

~ Clandestine ~

by Cheyne

Whenpiggsfly55@aim.com

Rating: 18 or NC-17

Summary: A company burned, ex-CIA operative, who seeks absolution in a bottle, is forced into a situation that could be the defining moment of her life. Burnt-out and long ago thinking herself incapable of feeling, her numb complacency is tested when she meets an innocent woman who must now suffer the ultimate consequences of her bad choices.

Disclaimer: Just in case there is a need to say this because a few of the characters might slightly resemble some cast members of a TV show we know and love, no infringement is intended to the powers that be at MCA/Universal. Other than that, the story, the characters and the fantasy are mine.

Warnings: This story contains lesbian sex. If that offends you but you continue reading anyway, then I take no responsibility if your retinas catch fire. Once again, I must mention that there is one fleeting recollection of heterosexual sex that is nonconsensual but not violent (you can tell from her snoring). There is also another scene that starts out as nonconsensual but changes very quickly.

Big Warning: My Spanish is rusty. Oh, let's not mince words, it sucks. Crossing my fingers that it isn't too far off.

This is for Ren, who really took me to task on this one. Thanks. I needed that.
And for Canna, whose initial reaction to this story inspired me to finish it. ;-)

Archive: Only with permission from the author

Chapter One

The loudest lies are the ones we tell to ourselves.

She was on her fourth beer chaser which was accompanying her sixth shot of Scotch. It was her routine, one she fell into far too easily every night. She was surprised she still had a functioning liver. She *liked* to drink. She liked blurring the line between her past and her present because she knew she would be too drunk by the time it came to thinking about her future. If she even had one. Every day brought it closer to home that she was slowly but surely flushing her life down the toilet.

She had been accused of betraying her country but her country had betrayed her. She had been a good operative, a dedicated officer with the Central Intelligence Agency and she had followed orders which, collectively, was her success and her downfall. The assignment could have been, should have been her greatest glory, should have garnered her a coveted Distinguished

Intelligence Medal for a performance of outstanding services for achievement of a distinctly exceptional nature in a duty or responsibility. Coulda, shoulda, woulda.

She had bravely come forward and outed herself, stepped up for the company, solved a huge problem for them. In a burst of brilliant counterintelligence, they removed her from a very successful, long-term assignment up close and personally monitoring Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna, a Basque group fighting Spain for an independent Basque state, and briefed her on infiltrating, any way she could, ELN, a Marxist guerilla group operating out of Columbia, known for kidnapping foreign businessmen for ransom. During her initial surveillance, she discovered that Maria Maladin, wife of one of the ranking lieutenants in the National Liberation Army had a preference for women, therein creating a weakness and an 'in' for the enterprising CIA operative. And, because she had a deeply rooted Latin heritage and spoke fluent Castillian Spanish, she effortlessly made her move on the seductively enchanting Señora Maladin, sweeping the powerful woman off her feet.

They began an intense, torrid affair, creating a scorching atmosphere easily visible to anyone in the same room with the two women. Everything was running like a well-oiled machine, progressing at a remarkable pace with her getting deeper and deeper into the organization that the government suspected was funding and training groups of aggressive covert warriors to arrange a scenario where even the President of the United States could possibly be abducted.

And then the unthinkable happened. One of her overzealous colleagues screwed up badly, hanging her out to dry with not only ELN and Maria Maladin but with the Agency, as well. She had been burned and with her cover blown, even through no fault of hers, she needed to lay low for a while for her own personal safety and the integrity of the case. In the meantime, her superiors wanted, needed a scapegoat and she was the most convenient mark. Her supervisor was never a fan of hers to begin with, never a supporter of females in the Agency, period, but the officer who blew the case was his second cousin. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who was going to be the one deemed culpable. When Señor and Señora Maladin and their entourage perished in a suspicious explosion less than a week after the incident exposing her as an operative, she knew there was no way it was just a coincidence. Regardless, she had been scheduled to be with Maria that night...either way, she would have been a dead woman. It wasn't the first time she faced her mortality and she was positive it wouldn't be the last. One did not become a spy with the CIA if one was looking for a stable, secure and safe life.

Tia Ramone was like a cat with nine lives. Eight of them were already gone.

Her life had not been easy but that never discouraged her. Obstacles only proved to make her existence more interesting. It was lucky she enjoyed challenges because she endured many, all of which shaped her and pushed her to become the person she was. The tougher the situation, the better the sense of accomplishment. At least that's how it used to be. Now? Her only challenge was how much alcohol it would take before the bartender shut her off and sent her home or some pretty young thing took pity on her or advantage of her and allowed her to take refuge in their anonymous fucking.

She had felt disgraced, disgusted, disheartened, and randomly out of control for the first time in her life. She was spiraling downward faster and more menacingly than a tornado, destroying everything in its path. And she didn't care. She seemed to be slowly killing herself without the quick and efficient benefit of pulling the trigger. Suicide by self-loathing.

Tia refused to openly admit that she had started to develop actual feelings for the engaging Maria Maladin but it was difficult not to. Maria was fashion model beautiful, deceptively clever, iridescently classy and, regardless of her involvement with her husband's business affairs and Tia knowing it was just a case, extremely hard to resist. It was not only nice but flattering to have someone as attractive and as sexy as Señora Maladin in her bed, not to mention that the woman was certainly not a novice lover by any means. It may have been just an assignment but the way Maria made Tia feel during sex was anything but a charade. Now Maria was gone, the job was gone, her life was gone...the only thing that made her feel better was to drink herself into oblivion and look for the next cheap thrill.

She wasn't going to have to look too far.

Anthony Holt Montgomery, Jr., had been watching her for a while. He had been pointed in her direction by a less than sterling employee who unwisely couldn't stay away from his abuse of illicit steroids and his debt to his boss was skyrocketing. Montgomery had a job most foul that needed to be done and was seeking someone whose conscience had deserted them long ago, who had no respect or regard for life (including their own), and who could be easily blackmailed if their fleeting scruples suddenly decided to make a reappearance. His muscular but cowardly minion was too reluctant to follow through, regardless of how much money was involved, but to save his own hide, the underling supplied the name of a friend of a friend of a friend. However, that didn't let the beefy, computer savvy employee off the hook. His calculating boss had other uses for him, pledging that if he completed these little 'tasks,' his debt to Montgomery would be paid in full.

Montgomery hired a prostitute, one he had enlisted the services of a few times in the past, to enter the lesbian bar where Tia was drowning her sorrows and pick her up, persuade her to leave (which, he knew, depending on how much alcohol Tia had consumed, wouldn't take much, especially since his hooker friend was quite comely) and lead her to his car where they would talk. Where he was positive he could convince her to do his dirty work if the price was right. And he'd make it right.

Crime begins in the mind. One only has to think wrong before he acts wrong.

Her name was Trisha but Tia didn't even need to know that. She had already sensed the second the auburn-haired woman occupied the stool next to hers at the bar what the hooker's intentions were. There were times when all Tia required for foreplay was, "meet me in the bathroom," but

she wasn't in that kind of mood tonight. She'd had a rather good day, breaking even at the casino on the wharf. Let this woman work a little for her attention.

"So...Trisha, I haven't seen you around here before. Just browsing, experimenting or thinking of becoming a regular?"

Catching Tia's eye, the younger woman winked and said, coyly, "Does it really matter?"

Shaking her head, Tia laughed softly, arching an eyebrow and fingering the torn label on her beer bottle. "No. I guess it doesn't."

Indicating the empty glass, Trisha placed her hand gently over Tia's which was resting idly on the bar. "Can I buy you another one?"

"Sure."

"What's your pleasure?"

A sly, lascivious smile curled the corner of Tia's mouth as she didn't try to disguise her appraising once over of the redhead. "I thought we'd get to that later."

Nodding, almost embarrassed at leaving herself so wide open for the inviting comment, she emitted a sigh and a laugh at the same time. "What's your favorite shot?"

"The next one." Looking directly at Trisha, the former CIA officer said, "Do you really want to buy me another drink? Didn't you have something else in mind?"

Trisha studied the beautiful woman on the stool next to her. Yes, she did have something else in mind. It was unfortunate that she really wasn't going to get to bed this exotic creature with the bronzed skin, sensuous mouth and pale blue eyes, which seemed devoid of any and all emotion. The dead glare just confirmed to Trisha that there would have been no attempt of commitment after sex, which would have been fine by her. She had been picked up by or hired to do women in the past and it never worked out well. They always came back for more but not to be a client...to be a lover full time or on the side, something she was definitely not interested in. Instinctively she knew that would not be an issue with this woman and she made a mental note to look her up again sometime when she could really experience her. She may not even charge her. "Yes. I did have something else in mind. But I really would like to buy you a shot or another beer, at least."

"I don't know if old Jane here will let me have anymore," Tia nodded in the direction of the bartender, then smirked, knowingly at Trisha. "And, besides, that's just wasting time, isn't it?"

"Boy, you don't mince words, do you?"

"Nope. Life's too short."

"You don't even want to do the minimal 'let's get to know each other a bit' thing first?" Trisha grinned, trying to buy a little time to give Montgomery a chance to get in place.

Sighing almost impatiently, Tia wasn't in the mood for this. She just wanted a nice random encounter with which to end her day. She glanced around the bar to see no other intriguing prospects...at least not as enticing as the sure thing seated to her left. "Okay...you get one question. Make it count."

Trisha tried to think of something that would draw out a long answer in the stunning, sable-haired woman. "All right. Hmmm. Okay, I think I've got a good one...what do you want most in a woman?"

"My tongue. So...your place or mine or somewhere neutral?"

Laughing, Trisha drained her glass and stood up. "Let's go to my car and decide."

Tia finished what was left in her beer bottle, said goodnight to the bartender who just shook her head, and followed the prostitute outside. Trisha led her to an Expedition with darkened windows, opened the door to the back seat and slid in next to Tia. Trisha knew that Montgomery would climb into the driver's side in a few minutes, so she decided to get what she could while she had the opportunity.

Straddling Tia's lap, Trisha took Tia's face in her hands and moved in for a searing kiss. She could taste the remnants of scotch and beer on the luscious lips and the gifted tongue that was now exploring every inch of the inside of Trisha's mouth. As the prostitute pressed in for deeper contact, she felt long fingers move down her shoulders taking the thin straps of her top with them, thumbs moving expertly over each nipple which stood up to greet the touch.

Trisha moaned into Tia's mouth as Tia cupped her breasts, tracing circles around the erect tips and started an almost imperceptible gyration with her hips. Breaking the kiss and hungrily nipping an earlobe, Trisha worked her way down Tia's throat to her shoulder. The ex-CIA officer had just lifted Trisha's shirt to reveal two perfectly perky and, obviously, implanted breasts and had just sealed her lips around one rosy nipple when the car door opened.

Drunk or not, her survival instincts were still intact and she quickly tossed Trisha to the side and reached for the .22 Stinger stashed inside her jacket pocket. She pulled the weapon out only to have Trisha tackle her, startling her and knocking it out of her hand. This action pushed her into the male intruder, sending the 9mm in his grip upward, causing it to smash against his chin, nicking his flesh. Wiping a small trickle of blood away, he bit his lip to hold his temper, as he thrust the former operative back to the middle of the seat. The cold muzzle of a Glock 26 was pressed to her temple and she stopped all movement, knowing she was outgunned and temporarily unarmed.

Easing into the back seat, Anthony Montgomery, closed the door behind him, not saying a word.

"Look, I don't know what game this is but I'm not into threesomes, *especially* not with men -"

"What in the hell were you going to do with this?" Trisha asked, incredulously, holding up what had fallen from Tia's hand when she knocked her over. She displayed what looked like a tube of toothpaste.

"Be careful with that," Montgomery spoke, finally. "It's a single shot survival weapon."

"A what?"

"A gun. And it's probably got a bullet in it. Let me see that," Montgomery requested and Trisha handed it over to him. Inspecting it in his gloved hands, he arched an eyebrow. "CIA issue? They let you keep this?"

Tia and Trisha looked at him, surprised, each for different reasons, the prostitute then scrutinizing her almost-lover. "CIA? What -? What the fuck have I gotten myself into?"

In the blink of an eye, Montgomery aimed the tube at Trisha and fired, hitting her square in the heart. Too stunned to speak, Tia watched as Trisha slumped back against the window, lifeless eyes staring at nothing.

"Oops," Montgomery commented, without remorse, "it *was* loaded...imagine that. Is it still registered to you?" He didn't wait for Tia to respond. "Pity. I can imagine what the police report will say...they left the bar together and were seen getting into the back seat of this stolen SUV. The bullet that killed her was shot from a weapon registered to former CIA Agent Tia Ramone, the last person to see her alive. Looks like you just found yourself a whole shitload of trouble." He was smiling at her.

She took one last glance at the woman with whom she had been about to get intimate and then fixed her gaze on the handsome man holding her Stinger and his Glock in his gloved hands. "What do you want?"

Chapter Two

Sometimes the safest way to start the day is to go back to bed.

She hated it when she tripped over nothing, an action this time that nearly caused her to step on her own foot. Doing goofy things like that so completely contradicted her aura of the refined, dignified, poised socialite she was brought up, but never really believed herself, to be. The first thing she did was immediately look around to see if anyone else had noticed her clumsiness, finding it hard to keep the smile of embarrassment from attacking her face. She always found it uproariously funny when stumbling over invisible objects happened to someone else, although she would never laugh out loud at them to cause them any further humiliation. She needed to keep reminding herself what it felt like each time she witnessed another's bumbling. Smoothing out her blouse, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, she continued her walk through the

upscale department store as though nothing had happened.

She recalled the last time she did that, she had been at a charity event with her mother and wasn't watching where she was going. She, a waiter and a full tray of hors d'oeuvres ended up on the floor. No one was hurt, she apologized profusely to the young man (much to her patrician mother's dismay) and, as he helped her up, he was charmed by her humility during the whole situation. He had expected to have his ass handed to him on one of the platters he had just been serving food on but, instead, this very attractive woman with very expressive, jade eyes, took full responsibility, helped him clean up the mess and offered to speak to his boss if there was any problem over the incident.

Locating her overbearingly perturbed mother before she cleaned her dress off in the ladies room, she battled her own overwhelming discomfort brought on not by her sometimes lack of grace but by her mother's attitude toward her occasional inelegance

"Good Lord, mother, I have the right to make a fool of myself every once in a while," she explained, quietly defensive.

"Unfortunately, dear, you abuse the privilege," her mother sniffed, not caring if she hurt her daughter's feelings. It was all about appearances, nothing more, nothing less and the younger blonde woman never quite seemed to measure up, no matter how hard she tried.

Joanne Dyson Wainwright Montgomery - Jody to her friends and relatives - was a very wealthy woman. More importantly, her family - descendants of the Mayflower, were downright filthy rich. The accumulation of old money in her ancestry made the Rockefellers and the Gettys look like paupers. An only child, she stood to inherit the bulk of the enormous family estate when her parents passed away, which would only add to the excessive trust fund she was living off now. Because she didn't have to work, she donated her time and an impressive amount of her monthly allowance to hospitals and, her special weakness, animal shelters. She was fortunate to live in the mansion she did because since she had started volunteering at the neighborhood pound, not one dog, cat, ferret or guinea pig had been euthanized.

The only shelter resident she passed on was a boa constrictor they named Beelzebub. The old boy had been found coiled around the branch of an apple tree in the local park's botanical gardens, an irony not lost on anyone, and no one came to claim him. If it hadn't involved feeding the snake other living, or once living, creatures, she might have adopted him also, because he really was kind of a sweet natured guy but instead, she found him a home with a young couple whose beloved Burmese Python had passed away recently. They doted on him instantly which made Jody feel happy and relieved since she couldn't take him.

If anyone hadn't known that Jody Montgomery was one of *the* 'Plymouth Rock' Dysons, they never would have suspected she was anything more than possibly a post-college age (maybe an ex-cheerleader), sharp, kind and beautiful woman. She carried that air about her, one that shouted spirited and tenacious before she even opened her mouth. There weren't too many people who knew Jody who didn't like her...except for, possibly, her mother and her husband.

It wasn't that Anthony didn't like her, *per se*, he had married her, after all. But that wasn't because she was a knockout or smart and fit and delightful and sweet and lovely beyond compare or even that he loved her (which he didn't but if he had to have a trophy wife, why not her?), it was because she was worth a *freaking* fortune. Plus, she wasn't bad in the sack, either...a little inhibited in his book but he could always get what she lacked somewhere else. It never occurred to him that maybe he was just too selfish in bed to understand or even care about her needs. Or that maybe she just didn't love him and just couldn't muster up the passion that belonged in a marriage between two such physically desirable people.

The question always seemed to be why did *she* marry *him*? She had her pick of every eligible bachelor around (and even a few of the not-so-eligible ones) and she ended up with Anthony Montgomery. Sure, he was darkly handsome, charismatic, owned his own company, had impeccable manners and was also sought after in similar social circles as Jody but none of that was the reason. Quite simply, after the young, ambitious Joanne Wainwright continued to show no interest in settling down and having babies to carry on the family legacy, her father arranged the union as a business deal. Jody and Montgomery had dated a few times, seemed to enjoy being with each other and John Wainwright liked the way they looked together. Fine with Jody...Montgomery wasn't so bad, it kept her parents off her back and if she found someone she actually fell in love with, she would divorce him. She was well aware that he had discreet affairs, which was okay since their sex was always protected, and that he pretty much felt the same way about her as she did him. Besides, her father had insisted they both sign a prenuptial agreement, so he most definitely would not walk away empty handed.

Except, Anthony Montgomery had no intention of walking away at all.

After outlining his plan and what he expected from her, Montgomery and Tia left the SUV, with the body of the dead prostitute still in it, parked on the side street around the corner from the bar. The former operative walked involuntarily and tightly beside Montgomery through two alleys to a rented Volvo wagon. Had she been sober, she had no doubt she could have disarmed him and shot him with his own weapon. In fact, under different circumstances, he would have been the one with the .22 bullet in his chest instead of Trisha. Unfortunately, Tia knew the real reason she had been unable to react quickly and properly was that both she *and* her gun had been loaded.

They had driven for approximately thirty minutes, listening to a CD of *Carmen* at a tormentingly loud decibel. It wasn't that Tia didn't like Maria Callas but when one's head was beginning to pound, the strains of '*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle "Habañera"*' set on continuous replay was enough to rival Chinese water torture. By the time they reached the small wharf where a dilapidated, abandoned speedboat awaited their occupancy, Tia would have confessed to just about anything had she been in an interrogation room.

The eleven-year-old Wellcraft 218 Coastal had seen its day, the tall woman thought, studying the beat up, once-white fiberglass fishing boat/cruiser as it cut through choppy waves. It thread its way around a small maze of deserted islands, carrying them to the diminutive but magnificent yacht anchored about six miles offshore, nestled inconspicuously close to a cay. It looked like

whoever lived on this boat wasn't exactly trying to conceal their whereabouts but definitely wanted their privacy respected. Hide in plain sight...it was a concept as old as the day was long and it worked better than the authorities liked to admit.

When she expressed her surprise at finding no one else on board, Montgomery told her that since it was a small yacht, a captain and a deckhand were the only crew and, even then, they were used sparingly as his wife rarely moved the vessel from this luscious and isolated location. He advised her that there was a security officer who was paid specifically to keep an eye on the boat when no one was aboard but, because of his exemplary service and dedication to his assignment, he had been rewarded with an all-expenses-paid vacation to Tibet to do something he had always wanted to do...climb Mount Everest. This, of course, was perfect as it would keep the conscientious young man not only away from the yacht but out of communication until his climb was done and hopefully this situation had been resolved. Acknowledging Montgomery's explanation with barely a shrug, Tia moved on with her tour.

Tia did a perfunctory walk-through of the place where she was to hold Montgomery's wife hostage. He advised her to get familiar with everything and how it worked because once they were there, the ex-CIA operative and his Mrs. were going to be spending all of their time together, isolated...until it was over. Whatever that meant. Tia Ramone, a born cynic who looked both ways before crossing a one-way street, didn't trust anyone anymore, not even her own mother, why would she believe a calculating, obviously greedy and heartless stranger to mean 'concluded' instead of 'dead'? He had nothing to lose by killing her when this little adventure was done...unless she could get something on him in the meantime, something to barter with. Hopefully, she would do her part, collect her ten million dollars and he would allow her to disappear into obscurity...exactly where she thought she had been when he found her. How *had* he found her, anyway?

Obviously he had done his homework and, well, it wasn't as though she had been exactly cautious about keeping herself inconspicuous. Reckless and careless would have described her behavior much better. She had no one to blame but herself. And did she really care at this point? Just give her enough of a supply of scotch and beer and she'd be fine. She didn't really need to be sober to babysit a rich, spoiled, heiress who was probably afraid of her own shadow, anyway. She immediately pictured this chick as an undeserving snob who obviously knew how to make the most of her birthright.

"This is where you will be keeping her until I get the ransom...I hope it's doable for you," Montgomery smirked, as they stood on the deck of the fifty-six foot Meridian 540 Pilothouse yacht, christened The Quintessence.

Although she was not a stranger to being around material wealth, she couldn't hold herself back from being impressed. He had called this his wife's 'little getaway tub' but Tia had never seen anything quite like it. The exterior size was very deceiving...it was a floating townhouse. She glanced over at the sundeck and at an imposing entertainment system. Shoving her hands in her pockets, the ex-CIA officer looked the other way, noting the direct, easy passage from the bridge to the helmsman's deckhouse which included a cockpit with stand-up access to the engine room. He would have to show her how to drive this 'tiny vessel,' not that she probably couldn't figure it

out on her own but they didn't have that kind of time.

Tia moved down the molded staircase, unabashedly wide-eyed, and strolled around the galley which included a dishwasher, a trash compactor, a double stainless steel sink, a microwave, stove top, oven, and a full-size refrigerator. This kitchen was more utilitarian and bigger than her entire residential motel apartment....the only sink in that place was in her tiny bathroom. Rounding out her other personal culinary possessions, she had a mini-fridge, a microwave, a hot plate and a temperamental automatic coffeemaker that only worked when it felt like it.

In the past, Tia had never been overly taken with affluence. The Maladins were wealthy people but they weren't excessive. And they didn't have a yacht. Montgomery had told her that this was the smallest of three yachts the Wainwright family owned. She got the feeling that the Montgomerys and the Wainwrights were exceedingly opulent and that she had a problem with because people in that category were usually never grateful for their good fortune. What was it her grandmother used to say? It is not wealth, but the arrogance of wealth that offends the poor.

She absentmindedly ran her hands over the smooth Karadon custom solid-surface dark, bronze ember countertops. Turning, she studied the rest of the decor, admiring the high-gloss real cherry wood interior. "How much does something like this cost?"

"About nine hundred thousand...pocket change to my wife's family," he scoffed, making his way over to the bar and pulling out a crystal decanter of scotch, a container filled with ten-year-old Talisker, and held it up to his 'guest,' removing two glasses from the shelf in front of him. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess you want some of this," he smiled sarcastically at her. He then poured some of the brilliant gold liquid into a small tumbler.

Abhorring his smugness and the lose-lose situation he had trapped her into, Tia cut him a look that should have struck him dead, "It's the least you can do. And you'd better have more where that came from."

He snickered. "Ice?"

"And bruise it? I think not." She watched as he added a couple cubes to his glass. "Ice is for pussies."

He was not insulted, in fact, her words broadened his smile. "Living your life as a drunk and finding courage in a shot glass is for pussies. I'm giving you a chance to redeem yourself," he handed her the alcoholic beverage, which she snatched out of his grasp and downed in two swallows. This was good scotch, she admitted to herself as it mildly burned down her throat but then she really didn't expect this pretentious bastard to have anything less. It was warming and strong, leaving a rich, smokey, malted aftertaste. She savored it, feeling comfort in its intensity.

"Redeem myself?" she arched an eyebrow, looking into the bottom of her empty glass and shoving it back toward him for another round, which he gladly obliged. "Funny, redemption is something that shouldn't even enter this realm of conversation," she indicated the both of them with the hand that possessed the glass. "On either side." She drew the drink to her lips and threw

her head back, the liquid disappearing quickly. It was even better the second time. "This is good stuff," she commented, unnecessarily.

"We import it from Loch Harport in Scotland, they make it in the village of Carbost -"

"Like that's supposed to mean something to me?" She looked up at him, bitterness almost seeping out her pores. Her voice was harsh, nearly a growl. "All I said was it's good, save that pompous crap for someone who gives a shit. Your wife drink this stuff?"

"No," he shook his head, not at all bothered by her rancorous attitude. "She sticks to her wine and champagne. This is for when she throws little soirees out here, when her closest sorority sisters come to visit...you know, she needs to play the part. Smoked salmon, oysters on the half-shell, grilled mackerel...and this brand of scotch...ostentatious bitch."

"Hmmm...sounds to me like the pot calling the kettle black."

The lonliest place in the world is the human heart when love is absent.

Jody settled into bed, wondering when her husband was going to be home. She was not only getting used to seeing him less and less, she was actually beginning to like it.

Most people in their situation would have opted for separate bedrooms, separate private lives and, as long as they kept up the charade for public consumption, could have managed perfectly well perpetuating the façade of being the ideal couple without much personal interaction. Although they did pursue other singular interests, Jody wanted very badly to be as much as a wife as she could be to the man she married. Even though their circumstances were a little eccentric, she kept hoping something more intimate would click between them if they continued to share the same bed. Yet after three years together, she had still not learned to really love Tony like her father had told her she would and even though she *liked* him immensely and he had been a good companion for her at all the right times, the marriage had not become what she had hoped it would. And, in all honesty, she wasn't even sure what that was anymore.

They had yet to produce heirs and the pressure was on from her parents. Her mother had told her that if she was as clumsy in the boudoir as she was everywhere else, that certainly explained her lack of children. She wasn't about to dignify that with a response or share the details of her sex life with her mother but she felt she could more than hold her own in bed.

Sondra Wainwright's rude, insulting, sniping aside, the Montgomerys hadn't had any babies because Tony had not wanted any yet and neither did a relieved Jody. She did not feel ready to become a mother, didn't really want to create children with this man who was her husband. She couldn't explain it and certainly would not attempt to expound on it with her parents but her gut told her that starting a family with Tony would be a mistake.

They had been drifting apart - Tony spending more and more time at the office, tending to his

business and, she was quite sure, with whatever 'flavor of the month' happen to tickle his current fancy and she was being indifferent to it all, anyway. When they did decide to have marital relations, there was never a question as to whether or not he would wear a condom, it was understood on both their parts that he would, for protection.

Jody had even contemplated taking a lover of her own but then she had to admit that she really wasn't interested. She could barely work up the enthusiasm to be with her husband when the opportunity presented itself and the only reason she did have sex with him had more to do with just plain feeling horny than any kind of love or obligation. Tony seemed to know just when she was going to be 'in the mood,' too and those were the nights he always seemed to be around. Yet, how her husband 'serviced' her was nothing so outstanding that she usually ended up shutting herself in the bathroom and finishing the job herself.

He had been acting strange lately, well...stranger than usual...and Jody wondered if he had somehow read her mind, her gradual realization that her attraction was starting to run more on the feminine side, wondered if he somehow knew that her curiosity about this new revelation was starting to become an obsession. She had never been with a woman and the thought frightened and electrified her at the same time, however, as quiet as she would try to keep a lesbian affair, or even experimentation (if she even had the mettle to attempt it), Jody knew her life was too public to ever try to hold on to a secret like that. Her parents would certainly not disown her but they would never forgive her for bringing scandal to the family name, especially her mother who would just add that to her list of disappointments, and as much as the idea of it might turn Tony on, it would assault his male ego and his behavior would no doubt become unpredictable and surly. She was well aware he had a temper and although he had never used it on her, she was not naive enough to believe he never would. After all, it was not just her reputation she would be fooling around with, it would be his, as well.

She just *knew*, though, that making love with a woman would not leave her unsatisfied in bed like having sex with a man always did. Or would it? Was it her? Was her mother right that her displeasure in the bedroom really was the result of her own awkwardness or sexual inadequacy? She had to laugh to herself. Here she was, looking for greener pastures when she couldn't even mow the yard she already had.

Glancing at the clock again, Jody read 1:17. She sighed and turned out the lamp on her nightstand. She had to admit that even if Tony was right there beside her, she would still feel alone and lonely.

He had left her there, to get familiar with her temporary digs, to get acquainted with and gain working knowledge of this pleasure craft. Pouring herself another scotch, chasing it down with another cold beer, Tia walked around this spectacular little boat, absorbing all it had to offer and then wondering if maybe she couldn't get the pot sweetened by having it thrown in. Yeah, she could definitely get used to living here.

