting she had been studying. "I know a little bit about art, but this is

crap.”

He bit back a laugh and felt his interest peaking.

“It’s by a very famous and upcoming artist.”

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“Still crap.” She leaned forward to look at the name. “Vinnie Cadaver. Really? Is that his real name or something he made up to appear more interesting?”

“I think the latter. What don’t you like about it?” He had drawn closer during the debate.

“It’s little squiggles that could have been done by a two-year-old.”

“It’s called abstract for a reason.”

“A reason to give whoever this is to splash some paint on canvas and call it art.” She turned to look at him again and he felt the breath lodging inside his throat. “Would you buy something like this?”

He turned to look at the painting, to gather his composure. “I have two of his paintings. In another year or two, it would have doubled in price, making it an incredibly wise investment.”

“Darling.” They both turned as the woman walked over and slid her hand through his arm possessively. “I thought you were joining me.”

“I got ..., detained.”

Margo was not certain if what she saw flashed on his face was annoyance, but it was quickly removed. “Jennifer meet Margo Sullivan. Margo, this is Jennifer Westley.”

Margo forced herself not to appear flustered. She recognized the woman and the

name and knew her to be a judge. Not that she ever had an occasion to be inside her courtroom, but still, she did not want her cover to be blown.

But she did not have to worry. After a dismissive look, the woman nodded briefly, before turning to look at Merrick.

“We should go and see if we can find something for your bedroom,” she murmured seductively, causing Margo to roll her eyes. She was just turning away when she caught the amused look on Merrick’s face and realized to her chagrin that he had noticed her reaction.

“Give me a minute, will you?”

Jennifer hesitated, sending her a fulminating look before flouncing away.

“You’re probably going to have to buy her a stack of paintings to make up for sending her off.”

“Possibly.” He was surprised by his unusual reaction to her. She was a stranger, a woman he knew nothing about, but he felt drawn to her and wanted to see her again.

“How about coffee?”

She gave him a puzzled look and felt her heart quickening. “What about it?”

“We should have a cup. Tomorrow.” He swore beneath his breath as he remembered he was going to be gone for the weekend. “I have a business trip...”

“No.”

A frown touched his brow. “No?”

“You’re involved and I’m not looking for a relationship.” She was going to play it cool, Now that she had peaked his interest, it wastime to pull back a little. She could not have him thinking she was easy.

“I’m not...,” he felt frustration ripening when he caught sight of Maurice and his wife heading their way. “Look...”

“Merrick, darling. You have got to see this painting.” He turned towards his sister-in-law with a polite look on his face and when he turned back, Margo was gone. He scanned the crowd with a hint of desperation and saw no sign of her.

“Please excuse me.”

He went as far as the parking lot, but it was as if she had vanished into thin air. Shoving his hands into the pockets of his dark blue dress pants, he rocked back on his heels – the keen sense of loss astounding him.

She should feel proud of herself. She had made the connection and her ploy had worked. She had put out the bait and he had fallen for it. All she had to do now was to reel him in.

He was involved with a judge. Sitting on the side of the bed, she kicked off the killer heels and massaged her insteps. She had wanted to explore the rest of the gallery but thought it prudent to just leave. She had not expected him to move so quickly and on the first meeting and his invitation to go for coffee had thrown her at first.

But she had the presence of mind to decline the invitation. And had taken the opportunity while he was distracted by his family, to leave. Rising, she peeled the figure-hugging material from her and tossed it on the sofa across from the bed. She

had not bothered with underwear and had felt completely naked.

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It amazed her that women dressed like this several times a week. Slipping on an old robe, she went into her office to sit at her desk. Bringing up his information, she read that he had been seeing the judge off and on for several months. Which meant it was not a serious relationship.

All she wanted was information and she had been holding men off for years, doing so with Merrick Pendergast, was not going to be too difficult. Ignoring the foreboding that had settled inside her chest, she continued to make notes.

Selecting a cigar from the slim gold case in his desk drawer, he searched for a lighter and took it along with a snifter of brandy out on the terrace. Lowering himself into the comfortable chaise, he stretched out and flicked the lighter open.

Squinting his eyes against the flavored smoke, he dragged it into his lungs and leaned his head back to stare at the star-studded sky. The rain had passed, washing everything clean. He could still smell the moisture as it clung to the leaves of the trees surrounding his own private patch of land.

His townhouse was situated on a slight incline, offering a spectacular view of the city, while giving him complete privacy. Jennifer had protested and made her disappointment clear when he declined her offer to go back to her place.

He was going to have to break things off with her. Plucking the cigar from between his teeth, he studied the smoldering tip with a frown. He would like to think that meeting Margo Sullivan had extraordinarily little to do with his decision to part ways

with the judge, but it did. He wanted to see her again.

Only, he did not have a number for her. All he had was her name. And her acerbic sense of humor. She had fascinated him as no other woman had before. Stubbing out the cigar, he sat forward and wrapped his hands around his knees. And allowed the memories to invade his mind.

He had met her at a function she was catering. He could picture her now, calm and collected even when it had turned out that the hostess had invited more people than was catered for. She had simply picked up her phone and have her staff bring more food.

He had watched in fascination as she handled several men who thought she was easy prey. She had been polite and firm, and in the end had them slinking away. He had been caught not only by her beauty, but her composure and found himself walking over to meet her.

She had turned him down the first three times, but he had kept coming back and before long, they ended up in his bed.

Their love affair had lasted three years and during that time, she never once asked him if he was every going to propose. Then she became pregnant, and it was all they could think about. It was at that point; he knew he wanted her in his life.

Reaching for the glass, he took a healthy sip and relished the burning sensation in his throat. Leaning back, he closed his eyes and found himself going back to earlier. Margo Sullivan. A smile played around his lips, and he felt the pressure around his chest easing off.

She had flawless skin, he mused and found himself wondering how old she was. Forty? Late thirties? Her body was long and lean, and he had seen the muscles in her

forearms. Her lips had made him hungry for a taste and that had surprised him.

Not since Laura had he felt such an intensely powerful hunger and even with her, it had been a pleasant buzz.

“Oh Christ!” He whispered, running a hand at the back of his neck. What the hell was wrong with him?

Perhaps he was never going to see her again. It was just a quick punch of lust and nothing more. Yes, he had enjoyed having a conversation with her. She had certainly livened things up. Maurice had asked who she was when he returned, and he had made some offhanded comment.

Putting her out of his mind, he rose and went to get ready for bed. He had an early flight in the morning and many things to go over before his meeting.

The nightmare came that night and had her springing off the pillows, her body drenched in sweat. It had been a long time since she had them, and the familiar headache came along in the aftermath.

Scrubbing her hands over her face, she switched on the lamp and pulled her knees up to her chin defensively. It was nothing, she decided fiercely. She was okay, she was fine. She had dealt with being abandoned and had learned to live with it.

She was stronger for it – the drug aspect of the case had brought it all back, but she was going to do the job. Her mother had been a junkie and had ended up giving her away, but she was not going to allow that to hinder her from doing her job.

Swinging her legs off the bed, she sat there for a minute to get herself together before

rising to go to the bathroom to get a glass of water. Downing it thirstily, she filled the glass again and drank some more, until the awful thirst was contained.

Putting the glass down, she peered at herself in the mirror and wondered what Merrick Pendergast saw when he looked at her. She had hoped to make an impression, and it appeared that she had. Somehow, she had gotten him to notice her.

Frowning at her image, she smoothed a hand down her throat and up again. She was not vain, had never taken the time to study herself. She was not into enhancements and would simply slap soap on her face and rinse with warm water and consider it done.

Her hair took a hell of a long time and every few months, she would sacrifice her hard-earned money to sit in a beauty shop to get it trimmed and conditioned. Easing away from the mirror, she went back into her bedroom and tried to get some sleep.

Chapter 5

He felt the prickling at the back of his neck and turned slowly around in anticipation. And then he did, the jolt was electrifying. He had spent the entire week wondering how to get in touch with her.

His weekend trip had lasted more than the two days he had planned. He had come back home two days ago and was overwhelmed with meetings and the usual family drama.

He had not planned on coming to the annual medical gala but had changed his mind because it was an event that was put on by his own company. It would have been glaringly obvious if the CEO was not in attendance.

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Cutting the chief of staff of a major hospital as he droned on about what R&D was done without the slightest hesitation as he threaded his way through the crowded ballroom of The Royale, until he was almost at her side. He had noticed the man next to her, but he was not going to let that stop him.

She would not be allowed to disappear on him again. Not a damn chance.

She was turning to say something to that guy, when he interrupted by touching her arm.

“Hi.”

“Would you excuse us?” He flicked a glance at Brad and made it plain that it was not a request.

“I’ll be over at the bar,” Brad told her as he turned and left.

Taking her by the elbow, he shouldered his way through the crowd, his expression forbidding small talk from the people trying to get his attention. Sliding the glass doors open, he guided her to a section of the balcony overlooking the harbor.

Letting go of her arm, he strode over to the beautifully carved railing, his hands gripping the iron.

She watched and waited for him to turn around.

He did after a few minutes, intense gray eyes wandering over her face and taking in

the snug fitting gold and black jacket over the figure-hugging black dress. She was no longer wearing braids but had her hair in a riot of dark brown curls streaked with gray, skimming her slender shoulders.

“You left.” His deep voice vibrated through the silence and had her lifting tapered brows.

“I did.”

“Why?”

She moved restless shoulders and came to join him at the railing. “I’m not having sex with you.”

Her bluntness took him aback and had his brows lifting.

“I just invited you for coffee.”

She turned to look at him. “Can you honestly tell me that wasn’t on your mind when you invited me for ‘coffee’?”

His mouth tightened fractionally. “Perhaps. Who is the guy?”

“A friend. Where is your date?”

“I am solo this evening.” He shoved restless hands into the pockets of his tan dress pants to avoid touching her. Wanting her was making him edgy. And confused. He was a fifty-five-year-old man with a hard on for a complete stranger. It was laughable, only he did not feel any levity in the situation.

“I want to see you.”

“You’re seeing me now.”

He made an impatient gesture with one hand. “I want to see you away from here. We could go back to my place...”

“No.” She started to turn and walk away, when his hand snaked out to grip her arm.

“You’re not walking out on me again.”

She could take him, maybe. He wasn’t a pushover by any means. She had read his profile and could feel the unleashed power in his body.

“You’re going to want to take your hand off me.”

He kept it there, his eyes challenging her.

“A walk.” He jerked his head in the direction of the harbor. “To talk. Just talk. Please.”

She succumbed. Her reaction to him putting a hand on her was knee jerk. She was a damn cop and really did not like people getting into her personal space. But this was different. She had a job to do, and he was making it so easy for her.

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“Okay.” She started to turn back into the ballroom, when he stopped her.

“We can leave from here.” Letting go of her; he turned towards the steps that led to the immense parking lot.

Biting back a groan as she minced her way in the heels, she wished she could take the damn things off and heave them. They were new and she cursed the day she had bought them.

His strides were long, but so were hers and within minutes she had caught up to him. He stopped at a bench facing the water with the boats bobbing on the surface. It was getting cold and she just realized she had come out without a jacket.

As if sensing it, he shrugged off his navy-blue sports jacket and draped it around her shoulders. “I can see you shivering.” He started to say something else but changed his mind and sat down.

Stretching his long legs out, he crossed them at the ankles and looked out at the water in silence. Seated next to him, Margo was so acutely aware of him that she had to force herself not to shift.

He continued to sit in silence for a few minutes before reaching into his pants pocket and taking out a slim gold case. Flipping it open, he took out a cigar and finally glanced at her.

“Do you mind?” He asked politely.

“No.” She shook her head and watched as he extracted a solid gold lighter and lit the cigar.

“You smoke.”

He squinted at her through the fragrant smoke as he slid the case back into his pocket.

“I do, yes.”

“No one told you smoking is bad for your health?”

He gave her a lazy smile. “They might have. I only smoke when I am stressed. Curiously, since meeting you the first time, I have picked up the habit.”

She did not dare allow herself to react. She was on the job and that was that.

“Meaning, I’m bad for you?”

He flicked her a glance again. “Meaning, I cannot seem to stop thinking about you.” Before she could respond, he nodded to the boats bobbing on the surface. “Want to go for a ride?”

“You own a boat. Of course you do.”

“Several actually. The company keep a couple on hand for when associates come for a visit. What do you say?”

She wanted to tell him that as a black woman she did not think about going near the water, but that would have been a damn lie. She loved the water and swam like a fish.

“Why not?”

With a pleased expression on his attractive face, he rose and offered her a hand to help her up. Ignoring the hand, much to his amusement, she stood up and started forward.

“Which one is yours?” The night had a romantic feel about it, with the star-studded sky and the moon peeping through the clouds.

“This one.” They climbed onto the boardwalk, and he had to force himself not to take her hand. She was a self-sufficient woman who did not need any of that.

“A speedboat?”

“You expected something else?”

“A yacht, maybe.” He started to climb aboard when he noticed she was just standing there.

“Problem?”

“I am not wearing the right shoes. You know what? Screw it.” To his amusement she simply bent and slipped them off, hissing out a sigh of relief.

“I take it that’s much better?” Taking her hand, he helped her onboard.

“You have no idea.” Her eyes roamed the deck slowly, noticing the trim lines and the sleek built. “Impressive.”

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“Thanks.” Going to the wheel, he gunned the engine and made a three sixty degree turn that took them into the opposite direction.

“Where are we going!”

“It is a surprise.” He flashed her a grin and she felt her heart taking a slow dive. She was going to have to be careful here. The man was lethal.

“Want a try?”

She nodded, eyes sparkling. Moving forward, carefully, she positioned herself behind the wheel and tried to ignore the slide of his body against hers as he exchanged positions with her.

Shoving the lever forward, she increased the speed and laughed for the sheer joy of it, when he stumbled slightly.

“Slow down!”

“Why?”

“You are going to capsize us. And you do not know where the hell you are going.”

But he did not care. He loved the fact that she was having fun and realized that he was having fun right along with her. Nowonder he was so fascinated, so damn turned on her. He had never met anyone like her before.

They had been going for twenty minutes, when he stepped up behind her and took control. She started to move, but he imprisoned her body with his hands covering hers as he slowed them down and took a neat left turn.

She was without shoes and barely came up to his chin. His cologne was subtle and expensive and sort of woodsy. His body was lean and muscular. Even with the wind blowing, she felt hot and bothered and it made her uncomfortable.

“Look.”

She jolted as his breath touched her ear.

“What?”

It was a patch of land in the middle of the water, with palm trees growing and was wide enough to build a house.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It is.” Pushing the lever down, he brought them to a halt and, to her immense relief, stepped away from her. “How about something to eat? I think I can rustle up something from the galley. They always leave the place fully stocked.” He gestured to one of the comfortable benches on the deck.

“That sounds good. I am starving.”

“I’ll be right back.” She sat and stretched her legs out, lifting her head to breathe in the fresh air. She was enjoying herself and she did not feel uncomfortable with him. Well, not really.

She had not been on a date in so long, she had forgotten what it was like. But in the

past, it never felt like this. Of course, she had never been with a man like Merrick Pendergast before either and she had to quickly remind herself that this was not a damn date.

He came back with a tray loaded with food and what looked like a bottle of champagne.

“Cheese, fruit and crackers.” He dumped the tray on a table attached to the floor and sat across from her.

“Champagne?” She stared at him with lifted brows. “What are we celebrating?”

“Our first date.”

“This is not a date.”

He merely smiled and popped the cork, his eyes intent on her face. She had dug out an elastic band from her foolish little purse that could barely hold her shield and had put her hair up into a careless bun.

“How old are you?”

She stared at him wide eyed at the bluntness of his question.

“Are you supposed to be asking me that?”

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“You strike me as a woman with no coyness to her and I am too damn old to be playing games. You look like you are either in your late thirties or early forties.”

Her smile came and was wide with pleasure. “I’m actually fifty-two years old.”

He stopped in the process of pouring the wine, a frown deepening his brow. “You’re lying.”

“It says so on my birth cert and my driver’s license.” She told him cheerfully, her cheeks dimpling. “Want to see them?”

“I might.” He continued to stare at her. “My God.” He whispered. “How on earth do you manage to look so young?”

“I work out a lot and eat right. Screw that. I have lousy eating habits, and I binge eat sometimes. I don’t know what to tell you.” She took the glass from him and took a sip, her eyes widening. “This is very good.”

“Glad you appreciate it.” He was still staring at her and in his mind he realized that he had been wondering if she was too young for him.

“You’re getting weird.”

“What do you do for a living?”

She had expected the question and was ready with an answer.

“I am an aspiring novelist.”

His brows lifted in surprise. “Aspiring?”

She shrugged and took a bunch of grapes. “I am just starting out. I was a photographer before that and just decided to follow my dreams.” She wondered if she sounded as lame as the statement and decided that she did when she saw him staring at her skeptically.

“What genre?”

“Historical romance.” She latched onto the first thing she could think of. Her aunt was an avid fan of historical romance and always had a pile of them in her library.

“You don’t strike me as one who would write novels, let alone a romance novel.”

She bristled. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“it means you don’t strike me as being the romance type.” He told her bluntly, intense gray eyes watching her too closely for comfort.

“You don’t know me well enough to assume that.” She went on the defensive and drank champagne to avoid looking at him.

“You are right of course, but I happen to be an excellent judge of character. From the little I have seen; you are a straight shooter with no form of coyness about you. You shy away from accepting help and you are very careful when it comes to men. Are you sleeping with the guy you came with?”

His assessment of her was close enough to the truth to have her feeling more than a little uncomfortable.

“He’s just a friend.” She said tightly. “And that’s none of your damn business.”

He simply inclined his head, expression neutral. “I have offended you.”

She backed down when she realized she was being defensive.

“It’s fine.” She thought of letting the subject die, but something he said nagged at her.

“How do you know I am careful when it comes to men? Because I said I was not sleeping with you?”

“Firstly,” he began with a smile. “We would not be sleeping and second, I said it because I think it is the truth. Are you going to tell me otherwise?” He enjoyed talking to her and wondered fleetingly if they were going to end up using the cabin down below.

He wanted their first time together to be somewhere solid, like inside his bedroom, but he would take what he can.

“No. And nothing is wrong with being cautious. Men are often known to be faithless pigs.”

A chuckle escaped him at her fierce expression. “is that right?”

“I am guessing you’re going to tell me you’re not one of them.”

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“I’m not.” Leaning back, he picked up his glass and took a sip, watching her over the rim.

“Bad experiences?”

“Not really.” She shrugged. “Just enough to make an evaluation.”

“I am betting I can get you to change your mind about my species.”

“I am fine.”

“Not up to the challenge?”

She cast him a retired look that had him grinning and taking several years off his face.

“I’m not sleeping with you.” She sounded more like she was trying to convince herself and was sure he heard it too.

“Why not?”

“Because.”

He merely lifted a brow and waited.

“It would only complicate things.”

“What things?”

She could not very well tell him the real reason, so she reached for something else.

“You’re involved with someone.”

“Not anymore.”

Her tapered brows shot up. “That was quick. I hope it is not on my account.”

“It is on mine. We were simply enjoying each other’s company, nothing more.”

“The last time I saw you, she was saying something about buying painting for your bedroom.”

Jennifer already knows I do not need any more paintings for my suite.”

“I’m guessing that statement was for my benefit?”

“Possibly.” He inclined his head, watching her closely.

“Which only proves that she wants the relationship to continue.”

“She knew the deal from the beginning.”

She took another sip of wine. “And that is what you would want from me? A diversion?”

Amusement intensified his gray eyes. “I would consider you more of a distraction.”

“Which is all the more reason not to start anything.”

“I never tagged you for a coward.”

Her eyes flashed, and he watched in fascination as she stamped it out. “You’re good.”

“It seems you’re better.” He took another sip of the wine. “There is a perfectly clean and tidy cabin down below. One might even call it the height of luxury. We could simply indulge.”

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She had to force herself not to react to the obvious invitation even while her heart was thudding actively.

“Is that what you do? Indulge?”

He contemplated her question for a minute, as if turning it over inside his head. “We are both adults and unencumbered at the moment. I have been attracted to you since the moment I laid eyes on you.

It is more than that if I am being honest. You intrigue me and not a hell of a lot of women do. In fact, you are the first since...,” his voice tailed off and for a moment, he remained silent. “Suffice it to say that I’m very interested to see where this will take us.”

So, he was still hung up on his dead fiancée, she mused. Not that it made one bit of difference to her. She just wondered what it felt like to be loved so completely that not even death and years could diminish it.

“Not interested.”

“Are you sure?”

She tried for sarcasm, which she was so good at. “Why, Mr. Pendergast, is it a novelty being turned down by a woman?”

Instead of rising to the bait, he seemed to guess exactly what she was trying to accomplish.

“I will back down for now. But keep expecting me to come back.” His gray eyes had a light in them that was making her warm. “Count on it.”

“Is that a threat?”

He laughed softly. “I have a feeling that a woman like you would not take that lightly. No, it’s a definite promise.”

She declined his offer to take her home. And even if Brad had already left, she would rather call an Uber. He had disturbed her in ways she had not expected. He was too damn confident of his ability to charm her and finally get her on her back.

So, she was going to take a step back and give it a day or two. She had not asked him anything about his company, figuring it was too soon.

“You’re quiet.”

Shaking her thoughts loose, she turned her head to look at Brad. “Just thinking.”

“How was it?”

“Okay.”

She whipped her head around when he made a snorting sound.

“What?”

“Come now Margo. The guy zeroed in on you as soon as we entered the room. He took you off to someplace private and all you can say, is it was okay?”

“What the hell else do you want me to say?” She snapped irritably. She certainly did not want to rehash the time they had spent on his boat and how tempted she had been to accept his offer of going down below.

“I want you to say that you will be careful. I want you to say that you will not get in over your head.”

“I already know all those things.”

He slid her a glance, which she ignored. “He wants to get you in bed.”

“And you are implying that I have no say in the matter. That I cannot control my impulses.”

“How do you feel about him?”

“He is a mark. Someone I am using to get the job done. Period. That is, it. People are dying, young people at the beginning of their lives and I want to get to the bottom of it. There is no time to think about getting laid.”

There was silence for a few minutes as Brad navigated the midnight traffic, which was to his estimation, still crazy.

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“And if it comes to that?” He asked her quietly. He had seen them leave the balcony, because he had been on his way to bring her a glass of champagne and to find out what the hell was keeping her so long. He had stood there with the two glasses in his hand and watched them make their way to the harbor.

He had stood there long enough, eaten up with jealousy as he further noticed them going on the boat. Things were progressing rapidly. He had also seen the way the man looked at her and knew he was extremely interested.

“It won’t.”

“If it does?” He persisted, even when she cut him off with a look.

“It won’t. Now shut the hell up and concentrate on your driving. I got this and I don’t need you looking out for me.”

Chapter 6

“Supper at my place. I promise it will be just that unless you say otherwise. You mentioned you were into kickboxing, and it so happens that I am as well. You want to keep things light, so be it.”

She knew that refusing would force him to lose interest and she could not afford to. So, she had reluctantly agreed after giving him space for three days. She could not afford to drag her feet any longer.

Two more people had turned up dead, one of them a fifteen-year-old boy and that had

officially pissed her off enough to want to push the issue. Having to tell a mother that her only son who had simply gone to a party at a friend's house would no longer be coming home.