The full width salon had plenty of windows, all tinted, which was good. She loved dark places, loved being able to look out as long as no one could look in. In the past, she could have chalked that up to job security but now it was just self-preservation. As her bare toes grasped the wheat-colored Berber carpeting, Tia ran her hand over the back of one of the two ultraleather sofas, the port side couch equipped with two recliners, while the starboard side divan had what appeared to be a large drawer below. As the visual of sinking herself, relaxed, into one of the sofas washed over her, she snapped herself out of it and continued her tour.

There were three staterooms, the forward bedroom featuring an island double-berth with a private head and stall shower, the port side stateroom had a queen berth, private head, stall shower and tub and a stacked washer and dryer. Down three steps and aft was the master stateroom which was equipped with a king-sized berth, vanity table, salon seating and storage lockers on each side of the bed. It also had a stall shower and a separate Jacuzzi tub. Montgomery told her that this is where she, for the most part, would be keeping his wife but studying the quarters, Tia felt new plans might be in order. Regardless, she would definitely take advantage of that hot tub tonight and the thirty-six inch flat-screen television and entertainment system equipped with surround sound. She couldn't remember when the last time was she watched the news or a movie or listened to music that wasn't in a bar.

Heading back up through the galley, Tia made her way to the Bimini topped bridge, admiring the powered sunroof, the entertainment system with its six exterior speakers, the wet bar and looked into the small refrigerator. It was stocked with two magnums of champagne, two dozen champagne splits and several oil cans of Sapporo. Despite what Tia was about to spend the next couple of days doing, she felt as though a little bit of her had died and gone to heaven. She drained the contents of her bottle and hauled out one of the twenty-two ounce silver cans of the Japanese beer, smiling fondly at the crack and hiss of snapping the tab backward. There were certain sounds she would never get tired of hearing. That was one of them.

Sitting down on one of the purposely stressed vinyl seats, Tia kicked her feet up to rest them on a cushioned bench and watched the three-quarter moon dominate the clear sky, freckled with stars, constellations and planets. This was the life, she thought, an existence she could get used to very quickly, a life she might have even had - for a little while - if only the assignment with the Maladins had worked out differently. Who knows? She may have even left the agency for Maria, may have given up her job for the beautifully intriguing woman of proud Hispanic ancestry. It became a badly guarded secret that she would have traded her life for her lover's if it had been necessary for the case and maybe that leak of information had been her real downfall. But saving Señora Maladin and sacrificing herself may have also been for the good of her country and that part seemed to have fallen by the wayside of facts during the poor excuse for the investigation that ended her career.

Well, wasn't that just a bitch...here she was feeling pretty damned good about having a night to herself on a nearly million dollar yacht with all its amenities and she had to go and get herself depressed by rehashing and overthinking everything again. Who was she kidding? She didn't deserve this kind of life, she deserved exactly what she had...nothing. She fucked up. She *always* fucked up and this Montgomery guy would probably find a way to kill her after all this was over

and, so what? Maybe he would actually be doing her a favor.

And she suddenly realized that she wasn't afraid to die, she was afraid to live.

Chapter Three

The power of love will never replace the love of power.

It was well past three A.M. before Anthony Montgomery slipped into bed next to his wife. Feeling his weight next to her, she automatically turned into him, resting her head on his shoulder, her arm across his chest. His cheek touching the top of her head, he envisioned his beautiful spouse, naked on their wedding night, not exactly naïve but vulnerable in her inexperience of not having had many partners before him. They had debated whether or not to engage in the customary wedding night ritual as neither one viewed this endeavor as traditional matrimony nor did they feel toward each other as a husband and wife should but they had both been caught up in the romance of the moment and her inhibitions were lower due to all that toasting with champagne during the reception. She was eager to please him and he would have been an idiot not to take advantage of that. Even though the sex just got better from there, she was never more attractive to him than she had been that night. He thought then that this modern day arranged marriage might not be such a bad deal after all.

And maybe it would have worked out if he had not gotten pissed off at Daddy Wainwright. Montgomery had his own business, MediMont, a distribution company which was solely dedicated to supplying hospitals, physician's offices and pharmacies with medicines, narcotics and medical supplies and which had been independent of the Wainwright fortune. Then John Fletcher Wainwright, his father-in-law, acquired the majority of shares in his company's stock and even though Montgomery was still the boss, he no longer had control over his own business or its decisions. Slowly, almost deliberately it seemed, he began to lose command of his ship, his authority diminishing day by day by the domineering influence of the more than possessively shrewd Wainwright, who professed to be doing it to keep his daughter's best interests at heart. What started out to be Montgomery's pride and joy, his one true, unassisted accomplishment, was now almost completely out of his hands and direction.

It certainly had nothing to do with him enjoying and taking advantage of his alliance with the family or spending any of his allotted fortune from his joint account with his wife, that was all to his liking and benefit. Had it not boiled down to a power, control and survival issue, Montgomery would have left well enough alone. After all, to the outside world, MediMont was still very much his baby and Wainwright was content to let the public still believe that. But he hated having to go through anyone for permission to make decisions involving a successful business he started from the ground up and when, last month, his father-in-law *suggested* he change the name of the company to MediMont-Wainwright, he was consumed by such a black rage, every breath he drew was homicidal.

If his father-in-law really wanted to sic his personal accountants and advisors on the company to

turn it into a corporation, they would be sure to find out about his other business of importing and distributing illicit anabolic steroids. Montgomery had a specific online clientele, selling these controlled substances to gym owners and managers, competition athletes and coaches, his illegal market including oxymetholone, nandrolone, methenolone, stanozolol and methandrostenolone among other various preparations intended for human use.

He got into the cartel long before he got hooked up with the Wainwrights and quite by accident, having gone out on a limb by using bluster, ingenuity and wile to obtain Anadrol for an old college buddy who basically bartered with his life to get it. The fraternity brother's doctors had taken him off the compound because of the effect it was having on his liver and because of his unpredictable and uncontrollable violent mood swings but by then, the steroid had blessed his friend's body with Schwarzenegger muscles and definition and procuring the synthetic testosterone had become an obsession.

When Montgomery realized how much money people like his buddy would pay for specific steroids, he was seduced into the enterprise by the good old-fashioned, deadly sin, Greed. From this, MediMont was born, a legitimate company he could use as his cover. Once again, the income from the steroid business was something that was all his, something he felt the Wainwrights could not take away from him and, if for some reason his marriage to Jody dissolved, the money he had secretly stashed away, in addition to the profit from MediMont and the funds from the prenup, would keep him able to live within the means and life style to which he had grown accustomed.

Now the distinct possibility existed that he could lose it all...MediMont, the illicit import business *and* the contract he signed ensuring his wealth, should for some reason the union not work out, being that he was guilty of violating the only negative clause in the agreement - breaking the law. He was desperate. It was then he came up with the plan he was now putting into effect.

Anthony Montgomery was not a man to be trifled with. His Jekyll and Hyde disposition, while hidden from his in-laws, was legendary among his underground adversaries. If you messed with Tony's status or income, you literally took your life in your hands, as he was described by some as vicious and cold-blooded and not opposed to murder if you got in his way. This was a side of him he never exposed to the Wainwrights. Up until now, he never needed to.

It was unfortunate that Jody was going to have to be a casualty of this war between him and her father. But Wainwright was hitting him where it hurt and Montgomery knew the only way to exact his revenge was to hit the billionaire where it hurt. It would have been different if he had been in love with his wife - maybe - but he wasn't and even though he was fond of her and she was a very nice woman, she was the perfect expendable pawn. With Jody gone, Wainwright's grief would be so encompassing that Montgomery was sure he could write his own ticket, without any more interference, to the family fortune. He was actually surprised that one of his rivals had not thought of or succeeded in kidnapping his wife long before now. There was serious money to be made here.

Still asleep, Jody snuggled closer and sighed. Yes. It was a shame the lovely little blonde was

going to have to go through this. He thought of her terrified, at the hands of that burnt-out drunk Tia Ramone, wondering if the ex-CIA operative's proclivities toward women and lack of conscience would prompt her, at some point, to sexually overpower Jody and suddenly he found himself aroused. He stirred his wife with some gentle but effective touching, knowing this would be the last time they would ever be intimate.

Tia had fallen asleep almost instantly once she climbed into the king-sized bed. The hot water whirlpooling around her tired and worn out body had relaxed her to a state she never believed was possible again. Drying off and retreating to the large berth, she laid nude atop the comforter, flipping television channels with the remote.

Tomorrow, when she awoke, she would take the boat for a little spin, getting used to how everything worked. Montgomery had told her that chances were she would not have to move the boat but in case something went terribly wrong with their plan, she should get familiar with how to pilot the vessel. Then tomorrow night, she would pick up the package and deliver it personally to the yacht and the assignment would begin. Montgomery would not say that he wanted his wife to be 'eliminated' but Tia saw in his eyes that he did.

She had killed before, in the line of duty, and she had been detached during all three incidents. She had learned at spy school in Camp Perry, Virginia, also known as The Farm, how to, basically, disengage her mind from her body to accomplish this task with little or no psychological damage or after effects. After all, it wasn't like she was taking out Santa Claus or Tinkerbell. These targets were ruthless, unconscionable individuals who would have thought nothing of spilling a child's blood to save their own skins, much less sending Tia to meet her maker. She wouldn't go as far as to say they deserved being executed but, in her eyes, they were better off dead.

However, the individuals she had disposed of had either personally committed or ordered carried out multiple crimes against the United States (as defined in her CIA bible), not to mention the horrendous depravity to people in their own countries and all three seemed to be living by a similar Machiavellian code of (un)ethics. This woman she was about to abduct and hold for ransom had done nothing except be innocently born into an obscenely wealthy family and, obviously, marry the wrong guy. But the lure of ten million dollars in reward for a job well done just might be enough to persuade Tia that she would be able to go through with killing Montgomery's wife if that's what he really wanted in the end...and she was convinced it was. She was also pretty sure that, should something go awry, Montgomery would not hesitate to point a finger in her direction to take any possible focus off him. If that happened, she knew the first thing the authorities would do, if they caught her, is force her to take a lie-detector test.

Fortunately for her, she had also been taught at The Farm how to beat a polygraph, trained not to believe in the machine's ability to read her mind which would cause her to not have the sudden nerve jump when she lied, which would further result in her passing. She sighed, blinking sleep out of her eyes, knowing that she was getting way ahead of herself. She would analyze her options more clearly in the morning. Until then, the exquisite feel of this European baffled box,

goose down comforter against her skin was luscious and was easily lulling her deeper into slumber.

There was a saying that the best sedative was a good conscience but that was obviously a myth, if Tia Ramone was any indication.

A true test of someone's character is not what they do in the light but what they do in the dark.

When Jody awoke, Tony was gone. Blinking away the last fragments of sleep, she stretched out her leg muscles and the memory of making love hours before slowly crept into her mind. Snapping her eyes open quickly as the vague visual of her husband performing on top of her came into focus, the startled blonde sat up on her elbows, now feeling the remnants of intercourse lingering around her lower body. She thought she had dreamt it.

Torn between being angry and surprised, she tried to recall exactly when Tony got home and when, precisely, they had gotten affectionate. The prescription sleep aid she took to battle her insomnia contributed to making it all too misty for her but she was pretty sure she had not initiated it. This was unusual for him to behave in such a selfishly uncharacteristic manner concerning their sex life and obviously, if he had left some of himself on and inside her, he had not used a condom. Pounding her fist on the bed, Jody rolled over to a sitting position and reached for her cellular phone. Speed dialing his cell number, she got his voice mail and hung up. She glanced at her alarm clock. 10:27. He would be at work.

"Nina, this is Jody. Is my husband there?"

"Yeah, Jody, he just got out of a meeting," his secretary advised her. "Hang on."

The longer she waited on hold, the more disturbed she was becoming. They had an agreement, for God's sake, it wasn't the point that he may have gotten her pregnant, what if he had given her something? She was pretty sure he was as careful about protection with his other women as he was with her - Tony seemed to be one of the few, rare men who actually enjoyed wearing a condom - but she only had his word to go on. Not that he had ever given her any reason not to trust him but to do what he did to her, semi-unconsciously, in the early hours of that morning, was just unacceptable.

"Hi, Mrs. Montgomery." There was a smile and fondness in his voice she was not used to hearing and it threw her off-guard and rendered her momentarily speechless. "Thank you for last night."

He was *thanking* her for sex? Who was this man and what had he done with her husband?
"Tony...what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

Nonplussed, her reaction was to laugh. "What do I mean? Well, first, we had unprotected sex and, second, since when do you just climb on board without, well, not just my permission but my knowledge, too?"

"You didn't seem to mind last night." His tone was playful and teasing and, again, it stopped her.

Finally, she said, "When was the last time you were tested for any kind of STD?"

"Last week and I'm clean and I haven't been with anyone else in over a month," he lied.

"What if I'm pregnant?"

"If you're really concerned, call Dr. Santos and get a morning after pill. But...would it really be so bad to produce an heir to get your parents off our backs?"

"Tony...!" She was flustered to a point of stammering. "I...you..." She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and concentrated. "We talked about this. Regardless of whether or not you have changed your mind, I have not changed mine. And that still doesn't address the issue of you basically having sex with me without my consent."

"You make it sound like rape." He didn't sound defensive or insulted, he sounded...smug. He wished he could tell her there was really no reason to be upset. She wasn't going to live long enough to suffer the effects of either a deadly disease or pregnancy.

"Well, in a way," she agreed, quietly, "it was."

"Like I said, you didn't seem to mind last night. Look, let me make it up to you. I'll call Santos for you and you can stop by his office in an hour and then why don't you meet me at The Cypress later for dinner?"

The Cypress? They had not had dinner at the most expensive restaurant in town since they had celebrated their third anniversary there. She had been there twice for charity events but not with her husband. What was he up to? Again, she asked, "Tony, what's going on?"

"Nothing. I'd just like to have a nice dinner out with my beautiful wife. I realize that we don't have a traditional marriage in the sense of most marriages, okay? But occasionally I like to feel like your husband in a more intimate manner. Don't worry. It's a phase. It will pass," he added, with humor in his voice.

She thought about his explanation. It sounded plausible enough. She sighed. "Just...wake me up next time, okay?" *If there is a next time*, she thought, as she was still pretty steamed.

"Okay. I promise."

"What time do you want to meet at The Cypress?"

"Six works for me."

"Okay. I'll see you there."

Tia had taken the modest yacht out for a nice little ride around the collection of small, uninhabited islands of which it had been nestled in the middle. It was a powerful little tug and complicated to maneuver at first. Fortunately, she was a quick study and had absorbed the directions that had been written out for her by Montgomery. It also hadn't hurt that mostly everything in the pilothouse seemed to be color-coded. After three hours of wide circles and piloting the craft in and out the cays like an obstacle course, she felt confident enough to move the Meridian in a hurry if the circumstances dictated it.

Relaxing before her big assignment, Tia reviewed her instructions one last time. As long as the heiress was where Montgomery said she would be, it should be no problem to carry out the abduction phase of this mission. She just wasn't sure where the rest of this project was going to take her. She wondered if Trisha's corpse had been discovered yet and, if so, whether or not the police had traced the fingerprints in the car, the saliva on the body and, even more incriminating, the Stinger Montgomery left on the floor in the back seat, to her. She had not heard anything on the news about a dead prostitute being found in a stolen car near her former favorite watering hole yet and even though scenarios like that weren't commonplace, maybe the press didn't feel it was a big enough story to report. But she was pretty sure when word got around that the hooker was allegedly murdered by a disgraced female CIA operative in sordid circumstances, shit would really hit the fan. And now this.

She really wanted, needed a drink right now but knew it was best to stay sober until she was back on the yacht with her package. This was the first time since she left the Agency that she had not been well on her way to drunk by noon.

Chapter Four

Never judge a person's actions until you know their motives

The restaurant was crowded and noisy, just the way he had hoped it would be. The more witnesses to see how 'cozy' they looked together, the better for him. They shared a nice, pleasant meal and some neutral conversation, avoiding the obvious subject of the previous night and then he left for his weekly Pai Gow game with a few of the town's more prestigious businessmen at the club...a perfect alibi for when the estimated time of her disappearance would be. Before he

exited the restaurant's parking lot, he had contacted Tia via a random calling card so that the phone records could not be traced, and made sure she was already at the rendezvous point. So far, so good.

Montgomery knew once Jody felt the effect of the drug he had smoothly and discreetly put in her second glass of wine that it wouldn't take long for her to start feeling groggy. He further knew that she was a responsible enough woman that she would pull over rather than drive while sleepy. And that's exactly what she did.

He had calculated perfectly the distance she would be able to put between her and the restaurant before the sedative took full effect because he had practiced on Bruce Wechsler, his indentured employee. Accounting for the difference in weight, the steroid-abusing young man's dosage was a little higher than what he would administer to his one hundred twelve pound wife. Bruce had minimal but specific guidelines which were to drive a fixed route from the restaurant and pull over at the first sign of really being overwhelmed by sleep. Each time, he found refuge at the same rest stop which was not highly populated and not extremely well-lit but it appeared to be safe. This would be the perfect place for Tia to walk out of the shadows, get into Jody's car, move her to the passenger side and drive away.

His insides were shaking with anticipation of the plan finally being put into motion, fear of something going wrong and just a twinge of sadness. Sex with Jody had been very sweet the night before, even if she had not been awake enough to participate fully and she looked particularly bewitching at dinner. When she walked into the restaurant to meet him, she had captured the eye of every red-blooded male in the place and he got a somewhat warped sense of satisfaction in that, his ego being what it was. He would miss her, as much as he hated to admit it, but Wainwright was to blame. If Jody's father had not gotten so unreasonably covetous, none of this would have been necessary.

Still, when she left him at the entrance of the distinguished eating establishment, waiting for the valet to bring up their cars, he could not stop thinking about just how beautiful she had become over the short time span of their marriage. She had matured quite a bit and even though she was still Daddy's Girl, she had no problem standing up to her pretentious parents when their convictions did not match her own and she had also become quite adept at defending him when either her mother or father decided to take a verbal pot shot at him. No, he and Jody were not in love but he had grown to love her in his own way. He studied her intently one last time before she got in her car and drove away.

What a waste.

Tia spied the vehicle from behind a tree. She had tied off the dinghy from The Quintessence at a deserted, unlit dock about three miles away and had jogged on the beach to the approximate location. Walking up through the forested area into the wooded rest stop, she spotted the Mercedes GL450 and surveilled the figure in the driver's seat, apparently asleep. Looking around, she noticed that the occupants of the four other vehicles did not really pay attention to

Jody Montgomery's SUV, they just attended to their business, using the restroom, buying refreshments out of the vending machines, checking maps, exercising pets and themselves. When the last of the cars had driven off, Tia walked swiftly to the shiny, gun metal gray vehicle, used the duplicate key Montgomery had given her to unlock the door, pushed Jody's unconscious form over the console, to the passenger side and drove away.

She was able to ease the Mercedes close enough to the dock without having to drive off the pavement therefore not leaving any evidence of deep tire tracks that might not be washed away in a timely manner by the tide and making the transference of her captive from the vehicle to the boat a lot easier. She removed the battery from Jody's cell phone and tossed it into the ocean, keeping the phone itself, knowing now the signal couldn't be traced if anyone tried to zone in on the pings before the battery died. She then drove the car a quarter-mile away and into a storage unit rented in Bruce's name over a month earlier, closed and padlocked the roll-down door and then jogged back to the small motorboat that held the unconscious form of Jody Montgomery.

She had removed the license plates and all identifying information from the vehicle and had taken it with her to put in a bag and discard in the ocean later. Montgomery had removed the vehicle recovery system, replaced the VIN on the dashboard and driver's side door with a fraudulent number one day when his wife was off with her mother, driving another car. It had been professionally done and it wouldn't completely throw the authorities off if they located the SUV but it would buy Montgomery more time if the vehicle was discovered...which he was quite sure it wouldn't be. To link his wife in any way with Bruce would be a stretch, as they never had any contact and he made sure Bruce had a solid alibi for the time frame in which Jody disappeared.

When Tia carried the limp body of the heiress, fireman-style, onto the yacht, she deposited the smaller woman on the berth in the master stateroom, making sure the blonde was still breathing and her respiration was as regular as it should have been under the circumstances. Locking her inside, Tia returned to the dinghy and proceeded to retie it securely to the bigger craft. The water had become choppy, and she wanted to ensure that the little boat was firmly tethered to the Quintessence. She climbed back aboard the yacht and went to check on her captive again before she took a shower and dried off.

She stepped over to the port side of the king-sized bed where she had slept so peacefully the night before and looked at the face of the heiress, which was illuminated by light shining into the room from the open door to the salon. Tia was startled by what she saw.

This woman appeared younger, slighter, than the photograph Montgomery had given her, than what she had recalled seeing from the press releases...her features unblemished, it seemed - at least in this state - by the obvious contempt, maliciousness and deviousness that consumed her husband, traits that he wore like armor. She was well aware that looks could be deceiving but instinct told her this woman was not that way. Before she realized it and could stop herself, she reached over and pushed a damp tendril of blonde hair away from the wan face of her captive, the sea spray from their trip across the water getting them both quite wet. Drawing her hand back quickly, Tia ensured that the heiress was comfortable and left the room, securing the door behind her.

Well, it was done. The car was hidden, the vehicle items disposed of, the dinghy was securely tied back up and her prisoner was safely in her custody. Now she would just sit back and wait for instruction from Montgomery. She was only to contact him if something had gone wrong and if not, he would call her on his way home, after his poker game. The plan had come off with near military precision, just as though she was back at the Agency and she felt it surge life through her veins again. She moved to the bar and dug out the decanter of scotch, pouring herself a double shot and when that was gone, another demitasse full of the deep amber liquid disappeared down her throat.

She would crack open a nice, cold beer once she was out of the shower.

Jody fluttered into consciousness slowly, painfully and disoriented. It took her a few minutes to recognize that she was not in her car, where she remembered falling asleep. Letting her eyes adjust to the darkness, she looked around for a lamp or light switch. Objects in the room began to come into a better focus, thanks to the moonlight coming into the porthole and then it hit her. The circular window meant she was probably on her yacht. But how did she get there? Attempting to sit up was a mistake as a searing pain of migraine proportion sliced across her forehead just above her eyes, making her at once, dizzy and nauseous. Lying back down, she closed her eyes and felt around for a lump or bruise but found nothing.

Slowly rolling to her side, she reached for the bedside light only to find it not working. Again, she tried sitting up, managing the throbbing ache that attacked her skull and the queasiness that clawed at her stomach. What the hell happened? How did she get onto The Quintessence? Why did her head hurt so badly? She shakily stood, reaching out to steady herself against the vanity, getting her bearings and walked to the door. Her whirling and nausea had begun to subside and the hammering in her head was lessening by the second. Twisting the handle, she was stunned to find the door locked from the outside. How could that happen? She felt above the doorknob where the flip lock used to be and it was gone. Tugging on the handle, her curiosity soon turned to alarm when the door would not budge.

"Hello? Hey...hello?! Kevin?" Now that she was capable of cognizant thought again, her mind was racing. What the hell was going on? "Kevin! Open the door, let me out of here!" She began pounding on the door and the wall, to no avail. Stopping, she placed her ear to the door and listened, hearing nothing on the other side, no sound of movement. Where was the security officer who guarded The Quintessence?

Jody started to pace the length of the stateroom. Although unsettled, she tried not to panic. There had to be a reasonable explanation for this. What had happened back at the restaurant? She and her husband had a nice dinner and she had two glasses of wine...nothing out of the ordinary there. Then she left the restaurant and got very sleepy and had to pull over...okay, *that* was odd. Two glasses of wine did not get her drunk. Had someone slipped something in her wine? No, she never left the table and the only person who came near it was their server. Did something happen to her medically to cause her to pass out? If that was so, why wasn't she in the hospital? Well,

there was only one way to find out any answers. Probing her belt for her cell phone, she was surprised to find it missing. Okay. Now she was experiencing some major trepidation. *What the fuck was happening here?*

Tia shut the shower off, stepping out of the stall and wrapped a huge bath towel around her body. She pressed the excess water out of her hair and scrunched it dry with the towel. She smiled at the thought of the hot tub working the soreness out of her bones again except tonight, if she indulged in the luxury, she would have to use the deck Jacuzzi. Opening the door to the storage area in that stateroom, she pulled out a t-shirt and a pair of cotton lounging pants that must belong to Montgomery and put them on. Although a little big, they fit and that's all she cared about. Exiting the stateroom to the salon, she crossed to the galley and took a cold beer out of the refrigerator. Twisting the cap off and taking a long swig, her attention was drawn back to the master stateroom by pounding and an uncertain, tremulous voice.

"Kevin? Is that you? Let me out of here. What's going on? Kevin??"

Tia tilted her head and took another swig of beer. It was showtime. Strolling down the stairs, toward the voice, the ex-operative stopped. "Step away from the door!" Tia commanded. Dead silence was the response.

"Who are you?" finally came the voice from the other side.

"I said: step away from the door." Tia placed her half-empty bottle on a table.

Sliding the huge bolt-lock backward, Tia opened the door and was nearly knocked down by a charging blonde. Grabbing the heiress around the waist with one arm, she used Jody's own momentum against her and flung her back through the door, onto the king-sized bed, where the smaller woman landed on her back, the wind almost knocked out of her.

"When I tell you to do something, you'd better damned well do it. Are we clear on that?"

Jody was stunned. She was not a weak woman. She worked out every other day, she rock-climbed once a week, she was in shape, yet she had been tossed around like a hacky sack. A dark-haired woman leaned against the frame, which silhouetted her tall body against the backlighting of the salon and gave her an ominous appearance. Jody tried to make out facial features but could not. The stranger's strength aside, what concerned Jody even more was the woman's calm. When she found her breath, she said, "Where's Kevin?"

Knowing she was referring to the yacht's guard, Tia said, "Kevin's on vacation."

Somewhat distracted by the honeyed silkiness of the woman's timbre, Jody tried to place if she had ever heard her voice before. Tilting her head, skeptically, not quite believing her answer about Kevin and trying to shake the last remnants of her headache, Jody again asked, "Who are you?"

"Who I am is not your concern right now."

Uh oh. This didn't sound good at all. "What do you want?"

"I want you to behave. It's as simple as that. Just do as you're told, don't give me a hard time, don't do anything stupid and you should be fine." Tia reached around and hooked her beer, taking a drink.

"Are you...did...have I been kidnapped?" She lost her breath again on that last word. Before it even left her mouth, she knew the answer.

Tia's throat went momentarily dry as she studied the heiress who lay on the berth, facing her. Jody was in the same position in which she had landed when Tia had thrown her back on the bed. This, along with seeing the fear growing in the wide, expressive eyes and hearing the quiver in her voice, was tempting the ex-operative to think thoughts other than what was expected of her. She shook it off, knowing the alcohol was lowering her restraint. In a different setting, Tia would have been all over this sexy little babe but not here. Not now.

Finding her voice again, Tia said, "You have been abducted, yes. A ransom will be asked in exchange for your safe return. So, it's really very simple...as long as the ransom gets paid with no complications, you'll be back in your rich little playground in no time...a little lighter in the bank account but nothing I'm sure you or your parents can't make up for in a few weeks."

"I can't believe it..." Jody slowly raised to her elbows.

"I can't believe it hasn't happened sooner." Tia casually took another swallow.

"How did - how did I get here?" Jody slowly sat up, leaning her back against the wall. She was still obviously in shock. "How did you know about this yacht?"

"Come on...it's not like you and your husband and your family exactly hide yourselves. Every other day someone from your family tree or little social circle is on the gossip pages of every newspaper in the world. Your private life is an open book. But then, that's what you get for being famous."

"So this is where you're going to keep me until you get paid?"

"Trust me, sweetheart, I can think of much worse places to be held hostage than on a million dollar boat."

Drawing her knees up protectively to her chest, Jody hugged them close to her, putting her head down. Her voice broke as she spoke. "How much are you asking for me?"

"Why? If it's over a certain amount, Mommy and Daddy won't pay it?" There was antagonism in her voice, making her sound unaffected by the anxiety in the heiress' speech, which wasn't true.

Something about Jody's bearing and the wounded look on her beautiful face caused Tia to want to get drunker to forget what she was doing to her innocent victim.

"No," she responded in almost a whisper. "They'll pay it." *Just something else Mother can blame on me*, she thought.

"So, before I lock you back in here, are you hungry? Thirsty?"

Shaking her head, without looking up at her captor, Jody said, "No, thank you. There's water in the mini-fridge here...unless you removed that, too."

"No," Tia's voice almost sounded as though it had softened, "there's water and club soda in there, still."

"Thank you."

As Tia resecured the door, she knew the heiress was crying and for some, unexplainable reason, it tugged at her heart.

Chapter Five

There is nothing consistent about human behavior except its tendency to drift toward evil.

As Montgomery folded his last hand, his evening uninterrupted, he bid goodbye to his peers and began his drive home. Connecting to Tia with his phone card, she picked up on the second ring. "Where are you?"

"The bridge."

"And she's in the master stateroom?"

"Yep."

"How is she?"

"Scared. Tearful."

"That's to be expected. But no problems?"

"Nope. Everything has gone as planned."

"Good, good. Okay, well, I'll do my part and the old man should be getting the notification and

ransom request first thing in the morning." Montgomery would start calling around as soon as he got back to the estate, to try and find out where his wife was. When he finally contacted the Wainwrights, he would tell them that things were fine at dinner, that Jody left and said before she went home, she might stop by the local PetSmart to pick up some treats and toys for their four-legged menagerie. When he pulled into the garage, he would notice her car wasn't there, nor was it parked anywhere in the driveway and he would ask the staff if they had seen or heard from her and they, of course, would tell him they had not. He would then start calling her friends who would not have seen her nor heard from her, either, and then he would begin calling her cell phone every fifteen minutes, calling all the area hospitals and police stations in case she had been in an accident and by two A.M., when he had still not heard from her, that's when he would make the decision to wake up her parents. There was no conceivable reason why it should not go just like that.

He could just see the expressions on the Wainwright's faces. John would be angry, terrified and beside himself. Jody was his pride and joy, just her existence pleased him to no end. Sondra would be annoyed and indifferent. He was looking forward to watching that glacial bitch's dispassionate, uppity guise finally crack when she realized her daughter wasn't ever coming back. Although, it really wouldn't surprise him if it didn't. Sondra constantly put herself in competition with Jody, especially when it came to John's attention and affection, as if her daughter was responsible for Sondra's own personal shortcomings and her husband's unyielding devotion to their child.

With everything Jody had going for her, she wasted so much time and energy trying to please her mother and gain Sondra's acceptance and respect and Montgomery knew it would never happen. Would she finally achieve that goal posthumously? Or would Sondra be even more angry that Jody's kidnapping and death would still overshadow her in John's eyes? Maybe he should have left Jody alone and eliminated her mother...but then, John might not have agreed to ransom her. At least not for five hundred million dollars.

"Listen, when do you think we can wrap this up?" Tia inquired, impatiently.

"When I get the money."

"Don't you mean when *we* get the money?"

He could hear her voice tighten, knowing she was automatically thinking the worst. Well...with her luck, he couldn't blame her. "No, I mean when *I* get the money. I told you, you will be paid accordingly."

"Right." She didn't sound convinced. "So when might that be?"

"Wainwright won't wait too long and he won't like the FBI running the show, either. If the feds can't find out who or what they're dealing with, I give him a week at the most before he takes matters into his own hands and agrees to pay whatever ransom to get his darling daughter back."

"A week? You've got to be fucking kidding me...!"

"Look, it'll take as long as it takes. Relax. When was the last time you got to live like this, anyway? Oh...that's right. Columbia."

"How the hell did you -?" Tia was stunned that he knew so much about her.

"It's a declassified case. It's all public record - if you know where to look. And I did." He sighed. "Can we get back our fucking little problem child in the master stateroom?"

"You sound like you really hate her."

"I don't hate her," he said, apathetically. "It isn't really about her."

"No, of course not, I forgot. It's about you. So let me ask...you going to kill her?"

"No. You are."

"That wasn't in the agreement," Tia told him, sharply.

"The rules change as I see fit."

"That was *not* what we agreed to and I'm not going to do it," she said, defiantly.

"You don't have a choice. If you had balls - which is in question - I would have you by them, don't forget that. That body in the Expedition's got to be getting pretty ripe by now so it's only a matter of time before it gets discovered. Your fingerprints are everywhere, your DNA is all over her, your bullet is in her heart and your gun is in the car. So what's one more body?"

"I didn't kill her - you did."

"Not according to the evidence."

"Why kill her? She seems like a nice woman. You'll get your money, I'll get mine and we can all go our merry ways. Killing that hooker was unnecessary but I can see in your sick mind why you felt you had to do it and yes, I will be wanted for that murder. But with the amount of money you're going to give me, I know I can vanish and not be pursued. If my captive dies and any of this gets linked to me, it doesn't matter how much money I have or where I go, I'll be looking over my shoulder the rest of my life."

"Not my problem. You're a loser, anyway, Ramone, if I hadn't found you and set you up, someone else would have. Now...when the ransom is safely delivered, you will either kill her or I will kill you both."

"How do I know you won't do that anyway?"

"You don't. I guess you'll just have to believe that I won't." Montgomery knew Tia didn't trust

him and she had good reason not to.

"Yeah. *That'll* happen. I wouldn't believe you if you told me you were lying." The gears were already starting to turn. She had learned very quickly that there were two reasons why people could not be trusted: one, because she knew them; and the other, because she didn't. She should have run the risk of getting shot and taken this guy out when he got into the car with her. She was going to have to find a way out of this mess with the least amount of damage to herself and she was going to have to do it soon. Pouring another shot, Tia took a deep breath, staying silent, absorbing the implications of this conversation with this coldhearted prick and let the robust liquor continue to numb her senses.

"What?" he asked, smugly. "No more argument?"

"Why? Arguing with you is probably about as useless as trying to blow out a lightbulb."

"Now I know you're not going to give up that easily. And don't think of getting cute with me, either...because if I suspect you are doing anything to betray me, I will set the feds on your tail so fast, you won't know what hit you."

"You're kind of a soulless bastard, aren't you?"

He laughed, a sound that literally made her shiver. "Well...as they used to say in grade school: takes one to know one."

"Are we done?" She asked, curtly.

"For now."

Tia snapped the phone shut and tossed it on one of the sofas, sure that Jody had not heard her end of the conversation. The access to the bridge had been cut off by two closed doors, two levels, the hot tub had been running and the stereo had been on low in the salon. She wasn't sure why she cared...after all, once she got the money, the heiress really wasn't her concern...but she did care and she needed to dissect those feelings.

Jody sat on her berth, staring at nothing for a very long time. Of course this had always been a possibility and her father had spoke of it often when she was younger. But she had lived twenty-eight years without it happening and she had to admit she had become complacent as, she was sure, had her parents. Her husband brought it up a few times but didn't really seem too concerned that it would ever become a reality but maybe that resulted from him knowing kidnappers would most likely not contact him since it was her parents who had all the money.

Well...the woman did have one good point, if she had to be held hostage anywhere, there were worse places than The Quintessence. Who was this woman and how did she get her to the yacht and then get access to it? What had she done to Kevin? The thought of something nefarious

happening to him made Jody shudder. Surely someone would miss him and come out to check on him. Surely someone would check the boat, explore every avenue, looking for her. And, then, what would happen if they found her there? The woman told her that if she played along, everything would be fine. Could she believe that? Was it only about the money? Hopefully it was. No, she would cooperate with this woman, whoever she was...no need to make this experience any more horrible.

Jody's thoughts moved from the circumstances back to the woman. Aside from the obvious, there was nothing about her that should have piqued Jody's interest the way it had. Yet this woman's deep, rich tone, her cocky stance, her total command over herself and the situation, fascinated the heiress. She could not stop herself from wanting to know more.

So why, when the woman came to the door and spoke calmly through it, asking her if she needed anything before she settled in for the night, did Jody feel such a sense of doom?

The first light of day broke at 6:32 A.M. Jody knew this because she was looking at her alarm clock, having briefly dozed twice throughout the night. She forced herself to stay awake, not really trusting the stranger who was sharing the yacht with her.

Getting out of bed, she stepped into the head, relieved her bladder and then cautiously washed her body, opting not to take a shower, not wanting to leave herself naked and defenseless should her captor barge in on her for whatever reason. She had noticed during the night that the locks had been reversed on the bathroom door, too. She could not lock herself in but she could be locked in.

While waiting for contact from her kidnapper, Jody inspected the room and immediately discovered why her bedside lamp and ceiling lights did not work - the bulbs had been removed. As had any connection to the outside world. Her television was gone, along with her radio which had been attached to her entertainment system. Maybe it was for the best that she didn't have to hear her father's anguished pleas for her safe return...or watch her mother stoically stand by, devoid of any emotion other than indignance.

Opening the porthole, putting her face up to it, she breathed in the sea air, grateful for the feeling of being alive. She prayed she would live to see another day, prayed her parents and husband would cooperate so that she could go home and prayed her house staff would feed and tend to her four-legged family in her absence. She was aware Tony couldn't care less about her pets but she knew Richard, their houseman, and his daughter, Melanie, doted on the furry creatures and was positive they would take turns ensuring the animals were taken care of.

She didn't know who this woman was who had kidnapped her but something about her warned Jody that it would be unwise to cross her. Her demeanor was beyond intimidating, it was frightening. She wondered what the woman had against her, or her family, or if she was just in it for the money.

She wondered if she would ever find out.

Tia awoke in her normal, hungover state. Nothing a cup of black coffee couldn't remedy. She was aware that coffee curing hangovers was a myth and all it really did was make someone a wide-awake drunk but it was a step toward rising out of the haze she was in. That, a cool shower and a little hair of the dog...

She almost wished she could have just stayed in bed. Unfortunately that wasn't an option and she rolled off the berth in the forward stateroom. It wasn't as luxurious as the room her captive was now in but it was still pretty damned nice. Much more palatable than her room at the North Avenue Arms.

The day before, she had moved some of Tony's clothes to the room where she would be sleeping until this was over. Since she had not been able to pack a suitcase for this little venture, she had to improvise. Going through the closet in the master stateroom, she found sweats, t-shirts, denim shirts and shorts and beach pants that were a little big for her but fit, nonetheless. There was also a windbreaker she had discovered hanging in the port side stateroom and she wasn't sure who it belonged to as it seemed too feminine for Montgomery and too large for his wife. Whose ever it was, she had adopted as it had come in handy protecting her against the mist that rolled in occasionally while she was on the deck at night.

Slipping into a pair of black lounging pants and a tank top, Tia climbed the stairs, used the head, moved to the galley, filled the small sink with water and ice cubes and dunked her face in it. *That* woke her up.

She regarded the coffee maker, some high tech, European-looking monster that didn't seem any less complicated to navigate than it did the morning before. Instead, she opted to make instant coffee in the microwave. While she waited for that to get done, she rubbed the nagging sting from her eyes and thought about the day ahead of her. She wanted to head off the disagreeable throbbing in her temples at the pass and she knew the coffee would help.

Tia figured the beeping from the microwave would alert the heiress that she was up and about and wondered if the small blonde had gotten any sleep. The younger woman had not reacted or behaved the way the ex-operative thought she would. Tia had expected the very wealthy, very privileged Mrs. Montgomery to be a handful, to yell and scream and kick at the door all night with that *"Don't you know who I am?"* attitude. The way Tony had talked about her, Tia presumed Jody to be a pompous, out-of-touch-with-reality, supreme bitch, a woman that would not have taken this too seriously, knowing her family would pay whatever the ransom was because they were all richer than God, a woman who would just impatiently consider this an annoyance more than anything.

However, when the extremely attractive heiress responded to the news that she had been abducted by sitting in a fetal position, her voice becoming small and scared and *crushed*, Tia almost felt sorry for her. If it was an act, the former CIA officer would know soon enough.

Chapter Six

An honest man alters his ideas to fit the truth, and a dishonest man alters the truth to fit his ideas.

When he wasn't getting further and further financially obligated to his boss, Bruce Wechsler programmed computers for MediMont. He was good at what he did, he was self-educated as the mechanics of any kind of electronic components, devices and equipment were very easy for him to grasp. He made sure that he kept up on new technology as soon as it came out and applied it at every opportunity. He had a natural aptitude for computers and could have gone a lot farther than he was now if he hadn't hit a few snags along the way.

Bruce was proud that he had pulled himself up from his dubious beginnings as a juvenile delinquent, getting thrown into jail at sixteen for stealing parts from a friend's father's computer repair shop. Three months, eight hundred dollars restitution and fifty hours of community service later, Bruce felt he had learned his lesson, deciding he didn't like being incarcerated very much. His redemption lasted ten years.

To impress a woman who worked out at the gym where he was employed part-time, scrawny Bruce hooked up with a not-so-sterling-of-character trainer named Mitch. To ease him into bulking up, Mitch started Bruce on a course of steroids recommended for use on horses, dogs and cats *only*, Dynabol and Drive. When that wasn't enough, the trainer moved him to Stanazol. Before he knew it, he was addicted and in debt to his trainer who cut him off until he could settle up. Desperate, Bruce begged Mitch to fix him up and feeling sorry for the former convict, the trainer connected him with his distributor, who needed some major computer work done and was looking for someone less than ethical to do it. While programming his new boss' system, he found the name of the distributor's wholesaler, which indirectly led him to Anthony Montgomery.

Bruce, in an unrealistic way, had hoped Montgomery was his ticket out of the financial dregs he had come to be in, when the prominent businessman hired him for a junior programming and troubleshooting position at MediMont. But every week, he got deeper and deeper in debt to his new boss and while Montgomery was generous at setting him up with a more than adequate supply of Anadrol, he wasn't paying Bruce enough to afford his nasty little habit. If he had known Montgomery had ulterior motives, Bruce might have done what he could to break away. He was beginning to think that maintaining his muscle and looking as good as he did wasn't worth this.

He took responsibility for his addiction to steroids and he was faithful about working off his debt to his boss. But he wasn't too sure about what Montgomery was making him do now. He had only met Mrs. Montgomery once. Actually, that wasn't quite true, they had never officially been

introduced. She had stopped by the office one day while he was installing a new inventory program on the boss' computer. She smiled at him, said hi and dropped something off for her husband. He thought she seemed nice. And that she was gorgeous.

Why Montgomery wanted to terrorize the poor woman just to get even with his father-in-law was beyond Bruce. There had to be other ways to get his point across, other ways to take Wainwright down without using Mrs. Montgomery as bait. Bruce had heard rumors that, in the past, Montgomery was ruthless when it came to competition and others had used the word 'sociopath' to describe him. Since he had been associated with his boss and doing a lot of Tony's online dirty work, he had even been advised that one or two of Montgomery's wholesalers who had attempted to rip him off had 'disappeared.' This was not an aspect of Montgomery that was advertised around the office and was clearly not the character he chose to show to his wife and in-laws. The fact that Montgomery was so cleverly and successfully capable of concealing that side of his personality scared the shit out of Bruce and fear prompted his allegiance which now saw the steroid addict in it up to his eyeballs. First he stole the Expedition and rented the Volvo, next he leased the storage space and now this. If *any* of this got tracked back to him, he was fucked.

Yet, as much as he hated doing this and despite his being nervous as hell, there he sat, ready to activate the phone call that would bring the world's attention to the woman who would soon be the most famous kidnapped heiress since Patty Hearst.

He set up the system to speak complex and emphatic information using a Text-To-Speech (TTS) program. TTS was computer generated synthesized speech where real voices were used to create the presentation in tiny fragments that then were glued together before being played to the person on the other end of the phone. So when John Wainwright asked questions, Bruce could type in the answer and the computer would speak it and sound exactly like a real person. He was instructed not to get too complicated. If Jody's father began to get overly inquisitive, Bruce would type in an advisory that Wainwright would be contacted again with further instructions and the call was to be terminated.

Today, he would not have to be concerned with the line being traced. Tomorrow, he would divert the call around a few relay stations and route it in such a way where it would appear as though it originated in Asia. The next call would trace to Canada, the next to Australia, etc. Bruce was sure, though, by at least the fourth day, the FBI would have caught on and, although he could still managed to bounce signals off satellites to make it look like the calls were coming from somewhere out of the United States, knowing what they were now looking for, the feds would be able to nail his location in one minute. This meant whatever Montgomery was going to have him say, would have to be done in fifty-eight seconds or less and even that would be cutting it close.

He hoped in four days, this ordeal would be over.

Anthony Montgomery was at the Wainwright estate when the first call came.

He had arrived there a little before nine A.M., acting frantic. He told Jody's parents that she had not come home all night, had not called, had basically disappeared off the face of the earth after dinner at The Cypress. He had called her friends, anyone whose place she may have gone to and no one had seen her nor heard from her. He called both local hospitals and any law enforcement agencies in the surrounding precincts, to no avail.

It was hard enough on John Wainwright that his precious daughter was missing, possibly the victim of God-knew-what but when Tony threw in for good measure that their dinner at the Cypress was to celebrate Jody announcing her pregnancy, the billionaire was beside himself. The *finally* joyous news of an heir was overshadowed by the fear that something bad may have happened to his daughter *and* his future grandchild.

Sondra remained her expected nasty, disdainful self, sniffing that Jody may have just negligently run out of gas and forgot to recharge her cell phone battery. Even after Tony argued with her that Jody had never been that irresponsible in the past and it had to be something...darker...that was going on, Sondra was ready to put the blame of anything sinister happening directly on the shoulders of her daughter. She knew whatever was going on, it probably wasn't good and all this would do is take John's focus off her - what little attention he paid to her anyway - and she resented it. And this would have to happen with a baby on the way...the eagerly anticipated heir, which would finally put John in a better mood. His constant whining about the lack of a grandchild had been pushing her over the edge.

As much as Tony wanted everything to go off without a hitch and was behind the impending death of his wife, he couldn't help but lash out at Jody's mother's indifference.

"You know, Sondra, you could be a little bit more concerned and a little less self-centered here. Your daughter has vanished. If she had run out of gas or even driven off the road, she should have been on a major or well traveled highway. She would have got word to someone. She's not helpless and she's not stupid, regardless of what you try to make her feel!"

Hazel eyes bored through him, punctuating an expression of barely controlled rage. "How dare you! You've only known my daughter a little over three years and we all know it wasn't true love that got you together, it was money. I've had her in my life for almost twenty-nine years! She's not the perfect little princess you and her father make her out to be." This statement earned her a sharp glare from John but he stayed silent. "You don't know her as well as I do."

"You don't know her at all," Tony threw at his spiteful and now pissed off mother-in-law. Those words caused a sudden streak of guilt to shoot through him, however, it left as quickly as it had appeared. Just then the phone rang.

It was ten o'clock. Everything was going just exactly as he planned.

Wainwright hung up the phone slowly, his face drained of all color. He had not been able to say much, the kidnapper doing most of the talking. He looked at his wife, who turned away from

him, her face bathed in antipathy, and then to Tony, who anxiously approached him. They had heard John's end of the conversation and the content of the message was clear.

"What's happening?" Montgomery asked, putting the most alarmed tone to his voice he could summon.

"Jody's been kidnapped. She's safe. For now. He'll call back tomorrow with a ransom demand. We're not to go to the police."

Running his hand through his hair, Tony sighed, "Aw, Christ..."

"What do you think of your revered child now, John? She allowed herself to get kidnapped because she was, no doubt, careless. I wonder how much money this recklessness is going to cost us?" Sondra's voice was dripping with contempt.

"That's enough!" John bellowed. "I don't know how you can carry someone inside of you for nine months and conveniently forget she's your child when she's not doing things to make you shine. She *is* your child, too, Sondra, for God's sake. This isn't about you! Our daughter could be murdered during this ordeal. We're not dealing with Jody's occasional lack of grace here! We're dealing with Jody's life!"

Furiously stalking out of the room, Sondra passed both men who watched her, stunned. Her level of coldness exceeded anything Tony had ever expected from her. He turned back to John, whose crimson face echoed his sentiment. "Jesus Christ, John..." Montgomery folded his arms. "What is wrong with her?"

"She probably doesn't think this is real yet. The idea of it is probably too much for her."

"Stop making excuses for her," Tony admonished him. "Has she always been this indifferent to Jody?" The glacial mask that had covered Sondra's face the minute she determined from John's side of the phone conversation that there had, indeed, been an abduction was downright heartless. The chill from her was so evident, it almost made Tony shiver.

"I can't be bothered with her petty insecurities right now. We need to call the police."

"Didn't he say not to do that?" Tony smiled inwardly. His father-in-law was so predictable.

"I want my daughter back alive but God forbid that doesn't happen, I want the FBI already on this bastard's tail!" Wainwright snapped.

"I want my wife back alive, John, I think we should do what he says..."

Removing his cell phone from his suit jacket's inner pocket, Wainwright flipped it open. "He didn't call *you* to tell you that he had Jody. He's not going to call *you* for the ransom. So this is *my* decision."

"Then it's on *your* conscience if we never get her back," Tony told him, bluntly.

The remark prompted Waintwright to pause. Then he dialed 911.

[Continued...](#)

[Cheyne's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)

~ Clandestine ~

by Cheyne

Whenpiggsfly55@aim.com

Disclaimer and author notes: [See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Seven

A lie is the deliberate withholding of any part of the truth from someone who has the right to know

Jody knew her captor was up and about. She had heard the microwave beeping. The heiress wondered when the woman would make her presence known and if Jody would be able to find out any more about this woman who had taken her hostage and the reason why.

She longed for a shower, knowing the spray of water would perk her up but she just didn't dare. Her stomach had started to protest its emptiness, breakfast being the one meal she tried to make sure she never missed. She had removed a bottle of raspberry flavored water from her small refrigerator, drinking the contents and all that did was make her more hungry. Noises started rising from her belly that could have rivaled the beginning of an MGM movie when she heard the knock.

"Yes?" Jody approached the door, her tone tentative. She wanted to sound stronger, more fearless but she couldn't muster the energy to act it out.

"I've got some breakfast for you. Step away from the door."

Having learned her lesson the night before, Jody obeyed, walking back to the bed. "Okay." She heard the bolt lock slide and her captor entered, balancing a tray on one hand while she closed the door with the other. She set the tray down on the vanity and stepped back.

"I don't know what you usually eat in the morning but I found some dry cereal, some milk and I made you some toast and coffee," Tia told her, civilly. She wasn't used to serving anyone and

had no idea if the heiress normally even bothered with breakfast but *if* Tia was going to kill her, starving her was not the way she was going to do it.

Stepping over to the vanity, Jody surveyed the tray. It held a bowl of rice krispies, an eight ounce glass of milk, two slices of buttered wheat toast and a pretty horrible looking cup of black coffee. She looked up at Tia, seeing her for the first time in daylight, catching herself before she openly gasped. Her kidnapper was powerfully striking, even in her obviously unkempt state. "Thank you." Not daring to stare at the tall woman longer than necessary, not knowing what would provoke her anger, Jody returned her attention to the tray. Reaching for the glass of milk, she poured enough in her coffee to turn the color to tan. Now that the food was in front of her, her stomach lurched at the thought of eating a bite. The presence of the woman standing next to her didn't help.

Nodding, Tia took a couple steps back and assessed her captive. She looked like shit, probably hadn't slept a wink, face a little puffy from, no doubt, crying. In fact, her eyes started watering a bit after taking a sip of the coffee. "Too strong?" Tia asked, then wondered why she cared.

"A little," Jody responded, nearly spitting it out. She reluctantly swallowed not wanting to insult her formidable abductor. Putting the mug back on the tray, she picked up a slice of toast, taking a nibble to hopefully remove the bitter, acidic aftertaste of the beverage. There was no way this sludge came from her coffeemaker. "Can I ask you something?"

Tia leaned against the door and folded her arms. "You can ask anything you want. I won't guarantee I'll answer."

"Why?" Jody looked over at Tia again and, for the first time, their eyes connected. What she saw in those ice cold blue eyes, rattled her. They seemed vacant, devoid of any and all life and Jody wondered how someone could get to that point. The taller woman held her gaze, studying her. The heiress was still a little jarred by this woman's smoldering beauty, a physicality that was unexpected as, in her sheltered upbringing, she incorrectly assumed that all criminals were male, blatant and never that attractive. There was no doubt her captor had an edge and, in order for her to be doing what she was doing, obviously had less than pure motives. Jody wondered what must have happened to this woman in her life to incite her into this kind of behavior.

"Well...I could say money, but..." Tia began, her mouth once again, moistureless. Regardless of the emotional condition of the heiress, she was indisputably pretty and disarming in her confusion. Tia was very drawn to her, feeling a sudden sexual pull that was undeniable. This was not good.

Jody looked away first, finding the mesmerizing eyes staring into the depths of her fear too intense. "If it's money you want, if that's what it will take to get me out of here, I can give that to you right now. I can have money transferred anywhere in the world for you *right now*. We don't have to do this." She concentrated on the contents of her tray, her stomach now feeling like it was taking forcible possession of her backbone, her distress overcoming her previous hunger.

"It doesn't work that way," Tia advised, troubled by her reaction to the heiress. Under different

circumstances, she would have been a nice little conquest. What a stupid time for her hormones to wake up and stand at attention.

Jody returned her focus to her captor. "Why? *Why* can't it work that way? Let me give you the money and we can both walk away right now." Her tone was pleading. She took a small step toward Tia. "Please...everybody has a price..."

Abandoning her casual stance, Tia instinctively responded to the heiress moving closer to her. Her body now had a slightly more defensive posture, not that she felt she had anything physical to fear from the smaller woman but she needed to send her a message without words. Subtle body language usually did the trick. As expected, Jody stopped dead in her tracks, immediately realizing her mistake and stepped back, demurely, looking down at the floor. The unspoken submission prompted a smile to curl Tia's mouth. She still had it - that dominant presence and 'don't-fuck-with-me' demeanor that helped her go as far as she did as an operative in the Agency. Glancing at her watch, Tia said, "Even if that was an offer that interested me, which it doesn't, it's too late. The first phone call has already been made to your father."

Shoulders slumping in defeat, Jody's hand covered her eyes. "My parents know I've been kidnapped?"

"Abducted," Tia corrected. "When a woman is the victim, it is usually referred to as an abduction."

Peeking out from behind her hand, Jody watched Tia, puzzled. "I'm talking about my life and you're correcting my phraseology?"

Almost laughing in spite of herself at Jody's expression, Tia turned to leave the room, putting her hand on the door handle. She needed to get out of there, away from whatever was eliciting this gnawing at her libido and back up to the deck as she was expecting a check-in call from Montgomery.

"Are you working alone?"

Tia's eyes swept the stateroom before alighting on Jody again. "Does it really matter?"

The expression rattled the heiress for some reason other than dread. Casting her eyes downward in embarrassment, Jody mumbled, "No. I guess it doesn't."

"Need anything before I lock you back in?"

"My freedom?" The smaller blonde woman tossed out, subdued.

Tia swallowed, hoping to work up some saliva. "You can't always get what you want, Mrs. Montgomery."

"How's the lovely heiress this morning?"

Tia grit her teeth, wishing she could reach through the phone and grab Montgomery by his throat and squeeze. She could not hide her contempt for him. "How do you think she is?"

"What's the matter? Get up on the wrong side of my wife this morning?" Just that thought almost made Montgomery hard.

"Shut up, you sick fuck."

"Jody is a very attractive woman. Don't tell me you haven't thought about it."

"I haven't thought about it." Instinctively knowing he was fantasizing about it made Tia nauseous.

"Liar."

"Do you have anything to tell me or not? If you don't, I have a beer calling my name."

"This early? My...you're nothing if not dedicated."

"Breakfast of champions. Tell you what, I'll drink to your health, how's that?"

"I'll be sure to be extra careful then. I bet you drink to so many people's health that your bar tab could be deductible on your medical insurance."

She found herself pacing. She hated this man, what he was doing and what he expected of her. "Did you make the call?"

"Me? No. But the call was made. I was there when it came in. I was appropriately frenzied. Distraught. I should have been an actor."

"So what happens now?" She could figure it out on her own. The police would contact the FBI, who would set up a command post in the estate and the crush would then be on. The reporter on the cop beat would then leak the story to the press and within an hour, everybody in the world who already didn't, would know what Jody Montgomery looked like.

"I'm waiting on the cops now. The chief of detectives wasn't good enough for Wainwright, he demanded the police commissioner accompany the feds when they get here." His casual, playful tone was repugnant. "Oh, by the way...the dead hooker was found this morning."

"Her name was Trisha," Tia reminded him, recalling the redhead's lifeless expression in her mind's eye.

"Yes, I know that. I've fucked her enough times." He yawned, sounding bored. Tia shook her

head, not believing the remorseless attitude of this prick. "So, I give the cops about twenty-four hours before they're on your trail. Fortunately for you, my wife's abduction will overshadow a lowlife, discredited ex-CIA dyke murdering her prostitute lover in a stolen car."

Fuming, it took every ounce of willpower Tia had not to explode. She had no idea that she was capable of such self-control. "How could such a nice woman as your wife seems to be, marry such a psycho?"