So, she was revved and ready to take on the world.

Hence her acceptance of the invitation. She would go to his place, pretend an interest, and try and lead the subject to his business ventures. She was going to have to find a way to get into his damn office.

A man like Merrick Pendergast would have everything pass coded, but she was hoping to see something lying around. She needed something. Her commander was onto her to get them some proof and she wanted it over and done with.

“Bring your best game. I have a feeling we are in for a very interesting night.”

“Hi.” He greeted her at the door after buzzing her up and she had to try her best not to goggle. The hallway was big with glossy wallpaper made of shimmering gold. An arched ceiling with muted lights shone dimly, giving the genuine hardwood floor an extra glow.

He led her through the hallway and into a dining area with several counters and a conversation area. A dining table took up space in the middle of the room and there was a grand piano in front of the floor to ceiling window.

From where she was standing, she could see an impressive gourmet kitchen with steel gray appliances and a semicircular counter.

“It's not too cold, so I thought we could eat on the balcony.” He had taken her jacket and hung it up. She was happy she had settled for faded denims and a thin black sweater because he was wearing jeans and a sweater himself.

“Don’t tell me you did the cooking.”

He smiled as he led the way through a sliding glass door hidden behind a panel in the wall.

“No.” He stepped back and pulled out her chair, going around to his side of the table. The balcony was enclosed, the privacy shade half open to the spectacular view of the entire city.

“My housekeeper prepared the meal before she left.” He lifted off the silver domed covers to reveal thin succulent roast beef, an assorted number of grilled vegetables and wild rice.

“I’m surprised you don’t have live in help.”

He lifted his brow as he poured the wine. “Why would that surprise you?”

She shrugged and picked up her utensils. The smell alone was making her salivate. “You strike me as a man who would want his every need met.”

His intense gray eyes bored into hers and she forced herself not to squirm.

“I do, yes. But I am capable of taking care of myself. Besides, I like my own space. Part of the reasons why I moved out of the manor years ago.”

This was the opening she was waiting for, and she took it.

“You have a brother who’s married?” She murmured casually.

“Yes. And two grown nephews.”

“Are you close?”

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He contemplated that while he handed her the glass of pale gold liquid. “I guess you could say we are. They are my family, and I happen to be big on family.” He shot her a glance.

What about you?”

“What about me?” She should have expected that information did not come cheap.

“Are you and your family close?”

“I only have a great aunt, and we get along.”

Her tone had him staring at her curiously and she could have cursed herself for revealing too much. “I was brought up in a home.” She blurted, surprising herself even more.

“I see.” He continued to stare at her as he sipped his wine. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“All right.” He did not press, and she felt the tension lessening around her chest. And had her saying.

“My mother was a junkie, and I have no idea who my father was.”

He felt something clutch at his heart. She passed it off as something that was not

important, but her off hand comment did not fool him. It mattered to her.

“Where is she now?” He asked so quietly; it had her insides going warm.

“Dead.” Avoiding his piercing gray gaze, she busied herself digging into her meal.

“You looked for her.”

“No.” Lifting her head, she gave him a fierce look. “I was not interested. Her aunt was looking for me and found me when I was already out of the system and on my own.”

She had to be careful here, she thought with a sick feeling at the pit of her stomach. She was revealing too much. She had never said this much to anyone before, and it shocked her. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

It was his damn voice. It was so deep and soothing that she wanted to dissolve in his arms and rest her head on his shoulder. Damn him!

“Life sucks and then we move on.”

He kept his gaze steady on her face until she looked away. And decided to file the information away for another time. He saw the hurt and pain there and was going to do his best to erase them. He had firsthand knowledge of those debilitating emotions and was going to make it his duty to see to it that she had some pleasure.

They both needed it. But for now, he would drop the subject.

“I don’t see you as a writer.” He cut into his roast beef with an economy of

movement she admired. He had strong tanned hands with dustings of dark hairs and long fingers that had her thinking of something other than what he was doing. And because she was, she had to look away quickly, but not before feeling the sharp and unfamiliar tug of lust.

She should not have come to his place. Coming here, being here took the power away from her.

“Why not?” Because she was out of control, her voice was sharp.

He merely spared her a glance as he chewed the succulent beef. “You’re too practical.”

His response was so unexpected; it caused her to laugh.

“What?”

A smile touched his stern lips and molded them into sensuously. She had to stop. Or she was heading into deep waters.

“You are earthy, which is sexy as hell. You do not believe in romance and the power of a love so encompassing it takes over everything else.”

“And you do?” She made her voice sound a tinge bored.

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you a little too old to believe in fairy tales?” This time, there was no pretense.

“You believe falling in love is just in stories?” He gave her an interested look, a slow sweep with his unfathomable gray eyes that had her going warm and soft at the core. The man was definitely lethal.

“I believe that people say the ‘I’ word to wield power over others.” She was unaware that she was proving his point. “Or to get laid. Or a combination of both.”

“Interesting.” He murmured. His fascination and desire for her was increasing every single moment and making itself felt, in parts of him that could not be hidden. It frustrated and intrigued him. “How are you going to write your romance if you don’t believe in the subject?”

“It’s called imagination for a reason,” she snapped it out.

“I take it you have never been in love.”

“No. And I’m all the better for it.”

He intended to teach her otherwise and felt a charge at the challenge facing him. Before long, he would have her writhing beneath him, even if he had to put everything he learned over his forty years of being with women. Without being vain or pompous, he knew his way around the female anatomy and what made them wet and wanting more.

With Margo Sullivan the need to feel her wet and panting for him was making him hot and shaky.

“Are you?” It took effort for him to remain seated and appeared unaffected when all he wanted to do was reach across the table and plunder her lips. It was not just the challenge of breaking down that cool façade, but the need to feel her, taste her was so ripe, he was almost bursting from it. He would have her in his bed very soon.

“Yes.” She sipped her wine and pretended that he was not affecting her. The surroundings, like nothing she had ever experienced before, because she was elemental. Her tastes ran to beer and burgers.

She was a cop and had never hankered for wealth. She loved what she did – the grittiness, the gore of delving into a murder investigation. She never considered herself beautiful or even female. Those at the precinct who made the mistake of trying to treat her like a damsel had been quickly disabused.

But right now, seated across from this very wealthy and powerful man – a man who was also very attractive and sexy and God! Was he sexy!

She felt like a female, with complicated feelings raging through her body. He was under investigation, and she was the cop who headed that investigation. She couldn't afford for lines to blur, let alone be crossed – she had to keep them clear.

“How disappointing.” He continued to sip the wine as he gazed at her with that intense look that had her feeling as if he was stripping off every piece of clothing from her body. “What do you think?”

“What?” She blinked at him.

“The wine. What do you think of it?”

The change of subject caught her off guard and for a minute, she simply gaped at him. “You do that so well.”

“What?”

“Switch from the topic.”

“I had a feeling it was getting too personal for you. The wine.” He gestured towards her glass.

“I am not a wine buff or whatever the hell it’s called, but it does not taste like horse piss, so that’s something, I guess.”

Her bluntness, the lack of tact had him blinking and then laughing. Damn if he was not already falling in love with her. She was the most fascinating woman he had ever met, and he was now more than certain he wanted her in his life.

The quickness of the decision, the increasing development of feelings left him breathless and alive for the first time in too many years to count.

“So, I take it that you like the taste.”

“I do. Why?”

“It’s from my vineyard in Napa Valley.”

“A man who has everything.”

“Oh, not yet, But soon.” His eyes settled on her lips, now made moist by the wine, and felt a need so great; he could hardly breathe. “Very soon.”

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She caught the expression on his face and went still as stone. His eyes lifted to hers and the meaning was clear. And because it was, she knew it was time to cut and run. She had never run from anything in her life, but it was time to regroup and decide what to do next.

Finishing the wine, she was about to put the glass down and make an excuse to leave, but he anticipated it and made his move.

“You mentioned you do some kick boxing,” he rose and came around to pull her chair out.

“Yes. I...”

“I want to show you something. It will not take long.” He promised, knowing that was a damn lie. He wanted to keep her here, persuade her to stay, kiss the wine off her sexy lips and suckle on her breasts.

He wanted to give her a taste and have her wanting more. The need to have her was so powerful, he was surprised he was still able to stand.

She allowed herself to be led away from the balcony through the dining room, along a winding hallway, past several doors before he stepped forward and pushed open a massive oak door and into a room that literally took her breath away.

He smiled secretly when she made a sound, he hoped would accompany her release when he brought her to the peak.

“Oh Lord!” She breathed as she turned into a tight circle and took in the wonder of it. She used the gym at the precinct often. And she had set up a little gym at home because she loved to workout. She had even gone to public gyms. Planet Fitness had all sorts of equipment, but nothing in what she had seen compared to this room.

There were weights, muscle training machines, strength training equipment, but what had her almost weeping was the boxing ring, the hefty punching bag, the wide mat on the floor for a quick sparring. There was everything here to get a good and honest workout without leaving the room.

“There are workout programs.” He called out a command and had the large screens coming to life with instructors, issuing out orders.

“Why?”

“I am regularly active. I sit in an office for most of the day and getting older means working harder to maintain muscles and strength. I intend to beat the odds. My nephew Michael comes over and we have competitions. He is like me and indulges the old man often. We box, spar and workout together.” He glanced at her comfortable boots.

“Want to give it a shot? See if you can take me down?”

She looked down at her jeans with regret.

“This is not appropriate...”

“I have clothes.” He intervened swiftly. “Michael is slim – not as slim as you are, but he has clothes here inside the locker.”

“Of course you have lockers” she murmured wryly, really tempted. “But I would not

dream of wearing someone else clothing.”

“There are some new ones. Unless you really don’t think you are any match for me.”

He said the magic word and almost laughed at the look that came over her lovely face. Christ, all those emotions flashing across her expressive face. He wanted to see passion there, passion for him, riding all over her.

“Let’s change that, shall we? Where do I change?”

Relief, sharp and sweet tumbled through his body like a flood and had him striding quickly towards the locker to grab clothing. “There is a bathroom through there. Another one to this end, I will take that one.”

“Prepared to get your ass kicked, Pendergast.” She was already in fight mode.

“We’ll see.” Excitement and anticipation coursed through him as they parted.

Inside the gray and green bathroom, he had to sit on the stool for a spell to get his rioting thoughts under control. He was aching for her. Leaning back against the wall, he pressed a hand over his throbbing cock, a shudder running through his body.

He would have her on the floor, sliding over her into her - he broke off abruptly, realizing he was heading into dangerous waters.

Hissing out a breath, he lunged to his feet and started to get ready.

“Where do we start first?” He asked briskly as she came back into the room. He had to force himself not to react at his first sight of her. She was wearing black skin shorts that did not quite reach her knees and as he suspected, had very strong tapered legs. The t-shirt was a bit loose, but he could see the outline of her sports bra and her

nipples.

“The ring!” She bared her teeth as she headed for it.

“You need helmets and gloves.”

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“Let’s go.” She climbed in and started circling like a professional, already marking her territory. She had put her hair up and was wearing a headband to keep it out of her eyes – eyes that were gleaming in anticipation.

“Here.” He handed her the helmet and watched as she strapped it on and pulled on boxing gloves.

“Let’s do this.” She ordered.

“I don’t want to hurt you, so the minute you feel like calling it quits, just...,” he did not get to complete that insulting statement, because her fist was slamming into his chest and had him staggering back.

“That wasn’t very sporting of you.”

“I had to shut you up!” She feinted when he came at her, and he had to admit that she was pretty light on her feet and extremely fast.

“Or you were being unfair.” They circled each other warily, looking for openings for weaknesses. He found one and punched out, holding back.

With his nephew, he could and had laid into him without doing so, but as tough as the woman in the ring was, she was still that – a woman and he really did not want to put bruises on a body he intended to make his.

But while he was thinking of it, while he was being careful, she used it against him and got in a few hard and swift punches that had him staggering.

With a feral growl, he decided to hell with it and came out fighting. Within a few minutes, he realized to his shocked surprise that they were well matched. What she lacked in strength, she made up in finesse and knew exactly what she was doing.

Her foot work was amazing, and he would have loved to just sit and watch her pommel an opponent into dust.

But that opponent was him and was having quite a time keeping up. And she was extremely competitive and did not know when to stop. Backing away, he held up a hand and called a halt.

Tugging off his helmet and boxing gloves, he dropped them to the floor and swiped a hand across the sweat rolling down his face.

“Well? “She had taken off her helmet as well and was grinning.

“Are we fighting as professionals?”

“I am one. I do not know about you.” She quipped. “Have I worn you out, Pendergast? Ready to call it quits?”

“Absolutely not. But being a gentleman and quite aware of your female inadequacies, I decide to be the better person and give us some time to recover, or rather you.” He grinned as her gaze turned to stone.

“Let’s get on the mat, shall we?”

The woman was magnificent, he thought in admiration and a warrior. Christ, he was enjoying himself immensely and had never felt this excited ever.

“Are you sure you would not like to lie down for a bit? I have some heating pads...”

“Screw you.” Slapping the ropes back, she climbed out and waited for him on the mat. “I’m waiting here.”

Grinning, he joined her and felt himself revved.

“The rules are...”

“Screw rules.” Her stance was combative, a gleam in her mahogany eyes that turned him on even more.

“Are you certain?”

In response, she moved in right and then feinted left, using her foot to slide in between his. He would have been taken down if he had not taken a firm stand and even then he staggered for a minute and had to regain his balance.

For the next half hour, they grappled and fought to get the upper hand. Sometimes it seems as if she had it, and then at the last minute, it reverted to him.

Margo felt her victory slipping away and for the first time in her life, she resorted to feminine wiles.

Dropping down, she pressed a hand to her chest and winced. And had him hunkering over her, a concerned look on his face. “Oh, Christ! I am so sorry. Where did I hurt you?”

He saw the glint in her eyes and anticipated the move. In a lightening move, he pinned her arms above her head and trapped her legs before she could do damage.

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“You are good. I am better!” He told her smoothly.

“Let me up.” She hissed, furious at how easily he was able to thwart her.

“I would ask if you’re going to behave, but I don’t trust you.” The feel of her long, lean body pressed against his was too much. And this time, he was not going to be able to step away. He would not.

She saw his head descending and panic set in like a storm – one that had her bucking.

“No.”

“Yes.” He whispered as he moved in. Slowly stretching out on top of her, he heard the groan escaped from deep inside his throat as he seized her lips with his.

Chapter 7

She resisted, but that was desperation and pride. Lust was stronger and surprised her – shocked her really as it slammed into her system like an electric jolt. She told herself that she should try harder – she could take him – maybe. But his mouth was brushing over hers - tongue trailing the moistness of her bottom lip and turning her into jelly.

When he started to nibble, she could have sworn she heard her blood boiling. She never allowed this – never allow anything unless she was in complete control, and she could feel it slipping away. Her heart was practically bursting, her body – Oh Lord! The heat had collected in one place and was burning hot.

He felt her resistance crumbling and increased the pressure of his lips. He was already aroused to the point of madness. His body was burning – a big ball of flame that was already more than he could bear.

He had to have her, or he was going to die. It was that simple. The passion raging inside him, the desperate lust slamming into his body had to be appeased or he would go out of his mind.

He persuaded her to open her mouth, used his tongue and more than a little finesse to get her to open up and when she did, when her breath escaped in a soft and somewhat sexy sigh, he simply went mad.

His tongue plunged into her mouth as he devoured, relished, and savored the taste of her. He was like a man faced with a sumptuous banquet after a yearlong fasting. He could not get enough.

The taste of her surrounded him, dug into him, wrapped around him, until he felt as if he would never be satisfied even when he swallowed her whole. He explored her mouth thoroughly, swallowed her moans- his hands busy dragging up the borrowed shirt.

Her skin was coated with sweat and felt silky to the touch. Lifting his head, he managed to pull the shirt and sports bra over her head, tossing them aside.

And he had his first look of her. The light in the gym was not on bright, he preferred less of it when working out, but he could still see the graceful throat, the dip in the skin. Her breasts were small, but full and rounded, the nipples already hard as stone.

He lifted his head to her face when she started to squirm.

“Let me go.”

“No.” He whispered, bending his head to her again. “You don’t want me to.”

He grunted as she dug her elbow into his stomach.

“Watch it pal.”

He was smiling when he kissed her again. He was fascinated by her, she had destroyed his senses, the wall he had erected around his heart, and he was breathless – speechless with the power she wielded.

Ending the kiss, he trailed his lips over her cheek, slowly, seductively sipping from her. He moved down to her throat and smiled at the hammering of the pulse, like a captured bird with the need to escape.

He spent time there, sipping from the surprisingly delicate skin, taking bites from her, and soothing the bites with his tongue, until they were both drunk from the pleasure.

When he moved down to her breasts, she put up a token resistance, shoving at his shoulders. Then her fingers clenched – nails biting – body arching as he circled the flesh with his tongue. Her head moved restlessly, her body feeling as if it was floating off the mat.

The man’s mouth was Creative, hungry, even, delicious. She had never experienced anything like this before. The last vestige of resistance crumbled into nothing and all she could feel was a desire so strong, it crowded everything else.

She tasted musky from the very energetic workout. She also tasted like honey; he thought dazedly as he tugged the nipple into his mouth. He was burning up and could feel the control slipping away by degrees, but he was determined to have her writhing beneath him. He wanted her to yearn for him the way he was yearning for her.

He wanted to seal them, to own her, the way she was owning him. He wanted complete surrender and was willing to do anything in his power to achieve it.

He could feel the suppleness of her skin. The toughness overlaid by silk. Her muscles were well defined, but her skin was baby soft. Who would have thought, he mused.

Bringing her nipples to a moist peak, he stopped short of making them sore. He was starving for her, but he had to stop before he could not, and he wanted all of her.

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Hunkering over her, he rid himself of his sodden shirt and hated that he had to stand to take off his sweatpants. But he did not spend much time doing so. He was afraid that she would take the opportunity to bolt, and he could not afford that.

She had her head turned away and was still when he removed the borrowed shorts. He would soon fix that; he decided as he removed her panties. A groan escaped him as he stared at the curly hairs covering her sex.

Stretching his long lean length on top of her, he cupped her face and forced her to look at him. “Talk to me.”

“No.” She could not tell him that she was taking the biggest risk of her life and putting her career on the line. She could not tell him that he had awoken something inside her that had long since remained dormant. All the sensations, the emotions tumbling inside her made her dizzy and confused.

“Just get on with it.”

His eyes searched her face as if seeking for answers.

Without responding, he lowered his head and tried for her lips, but she turned away and he had to settle for her neck, and he ravaged it. His body was pressed against hers and she could feel the springy texture of the hairs on his chest.

She could also feel something else – the insistent hardness rubbing between her thighs. And wanted it inside her. A need so strong, she could not believe it.

Reaching between them, she cupped the hot flesh and felt him vibrating. Lifting his head, he stared at her, gray eyes almost dark.

“Put me in,” he rasped, lifting his body so she could. As she guided his shaft at the opening. His eyes stayed on hers, watching them darkened and widened. Her body arched as he slowly entered her. She slid her hands up his taut stomach and over his chest, her body trembling as he went in deep.

His body vibrated with shock as her tightness enveloped him. She was too tight, incredibly moist and he was not going to last. But before he flooded her with his seed, he wanted her to come.

With that in mind, he eased out of her slowly, his eyes still holding hers. Reaching between them, he gripped his member and rubbed the tip, just the tip over her sensitive flesh. He saw when she arched, her mouth opened in a silent scream, her eyes widening.

Not satisfied just yet, he eased himself into her and used his thumb to toy with the flesh and watched her fragment. He felt the shift in her long, lean body and triumph was a burst of flame inside him.

She tried to resist; he could feel her pushing at him and saw the look of shock over the punch of passion as the violent orgasm crashed through her body. She screamed! Her hands racing up and down his back, her body writhing beneath his – he had to hold onto her hips to avoid being thrown off. Her reaction fired his senses. His control snapped.

With a feral growl – he drove into her - mouth capturing hers as he spilled his seed, watering her womb – his body bucking on top of hers. And even then, even when she had completely drained him, he could not stop. His heart was shuddering, his body coated with sweat, his limbs weakened and still he could not stop.

It took some time for her to recover enough to move and to feel. And to think. She had to think about what just happened and she could not do that because he was still inside her. His body was still covering her and to her utter confusion, she did not want him to move.

She enjoyed the feel of him on her. He filled her up – sex to her had just been a release, something to tolerate. And be done with it. She had never cuddled with a man after sex, never had one sleep over. Once it was over, she was done and wanted him gone. She did not have a lot of experience in that department.

She had once been so bored when she visited her aunt that she had started reading one of her historical novels. The love scene had been tastefully graphic and had her scoffing at the reactions of the female.

But she had to be honest to herself and admit that it paled in comparison to what happened here just now. Nothing in life had prepared her for this and she was bothered by it. For so many reasons.

He finally stirred and lifting himself, he looked at her.

“Am I crushing you?”

“Yes.” She answered too quickly and saw the quirk of his lips as he realized she was lying.

His eyes searched her face, and she had to force herself not to squirm. His fingers trailed the left side of her cheek slowly, his intense gaze making her warm. “You surprise me.” He murmured.

“That’s my life’s goal.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me why?”

She lifted her shoulder in a careless shrug. “I’m sure you’re going to spill.”

“For a woman of your age, you seem almost – innocent.”

Her eyes flared. “Don’t get it twisted, I’m not.”

“And yet.” He mused as he continued to trace her skin with his fingers. “It was as if you had not been with a man in a very long time.”

“So?”

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He was fascinated with the texture of her bottom lip. “And your reaction when you had an orgasm leads me to wonder if it was your first.”

“Oh please.”

“Was it?”

“I’m in my fifties...!”

“I am not judging you. It takes a certain quality and time to make a woman come.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. The look on your face when it happened...,” he eased out a breath. “It simply shattered me, and I want to see it again. I want to make you come over and over again. I want you to lose control.”

His eyes smoldered and he was not surprised to feel himself hardening inside her. Apparently, it was a shock to her as her eyes widened and her body trembled.

“I want to look at you when you’re exploding all over me.”

“No. Please... Just...” she hated that her voice was high and thin and that she did not sound like herself.

“I want the pleasure of seeing you go over,” He tilted her chin up even when he started to move, slowly, his eyes watching her. “I want to see you letting go.”

“No.” She pushed at his shoulders. “Damn you! Stop.”

“Let go, baby.” One hand curved around her neck as he increased the pace, making it impossible for her to look away. He saw the various expressions racing over her face, surprise, pleasure, and then complete surrender and saw when it started to happen.

Her lips parted and hers became bright. “That’s it baby. Just let go.”

“Damn you.” She gasped, just before her body imploded. She felt as if she was racing towards the edge of a cliff and could not stop. It took her over and swept her away, washing her up until she was so weak, she could not stop trembling.

With a growl, he seized her lips, his body driving into hers with a relentless passion that had him tumbling over the edge with her.

Somehow, they found themselves in the wide ocean of his bed and starting all over again.

It troubled him that he could want her so much that his appetite for her could not be appeased. And that he had to force himself to give them a bit of a break.