Montgomery let loose with a hearty laugh. "I told you. I should have been an actor. Okay, at some point, the FBI is going to want to check The Quintessence just to make sure Jody just hasn't flipped out and run away on her own. When that happens, I will let you know before we leave the house."

"You're going to bring them *here*?"

"Oh, absolutely. I've thought of everything. I, of course will stay on the bridge when they do their walk-through as it will be too painful for me to go with them, remembering all the great times my wife and I have had there...which have been none but they don't need to know that."

"And where will your wife and I be?"

Tia had returned to the master stateroom a lot sooner than Jody had anticipated she would, in fact it had only been a matter of minutes since she had left. The tall, sable-haired woman instructed the heiress to once again step away from the door and she entered with a purpose. As she walked directly toward Jody, the frightened blonde instinctively backed away from her.

"Come here," Tia commanded, reaching out and grabbing Jody's forearm.

The heiress was torn between complying and trying to fight her. The look in her captor's eyes was flooded with hostility and if, for whatever reason, this was going to be her last few minutes on Earth, she wanted to know why. But it all happened too fast for her to get the words out. "Wait! What -?" she tried to dig her heels into the carpet, hoping to make herself resistant against the pull but it did not work. The woman yanked her to the head, pushing her inside, shutting the door and securing it. "What's going on? What did I do?" Jody's voice was on the verge of hysteria. She slapped the palms of her hands against the door in confusion and alarm.

Ignoring her, Tia moved back over to the berth, dropping to her hands and knees. She completely removed one of the drawers underneath the bed and studied its width. Then, she looked at the height and estimated what would be the highest part of her prone body. Not leaving it to chance, she laid down and eased her body into the vacancy left by the drawer. It was snug but she fit, nonetheless. She slid back out, stood up and walked to the other side of the berth and pulled that drawer out as well. It was the same size as the first one which meant the space left in between would be just about big enough for two people. She stood up and placed her hands on her hips in reluctant admiration. Damn if Montgomery *hadn't* thought of everything.

Putting everything back where it belonged, Tia unlocked the door to the head and opened it to see Jody sitting on the edge of the tub with her arms crossed. Her expression reflected a mixture of anger, bewilderment and fear. Feeling almost guilty, Tia rolled her eyes and turned her face away then looked back at the heiress. "Come on out," she requested, calmly.

Stubbornly, Jody remained in the same position, tears threatening to spill down her cheeks, mollified but still apprehensive. "Why did you do that?"

"You don't need to know that. Now, come on out of there."

"No." There was a defiant edge to her voice and a mutinous demeanor that showed Tia there may be some spunk in this adorable woman after all. "I'm cooperating with you and I intend to continue cooperating with you. You said if I behaved that everything would be fine. There was no need for you to do what you just did. If you had asked me to go into the head and stay there until you did what you had to do, I would have done it. You don't need to bully me." Overcome with relief and frustration, the tears involuntarily rolled down her cheeks.

Tia dropped her head and sighed. Nodding, she glanced back up at the heiress. "You're right. I'm sorry. I was pissed off and I took it out on you. You didn't deserve it."

The apology stunned them both. Wiping away her tears with the backside of her wrist, Jody slowly stood up and passed Tia in the doorway and moved to the vanity. She turned toward her captor who was looking quite uncomfortable. "Can I at least ask your name?"

Tia's first reaction was to tell her no, it was none of her business but then she could not really come up with a legitimate reason why Jody shouldn't know. After all, what difference did it make if the heiress knew her identity, they both might very well be dead in a couple of days. "Sure. It's Tia."

"Tia," Jody repeated, liking the name immediately. It was exotic and seemed appropriate. "Is that a nickname for anything?"

"No. It's just Tia."

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you my name."

"No, Jody, you don't." Tia relaxed at the sound of her own voice saying her captive's name. She suddenly imagined that name coming from her lips under entirely different circumstances and a wave of sweat washed over her body. She had to stop this. Once again, she felt the need to bolt. She picked up Jody's breakfast tray and started walking to the door.

Jody noticed the slight flush that rose in her captor's cheeks as Tia reached for the door handle. Was it anger or something else? She knew she had done nothing to upset the taller woman so what could have provoked that blush? Was it something related to why she shut her in the bathroom? "Tia?"

She stopped but did not turn around. "Yes?"

"Can you stay longer and...talk to me?" Jody silently admonished herself for sounding so needy.

Yes, Tia wanted to very much. She wanted to get to know the heiress on a more personal level, wanted to look at her lovely face for a few unguarded moments, feeling entranced like she hadn't been since Maria Maladin. She wanted some of Jody's decency and decorum to rub off on her, wanted the heiress to make a difference. She wanted Jody to liberate her from herself, a task she considered impossible and would not have placed that burden on anyone. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

With that, she locked Jody in and headed for the bridge. She needed a drink. Bad.

Chapter Eight

One of the most painful wounds in the world is a stab of conscience

Jody sat on the king-sized berth, staring at nothing. She had been thrust into a living nightmare. She was being held for ransom by whoever this Tia person and her silent partner were, knowing her father would do whatever it took to get her back, knowing her mother would hold this against her for the rest of her life - if she even survived - and knowing her husband would be caught completely in the middle. If there was any chance of her having anonymity before, it would be gone now.

The idea that she might be dead within the next couple of days felt like a punch in the stomach. Obviously there was no rationalizing with her captor and, even more evident, money was not the real reason Jody was being held hostage. Tia had to know that Jody could make good on her proposition to buy her way out of the situation yet her offer had been immediately rebuffed. The initial emptiness in the woman's eyes reflected a barren soul, which Jody interpreted as representing a lack of conscience. If that was true, she suspected Tia could and, no doubt, would kill her should something go wrong. Hopefully, the plan all along was not to eliminate her regardless of whether or not the ransom was delivered.

Yet this woman, her kidnapper, her *abductor*, had her riveted. Had she actually seen a small spark of *something* in her eyes when she apologized? Jody wanted to know more about Tia, what made her tick, why she was doing what she was doing. There had to be a story behind her actions, an explanation to justify her criminal behavior. Maybe if Jody could appeal to that, her abductor would think twice about harming her in any way.

She then returned her focus to her yacht. How had Tia gained access to it? The location was not a secret but neither was it well publicized. However, if one knew where to look, finding it was not

that difficult but Kevin never would have allowed anyone access without clearing it through her or Tony first. Was this something the young security officer was in on? Well, it was possible but she didn't see that happening. Kevin had been in their faithful employ for five years and his loyalty was beyond reproach. Had this woman and her partner ambushed him and done something insidious to him? No, that was just too horrible for her brain to wrap around, that she would indirectly be responsible for Kevin's death. She would have to believe, for now, that the young man really was on vacation.

Her attention went back to the glass of milk on her vanity that she had not finished. She thought about the breakfast she should have been eating: eggs florentine, vanilla yogurt with fresh raspberries, seven-grain toast and a Latte with a hint of caramel. She thought about what she should have been doing that day: volunteering at the Westside Animal Shelter in the morning and telling stories to the kids in the pediatric cancer ward at Valley Hospital in the afternoon. Although both activities were emotionally compensating, they were also heartbreaking and were beginning to take their toll on the normally optimistic heiress.

She had been pretty successful at finding homes for the animals who weren't too severely injured and had to be destroyed but having to watch more and more abused 'pets' come in on a daily basis was testing her resolve. She quickly gained the opinion that anyone who harmed an animal should have the same thing done to them as punishment. Then there were the kids. She was getting too attached to these brave children whose fate was out of her control. She could donate all the money in her bank account and it still would not cure the patients who were infirmed in that unit of the hospital. The research her money funded may help future cancer patients but not this current group. However the time she donated was rewarding and these kids had given her much more than she ever could have given to them. It was these children who taught her that the greatest wealth was contentment with little, a lesson she wished her mother had learned.

Snapping out of her introspection, Jody stood up and began pacing again, wondering when her next encounter with Tia would be.

She sat, stretched out on the deck, soaking up the heat of the sun, letting it toast her skin. Although it was nice, her can of Sapporo quickly became tepid and she considered allowing beer to get piss warm alcohol abuse. Rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand, Tia contemplated her predicament. She was being framed for a murder she didn't commit and was about to be set up for another murder that had yet to be committed. Whether or not Tia would actually follow through with killing Montgomery's wife was not the point as Montgomery made it very clear that, one way or another, the heiress was going to end up dead. The question was *Why*?

Casting aside her earlier reactions to Jody, Tia was having a big problem reconciling the justification for anyone having to kill the fetching little blonde. If this abduction went off without a hitch, the heiress could be returned to her family none the wiser about her husband's involvement. There was no reasonable need to eliminate Jody other than pure malevolence on Montgomery's part and this was what was tying Tia up in knots. Dispatching bad guys served a purpose. Murdering the innocent did not.

Tia was sure Montgomery would go through with his intention of killing her if she did not get rid of his wife. However, she was also sure Montgomery wanted no witnesses to this little adventure and would execute her and whoever this Bruce guy was, too, whether she did his bidding or not. If she could only find a way out of this mess, nobody had to die.

Tia told herself it wasn't about saving Jody, Jody was incidental, it was about self-preservation and if she was going to get herself out of this situation without dying, she might as well rescue the heiress as well. But how? She was in this deep but was it such an abyss that she couldn't climb out? Every problem had a solution. She just had to figure out what it was.

Chapter Nine

No amount of riches can atone for poverty of character

Sondra Wainwright remained in the room as the FBI set up their intricate, technical trapping devices. While playing the dignified, overwrought mother, she silently seethed at all the activity invading her home. Damn her daughter! The focus was supposed to have been on her this week, she had been scheduled to receive an award from the Metropolitan Arts Council for her relentless fundraising skills which netted the organization close to a million dollars. It was a big deal, it was to have been covered by the media and it would have been her fifteenth fundraising award in two years, a distinction separating her from anyone else in her social group.

And now it was going to be overshadowed by this. Once again, her dear Jody stole her thunder and with this stunt, Sondra was pretty sure she would never have the spotlight again. Watching her husband and son-in-law interact with the federal agents in the sitting room and trying to stay out of the way of the other worker bees as they set up their equipment caused Sondra to simmer in her own self-pity. She bristled when a female agent asked her if she was okay, telling her that they would do everything possible to get her daughter back. She honestly didn't care if they ever got Jody back. That girl was nothing but an obstacle in her path to being first and foremost in her husband's life and in furthering the elite Wainwright name.

Jody's charity work was noble and, although she was highly praised for it in bourgeois circles, she never quite grasped the concept of her aristocracy. Sondra never understood how a daughter of hers could have turned out to be the exact opposite of what she always wanted and expected of her. All the private schools, tutors, specific education and training with the best of the best still didn't have an impact on the inherently kindhearted and ridiculously benevolent heiress. Try as she did, the supercilious Mrs. Wainwright could not turn Jody into a snob. In her eyes, her daughter was useless and an embarrassment.

She never wanted a child and only agreed because producing an heir was a provision of the marriage agreement as John needed someone to whom to pass on his fortune and legacy. She despised every day of her pregnancy, cursing what it did to her perfect body for six of those nine

months and hated every second of her seventeen hours of labor. When her daughter was born, Jody immediately went into the care of nurses and nannies. The only time Sondra spent 'quality' time with Jody was when John insisted or when in competition for John's time and attention or when a 'family outing' was going to be recorded by the press. The child may have walked on water as far as her husband was concerned but Sondra made sure Jody knew, every chance she got, that her daughter never quite lived up to her standards. She never really liked the little brat and Jody never seemed to understand that no matter how hard she tried, nothing she did would ever change how her mother felt about her.

If Sondra didn't know any better she would have suspected her daughter did this on purpose but she knew Jody would never put her father through this intentionally. Especially not after finding out she was carrying a Wainwright heir, something else to kick her up a notch in John's eyes and push Sondra even further out of the picture. Well, at least a grandchild would have made John dote on Jody less and then maybe her daughter would know what it felt like to constantly be pushed aside for a child.

As Sondra reached for the decanter of bourbon, she was unaware of how much her bitterness and resentment showed in her body language. But it didn't escape Anthony Montgomery. Maybe he should have set up Sondra to take the fall for Jody's death. Would have served the bitch right.

The Wainwright residence was in barely controlled chaos. Uniforms and ill-fitting suits were everywhere, as were cables and wires and computers and federal technicians. The personnel running around included members of the Critical Incident Response Team, a group which was expressly assembled to deploy a staff of specialists trained in areas of negotiation, communications and behavioral sciences and usually provided command logistical support. The local Police Tactical Response Squad was also in attendance and were on their best behavior due to the presence of the police commissioner, a personal friend of John Wainwright's.

House staff busied themselves serving the new 'guests' while privileged friends and business associates were allowed into the sacred fold, much to the FBI's dismay. Montgomery heard, "I'm so sorry, Tony," and "Don't worry, they'll get her back," so many times, he thought he'd retch if he heard it one more. Yet each time, he would nod somberly and pat the person's hand who was grasping his arm or shoulder. When a concerned colleague of his father-in-law's started heading toward him for the fourth time, looking more dour than the last time, Montgomery excused himself and made a beeline for the exterior patio off the living room. He approached an official-looking, young gentleman who was taking a cigarette break.

After reintroducing themselves, Montgomery engaged in small talk with the agent who seemed uncomfortable, standing there exchanging pleasantries with the man whose wife was missing. He understood that the man must be beside himself with despair. Finally, he said, "I don't want you to worry, Mr. Montgomery. We're very good at what we do and we'll do everything we can to make sure Mrs. Montgomery is returned to you safely."

"How many kidnappings have you handled?"

"Well," he looked out over the vast landscape, avoiding direct eye contact with Montgomery, "this is actually my first..."

"And what about your comrades?"

"Agent Sanborn has supervised three incidents all with successful results."

"Well, I'm surprised to see you guys jump right on this. Is it normal for you guys to give this such prompt attention? Don't you have to wait a day?"

"We used to have to wait twenty-four hours before responding to and beginning the investigation of an unwitnessed abduction. But, experience has shown us that those kind of delays can prove fatal for the victim and that the first hours following the abduction is critical and how we respond and react in that time is crucial."

"And this has nothing to do with her being from one of the world's richest families?"

"I think that also sped things up," Agent Danny Marciano admitted, grinning sheepishly.

"Look, the guy told my father-in-law that he didn't want the cops involved. Yet here you guys are. What are the odds that's going to piss this guy off and he'll hurt her?"

"I'm sure he expected it," Marciano told him.

"But what if he didn't?" Montgomery probed, doing his best to sound distressed.

"Mr. Montgomery, let's not jump the gun here," Marciano warned, kindly. "Your father-in-law did the right thing. The only way we're going to catch who is behind this is if we get on it right away. We first need to make sure whoever this person is even has your wife and that she isn't already..." He shut up before he could say any more. Seeing the stricken look on Montgomery's face, he knew he had not stopped himself in time.

"Isn't already what? Dead? Is that what you were going to say?" Montgomery sounded very close to becoming unhinged.

"Sir, listen to me, please," Marciano implored. "I'm not trying to be cold here and I understand we're talking about your wife's safety. I would be inconsolable if it were my wife going through this, regardless of the outcome. But before your father-in-law goes any further with this abductor, we need a show of good faith. We need to make sure he or they actually have your wife and that she is still alive and not harmed."

Montgomery visibly calmed down. "Yes, of course. That makes sense." He had already thought of that and tomorrow morning he would call Tia with the headlines from the morning paper so that the feds would know when they heard Jody's voice mentioning the latest news, that she was still alive. He would provide Tia with a brief script of what he wanted Jody to say into the phone

and then Tia would call Bruce who would dock his cell into one of his computer ports and then incorporate Jody's dialogue into his interactive voice response program. "How do you guys negotiate a ransom?"

Marciano sighed. "Mr. Montgomery, the FBI strongly urges private citizens not to pay a ransom."

"Excuse me? This guy told my father-in-law that he was going to call back tomorrow with a ransom demand. If John refuses to pay a ransom, my wife is as good as dead, don't you think?"

"Sir," Marciano began, patiently, "The FBI cannot participate in establishing and enforcing a ransom strategy. It's against policy. If Mr. Wainwright wishes to follow a path that deviates from our hostage resolution policy, he will do it without the consent or cooperation of the Bureau."

"So what you're telling me is that any payment of money and supervision of the transaction is the sole responsibility of the victim's family?"

"That's what I'm telling you. However...that doesn't mean that we can't be kept discreetly informed of the progress if that's the route he decides to take. Legally, we just can't be involved."

Montgomery glanced toward the living room at all the activity and looked back at Marciano. Sighing, he ran a well manicured hand through his expensively styled hair, feigning anguish. "God. I know all these people are necessary and I hope my father-in-law hasn't signed my wife's death warrant by getting you all involved."

"I do appreciate your concern, Sir. But, with all due respect, this is what we do."

"So now that you are here, what happens next?"

"We wait for the next call. Although we follow a certain criteria, we do realize that this kind of investigation is interpretive and sometimes we are expected to make plans or revise existing plans on a moment's notice, based on the requirements of the situation. So how we respond will depend on the demands of the abductor. In the meantime, I want to assure you that we are not sitting idle. There are police officers and agents retracing Mrs. Montgomery's last route, looking for leads and witnesses. Hopefully someone will have seen something and come forward so we can at least get started with a composite drawing. We have helicopters searching for her vehicle and we have dogs who have been trained to track your wife's scent, starting at The Cypress, which was the last known place she was seen. We have technicians who will be digging into the Violent Crime Information Network which keeps track of crimes and offenders such as convicted kidnappers, registered sex offenders -"

"Oh, shit. Oh, no. That never even entered my head. Do you think she could be sexually assaulted during this?" Montgomery asked with a panicky tone to his voice.

"I can't predict that, Sir. In the vast case files I have read, usually kidnappers are not sex offenders, I was just advising you of what the VCIN kept track of. I didn't mean to imply -"

Montgomery put his hand up to halt Marciano's backpeddling. "No, no, it's okay. I just hadn't thought about that...aspect. Please go on."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to the field supervisor or our profiler, Mr. Montgomery?"

"Actually, Agent Marciano, I feel comfortable with you, if you don't mind. I'd like to know what the Bureau is going to do to get my wife back to me alive."

By the time Tia brought Jody's lunch around, the ex-operative was well on her way to being drunk. Since it was routine for her, she was under the impression that she was able to disguise it well, except for the appearance of her eyes, which she knew would be glassy and unfocused.

Jody watched her captor as she placed the tray on the vanity. She didn't seem to be intoxicated but she smelled like a brewery. Tia didn't look at the heiress once while she was in the room and that bothered Jody considerably. Their conversation was limited to Tia asking if there was anything else she could get for her, Jody replying with a polite 'no, thank you,' and the former CIA officer advising her that she would be back for the tray and then she exited.

The heiress wanted to ask Tia to join her for lunch, to sit and talk with her while she ate. She was desperate to learn more about this woman, especially now. Added to everything else she was curious about concerning her captor, she now wanted to find out what drove Tia to be inebriated before noon. However, as her abductor's temperament was unpredictable, at best, Jody chose to remain subdued and not test her boundaries.

She sighed and looked over the meal that was displayed before her. It was a microwaved container of vegetable lasagna that actually smelled pretty darned good. Her stomach had settled down since that morning and the more the aroma wafted upward, the hungrier she became. If she didn't eat, she was only hurting herself, so she picked up the fork and dug in.

Montgomery had stocked the yacht with enough food and alcohol to last a full week. Guessing that Tia was far from a gourmet cook, he made sure that a majority of the provisions were quick and easy to prepare. The ex-operative was fine with that arrangement. If she ate anything at all during her binges, she could certainly deal with a Marie Callender frozen entree and if it was good enough for her, it was good enough for the heiress.

The heiress. Thinking about her drove Tia to reach for the scotch bottle. It wasn't that Tia didn't like her, it was that she liked her too much. She wanted to stay in that room and talk to the petite blonde, to absorb her. She wanted to tell her not to worry that she would think of something to get them out of this mess - except she hadn't come up with any brilliant ideas yet and the heiress had no idea that Tia was quickly crossing over to being on her side.

Smiling, Tia knocked back the shot and chased it down with another ice cold beer. She liked the idea of rescuing Jody. Maybe there was hope for her yet.

Chapter Ten

Zeal without knowledge is like heat without light

The media was starting to gather outside the gates of the Wainwright estate, setting up their video production and uplink satellite trucks. Network news helicopters were beginning to buzz over the area like a swarm of bees and members of the press were already in competition to see who could break the story first. So far, the only thing that had been leaked to the news agencies was that Jody was missing. Until a show of good faith and a ransom demand was made, the authorities wanted the public involved only so far.

Although speculation was already running rampant, reports of an actual kidnapping were, at this point, just a rumor. When the official announcement was made, then the cutthroat rivalry would really begin to see who could get the first interview with a family member. It wasn't about Jody Montgomery or whether their broadcasts might help find her safe and sound, it was about ratings.

Montgomery questioned Special Agent Walt Sanborn as to why he made the decision to alert the press when the man who called didn't even want the police to know. The CIRT supervisor advised him that because at this stage of the investigation, Jody was just 'missing,' allowing the public into a limited loop was usually beneficial and a major tactic in an ongoing search. Getting the story out there and keeping it in the public eye could result in valid leads and maybe get a jump on the abductor's trail. Time was of the essence and sitting around, idly waiting for the abductor to run the show was not in the best interest of Mrs. Montgomery. "You never know who could have seen what from the time she left you at dinner until right now," he told the 'anxious' husband.

"But doesn't that open you up to all kinds of nutcases? And wouldn't that just take up *more* of your time trying to weed through what was an authentic lead and what wasn't?"

"We'll only release so much information to the public. One of our strategies is to subtly, through daily press conferences, let the abductor know we have specific evidence that will lead to him while holding other things back. That way, when you have the nutcases, as you put it, coming forward with invented clues and stories or jumping up, screaming, 'I did it,' we have a way to separate the liars from the credible witnesses or someone actually involved in the case."

Montgomery nodded. "And what if it's an inside job? You know, staff or someone who knew her?"

Sanborn scratched his chin. "Or a family member?"

"Well, yeah, but the only family is her parents and me. John and Sondra have no brothers and sisters, John's parents are deceased and both Sondra's parents live very comfortably in Hawaii.

And I love my wife very much and have unlimited access to her bank accounts so it would make no sense for me to do this."

"True. But you'd be surprised. In any case, anyone and everyone in this household and in yours will be given a polygraph...just for process of elimination. Then should something suspicious come up during that, we'll take it from there."

"Isn't the lie detector test pretty vilified legally, though?"

"Honestly, Mr. Montgomery, I'm not concerned with whether polygraph results are allowed in court or not. It is an effective tool to help us maneuver through this investigation quickly. We have one of our top FBI polygraphers flying in today from Washington. He will start with immediate family and spread out from there - friends, acquaintances and then strangers. If anyone has anything to hide, it will come out."

"Well, just let me know when you need me to take mine. I'll do anything to help." He wasn't worried. He'd passed polygraphs before, lying through his teeth. This time should be no different.

"Thank you, Mr. Montgomery. Your cooperation is much appreciated. Oh, by the way, you don't have a problem with us taking a look at your personal and work computers, do you?"

"Uh...no, no, of course not but why is that necessary?" He tried his best to sound more curious than concerned.

"There is always a possibility that whatever is on Mrs. Montgomery's computer could give us a clue to her possible whereabouts. And, with you, it's just a precaution. If you pass the polygraph, we probably won't but if your results come up inconclusive, once again, it's just another procedure to help establish your innocence."

Uh oh. Montgomery swallowed hard. Why hadn't he thought of that?

"I don't give a good Goddamn how you do it, Bruce, but do it! Copy everything off the computer in my office and then send the fucking thing a virus that will crash the machine and destroy everything on the hard drive! Or reformat or repartition the drive, whatever the hell it is you do to get rid of that shit!" Montgomery was on his way home from his in-laws' house. Getting out of there without being mobbed by the press took a police escort which separated from him within three miles of the estate when it looked like whoever had been following them had given up. Except for one news van that seemed to appear out of nowhere after the cops left and was now four cars behind him in traffic. That didn't matter, he wasn't intending to go anywhere he shouldn't or behaving in a suspicious manner and once he got beyond his electronic gates and was safely on his own property, they were going to get mighty bored waiting for him to show himself again unless requested to leave the sanctity of his home by the FBI.

"But Tony, that won't guarantee..."

"Just do it and do it right now!" Montgomery hissed. As he passed the rest stop where Jody had been abducted, he saw three uniformed police officers spread out, showing people flyers and taking notes. It was a popular area to pull over and use its facilities and just take a break. However, the possibility of the officers speaking to anyone who had been there last night were between slim and none.

"Yes, sir, I'm on it," Bruce replied, as he heard the beep on the other end of the line indicating the call was over. He snapped shut the pre-paid wireless phone his boss had purchased for the specific purpose of communicating during the abduction. Well, at least if he had to get deeper and deeper into this mess, Montgomery finally assigned him a task at which he was good.

If Bruce so desired, he could disarm all the firewalls and anti-virus protection, opening up security holes right from his desk. He had the know-how which enabled him to attack anywhere he chose with little chance of detection. But that ran the risk of still leaving information on the hard drive that surely any FBI techie could retrieve with no problem. Reformatting the drive would be useless in this case. Repartitioning the drive would only be a little better as all it would do would modify the partition tables stored on the disk and leave the file data on the hard drive intact.

The only way to ensure that all information had been erased was to use an encryption program to scramble the data, delete it, and then completely overwrite each and every subdivision on the disk including the master file tables, deleted files, the boot record, cookies, memory, system restore, temporary files and contents of the hard drive. He could do that by repeatedly using fabricated data of configurations with random patterns of ones and zeros. And he had just the disk sanitizing program to accomplish that.

When all pertinent files had been copied and everything had been wiped down to the hardware, Bruce would reinstall all the business-related programs to make the system appear normal. If the geeks at the Bureau did find anything on Tony's computer, it should take them a few years to do it.

Arming himself with a portable file box full of blank and programmed CDs, Bruce headed out of his basement office and up to the executive suite. He had his work cut out for him. Being Saturday, the building was not occupied, meaning he did not have to be concerned about his presence in his boss' office, working on the computer for so long, looking suspicious in any manner. It was the beginning of the weekend and he had been at work when Montgomery called. Sighing, he thought, when this thing was over, if he survived it, he had to get a life.

Turning the television on, Tia was curious as to what was being said about the discovery of Trisha's body but before she could tune in to a local station she saw a 'breaking news' banner with the words, 'Pregnant Heiress Missing' underneath it. The ex-operative's eyes grew wide and

she nearly lost her grip on her beer bottle. That bastard didn't say anything about his wife being pregnant. If she had seriously considered getting rid of Jody before, this little tidbit cemented Tia's decision to keep the heiress alive. Raising the volume, the ex-operative watched the unanimated Barbie doll reporter's collagen-injected lips move and listened with interest.

"...the FBI is not releasing much information at this point but from what our police source tells us, Joanne Wainwright Montgomery was last seen at approximately eight-thirty last night driving eastbound on Dillon Highway from The Cypress restaurant, where she and her husband, Anthony, had dinner." Flashing across the screen was a casual picture of Tony and Jody both looking happy and perfect. God, Tia thought, her captive certainly was gorgeous. File footage of a Mercedes, the color and model exactly like Jody's was then shown while the voiceover of the reporter provided the listener with the details of the car. Another candid photo of the heiress was displayed and Jody's vital statistics were provided. "The family is asking anyone who may have seen this vehicle or Joanne Montgomery to please come forward. A toll-free tip line is being activated but until we have that number, anyone with any information, please contact your local law enforcement agency or FBI office."

Tia heard the same broadcast at least four times before she shut the TV off and only once was Jody's pregnancy alluded to with the news anchor commenting about the mysterious disappearance of the heiress being doubly unfortunate because of her carrying a Wainwright heir. Pressing the 'off' button on the remote, the ex-operative tossed the device onto the sofa closest to her and headed down to the master stateroom.

Chapter Eleven

We underrate that which we do not possess

Despite fighting sleep, Jody had dozed off after her meal. She had stretched out on the bed to rest, was only going to close her eyes for a second and ended up in a light nap. Something lured her out of her little siesta and when she awoke, she sat up, startled to find Tia leaning against the edge of the hot tub, her arms folded, observing her.

The look on her captor's face caused her insides to tremble and she could not decide why. This time Tia's expression was not one of menace or intimidation but of...was she actually seeing concern?

"Did you want something?" Jody asked, cautiously.

Oh, the places Tia could have gone with that question. "Actually, I need to ask you something. Are you pregnant?"

The inquiry obviously surprised the heiress, whose eyes snapped open wide and struck her momentarily speechless. Finally finding her voice, Jody shook her head in puzzlement. Where had she gotten that idea? "No. I'm not. Why?"

"The media seems to think you are," Tia countered. "They're referring to you as 'The Pregnant Heiress.' Why would they do that if you're not?"

Still shaking her head slightly, she said, "I honestly have no idea. Maybe...maybe that's something my parents are putting out there to make you think twice about harming me."

Tia nodded, then shrugged. "Maybe." She let her arms fall to her side and stood up to leave.

Jody looked up at her through honey-colored eyelashes. "Did it work?" She sounded unwittingly coy.

"Did what work?" Tia asked, wondering if the heiress was trying to be flirtatious or if it was just wishful thinking.

"Make you think twice about harming me?"

Pursing her lips into a smirk, Tia remained silent and left the room, locking Jody back in.

The sultry expression on her captor's face caused Jody's stomach to unexpectedly clench and not in an unpleasant way. Her mouth fell open as she stared at the closed door. This certainly was an alien feeling, she thought, wondering what caused her body to suddenly react as though her insides had just fallen to the bottom of her feet. It had to be her nerves.

Tia leaned against the wall outside the master stateroom and closed her eyes. She was relieved that Jody was not pregnant as that really would have turned her irrationally homicidal against Montgomery. For him to want to waste his guiltless wife was bad enough but to want to dispose of her and their unborn child depicted a monster of a whole new caliber. Not that she didn't think Montgomery had it in him but if he had known Jody was going to have a baby and had expected Tia to kill her anyway would have provoked her to turn whatever murder weapon she was supposed to use on him instead, damn the consequences. Hell, maybe she should do that anyway.

Slowly ascending the few steps to the salon, Tia's head was swirling with too many thoughts at once, the most prominent being her libidinous feelings involving her captive. She knew she had to keep things in perspective. Despite her growing attraction to the younger woman, Tia knew the heiress would not be interested in someone like her once this ordeal was over, even if Jody had been inclined toward the fairer sex. Maybe once upon a time but not how she was now.

She walked to the galley and began searching for something to munch on. Finding a few possibilities that appealed to her quirky palate, she opened one cellophane bag and returned to the salon, picking up the remote where she dropped it. Flopping down on the sofa, Tia replayed Jody's coquettish demeanor only moments ago in her head. She was pretty sure she read something into it that was never intended to be there. The heiress was a married woman. Her taste in men left a lot to be desired but, that aside, all indications pointed to Jody being straight.

She speculated that even if Jody was remotely interested in women, in *her*, more specifically, their interaction had been minimal and certainly not under the healthiest of circumstances. And, what if the occasion in which they met had been different? Tia wasn't even sure she could do romance anymore. The idea of settling in with a lover who actually meant something was difficult as ever since Maria Maladin, women were nothing but sex objects to her, regarding them and treating them worse than any man she had ever known. Fuck 'em and leave 'em. Anything else was unfathomable to her. Until now.

How could this man have such a gift as his wife seemed to be and not appreciate her? To have such a beautiful and, evidently, loyal woman in his life and in his bed and take that for granted was a display of arrogance that well surpassed anything she could ever achieve. Her hatred for Montgomery was beginning to take on an entirely different level of potency.

Well, it didn't matter. All this mild fantasizing about the heiress was futile and frustrating. The reality was, in that aspect, Mrs. Montgomery was a chimera and Tia might as well resign herself to that and keep her focus on her task of getting them both out of this situation alive.

Turning the television back on, Tia tuned in to the cable news program which was now showing footage of Montgomery leaving the Wainwright estate amid a crush of reporters attempting to stop his vehicle to hopefully interview him. As she watched his black Porsche Cayenne Turbo S slowly push through the crowd of people and equipment, followed by two motorcycle cops, she sneered and popped a lime-flavored corn chip into her mouth. "Fucker," she said to the screen.

When Montgomery reached his residence, he found it crawling with press on the exterior and FBI agents on the interior. He could have been annoyed but he had willingly brought this on himself and actually welcomed the intrusion. He knew they would find nothing incriminating in the house and the sooner they did their search, interviewed all staff members and confiscated Jody's laptop, they would be gone back to the Wainwright estate where all the action really was. He did not have a personal computer as he preferred to do all of his research and communication from his office.

Tomorrow morning, promptly at nine, he would be hooked up to a polygraph and hypnotize himself to believe that every word he was saying was the gospel truth. And while he was in the presence of a group of law enforcement officials, lying his ass off, the ransom call would come in, placing him even farther down the list of suspects. After all, he couldn't be two places at the same time.

After the agents completed their business and left, Montgomery retreated to the privacy of his personal bathroom, turned the shower on and called Bruce. No one but the maid ever came into his and Jody's bedroom, other than to clean the room and that had already been done. Just to be safe, he made sure he was behind two locked doors, the television was on in the bedroom and the sound of running water drowned out any side of his conversation to anyone in the house. He was pleased to find out that his personal geek was almost finished with his little project, the results of

which seemed very gratifying.

He then phoned his less than enthusiastic cohort on The Quintessence who was clearly feeling no pain.

"You might want to take it easy on the booze there, Ramone."

"Or what? You gonna threaten me with death? Too late, so fuck you." She detested the sound of his voice.

"No, or you're going to run out." He really wasn't in the mood for her contentious and combative attitude. "How's my wife?"

"Not pregnant. What is that about?"

"Don't know how that leaked out. It was something I threw out there this morning at my father-in-law just to rub salt in the wound. So, in order for you to know that, you two must be talking a lot."

"Actually, no, we're not." She wasn't going to give him any more than necessary.

"That's good. No sense in getting too cozy, she's not going to be around that much longer. But then, on the other hand, that would give you free reign to take what you wanted from her...it's not like she's ever going to have the opportunity to tell anyone."

"Is there a purpose for this call other than you trying to make me despise you even more?"

"Just checking in, making sure everything's okay at your end. Tomorrow, I will be calling you with Bruce's number. I'm going to give you the morning's headlines from the Daily Herald and a script of what I want Jody to say. Then you will call Bruce and have her say *exactly* that. I'll see how that's received and take my cue from there. Who knows? If it looks doubtful that they'll pay the ransom, maybe you'll get to kill her by tomorrow night and then you can go on your merry way."

That thought sobered her up somewhat. She couldn't let on to Montgomery that she would execute him before she'd kill his wife. She needed to think. There had to be something she could get on this bastard that was provable. Until then, she needed to continue sounding ruthless and normal. "What about my money?"

"Don't worry about your fucking money, Ramone. You'll get paid regardless of what happens to Jody."

"Good. Anything else? Because it's time to feed my prisoner."

"Nope. Just make sure you are up and sober by seven. That phone call to Bruce is going to be the key to this whole scheme."

"Don't worry about me." She poked around the galley for something she could bring Jody for a substantial evening meal.

"Of course I worry about you. You'd turn on me in a second if you had the chance." Dead silence on the other end of the line confirmed his sentiment. "Yeah. Just what I thought. That's why I'm not going to let you get the chance."

"If you're finished -"

"Yes, I'm finished. Go have fun with my wife now."

She could hear the lewdness in his voice. She wanted to throw the phone against a wall and break it into a million pieces. "Fuck you."

"Your welcome."

Chapter Twelve

Dignity is one thing that cannot be preserved in alcohol

Once again, Tia left Jody a tray of food for her to eat, alone, politely but firmly refusing to be drawn into a conversation, despite her captive's persistent and charming attempts. When she returned to retrieve the tray, the ex-operative brought with her a Sapporo and a champagne split. If the little heiress wanted to chat, Tia had some specific subjects she wanted to discuss.

After shutting the door behind her, Tia was a little surprised to see Jody seated on the side of the berth, looking toward the porthole, not paying any attention to her. "You okay?"

"Do you really care?" Jody's voice was soft, almost detached.

"I have to care. You're my responsibility until this is over, so it's up to me to keep you safe. And well."

The heiress bowed her head and then swiveled her body to face Tia. This time when their eyes connected, Jody saw beyond the impassible gaze that had stopped her cold the first time. She was mistaken. There *was* a spark of life there, after all. Might as well get the hard questions out of the way first. "Are you going to kill me?"

The terrified look behind the inquisitive green eyes made Tia want to run to her, envelop her into a tight hug and tell her no, that she was going to try to make everything okay. Tia shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She had to be careful how she answered, as until she devised a plan, she may have to use the heiress' fear to her advantage. It actually might be the only way to save Jody's life. "If everybody does what they are supposed to, you should be fine."

That did not make Jody feel any better. "And if they don't?"

"Do you honestly think they won't? They do know what's at stake here."

"Yes. My life."

Tia studied her, noncommittally. She stepped toward her and extended her hand with the mini champagne bottle in it. She held up the Sapporo with her other hand. "Join me. I have a few things I'd like to ask you."

Staring at the small frosted glass bottle, Jody looked up at Tia. "No, thank you. I'd rather have all my wits together."

"One champagne split gets you drunk?"

"Normally I wouldn't think so but one glass of wine doesn't get me drunk, either. Yet look at the mess that got me into."

"Your wine was drugged." Should Tia have told her that? Oh well, too late now.

Jody figured as much. "How? I never left the table."

"Careful planning is how."

"It was the waiter, wasn't it? He's in on it with you."

Smiling, Tia offered the champagne again. "This isn't drugged. The seal hasn't even been broken. Besides, you're already here. What purpose would I have to drug you?"

Shrugging, the heiress thought if Tia had been a man, there was at least one reason she could think of for wanting her sleepy or unconscious. Looking longingly at the bottle, thinking she really could use something to ease her tension, Jody wondered if this was the only thing that would keep Tia there, talking.

"Come on," Tia coaxed. "Take it and hold on to it. If you don't want it now, save it for later."

Hesitantly, Jody took possession of the bottle. She noticed that Tia appeared less under the influence than she had when she brought her noon meal and her supper yet she was still drinking. Interesting. "So what is it you want to ask me?"

"I was watching your family on the news and -"

"How does my father look?" Jody inquired, worried. The thought of what this must be doing to him nearly choked up the heiress. She took a deep breath and kept her composure.

"Your father? He actually seems to be holding up well at this point." She had to remember that Jody had no access to the news and Tia could tell her anything and the heiress wouldn't know the difference. "I'm more curious about your husband," she brought up, cautiously.

"Tony? Why?"

Taking a long swallow of her Sapporo, Tia said, "I don't know. You two just don't seem to...fit. He somehow seems, well, beneath you."

"Beneath me?" Jody flared. Shades of her mother. "You don't know him," she threw out, defensively.

Neither do you, Tia thought. Aloud, she said, "Hey, relax. I'm just sharing an observation." She wanted to ask the heiress if she loved her husband and why. She wanted to know how Jody could have ended up with such a megalomaniac but she wasn't quite sure how to broach the subject without letting on that she was acquainted with him.

"I think you somehow have gotten the wrong impression of him." Her fingers were nervously playing with the foil protecting the cork in the bottle. Her curiosity was getting the better of her, though, and she was interested to know why Tia had come to that conclusion about her husband. The ex-operative raised an eyebrow as she took another drink, a disbelieving countenance that prompted Jody to ask, "How can you think that about someone you've never even met?"

"Call it a hunch."

"A hunch?" Jody repeated, incredulously. "That's rather unfair, don't you think?"

"Perhaps. But I'm usually pretty accurate with my hunches."

The heiress remained silent, wanting to tell Tia that it wasn't so much that Tony was beneath her, it was more that Tony wasn't suited to her and there were several reasons for that, none of which she was going to get into with this stranger. No matter how attractive and compelling she was. Jody then blinked a few times, wondering why she was thinking of her captor in terms of being attractive, even if her dark beauty couldn't be denied. Under the circumstances, those thoughts were inappropriate and definitely out of place. "Well...you're not accurate with this one," she said, finally, not sounding the least bit convincing.

"Do you love him?" Tia had to know.

Jody's eyes flashed up at Tia. "That's none of your business." Again, the ex-operative had stepped into somewhat sacred territory but it had nothing to do with invading Jody's privacy.

"My asking you whether or not you love your husband is none of my business?" Tia repeated for clarification. "Well, most women wouldn't have a problem telling anyone and everyone that she loved her husband, so I guess I got my answer."

Flustered, Jody peeled the foil off the cork and twisted the stopper out of the bottle, the action making a soft popping sound as Tia continued to search her face for any signs of ostentation. There didn't seem to be any and instead, she found her almost humble. As the nonplussed heiress took a sip, the former CIA officer smiled at her captive. She certainly was unnerving her.

"You could obviously have the pick of any man in the universe. Why would you marry and stay with a man you don't even love?"

"I never said I didn't love him," Jody protested, taking a longer swallow, avoiding eye contact with her captor.

"You didn't have to."

"Why are you asking me these questions?" She glanced back up at Tia, puzzled by her amused expression.

Shrugging, Tia said, "You wanted to talk. We're talking."

"What possible difference could whether or not I love my husband make?" Finally, she looked directly into Tia's eyes and stopped breathing at the raw, smoldering, sexuality that adorned her captor's face. This time, in her eyes, she saw something else, something predatory and it sent a shiver down her spine. It gave her a small idea of the many things of which this woman just might be capable. Kidnapping, murder...what else? In order for her to breathe again, she needed to break the spell and look away. With great difficulty, Jody then concentrated on the bottle in her tight grasp.

I bet I could seduce you right now, Tia thought, having recognized the familiar yield in the heiress' bearing. But if she did, she wanted to make sure that Jody's submission would be out of want, not fear. Although sometimes overly eager to make the conquest, Tia had never crossed that line into rape and didn't intend to start now. Especially not with this woman and not with the amount of alcohol in her system. If it was to be, this was an encounter in which Tia wanted to recall every detail, unlike her subjects in her recent past where she could not have cared less about the particulars, just in getting off.

Draining her beer bottle, dangling it between her thumb and forefinger, Tia leaned against the vanity. "It makes no difference. I'm just confused. Honestly, I don't understand the attraction to men, period, but I find it curious that a woman, such as you, would marry a man she didn't love. I'm sure there wasn't a lack of suitors. You're still young, there's a whole world of guys out there. Why this one?"

She had suspected that Tia might be a lesbian but now, in so many words, she had admitted it. Those blue eyes boring through her were almost too much. As if being abducted and held for ransom wasn't stressful enough... "You don't understand. Marriage was expected of me..."

"And he was convenient?"

"My father thought so."

Tia's eyebrows knitted. "Was your marriage arranged?"

"In a manner of speaking." Why was she telling her captor all this? She still couldn't look at her. It was disturbing enough knowing she was under the scrutiny of those exquisite eyes.

"There had to be other choices," Tia stated, a little blown away by this information. Why would someone of Jody's social and financial stature have to have a husband picked out for her? And what kind of deal had her father made with the devil to hook her up with Montgomery?

"I'd rather not talk about this," the heiress said finally, bravely. "What about you? I bet the choices you make about...partners...aren't always perfect."

Cheeky little thing, Tia mused, as memories of the unseemly women she'd had since Maria Maladin sifted through her brain. "People don't usually warm up to me." She anticipated a sarcastic comeback from her captive, expected her to say something like, 'Well, what do you expect?'

Instead, the demure blonde took that moment to stare directly into Tia's eyes and in a gentle tone said, "If you don't have fire in yourself, you can't very well warm others, now can you?" This time it was Jody's gaze that was too intense and it was Tia who had to look away. The heiress felt heat rise to her face that she conveniently blamed on the champagne.

Tia knew if she did not leave that room right then, she would be too tempted to approach her captive and do something she might regret. In her inebriated state and hopeful frame of mind, she may have been completely mistaken regarding her seduction odds and there was no way she was going to purposely make this ordeal any more traumatic for the heiress.

Nodding, the ex-operative picked up the tray she had brought in earlier and headed for the door. Surprisingly parched, despite the amount she had been drinking, her question came out in a full rasp. "Anything you need before I lock you in for the night?"

"No," Jody replied, quietly. "Thank you."

Totally perplexed by the interaction that had just taken place between Tia and her, Jody finished her drink, and returned to her berth to lie down. She found Tia fascinating and, even though she fully understood that her captor was not her friend but instead someone who could end her life, Jody was still drawn to her strength of character, regardless of how jaundiced it may have been. And, there was something else she was drawn to but the heiress wasn't ready to confront that yet.

Tia's interest in her marriage to Tony still puzzled her. She had asked some pointed questions that seemed to get right to the heart of the sham of her being Mrs. Montgomery. Very perceptive of her. But why? Tia was holding her hostage, shouldn't she be inquiring about, well, other

things, things pertaining to security and finances?

And what was this odd *kinship* she was experiencing toward this ominously feral and strangely magnetic woman? What was she really seeing in those mesmerizing pastel eyes that could one minute appear dull and lifeless and the next be blazing with intensity?

Folding her hands behind her head, Jody spent the next couple of hours in deep contemplation. She knew sleep would be elusive without her medication, despite how tired she was, so she might as well put her solitude and waking hours to good use.

She wished Tia had at least left her CD player in the room. Some music to help divert her mind from her possible imminent death would have been nice right now.

She had been topside, reclining, looking up at the black, starless sky, a position she had occupied for hours, ever since she left the master berth. She had finished her oil can of Sapporo ten minutes after she had ascended the deck and held onto it, mindlessly, her thoughts clearer than they had been in months. Tia needed to find something on Montgomery that was not connected to this abduction, something on him that was not tied to her, something she could use against him. She wondered if this Bruce guy had any information that might be helpful and, if he did, would he be willing to share. She would be speaking with him briefly tomorrow. Her question now was should she take the chance that his allegiance to Montgomery was as coerced as hers was.

But what was really driving her was that she wanted the little heiress. Bad. And, unrealistically, she wanted Jody to want her, too. Unlike her recent past, however, what she was feeling was more than mere lust, it was deeper. In any other situation, she would dismiss the idea that she felt something other than sexual for a woman she had just met a day earlier as ridiculous. The overwhelming longing that was caressing her heart for Jody Montgomery felt almost...ethereal. Had Tia been brought to this moment for a reason? No, she didn't believe in fate, because if she did, she might have thought that she and the heiress were predestined to meet. But if that were true, why under these conditions? And when would Jody recognize it? How could she prove to this woman that they should be together? Because just as sure as Montgomery wanted his wife out of his future, Tia knew her future was supposed to have Jody in it.

For the first time in many months, she had lost the urge to drink herself unconscious.

Chapter Thirteen

People determine your character by observing what you stand for, fall for and lie for

Bruce nervously awaited the phone call from the former CIA operative to whom he had

spinelessly directed his boss. It didn't matter if she knew it was he who got her into this mess, he acknowledged it and felt enough guilt for both of them. It didn't matter that the heiress wasn't going to die from an act committed directly by him because indirectly he would be just as responsible as Tia Ramone.

Checking once again to make sure he had all his programs ready, he glanced at his watch again. It should be anytime now.

Montgomery had phoned Tia with the morning headlines and she dutifully copied the words Jody would be speaking to Bruce so that he could prepare the next call to the Wainwright residence, the one that would demand a ransom and start the ball rolling for the real search to begin. When he was satisfied that the former operative had recorded everything properly, he hung up and headed out the door on his way to the Wainwright estate, where he would be right in the middle of his polygraph when the ransom call came in.

Just a couple more days and his life would be his own again.

Tia was actually civil to Montgomery but she wasn't sure if that was due to not waking up with a hangover for the first time in she couldn't remember when or the fact that it was too early to work up the proper amount of hostility. Writing down, verbatim, everything he told her, she then clicked the phone shut and went to the master berth to wake up the heiress.

Knocking on the door, she was surprised to hear an alert voice telling her to come in. Entering, she found Jody, freshly showered and in a change of clothes that unintentionally showed off the little blonde's physical attributes. Trying not to stare at the obvious, Tia cleared her throat and looked at the heiress' face, who actually smiled at her. This was an expression she had not seen yet and it startled her. A smile? For her? Perfect, white teeth were revealed behind rose colored lips that enhanced all of Jody's already lovely, unblemished features and Tia was positive her heart actually stopped for a minute. Recovering, she returned her attention to the note in her hand as she approached her captive.

"No breakfast?" Jody wondered, feeling unusually peckish but not looking forward to that horrible cup of sludge. She was about to ask Tia what exactly she did to make the coffee so awful when her captor held out a piece of paper to her.

"We have to do this first." She did her best to sound professional and indifferent. But standing next to the heiress took everything she had to behave herself. Off Jody's quizzical look, she said, "I need you to say these words exactly as they are written and I need you to sound as though you are not being forced to say them."

The bright expression disappeared from Jody's face as she accepted the paper from Tia. Reading the contents of the message, reality washed over her once more that she was a prisoner and that

the woman standing next to her was her warden. She had decided some time around three A.M. that she would continue to try and pull Tia from her inhuman side, hopefully wearing her down so that she would reconsider killing her if it came to that. The words she was going to have to repeat quickly reminded her that her captor was in a business deal and one her life depended on.

"Will I be speaking to my father?" she inquired, her tone now disheartened.

"No. You actually won't be speaking to anyone but you need to say it as though you are. I want you to read it over a few times and get comfortable with the words so that it doesn't sound like you're reciting it."

Jody stopped short of glaring at her. "Get comfortable with the words? You think I'm going to be comfortable saying, 'Daddy, you need to pay the ransom or they will kill me'?" Shaking her head and folding her arms, the heiress said, "I don't want to say that."

Please don't start getting rebellious on me now, Tia thought. She had to play tough. Narrowing her eyes, she stood up straight, her bearing immediately becoming ominous. Firmly, but only with enough pressure necessary to get Jody's attention, she took her captive's chin between her thumb and forefinger, forcing the heiress to look at her. "There is no negotiation here. You will say what is written. I don't care how you manage it but just do it. If you don't get it right the first time, we will continue to do it until you do. Got it?"

Nodding, Jody understood that any resistance, no matter how mild, would not be tolerated. As Tia removed her hand, Jody bowed her head, angry and embarrassed. Silently reading over what she was expected to say, the heiress advised Tia that she was ready.

"Let me hear it first." It wasn't a request and Jody did as she was told. "Okay." Tia displayed her cell phone. "I'm going to make a call. When I hold the phone to your mouth, I want you to say that exactly as you just read it. No short cuts, no embellishments."

Still chagrined from Tia's admonition, Jody said, "Yes, Ma'am."

Sighing, the ex-operative, shook her head. "Jody, this isn't a game. I have to have your cooperation. I can almost guarantee that, given the choice, you don't want to say or do anything I ask of you. But," she added for effect, "if you want to stay alive, you are going to have to do as I tell you."

There was that message again, the scary one reminding her that this woman held her life in her hands. "I understand."

"Good." Tia searched her face, seeing no more insurrection there. Jody's expression reflected a fear that Tia immediately wanted to kiss away. Instead, she stayed on course with the inevitable call. Dialing the number Montgomery had given her, the phone was answered in one ring. When she heard a baritone voice greet her, she responded with, "It's Tia. You ready?"

"Yep, put her on."

Tia placed the phone to Jody's lips and the heiress began to recite, "It's Sunday, July sixteenth. The headline in today's Herald is Wainwright Heiress Missing, Police Step Up Search and right below that is Discovery Astronauts Prepare For Fourth Spacewalk. Hi Daddy. Please don't talk, just listen. I have been abducted. I don't know who my captors are. I'm fine right now and I'm being treated well but unless you pay them what they ask, I won't be. They have told me that they will kill me." Her voice broke. "Please, Daddy, do what they tell you. I love you."

Tia took the phone away and spoke into it. "Get what you need?"

"Got it," Bruce replied.

"Great," Tia told him, unenthusiastically, as she terminated the call. She looked at her captive, the stress of it all getting to her. Jody tried to control her tears, clamping her hand over her mouth as though that would dam up the flood from her eyes. The ex-operative used massive restraint in not going to her and wrapping her into a comforting hug. "Jody, you know your father will come through." Her tone was as close to consoling as she felt she could be without stepping into compassionate territory.

"I'm sure he will try," she got out, getting control of herself. "I still don't understand why you will take a ransom from him and not from me."

"I told you, it really isn't about the money."

"What *is* it about?" She asked, desperately.

"I can't tell you that." Turning, Tia walked toward the door. "I'm going to bring you some breakfast but only if you're going to eat it."

Jody thought about it. She was upset but she was still hungry. "Do we have any bagels?"

"I'll have to look again but I think there are some plain bagels up there."

"Could I have a bagel, toasted with butter, please?"

"Sure."

"Do you cook eggs?"

"Not anything you'd want to eat." Tia smirked.

Jody nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. She had stopped crying. She reached for a tissue. "Is there any yogurt?"

"I'll check. Anything else?" Tia put her hand on the door handle.

"Yes. Your coffee sucks."

Tia couldn't help herself and let go with an uncharacteristic, delightful chuckle as she locked Jody back in. The sound of the dark, brooding woman laughing elicited a strange reaction in the heiress. Amid the severity of the situation she was now in, she found herself smiling, as well.

Filtering out any background noises from the segment of Jody's call that could even remotely be recognizable, Bruce prepared the application for the ransom demand. His computer would be asking one of the richest men in the world for five hundred million dollars in exchange for his daughter's safe return. Five hundred million dollars. Montgomery had promised him five million of that. If there was any consolation to what he was doing, the payoff would be it. If only it could buy off his conscience.

The speech the heiress gave took up fifteen seconds which gave him forty-four seconds or less to make sure the guidelines of the script Montgomery provided him with were met. Since he was controlling the pace of the conversation, that wouldn't be a problem.

Tomorrow, when he called back with the instructions of what to do with the money, hopefully Wainwright wouldn't fool around and by Tuesday this would be over and he would be a millionaire. He tried not to think about his fortune balancing on the murder of an innocent woman. Would every time he spent some of this blood money, drive it home even further just how he had 'earned' it?

Suddenly he found himself nauseous and wished he knew a way out of this that wouldn't get him arrested or killed.

The FBI polygrapher was considerably younger than Montgomery had expected him to be. Not that it made any difference. Even an inexperienced examiner trained in reading the machine could tell when the instrument was recording deceptive responses.

The last time Montgomery was hooked up to a polygraph, when he was questioned on his honesty and ethics before winning a government contract for being allowed to distribute certain controlled narcotics, it was an analog machine. Now he was being connected to a digital system, a laptop computer, the needles and scrolling paper replaced by algorithms that would monitor his blood pressure/heart rate, respiratory rate and electro-dermal activity. His hands never sweat so that would be the least of his worries. He really wasn't concerned, anyway. As a practiced liar, he didn't need to put antiperspirant on his fingers or a tack in his shoe to counteract his reactions, he was an expert on deceptive behavior. After all, he had completely fooled his wife, his in-laws and the staff of his legitimate business all these years, so the normal involuntary, stress-related responses that told the examiner his or her subject was lying were something he knew he could control. Regardless of the sophistication of the equipment.

As the pneumographs and the blood pressure cuff were applied to Montgomery by the forensic psychophysiological, the FP explained to the heiress' husband that he would be looking for fluctuation in specific physiological activity. He was a personable guy and tried to put Montgomery at ease, as he would all of the people he would test today. He may have been young but he was aware that the anxiety brought on in anticipation of taking a polygraph could sometimes bring out responses that indicated deception and how he conducted himself and how he presented the questions could influence the results.

Mr. Montgomery would be his first subject but his responsibility didn't stop with just preparing the husband and asking him questions. He was also a trained profiler who analyzed and evaluated the test results. He administered a pre-test, asking Montgomery more generalized questions, getting to know him a little bit, asking him about his side of the events that led him to be sitting in that chair. Then how Montgomery responded to him determined how he designed his questions. When he started the actual exam, he would ask a dozen or so questions only four or five of which really pertained to the investigation, the rest being what were known as control questions, broad inquiries where a lie or truth could easily be detected.

If all else failed, Montgomery knew his attorney could easily discredit the results of the polygraph, which was inadmissible in a court of law but that widely known fact would not let him off the hook as a possible suspect in his wife's kidnapping. So, in order to avoid the FBI's further scrutiny, there was no margin for error in how he came across during this exam.

He took a deep breath and put on his best nervous smile for the FP. Let the games begin.

[Continued...](#)

[Cheyne's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)

~ Clandestine ~

by Cheyne

Whenpiggsfly55@aim.com

Disclaimer and author notes: [See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Fourteen

To know what is right and not do it, is as bad as doing wrong.

Both John Wainwright and the FBI listened to the phone call from the kidnapper and Jody. The multi-billionaire nearly wept as he heard his daughter's frightened voice crack. Sondra Wainwright nearly fainted when she heard the amount of money the abductors were asking not

to kill her daughter. The federal technicians started the trace immediately, staring at their screen and then each other in disbelief when the results pinpointed a business district in Shanghai, China.