The dawn was just starting when they both tumbled into exhausted sleep and even then, he had to feel her against him. Resisting her effort to move away from him, he wrapped his arms around her and cradled her with his body.

She woke up on the bed with sheets tangled all around her and vaguely recalled that she had left the gym in his arms. He had carried her upstairs and into his bedroom and she had allowed it. She could always use the excuse that she had been weak and disoriented.

Sitting up against the mound of scented pillows, she took the time, time she had not had last night to look around the huge space. The man loved his space as she had seen from the rooms downstairs and this was no exception.

A fire was smoldering in the hearth that stretched from one wall to the next, giving the room a warm and wonderful glow.

The floor was not carpeted, but repeated the theme throughout the rest of downstairs, the stained wood floor, the gold and blue wallpaper, and a closet that could have swallowed her five times over. There were no doors, but a wide-open space again that showed enough clothes to outfit a department store.

“Jesus!” She whispered as she gaped. The design was unique, at least, to her it was. Revolving hangers, shelves stocked with sweaters and what looked like casual pants, denims and another section for ties, shoes – so many shoes, Italian loafers, sneakers, boots – Good Christ!

What does one person do with so much? It was ridiculous and made her own tiny closet seem woefully inadequate.

Turning her head to the left, she noticed the floor to ceiling window and the unrestricted view of the city. Shoving the covers away, she climbed off a bed that was wide enough to fit a dozen people comfortably and remembered they had left their clothing on the floor of the gym.

And she was completely naked and sore all over. Limping towards the bathroom, she stood on the threshold and experienced another shock.

The bathroom was the same color scheme as the bedroom, and it was huge. There was a wide tub in the middle of the floor and a shower install that could easily fit – well a dozen people, with knobs and a fancy nozzle that seemed too complicated for

words.

Taking a deep breath, she moved over the tiled floor that seemed like sapphire glass and stood at the triple sink with its muted lights to study her image. She looked as if she had been thoroughly used. Her hair was tumbling all over and around her face in a tangled mess and her lips were swollen.

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Little surprise there, considering that they had spent an inordinate amount of time kissing. Christ, just remembering his mouth on hers was making her moist.

Damn him! He had asked if it was her first time having an orgasm and she had not given him a straight answer. But he was smart enough and experienced enough to realize that it had been her first.

In the past, the only thing she had experienced was a small pop and nothing more and she was too honest to pretend something she was not feeling. She had left the bed of the man she was with, feeling a sense of dissatisfaction and that something was definitely missing.

Now she knew what it was. Scrubbing her hands over her face, she stood there for a moment, absorbing the significance of what this was. And how it was going to affect her job.

She had spent the night with him, something that she never allowed before. She hated people in her space and when the sex was over, she wanted the man gone. Now she had woken up in a man's bed, with hardly any sleep at all. The worst of it was that the man was a suspect.

She could see her case being compromised because she slept with him. Let her guard down and allowed him to get under her skin.

She told herself she could have stopped it, simply walked away, and find some other way to get the job done, but she had wanted it to happen. The first touch of his body on hers had done it for her and now she had no idea what to do.

First things first. She need to get out of here and put clothes on. With that in mind, she rinsed off her face and gargled with some mouthwash.

When she went back into the bedroom, she strode into the department store disguised as a closet and selected a white cotton t-shirt. Making a sound of frustration, she stood there staring at herself in the sea of mirrors. She was going to have to retrieve her clothing and get the hell out of here.

She had left her purse and everything else on the balcony and hoped he was not the curious sort, because her piece and her shield were in there.

She had never been this careless before and it bothered the hell out of her. She was halfway down the winding staircase when she saw him coming up. They both stopped and stared at each other. He was wearing a pair of sweatpants that rode low over his taut belly and his impressive chest was bare, stirring something deep inside her.

“I thought we could have breakfast on the balcony just outside my bedroom.”

“I have to go. I need to get my things.”

He advanced, and she just stood there like a complete moron until he reached the step below her.

“Look, I really have to go.”

“I know.” Putting the tray down, he clamped his hands on her arms, his eyes roaming her face with a hunger that was transferring to her. “You look good in my shirt.”

“I – I did not have anything else to wear...”

“I’m not complaining.” The look in his eyes had her slapping a hand on his chest. Big

mistake, she thought belatedly. His skin was warm, the chest hairs feeling pleasant on her skin and his heart was thudding.

“Look, I really have to go.”

She did not sound too convincing, and he must have noticed it. His hands drifted down to tug at the hem of the shirt and before she knew what was happening, he was taking it off and leaving her naked.

“Look pal...” The rest ended in a gasp as he eased her up and managed to drag his pants down. She found herself sinking into his, taking the hardness into her- until she was blinded. Emotions flooded her, she went blind as he pushed into her.

Turning skillfully, he dropped to the step and wrapped her long legs around his waist as she sheathed him completely. His breathing was ragged, his heart pounding so loudly, he could swear it drowned out everything else. That he could want her again, that the want had turned into desperate need took him aback and had him spiraling down.

He had left his bed with her sleeping in it, and it had felt like the most natural damn thing in the world to him. He had sat there watching her sleep and felt the raging inside his chest.

Kicking off the sweats, he clamped his hands around her narrow hips as she started pumping. A cry escaped her when he brought her arched body forward, so he could feast on her nipples. He was hungry for her.

Desperate to make her his. He wanted his stamp on her, wanted her at his side, in his bed, waking up to her and it scared the hell out of him, how much that desperation was making him crazy.

He brought her to a stunning and violent climax within minutes, her body arching, her flesh quivering as she surrendered.

He was right behind her, his body plunging into hers, desperate to touch her soul as he poured his seed and watered her womb. His hands bit into her flesh, making grooves. He lifted his head from her sore nipples and simply took her lips, swallowing her cries as the release overpowered them completely.

Margo clung, the tears burning the back of her eyes as her body fragmented. It occurred to her fleetingly that she had never clung to a man before. Ever.

Chapter 8

The coffee had gone warm. But it was excellent coffee, and she had not expected anything less. He kept her on his lap, wrapped around him while they ate. She had started to fight him, to try and get off him, but his arm was like a steel band around her waist.

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There were fat green grapes, delicious thin biscuits and cheeses, several unusual types and he insisted on feeding her. Everything was a first to her. And because all of it was new, her head was crowded with sensations.

She could no longer remain aloof. She was sheathing him, wasn't she? He was still buried deep inside her and after last night and this morning, she could not believe he could – that they would be...

"I need to ask you something." She finished the coffee and wished for more.

"Ask away." He offered her a biscuit that tasted as if it had been soaked in honey.

"Are you on anything?"

"Pardon?" He gave her a perplexed look as he chewed a grape.

"I mean, you have been at it since last night and we're still – you are... Are you on the little blue pills?"

To her surprise, he looked offended and embarrassed. "Absolutely not!"

She grinned and felt light and giddy. "You sound pissed."

"What if I asked you the same question?"

"I am a woman and that means I can go without help. You are a man and one in your fifties..."

“I know my own age.” He sounded miffed and made her delight even greater. “I am in excellent health and certainly don’t need help in that particular area.”

“Just checking.”

“You really are enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Immensely.”

“Why don’t we go back to bed and...”

“As much as I am tempted, you have a company to run and I have work.”

“You are a writer.”

“So?”

“You can work anytime.”

“It so happens, I have a deadline.”

Putting away his cup, he rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “I want to see you later.”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I do not owe you an explanation. I do not do relationships; I don’t sleep over....”

She blew out a breath at his raised brows. “Not usually anyway. I need time to think.”

“About?”

“What we’re doing here.” She started to move off him, but he would not allow it, and she told herself that she was humoring him, ignoring the deep-down feeling inside the pit of her stomach that was saying that she liked this – liked the feel of him against her.

“What do you think we’re doing?”

“Having fun.” Ignoring the dangerous flash of his gray eyes, she continued. “Having great sex. But that is it. You cannot expect anything else.”

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“Is that right?” His voice had gone dangerously low. “It’s just sex, is it?”

“There can’t be anything else.” This time she shoved hard enough, and he let her up. Reaching for the discarded shirt, she dragged it over her head. “I have to go.”

She told herself that it wasn’t disappointment she felt when he did not come after her. Not even when she retrieved her stuff from the balcony and went to the gym to get her clothing.

When she came back out, he was not on the steps where she left him, and the tray was gone. Swallowing her acute disappointment that he had taken it so lightly, she turned and went towards the door, stopping when she saw him leaning against it.

“I need to get past.”

“In a minute.” He had his arms crossed over his impressive bare chest and she was doing her best not to stare or she would start yearning. “What you said to me earlier was pure bullshit.”

“I don’t care what you think...”

“You feel something for me and I sure as hell feel a lot for you. You are under my skin. In my bloodstream and if you think I am going to step meekly aside, then you do not know me very well.” He unfolded his arms and started towards her. And she had to force herself not to back away.

A grim smile touched his lips, and she had the sinking feeling that he knew she was

quaking inside. “Take the time you need, but I am not going to simply disappear. What we have, what we feel for each other is not going away and I want to see you again. No!” He shook his head. “I’m going to damn well see you again.”

“This is not a relationship...” She figured if she said it enough, it would resonate and make it so. “We’re just having fun...” She let out a startled gasp when he yanked her forward and crushed his arms around her.

Before she could react, he took her mouth – just seized her lips, crushed his against hers and shoved his tongue in. She felt dizzy and then recharged and then numb.

But all of that passed as he ravaged her. She went weak, her knees buckling and thought dazedly that it was a good thing, he was holding onto her, or she would have slid to the floor. She felt as if she was dissolving, her heart racing like a maddened thing. Her hands came up in defense and curled into his chest.

When he let her go, the abruptness had her staggering and trying to keep her balance. Her lips throbbed and she felt as if she was burning up.

“When you’re doing your thinking, remember that.” His eyes smoldered and he looked dangerous and utterly sexy, standing there with his chest heaving and his hair tousled. The man was too sexy for words and for the first time in her life, she found herself wishing things were different.

But it wasn’t. There were murders between them. Lies and subterfuge. She was not who he thought she was, and he was a suspect. That stopped her cold. And had her snapping out of the daze.

“Let me out.” She whispered hoarsely.

With hissed breath, he uncoded the door and yanked it open and she prayed that he

would not touch her again. She had to try and find a way to regroup and come again. To try and come back from this.

Without another word, she strode away and went to the elevator that would take her to the ground floor. And he watched her. She was inside the car when she heard the door slammed shut. Leaning back, she closed her eyes and tried to settle.

He went upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. She had dropped the t-shirt she had been wearing on a chair just inside the parlor and he took it up with him. It damn well pissed him off that he was sniffing at it like a fricking schoolboy with his first crush. It smelled like her.

A kind of musky scent, faintly exotic, because he did not believe she was into expensive scents. And it was still warm from her body. Damn her for reducing him to this.

He wanted her. Had almost begged her to spend the night again. The entire day. He had been about to call and ask his assistant to reschedule meetings so that he could spend the day with her, and she had left after telling him she had ‘fun’, and it was just sex.

He stood by the side of the bed and stared at the tangled sheets. The room smelled of sex and the smoke from the fire he had lit – faint whispers of both, but it had his knees going weak and memories flooding him. Lowering himself to the bed, he hauled the sheet up to his nose and inhaled what he thought was her scent.

He could not get enough of her. Touching her had been something he had to do. He sighed raggedly and felt the piercing guilt that he had never felt this way before. Not even with the woman he had proposed to, one who carried his son inside her womb.

What he felt for Laura had been a pleasant sort of buzz, a glow inside his chest.

He had loved her of course, but he now realized that it had been a comfortable sort of feeling, like sliding on an old robe. With Margo – it was violent, addictive, and raw. He had wanted to devour her completely. Align her body with his, absorb her until they were sealed, bonded.

For the first time in his life, he felt giddiness coursing through him, giving him wings. Dropping the sheets, he covered his face with his hands and ached. He was aching for her. And if she had the idea of brushing him off, then he would damn well see about that.

The determination settled on him like a well-known cloak and had him squaring his shoulders. He would give her the damn space and time to think, but not for long. Oh no, he wasn't going to give her time to rid herself of him.

Margo let herself in and dropped her key fob into the ceramic bowl residing on the entrance table. Methodically, she removed her boots and jacket and sat on the stool at the side of the door. She had refused to think about anything on her drive here.

But now, she could not help it. She had seen several missed calls from Brad and heard his messages. His impatient tone that she had not returned his calls. She would go in, she had to.

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She had a briefing, reports to write and they were certainly going to inquire about the progress if any. Brad knew she had left the function with Merrick. He did not know she had gone a step further and slept with the suspect, spent the entire night – a night she was never going to forget.

How could she? He had warned her that he would not allow her to deny them. Stretching her legs out, she stared at her unadorned nails. What the hell did he see in her? He was Merrick Pendergast, fabulously wealthy, extremely attractive and she had seen him naked.

She knew his body, had explored it, he had made her feel completely wanted. What did he see in her? She was not sophisticated, far from it. She was not from his level of society. What the hell did he want with her?

But there was something between them and she was damn well not going to explore that troubling aspect. She couldn't. But she had overestimated her position and was paying for it.

She was second guessing herself. She should have gone in as herself – a cop and questioned him. But others had done that and had been blocked by his retinue of lawyers, hadn't they? That was the reason for her offering to go undercover.

But what good was it going to do if she blew the investigation? More children would die and all she had to show for it was a roll in the hay and probably the loss of her shield. What the hell was she going to do now?

Where did she go after this? Should she quit while she was ahead or continue this

farce? She was never one to give up, but now her damn feelings were involved. She felt something for him. For the first time in her life, she had all these emotions racing through her body. And wasn't it a kicker?

She had spent time sailing through life, smug in the satisfaction that she was immune to emotional entanglements. The precinct had her pegged as being hard and tough as rocks.

"Sullivan has a heart of stone." They would joke. And she had thought herself above certain things. Now the joke was on her.

She could still feel him inside her, his mouth on her nipples, his long lean body, the supple strength of him, his lips on hers. Lifting a hand, she touched her mouth and felt the shimmer running through her body. He had left his mark on her, mentally and physically.

There was a bruise on her left breast he had put there. She had left her marks on him as well. Her blunt nails had scorched his back and shoulders, and her teeth marks were on his chest, when she had spiraled out of control so many times.

Her phone rang again and jolted her out of her reverie. Dragging it out, she read the LED and answered.

"We have two more." Brad told her grimly.

"I'm on my way."

Her murder board was updated, and she had gone through the briefing.

Her commander had made himself clear. They need results and they need them now. “The mayor and chief of police are putting the pressure on. The press is giving us hell. We need results and fast.”

Kicking back, she placed her feet on the desk and cradled the cup of coffee as she studied the board. Two more had been added. Teens – two nineteen-year-old boys at a different club. Another fancy place where the music was hopping and too packed for anyone to know who was passing out the illegals.

Or no one was willing to come forward. It was frustrating as hell and it all points to Medtech. That was the familiar link, and it was breaking her heart. She could not eliminate the company. She had tried – turned it, twisted it sideways and it still pointed to them.

She looked up as her partner came in and closed the door behind him.

Moving over to the small table, he poured coffee and came to sit on the edge of her desk, facing the board. “Where were you last night?”

The casual question almost had her spilling her coffee.

“What do you mean?”

He turned to look at her, feeling the familiar awareness of her that seem to be something constant.

She was wearing an emerald, green sweater over jeans and her familiar well-worn boots and her hair was brushed back from her face and secured at the nape of her neck. As usual, she was not wearing a stitch of makeup and was sexy and aloof.

“I mean that when I could not get you, I drove to your place. Your car was not there,

and you did not answer your doorbell.”

She struggled to remain casual, even though guilt was churning away inside her gut.

“I must have been out.”

“Out where?”

Her tapered brows lifted and had him backing down. “Sorry.” He muttered. “None of my business. Unless you were out with Pendergast.”

“Why would I be out with him?”

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“You seemed chummy at the function, and you did leave with him.”

“So?”

“It seems to me that the guy is really interested.”

“We have an ongoing case, one that is frustrating as hell. We certainly do not have time to be digging into my personal life.”

He latched onto that. “You have a personal life?”

“Why don’t we concentrate on the case?”

“You’re being evasive, and it makes me wonder why.”

“I am subtly telling you to mind your own business, but that is not working. Butt out.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he muttered.

“I know what I am doing. Now back to the evidence.”

“What evidence?”

“Or lack thereof.”

She weighed the consequences and decided that she did not have a choice. She had asked him for a couple of days, and he had not called her. She had of course ignored the tingle inside her as she wondered what he was doing and if he was still interested.

So, she had called and was put through to his very professional sounding assistant. She had preferred going that route, even though he had given her a card with his personal cell numbers on the back.

And she had asked for a meet.

“I think it’s time I saw where you operate from, don’t you?”

“That is, it? Nothing more to say?” His voice was cool and had given her pause for thought...”

“Are you going to be pissed off right now? I am not going to apologize for wanting to take some time to think.”

“And have you thought about it?”

“Yes.” She blew out her breath. “Now, can we move on?”

“Oh, we are going to have a damn conversation all right. Swing by at seven. I am assuming you know where the place is?”

“Everyone does.”

So, now she was in the vast parking lot of the impressive Medtech building. The building was easily sixty floors and considering that she was afraid of heights, she tried not to think about it. He had told her to come right in.

“The guards downstairs will point you to the private elevator.”

Sitting behind the wheel, she took in the towering glass and stone building and the lush green trees, the park benches, the fountains, elegant and lovely sprouting clear, clean water and felt overwhelmed. Brad was right. She was in over her head.

She was dealing with a giant. Medtech had an extraordinarily long reach. Merrick Pendergast, the man she had spent an entire night and morning with, naked in bed, was a powerhouse.

And if he discovered, had even the slightest inkling of what she was up to- Well, she had no idea what would happen. He would hate her of course. And he would probably ask for her badge. He was friends with politicians, judges, and lawyers.

She was just a cop looking for justice for some dead people. Blowing out a breath, she placed a shaky hand to her chest. Never in her career had she felt the slightest hint of fear. Yes, she had gone up against gang members and other unsavory elements, but she had always been unafraid.

This was different, not just because of the man she was dealing with, but because of the emotional upheaval she was going through. She had spent two days away from him to try and get some sort of balance, some sort of semblance of order to her life, but ended up yearning for him.

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“Okay, Sullivan,” she muttered as she stepped out of the vehicle and wrapped her jacket around her, “time to tie this up once and for all.”

He was pissed at her and nervous at the same time. And that made him furious. She had kept him waiting for two damn days and during that time, he had been unable to sleep. The bed had smelled of her, even though his housekeeper had changed the sheets. And he had worried that she would not come back.

That he would not hear from her again. That she would decide it was over between them, even before anything got started.

But she had called.

He would set some rules. Leaning back in the chair, he closed his eyes wearily. What the hell was he thinking? Rules? With a woman like her? That would probably send her running in the opposite direction.

And he could not afford that. He snapped to attention when his intercom sounded.

“Ms. Sullivan is on her way up, sir.”

“Thank you.” Releasing the button, he shoved away from the desk and made his way to the cabinet. He was not going to give her the satisfaction of seeing him nettled. He had just poured the Scotch from the decanter when his doors swung open. Turning around, he felt every angry thought and resentment melting away at his first sight of

her.

She was wearing the familiar faded denims and scarred jacket with a thin navy-blue sweater underneath. Her hair was piled in a haphazard fashion on top of her head. And she wasn't wearing makeup. And she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Her first comment had his pleasure blooming. Coming into the room, she turned in a tight circle, a look of amazement on her face.

"Holy crap! This is all you? No! Don't answer that, of course it is. And I just met your prune faced assistant who gave me a look of such disdain, I almost told her to kiss my ass."

She held up a hand. "But I managed to refrain from expressing myself, as hard as that was. Are you going to pour me one of those?" She jerked her head to the drink in his hand.

"It's Scotch." His eyes twinkled as he continued to stare at her.

"I happen to know that it is." She walked in further, her feet sinking into the gold-colored carpet. "What a view." She moved over to the sofa at the window and knelt there staring out the window at the entire city spread out before her. "How the hell do you get any work done? Thanks." She took the glass from him and turned back to look at the view.

"With considerable effort." He joined her on the sofa and stretched his legs out. "How are you?" Taking her arm, he tugged her down next to him.

"I am fine. Hey!"

Chapter 9

Snagging her glass and putting it on the table next to him, he tumbled her into his lap, his arms like steel bands around her waist.

“I would like a proper greeting.”

She struggled a little, but that was token because seeing him brought back all the conflicting feelings. Seeing him reminded her that she had been yearning for the past two days.

A ragged sigh escaped her as he found her mouth. Instead of the punch of power, he surprised her by gentling the kiss and had her sinking into him. But it was not long before the passion exploded and had his hands roaming over her back and pushing off her jacket.

But even that was not enough. He wanted to feel her skin on his. Dragging her sweater up, he felt himself hardening even more at the touch of her flesh.

This time, it was she who became the aggressor. Everything else faded away, but just the two of them. She would think about how far she was compromising her position after, but right now, she had to feel him inside her or she was going to die.

Tearing her mouth from his, she grappled with his sweater, snarling when his arms became tangled.

“Baby, wait.” He winced as her fingers dug into his shoulders.

“I can’t. I want you.” She was on fire, the heat spiraling through her body. “Now. Now.” They rolled on the sofa and fought to get rid of their clothing.

A low growl escaped him when she dragged him up so she could straddle him. Sensations rocketed through his body and had him gripping her hips with brutal fingers.

His heart was racing so fast, he wondered dazedly if he was about to have a heart attack. When he started moving, she took over and rode him hard and fast, her body bowed, her head thrown back.

Rearing up, he seized her nipple and suckled hungrily. The touch of his mouth on her rigid flesh sent the orgasm punching through her with a violence that staggered both of them.

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He had to hold onto her to keep her anchored to him.

Lifting his mouth from her nipple, he fisted his hands into her hair and dragged her mouth to his. "More." He whispered harshly.

"Damn you." Her body was still vibrating. "I can't."

"Take more."

She cried out when he reached between them and rubbed the swollen flesh. The shocked look on her face as she went under again, snapped every bit of control and had him going under with her.

She collapsed against him, her face buried in his throat, her eyes squeezed shut.

As soon as he stopped shuddering and he could command his weakened limbs to move, he shifted so that he was lying down and cradling her on top of him. For several minutes, they did not move or speak.

She felt the soothing movements of his hands roaming up and down her back and wanted to weep. She had entered this assignment with her eyes wide open, with the intention of standing for the victims and that was still the plan.

But it had changed. She wanted him to be innocent. The thought of him being involved with killing people for profit was something she could not bear.

And being with him for the past few days, instinct told her that he would never be

involved with anything like that. But she needed proof. She also had to put away the troubling thought of what his reaction would be when he found out what she had done. She could not bear thinking about it.

The assignment had become distasteful to her, and she wanted it over and done with.

She wished she could tell him what was going on.

But she could do the next best thing. She could free him from all suspicions. And hope that he did not hate her too much when the truth was revealed.

With that in mind, she lifted her head to look at him and felt the familiar ache starting inside her heart. His hair was delightfully mussed, and his eyes had a luminous quality that changed the color to a fascinating kind of smoky gray.

“What?”