"Is that possible?" An agitated Wainwright asked Walt Sanborn after the call had ended and the terms of the ransom demand were discussed. "Could they be holding her in China?"

"Anything is possible. They certainly would have had enough time to get her there. We'll contact our office at the embassy and get them going on this. My gut tells me she's still here, though, still in the U.S., probably still in this state. The abductor's voice sounds almost, well, artificial -"

"Artificial? What does that mean?" Wainwright was confused.

"Not real. We're not talking to a real person. The voice could be computer generated. For example, if you call for train reservations, there's an automated voice that talks to you, interacting with your responses. The vocal inflections and lilts are different than with an actual person. I think that's what we're dealing with here."

"But Jody's voice was real," Wainwright protested.

"Yes, that was obviously her. I will talk to my analysts. Her voice could have been pre-recorded, although since she did have the proper headlines from this morning's local paper, that indicates to me that if it was pre-recorded, it most likely wasn't that long ago."

Wainwright shook his head. "I don't understand. You think these kidnappers really don't exist?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Wainwright, I'm sure they exist. They are just using modern technology as opposed to tradition to do their dirty work."

"But if she's still here, how could the call come from China?"

"Cleverly. We're obviously dealing with people who are not to be taken for granted."

"So, in a nutshell, with all of your electronic, digital and scientific methods, you are no closer to finding my daughter than you were yesterday afternoon, when you had no information at all."

"Mr. Wainwright, you need to give us a chance to dissect the data we just received so that we have a better idea -"

"I don't want you to have an idea! I want you to know! I want my daughter back! Alive!"

"Yes, Sir, I understand that but -"

"But nothing! You're advising me not to pay a ransom and right now, that's the only resolution that I see. I will call my lawyer and financial advisor and have them start getting the money together."

"Mr. Wainwright, again I must highly advise against that."

Outraged, John Wainwright put his face close to Walt Sanborn's. "Then find her, Goddamn it, find her before tomorrow's phone call or you won't be running the show!"

Special Agent Sanborn stood there, watching the irrational billionaire walk away from him. He wasn't sure who was turning out to be more difficult to deal with - the emotional, illogical Wainwright or his detached, shrew of a wife. At least the heiress' husband was willing to listen to reason. Letting out a long, exasperated breath, he turned and walked back to the command center to talk to his team.

Tia had found some vanilla yogurt and toasted a bagel which she brought to her captive. The more she saw the heiress, the guiltier she was feeling. She had decided that, right now, she needed to spend as little time as possible with Jody as her senses were quickly approaching overload, torn between her desire to stay sober and really work on a plan to get them out of this mess or to get rip-roaring drunk and fuck her captive senseless. So, as not to tempt herself, she stayed in the master berth only long enough to deliver the tray and then she left, returning to the salon to pace and think.

She knew she had to call Bruce back, had to find out how deep he was in this thing and what, if anything, he was willing to do to get out of it. The problem was, if Bruce was lacking as many scruples as Montgomery, she could be opening a whole new can of worms by trying to enlist his help. He could tip off Montgomery that she was fishing for a way out behind his back, searching for something, anything, she could get on the bastard to use as collateral.

On the other hand, Montgomery did not seem the type to want to share anything equally and that included responsibility. She bet that Bruce was in similar circumstances as she, the details of which could be anything. If he was being threatened by Jody's husband to 'do this or else,' he might be more than willing to work with her against Montgomery. After all, there was strength in numbers, even if the total only was two. Or he could be a coward and refuse to betray this monster, thinking he really would get a reward. Was she ready to take that chance?

God, she wanted a drink. But she needed a clear head to think this through.

It had not taken Jody long to finish her breakfast, Tia's brief appearance leaving her perplexed while she ate. Her captor was so hot and cold, mostly the latter, and she never knew what to expect when Tia entered the room.

Oddly enough, she found herself actually looking forward to the tall woman's visits. Jody tried to convince herself that was due to feeling isolated and any company was better than nothing. Realistically, she knew it was more than that. Tia aroused her curiosity in the most engaging way

with her daunting yet...*protective*...demeanor. Jody realized that although her captor frightened her, she also fascinated her.

Jody was discovering that she wanted to know what made Tia tick for more than just using the information for her survival. Yet she couldn't define exactly why she wanted to know. Something changed when Tia alluded to her lesbianism, something that made Jody want to practically interrogate Tia about her orientation and how and when she knew. There were so many questions the heiress had about herself and even though the woman holding her hostage probably wasn't the best source, she was the first person Jody had met that she didn't feel would judge, criticize or demean her for her curiosity.

When Tia came back for her breakfast dishes, Jody was disappointed when her captor picked up the tray, advised her she would be back with her lunch in a few hours and exited the room without further conversation. Common sense told her she should be grateful for the limited contact but, instead, she felt neglected and very, very alone.

The solitude gave her too much time to think about her immediate future, wondering if she even had one.

Montgomery had returned downstairs to all the activity with the knowledge that he had passed his polygraph, not that there was ever any doubt. Wainwright was now in the upstairs study behind closed doors, where the lie detector had been set up, being grilled by the forensic psychophysicologist and after him, it was Sondra's turn.

He sought out Agent Marciano to find out what he had missed during his morning in the box. The young fed filled him in on the ransom call and what they had determined from it. It didn't bother Montgomery that they had figured out so soon that the voice setting up the terms of the abduction was synthetic, nor did it faze him that they realized quickly the call didn't really originate from Asia. They were still no closer to finding his wife and by the time they had unraveled the mystery, the ransom would be paid and she *and* his accomplices would be dead.

Montgomery was being kept abreast of the hunt for his wife and any other areas that the CIRT group felt was pertinent for him to know. Not wanting the search teams to happen onto The Quintessence by accident, he decided to take that out of the equation ASAP.

He casually mentioned the supposition of Jody just getting fed up and running away. He continued by telling Marciano that she had been acting a little strange the last few weeks, acting unusually antsy. Maybe it was the pregnancy, he went on, he heard women got a little crazy with the sudden hormonal changes and knowing the responsibility of bringing a Wainwright heir into the world may have been too much pressure for her. She was a lot more mentally fragile than even her parents knew, he advised the agent.

"Do you think she would set all this up herself just to get lost for a while? No disrespect, Sir, but that would be a federal offense."

"Nothing her father couldn't get her out of. She pleads temporary insanity, agrees to get help, the attorneys on retainer do their legal magic and it all disappears."

Shaking his head in disbelief, Marciano still didn't want to discount even the slightest possibility of that scenario. "Hypothetically speaking, if she did something like that, any idea where she might go?"

"Well, to start, has anybody checked the family's three yachts?"

Chapter Fifteen

Courage is being the only one who knows you're afraid

"Goddamn it! Fucking son-of-a-bitch!" Tia swore, clicking the phone shut. She really could not believe Montgomery was actually bringing the FBI directly to her. She did understand the theory behind it but it didn't make the reality of it any easier. Moving quickly around the deck and the interior of the yacht, she picked up any mess she had previously made, using the trash compactor to get rid of it. She then did a quick tidying up of the stateroom she had been sleeping in. Performing a spot check walk-through, satisfied with her hasty cleaning job, she then walked down to Jody's room.

Unlocking the door, opening it wide, leaving it in that position, she didn't bother knocking, announcing herself or trying to determine where the heiress was in the room, she just barged in with a purpose. She headed right toward Jody, who backed up against the wall, startled by Tia's unexpected aggressiveness. Grabbing Jody's upper arm, pulling her along, Tia moved first to the head, as she quickly wiped down any excess water with the bath towel Jody had used that morning. She then removed any dirty clothes from the hamper.

Coming back into the stateroom, opening a closet door, she placed the items in the very back behind a stack of shoeboxes. The ex-operative then began searching through drawers. "I need scarves, kerchiefs, anything along that line, where can I find them?"

"Why?" Jody asked, suddenly afraid of the savage look in Tia's eyes. She couldn't have known that expression had nothing to do with her.

"Where?" Tia stopped short of yelling, trying to convey an urgency, her grip on Jody's arm tightening.

Leading her to one of the storage containers under her berth, Jody pulled out several silk scarves as Tia removed the entire drawer and then sat Jody down on the bed, binding her feet together. "What are you doing?" Now she was beyond alarmed, her heart in her throat.

"Just don't ask and do what I say." Finishing her knot, Tia grabbed for another scarf.

"Please don't do this," Jody begged, hanging on to the last shred of composure she possessed, as Tia tied her hands.

"Shhhh, shhhh, I have to, okay?" Tia was surprised at how soothing her own tone of voice was. "No debate here. If you do exactly as I say, you'll be fine. If you don't? I'll have to hurt you."

Jody's eyes grew wide, terrified of what that might possibly mean. So far, Tia had been benevolent toward her, had treated her with as much respect as the situation would allow. However, she had caught a glimpse of the taller woman's temper and strength and did not want to test their boundaries. "Why are you doing this?"

"My source tells me that this boat is going to be boarded. You can't be found here and neither can I. This will only take as long as it takes for them to walk through and make sure you aren't here."

After tying a gag around Jody's mouth, Tia carefully laid her down on the floor, gently pushing her into the compartment, face first, and then slid in behind her, pulling the drawer closed as she inched them in. The quarters were so close that both women were tight up against each other, Tia knowing Jody had to feel every curve of her body touching Jody's back. Reaching over the heiress, Tia pushed the opposite drawer out slightly, so that she could reposition herself, using the least amount of space possible and then she pulled that drawer to her, securing them in total darkness, inside the bed. Not wanting to lay on her right arm for fear it would go to sleep, Tia maneuvered it so that it snaked under Jody's neck and around to cup Jody's left shoulder, her left arm around Jody's waist to hold them tightly together. Jody had no choice but to rest her head on Tia's bicep, leaving Tia now breathing into Jody's hair.

They could not see each other but a visual was not necessary as both were very aware of the full body contact. They could feel each other breathe, hear each other's heartbeat, sense each other's apprehension about being that close. Tia's desire to kiss the back of Jody's head, to nuzzle her neck, to run her hands over the body in her arms was overwhelming. They torturously maintained that position for ten minutes before they heard conversation in the distance, indicating there was now someone else on the yacht.

As the voices and the footsteps got closer, Tia regulated her breathing and gently put her index finger to Jody's top lip, who also forced herself to draw shallow breaths. Both Tia and Jody started to perspire, each wondering if their thundering heartbeats could be heard outside the compartment. The lack of ventilation and danger of the moment wasn't the only factor causing the women to heat up.

Danny Marciano and another agent accompanied Montgomery on the three yacht tour, starting with The Quintessence. He was sure they would find nothing out of the ordinary but he was grateful to have something to do away from the estate. He had questioned the heiress' husband as to why this boat wasn't anchored with the other two which were right off shore and was fine with

Montgomery's answer that this is where his wife wanted it. Montgomery had also apologized in advance, saying he wasn't sure in what condition the live-in security officer left it before going away on his vacation.

Agent Marciano asked Montgomery who was watching the yacht while the guard was away and Montgomery told him that he was trying to keep an eye on it himself while Kevin was gone, he'd try to get out here once a day on his lunch break. He then admitted that his schedule had not permitted him to leave work and he had skipped a day or two, trusting that no one would bother it, being where it was.

The two agents boarded The Quintessence and walked through while Montgomery waited on the bridge. He was tempted to go with them, to make sure they didn't find anything but he was pretty confident that Tia would keep herself and his wife out of sight and quiet, for her own safety as well as his.

It took them a total of fifteen minutes to search the yacht, not surprised that they didn't find anyone aboard or anything strangely out of place. While the other agent looked behind closed doors, Marciano also went through the motions of a half-hearted search, including tugging out the drawers under the berths. Seeing them filled with clothes, he shoved them back in, the one under the bed in the master stateroom stopped from slamming Jody in the face by Tia's hand.

"Why is the TV and stereo system removed from the bedroom and sitting in the living room?" the other agent asked Montgomery.

"Oh...our security person advised me that the room needed to be rewired, he was concerned because the plug kept getting hot, so he just took everything out. I've been meaning to get someone over here to fix it before Jody had her next little party here."

Easily believing him, the two agents were satisfied with their inspection and left to move on to the other two Wainwright yachts.

Pushing the drawer back out, Tia had to use her free arm and foot, which required her to stick her lower leg between Jody's knees to get the proper amount of leverage. If they both didn't feel like they were suffocating, Tia might have opted to stay there a while longer. The body contact had been impossible to put into a decent perspective and Tia keeping her hands to herself, except for what needed to be touching Jody, had been a nearly unattainable exercise in self-control.

When the drawer was free, Tia helped ease Jody forward until her body wormed its way out, Tia right behind her. Standing up, Tia reached down and delicately pulled Jody to her feet. Both women were bathed in sweat and after Tia removed Jody's gag, she ran her thumb smoothly over a red mark next to Jody's mouth left by the scarf and then guided a wisp of wet hair behind Jody's ear.

"Are you okay?" Tia inquired, untying Jody's hands, then her feet as the heiress stood before her.

Still reeling from the incident they had just endured together and resulted in them being as intimate as they could get without being naked, Jody couldn't speak, she could only nod. Tia holding her for the last forty-five minutes, saving her from certain pain by halting that drawer being jammed into her and then the almost tender touching of her hair, Jody's head was spinning from the sensation that was now encompassing her entire body. She felt faint and sat down on the bed before she passed out.

Tia noticed this and placed her hand on her captive's shoulder to steady her. "What's wrong?" The question was just a formality as Tia was sure she knew what had happened to Jody. If they were experiencing the same thing, the heiress wasn't weak solely from the sweltering space they had just shared and she wasn't wet just from the perspiration.

"I don't know," Jody finally answered. "I felt a little dizzy. Probably too much..." She pointed down, toward the vacancy left by the drawer. "...of that."

Tia wondered if she had purposely left that statement up to interpretation. She reached into the refrigerator and plucked out a bottle of water, twisting off the cap, handing it to the heiress. "Rehydrate yourself."

Accepting the bottle from Tia, Jody looked up at her, feeling very indefensible at the moment. "Shouldn't you drink too?"

"Oh, I intend to," Tia told her. She peered down into Jody's questioning eyes. There was a storm raging in her own. She wanted to reach down and caress her captive's face. Instead, she tightly balled up her fist and kept it at her side, hoping to redirect the energy of the licentious tempest brewing within her. Jody's expression told Tia that she felt something, as well.

Something undefinable electrified the air between them and it jolted both women to their cores. Seconds seemed like hours as neither could break eye contact. A current traveled through Jody's body in a continual loop that damned near set her blood on fire. She had never experienced anything quite like it.

What the hell was happening in that room? Jody was encountering a fluttering in her stomach that she only got when a situation sexually excited her. She closed her eyes and tried to will it away. It had to be fear. Or fatigue.

Jody indirectly looked at Tia again, avoiding that sapphire gaze that had so stirred her before and was continuing to have a profound effect. It was an impossibly sultry expression which, once again, left the heiress breathless.

Jody's undisguised reaction to her prompted Tia to cut their interaction short. She really did not trust herself alone with her captive anymore. "I'll bring back some lunch for you."

"I'm...I'm too upset to eat," Jody admitted.

"Then I will be back at suppertime with something for you."

"Okay." She watched her captor's back as she walked to the door. "Tia?"

"Yeah?" Tia turned toward her voice but would not look at her.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Stopping that drawer from hurting me."

"I told you I need to keep you safe and well until this is over."

"I think it's more than that. I think that deep down inside, you're a decent person."

"You're wrong. Anything else?"

"I'm not wrong," Jody argued, quietly.

Not responding to that, Tia closed the door behind her, locking it.

Jody again sat on her berth, stunned. She could not believe this. Taking a long drink of the cold water, which did nothing to help cool her elevated body temperature, she pondered the spot she was now in. To say her life was certainly a mess was a gross understatement.

Yet more troubling, more *disturbing* than the fact that she had been abducted and had no idea what the immediate future held for her welfare, was her unmistakable attraction to the woman who was holding her hostage. What was that about? Jody tried to shake the thoughts out of her system, horrified that she had clearly been aroused by the woman who might very well kill her. It had to be because she was scared and tired and her emotions were all over the place.

Yes, this woman was coarsely stunning and she had an obvious commanding presence but to feel such an unexpected...*desire*...for her? No. It had to be something else. It had to be just her reaction to those suggestive blue eyes reflecting the tall woman's own libidinous inclinations.

Shaking the absurdity of those thoughts from her brain, Jody retreated to the head to take another shower. She would definitely use more cold water than hot this time.

Chapter Sixteen

Choice, not chance, determines destiny.

Tia had started drinking heavily the rest of the day after she had showered the sweat from her overheated body. She had been trying to stay away from the booze, trying to keep a clear head, trying not to act on the personal feelings she had been rapidly developing toward her captive but it was too much. She wasn't that strong yet.

The beguiling blonde hadn't turned out to be quite the pretentious bitch Montgomery had made her out to be. On the contrary, she appeared to be one of the nicest, most down-to-earth women the former operative had ever met. Tia was quickly reaching a point where she knew she couldn't do this anymore.

Jody was petrified and that was obvious to Tia regardless of how the heiress tried to disguise it. The ex-officer was being besieged with an acute attack of conscience and suddenly she knew she wanted not only a whole new deal, she wanted a whole new deck of cards. She poured herself one more shot of the good stuff and chased it down with the rest of her beer.

Tia had just settled onto the bridge, placing the scotch bottle on the small table beside her seat, one that faced the vast expanse of the ocean, when the cell phone rang. She clenched her teeth and drew in a deep breath. She really did hate this man. As she reached back into the refrigerator for a cold beer, she answered the phone. "Yeah?"

"Nice job, Ramone. If they suspected anything, they hid it well so I think you're safe there until we conclude this little operation." Montgomery was clearly very pleased with himself.

"Define safe," she growled at him, opening her beer and taking a long pull.

"Are you always this surly?" He sounded amused. "I would think after having to be in such close proximity to my wife that you would be thanking me."

"If you think your wife so fucking hot, why the hell do you want her dead?" She spit out.

"Although she is a delectable little morsel, I can get that anywhere."

"And you think I can't? I've got news for you -"

"Yeah, whatever. I'm not wasting time arguing with you about whose is bigger. So how is the little woman after her ordeal this afternoon?"

She was tired of his arrogance and smugness so she decided to try a different approach. "You'll be happy to know that she was all over me. So your wish finally came true." There was dead silence on the other end of the line, which actually made Tia smile. "What's the matter, Montgomery? Cat got your tongue? I thought you'd be happy to know a certain pussy had mine, too."

"You're kidding me," he said, finally, his tone one of disbelief. "You *are* kidding me, right?"

"I thought this was what you wanted, what you fantasized about. Yeah, she's quite the hot little

ticket. Very responsive. I guess being so close to me in that tiny compartment triggered something in her. I have to tell you, Montgomery, she's very, very eager to please. Why you'd want to get rid of that, I don't know."

His voice seemed strangled. "You're telling me that my wife fucked you?"

"No. I fucked her but I left her wanting. I'm sure tonight when I go back for more, it will be a different story."

He snorted. "Now I know you're kidding me. You can't be talking about my wife. Beautiful, yes. Phenomenal body, yes. But she's more than a little boring in bed."

"Maybe in *your* bed." Tia reveled in the mute response from Montgomery.

Finally, tightly, he said, "Did you rape my wife, Ramone?"

"You can't rape the willing. And besides, why are you sounding pissed? Like I said, I thought this is what you wanted." It was just as she suspected. His fantasy was better than the reality. Tia was sure the actual thought of her having sex with his wife wasn't quite as stimulating as he assumed it would be, not for anything else than until Jody was dead, she was still Montgomery's property. And all dirty joking aside, he was a very territorial man. Now that she'd had her fun, she chose to be honest. She didn't want him thinking that, because of this imagined intimacy, Jody would be less afraid or Tia would be less likely to kill her and have him suddenly change his plans. She needed time to think about how to get herself and her captive out of this alive and, hopefully, unharmed. Tia then laughed, the inflection having a cruelty to it. "You're such an idiot, you know that, Montgomery? I haven't touched your wife. She's terrified and I'm keeping her that way," Tia lied. "But thanks for letting me know that you couldn't satisfy your wife in bed."

"I never said that," his voice bordered on defensive. "Even if she did go for women, which she doesn't so I know the only way you'd get her would be by force, she's too damned inhibited to be satisfied in bed."

"No woman is inhibited if she has the right partner."

His smugness returned. "Trust me...if I couldn't open her up, nobody could."

Rolling her eyes, making a quick, silent gesture as though she were a male jerking off, she said, "I'm sure. So...what's on the agenda for tomorrow?"

It was getting chilly after the sun had disappeared from view. Tia looked out at the offing, stood up from the deck chair, hooked the scotch bottle and descended the staircase to the salon. She placed the bottle back in the cupboard and contemplated her next move very carefully. Constant

drinking, recalling the day's events and her conversation with Montgomery about his wife had worked her up to frenzied horniness. Normally, if it had been anyone else, Tia would have accepted the unspoken challenge that Montgomery presented regarding his wife's restraint in bed. But she could not look at Jody as a conquest or as a pawn in Montgomery's sick game.

On the other hand, despite Montgomery, Tia decided she had to have Jody, she could no longer stand that sexually magnetic pull. And she was pretty sure Jody wanted her, too, except Jody wasn't acknowledging it as such. Or maybe she was. The candidly wanton look in her eyes and her distracted, flustered behavior that afternoon after being enclosed in the compartment together and, even the night before, when she said to Tia, *"If you don't have fire in yourself, you can't very well warm others, now can you?"* spoke volumes...or at least it did to the tall, desperately lonely brunette.

She unlocked the master stateroom door quietly and closed it after she'd crossed the threshold. She let her eyes adjust to the dark and then studied the still form of the heiress, supine above the covers. So beautiful, so vulnerable, so trusting in slumber. Tia knew Jody was exhausted, knew she fought losing consciousness for fear of it being her last night's sleep. The first day, Tia wouldn't have cared but now, after a little less than forty-eight hours since she took this woman hostage, Tia knew she wasn't going to, couldn't hurt her. At least not in a violent way. *Something* about Jody Montgomery was drawing her in, was almost *familiar* and, as though she were suddenly on a mission, Tia was overwhelmed by the need to sexually connect with the heiress. She may have been wrong about this but she couldn't stop herself.

Tia settled herself on the bed as lightly as possible so she wouldn't suddenly awaken and startle her captive. She stretched out behind the sleeping form lying on her right side and slowly snuggled in close, up against Jody. Almost instantly, the heiress cuddled back into Tia's body, as though it was routine. Obviously she was still asleep. Gingerly, Tia placed her left hand on Jody's hip and lightly traced a pattern, over her clothing, up to her shoulder, repeating this movement several times. Leaning her head in, she nuzzled the side of Jody's face, inhaling the fragrance of her lightly fruit-scented shampoo. Burying her nose into the short, blonde mane, she began kissing Jody's neck, from her earlobe to her collar bone and that's when she felt the smaller woman start to stir.

As Jody moaned lightly in her sleep, Tia snaked her hand around her captive's waist, securing their bodies closer together. The ex-operative nipped lightly at the inviting, delicate throat displayed before her, following with slow kisses, as her hand found its way under Jody's blouse and connected with warm skin. Feeling the woman in her arms involuntarily shiver, Tia continued her path up the heiress' ribcage to make lazy circles outlining Jody's breast. A smile came to Tia's face as her thumb brushed over a very stiff nipple. Tia cupped Jody's full breast and lightly pinched the erect flesh causing another moan to rise up from deep within Jody's chest.

Propping herself up on her right side to give herself better access, Tia's lips led a trail of more kisses along Jody's cheekbone. She touched the side of Jody's mouth with her own and again, unexpectedly, the heiress turned her face toward Tia, Jody seeming to crave more, direct contact. Tia was amazed to find Jody was still out of it, that the reaction appeared impulsive.

Jody's lips were very soft, very kissable, but Tia had decided that long before the desire to make love to her had practically consumed her. An unexpected thrill surged through her body as she intently pressed her mouth to Jody's and the heiress was responding so positively to her, she had to pull her head back slightly to see if Jody's eyes were open. She was surprised to see that Jody was still, for the most part, asleep.

Tia continued to lovingly assault Jody's mouth as her hand persisted in manipulating the heiress' breasts. Suddenly she felt Jody's fingers on her face, caressing her chiseled cheekbone before finding their way to the back of her head, tangling in her hair. Jody's other hand covered Tia's as it massaged her breast and her lips parted begging for Tia's tongue to come out and play.

Dueling with her captive's sweet, languid tongue, Tia realized that Jody was waking up, albeit slowly. She lingeringly slid her fingers down the front of the heiress' cotton panties, feeling wetness through the material. She slipped her hand inside the undergarment, massaging the moist, soft curls she felt there. It pleased her when Jody arched into her touch, moaning loudly. Slithering two fingers over the well lubricated area, Tia circled and teased Jody's clit, applying a little more pressure each time. The longer the strokes, the more intense the contact, the harder Jody breathed.

Now, wide awake, Jody could not have pushed Tia away even if she'd had the presence of mind to as what she was doing felt so good, so needed, so wanted. Her mild bucking encouraged Tia to continue as Jody could feel the whirlpool of emotions swirling within her body, a sensation between her legs she hadn't felt since she could not remember when, if ever. So fast and so strong was her climax building and pumping through her veins, she thought she would burst.

Tia had stopped kissing Jody to study her expression as she so obviously was reaching the edge. Their eyes locked, Tia's looking ferocious and expectant while Jody's were a mixture of desire, surprise and gratitude - but no apprehension.

Closing her sea green eyes, now darkened by a voracity she never knew existed within her, Jody tilted her head back, opening her mouth to scream her release. Instead, she buried her face in Tia's shoulder, muffling her vocalizations against her captor's jersey, quivering as the orgasm continued to roll through her.

"Come on," Tia whispered into her hair, "let it out. Nobody's going to hear you but me. Let it out."

It was the impossibly sultry voice in which the words were spoken, added to the fact that Tia never stopped stroking her that almost instantly brought Jody right back to coming again. She dug her fingers into Tia's arms, preparing for the sensation to wash over her once more only this time when the climax hit her, she did as Tia suggested and yelled her release with several "Oh gods" "Oh fucks" and "Tias" before she regained control of her senses and her body.

Kissing Jody passionately as she settled down, Tia gratefully - if not somewhat smugly - held Jody as she relaxed back on the bed, occupying the same position she had before they started. Feeling the woman in her arms shuddering again, the former operative rose on one elbow and

looked at her to discover that the heiress was ever-so-quietly weeping.

"Jody...please don't cry," Tia whispered in her ear.

The smaller woman tried to wiggle away from her, tried to move from her captor's embrace, coiling up in a fetal position, folding her arms protectively across her body. "I can't believe I just let you do that." Her voice was hushed and her tone sounded ashamed.

Brushing her lips next to Jody's ear, Tia lightly outlined the delicate shell with the tip of her tongue, feeling the heiress stiffen, not sure whether it was from regret and horror or resisting her own traitorous urges. "It's okay..."

"No," she spat out in an anguished hush, "it is *not* okay. Jesus! What is this...do I have a sign on me that says fuck me while I'm sleeping? Please go. Please, Tia."

Embarrassment and anger burned in the cheeks of the taller woman, who was suddenly sober and momentarily frozen in place. Had she been wrong? Had she just forced herself on someone unable to resist her from fright? No, no, no, she wouldn't be able to live with herself if fear was the cause of the submission. Instinctively she knew it was not the case and she would not leave that room without an explanation from the heiress as to her sudden retreat.

Rolling over Jody's body, Tia straddled her, grabbing Jody's wrists and pinning them to the bed, making the smaller woman focus on her. At first Jody looked so innocent, afraid and exposed. Then she got mad, and tried to fight her way free from the stronger woman's grasp but there was no way she could match the former CIA officer's energy and muscle. "Get off me, Tia! Let me go!!"

"Not until you answer a few questions," Tia told her, evenly, her eyes now ice blue and narrowed. Tia was wrong about a lot of things but she never misread the signal of attraction, almost having a sixth sense about when even the most aloof woman wanted her. She wished the little blonde would stop struggling. Her movement and the action of restraining her was firing up Tia's libido in the worst way. "Why are you so pissed off? You certainly didn't act like it was against your will. If you had told me to stop, I would have."

Scrappling in an attempt to achieve her physical freedom, unable to gain any ground, especially since Tia exerted little effort to hold Jody down, Jody surrendered and stopped wrestling with her captor, the tears beginning again. "I don't want to have these feelings toward you..." she finally admitted, breathing it out as though she had been fighting to keep air in her lungs and had to exhale.