“You look so pleased with yourself.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” He was still buried deep inside her and planned to stay that way for a while.

“We’re going to end up killing each other.”

“What a way to go.” One hand came up to cup the back of her neck. “I would like you to meet my family.” He grinned wryly when she jolted. “Just dinner, this Sunday.”

“No.”

“Baby, listen to me.” He gripped her neck to prevent her from moving away. “I’m not

pressuring you into anything. It's just dinner..."

"With your family." She pointed out.

"Yes." He agreed. "I want you to meet them."

"Why?"

He gave her a frustrated look. "You already know the answer to that."

She moved restlessly and the thought came to her that this was an opportunity to get an opinion on his family, especially the nephew in whom she was interested.

Jason Pendergast had skirted the law since he was in his teens and was worth more than a second look. He was also a drug user, something the family, especially his father had tried to cover up.

"Okay, fine." She grumbled, making it appear that she was agreeing under extreme duress. "But that does not mean we are in a relationship. And no talk about where this is going."

He gave her a cool look that had her lifting her brows.

"Anything else?"

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“If I think of something else, you will be the first to know. Oh, stop looking at me like that.”

“It seems as if you’re just doing me a favor.”

“It so happens, I am,” she sighed as he started to glower, “I’m not going to apologize for being honest.”

He felt her shiver slightly and immediately reached for the throw and pulled it over them.

“Better?”

She nodded. “Tell me about this place.”

“My office?”

“Your company, I read somewhere that it was started by your great grandfather and was simply an apothecary shop where he sold medicinal herbs and healing balms.”

He chuckled, feeling his irritation lifting.

She had the uncanny ability to fill him with pleasure one minute and frustrate him the next.

“It was a little more than that.” He settled her on his shoulder and turned so that he was facing her. “Ira Pendergast cared about people and was a born healer. He also

had a way with herbs and would study their healing properties and what could be done to give them the necessary boost.

What herbs could be combined to get rid of the malady and so on. People came to him from near and far for something as simple as a rash on the skin to migraines and heart conditions.

He would combine holistic medicine with the proper diet. Before long, he had become very popular and his home where he saw people was no longer able to accommodate them. So, he opened the store.”

She was fascinated by the story and found herself drawn into it.

“He did it with no formal education?”

“It wasn’t until he had come back from serving in the war that he got some training and expanded the store.”

“It wasn’t called Medtech before, was it?”

He shook his head. “It had the unfortunate name of ‘Pen-Med’,” he grinned and shook his head. “It wasn’t until my grandfather inherited the business that it changed to Medtech.”

“Your grandfather was a doctor.”

“Yes. He trained as one – a GP.”

“And your dad as well.”

“A neurosurgeon.”

“Neither you nor your brother followed in their footsteps.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I knew from the very beginning that I wanted to concentrate on the business aspect of things, so I went to law school.”

“I keep forgetting that you have a law degree,” she murmured.

“And a business one as well. Maurice has an associate degree in business.”

And is constantly in your shadow, she thought. Another thread to tug on.

“You built the company and took it into the twenty-first century. It was mainly a pharmaceutical company before, but now it has holdings all over the world.”

He moved his shoulders restlessly. “Diversification is a way of spreading the profits around.”

“Your company manufactures drugs with little to no side effects. From what I see and have read, that’s a little iffy, isn’t it? To my way of thinking, ‘Big Pharma’ is all about the bottom line and that’s making a profit.”

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He was silent for a while and had her wondering if she had gone too far.

“The mission of the company is ‘Finding a cure at a cost’. That has been the way of it since my great grandfather founded it and we have tried to maintain the quality.” His expression became sober.

“We are not a perfect corporation and there have been some hiccups over the years, but we are determined to make it more about caring for people and trying to do our part in healing the sick. Making more people comfortable. Giving the best we can.”

“Medtech has been a sponsor of various cancer research over the years.”

He nodded. “Unfortunately, we are still trying to come up with a cure for several illnesses.”

She trailed a finger over the hairs on his chest and felt her skin quivering when his muscles flinched in reaction.

“And the rumors about illegal drugs being funneled through the company?” She asked casually, watching his face closely.

And saw his jaw tightened.

“Just rumors and ones I am not going to talk about.”

“I’m sorry...”

“No,” he blew out a breath and forced a smile. “I’ve worked too damn hard to see the company dragged through the mud.” His expression softened as he stared at her. “Shall we talk about something else?”

“Like what?” She asked lightly, knowing she could not afford to stay on the topic.

“Like how much I would love you to come and live with me.”

Her head snapped up sharply as she stared at him in shock.

“Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m beginning to think so.” He had not meant to jump right in. He had been thinking about it and thinking had turned into words that had just flown out of his mouth.

“What do you say?”

“I say that you are certifiable.”

“Will you think about it?”

“No.” She started to move away when he flipped her onto her back and covered her body with his. “We only just met...”

“And I already know that I want you in my life.”

“This is crazy. You know that right?” She was trying to keep the panic from showing on her face but was afraid she had not quite succeeded.

“I know I am crazy about you.”

Panic and excitement vied for supremacy and had her closing her eyes and willing

herself to be rational.

“It’s just sex,” she insisted.

He simply brushed his lips on hers and had her vibrating. “Is that what you’re telling yourself?”

“Look pal...,” the rest was swallowed as he seized her lips in a kiss that had her clinging to him.

She spent the night at his place and as soon as they had arrived, he fed her and then they went straight to bed.

She was going deeper and deeper into a place where if she was not careful, she would not be able to come back out of. She loved being with him. It was not just the sex, even though she did not quite know how to describe it.

She loved talking to him. For the first time in her life, she felt safe with a man. He takes care of her, and she was finding that it was becoming addictive.

Her gut was telling her that he was not in the wrong and she had always trusted her instinct. But she needed solid proof in order to cross him off. Her gut was also telling her that it had to be a member of his family and several key people in his R&D department.

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It was the only reason she had agreed to a dinner she was not looking forward to attending.

Not only was she going under false pretense, but she was giving him hope that they were in an actual relationship.

Even after he had fallen asleep after making love to her for the third time, she was unable to fall asleep. He was curled up on her stomach, his hand wrapped around her, his leg trapping both of hers as if afraid she was going to sneak out.

She was in a quandary and that was too mild a word for it. She was a cop involved with the man she was investigating. And was going to have to tell him eventually, but she had to keep it to herself for now. And what was worse was that she had feelings for him. Complicated feelings, but feelings, nonetheless.

To her shocked surprise, she felt tears burning the back of her eyes.

Even if she was free to be with him, it wouldn't work. They were from two different worlds. As far apart as two people can ever be.

A cop and a multi-billionaire. Shaking her head, she sighed raggedly. She was going to have to say goodbye to him eventually, but God forgive her, she was going to take advantage of just being with him at this moment.

“Will I see you tonight?” He asked it casually, but she could tell that her answer was

important to him.

She had told him she had to make an early start because she had some things to take care and he had not argued, because he had to be in early as well.

“Aren’t you afraid we’ll get tired of each other?” He had made coffee, and she was enjoying her second cup.

“I’m sure you will let me know when that happens.” He came around the counter and turned her to face him. They had taken a shower together and that had turned into something much more. The man had a stamina that did not cease to amaze her.

“I’m sure I will. You know I’m only coming back for the excellent coffee and the sex of course.”

“I feel so used.” Tilting her chin up, he brushed his lips against hers. “You’re in my blood stream.” He whispered. “And I’ll never get tired of looking at you.”

“You say that now.”

He rubbed his hands up and down her arms. He had seen the bullet mark on her left shoulder as well as the knife cut on her abdomen and asked her about them. She had a lie in place and had told him she had been mugged.

“Twice?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Nothing. I don’t like the idea of you being hurt.”

She had almost said it goes with the territory, and it scared her that she wanted to tell

him who she really was and be done with the lies. She was sick to her stomach that she was deceiving him. But it couldn't be helped. She had started it and had to finish it.

“Well?” He broke into her reverie and stared at her quizzically.

“Yes.”

Her heart veered crazily at the look of absolute pleasure on his face. “Good. What would you like to eat? I will instruct the housekeeper on what to prepare.”

“Anything is fine with me.”

“How about grilled lobster? We could eat by the fire in the living room.” He tucked a tendril of her hair away. “I was thinking we could also go a round or two in the ring.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Is that the usual activity for a date?”

He chuckled and pressed a kiss on her lips again. “You happen to be an unusual woman. Finish your coffee.”

She was early. And that was very good. The squad room was quiet for a change as the shift change had not already taken place. She went swiftly to her office and closed the door behind her. Merrick had poured her a go cup of coffee and she went to get a cup to pour some in and went behind her desk.

Propping her feet up, she wrapped her fingers around the cup and inhaled the wonderful scent of superb caffeine and studied her board.

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She would go through the evidence again, this time with a fine-tooth comb. They were missing something. A key -piece of evidence.

Or missing someone. She had listened keenly to Merrick last night as he spoke about his company and knew without a doubt that he would never be involved with any illegal drugs. He had been too passionate about maintaining the integrity of the company and she believed him.

It was not her emotions talking, she was practical, or usually was, and very good at nosing out these things. But someone close to him was involved and she had the feeling that it was his nephew Jason. It could be his brother too.

She had dug up some info on Maurice Pendergast. Not only was he the lesser of the two, but he had been given a glorified position. The man did not have the initiative and drive to make anything happen and that had to sting.

Merrick was the big shot. He had taken the company from millions to billions. He was brilliant and innovative and was not just a figurehead. The man worked like a fiend.

She had seen the photos of him – with the president, sitting in on a global meeting. Ones with him walking through a third world country and setting up clinics.

He was a humanitarian as well. It had broken her heart a little to realize that he had set up scholarships in the names of his unborn son and his fiancée. The woman was pretty in a soft and ethereal kind of way, with her sable brown hair and large green eyes.

Margo had spent time studying Laura Wilkin's photo and felt the faint twisting of her heart. Was he still in love with her? Of course he was. How could he not be?

Shaking her head, she went back to studying her board. She was frowning at a group photo from one of the clubs when the door was pushed open.

"That's not cop coffee."

"Good morning to you, too."

"You're early!" Brad came into the room and sat on the edge of the desk. Snagging the cup from her, he took a sip and closed his eyes in ecstasy. "Where the hell did you get this?"

"It shall remain a secret." She snagged it back and shoving from the desk, moved closer to the board.

What do you see?"

"A bunch of idle rich kids." He moved closer to stand next to her. "Why?"

"Him." She jabbed a long finger on the glossy photo. "He looks familiar, and I have seen him in several of the photos." She walked over to rest of the photos and stared intently. "Jesus Christ! How did we miss this?"

"Miss what?"

"That's fricking Jason Pendergast."

He moved closer, a frown touching his brow. "Are you sure?"

“See for yourself.” Taking up her pointer, she aimed it at the photos, one at a time.

“The common denominator.” He murmured as he continued to study the photos. Without thinking, he took her coffee cup and finished it in one gulp. Fortunately for him, she was too preoccupied to care.

“What does this mean?”

“It means we are going to dig into this little sucker’s life.”

“Discreetly.”

She flashed him a look. “I know how to do my damn job.” Turning away from the board, she sat on the edge of the desk. “I’ve been invited over for dinner.”

“Come again?”

Avoiding his shocked gaze, she went to sit behind her desk and booted up her computer.

“It’s just dinner!” She rushed to say. “I want to get a close up look at the family and make my own impressions. Especially of Jason.”

Brad had to tamp down the anger rising up inside his throat.

“Come again?”

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Leaning back in the chair, she gave him an annoyed glare. “I want to get close to the family...”

“He invited you to dinner to meet his family? Why?”

She fiddled with the pen on her desk and refused to meet his gaze.

“Oh Christ! You didn’t. You would not be so frigging stupid. You slept with him?”

“Stop yelling.”

Spinning around, he slammed the door shut hard and turned to stare at her. “Are you out of your goddamned mind? You are sleeping with the guy? With a suspect? Does your badge mean so little to you? Because believe me, honey, that is now on the line.”

Chapter 10

The silence was pregnant as the two glared at each other. She was the first to relent.

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” He walked menacingly towards the desk and slapped his hands on the surface. “The Margo I know would not have fallen for a man because of his frigging money.”

The dig went deep, and it hurt like hell.

“How dare you,” she whispered.

“I dare because you are more than my partner. I care about you.” He told her bitterly.

“What the hell did he say to you, or do to you to get you on your back?”

She shoved from the desk, her anger bubbling over.

“Get out of my office. Now!”

“Look...”

“Get out. This is my office, and I don’t answer to you.”

“You are my partner...”

“That can change at any time. Just get the hell out of my sight.”

She watched as he wrenched open the door and left, slamming it shut behind him.

Sinking down, she covered her face with her hands, despair covering her. She was not concerned that he was going to run to the commander. He was not like that. But what he said to her burned.

And he was right. What the hell was she doing?

She was playing house with a suspect and her objectivity was shot to hell.

She knew it and no doubt Brad knew it as well. She wanted to prove that Merrick wasn’t a suspect and was willing to go to any lengths to do so.

Her intercom sounded and caused her to jump.

“Yes?”

“The commander would like to see you in his office.”

“Did he say why?”

“No. He expects you to be here in five minutes.”

Her hands trembled, and she felt herself sinking into fear. Had Brad gone straight to him after all?

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Firming her lips, she shoved from the desk and made her way from her office. The change in shifts had started and the squad room was filling up. The scent of bad coffee and Lysol permeated the air. Two officers had a suspect sandwiched between them, the man protesting his innocence.

A woman with a garishly made-up face and wearing a crotch high black skirt and fish net stockings was mouthing to another officer and overall, it was the general state of chaos that had in the past brought her pleasure and amused her.

But she was carrying a heavy weight and could not think beyond what was happening to her and what her commander wanted with her.

“He said to go straight through.” The woman who guarded his desk, barely looked up from the computer.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and felt her heart slamming against her ribs when she saw Brad standing by the window.

Bracing herself for the worse, she stood there facing her commander.

“Sir?”

“Please have a seat.”

“I prefer to stand, sir.” If she was going to be asked to turn in her badge and shield, she would take it standing.

He stared at her – his face expressionless.

“Suit yourself.”

“The mayor wants a press release.”

She simply stared at him and did not dare look over at Brad. She had been given a grace period, or this was a trap.

“A press release, sir?”

“I already told the commander that would be a mistake.”

She looked at Brad then and saw the warning in his gaze. He had not sold her out.

“I agree with Brad, sir. A press release would only add fuel to the fire, and we do not have enough to give to the public.”

Leaning back in his chair with the old leather squeaking, he stared at her for so long that she was tempted to shift from one foot to the next.

“You are working on Merrick Pendergast. I assume that you have made contact?”

Scrupulously avoiding her partner’s gaze, she kept hers trained on the man behind the desk.

“Contact has been made, sir.”

“And?”

She just stopped herself from shoving her hands into her pockets. “I’m making

progress.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“it means she has established a rapport with the suspect and is making some headway.”

Both the commander and Margo turned to stare at Brad.

“Sir, I need a little more time,” she offered, sending Brad a warning glance.

“That is what we’re running out of and if anyone else turns up dead, we’re out of time. Wrap this up and fast. Dismissed.” He waved a hand and sent them on their way.

They waited until they had cleared the offices before he spoke.

“You thought I had ratted you out.” The voice was accusatory and had her looking up at him.

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“Yes. The way you charged out of my office led me to believe that you went straight to the commander.” She automatically jerked her arm when he gripped it and steered her into a storage room.

“What are you doing?”

“How long have we known each other?” He asked tightly, dropping her arm, and taking a step back.

“It doesn’t matter...”

“Haven’t I always had your back? I care about you a hell of a lot, not just as a partner and you damn well know it.”

Blowing out her breath, she sat on a crate of disinfectant. “I know, but you were so angry – I thought...”

“Can you blame me?” He hissed. “You’re sleeping with a suspect and that’s a recipe for disaster.”

“I know what I’m doing,” she said defensively.

“Do you?”

“Yes.” She insisted. “He’s innocent, Brad.”

He simply stared at her.

“And if he’s not, I will personally put the cuffs on.”

“You’d better hope he is.” With that, he turned around and jerked the door open, leaving her sitting there.

She was quiet and he wondered what she was thinking. The workout session between them had been intense. Afterwards they had taken a shower and now they were having a meal in the living room with the fire glowing in the hearth. He was not accustomed to her silence and was concerned, and she was picking at her meal.

“The lobster is not to your liking?”

He noticed the tiny jolt when he spoke as if she had been immersed in her own world.

“It’s delicious.” To prove it, she scooped up a forkful.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Please tell me.”

She shrugged. “This is a mistake.”

He willed himself to be calm. All day he had been in meetings, sitting behind his desk plowing through several complicated contracts and all the while he had been thinking of her.

Her smile, her witty and sharp humor, the way she carries herself, the way she fitted

him like a glove and the excitement and anticipation of tonight. And under all of that was the fear that she would decide she did not want to stay with him.

“You have to see that I’m right.”

“Do I?” They had showered together in the gym bathroom, and she was wearing one of his shirts, which looked as sexy as hell on her. Her face was scrubbed clean, and he had a challenging time remembering that she was in her fifties. Shoving off the sofa, he went to stoke the fire and had sparks flying up.

She bit her lip as she watched his controlled angry movement. The conversation with Brad had nettled her and the call to the commander’s office had been disturbing. Brad was right. She should not have gotten involved. And when they find the real culprit, the man standing by the fire was going to hate her. And she could not bear it.

She should end this now before it was too late. But wasn’t it already too late?

“What the hell are you afraid of?” He came back around and sat at her feet.

“I am not afraid of anything. I am just being practical. This ...,” she flung a hand at him first and then at herself. “We are polar opposites.” Putting her utensils down, she sat back and closed her eyes briefly. “I cannot give you what you want.”

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“What is it you think I want?” He asked in a dangerously soft tone.

“You want me to live with you and that is not going to happen. You want a relationship, and I am not in the market for one. I do not do relationships because they are messy, and I am too old and set in my ways. Besides that, you are Merrick Pendergast, what the holy hell are you doing with someone like me?”

“Someone like you?”

“My family is tainted, and I am just a simple woman with simple tastes. I hate shopping – I would rather be stretched out and have nails driven into my palms than spend a day shopping. I hardly do housework, and I do not cook – period. I am a slob and the most important thing...” She picked up her wineglass and took a swallow.

“I do not know wines. I do not know which utensils to use, and I do not give a crap. I will only embarrass you if we go out together at your fancy events. And I hate socializing because I do not like people.”

And I am a cop who is using you to try and get to the bottom of a case. When you find out, you are going to hate me and it’s killing me.

“Are you finished?” He asked quietly, intense gray eyes on her face.

“For now, yes.”

“Let me try and address your concerns in the correct order. I have an account at Romano’s which means you never have to step inside a store. I have a housekeeper

and if she is not enough, then I am perfectly willing to hire any other staff. If you want to know about wines, I am willing to teach you.

Basically, all those things are superfluous. All I want is you and the rest is just...,” he waved a hand. “It’s additives – ones that we can work around. Yes, when you are ready, I would like you to accompany me to various functions and would consider it an honor to have you next to me.”

“Merrick...”

“Let me finish.” Taking the glass from her, he scooted over and hauled her into his lap. “I am in love with you...”

“Oh God!”

He smiled grimly at her terrified expression. He had not meant to tell her so soon, in case he scared her off, but he did not care. He loved her. For the first time in his life, he was head over heels in love with someone and he did not want to keep it to himself any longer. What she did with it was up to her.

“And when you get used to the idea of my adoration, I want to marry you.” He held on tight as she started to jerk away. “I will wait until you are ready and I hope one day soon, you will say it back to me.

But for now, I want to hold you, be with you every single day.” His hands drifted up to cup her face. “Let me love you darling. I do not care where you come from or anything like that. All I want is you.”

Her throat burned; her body felt as if it was melting from the inside out. She could not hear these words. She was a fraud. And very soon he would know it.

“Say something.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” she whispered hoarsely, “you do not know me. You do not know who I am.”

“Then show me.” He murmured, thumbs caressing her cheeks. “There is nothing you tell me that I am not willing to hear and adjust to. I am here, darling, and I am not going anywhere.”

She curled into him and could not stop the tears.

He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her against his chest as she sobbed.

He was not used to her being so vulnerable and felt an aching tenderness invaded his very soul.

Margo was thinking that for the first eighteen years of her life, she thought no one cared about her. She had been a scrawny kid and a sickly one as well and no one had wanted to take that on, and it stung. She had been forced to become tough and put on a veneer of coldness just to survive.

She never showed emotions, had learned to hide what she was feeling. Now this man had come into her life and was showing her that it was never too late for anything. But it was off – the timing sucked. She could not accept his love or anything else he had to offer.

Lifting her face from his chest, his eyes scanned her wet cheeks and eyes washed with tears.

“I have to ask, is it a good sign that I have brought you to tears?”

She laughed shakily and blinked. “I will let you know. Do me a favor?”

“Anything.” He said solemnly.

“Make love to me.”

“With pleasure.”

“It’s like a museum.” She murmured as they made their way through the winding driveway. She had called to ask him what the required dress code was, and he had told her to wear anything she felt comfortable wearing.

“In my world, that means combat boots and jeans.”

“How about dress pants and a nice sweater? I could order something from Romano’s, and you dress at my place.”

“No. I wear what I have and if it’s not pleasing to the eyes of your family, then to hell with them.”

He had not cared one way or another what she put on, but his family, especially his sister-in-law were snobs. He had told them he was bringing someone by for supper and they had been trying to find out who it was.

“It’s been in the family for several generations.”

“You moved out.”

He parked at the base of the wide porch steps and stared at the place he still considered as home. Bright lights blazed inside, giving the mellow white and gray bricks a kind of homeliness that never ceased to amaze him.

“I wanted my own space, and Maurice was starting his family. I figured he wanted space as well.”

He opened the door just as the wide double doors were flung open and a man dressed in all black, stepped out and stood waiting.

“Is that – no way! A butler!”

He grinned at her stupefied expression and she did not notice when he took her hand to help her out of the vehicle.

“He is in charge of the household and has been with the family since I was a child. His name is Boris.”

“He does not look like a Boris.”

He gave her a quizzical glance. “What does a Boris looks like?”

“Big and brawny with a lot of hair. This guy is skinny and with hardly any hair.”

“You are weird.”

“Wait!” She started to jerk her hand away, but he held fast as they mounted the steps.

“Mr. Merrick.” The man beamed at him and transferred his watery blue eyes to Margo.

“Boris, please meet my ...” He turned his head towards her, a small frown on his brow.

Margo solved the problem by responding. “His sex partner.”

To his credit, Boris' stoic expression did not change, and she had to bite back a laugh when she felt the pressure of Merrick's fingers digging into her palm.

"My lady, Margo Sullivan."

"Very pleased to meet you Ms. Margo."

"The family is waiting in the main living room." He stepped back so that they could enter the huge foyer with the soaring ceiling and Margo tried her best not to goggle. Boris took their jackets and folded them carefully across one stiff and polished arm and stood there waiting until Merrick took her arm and led her down the hallway.

"Please behave," he whispered.

"I cannot make any promises. This place is impressive."

"Want the tour?"

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“I don’t think we have the time. And did you have to refer to me as your lady?” She hissed.

He only arched a brow at her. “I might mention that you called yourself my sex partner.”

Before she could respond, they were veering to the right and entering a large room with an enormous fireplace. The polished wooden floor with a lovely butter colored patina shone like glass.

Three men were standing near to the fireplace with drinks in hands. From various photographs, she could pick out who was who.

Maurice Pendergast looked even more unimpressive in person than in the photos and was a pale shadow of his dynamic brother. The two young men were tall, taller than their dad and had the same shade of dark hair and piercing gray eyes which told her it was a family deal.

Jason looked jittery and was moving from one foot to the next restlessly.

Michael was charming and had a genuine smile that welcomed her openly. A sudden movement caught her eye and Janey Pendergast moved forward – glided rather, the stunning red gown molding her voluptuous curves. Diamonds glittered at her lobes and around her neck and her lustrous blonde hair flowed over one shoulder.

“Darling.” With arms outstretched, she completely ignored Margo and came towards Merrick.

Margo started to move away, when he clamped a hand around her waist, holding her to his side. Bending, he kissed his sister-in-law's cheek, before turning to the rest of the family.

"I would like you to meet Margo Sullivan." He announced with a smile. "Darling..." he added deliberately, making it clear who she was to him. "Meet the family." When he called their names, they stepped forward to greet her.

Maurice was cool and reserved, making his opinion of her clear. Jason was sullen and uncommunicative, but Michael took her hand and kissed the back of it gallantly. "Welcome to our home."

"Thank you."

Janey swept her blue gaze over Margo's black dress pants and black and white sweater with a disparaging look and gave her a cool nod.

Merrick was about to offer her something to drink when a maid slid into the room and announced dinner.

The dining room was huge as well and formal, with an elegant breakfast nook to one side, a floor to ceiling windows with a stunning view of the lush grounds and a dazzlingly white gazebo. A table stood in the middle of the floor that could easily seat twenty people.

Flower were everywhere, on the table, the credenza in one corner of the room and in alcoves all around the space. Taking her hand, Merrick kept her next to him, but still Janey, playing the less than gracious hostess managed to find herself at the opposite side of him.

She caught the annoyed look on her husband's face as he slid into his seat at the head

of the table.

The conversation at the start of the meal was mainly centered around the business while Margo listened with interest as she tasted her creamy spinach soup and found it to her liking. She also had time to make her impressions.

Jason was definitely on something. She recognized the signs. The restless tapping of his fingers on the white tablecloth, the hunching of his shoulders and his sullen expression and she wondered if the family were deliberately being obtuse.

Michael was charming and explaining that his girlfriend or fiancée was away for work. She decided that she liked him. He was genuine and charming, and his smile came easily. Maurice on the other hand, divided his gaze between her and his wife, his frown getting heavier.

She could not blame him. Janey used every opportunity to touch Merrick and behaved as if they were the only two people at the table.

Margo wanted to deck the woman and pull out her phony blonde hair by the roots.

“So, Margo my dear,” Maurice spoke over the conversations going on, “what is it that you do?”

She was prepared for that question, but it unnerved her just the same when they all stared at her.

“I was a photographer and now I am an aspiring novelist,” she said smoothly as she cut into her veal.

“Aspiring? What genre?”

“Historical romance.” Picking up her hand off the table, Merrick kissed the knuckles and ignored her effort to pull away. “She has yet to show me what she is writing.”

“A quirk of mine.” She turned a sweet smile at him. “It’s bad luck to share too early.”

“And where did you two meet?” This was from Janey who was staring at her in disbelief.

“At the gallery a few weeks ago.”

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Both husband and wife stared at Merrick in shock. “You mean you only just met?”

“Yes.” He challenged them with a glance as he linked his fingers with hers.

“Uncle Merrick, you work fast.” Michael said with a grin, his eyes sliding towards Margo. “But I can see why.”

“Precisely.” Merrick grinned at him in approval, and they resumed eating.

Chapter 11

“The men have this old-fashioned tradition that has stood the test of time. They all adjourn to the den and talk business or have a drink and leave the women folks alone.” Janey wandered over to the refreshment table in the blue and white salon and poured a glass of wine. “What can I get for you?”

“Nothing.” Margo was going to have definite words with him for leaving her alone with this woman.

“I hope you don’t mind if I imbibe.”

“Knock yourself out. It is your house.” She did not sit but prowled restlessly to the window.

“That is right. It is my house and my family.” Janey watched her over the rim of her glass as she perched on the edge of the Queen Anne chair. “Merrick is very special to me.”

Margo turned to look at the woman and felt amusement rising. “Does your husband know that?”

Janey bristled; her chin lifted. “I am sure he shares my concern.” Her tone dripped scorn. “Do you know that Merrick can have any woman he wants?”

“And you are thinking he is scraping the bottom of the barrel. I agree with you there. I have even tried to tell him that, but he will not listen.” She leaned against the wall and crossed her feet at the ankles.

“But he is hooked. Asked me to move in with me. Wants marriage.” She hid a smile at the look on the woman’s face. “I turned him down of course. Too soon, what would people think?”

“You turned him down?”

“Hard to believe, right? Him with all that money dripping from him and all that.” She shrugged. “I’m not a damn gold digger and that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I am too polite to tell you what I’m thinking.”

“Unfortunately for you, I am not. From what I have noticed, you are into your brother-in-law big time which makes it very incestuous and makes you very pathetic as he is just not into you that way.

Your poor husband is frustrated and angry because he knows that he is second choice. But...? She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “What the hell do I care? It is your deal.”

Janey rose slowly and Margo could all but see the anger steaming from her ears.

“You dare to speak to me that way? You who have no class, no career, nothing? You

would speak to me like that?”

“No class, huh?” Margo grinned. “I suppose you’re right. But what I have is an ‘I don’t give a damn attitude.’ Lady, there is nothing you can say that would make a dent or get under my skin. I am completely immune.”

Janey stared at her for a full pulsing second before slamming down the glass and rushing from the room.

“Guess I told her.” Margo muttered to herself. Changing her mind about the drink, she moved towards the cabinet and poured some wine.

“What do you know about her?”

Merrick looked up from the drink he was pouring and contemplated for a few seconds before responding. His nephews had left them to go and see to their own affairs.

“I know that she is the woman I’m utterly and completely in love with.”

“This is not like you.” Maurice gestured with his own glass and went to sit behind the desk. They were in the den that had once been their father’s favorite place. His portrait hung over the mantle place and brought back nostalgic memories of a tall, gray eyed man smoking his pipe and indulging his sons.

“What do you mean?”

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“You don’t just go over a woman just like that and one you barely know. She’s not even your type.” He pointed out.

He flinched at the look his brother gave him.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s not because of her color...”

“It had better not be.”

Maurice hastened to add. “She is not sophisticated. You usually go for the glamorous type. I am not saying she isn’t lovely...” He threw up his hands and took a gulp of his own scotch as his brother continued to stare at him. “I just want you to be careful.”

Merrick relented and took pity on him. “You think she’s after my money?”

“She might be.”

He twirled the glass around in his fingers, an amused expression on his face. “She does not care about that sort of thing. No!” He shook his head. “I am not blinded by love and yes, I am hopelessly and irrevocably in love with her.

She is the most intriguing woman I have ever met. She fascinates me, excites me and that is something I never expected. She has not asked me for anything and when I tried to buy something for her, she freaked out. Which makes me want to buy her the world.”

Maurice stared at his brother in shock. His usually cool and controlled brother was behaving like a lovesick idiot – something had to be done about it. The woman was unsophisticated at best and crude. He had watched her at the table, and she did not practice dining etiquette, he had an idea that she did not know any of it.

He had also never seen Merrick look at anyone the way he was looking at her.

“What about Laura?” He asked softly, knowing that the subject was taboo.

“What about her?”

He gulped some more of the scotch. “You loved her. You always claimed that no woman could ever replace her.”

“No one could, until I met Margo. What the hell is your point? I thought you would be happy for me, and this works to your benefit.” There was a cynical twist to his lips. “This will take Janey’s attention off me.”

The minute he said the words, he regretted it. His brother looked like he had swallowed a trout. His face paled and his hand holding the glass trembled slightly.

“Look, that was uncalled for.”

“No.” Maurice shook his head and went to refill his glass. “We both know that I am second best at everything. Not even second, but a dead last. Janey wanted you first, she always wanted you and I have accepted that.”

“Maurice...”

Maurice turned to face his brother, anger giving his face color. “You are better at everything more than I ever was. At business, at women. Everything you touch turns

to gold, while I have to trail along in your shadow.”

“Is that how you see yourself?”

“It’s how everyone sees me.” He finished the drink. “I need some air.”

“Maurice...”

“Congratulations, by the way.”

Merrick swore viciously and considered going after him but decided to let him cool off. Finishing his own drink, he went to find Margo.

“Want to talk?” He asked quietly. Sitting on the edge of the sofa, he turned to face her. He had been afraid that she would insist on going straight to her place, after what had happened at his family’s place and was pathetically grateful that she had come back home with him.

But she was quiet, had been quiet on the journey home and had turned her head away and closed her eyes to avoid conversation.

He had let that go because he had been doing some thinking of his own. His brother had been stiff and formal with the goodbyes and Janey had been rude. Jason had disappeared. Michael was the only one who had extended a warm goodbye, and he was grateful to his nephew for making her feel welcome.

“Your family hates me.”

“They don’t...”

“I don’t give a crap about that but just thought you should know.”

He stared at her for a minute, before taking her hand. “Do you give a crap about me?” His quiet and patient tone had her feeling like a bitch, the guilt rearing its ugly head inside her. He had introduced her to his family with the intention that this was going to end well. It hadn’t.

“That’s not the point.”

“Answer the damn question. I love you...,” his mouth tightened when he felt her trying to pull away from him. “Yes, that dreaded word. Love. The one that makes you so goddamned defensive.

And looking like you have just been told you’re going on death row. I love you Margo and you’re going to have to deal with it. My question to you is this- what are you going to do about it?”

Her eyes flashed, and she felt the sickness churning inside her belly. His family had a right to be suspicious because she was not being straight with him. She was lying to him, and he did not see it, could not see it because of the way he felt.

“Nothing. I need time.” She felt her heart aching at the shimmer of pain that came over his face.

“Well...” Letting go of her, he rose and strode over to the recessed cabinet. Touching a button, he waited for it to slide towards him. Plucking up a glass, he poured a shot and downed it in one gulp before taking another.

“I didn’t ask for any of this.” She was angry, unreasonably so. She was angry at herself for falling into a situation like this. Angry that she could not do anything about it. They were both going to end up being hurt and the idea of hurting him was killing her.

“No, you didn’t.” He had his back turned to her, but she could see his hand fisting.

“Neither did I. But what the hell can I do?” He turned to face her then and she felt a frisson of fear shimmering through her body. “My brother thinks you’re after my money.”

“That’s ridiculous. Is that what you think?”

“No.” Intense gray eyes pierced her, and she had to fight the instinct to run. “But I think there is something you are not telling me. I have been asking myself what that could be.”

The fear bloomed inside her chest until she felt it taking over. “Like what?”

He turned the glass around and watched as it caught the light of the fire, changing its color to something else. He wanted to hurl it, wanted to send it crashing into the wall and roar at everything and everyone.

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“There is nothing to tell. Look, this is not working. We are obviously on different pages. We are certainly not suited, and this is a mistake. Your family obviously

knows it...”

“Is that right?” His voice was soft and menacing, sending shivers up and down her spine.

“You’re angry...” she rushed to say. “But if you are looking at this from a practical perspective...” She actually jolted upright and surged to her feet.

“Damn you for bringing me to this.” His face was harsh, his voice strained as he stared at her.

She felt fear coating her usual calm composure. As he came towards her, she forced herself to stay where she was. Her heart was beating hard, her knees weak.

He stopped in front of her, eyes fierce and molten. “For the first time in my goddamned life, I love completely. Do you know what my brother said to me?” Without waiting for her to respond, he continued. “He asked me about Laura. I loved her of course.

She was sweet and gentle and kind, and I loved her with that sweetness that flows through one like a gentle river.” His handshot out to grip her arms, fingers digging into her skin. “Never like this. It was nothing like what I feel for you.

You make me breathless – I get faint just thinking of you. I want you so much that I can feel it in my very pores.” His eyes glittered. “You have me. The first time I saw you, I felt the shot straight through my heart and into every area of my body. Why the hell are you denying yourself this happiness? Denying me?”

She trembled and felt the tears burning the back of her throat and wanted to lash out at fate. She could not accept his love, was not worthy of it and she wanted to weep and curl up into a ball.

“Don’t.” Her voice was thin and thready. “Please don’t.”

“Don’t what?” He shook her. “Love you with every fiber of my being? It is too late for that. I want you, need you more than the very air I breathe? I do. God help me, I crave you with a violence and desperation that frightens me.

Will you deny that you feel the same?” He shook her again. “I want a life with you, dammit. I want to wake up next to you and pray fervently that I get to spend even the next fifty years with you. How can you not want that too?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:40 am

“Please.” Her breath shuddered out and she unwittingly fisted her hands on his chest where she found his heart beating wildly. Her knees buckled and she would have fallen if he was not holding her. Tears swam in her eyes and her lips trembled open. “Please.”

“Damn you.” He whispered as he hauled her against him. She did not resist, but melted against him, tears spilling down her cheeks. The anger dissolved like smoke from him as he bent his head to capture the tears. He knew her to be tough, saw it every time he was with her and her tears moved him beyond belief.

He wanted desperately to hear her say the words to him, but right now, he was prepared to accept just being with her. His mouth whispered against her cheek and trailed down to her lips, his tongue darting into her mouth. The kiss was gentle and potent and had her gasping, her moans swallowed up by his mouth.

His hands went around her waist as he brought her even closer. His body was charged and ready for her. His blood was hot, always hot for her. He felt as if he was trapped in a fever that was never getting better.

Margo accepted what was. Very soon, she was going to be faced with his hatred, and she could not bear to think about it. She needed this now, needed what he was offering if only for a short time.

Her arms came around his neck and she went on her toes to participate in the kiss – a kiss that took only seconds to go wild. He devoured her mouth, his hands racing up and down her back. He wanted to swallow her whole, was desperate to place his stamp on her.

With that in mind, he lifted her up and carried her to his bed, Putting her down, he struggled to take off his clothes before undressing her. She laid there and watched as he lowered himself and gently took off her clothes. Her breath hitched, her body trembled as he ran his hands over her stomach and arms, his eyes boring into hers.

Neither of them spoke, there was no need. The air was thick with unspoken questions, an air of anticipation and desperate need that they both were trying to ignore. He shifted so he was lying next to her.

His hands framed her face as he inched closer to her. The argument was forgotten for now. The uncertainties that she was going to walk out him were shelved for the moment. All he wanted was her. All of her. But for now, he would take what she was offering. His lips met hers in a tender kiss that had her wrapping herself around him.

Her fingers touched his face, lingering on the shadows on his cheeks, before going to the dent in his chin. She wanted memories to take with her, to keep, after she was gone, after it all came out, after he started to hate her for her duplicity.

He felt the change in her and wondered on it. Her touch was gentle, her expression one of wonder. It got his juices flowing even more and he knew he was not going to last for very long.

Ending the kiss, he kissed her cheeks, sipping away the tears that still rested on her skin. Her neck arched, inviting his mouth and he took advantage of it, sucking at the skin, sipping at her flesh and ravaging the hollow of her throat.

When he sidled down to her chest, her nipples were hardened peaks, inviting his lips. And he seized the invitation. His tongue swirled around the tight bud and had her arching, her fingers digging into his shoulders, her moans echoing around the room and firing his blood.

He climbed on top of her when he realized he could not hold out any longer. Slipping into her, he watched her face went alight with passion.

Her fingers touched his chest and curled into fists as she closed around him like a tight wet fist.

“I love you.” He whispered against her mouth. “What you do with it, is up to you.” His mouth seized hers and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Sensations raced through them with the speed of lightening and before long, they were consumed by the flames of a passion and desire that was so strong, it left them breathless. He felt her stiffen and knew she was on the brink.

The orgasm rocked her with a violence that had her clinging to him. Lifting his mouth from hers, he switched position, so that she was on top of him.

Her fingers curled into his chest, and she was so shaken, it took her a few seconds to settle, and even then, he was determined not to give her any rest. Reaching between them, his eyes holding hers, he tugged at her swollen flesh and had her going over again.

“God!” She cried, arching her back as the second vicious orgasm slammed through her slender body. He went over with her, eyes blinded, body shuddering as he emptied himself into her.

She collapsed on top of him, her body weak, her mind scattered. He held her close, his own body still shuddering.

They stayed that way for a few minutes before he shifted her off him. She opened her eyes to see that he was getting off the bed and watched as he strode towards the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind him.

Scrubbing her hands over her cheeks, she curled into a ball and pulled the covers over her. She wanted to weep again because she knew nothing had been resolved between them.

Standing at the mirror, Merrick curled his fists on the malachite counter and stared at his image. His hair was sticking out on top of his head and his eyes were still blurry from the passion they had shared. There were scratch marks on his chest and shoulders. And he felt the bruises on his back as well.

He had left marks on her as well. He was close to begging her to love him, very close to begging her to stay with him. Move in with him. She was careful not to leave even a stitch of clothing at his place.

Not even a toothbrush. She carried a case inside her large purse and would use things and put them back inside it. She even carried her own travel size toothpaste and mouthwash.

Nothing was left behind. He had palmed one of her panties and folded it under his t-shirts. It was pathetic. He was pathetic. He had lost himself and given her power over him. And still she refused to commit to him. Not even to leave so much as a shirt at his place. He had nothing of her, other than the panties he had stolen.

Easing off the sink, he went to relieve himself and closed his eyes as he felt the wetness from her, the musky scent of her filling him. She was hiding something, his gut told him that and he was dreading what it was. But like it or not, he was going to have to find out what the hell it was.

And he was going to have to deal with it. Washing his hands, he opened the door and walked back inside the room to see her curled up with her knees almost to her chest. Love swamped him and almost had him staggering under the weight of it.

He wanted to tell her to go home, leave him to his thoughts, but he needed her and needing her so much pained his heart. Because it was not returned.

Forcing a smile, he moved forward and got into bed.

“Are we good?”

“Yes.” To prove it, he tugged her into his arms. “Go to sleep.”

She curled into him, and he closed his eyes in acute misery as he allowed the love for her to take him over. Tomorrow was another day, and he was going to have to deal with her. But tonight, he would forget.

Chapter 12

He went back to where it all started. The small apothecary shop tucked between a pizzeria and an Italian restaurant. New York – Thirty-Fourth street with all its smell and people scurrying around – streaming past each other. The sound, the scent brought back a rush of nostalgia.

The place was now a pharmacy, the building had maintained its structure and shape, because they had willed it. His grandfather had not changed it and neither had his father.

Merrick had decided to let tradition maintain. The pharmacy was owned by Medtech, a thriving one in the center of a busy section of New York. It was family friendly, and people trusted the employees.

Upstairs was still an apartment, two bedrooms and two baths. It had been home for great-grandfather and his family. Now it was home to old Mr. Josephs who had been

running the place for more than a decade.

He had not called to let them know he was coming, because it had been a spur of the minute decision and he had no intention of going in. He just wanted to view the place, his heritage from a distance.

And he had selected a worn café where the food was barely passable, and the coffee was insipid. The most important thing was that he would not be recognized.

He had told her goodbye this morning. Woke her up with his mouth and hands. Had them clinging to each other before it was all over. And had kissed her lingeringly, his hands around her waist.

Then he told her he would be out for a bit. It stung and ached that she had not asked him why or when he would be coming back.

She had simply nodded and left.

When he found himself starting after her, he had stepped back in and slammed the door shut. And had gone straight to his phone.

The conversation would be confidential. His head of security was the best and he would find out what was going on.

It pained him to check into her life, but he had to know what he was up against.

He was twisted inside and out with love, but he had to find out. Had to find out in order to deal with it and decide on what to do next. The kicker was he knew that she felt something for him. Something more than lust and was puzzled as to why she was holding back.

And she was. He knew it, sensed it. Pushing away the bad coffee and the pie that the waitress had forced on him, he turned his gaze to the building and felt nostalgia sweeping through him like a storm.

He loved her and would like to think that whatever it was, they could work through it. He could not bear to think otherwise.

A smile touched his lips as he thought on it. He was fifty-five and head over heels in love. He had not told anyone where he was going. His assistant had not questioned him, she had not reminded him of the pressing schedule he had, and the meetings lined up.

She had simply reshuffled things and he promised he would let her know when he was on his way. He had secured a suite in The Royale, a hotel the company had a substantial amount of shares in, and he would go there and perhaps take in a show at the theater later on.

Just lose himself in the performance. He might even call up a few friends and have dinner. If he was up to it. But what he was not going to do was call her.

He had allowed her to trample over his heart and his pride and had to take a step back. Until he discovered what she was hiding, he would stay away. Even if the idea of it would surely debilitate him.

“We’re digging into Jason Pendergast?”

“Yes,” she responded without looking up from the notes she was making.

“I take it you received new information?”

“Something like that.” She looked up when he came in and closed the door. “I don’t have time...”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to make time!.” He sat on the chair and stretched his legs out. “You look like hell, by the way. The billionaire keeping you up at night? Or is it your conscience.”

“Go to hell.”

He sighed and back down. “Look, I’m not here to give you grief...”

“Then why are you here?”

“We have another body and rumors from up top indicates that our time is up. If we do not close this out by the next couple of days, we are off the case.”

She felt the burden crashing down on her. She was not on her game. This morning when he kissed her, she knew he was telling her goodbye and had not done a damn thing about it.

She couldn’t and was telling herself that it was for the best. But she had stared at her phone several times during the morning and ached to hear his deep voice. She picked up the phone at one point with the intention of calling, but she had nothing to say, at least nothing he would want to hear.

“We’re close,” she murmured.

“How was dinner?”

“Enlightening. I met the entire family who does not approve of me with the exception of Michael who is a sweetheart. The wife – Janey is a royal bitch who has the hots for Merrick and did nothing to hide it. It was damn embarrassing.”

He gave her a level glance that had her shifting in her seat.

“What?”

“A family like that is bound to be suspicious of a woman who just came into Pendergast’s life. What did you tell them about yourself?”

“Next to nothing.”

“My point exactly. No doubt they are going to have you investigated.”

She had thought of that and the thought of him finding out about her was making her edgy. She need to finish this quickly. “There are some other key players.”

“In the company?”

She nodded. “In the R&D department. Jason was jittery, so I suspect he was using or jonesing for a fix. He left right after dinner and when I asked casually where he had gone off to, they could not or would not say.” Kicking back in her chair, she stared at her board. “He’s the key to all of this; I just know it.”

“You and Pendergast. What’s going to happen?”

“Nothing!” She snapped it out. “I am doing my job and intend to see it through.”

“Margo...”

“Please.” She held up a hand to stop him. “I cannot talk about it, not now.”

He had lived in New York so many years ago and knew the ins and outs. He had enjoyed the frenetic pace, the constant ebb and flow of people, the madness of the

traffic and the brilliance of the lights pouring from the many high-rise buildings. That had been when he was young and just getting to know himself and who he was.