"Why?"

"*WHY?!!!*" Jody almost laughed at the question but thought better of it when she saw that Tia was deadly serious. "You abducted me! You are holding me hostage and you're probably going to kill me once you get the money!" The impact of her own words struck her like a hard slap in the face and her eyes promptly stung with tears again.

Realizing what Jody was saying and fearing, Tia felt the immediate need to comfort and reassure her. She knew she had to tell her she would not only never kill her, she would never allow one hair on her head to be harmed. "Shhhh, shhhh, Jody, no. No." Tia loosened her grip on Jody's wrists. "Listen to me...shhhh." When she had the heiress' undivided attention, she continued. "I'm not going to kill you. I give you my word."

"Your word? Jesus Christ, Tia...!" Jody's expression was incredulous.

"Okay, all right, I know that sounds ridiculous under the circumstances," Tia conceded, "but..." Then the ex-operative thought about what she was saying. Of course it made no sense. She was not exactly exhibiting that she had the heiress' best interest at heart by holding her captive in a secluded, self-contained area until she got paid handsomely for this task. She relaxed her grip even more on Jody's wrists as her anger dissipated. "Jody...I don't want to hurt you. Not any more than I already have."

"Then why are you doing this?" Her words emerged as a hiss but there was a genuine question in her eyes.

"Because your husband is paying me to..." It came out before she thought about it, startled by her own slip, wondering if it was Fruedianly intentional but her surprise at herself was no match for the stunned look of ultimate betrayal and hurt on her captive's face.

"Wh-what?" No. Not Tony. She knew things weren't perfect between them and that he had a greedy side but...this...? Tony had it too good to do something like this. Didn't he? No. It couldn't be. This woman had to be making this up. Yet why would she? What would she possibly have to gain?

"I'm sorry. But your husband is behind all of this." Tia released her hold on Jody but still remained in the dominant position over the heiress, astride her hips, watching for her words to really be absorbed.

"You're lying. Why would he? He has everything, why would he risk it by doing this?"

"I don't know the answer to that. I guess he wants out and wants more than what he'd get from a pre-nup. And, why would I lie to you, Jody?"

"Why *wouldn't* you lie to me?"

"How do you think I got access to this yacht? Why do you think your personal security officer so conveniently was sent on vacation right now? How do you think I had the inside scoop that we were about to get boarded? How do you think I knew about that space under the bed? Your husband set all this up. He's protecting me...at least until your family pays the ransom. And what happens after that is anybody's guess. For both of us."

What the taller woman was saying was sinking in and Jody couldn't hold back her hurt and

confusion at the thought of Tony betraying her like this. She was torn between taking Tia at her word and defending her husband. "No, I don't believe you!" But she did and that was what fueled her angry outburst. She began furiously slapping at Tia, struggling to find a vent for her outrage.

Before she could restrain the rambunctious heiress again, Tia felt the contact of Jody's fists against her shoulders and one that actually connected with the side of her face. Finally taking control of the smaller woman's wrists, Tia held them to the bed on each side of Jody's head. Struggling more, Jody almost bucked Tia off her, which prompted the former operative to reposition herself so that she could immobilize the heiress. "Stop! Stop it, I am not going to hurt you!"

The look in Jody's eyes was belligerent. What she had just found out had caused her to feel a combination of panic, wrath, contempt, hate and the utmost infidelity. But what was transmitting to Tia, on top of her, was rabid lust and as the smaller woman thrashed about beneath her, Tia could not resist the temptation to lower her face to Jody's and unapologetically seize Jody's mouth with her own. It was a bold, arrogant move and a spontaneous decision to temper the heated moment, quite sure she could transfer Jody's rage to passion.

After a valiant but wasted effort to gain control of the situation, trying not to react to Tia's lips against hers, moving the way they were in the kiss, sparking more than longing within her, Jody ceased her struggling, actually becoming aroused again at being held down by this more than exciting woman. She returned the gesture with an equal amount of fervor, feeling the heat between her thighs again, wrapping her legs around Tia's waist. Unconsciously, Jody began to rotate her hips, pushing her pubic bone into the taller woman's belly, an action which caused Tia to growl almost uncontrollably and in one swift, fluid motion, Tia extricated herself from Jody and almost ripped the heiress' beach pants off her. This aggressive movement only served to fuel Jody's desire even more and she watched, almost helplessly fascinated as Tia quickly stripped her completely of any clothing.

As Tia slowly, reverently, scanned Jody's fit, enticing body, the heiress found it difficult to breathe. No one had *ever* looked at her like that before, with such fiercely untamed want yet with an almost gentle adoration and appreciation that paralyzed her with a deep-seated need for her captor, something of which she never would have believed herself capable. Jody's hands found the front of Tia's jeans and grabbed on, pulling the stronger woman down to her. Tia settled her body over Jody's, completely covering her, staring down into impatient but exposed green eyes, an expression that displayed vulnerability and an unsated hunger, a combination which Tia found irresistibly intoxicating.

"Jody..." Tia's voice was hoarse with desire and she could not have elevated it above a whisper if she tried, "I have to have you. All of you. It will be very hard to stop but I will if you tell me to."

"I know it's probably wrong...but I want you, too...I -" She was quieted with a smoldering kiss, one that she closed her eyes for and allowed herself to bask in the sheer bliss of the moment. She had never been kissed the way Tia was kissing her. Nothing had ever elicited the sexual excitement surging through her now and the beginnings of what had rippled through her only moments ago when the raven-haired woman had effortlessly fingered her to orgasm. She was

awed by the way her body responded to Tia, rapt with the sudden knowledge that this was what it was *supposed* to feel like when someone made love to her.

As Tia appreciatively brushed her lips to every area of the heiress' upper body, taking her time, Jody savored every sensation, wishing each touch would last forever. Sometime, between Tia resting herself on top of Jody and hovering above the reddish-blond curls that covered her mound, the enterprising ex-operative had taken off all her own clothes. Jody cursed herself for not paying attention as this was a body she really wanted to see up close and personal but Tia had kept her, well, deliciously *occupied*.

"Tia. Tia." Jody was breathless at the thought of what Tia was about to do to her but she needed to get her attention. She wanted to tell the woman dominating her not to be gentle.

"Yes?" Eyes the color of an unclouded sky locked with Jody's.

"Don't hold back." The look of prurient desire that Tia wore at that request was so overpowering, Jody could no longer speak. Instinctively recognizing that her captor would not be restrained, that she would, indeed, fuck her hard and completely and would not be concerned with whether or not this was something the heiress was used to, was no longer a question.

Silently acknowledging Jody's wishes with barely a nod, Tia's smile was feral as she returned her attention to getting things started. Nuzzling Jody's curls, she kissed her before parting her and firmly, ambitiously, assaulting her with her tongue. The sharp intake of breath she heard in response to her action, the hand in her hair pushing her head closer and the slight gyration of Jody's hips told Tia she was right in her appraisal of what the heiress wanted. The ex-operative did not have to ask Jody what it was she liked to do in bed. Tia would do it all.

As both women settled into a rhythm, evening became night and night became morning. At some point before the sun rose, they had fallen asleep tangled up in each other, warm, sweaty, bare skin seemingly connected and difficult to decipher where one body started and the other one ended.

Chapter Seventeen

Ability is rated by what is finished, not what is attempted.

Rising slowly into consciousness, Tia stretched the after effects of marathon sex out of her muscles and sighed contentedly. For someone who had never been with another woman before, Jody surprised her with the enthusiasm in which she thoroughly and vigorously participated. Tia expected a little more reserved, straitlaced behavior from the young aristocrat in bed, not the forward, wild, no-holds-barred woman who eagerly satiated her every whim. Before they had fallen asleep, Jody confessed that she didn't know what had 'gotten into her,' a remark that immediately made Tia bubble with laughter, to which she received a rather spirited swat on the

shoulder.

The heiress went on to say that she had always practiced a tame, controlled, discreet manner during sex, possibly because she felt that was what was expected of her. She then held Tia tightly to her and told her that she really had no idea sex could be like that, that her body had the capacity to feel those things. Obviously, Tia had awakened something dormant in the heiress, unleashed something primal within her and she hoped there was no putting it back. It was then Tia suddenly realized the other side of the bed was empty.

Flying off the berth, it took three steps for Tia to reach the door, expecting it to be locked from the outside. The panic had risen to her throat and was nearly strangling her. In her haste to have sex with the heiress last evening, she had not thought about the fact that she could not secure the door from the inside when she had entered the stateroom. As much as she felt she had convinced Jody that she wasn't going to hurt her and they would figure this out together, the fact remained that she had abducted this woman, was holding her for ransom and with Tia confined, Jody could drive the yacht right up to the marina and have the cops waiting to arrest the disgraced former CIA officer.

Taking a deep breath, her fingers around the handle, she pushed down and the door opened easily outward. Relieved, she stood there, her eyes adjusting to the brilliant sunlight and searched the salon and the galley for her new lover. Her panic would have risen again, since Jody could have just as easily left the yacht and taken the dinghy back to shore, if she had not smelled the inviting aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

Descending the stairs from the bridge, mug in hand, green eyes captured softening blue ones and a smile of almost shy indulgence greeted the tantalizingly naked woman leaning against the door. "Happy to see me, I see," Jody teased, giving Tia a drawn out once-over.

Glancing down at her taut nipples, the ex-operative then looked back at the beautiful blonde she had confidently and successfully ravished only hours earlier and grinned. "In more ways than one."

"Did you think I had left to turn you in?"

"It crossed my mind," Tia admitted.

"Why don't you get dressed and join me for a nice cup of coffee and we can talk about it."

"Does my nudity bother you?"

"Bother me? No. But it is distracting and I really think we should talk about our situation. You sit near me in that state and I can't guarantee we'll get any talking done."

Crossing her arms, Tia smirked. "And that would be bad because...?"

Shaking her head, Jody laughed and pointed. "Go put some clothes on."

Before Tia retreated inside the master state room, she and Jody exchanged a heated, meaningful look. Tia had no doubt she and the sexually adventurous little heiress would be warming up the sheets again before the sun went down and she felt a flash fire between her legs she knew could only be extinguished by one woman. What had Jody Montgomery done to her?

At the initial break of first light, Jody had quietly slipped out of bed and threw on her robe. She stood at the side of the berth, observing the long, naked form of the woman who, just mere hours before, had done magical things to her and to whom she had done things she never would have dreamed herself having the ability to give or receive. Her body still tingled as the residual effects of their passion thrummed through her. As she studied the gorgeous, sensuous woman in her bed and visions of their raw fucking rippled within her, her arousal began to build again and she knew if she did not get out of that room, she would not be able to control herself. Not that attacking Tia would have been met with any resistance, she was sure, but she needed to let her body calm down from the permissive force with which she had been taken and had just as aggressively answered with a potent flair of her own. The fact that this woman was dangerous only served to enhance Jody's excitement and the thrill of sexual play that was different, more fulfilling, compelled her to unabashedly crave more.

The reality was, however, that Jody was still a captive and regardless of the sudden, overwhelming change in their relationship, she didn't know if she could trust this intriguing woman. With that little bit of suspicion still in the forefront, Jody sidled over to the door, keeping her eyes on Tia and tried the handle. She then remembered, as the door opened freely, that Tia had removed the interior lock and could not have secured the door from the inside after she had entered.

Quietly shutting the door behind her, Jody pushed the bolt closed, leaning her forehead against the cool surface of the frame. If Tia was lying to her, this was her chance to escape. If Tia was telling her the truth and Tony was behind all this, escaping might put her in greater danger than she was in right now. If Tia was lying, just to get Jody to sleep with her, she would have left the room after sex and locked her back in. If Tia was telling the truth just to clear her conscience for wanting to sleep with her, her captor would still be her only hope to figure a way out of this situation. Closing her eyes, she opened the bolt and sighed. It amazed her that she decided she would rather take her chances with an unpredictably contentious (and unmistakably amorous) kidnapper than a man she had been married to for over three years and one she obviously didn't really know at all.

Once in the salon, Jody stopped to contemplate her next move. She had a lot to consider and she determined the very first thing she wanted was a decent cup of coffee. Maybe Tia was exceptional at everything else she put her mind to but she couldn't make coffee for shit. Walking into the galley, the disheveled heiress activated her Jura Capresso Impressa F9, figuring that the only reason Tia's coffee was so bland was that she probably didn't have the patience to figure out such a high-tech machine. How many coffeemakers had a touch screen with internet connectivity? How many coffeemakers cost nearly two thousand dollars? Her perfect cup of

brew in hand, she climbed the stairs to the deck to watch the full sunrise and think.

"I should have let you out to make the coffee before," Tia smiled after taking a sip of the steaming beverage. She had chosen to wear a sleeveless t-shirt and a pair of Tony's boxer shorts she found in the drawer under the bed. Her tanned and toned arms and legs were a clear contrast to the pale, exposed limbs of the fairer woman seated opposite her.

"So you don't really like it awful, you just couldn't be bothered to crack the code of the complicated coffee machine," Jody joked.

"I was afraid I'd break it so I just made instant instead."

"Oh. Well, that explains why it sucked out loud. All you had to do was push the button and it makes coffee that rivals Starbucks."

"I'd rather have Dunkin' Donuts." Tia held the mug in both hands, took another sip and looked out over the water. "Why didn't you run?" She then focused on her new lover.

Under the scrutiny of intensely unique blue eyes, Jody refused to look away. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I thought about it. I really did. For about a minute. And then...I realized that I believed you. I believed *you*, basically a total stranger to me, that my husband is behind this, without even talking to him about it. How pathetic is that?" The heiress looked as though she were on the verge of tears, torn between disgust and sadness.

Tia leaned forward, also, and took Jody's hands in her own. "Is that the only reason you didn't run?"

"No," the smaller woman acknowledged, barely above a whisper. "I don't want to believe you are a bad person." She looked down at their joined hands. "I...I don't want to think that you have entered my life just to do me harm."

"Originally, I did. That's exactly why I was here. But now? I couldn't hurt you if I tried." She brought Jody's fingers to her lips and kissed them.

"I believe that, Tia. I know I shouldn't, but I do. If I wasn't listening to my gut instinct, you'd be in custody right now." Jody looked surprised at the boldness of her own statement. "Does Tony just want more money or does he want me dead?"

Tia's reluctance to respond to that question gave Jody her answer and then she watched helplessly as her companion broke down. First her abduction and then finding out who was responsible for it...it had to have been difficult to realize that everything she had previously thought was safe and secure was now shattered. Pulling the heiress into a tight embrace, Tia positioned Jody on her lap. "Listen to me," the ex-CIA officer said, quietly but firmly, "I don't know what kind of marriage you two had but he's an idiot to want you out of his life. In any

manner. I am hoping very much that his loss is my gain. In whatever capacity."

"We don't even know each other. I know nothing about you and all you think you know about me is only what you've read in the papers. Yes, granted, we just spent an incredible night together...but you have to admit, Tia, it was under the most extraordinary of circumstances."

"Yes. It was. All I know is that from what I've seen and what I feel, I want to get to know you better. A lot better." Tia cuddled Jody closer, wiping away her tears. "I don't give a flying fuck about your wealth. I don't care that you're high profile or that your family is famous. Your bank account doesn't impress me, I want to get that out into the open right away. My last lover was extremely well-off and it was not the reason I was with her."

"Did you abduct and take advantage of her, too?" Jody sniffed and lightly ran her finger along the pattern embroidered on Tia's t-shirt.

"No." Even though she could feel the smile on Jody's face against her shoulder, and Jody's tone seemed congenial enough, Tia's remorse was obvious.

"You like to pick up rich women?" Jody loved the physical position she was in. She felt unusually protected and it was comfortable. She tucked her head into the curve of Tia's neck, as Tia put her arms around the heiress and clasped her hands together over Jody's hip.

"It is the woman and not the money that I'm interested in."

"You do realize this is insane..." Jody commented.

"Yes, I couldn't agree with you more. My life is insane and I've needed for the insanity to stop for a while now and nothing has even come close to giving me the incentive to turn my life back around to being the responsible person I once was. Until you."

"Why me?" Her tone was curious...and hopeful.

Tia shrugged as much as her shoulders would allow with a blonde head lying against them. "Well...other than the obvious, I honestly don't know."

"How much was Tony going to pay you to finish the job?" The question was asked out of curiosity, not maliciousness but Jody felt Tia's reaction.

Expelling a long breath, the former operative's shoulders slumped slightly. "Ten million dollars."

"That's all? Huh. Nice to know what my husband thinks I'm worth."

"Well, actually...he's asking five hundred million..."

Jody sat up and looked directly at Tia. "And you're only getting ten? Oh dear, you need a business manager..."

"Honestly, I cared less about the amount of money than I did having enough to get me out of the States and get me started elsewhere. I would have probably pissed it all away on women and booze anyway."

Jody smiled, "Well, that's a glowing argument in favor of wanting me to be with you..." It surprised her that she was being so playful when they were talking about an acceptable price for killing her. "So what changed your mind about doing it?"

"You did." She kissed the top of Jody's head. "I honestly didn't think I was supposed to kill you when I got involved in this. I just thought I was supposed to keep you here and safe, keeping you out of sight and guarding you until the ransom was paid. Then, after I got you here, your husband changed the plans."

"Would you actually have done it?"

"If you are asking me if I am capable of doing it, the answer is yes. If you are asking me if I wanted to do it, the answer is no."

Jody sighed and slid her arm over Tia's middle. "It's wrong, my wanting to be with you, isn't it?"

"I don't know if it's wrong but I can assure you that it's probably not wise."

"Are you purposely trying to dissuade me from succumbing to your subtle charms?" Jody kidded, patting Tia's waist.

"You mean it isn't too late already?" Tia teased back. "I'm just saying we need to have a little chat about my past before you make any decisions about me."

"Should we talk about that before we discuss what we're going to do about my abduction?"

"I think we should." Tia wanted a drink. She wanted to start herself on her path to daily numbness before she revealed all to the woman in her arms, positive that someone as cultured and dignified as Jody would be horrified and repelled by her history. Maybe the heiress would surprise her and accept her as is, unconditionally. After all, Tia had already been pleasantly surprised that Jody wasn't quite so refined between the sheets. It also elicited a lascivious smile at the memory and a little unexpected heat between her legs.

She bit back the urge to deposit Jody in her chair and grab a beer and the bottle of scotch she had been working on yesterday. But the feeling of the heiress tightening her arms around Tia caused Tia to stay where she was and reassuringly kiss the side of Jody's neck just below her ear. This action sent an obvious shiver through the smaller woman and she moved her head back to look at Tia. "You keep doing that and we're never going to get anywhere except right back in bed."

"Again...that would be bad because..." Tia inquired, her voice husky.

Green eyes engaged blue. "We'll never get anything else accomplished. And as much as I really want you to fuck me senseless again...and oh, God, do I...I think this is a little more important."

"Unfortunately, you're right." It was hard tearing her eyes away from Jody's, the expression the heiress wore was so unintentionally coy and inviting. Lifting Jody's chin with her index finger, Tia could not resist kissing Jody one more time before their dreaded talk.

They had made out a little longer than either had intended, finding it difficult to stop kissing each other and move apart.

Jody could not completely comprehend her body's impulses toward Tia and the magnetic tug that kept her wanting to touch this perilously beautiful woman. She could not recall ever being so attracted and drawn to anyone in her life and each time she even glanced at Tia, it brought her right back to a state of heightened arousal. Finally, she took the initiative to lightly push herself away from the woman who was igniting her libido and sit back in her own chair. "Okay, what is it you need me to know?"

"Everything." Sitting up, folding her hands on the table, Tia rested her forehead on her knuckles. Taking a deep breath, she sat up and looked beyond Jody, out to sea. "One thing you need to know is that...I'm a drunk." It was the first time Tia had ever said it out loud and she winced as she heard the words come out of her mouth. She focused on her companion whose expression was blank. Whether Jody had already guessed it or not wasn't evident by her reaction. When the heiress did not comment, Tia continued. "And it is because I'm a drunk that I got into this mess."

As Tia unraveled the tale of Montgomery entrapping her and blackmailing her into abducting Jody, Jody sat agape, all cognitive thought leaving her momentarily. *Who was this man?* Finally, she realized she was staring incredulously at the woman across from her and she closed her mouth and cleared her throat. "Tony murdered a prostitute? With your gun?"

"Yes."

Jody absorbed this with a slight nod and said, "A gun that you kept from when you were a CIA agent -"

"Officer," Tia corrected. "I was a CIA officer. An agent is usually a foreign national hired by the Agency or an officer of the Agency to spy on his or her own country. I guess the movies like the sound of 'agent' better than 'officer' so that's where the confusion comes in." She then went on to tell a riveted Jody about Maria Maladin, the case and being burnt which led her to drinking more and more until she just did not care.

"But, I still don't understand...how did Tony find you? I mean, how did he know who you were?"

Tia shrugged. Her throat was really dry. A cold beer would taste really good right about now. "He told me this Bruce guy who is working with him found me. How Bruce knew who I was, I

don't know. He ever mention a Bruce to you?"

Searching her memory, Jody shook her head. "Not that I remember. In fact, to my knowledge, I didn't know he knew anyone named Bruce. But then...I'm discovering that I really didn't know this man at all." There was a hint of sadness in her voice.

"Well, whoever this Bruce is, he led your husband to me."

"You can stop referring to him as my husband because as soon as we figure out what it is we're going to do, he won't be my husband for too much longer." Jody threaded her fingers through her blonde locks as she slowly processed all this information. "Why? Why does he want me dead?"

"Now that, I'm not really sure. I do know it has something to do with him getting even with your father."

"My father?" What could her father have possibly done to push Tony to this point? Standing up, shaking her head, she looked down at Tia and said, "I really need a drink. Can I get you anything?"

"Oh, God, yes."

Chapter Eighteen

Plenty in the purse cannot prevent starvation in the soul.

Montgomery awoke after a great night's sleep. His little guided tour of the Wainwright yachts had been a success and so far everything was going along as smoothly as he could have hoped for. Just a day or two more and he would be free and independently rich, without the family ties. He enjoyed being able to toy with one of the wealthiest dynasties in the world but now he was getting bored and it was time to get this ball rolling.

He wondered what was going on at his in-laws' estate, how rabid and frightened John must be and how chafed and indignantly out of her mind Sondra probably was, but first, before he jumped into that frying pan, he needed to call the killer and then the geek.

Bruce, although obviously very smart, was a moron in Montgomery's book. Bulking up for some woman he didn't even know, getting hooked on steroids, making himself beholden to punks and becoming a victim of his own addictions and low self-esteem. If Montgomery had not needed Bruce's computer expertise, he would have eliminated him the second he refused to kidnap and kill Jody. Montgomery mistakenly thought, with Bruce's debts, conscience would have been secondary.

How fortunate that Bruce had recommended Tia Ramone to him. The burnt out alcoholic had been the perfect patsy for his sinister plan. Regardless of her anger and resentment at being

involved, he had her between that proverbial rock and hard place where she had to do what he told her. For the once respected, enterprising, rising star CIA operative, there was no way out. He could not afford any witnesses. Both she and Bruce would have to die. Two loners with only enemies. No one would miss them.

Tia's cell phone rang right in the middle of a tender kiss with her new lover. Jody had just placed a beer in front of her and Tia pulled her in for a gentle liplock.

"Do you want to listen in on this?" Tia asked.

Jody was undecided. She wanted to believe Tia and yet, she wasn't sure she wanted to hear Tony's voice on the other end of the line. She sat down next to Tia and shrugged. "I'll just sit here." As Tia answered her call, Jody poured champagne into her flute half-filled with orange juice.

"Good morning, Agent Ramone," Montgomery greeted.

"I'm not an agent, you mook, that's FBI. What do you want?"

Although he bristled at the slang insult, he refused to let it come through in his voice. "First, I'm impressed. It's eight A.M. and you don't sound three sheets to the wind already. Second, you actually sound awake and alert."

"Gee...I'm so glad you're pleased," Tia responded, blandly. She looked over at an apprehensive Jody and winked at her, smiling automatically. Reaching over, Tia curled her fingers around Jody's.

"How's my little scorpion this morning?" The complacency in his tone was just aggravating as hell.

"Your little scorpion?" Tia repeated, puzzled. She saw Jody's eyes close in recognition of the phrase. It must have been that term of endearment that convinced Jody it was, indeed, her husband on the phone. Tia squeezed Jody's hand in reassurance.

"Yeah, that's what I would call her occasionally. Her birth sign. Scorpio."

"Your little scorpion seems fine." She was going to let it go at that and then she added, "I heard her moaning earlier, she seemed to be in some kind of distress but I found something to relieve her...aching." Tia and Jody exchanged an intimate smile.

"Good, good. Is she sick or do you think it was just stress?"

"Come on, Montgomery, do you really care?"

"Well, it bothers me to think of her being sick."

"But it doesn't bother you to think of her as being dead?" Tia watched as Jody bowed her head on that last word. Again, Tia tightened her fingers around her lover's in a comforting touch.

"That's different. You know, you had me going there last night, Ramone. I guess deep down inside, despite my taunting and even knowing your preferences, I really didn't think you'd force my wife to have sex with you. After all, you did have *some* honor at one time."

Yes and thanks to your wife, I'm getting it back, Tia thought. "Whatever," she shrugged it off. "What'd you call for? I'd like to get my day started. I have some serious drinking to do."

"I can't imagine what your liver must look like. Okay, on to business. I have another couple sentences, with a list of individual words, that my wife needs to read to Bruce. Got a pen?"

The first thing Montgomery found out when he got to his in-laws was that Sondra Wainwright had failed the polygraph the day before. Her results were inconclusive. This news made Montgomery chuckle. Here he had passed with flying colors and he was lying through his teeth and his mother-in-law flunked and the only thing she was guilty of was being a cold bitch.

Searching out Agent Marciano, Montgomery put on his best concerned expression. "I just heard my mother-in-law didn't pass her polygraph. What does that mean? She's not involved, is she?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Montgomery, I can't discuss the results of Mrs. Wainwright's test with you," Marciano advised him.

"Why? My father-in-law already told me that Sondra -"

"Mr. Montgomery," Marciano interrupted, politely but firmly, "I can't. Again, I'm sorry. What Mr. Wainwright tells you is between the two of you but I am not allowed to talk about it with you."

Montgomery held his hand up in concession. "No, it's okay, I understand. I'm just anxious. It's just..." he hesitated for dramatic impact, "Sondra has always hated my wife." He shrugged, knowing Marciano would pick it up from there.

"Wait," the young FBI man began, not disappointing Montgomery and taking the bait, "Mrs. Wainwright hates her own daughter?"

Dialing Bruce's number, Tia waited for him to pick up while Jody quietly reread the script her husband had prepared for her.

"I wish there was a way I could let my father know that I'm okay," Jody sighed.

"Me, too. Unfortunately -" Tia heard Bruce answer and spoke into the phone. "Yeah, it's me. She is ready with her dialogue."

"Okay. Put her on." Bruce told Tia.

Handing the phone to her new lover, Tia studied the table, thinking, while she listened to Jody recite what was on the paper. When Jody was finished, she gave the phone back to Tia. "Got all that?"

"Yep," Bruce responded.

Taking a chance, Tia said, "Bruce...can we talk?"

There was dead silence on the other end of the line and then, "You know my name?"

"It's only fair. You know mine. In fact, you know it so well, you gave it to Montgomery."

"I...uh...look, it was nothing personal, okay? I mean, I don't know you, it's just -"

He sounded apologetic, Tia thought. This was a good sign. "Bruce," she interrupted him, "we can talk about that another time. Listen, you know Montgomery is going to kill us when this is over, if not before, right? He's not going to want any loose ends and that's exactly what you and I are. We both know way too much and there is nowhere on this planet we could hide where he can't find us."

There was more silence and finally Bruce said, "What do you want?"

"I want to meet. Can you come here? Without anyone knowing?"

Bruce stared at the phone after terminating the call. Well, *that* was unexpected. And a relief. But could he trust Tia Ramone? Probably more than he could trust his boss at this point. Plus, Mrs. Montgomery was right there and heard everything so, clearly, she was now aware of who was behind her kidnapping and the plan to eliminate her, regardless of whether or not the ransom was paid. Why was she still going along with it?

What did Ramone have up her sleeve? What could she possibly suggest that could get them out of this mess? He was desperate enough to find out.

But first, he had a job to do.

"Coffs Harbor, Sir." Agent Marciano told Wainwright, in response to the question of from where the call was pinpointed as originating.

"Where?!" The multi-billionaire asked again, his tone a reflection of hope that this location was more believable than Asia.