He had brought Laura here to wine and dine her. They had gone to several shows, walked in Central park and taken buggy rides in the dead of winter. One night – in the middle of the night, they had ordered pizza and sat on the floor of the apartment and just filled themselves with the pie and a bottle of vintage wine.

Now he was a lot older and would like to believe much wiser, but here he was, sitting in an exclusive restaurant and wishing Margo was here with him. He had not called her, and she hadn't called him either. He had not expected her to.

He was about to pick up his wine glass when he heard his name.

Looking up, he felt a shimmer of surprise as someone from the very distant past came rushing over, followed by the maître D'.

"I cannot believe my eyes."

"Grace?" He rose slowly and nodded to the man who bowed and retreated. Pushing back his chair, he moved towards her and extended his hands. Green eyes sparkled in pleasure as she leaned in for a kiss.

"Of all the eateries in the state of New York." She pulled him in for a resounding kiss and he let her. "You are here – in New York. You should have called me."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:40 am

“I keep forgetting that this is where you live now.”

“I am a news anchor for CBS.”

“I have watched you several times.” He gestured for her to sit. “Have you eaten?”

“I was just meeting with my agent and was on my way out.” Leaning across the table, she took his hands in hers and squeezed. “You have been out of touch since the accident and the funeral. Laura was my best friend.”

“I know,” Merrick murmured. “It was difficult for me to stay in touch with her friends. For an exceedingly long time, I could not face what was.”

“I understand. You are finishing up. How about I buy you a glass of wine and we catch up?”

“That sounds like a plan.”

“All right then.” She signaled the waiter, who came right over.

Her house seemed empty and strange. She had spent several nights away, and her plants were neglected. The bite of wind had cut through her light jacket, reminding her that fall was roaring in. And she was tired. Worn out, like she had never been before.

She was getting old; she thought as she went into the kitchen to water her plants and put the kettle on. She had picked up Chinese out of habit. She was not hungry. Brad had brought her something from the deli a block away and she had barely nibbled on it. The coffee at the precinct tasted like crap and she realized she had been spoiled.

She was listless and unhappy. Her aunt had called, and she promised to go and visit her, but she was not in the mood for conversation. She was not in the mood for anything.

She wanted to shy away from what was really bugging her. She was hooked on him, gone all the way over and she missed him. He had done something to her. She had gone through all her life being independent, self-sufficient, never needing anyone. The job had always been enough for her, and it had satisfied her.

Rummaging through the pantry, she chose a blend of ginger and lemon and poured water over the pouch and then added honey.

Taking the cup with her, she went to sit at the table next to the window and looked out at the trees waving in the breeze. She should get Bernard to come and do some trimming before the leaves start making a damn mess.

Where was he? The thought snuck in before she could stop it. He had only said he was going out of town for a bit. He had not told her he would call while he was away or when he would be coming back.

And she was not going to call him. The words he had spoken to her were haunting her. And she was afraid that she had fallen deep. Was he with someone else? She wondered aching. And if he was, could she blame him?

Picking up her cup, she took a sip.

And was not surprised to feel the tears leaking from her eyes.

Damn him! Since getting involved with Merrick Pendergast, she had cried more than she ever did before in her whole life.

“I believe it’s a sign,” Grace murmured as she stared at him over her glass.

“A sign?”

She nodded. “That we are in the same restaurant at the precisely the same time. After all these years. I liked you all those years ago Mer, but you had eyes only for Laura and being the good friend I was, I decided to let things go.

And after the funeral, you were so broken up, I could not do anything. I wanted to comfort you, be there for you.” She touched his hand briefly and let her touch linger. “Then we were both so busy afterwards. I launched my career and well you...” She smiled. “You became busier taking your company to exalted heights.

Then I made the poor decision of marrying my co-anchor and that fell flat. It lasted all of two years, and we realized that we should have just stuck with the sleeping arrangement.” Her green eyes softened. “Laura was lucky. Even though you had all that money and good looks, you never once looked at another woman.”

“I was in love with her.”

Grace nodded. “And now?”

“Now.” He contemplated his wine and felt his heart lurching. “I’m afraid I am in love with someone – all the way in love with her.”

Grace stared at him in surprise. “She’s not here with you?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:40 am

“No!” He shook his head. “It’s complicated.”

“Anyone I know?” She asked casually as disappointment lanced through her heart. She had thought that seeing him here and now, was a sign that they would end up in bed and form some sort of relationship.

“No.” Lifting up his wineglass, he took a sip. “It’s really good to see you.”

She hid the grimace and made one last desperate play. He had been on her mind recently and she had thought of getting in touch with him. She was ambitious and driven and existing in a man’s world; it takes guts and stamina to stay in that position. Hooking up with a man with tremendous resources could only sweeten the pot.

“I was thinking we could go upstairs.” Her fingers danced over his hand lightly, seductively. She was a beautiful woman after all, and men were usually susceptible to her considerable charms.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to say - no.” He removed his hand and sent her a regretful smile.

She sighed and picked up her wine. “Just my luck to fail a second time. Whoever she is, I hope she realize how fortunate she is.”

He smiled at that and did not respond. “Tell me about your job as a news anchor.”

“It’s late.”

“I know and that has never bothered you before.” He pushed his way in and went straight into the kitchen with her trailing behind him reluctantly. She was tired, but drinking tea and taking a warm bath had not helped. She was still up, and the Chinese food was still untouched. She was not hungry, just lethargic as hell and terribly unhappy.

“What do you want, Brad?”

“In a minute.’ He dug into the bag and took out the food, looking up at her with a frown.

You didn’t eat.”

“No, mother.”

“Do you mind if I...”

She waved a hand at him. “Knock yourself out. It needs reheating.”

She sat at the table and waited for him to reheat the meal and bring it over. Even the scent of it was making her nauseous.

“Last chance.” He pointed at the food, and she shook her head.

“What’s up?”

“I should be asking you the same thing.” He dug into Chow Mein with gusto, his eyes on her. “You looked haunted and that is the most appropriate word I can come up with and you’re not eating. Are you that gone over this guy?”

“I am tired, this case has me wiped. That is all.”

“And you’re sticking to that story.”

She hissed out a breath and shoved out of the chair to get a glass of water. “He suspects that something is not right.”

“I see. Did he tell you that?”

She took a gulp of water and came to sit back down.

“No. But I felt it. He wanted – wants a commitment and I blew him off.”

Brad stared at her with narrowed eyes. “What sort of commitment?”

“Live together, marriage, the whole works. He said that he is in love with me.”

He stared at her and did not say anything for a full five seconds.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:40 am

“What did you say to that?”

“I just told him he was crazy, and that we have only just met.”

“Christ!” Brad was trying to figure out how he felt about that. “And?”

“Nothing. We parted ways this morning and he said he had to go out of town. He did not tell me he would be in touch or anything like that. It felt like goodbye.”

“How do you feel about that?”

She shrugged and took another sip of water. “Relieved.” She caught his skeptical expression and took a breath. “Miserable. But it is for the best. My instinct is telling me that he is going to run me.”

“I am surprised he hasn’t already. Your cover, that of being a novelist sounded a little thin and shaky. You could not come up with anything else?”

“It was on the fly and why is it shaky?” She demanded.

He snorted and scooped up some chicken. “You’re not romantic.”

That stung, a little. “I can be.”

“You’re not. You are a little crude and over the top rude. You dress like you’re going hiking, and your body language says a hell of a lot.

And I doubt you ever read a romance novel in your life. I once forced you to watch a Romcom with me and you laughed at the love scenes and called the main actress weak willed and always begging for attention.”

“She was.”

“My point exactly.”

“And for your information, I have read a romance novel. At my aunt’s when I spent the night.”

“Did you finish it?”

“No. It was boring as hell. The female kept crying at the drop of a hat and wanted to ‘be taken’ by the guy. It was humiliating. I wanted to shoot myself.”

He grinned at her pained expression. “Now you’re that person.”

“What?” Her head jerked up.

He studied her face for a minute and could feel regret churning inside him. She was fresh from a bath and the scent surrounded her. Her hair was twisted and piled on top of her head and her skin was flawless. She looked like a woman twenty years younger.

“When are you going to admit that you are in love with Pendergast?”

“I am not! I,…” She subsided and closed her eyes briefly. “Is it that obvious?”

“To me.” He felt the regret twisting him inside out. “What are you going to do about it?”

“I am going to close the goddamned case and prove his innocence. He is not involved. And that is not my hormones talking. I am a damn good cop, and I know when a person is guilty.

Merrick is not. I have no idea why a man of his smarts has not figured out what is going on in his company, but I have a feeling it's because the key player is family. And Jason Pendergast has covered his tracks.”

He continued eating, his head down as he handled the chopsticks and picked up the meal.

“What?”

“It's strange to know that you are normal after all.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

He finished the last of the meal and placed his elbows on the table, blue eyes studying her irritated expression. “It means Sullivan that for years I have tried to get you to notice me as more than a partner, but you never did. I have to admit that I am more than a little jealous of the man who was able to accomplish the impossible.”

He took his drink with him and sat on the edge of the bed. The time spent with Grace had been pleasant enough, but he couldn't wait to get away and be alone with his thoughts. Seeing her brought back the painful memories of what had happened.

Twirling the glass around in his hand, he was oblivious to the sumptuous luxury of his suite. The royal blue and cream décor meant nothing to him. He had stayed here a few times before and the staff had always been gracious, bending over backwards to accommodate him.

The manager, a small meticulous man had hurried out to greet him and escorted him personally to his suite with the promise to send up some refreshments. He had told the man he was all right for tonight, but at the look of consternation on his face, he had reluctantly agreed for something to be sent up.

He took a sip of the bourbon and let his thoughts drift to the past. To Laura. He remembered her ready smile, the richness of her dark brown hair and the sparkle in her hazel eyes.

She had loved him- perhaps more than he had loved her. She had done everything to please him and sometimes it irritated him that she was so eager to please him.

He had acknowledged to himself that was the reason he had put off marrying her. Downing the liquor, he also admit to himself that he had met his match in Margo.

“Something to drink?”

He knew he was prevaricating, but the dread was like a ball inside his chest, and Matthew could damn well wait before his life unended.

“Of course. The usual.” Matthew put away the folder he had been about to hand to him and went with the flow. What was revealed in there could wait. It could wait because it was going to blow his employer to bits. “Cold out.”

“Yes.” Merrick poured two glasses of blended scotch and was surprised his hands were so steady. He was trembling inside. He could hear it from the tone of his friend’s voice that it was bad.

“Fall is officially here.” Taking a breath, he walked over and handed the man the glass. Going back to his desk, he sat on the edge of it and lifted his own glass to his lips.

“How is Marianne?” He asked, referring to Matthew’s wife.

Love glowed and shimmered in the man’s eyes at the mention of the name. “Still pottering about in her greenhouse. She wants you to come over for dinner when you can swing it. Has this organic mushroom going on and wants to try it out.”

“And the boys?”

“Chad is bent on becoming a musician and Eric is doing very well in that software firm.” Matthew gave him a grateful look. “Thanks to you. When the company bought it, you put him in charge.”

“And he’s doing a marvelous job turning things around.” He finished his drink and went to sit behind his desk. “What did you find?”

He saw when his friend hesitate and felt his belly tying up in knots.

“I can take it.”

“You are involved with her?”

“I am, yes.”

“Christ!”

“That bad?” He asked grimly.

“See for yourself.” Matthew brought the folder over to him. “If you want to be alone?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Matthew finished his drink and left the room, closing the door behind him.

It took him a few minutes to open the folder and was not prepared for the intense longing when he saw the glossy black and white photo of her. It was a candid shot and showed her sitting on a park bench, her face slightly lifted as if enjoying the glow of the sun. She was wearing a jogging outfit which molded to her curves like a glove.

Her hair was in a ponytail, and he could see the moisture on her skin. The photo did not do her justice, because it could not reveal the flawlessness of her complexion or the directness of her lovely mahogany eyes.

Nor had it been able to capture the lushness of her bottom lip. Feeling like a damn fool, he used the tip of his index finger to trail a path over her face.

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Taking another deep breath, he forced himself to move on and the minute he did, he went into shock mode.

Detective Margo Sullivan. She was a bloody cop. Of all the things that he had expected – perhaps a husband or children – he never expected this. Rage erupted inside him and that was before he read further that she was investigating his company.

And like a fool he had fallen for her. For her lies, when all the time she had pretended... Pain and grief edged out the fury and had him sagging back weakly in his chair.

She had used him. All the questions about the company had not been because she was interested in him, she had been fishing for information.

Matthew had been thorough. At least, she had not lied about being brought up in a group home. She had told the truth there. And he, who had always been cautious because of his position in life had fallen for her flimsy lies.

And they had been flimsy. She had not struck him as a damn romance novelist. But he had fallen so quickly, he would have swallowed everything she told him.

Pain shimmered inside his chest, and he felt as if he was suffocating from it. It had all been a damn lie. No! he shook his head. She could not have faked her reaction to his lovemaking. He had seen the shock when she had her first orgasm, and he recalled how she had fought him. His guess was that had not been in the plans.

She had not expected to be so caught up. Or he was just making excuses for her because he wanted to believe that at least she felt something for him.

Swiveling his chair around, he stared blindly at the stunning view outside his window. He had deliberately asked Matthew to stop by after business hours because he wanted privacy.

Now he knew. And the pain was spectacular. He had fallen hard – extremely fast and was devastated. He felt as if he was dying. Not even the crash and what had happened to Laura and his unborn son had felt like this.

He felt as if he was being hurled from the top of the cliff and into a dark pit. He was destroyed. She had effectively torn him into tiny pieces. And he was going to drown himself in alcohol, but first, he had to hear it from her own lips. With that in mind, he reached for the phone and made the call.

“He wants to see me,” Margo turned to look at Brad as she hung up the phone.

“Which means he did not have the time to run you yet. Are you going? And if so, will you tell him?”

She shook her head. “I have to tell him it is over. Find some excuse. We have enough to search his company and his brother’s home. I cannot jeopardize any of it.” She drew in a breath and tried to steady herself.

“Are you sure you should go and see him?”

“No.” She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “But I have to.”

“Be careful,” Brad warned.

“I can take care of myself and he’s not going to hurt me.”

Margo had to admit to herself that she was feeling on edge. He had not called her in two days and suddenly he was doing so. It also had to do with the fact that she was not sleeping well without him, and it pissed her off.

She who had so often scoffed when she heard women say that they could not function when their men were away and that included cops.

Thankfully, the dragon assistant was not at her desk, sneering at her and his doors were open.

He was not sitting behind his desk, but standing at the window, with a drink in his hand. The sight of his broad shoulders outlined in the black silk sweater sent her heart bumping against her ribs. She wanted to rush over and wrap herself around him.

As if sensing her presence, he turned around, his face scrupulously expressionless, intense gray eyes wandering over her. She was wearing the same faded denims and red sweater she had worn for work and the scarred jacket.

How had he not seen it? He wondered bitterly. Everything about her screamed ‘cop’...

“Drink?”

“No, thanks. You’re back.”

“Yes.” He was fighting for control and could feel it slipping away by degrees.

“When?”

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“Late last night. I had some meetings that had been rescheduled. Sure, about the drink?”

“Yes.” She came in and closed the doors behind her.

“Uhm, how are you?”

“I’ve been better.” So civilized and polite, he thought viciously as he tossed back the rest of the drink. He went to his desk and gestured for her to sit. Instinct warned her that something was dreadfully wrong.

“How’s the writing coming along?”

“Writing?” She recovered quickly. “It’s um - it’s coming.”

“What is the plot about again?” He was staring at her in a way that had her shifting restlessly.

“Man meets woman and the usual drama.”

“I am sure it is much more than that. What is the conflict?”

“Conflict?”

“Yes. I am not much of a romance reading, it is not quite my thing, but I have been to several movies and there’s always conflict. What would you say yours is or rather theirs?”

She shifted slightly and had to force herself to appear nonchalant. “This sounds like an interrogation.”

He leaned back in his chair and tamped down the rage that was threatening to bubble to the surface.

“Interesting word. Interrogation. Sounds like cop talk.” His eyes bored into hers and she felt the fear blossoming. He knew. Oh God, he had found out about her. She should not have come.

“Look...”

He slapped open a thick folder in front of him. “Detective Margo Sullivan. A decorated cop with the prestigious Twenty-one Precinct. Decorated cop, shot in the line of duty. Undercover cop for over twenty years, went to the precinct straight out of the academy and spent little time on the streets before finding her niche as an undercover officer.”

He lifted his head and pinned her. His face was cold and stark as if carved from stone. “And the same precinct investigating my company for illegal drugs. Am I leaving anything out?”

Her hands were clammy, her heart racing. “I was doing my job.” She whispered hoarsely.

“I see.” He slammed the folder shut. “Was it your job to sleep with the suspect and I am a suspect, am I not?”

She rubbed her damp palms over her jeans and wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. “I have eliminated you as one.”

“Is that so?” His tone was dangerous, his eyes shooting fire. “How is that? And when did that happen? Was it when you were panting under me, begging me to take you, trembling from the aftermath of an explosive orgasm?”

Or was it when we were snuggled in bed and I was pouring my heart out to you, telling you how much I love you and wanted to marry you?”

“Merrick, I want you to know I did not plan it...”

“Shut up!”

His voice cracked like a whip and had her jolting.

“You used me to get information on my company!” He fought to get his anger under control. The pain was lancing through him like a thousand swords, and he felt as if he was dying. “You had me fooled. I was about to give you everything, my heart...,” he surged to his feet and had her jumping to hers.

“You had me.” He fisted his hands. “I fell for you, hard and all you were doing was your damn job! You slept with me for what? To get details in order to ruin me. What kind of person are you? Who the hell does that?”

She was trembling, her heart pounding. “I never expected it to go that far...”

“You arranged the first meeting. At the gallery, that was planned?”

She nodded and felt her heart turned over at the flash of pain on his face.

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“How did you know I would be there?”

“I studied your movements,” she took a step forward when he staggered.

“You studied me.”

“Merrick...”

“Don’t!” He snapped it out. “Everything was a lie.”

“Not everything,” she whispered.

He laughed harshly. “Oh, I know the climaxes were not faked, that much I realize, but everything else was. How far did you intend to take it?”

“We are wrapping things up. Look, several people are dead, and I had to do something.”

“And you believe my company is involved.”

“All evidence points to that.”

He was suffocating, his throat tightening and his bowels felt loose. He wanted to lie down, wanted to die, or just drink himself into oblivion. “Well, Detective Sullivan, I suppose I will be seeing you in your official capacity. You may go.”

“Merrick...”

“Get the hell out of my office and if you ever come near me again, I will alert my lawyers. Good job detective, you have gone above and beyond the call of duty. I hope the squad appreciates your sacrifice. Get the hell out of my sight.”

She was surprised she was able to walk to the doors. Tears blinded her eyes and her knees were knocking. She felt sick and weak. She had broken his heart and ended up breaking hers. Pushing the doors open, she stepped out and stumbled towards the elevator.

He drank. An entire bottle of scotch and opened another one. But it was not enough to make him feel better. He was destroyed. He had opened his heart twice and they had both ended in disaster and tragedy. This was the worse, because of the level of emotions, the intensity of the passion he had experienced with her.

He felt as if he was falling over a cliff with no hope of surviving. He wasn't going to survive this one. Losing Laura and his unborn son had been devastating. But this was even worse. He did not want to live. He just wanted to die.

She considered it a miracle that she made it home in one piece. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she navigated traffic and thank God that she knew her way home by heart. It was as if the vehicle drove itself.

She drove into her driveway and just sat there.

The look on his face was going to haunt her for the rest of her life. She had broken him. In her arrogant quest to get to the bottom of the case, she had broken him. The last words he had said to her that night sprang to mind.

He had told her that he adored her, that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with

her. And he had been through a lot, losing his fiancée and unborn son. He would never forgive her, and she accepted that.

Gripping the steering wheel, she looked out and to her surprise, discovered it had started raining. Rubbing the tears from her cheeks, she gathered her bag and hustled out of the vehicle.

“She is a bloody cop?” Maurice turned to look at his brother in disbelief. “She’s a cop?”

“Yes.” Merrick was recovered enough to be able to study the warrant thoroughly. “It appears to be in order.”

“We should call our lawyers...”

“I’m a lawyer, remember?” He looked over at Margo and she flinched at the contempt in his gaze. “You may proceed.”

“We decided to do the raid after business hours...”

“Get on with it, will you?” He cut her off curtly and turned towards his brother, shaking his head as he opened his mouth. “Let them do their job.”

Margo had to command herself to appear professional.

“Brad, let’s do this.”

“You knew?”

Merrick marveled that he was able to pour the drink without his hand shaking. Right now, the woman he loved was tearing his company apart, looking for evidence that he was funneling illegal drugs through the company.

“I did, yes.” He turned to offer his brother a glass of scotch. “I found out yesterday.”

“And you never said a word.” He shot an accusing look at his brother as he took the glass.

“We have nothing to worry about or do we?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means my investigation into Margo had me thinking and I did some digging of my own.” He sat on the edge of his desk and stared at his brother. “Jason.”

Maurice stiffened. “What about him?”

“He’s using.”

“That’s not...”

“Stop. You knew he was not going to rehab as mandated and never said a word.”

“You were the one who brought a cop into our home, our family...”

“And it would not have happened if there wasn’t suspicion in the first place,” Merrick interrupted him icily. “The question is this: is he just using or distributing?”

“How could you...”

“The police are here armed with warrants for the company and our homes and considering that I am a lawyer and a damn good one at that, it means they have enough to get the warrant in the first place.”

“Our home?” Maurice blanched. “We can block that...”

“No, we can’t. Where is Jason?”

“He’s...” Maurice lowered himself in the chair heavily. “He has not been in since yesterday.”

“Call him.”

“I tried and he’s not picking up.”

Merrick gave him a hard calculating glance. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing!” He bit his lip and settled back in the chair, a look of abject misery on his face. “He’s my son, your nephew...”

“And if he’s responsible for the death of those people, I am stepping back.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“Let’s hope so. Keep calling until you get him.”

“You bitch!” Janey screamed and would have launched herself at Margo, if the cops near her had not grabbed her. Margo wished they had allowed the woman to come at her. She was feeling mad enough to justify knocking her on her pretentious ass.

“We found the mother lode in your son’s room. You might want to call your fancy lawyers. We’re issuing a warrant for his arrest.”

“On what charges?”

“Possession of illegal drugs, intent to distribute and possibly murder.”

“What?” They turned to see Maurice hurrying into his son’s suite followed by Merrick and Michael. “You cannot possibly think...”

He broke off as his wife hurled herself into Merrick’s arms and burst into tears.

Margo saw the flash of pain on the man’s face and had to force herself not to drag the woman out of Merrick’s arms. That bitch.

“Merrick.” Maurice sent him a desperate glance.

“Don’t say a word.” Patting Janey on the back, he put her away from him. “Call our lawyers.” He glanced at Margo, the contempt causing her to flinch. “Detective Sullivan, may I have a word, alone?”

“Okay, let’s wrap this up, I’ll be down shortly.”

Merrick saw her partner hesitating and his mouth tightened as he wondered if they were sleeping together.

He waited until the room had emptied out. Looking around the tan and green room and the upheaval, he turned to face her. “You’re very good at your job.”