"Coffs Harbor. It's in Australia. New South Wales. The coast, Sir." Marciano braced himself for the tirade he knew was eminent.

Wainwright took two steps closer to Marciano and put his face right up to the agent's. "Do you believe the kidnappers have taken my daughter to Australia?" He bit off every word.

"Uh, no, Sir. It's, um, highly unlikely." Marciano hated his life at this moment.

"What kind of dog and pony show are you people running around here?!" I want to know where my daughter is and I want to know today! Do you understand me, you imbecile?!"

"Mr. Wainwright, there's no need for name calling. We're doing our best, Sir," Marciano told him, as civilly as possible.

"If that's true then that is a sorry state for the FBI. *Where is your boss?!"*

"He had to brief his boss in Washington before he came here, Sir." Marciano checked the time on his watch. "He should be here any minute now."

"Good. When he gets here, maybe he can tell me why his boss in Washington isn't here, directing you inept fools on how to get my daughter back! I want some progress made on this today or I start handling it myself!"

"Sir, as I have advised you already -"

"Shut up, Marciano, or I'll have your job!" Wainwright hissed.

"Yes, Sir," Marciano obeyed, as he watched the irate father stomp away from him. Shaking his head and expelling a breath, he thought, 'you can have my job and then you'll know what it's like to have to deal with people like you.' Turning to walk back to the living room, he ran into Anthony Montgomery.

"Don't mind him. He's just used to saying 'jump' and having people respond with 'how high?'. I know you guys are doing everything you can. I mean, the whole world's watching, so I know the last thing you want to do is screw up." Montgomery's voice was soothing...in a snake-oil salesman sort of way.

Marciano was appreciative that Montgomery was a lot easier to deal with than Wainwright but that was starting not to set well with him. Montgomery was almost too easy to deal with. Although he had been nothing but helpful and cooperative, there was something about

Montgomery that made the little hairs on the back of Marciano's neck stand on end. Maybe he was just too wary because of the unnecessary dressing down Wainwright had just given him. Montgomery was more solicitous than either Daddy or Mama Wainwright but then it was his wife who was being held for ransom and having God only knew what being done to her in the interim. That would make any husband crazy.

"So how close are we to zeroing in on getting my wife back safely?"

But that was one of the problems. Montgomery wasn't exactly acting crazy. Studying the too-well-rested-looking man opposite him, Marciano made a snap decision. "I don't seem to be giving out the right answers here and I'm not in charge of the case, so I think from now on, you should probably get your information from Agent Sanborn." With a polite nod, Marciano walked away.

Cocking his head, curiously, as Marciano moved away from him, Montgomery then shrugged, figuring that the agent was embarrassed by Wainwright's outburst. He tried to reassure Marciano that the old man's hissy fit wasn't personal but he could certainly understand how a grown man not used to dealing with Wainwright's tantrums would get self-conscious. He'd give Marciano an hour or two and ask him again what their progress was so he could plan his next course of action.

As long as he and his unknowing participant father-in-law could keep up the 'good cop, bad cop' routine, he was pretty sure the young agent would remain his best bet for inside information. By tomorrow, if the money ball wasn't already rolling, he'd have to raise the stakes. Although playing the FBI and watching his in-laws squirm was fun, this was getting tedious already and he did not want the feds to get too close before he eliminated his two accomplices.

[Continued...](#)

[Cheyne's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)

~ Clandestine ~

by Cheyne

Whenpiggsfly55@aim.com

Disclaimer and author notes: [See Part 1.](#)

Chapter Nineteen

Nothing pleases a little man more than an opportunity to crack a big whip

The Quintessence had been easy to find. Bruce had gone to the pier and rented a boat to get out to the yacht for his meeting with the woman hired to abduct and murder Jody Montgomery. Approaching the craft, he got an eerie feeling as he could see no movement anywhere. The thought that Tia Ramone might have set him up had crossed his mind before he left shore, but he made the trip anyway. If she did have it in her head to kill him, he felt it would be easier to reason with her than Tony. However, he hoped that she was just being covert, not showing herself until she was sure it was really him who was approaching the vessel.

Tying his small motorboat to the aft deck landing and climbing aboard, Bruce looked around as he made it to the top step that led to the bridge. "Hello?" he called out, cautiously, as he walked under the immense radar arch.

"Too early for a beer?"

The voice behind him was confident and well-modulated. He spun around to see a tall, bronzed, dark-haired, striking woman, smirking and holding out a sweating bottle of Corona toward him. "It's never too early for a beer," Bruce commented, relieved, as he focused on the woman who must have hated him with a passion for what he had gotten her into.

Tia removed the cap and handed the bottle to him. "Good. You're my kind of guy. Relatively speaking, of course. Come on," she tilted her head sideways, "let's go to the salon and meet the Mrs."

Bruce felt scrutinized as he stood in front of Jody and between Tia and the settee, looking extremely uncomfortable. He must not have been what she expected with his ruggedly attractive, slightly pock-marked face, his muscular body and his compact, yet intimidating size. She probably mistakenly assumed he would be much less...husky. Everyone else usually did. She also wore an expression as though she had seen him before but she couldn't quite place him. "Where do I know you from, Bruce?"

"I work for your husband, Mrs. Montgomery, I'm his main techie and troubleshooter." Bruce found it just as difficult not to stare at the gorgeous wife of his boss as if it was the first time he ever saw her. He guzzled his beer and found interest in the carpet.

"A little thirsty, are you?" Tia cracked, removing the empty bottle from his hand and replacing it with another cold beer.

"I'm just a little understandably nervous," Bruce admitted as he sat down on the couch.

"I remember where I've seen you," Jody blurted out. "Tony's office, doing something with his hard drive!"

Bruce smiled, mildly bowled over that she had actually remembered the ten second encounter.

"Yes, that was me."

Tia sat down next to Jody, pinning Bruce with a probing gaze. "How do you know me, Bruce?"

"I...I don't. Not really." He eyeballed both women, then returned his attention to Tia. "How much does Mrs. Montgomery know?"

"I know as much as Tia knows," Jody told him. Bruce nodded, taking a long swig of Corona.

"And what I don't know is how I got involved in all this," Tia stated. "I'd like to know how that happened and we would both like to know what you know about your boss that makes you also beholden to him."

"How would knowing that help anything?"

"It might not," Tia conceded. "But the more I know about this man - and I mean every dirty little detail you can tell me - the better chance I will have at figuring a way out of this. Because if we can't turn this around, back on him somehow, we're in deep, deep shit." Tia emptied the contents of her bottle with one long drink. "But whatever happens, I want to make a pact with you right now that we save Jody."

Placing her hand on Tia's forearm, Jody said, "I want us to *all* get out of this alive." She then looked deeply into Tia's eyes. "Which is why I didn't escape this morning."

Bruce definitely got the impression that Mrs. Montgomery was more than just a hostage to Tia. Damn. That happened rather quickly. Not that Bruce could blame either woman for falling into bed with each other. Tia Ramone was as uniquely extraordinary as Jody Montgomery was and he knew his boss' wife could do a hell of a lot better than what she had. And, it seemed to Bruce, that with Tia trying to save Jody and the both of them as well, she obviously wasn't the barbarian Montgomery had made her out to be.

"I promise that whatever happens, I will do what I can to help you save Mrs. Montgomery," Bruce pledged, sincerely.

"Please. It's Jody."

Bruce smiled at the captivating heiress and then took a deep breath. "Where do I begin?" he sighed, frustrated.

Jody sat back in her chair, agape. *Who* was this man she had been married to? As Bruce unraveled his tale of woe, she shuddered, feeling a chill unlike anything else she had ever experienced before.

While Bruce spoke, Jody observed Tia intently. Her captor turned lover wore a formidable but

studious expression. She was clearly interested in what Bruce had to say. She wouldn't understand why Tia was so absorbed until after Bruce had calmed down and was encouraged to relax and go for a swim while the two women discussed the situation. Borrowing a pair of swimming trunks that were on board, Bruce willingly and gratefully obliged.

Resting her head in her hands, Jody sighed, "This just gets worse and worse. Now what?" She glanced back up at Tia, who was smirking.

"I think we have found our legitimate way out of this." She excused herself, rising from the table and disappeared into the master stateroom. When she returned, she held the Trac Phone Montgomery had purchased for her and she dialed a number from memory. Sitting back down, she felt comfortable and confident enough to wink at the more than desirable woman across from her, an action that caused Jody to develop an adorable rosy tinge. "Special Operations Division," she spoke into the phone and waited. "Yes. Javier Zamora, please." When asked to identify herself, she used one of her operative aliases, one she knew Zamora would recognize immediately. "Tell him it's Anna Santiago."

This made Jody sit up and take notice. She mouthed the word, 'Who?'

Reaching over, Tia patted Jody's hand. Suddenly her eyes lit up and she said, "Javier, ¿cómo está?"

"Santa mierda," Zamora breathed, proceeding to communicate with her entirely in Spanish. "Do you know how many people are looking for you?! What the fuck did you get yourself into? Offing a streeter with agency heat?"

"Are you on a secure line?"

"Secure as it can get in this place. Where are you?"

"Let's talk business first. I'm calling in that debt."

There was dead silence on the other line. "You can't do this to me, T...Anna. I cannot get caught up in your little problem. I know what I promised you, I haven't forgotten but you're persona non grata around here. I know I owe you but let's be honest here...it ain't gonna be happening now." He wasn't refusing her by choice, he was refusing her by necessity. His instincts of self preservation had kicked in. "You would have to have a pretty powerful reason for me to stick my neck out for you right now."

"I do. *My* neck is on the line. If you don't help me, I'm dead. Not only can you save my life here, I have a career-maker for you, compadre. You know the top story on the news right now?"

"Yeah, the heiress thing. You got something on that?"

"You could say that. Actually...I have possession of a certain package."

It took Zamora a few moments to respond. "You - you what?" His tone was one of disbelief. "You mean you actually have...*the package*?"

"Yes. But, Javi, I have some bartering power to get myself out of this jam -"

"Jam? *Jam*?! You call what you're in a 'jam'?" He laughed, incredulously. "You always were a good one for minimizing things. Jesus Christ, *Anna*...I...I can't believe you are involved in any of this. *What were you thinking?* Let me ask - is the package damaged in any way?"

Tia smiled, switching to English. "No. The package is perfect. In fact, I'm admiring its beauty right now." She watched as Jody grinned back, blushed again and then looked away. Returning to speaking Spanish, Tia continued, "She is alive and well and pissed off but not at me. Would you like to speak to her?"

He was hesitant, confused. "No. So...you're not...uh...holding onto the package, awaiting payment?"

"No. I'm keeping the package safe."

Another contemplative pause. "What about the prostitute in the car?"

"Unfortunate. But I didn't kill her and I can tie that incident in to this one."

"I knew you'd hit rock bottom but I still didn't think you'd resort to killing someone who didn't try to kill you first. Not your style. So you've really got something for me?"

"Something big, my friend."

"Give me ten minutes and then I want you to call me at this number," he instructed as he provided her with the number of his personal cell phone.

Snapping the phone shut, Tia triumphantly said, "We're in." She had no doubt Javier would come through for her. The Drug Enforcement Administration agent and Tia became close, working on a loose cannon project a couple years earlier and they had sporadically kept in touch. Agent Zamora owed his life to Tia who, the day after the mission had been completed, noticed a laser dot targeting Javier's head as they were leaving their debriefing in Bogota. She tackled him, slamming him to the ground before a host of bullets, in rapid fire succession, pierced the building sign they had been standing in front of, saying their goodbyes. Although there was never any way to confirm her suspicion, Tia would always believe that she had also been scoped that day, and had she not accidentally witnessed the intense, red, pencil eraser-sized spot marking Javier for death, neither of them would have made it to their vehicles alive. Zamora pledged that he *owed* her and however she needed to cash in on that, he would never deny her. Tia didn't like people owing her and she advised Javier that she would probably never collect on the debt but she never expected to be thrown into circumstances like this. Had Bruce not opened the book on the drug issue, Tia would have still been trying to come up with a way to save them all without Javier's help.

"You want to clue me in there, *Anna*?" Jody reached behind her, to the refrigerator, and pulled out another beer for Tia and a champagne split for herself.

"Sure. In 2005, when I was in South America, just before my last assignment in Columbia, by coincidence, I fell into a situation that allowed me to assist the DEA on a project called Operation Flexión. It was a twenty-one month investigation that I came into on the tail end." She pulled back the tab on the can and took a refreshing swig. "Operation Flexión was a task force that targeted major steroid manufacturing companies, their owners and their trafficking associates. Over eighty percent of the steroids seized were of Colombian origin. And, although these companies conducted their business over the internet, these groups also supplied numerous pharmacies along the South American border towns, where U.S. customers could buy steroids and then smuggle them back across the border into the United States. That's where I met and worked with Javier. He and I were selected from our respective agencies to assist the South American Federal Agency of Investigation." Tia took a swig, then drew the cold receptacle across her forehead and touched it to the back of her neck in an effort to cool herself off.

"I didn't realize it was such a problem," Jody popped the cork off the bottle and poured it into a glass with some mimosa remaining.

"Just those nine companies had average combined sales totaling seventy-five million dollars a year. Now, that may be a drop in the bucket to your family but that's pretty big business in the illicit anabolic steroid world...and that was just online."

"I don't consider seventy-five million dollars a drop in anyone's bucket. How did they think they were going to get away with it?"

Tia went on to explain, "The manufacturers we were investigating tried to disguise the marketing of their product by saying it was being developed for use in animals but the 'laboratorios' knew their real customers were anybody from street level dealers to high-end businessmen, like your husband. And they didn't fool the DEA, either. It would be my guess that most of Tony's transactions have been through the internet and, if that's true, the evidence of that will still be on his hard drive. With the help of Bruce, we're going to bring Tony down."

"If Tony had anything illegal on his computer, he is too smart to leave it there. Of that much I am sure," Jody surmised.

"Actually, that's not true," Bruce stated, walking up the steps, toweling himself off. His sculpted muscles and well-defined abs were quite impressive. Even Tia gave his body a second look. "I just barely cleaned up his hard drive the other day. He was afraid the FBI was going to seize his computer to see if they might find anything on there that possibly related to your kidnapping. So he ordered me to make everything disappear."

"I didn't think you could do that...erase the hard drive," Jody skeptically challenged him.

"You can and you can't. You can't really remove data but you can make it extremely difficult for

someone to find what they are looking for, even if they know what they're doing. And that's what I did. I wiped his drive and then did a multiple encryption. So if they do seize his computer, all they'll initially find is legitimate, work-related data."

Tia sat up, erect, intensity crackling from her every pore. "Bruce, what did you do with all that information you removed? Tell me that you saved everything, that you did not destroy any of it." Tia held her breath. She might be able to tie Tony into the murder of Trisha and might be able to nail him for being the mastermind behind his wife's abduction but without the evidence on his computer, Javier would have nothing to associate Tony with the purchase, importation and distribution of illegal steroids. With that corroboration, it would be the nail in Montgomery's coffin, without it, it would be the nail in hers.

The look in her eyes was deadly and it went through him like being stabbed by an icicle. He was indebted to the powers that be that he had the right answer. So why he responded with, "I have to tell you, you're expecting a lot. I mean, come on, if Tony ever found out I didn't destroy all of that compellingly incriminating information, I'm a walking corpse." Seeing Tia's fists clenching and her suddenly rising out of her chair, prompted him to clarify. "But I saved it all. I have it in a fireproof safe under some floorboards in my apartment." He shrugged. "I figured if I abruptly disappeared or was found dead during or after this little deal, it wouldn't be in vain. I had a timed message on my pc that would automatically send to the local FBI office if my computer wasn't touched in a three-day period."

Visibly relaxing, Tia sat down with a relieved thump, leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Running both hands through her hair, she sighed audibly. "What did your email say?"

"That Tony was behind it all, that he set both you and me up and how he did it and where to find the evidence regarding his illegal drug business."

"So you were pretty sure he was going to kill us, too, eh?" Tia asked, rhetorically.

Bruce nodded, rolling the towel and placing it over his shoulders. "It has always been in the back of my mind but it never really surfaced as a reality until you said it. I mean, I took the precaution but it was honestly just that. The practical me figured it was a probability and the theoretical me kept saying, 'but I'm doing him a favor, I'm working *with* him on this, he'll leave me alone'. The lure of the money was a big deal for me and that's all I was focused on because Tony made it as impossible for me to refuse as he did for you." He bowed his head and looked at Jody again. "I'm so very sorry. It wasn't personal."

Tia shook her head. "It wasn't personal for Montgomery, either. That's what makes it so wrong on every level."

Jody shook her head again. "I can't believe I have been married to such a monster."

"Neither can I," Tia told her, sincerely, grateful that, by fate, it was she who was chosen to be Jody's executioner and had the presence of mind to realize what an absolute prize she had in this woman. Tony was an idiot. It would give Tia no greater pleasure than to be the one instrumental

in destroying his life, thereby saving her own.

Tony's charm seemed to be just the slightest bit off today. Agent Marciano was obviously avoiding him, although, he assumed it was a result of Marciano's not-so-private dressing down earlier and that the agent was still uncomfortable. John didn't seem to appreciate his company either, today, and Sondra *never* appreciated it, so that was nothing new. She was just as disdainful as ever. The staff was jumpy and, most of all, melancholy. Jody had always been a welcome breath of fresh air in her parents' home and the Wainwright employees loved her. Especially after having to deal with her mother on a daily basis, so the thought of anything bad happening to the lovely and kind heiress created a heavy-hearted atmosphere. Something was amiss with Tony's usual appeal factor as no one seemed to be responding to it. If things didn't improve, it was going to put him in a bad mood. Tony hated bad moods. Somebody always suffered when the mercurial crooked businessman slipped into his dark side.

The news networks were setting up and fine-tuning for the morning press conference where Walt Sanborn would update the media on what the participating law enforcement agencies wanted the world to know. It would be rhetoric, of course, and everyone would know it but, by the end of today, the response of, "We are not at liberty to discuss that at this time," would no longer satisfy the voracious curiosity of the news hounds and when investigative reporters started poking around where their noses didn't belong, that's when things could get complicated for Tony.

Then, just before the daily media feeding frenzy began, as the family gathered stoically behind the assorted public information officers who would take turns speaking and answering questions, Danny Marciano quietly approached Montgomery and told him that they were going to confiscate his office computer and the computer of his secretary. Nodding, telling Marciano, 'no problem,' Montgomery was curious as to why now? Had they suddenly found something or thought they had found something? If it was routine, they should have impounded his computer when they seized Jody's. Since Marciano had previously advised him that they might take possession of his computer at some time, he should not have been suddenly so nervous about it. After all, it was the reason Bruce erased his hard drive because it was pretty much a given that this would happen. But it was the look in Marciano's eyes that made Tony uneasy. Trying to look nonchalant about it, Montgomery still bit his lip, now counting the minutes until the press conference was over so that he could contact Bruce just to make sure the authorities would find nothing suspicious. Taking a couple deep breaths, he swallowed his paranoia and put on his best game face for the cameras.

Marciano was sure they would find nothing of interest on Montgomery's computer, otherwise Montgomery wouldn't have been so accommodating but something tugged at the agent today about the heiress' husband. Maybe Marciano was just tweaked because his co-workers were doing the best they could to bring this situation to a satisfactory conclusion for all concerned, they were doing their job, following standard operating procedure, and he was still getting his ass chewed. He wasn't even in charge of anything and he was taking the heat, even though he knew

the reason for that just happened to be because he was there and was convenient as a body at which Wainwright could vent. Not that he blamed the billionaire, the man just wanted his daughter back and Marciano was positive that it had nothing to do with the money. The man seemed to be sincerely concerned about his daughter's welfare and not how much it might cost him to get her back safely. Mrs. Wainwright, however, was just a contemptible piece of work. Even though the result of her polygraph was inconclusive, instinct told him she had nothing to do with her daughter's abduction even though Montgomery tried to direct suspicion her way. The woman just personified the word Bitch and Marciano had no doubt that this woman had no love for anything except her husband's bank account. Her behavior and attitude were clearly reprehensible but, that aside, the agent didn't think Mrs. Wainwright was smart enough to pull this off and not get caught. Plus, it would have required way too much effort on her part.

No, the first rule of thumb was to always look at the husband and Marciano hoped that's exactly what his superiors were doing. They knew that neither Montgomery nor his secretary had been near their office computers since the FBI became involved in his wife's abduction. Although either one or both could have been adding or deleting information from remote locations, he didn't feel there was too much damage Montgomery could do that the FBI technicians couldn't fix and recover, especially since he had not been anywhere physically near his hard drive in days. The ordering of the commandeering of the equipment at this particular time was more for effect and Marciano, especially, wanted to monitor Montgomery's actions and responses. He could not put his finger on exactly what it was he was looking for, nor did he have anything solid to go on but gut instinct was a large percentage of police work and the feeling in his bones about Anthony Montgomery was suddenly not a good one.

Chapter Twenty

The heaviest thing a person can carry is a grudge

Javier Zamora listened patiently and, at first, dubiously as Tia untangled her recent saga to him. If he hadn't known Tia so well, he would have accused her of being overly dramatic and desperate. But what she was telling him was too outrageous not to be true. His enthusiasm grew with each word she spoke, his imagination running wild at how much glory and recognition this would bring him. When she was done and he had written everything down, he asked her, "What do you want out of this, other than the obvious?"

"What's the obvious? To get my reputation back? My job back? It's too late for my reputation, whatever they didn't fuck up, I did and I don't want to go back and work for The Agency. But I do want to be exonerated. And an apology would be nice but I'm not going to hold my hand over my ass waiting for that. And I want immunity for Bruce. Anything else I'll have to think about."

"I'll look into the immunity thing but -"

"Don't 'but' me, Javi, this guy is handing you Montgomery's head on a platter. It's the least you can do for him...other than putting him in witness protection when this is done." She winked at

Bruce, who looked astonished and relieved. "You'll probably get a promotion and a big, fat raise out of it, too."

"God, I'm hoping. I'm going to contact FININT, too," Zamora said, referring to Financial Intelligence. "Any idea how he planned on moving the ransom money?"

"According to Bruce, he's been going through offshore accounts over the past couple of years with all the money he has been making from his side business, so he was going to work the ransom money through those same channels so he could make anonymous deposits in Antilles, have it transferred to the Cayman Islands and then transfer it to Singapore but never in any particular order so that he can best eclipse its origins. Singapore seems to be the country he uses the most because the institutions he deals with there allows the easiest routes for transfers, deposits and withdrawals are protected by the bank secrecy laws."

"Ah. They operate outside government control, a trust-based system that leaves no paper trail."

"Exactly."

"And people say crime doesn't pay," Zamora snorted. "He could spend all of it and no one would be the wiser. No repercussions."

"Yes. Honestly, Javi? I don't think this is really about the money. Maybe the drugs but not the abduction. He's disgruntled. He's got a grievance against his father-in-law and this is his way of really hurting him."

"At the expense of his wife's life? Cold bastard."

"He really is."

"Tia, we *really* need something to put Montgomery in that vehicle to connect him, though. Otherwise it's your word against his."

"And Bruce's."

"But Bruce wasn't there so Bruce's word on that is hearsay. I read the report. They found no identifiable fingerprints in the car other than the owner's, who reported it stolen, yours and the hooker's. Lots of smears. And very little blood."

A flash of memory flickered through Tia of Trisha's surprised, lifeless eyes immediately after being shot dead in the heart. The next thing she remembered was Montgomery wiping his chin of blood after the initial struggle when he first entered the back seat of the car. She sat up. "That's it! Javier, have them check the blood found in the car! Montgomery cut himself on the front sight of his gun. It bled a bit. See if any of it got anywhere other than on himself."

"I do believe they found a spot or two of dried blood on the back of the driver's side head rest that had not been identified. I'll see if the FBI has Montgomery's DNA on file yet. If they don't,

they'll get it."

"Could you make sure they do this without tipping him off as to why they need it? We don't need him to suddenly disappear on us where we are all looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives. We don't know who he may or may not have on his payroll."

"Don't worry. Just leave it to me."

"If anyone else said that to me, believe me, I'd be worrying. I trust you, Javi, to bring us all home on this."

"With what's at stake, you know I will."

"Call me at this number when you have something."

"Isn't Montgomery tracking your minutes? Won't he want to know if you have used time that wasn't spent talking to him?"

"He might be but he is very arrogant and my guess would be that he will think I have been talking to Bruce. If he asks, I'll just tell him it took us a few tries to get Jody to correctly say what he wanted her to."

Hope he buys it for your sake."

"I don't think it will be an issue."

Zamora sighed. "Okay, let me get started on this and I will call you with updates and keep you posted. Thank you very much, Tia. You have made my day. Hell, fuck that, I think you just made my career."

"Don't get cocky on me, Javi, just nail the prick and let's all get on with our lives."

Laughing, Zamora said, "And you still minimize things."

Snapping the phone shut and placing it on the table, Tia smiled confidently and looked at Jody. "Tell me, does Tony have fire insurance? Because he'll need it where he's going when he dies."

In spite of the gravity of the situation, Jody smirked. "Knowing him, he probably sold a policy to Satan." She shook her head. "Just listening to you makes my head spin. All that shifting of money...it's just all so complicated."

"It has to be. That's the idea. It's not supposed to be easy to trace."

Bruce rubbed his eyes and looked at Tia. "Do you think your friend can really get me out of

this?"

"If he can't, with everything I just gave him, no one can," Tia told him.

Tia, I am *so* sorry I involved you in this. I can't believe you don't want to hang me out to dry," Bruce admitted.

"Well, Bruce, I look at it this way. This was a wake up call if ever I needed one. And, besides, if I hang you out to dry, I tighten my own noose as well."

"Will I owe you now?"

"If we all get out of this alive and things work out the way I think they will, I'd say we can call it even."

Just then, Bruce's phone rang. "Shit. It's Tony. He shouldn't be calling me right now. I wonder what's happened." Bruce stood up and walked away from the women to answer the phone.

Watching him, studying his body language, Jody kept her voice quiet. "Could you personally arrest Tony if your standing with the agency was still valid?"

"No," Tia responded.

"Why not?"

"Because the CIA is a foreign intelligence agency, not a law enforcement agency, like the FBI. The CIA is forbidden to make arrests or conduct investigations of domestic subjects on domestic soil. That's the FBI's job." Seeing the worried look in the expressive green eyes of the woman seated opposite her, Tia slid her hand over and laced her fingers with Jody's. "We'll get him and then this will all be over," she reassured.

Rubbing the inside of Tia's wrist with her thumb, Jody looked down at their joined hands. "All of it?"

Tia squeezed Jody's fingers and reached over to lift Jody's chin with her free hand. When she had thoroughly engaged the heiress' eyes with her own, she said, "I think there is at least one thing that merits pursuing further."

Giving her a silent nod, Jody couldn't stop the grin that lit up her face. "I think I'd really like that."

"Now, you're sure they won't see anything suspicious on my computer..." Tony asked Bruce again.

"No. They may be able to tell that it has been recently wiped down. Just tell them you had an intrusion scare with a hacker. Working in the field you do, they will realize that the information stored on your hard drive is very sensitive and it should make sense to them that you would have to do that. But if they need to know more, that will point them in my direction and I will confirm your story."

"I don't want them anywhere around you, Bruce. I don't want you connected to this at all unless it is absolutely necessary. Those boys start sniffing around you and everything might unravel. I can't take that chance."

Bruce was almost hurt by Montgomery's lack of faith in him. "Well, you may not have a choice."

"Where are you? Sounds like seagulls in the background."

Bruce thought quickly. "I'm at the pier. I thought I'd come down to the beach and have a quick swim and then pick up some fish for dinner. You know Davy Jones Locker has the best fresh catches in town."

"You're buying your fish at Davy Jones Locker? I'm paying you too much." Bruce could hear the smile in Tony's voice.

"Yeah, probably," Bruce concurred, relieved that Tony believed him. His fears were also lessened by the fact that his boss was not computer savvy. He could tell Montgomery anything he wanted regarding the technology and Tony would question him only minimally. As of that morning, he was no longer intimidated by Anthony Montgomery. He realized he now held the hammer that could smash down on his evil boss' head. He wished he never had to leave the yacht until Montgomery had been caught.

"So, tell me, how does my wife sound? Scared?"

"Of course she sounds scared. She has no idea what is going on and she has a psycho watching over her," Bruce improvised. "It took her a few times to get what you wanted her to say right."

"You know...since she's going to be killed anyway, maybe I should visit her one last time. After all, it won't matter whether or not she knows just before she dies."

"Your wife is beautiful, Tony...I don't understand why you need to kill her. It's