“I am.”

He nodded. "I have been asking myself how I could have fallen in love with someone like you. I am usually an excellent judge of character, has to be, considering the kind of business I am." She stuck her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, causing the jacket to shift and reveal her shoulder holsters.

"Were you carrying all the time you were with me?"

"Yes. I always carry."

He thought he was numb to the pain, but that was just wishful thinking. The pain of betrayal ripped at him and caused him to stagger.

"You really are a soulless bitch aren't you?"

The insult pierced her heart and for a minute, she could not catch her breath. "If you say so."

"I loved you." He said quietly, suddenly feeling every bit of his age. "I would have laid everything at your feet."

"I am not that type of woman. I am simple and..."

"Just about the job." He nodded and shoved his hands into his pockets to avoid marching over and shaking her. She was all cop, and he had seen that when he came in and watched her in command. And she was the one running the show.

"I hope you get your collar and a promotion. I will be talking to my lawyers to see what can be done."

"That's your right." She turned to leave and hesitated. Looking at him over her shoulder, she allowed herself to take in the set look on his attractive face and felt the

ache deep inside her.

“Not everything was a lie, and I don’t expect you to believe that.”

“I don’t. Get out.”

She walked down the stairs; past Michael who was shooting her accusing looks and Maurice who was holding a weeping Janey in his arms and felt the weight of the job weighing her down.

“You okay?” Brad was waiting for her next to the car.

“Yeah. We got what we wanted. Any word on Jason?”

“Not yet, but he will surface. Got to be running scared.”

She nodded and went around to the passenger side of the vehicle. Brad wondered if she noticed that she had not jumped into the driver’s seat.

Sliding in behind the wheel, he wisely kept his thoughts to himself as she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. The entire thing had been hard on her and he had no idea what to do about it. He had seen the way Merrick Pendergast looked at her and her reaction to his presence.

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But she had done the job, and he admired her for it. She was a remarkable cop, that much he had to admit. But she was a woman as well and that part of her was under extreme duress.

Chapter 14

“We’re going to the bar to hang out for a bit and would like you to come.”

She looked up from the report she was perusing and studied her partner. “I don’t need you to feel sorry for me.”

He came in and closed the door behind him. Sitting on the edge of the desk facing her, he felt his heart turned over at the gaunt look on her face. It had been two months of pure hell, at least on her part.

Two months of sifting through evidence and arresting suspects. And to discover that a rival company had planted some people at Medtech to try and destroy the company from the inside. And had used Jason as a pawn.

The media had reported the entire thing and Medtech as well as the entire Pendergast family have been in the news. On top of that, she had had to face Merrick Pendergast in the courtroom and at the precinct where he and the rest of the family had come in for interviews.

She had done the job, but at tremendous personal sacrifice. He had a feeling she was not sleeping and by the look of her, she was not eating either.

He had also seen the photos on the internet. Pendergast was back with the judge.

“You’re staring.” She pointed out mildly.

“Call him.”

“I did, several times, to apologize and explain and he has not returned any of my messages. I happen to have my pride.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug and leaned back in the chair. “It is over and should not have started in the first place. I ended up hurting both of us.”

“You were doing your job.”

“Yeah!” She said bitterly. “And was arrogant to think that I had to do whatever it took to get it done.”

“People were dying. And you went out of your way to prove the family were being set up. You spoke to the DA about Jason and he is doing a stint in a fancy rehab clinic instead of serving time. They should be damned grateful.”

“Should they?” A slight smile flitted around her lips. “Merrick called me a soulless bitch and I am beginning to think he is right.

“That’s utter crap, and you know it.” He jumped up and started pacing the small space. “I should find him and beat some sense into him.”

“Thanks.” She laughed shakily. “But it’s for the best. He has moved on and so should I.”

“Can you?”

He came back to sit down on her desk. “You’re wasting away here.”

“I will be fine. Give it another month or two and I will be as right as rain.”

“Margo...?”

She held up a hand. “That is all I’m prepared to say on the topic. Now go away and let me get some work done.”

He hesitated for a moment and then shrugged helplessly. “I am calling you later to make sure you leave. It is after seven.”

“Yes, mother.”

He sent her a fulminating look before leaving the room.

She sat back and closed her eyes, feeling the familiar ache inside her heart. She had seen him with the judge, and it had broken her. Whenever they happened to be in the same room, he looked straight through her as if she no longer existed.

She could not sleep; eating had become something of the past. She loved him, was aching for him – for his arms around her, his rich laughter, the look in his gray eyes when he stared at her.

She had told herself a long time ago that she could survive without love, and she had. Because she had the job. Until he came into her life.

Her eyes flew open at the knock on her door frame and saw Brad standing there.

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“Please know when to take no for an answer. I...”

“You have a visitor.” His stare spoke volumes and when he stepped aside and she saw who it was, she rose slowly. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

He looked so much like his uncle that she felt the pain shimmering inside her. His dark hair was brushed back from his face and gray eyes, the exact shade and shape of his uncle’s stared at her.

“I hope I have not come at an inopportune time.” Even his voice was similar, she thought dazedly. How the hell had she not realized that before.

“What are you doing here, Michael?”

He came into the office and looked around. “I wanted to see you, tell you thanks for what you did for Jason.”

“Does your uncle know you’re here?”

“No. May I?” He gestured to the shabby chair in front of the desk.

“At your own risk.”

He sat and folded his hands between his thighs. “I was angry at you, pissed off that you would use him to get your information. But the last two months – throughout the trials and testing the family has been through brought us closer to each other and forced us to see what was happening right in front of our noses.” He gestured with

one hand.

“My brother was crying out for help, and we ignored it.” He stared at her and noticed that her lovely face had whittled down some. “I am my uncle’s heir. Not his brother, my dad.

Uncle Merrick is my hero, my inspiration and I have so often wished that he was my dad. I love him completely and heard what he went through. I respect him as a businessman. He cares about his employees, and there are thousands of them.” He shook his head with a smile.

“He gives of himself. A lot of men in his position only care about the bottom line, but not him. If an employee needs a loan, he approves it. If one of their family member is ill and he can help, he does. Just a month ago, while this fiasco was going on, a long-time employee had a crisis, and he stepped out of the fray to lend a hand.

Another employee had his farm burnt to the ground and he was given a place to stay and help to rebuild the farm. That is what makes him so special. He is ruthless when it comes to business, but a stickler for being fair.” He trained his eyes on her. “And for a long time, it was all about work for him.

I saw the way he looked at you and realized that finally he was happy – over the moon happy. I had never seen him looked at a woman like that before. You were good for him. All the others just wanted the prestige of becoming Mrs. Merrick Pendergast, but you were different. You changed him for the better.”

“I used him.” She told him bluntly. “To close my case.”

He continued to look at her. “You love him.”

“That’s neither here nor there.” She hedged.

“He’s suffering, the way you are.”

“I’m fine.”

“I do not know you very much, but I believe that you are always straight. You love him and he is miserable without you. He does not smile anymore and spends all day and all night at the office. I went over to his place one night to hang out with him, and he got drunk.

That is what he has been doing to try and cope. Getting drunk, but it is not working.” He scooted forward, expression pleading. “I love my uncle very much and I am frightened he is going over the edge. Please, I am begging you, do something about it.”

She sat there in silence, staring at the young man who in all the investigation had remained steadfast and unmoving, with not a scratch to his impeccable record. Yes, he reminded her very much of his uncle, a man of integrity who had been shoved into a bitter and exhausting investigation and his name dragged through the mud.

“He has moved on,” she whispered.

“No.” Hope flared in his face. “If you’re talking about the judge, he just takes her to functions he cannot get out of and nothing more.”

“He won’t forgive me.”

“Perhaps not at first. You ripped out his heart.” He nodded when she flinched. “But you are the love of his life and a love like that can never just go away. It stays.” Digging into his cashmere overcoat, he took out a creamy envelope and rose to hand it to her.

“What’s this?”

“An invitation to my wedding.” His smile came. “Julia and I are getting married. Something to celebrate after the horror we have been through.”

“I can’t...”

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“I am not taking ‘no’ for an answer.” There was a fierce determination on his handsome face. “You owe me, after what you did to our family.”

“Your family hates me.”

“And I believe that you are strong and do not give a rat’s ass about that. My uncle will be there of course. You do not have to be at the church. The reception is being held at the house, and he will not be able to avoid you. Bring a plus one if you must, I do believe he is taking the judge.

But know that he is not interested in her, in any woman except you. Confront him, make him angry so that he takes you somewhere private and go on from there. He will not be able to resist you when you are alone in a room together. And we have plenty of rooms.”

She looked over at him. “Why are you doing this?”

“For selfish reasons.” He smiled slightly. “I love my uncle and he is all the way in love with you. I want him to be happy. See you at the wedding. Wear something scandalous and knock his eyes out.”

After he was gone, she turned the envelope over in her hands. Picking up the letter opener, she sliced it open and took out the fancy embossed card. The last Saturday in January. Christmas had come and gone and had meant nothing to her. She had spent it at her aunt’s place, being plied with food, but had tasted nothing.

She could not go of course. The thought of seeing him in a setting like that was

unnerving. She would be crashing the family function, even if she was invited. Putting the envelope down, she sat there staring at her report and just could not settle.

Standing in front of the mirror, he struggled to perform a task he had done too many times to count. Knot the tie at his throat. If it was not for his nephew getting married, he would have declined the invitation. He was certainly not in the mood for celebration.

He had lost weight and the haggard expression on his face was due to his not eating, working too hard and drinking too much. He was an empty shell inside. He knew realistically that he was never getting over her, but had thought the terrible ache and pain would have lessened by now.

It had been two goddamned month. Two months in which the company he had worked so hard to build on had been in the press, speculations surrounding his family and worse - much worse was seeing her in the courtroom - at the precinct – in the room interrogating him and his family.

He had wanted to hate her, strike out at her, but he had been furious that all he wanted to do, even despite what she had done was to just haul her into his arms.

At nights, he had taken to sleeping at the office, because his bedroom smelled of her. The bed reminded him of the passion enjoyed there. He could not settle. Jennifer was hinting at a relationship, but he could not stomach being with another woman. Damn Margo Sullivan to hell and back!

The wedding was a reminder that he had failed twice. Two times he had proposed. One woman had died and the other – well – she was dead to him, wasn't she? But he could lie to himself. She was not dead – in his heart, she was alive and standing firm.

In his soul, where she had woven herself.

It angered him that she had managed to break him into bits, and he still wanted her. She had stamped on his heart, set fire to that piece of him and he still craved her. He still recalled the times they spent together, the passion that had struck him like lightening.

Staring at his image in frustration, he renewed his effort to knot the damn tie. As soon as this was over, he was going to take a break. Go out on his boat, sail far away and be alone with his thoughts and try and recover from this painful period in his life. He was through with women. He would take what they had to offer and be done with it.

“My God!” Brad let out a breath as she opened the door, and he got an eyeful of her.

She looked completely different. She had done something different with her hair, it was not curly, but straight and longer, the glossy strands bouncing past her shoulder, and she was showing skin. The dress was a stunning electric blue that skimmed over her slender curves like a lover’s hand and was high above the knees.

“Close your mouth, Michaelson.” She could smile and be pleased at his reaction.

“Is that really you?”

“Bite me.”

“I recognize the tone and the words, but Christ! You are exquisite and you are wearing makeup.”

“Not much.” She was starting to feel self-conscious. Michael had called to remind her

of the date, as if she would forget. And in the end she had asked Brad to accompany her and sprung for a much too expensive dress.

The boots had her thinking long and hard, but she had succumbed and bought them. They came up to just above the knees and had heels. She had also bought a coat. Black cashmere that felt as light as clouds. The entire ensemble had cost the earth.

“Ready?”

Brad was still staring at her.

“Brad.”

He cleared his throat and nodded. “Yeah, let’s go. If Pendergast does not jump all over you, I reserve the right to.” He grinned at her dirty look. “What? Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

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“Can’t blame a girl for kicking you in the nuts. Let’s go.”

His smile was becoming strained. The ceremony at the chapel had been poignant and lovely. Julia made a beautiful bride, and his nephew looked happy. Jason was there as well. He had been given the time to attend the wedding.

He looked thin and drawn, but at least he was alive and not in prison. It would take time for Merrick to forgive him for almost dragging the company down with his addiction.

Jennifer, looking resplendent in gold satin was holding court with the bride and with several others. He was about to take a sip of the champagne that had somehow been passed to him when he felt the prickle of awareness at the back of his neck. Turning slowly, he saw her and for a minute, he thought he was hallucinating.

Months of wanting her - wishing for her had addled his brain and he was seeing things. Besides, it did not look like her. She was wearing some sort of figure-hugging dress, and her hair was different. But the guy hanging onto her could not be mistaken.

She was here. Who in the hell invited her, and he knew when Michael glanced over at him.

Damn him for interfering. Turning his back, he strode to the makeshift bar and ordered a full glass of brandy. She could bloody well go away.

Even though he had his back turned, he knew exactly when she walked up behind him.

“Uncle Merrick.”

Politeness forced him to turn around and her nearness hit him like a ton of brick. Forcing his expression from revealing the turmoil going on inside him, he nodded curtly. “Detective Sullivan.”

“I invited her...”

“Of course you did.” He cut off his nephew coldly. “Now you can take her as far from me as possible.”

“I...”

“No. I can answer for myself. I never thought you were a coward.”

He stiffened and felt the anger brimming over and clogging his throat.

“You want to say that to me again?”

She felt the frisson of fear at his ominous expression but was determined to stand her ground and do what she came here to do.

“I said you are a coward. Yes, I went about it all wrong and I have been beating myself up over it. I have tried to apologize...”

“Apologize!” His eyes flashed fire as he stared at her. “For almost ruining my company? My family? Well, I suppose I should bow down and kiss your frigging feet, shouldn’t I?”

“Your nephew and the people involved almost ruined your company. I was tasked with the job of trying to close a case where people, young people were dying. I am not going to apologize for that.”

“You used me. Damn you to hell, you used me to get what you want.”

“And I am sorry for it. I never intended for it to get that far.”

“You never intended...” Surging off the stool, he grabbed her hand and not caring that they were the cynosure of every eye, he hauled her out of the room and turned into the library. Slapping on the light, he flung her arm away.

For a few minutes, he did not speak but prowled the room like a caged lion. She stood there watching him as he tried to bring his temper under control. Michael had told her to get him alone, but she was not certain it was such a good idea.

She jumped reflexively when he whirled around and approached her.

“Do you know what you have done?”

She held up a hand as if to ward him off. “I hated myself for what I did to you.” Her voice was unsteady, and she was trembling.

“Not as much as I hate you.”

Her nearness was unnerving, and he was beginning to think this was a bad idea. He was alone with her in a room and her scent, her very essence was seeping into his pores. He inhaled her and felt the familiar mad passion surging inside him. “Get out of my life, out of my family’s home. I never want to see you again.”

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He started to turn away when she grabbed his arm. His first instinct was to shove at her, but he turned and saw the tears shimmering in those magnificent eyes and just like that, he felt his resolves crumbling.

He went still for a second before turning and shoving her against the door. “Damn you.” He whispered against her mouth before seizing her lips hungrily. He swallowed her cry and heard someone groaned. His hands were all over her, running over her arms, her back and settling on her butt as he lifted her against him.

His body was hot and heavy with need, his lower body throbbing. He poured two months of anger and pain into the kiss and when she responded in kind, he went mad. Dragging her to the floor, he rolled her as he tried to get to her skin. She fought to get his jacket off and managed to tear at the pearl buttons of his shirt.

His tie almost strangled him, and he had to stop to help her get it out of the way. But she was not satisfied with that. He had torn the sleeve of her dress and was working on getting her panties out of the way, all the while, his mouth was still fused to hers.

“Wait! Jesus! Wait.” He sat on his knees and wrestled with his belt and zipper.

“We should...” A groan escaped him with she reached in and cupped him. He was hard as a rock and burning hot.

With a cry of defeat, he plunged into her with a force that shoved her several inches backward. They were on the heated floor, but that did not matter to them.

Nothing mattered except the two of them and what they were feeling. Hiking up her

knees, he drove into her and seized her lips again. She was still wearing her boots and nothing else.

Emotions washed through them like a violent river and the first orgasm stole her breath and had her fingers biting into his skin.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he ravaged her neck, her throat and tolled until she was on top of him. His hands reached up to cup her breast, fevered eyes watching her own go blind with passion. When she arched her back and stiffened, he reared up and tugged a nipple into his mouth.

Chapter 15

He somehow managed to pick her up and carried her to the sofa in the corner of the room where he collapsed. Drawing her into his arms, he pulled the throw over them, his breathing ragged.

He had emptied himself into her and was now weak and far from satiated. There was a reception going on a few feet away, but he did not care about that. Their clothing was strewn all over the floor, but that did not matter.

She was still trembling. Wrapped around him, her slender curves pressed to his, he felt the tremors passing through her. They would have to talk, but right now, he just want to hold onto the miracle of her being here with him.

Several minutes ago, he was floating in a sea of thick despair and now, he felt as if he was on a cloud. God! How he loved her.

She lifted her head to look at him and he felt a jolt at the look on her exquisite face. He could never hate her.

“What?” He asked mildly, his fingers roaming her back.

“We just had sex on the floor,” she looked around the room, realizing for the first time they were in an extensive library. “With ancient volumes staring down at us, not to mention pictures of what I assume to be generations of Pendergast.”

He chuckled at that – the poignancy of her usual direct approach giving him pause.

“We did.”

“I have never done it on the floor before.”

“Any regrets?”

“None whatsoever.” She turned to look at him, a sober expression on her face. “Michael came to see me, to intervene. I thought all was lost,” she shook her head. “Even now, I don’t see how you can ever forgive me for my part in what happened.”

“I told myself that I never could.” One hand drifted up to stroke her cheek and he felt a pang at how much weight she had lost. He had believed he was the only one suffering, but he was wrong. “I was so angry with you; I could not function. And there was the pain. I could not sleep. I started drinking.”

“Merrick...”

He shook his head. “Just let me get this out. I blamed you for everything, but that was wrong. I refused to see what the hell was in front of me because Jason was family.

Then when I met you, I did not care about anything else. I had been given a second chance at happiness, and it blew me away. Nothing else mattered.” He smiled crookedly. “You changed my focus and my goals.

All I wanted was you.” He saw the tears swimming in her eyes and felt his heart quivering. Was it any wonder he was in love with her? Completely and irrevocably tied to her? She was strong and tough, but there was heart and soul there.

“I am sorry.”

“I know, baby.” He shifted so that he could face her. “Are you willing to marry me?”

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He saw the cloud coming over her face and felt a spurt of annoyance.

“We could live together...” She grabbed onto him when he started to leave and held on tight.

“Dammit!” She glowered at him. “Okay fine. If you want to take me on as a wife, then that is your damn problem. I am warning you what you are up against. I hate attending functions and I am not bloody well giving up my job. I will forget your birthday and important milestones because I will not care about any of it.”

“Anything else?” He asked coolly.

“Yes, damn you. This is...” She was about to say a mistake, but she stopped and realized that being without him was going to be the end of her. “I love you.” She whispered.

“These past couple of months without you has been hell on earth. I was unable to eat and sleep. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I can face whatever it is as long as you are with me.”

Emotions stormed through him and for a moment, he could not speak. Gathering her against him, he breathed her in, his face buried in her hair. When he lifted his head, his eyes were suspiciously bright.

“We get married next week.”

She opened her mouth to protest and then closed it. Sliding on top of him, she

sheathed him and watched as his eyes darkened.

Minutes later, they vaguely heard the persistent knocking on the door but were too busy exploring each other's mouth. When the knocks did not yield a response, the door was pushed open slightly.

"I have been tasked with coming to find out if you two have killed each other. Margo, your partner said that you are carrying."

Lifting his mouth from hers reluctantly, Merrick arched a brow at her. "Are you?"

"Always." She was breathless and hot from his ardent attention.

"Where?"

"In my ridiculous excuse for a purse."

"Uncle Merrick?"

"Come on in, Michael." When the young man stepped in, he tried to ignore the clothing strewn on the floor and the couple, obviously naked, wrapped around each other.

"Is the reception over?" He kept a firm arm around her, even though she wasn't trying to break free.

"Just about. Julia and I are ready to leave." His gray eyes twinkled in amusement. "Jennifer is making noises and threatening to come and find you." He glanced at Margo. "Detective Michaelson wanted to know if you're ready to leave."

He nudged his chin down to look at her. "It seems we have an awkward situation on

our hands.”

“Not me!” She told him airily. “Brad is just my partner, you on the other hand came with a date.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.” She grinned at him. “You might want to put some clothes on before facing her and the rest of the guests.”

To shut her up, he seized her lips and had her sighing into his mouth.

Michael cleared his throat loudly. “I will - uhm – just be on my way.”

“Wait outside for a bit, I would like to talk to you.”

When his nephew closed the doors behind him, he continued kissing her.

“Merrick...”

“Hmm.” He loved the taste of her.

“Michael is waiting.” She did not want him to leave.

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“You’ll be here when I get back?” He ended the kiss reluctantly.

“I will, I promise.”

“Good.” Kissing her roughly on the mouth, he rose and went to get dressed.

Looking back at her lying against the cushions with her hair spread over the silk, he felt his heart turning over. “This will not take long.”

His nephew was still standing outside, waiting for him. “Whatever I have that you want, just ask.” He said quietly. “I owe you my life.”

Michael grinned. “It was really my pleasure. You two belong together.”

“We do.” Bolstering a smile, he headed towards the ballroom, to attend to the unpleasant task of getting rid of his date.

She stretched languidly and smiled. It felt good. No, great. She had come here with the intention of having it out with him and trying to put it behind her, but now it looks like she was sticking. She loved him – Lord, how she loved him. So much so that she could scarcely believe it.

When the doors were shoved open, she started to say something but stopped as the woman stormed into the room.

“You must be very proud of yourself.” Janey stood there vibrating, her pink gown with the silver etchings shimmering. “You ruined our family’s lives, by lying to Merrick and all of us and now you are back here spinning more lies to get him to take you back.” She swept a scornful gaze over the woman on the sofa. “No doubt using your body...”

“Stop it now.”

Both of them looked towards the doorway where a furious Merrick was standing.

“Merrick, darling, I was just...”

“Leaving. Go and see to your guests. I will excuse what you just said to the woman who is going to be my wife and chalk it down to your worries over Jason. But you get one shot. Just one. If you ever speak to her like that again, there will be consequences. Is that clear?”

“Merrick...”

“Is that clear?” His face was cold and uncompromising.

“Janey.” Maurice had come up behind him and hustled into the room to take her by the arm. “I apologize.” He gave Margo a brief glance before practically pushing his wife out the room and slamming the doors shut.

Merrick rushed over and sat at the edge of the sofa, an anxious look on his face. “It took longer than I expected, and I never thought Janey would come in here, let alone insult you like that. Baby, I am so sorry.”

He felt his heart spiking as she continued to look at him without speaking. Then it turned to anger. “If you think you are going to worm your way out of marrying me,

think again. I will hunt you down...”

“I was just here thinking that she caught me with no clothes on and I could hardly get up to kick her ass while I am only just wearing boots.”

He blinked and stared at her in stupefaction for a full minute. Then snatching her into his arms, he laughed, relief shuddering through him. “I adore you.” He managed as he buried his face in her hair.

“Yeah. Yeah.” She clung to him, loving the feel of his body against hers. “How did the judge take it?”

“Not very well.” He eased back to look at her. “Want me to take the boots off?”

“Are we staying here?”

“No. I want you all to myself. Are you on duty tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Good. We get to spend all day in bed.”

“You just want to use my body.”

“And what a body.” Pushing her back, he slid in next to her. “Just let me hold you for a bit.”

“I have no problem with that.”

“I should let you get some sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because...,” his mouth trailed the length of her neck, his teeth nipping into the hollow of her throat. “I cannot get enough of you.”

“I love hearing that.” Her hands skimmed over the bunched muscles of his shoulders with obvious delight.

“I don’t want you to tire of me.” He really should stop. They had been at it since they arrived at his place and that was two hours ago.

“I will let you know when and if that happens. I love the feel of you. So lean and muscular. Like a wolf.”

“Wolf?” He lifted his head and gave her a quizzical stare.

“Hmm.” Her fingers skimmed the stubble on his firm jaw and trailed down to the dent in his chin. “I need to ask you something.”

“Ask away.” Placing his hand over hers, he brought it to his mouth to kiss the palm.

“Can you talk about her? Your fiancée.”

He felt the quick tug of grief and realized that he was over it – over the past and looking forward to the future. A future with the woman in his arms.

“Yes.” Settling back on the pillows, he cradled her and stared up at the ceiling. “We were young when we met.” His hands skimmed over her back. “She was sweet and always had a smile on her face.

My parents had a very good marriage, and I wanted that for myself. When I met Laura, I felt the attraction, but it took me some time to approach her. When I did, she was open to a relationship. But I wanted to wait to get married. I did not want to tie myself down so soon and I wanted to be certain.

When she told me she was pregnant, I knew it was time to do the right thing, and we got engaged. She was so excited about the baby, the upcoming wedding, that she insisted on flying to Paris to purchase her trousseau.

I was supposed to go with her, but I was just starting out at the company and there was a new drug being put out on the market and I was in charge of the legalities of it. I could not get away and I asked her to wait, but she wouldn’t,” he paused for a bit, and she turned her head to look at him.

“I was in a meeting when I got the news.”

“You blamed yourself.”

“Yes, I did.” He smiled at her intuitiveness. “I kept saying that if only I had gone with her or be firmer when I asked her not to go, she would still be alive. More than that, I grieved for my unborn son and was resentful that she had taken that away from me. Unreasonable, I know, but grief has a way of doing that to a person.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Free.” His hands cupped her face. “Wonderfully happy and head over heels in love.” His expression became sober. “I started feeling guilty right after I met you.”

“Why?”

He traced the outline of her full bottom lip and felt an answering tug in his belly when it quivered. “What I felt when I first met you was nothing compared to what I felt for her. It was like a quick one – two punch that took my breath. When I first made love to you, I felt as if I was being thrown into the eye of a very violent storm.” He smiled wistfully.

“I had crushes in high school and was even in a semi-serious relationship in college. With Laura, I contemplated marriage for the first time. But with you, I knew without a doubt that I could not live without you.” His hand cupped her cheek. “You blew me away and it frightened me.”

Her heart took a slow dive. “Can you imagine what it was like for me?” She whispered. “I grew up without anyone to love me.

Until I was eighteen, I thought I was alone in the world and then Aunt Sybil came into my life, and it took me years to warm up to her. I am still uncomfortable with her show of affection. Then I met you. It was an assignment, but from the very start, I felt something.

I had to sleep with you. I was jeopardizing my job, but for the first time in my life there was this explosion inside my chest. I tried to deny it at first, told myself that I should stop...,” her fingers curled into his chest. “But I couldn’t. I am fifty-two and for the first time in my life, I am in love. God! Talk about scary.”

His hands trembled as he used them to frame her face. “Let’s be scared together.” He drew her up and captured her mouth in a smoldering kiss.

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They argued about her wedding dress.

“I am paying for my own damn dress. I might not have the kind of money you have, but I have savings, and I happen to know what I want.”

“I have seen your wardrobe!” He held up a hand as she hissed at him. They had gone to meet her aunt, and the woman had been utterly charmed by him. She and Janey and Maurice had come to some sort of truce, and she realized that Merrick had a lot to do with it.

The precinct was buzzing with the news about her upcoming wedding to the man she had been investigating a short time ago and the press was having a field day with it. His people had issued a statement as a way of getting them to leave her alone, but one or two reporters still found their way into ambushing her when she went to work.

She also refused to wear her square cut diamond engagement ring to work and that caused another argument.

“What if I lost it? Or go out on a raid and get robbed? I am a cop for crying out loud. What are people going to say when they see me wearing big ass diamonds?”

“That you are engaged to a wealthy man. That you are mine, that it is a symbol of our love for each other. The ring is insured if you are worried about theft. Or is there something else? Like your partner for instance. Was there something going on there?”

She had given him an incredulous stare. “We had a moment, once – years ago and

nothing after that. You cannot possibly be jealous of him.”

He had felt foolish even bringing it up, but where she was concerned, he was unreasonable.

“I would like you to wear the ring.”

She had compromised and was wearing it on a chain around her neck. The things she did for love, she thought darkly.

Now she was dressing to go out and tie herself to a man for the rest of her life. And she was not wearing white, because that would be just plain stupid and lacking in class. Not that she was a fashion expert or anything.

Which was why she had sought the advice of one who was. Monique Romano had come through for her and had taken her call personally, welcoming her to some sort of ‘clique’ - but she would have to get used to that.

The dress had cost the earth, and she had balked at the price, but as Monique reminded her, this was the only time she was ever getting married.

“And you might want to accept the fact that Merrick is a very wealthy man and has a certain standing in society.” She said in her gentle voice. “It took me a while to get used to being married to a man of substance. Even now, I find myself wondering how come.”

The dress was a stunning electric blue with a cowl neckline, with straight lines, clinging to her curves. It was not long, just slightly below her knees.

The sleeves were tight and reached to a point at her wrists. He had given her diamond earrings and necklace to go with the engagement ring. Her hair had been styled by a

professional who had arranged it into a soft coil at the nape of her neck.

“You have such a graceful throat. It would be a sin not to show it off.”

Her shoes were painted to match her dress, and she was sure she was going to slip and fall flat on her ass and end up disgracing both of them. But they looked good on her.

She looked up when her aunt came bustling into the bedroom. She had stayed at her place for the night, overriding Merrick’s protests.

“My dear!” The woman gushed, blinking behind her glasses. “How lovely you are. That young man is going to be unable to take his eyes off you.”

“That’s the plan.” She was not nervous, but anxious to get it over and done with.

“Ready?”

“As I will ever be.” She flashed the woman a grin. “Let’s go get me hitched.”

They had planned for a small ceremony, but at the end, it had turned out to be larger than they expected. They were getting married in the small chapel she attended since she joined the academy.

The decorations had been done by the ladies of the church and Margo had no idea where they got so many flowers in the height of winter. But she suspected her fiancé had something to do with it.

Commander Williams was waiting for her as soon as she stepped out of the

limousine, bundled up against the frigid January weather.

“You look unlike a cop, Sullivan.” He murmured as he took her arm and guided her towards the entrance. “And that’s a compliment.” He added before she could respond.

“Thank you, sir.” And may I say, how sharp you are in your tux.”

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She grinned as he automatically tugged at his tie. “Damn monkey suit.” He muttered. “I am happy for you. Never thought I would see the day.”

“Neither did I. Feels weird.”

“Must be.” He stopped talking as they cleared the threshold, and the music changed. Her eyes went straight to the man standing at the altar, his own black tux suiting his tall, leanly muscled frame.

The look on his face, the light in his eyes was just for her and it gave her a jolt to know that he had eyes only for her. As far as he was concerned, she was the only woman in the world.

Love overflowed and wrapped her around and without a doubt, she knew this was exactly where she belonged.

He came forward to take her hands, nodding briefly to her commander.

And just stood there for a minute, taking her in. “My beautiful bride.” He whispered as he guided her towards the minister who was waiting.

Chapter 16

The honeymoon lasted two weeks. He insisted on it.

“Surely you can spare two weeks from the precinct. Crime will still continue to prevail even if you are not here and I want to show you the world.”

They took long walks on Champs Elysée's. He knew all the crevices and corners, having been there so many times. He acted as her guide, especially when he discovered that her only trip out of the country had been to Jamaica and Mexico.

They went to Tuscany, where he invested in a vineyard and spent two nights there, having cheese and wine. In Venice, they took rides on the gondola, skimming along the water with the colorful city before them.

In Paris, he took her shopping, ignoring her protests and bought her expensive scents and ridiculously priced clothing and had the packages sent to their hotel.

They took in Scotland, the craggy mountains and shimmering green land and stopped at pubs where he she found a love for their stout.

England was next and then Wales. Their final destination was Hawaii. They spent most of their time on Waikiki Beach, the white stretch of sand and blue water under a brilliant sun was the perfect end to their enchanted honeymoon.

He had procured a private villa and under the stars, with the water lapping against the sand, he made love to her, until she was crying in his arms.

He had shown her so much, given her so much and still it would never be enough. He had found her late in life when he had all but given up on love and romance. Now, she was his and he was going to lavish her with everything.

“We could extend the honeymoon.”

It was their last night on the island, and she was wrapped around him after a rather tumultuous lovemaking.

“You have a company to run.”

He shifted so that he could look at her beloved face. It still gave him a jolt to know she was his wife.

“The benefits of being CEO means I can take extended time.”

“Since I am not CEO and I have a job to go back to, the answer is regrettably no.” She eyed him for a minute. “You promised you would not interfere with my job.”

“I was not planning to.” He brushed back the hairs from her forehead. “You were shot and then knifed.”

“While under cover. I am riding a desk now.”

“I cannot lose you.”

“I could just easily die in an accident.”

“Don’t!” He closed his eyes briefly. “Please do not say that. I cannot...”

“I’m sorry, darling...,” he felt a jolt at the endearment. “What?”

“You’ve never said that to me before.”

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“Darling?” She frowned at him. “Of course I have.”

“No,” he hauled her on top of him. “Say it again.”

“You’re weird.” She framed his face with her hands. “My darling husband.”

The kiss was potent and had them tumbling headlong into ecstasy.

It was a delight getting to know her. The woman he was married to was unpredictable, moody and he loved her to pieces. She was also untidy and made no apologies for it. She was a workaholic, a stickler for the victims she stood for.

She would growl and complain about slapping on makeup and wearing fancy clothes, but at the end of it, she was there right beside him.

The week after the honeymoon, she came home while he was in the middle of setting their meals out on the balcony. He had left the office earlier than usual to instruct Mrs. Hanson, their housekeeper, on where to put things that had been shipped just this morning and was waiting for his wife’s reaction.

He had told her while she was on her way where they would be eating and heard her come into the bedroom and went straight to take a shower.

A smile touched his lips as he waited for her to come storming out and did not have long to wait. Not even bothering to dress, she grabbed a robe he had set out for her

and came marching towards him, eyes flashing.

“They are all going back. Every last one of them.”

“Good evening to you, darling.” He said mildly, uncorking the bottle of Cabernet he had selected to go with their mushroom chicken. “And how was your day?”

He imagined he could see steam coming out of her ears as she continued to glare at him.

“This is not a joke. A closet full of fancy clothes? Silk sweaters? Designer trousers? I am a bloody cop. Jeans and a t-shirt and jacket and when the time is cold, flannel shirts do the trick. You are sending them back.”

“No, I’m not.” He twisted the cork out and poured the wine into the glasses. “You should put something more on, it’s quite nippy.”

She let out what he identified as a strangled growl, before turning on her heels and marching back inside. And wondered if he should go and get her bodily.

Deciding against it, he sat and waited for her to come back out. The love of his life was stubborn, but as he had discovered over the last three weeks – Good God! Was it just three weeks since they had exchanged vows? It felt as if they had been married for years.

He had discovered that she would blow off steam but never allow it to get out of control. They would argue, but it would only be for a few minutes.

Right on cue, she came out, bundled up in a brand coral pink sweatsuit and socks on her feet. Her hair was piled on top of her head and her face looked fresh and impossibly young.

“We’re not done talking about this.” She warned as she went to take her seat. Before she could do so, he snagged her hand and tumbled her into his lap.

“This is not going to make it better.” She muttered, but her tone lacked heat, and she was already wrapping her hands around his neck.

“If you love me, you will stop buying me so many things.”

He simply lifted a brow and had her rolling her eyes.

“Okay, I know how that sounds. Merrick, be reasonable. Where am I going to wear all of that to?”

“Work and whenever we go out to functions.” He skimmed his fingers over her skin made dewy by the special body wash he had bought her in Paris.

“I will not have the entire precinct sneering at me for wearing silk sweaters and hand tooled leather jackets and boots to work. I would die of mortification.”

He flicked a finger over the diamond ring she wore on a chain around her neck.

“That is different. It is worn under my shirt.” She sighed and shook her head. “All of this is going in one ear and coming out the other, isn’t it?”

“Something like that.” He smiled at her indulgently. “I like spoiling you. You told me you had to be contented with hand me downs when you were growing up and I would like to make up for it.”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

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“It does to me.” He told her firmly. “I love buying you things, let me.”

She gazed at his beloved face and felt her heart simply melting like wax against the sun. He spoiled her rotten. She was not a particularly good wife, or at least, that’s what she told herself. He made the effort to do things for her.

He would come home and set the dinner out and wait for her to come home. On weekends, he would let her sleep in and bring her breakfast in bed.

Never having anyone to take care of her before, it took some getting used to.

“Okay, fine.”

“Good!” Lifting her chin, he brushed her lips lightly with his and breathed her in. “How was your day, my love?”

That was another thing she was not used to either. Someone asking about her day and really wanting to listen.

“We caught a case.” She shifted to plates he had uncovered and started to feed them both. “A smuggling ring straight out of New York...” She tasted the chicken and closed her eyes in pleasure, before chewing.

She felt comfortable sitting on his lap – something else that surprised her. “A wife and husband, bilking people of their savings and smuggling drugs in birthday cakes. Quite a setup actually, but we caught a break.” She scooped up baby potatoes and absently fed it to him.

“Have they been detained?” He settled her closer to him, one hand wrapped around her waist as he picked up his glass and took a sip.

“Not yet.” She leaned into him and inhaled his masculine scent. “We are close. How about you? How was your day?”

He looked pleased that she had asked and knowing how business bored her, kept it simple.

“We’re still recovering from the incident.” They had talked about what led to their meeting each other and cleared the air between them.

“And Pharma Medical?” She asked quietly, referring to the other company involved. “I see they are blaming some of their top management people.”

“Throwing them under the bus.” He concluded grimly as he handed her a plump grape. “Harry Sylvan, the CEO is noted for doing that. They have been getting a lot of bad press since the incident.”

She tilted her head to look at him. “Since I am beginning to know my husband, I sense a takeover coming on.”

His pleasure at her calling him her husband reflected on his attractive face and for just a few seconds he could not speak. His hands trembled and he had to take a breath or two to steady himself. “Think I should?”

She shrugged, noticing his reaction and feeling her heart responding. “What do I know? The CEO is rotten to the core, and they were shaken to the roots by what happened.” She lifted a hand to trail along his jaw. “Not like this CEO I am married to. And besides, don’t you already have a lot on your plate?”

“Not since I partially handed things over to Michael.”

“Oh yes. How is Maurice taking it?”

“Not well, but he knows that it is the right thing to do.” He continued to stroke her back. “I am not resigning any time soon, but Michael needs to be eased into the position. I want to travel with my wife.”

“Merrick...”

“I am not asking you to resign or anything like that. I just want us to spend as much time together as possible. A weekend at the place in Maui or the vineyard in Napa. Or a trip to Mexico.” His eyes smoldered as he stared at her.

“I want to cram in as much time as possible with each other. “You are sitting at a desk and for that I am grateful. But I need you baby. You are the heart and soul of me, and I want more than just a few hours in the evening. I need more than that.”

“You promised.”

He sighed. “I know I did, and I respect your need to work and be independent. It is just that, I love you so damn much, that I am jealous of the time you spend away from me.”

She understood because she felt the same way. In the past and for so many years, it had been the job for her, because she had nothing else. And being a cop had given her so much pride and fulfillment.

But now it was so different. She had been handed a gift, in the form of a wonderful man who loved her beyond measure, and it was something she was never going to take for granted.

Taking the glass from him, she put it away and cupped his face. “I love you.” She smiled when she felt him hardened beneath her and knew that dinner was at an end. “More than my life, more than anything in my life.

More than the job, because that is just what it is – a job. You are everything to me and I will think about scaling things way down. Because I want to spend time with my man, going places, enjoying the time we have together.” She bent her forehead to his and closed her eyes. “Make love to me Merrick, let me feel you deep inside me.”

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It took that to shatter his control completely and had him complying and surrendering.

“You look like the wife of a very wealthy man. Oh wait! You are the wife of a multi-billionaire. It begs the question, why are you still slumming at our lowly precinct.” Brad grinned and skipped out of the way before she could retaliate physically.

“Some of us have work to do.”

“Just thought I would come and check in. Nice threads.” He skimmed an admiring look over the gold silk sweater and leather boots where her feet were stacked on the desk as usual as she studied her board. “I am betting your husband picked out your clothes, you’re looking very sharp.”

“Are we here to discuss fashion or murder? It seems to me that one trumps the other.”

“I can do both.” Easing her feet off the desk, he sat on the edge and stared at her board. “You smell good too, new Parisian perfume?”

Ignoring him, she rose and went to stand in front of the board. She was not going out much these days, but her excellent observation skills were an added bonus.

“What do you see here?” She gestured to the photos stacked against each other.

“A family unit. Mother, father, sons.”

“Precisely,” She frowned at the blurry photos for a minute. “Irvin here,” She pointed to the photo. “He is the weak link. He has been brought in for questioning. I...,” her voice tailed off when she saw the man leaning against the doorframe.

“It’s my cue to leave.” Brad eased off the desk and nodded to his partner’s husband. “I will let you know when the suspect is brought in.”

“Detective.” His deep voice sent shimmers all the way down to her toes. The sight of him, tall and lean, looking immaculate in his dark blue suit and black cashmere overcoat made her want to jump him. It was slightly distressing how much power the man had over her.

“Do not tell me. You were in the neighborhood.” She went behind her desk to keep from following on her desire to melt against him. She was almost fifty-three, but that did not stop her from feeling like a schoolgirl every time she sees him.

“Something like that.” Warm gray eyes held hers captive. “I had some business in the downtown area and decided to kill two birds with one stone. That’s lunch?” He nodded to the Ramen noodles on her desk.

“Yes. So?”

He smiled at the defensive tone and walked forward. “It’s not filling.” Sitting on the edge of the desk, he tugged her so that she was standing between his thighs.

“The door is open.” She hissed, turning her head away so that his mouth grazed her cheek.

“We happen to be married.” He kept a firm hold on her when she tried to wriggle free.

“I have work to do.”

“So, do I. You did not ask me what the business was, that I had to take care of.”

“I suppose it’s buying up some unfortunate company.”

He grinned at her. “Not this time. I donated to the precinct, or rather the company did.”

She gave him a suspicious look that had his smile widening.

“What sort of donation?”

“I believe you’ll find out soon enough.” As if on cue, her phone rang. “You want to get that.” He continued to hold her as she reached for the phone. It was an order from her commander to present herself in his office immediately.

“What have you done?”

“Nothing much.” Tipping her chin up, he gave her lips a bruising kiss. “I must be on my way. I love you.” His eyes darkened and he went in for a second kiss. “See you later. We have the medical association dinner this evening.”

“Great.”

He kissed away her frown and hopped off the desk. “Shall we?”

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“You’re not holding my hand, so forget that.”

“I would never dream of it.” His expression was so bland and innocent, it tore a laugh out of her.

And even though she tried to avoid it, he still managed to hold her hand just before he hopped onto the elevator.

Shaking her head, she veered off to the commander’s office and was ushered right in. Brad was there as well, and the two men were beaming.

“What’s going on?” She asked puzzled.

“Your husband is a very generous man.” Commander Williams turned his desktop around to face her. “New and sophisticated software update to make our investigations a hell of a lot easier.”

“And more than that, excellent coffee in all the rooms. His own brand. I just had a taste of it in the squad room and I am never going back to the mud disguised as coffee we were accustomed to.” Brad lifted his brows at her. “You did not know.”

“Of course not.” She shook her head. “He’s sneaky like that.”

“He does not want it advertised at all.”

“Sounds like him.” She felt the love overwhelming and threatening to overflow.

“You got yourself a good man there, Sullivan.”

“I do. Please excuse me.” Turning out of the office, she dragged her phone out and made a call.

“Where are you?”

“Still in the parking lot. I had to make some calls. What is the matter?”

“Stay there. I am coming out.”

He was leaning against a sharp-looking Lamborghini, his coat flapping in the sharp February wind, the same wind ruffling his black hair threaded through with gray.

His gray eyes examined her face as she came hurrying forward.

“Darling?”

Saying nothing, she stopped in front of him and fisted her hands on the lapels of his coat. Going on her toes, she crushed her mouth to his, knocking him back with the force of the passion in the kiss.

He was taken aback and for a few seconds could not react. When he started to slide his hands around her waist, she ended the kiss and danced away.

“What...”

“That is for being the best man in the known planet. And being a hell of a husband. I love you Merrick Pendergast.”

He watched dazedly as she turned to walk away.

“Wait...”

“Later. I have to run.”

It took him a full two minutes to peel himself off the car and to feel the control coming back. When he got behind the wheel, he had to wait until the trembling of his hands had subsided. Leaning back in the seat, he closed his eyes and laughed softly. He was never going to be bored married to her. God, he loved her so damn much!

“You look absolutely ravishing. Perhaps we should skip this thing and stay home.”

“I would love to gleefully agree with you and take off this sorry excuse for a dress, but I am trying to be a better wife.” She told him dryly as she tugged at the bodice so that only half of her boobs were hanging out. “Seriously Merrick, I am a woman in my fifties and there is no need for advertising the package. I feel like a prostitute.”

Chuckling, he grabbed her around the waist and turned her to face him. “You look like a beautiful woman on the way to the ball.”

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“I am not damned, Cinderella.” She grumbled, wrapping her hands around his neck.

“You have the precinct practically eating out of my hands with your very generous gifts. And what if I wanted to be the only cop there drinking excellent coffee?”

“I believe in spreading the good fortune around.” He brushed his lips against her glossy ones, surprised she had sprung for lipstick. “And you were complaining that people were crowding into your tiny office to get a taste.”

“Ah yes, I did say that.” Her expression turned dreamy. “I love you so damn much.”

His eyes darkened. “We could skip the function and stay home.”

She shook her head. “We have the rest of the night.” Going on her toes, she whispered something in his ear that had him jolting, his face turning a slight shade of red.

Clearing his throat, he dug his fingers into her waist. “Let’s go. The sooner we get there, the sooner we make it back, so that you can do...” He swallowed the lump in his throat and had her laughing. “You, wonderful and marvelous witch. My love, my heart, my soul.”

The end... but wait: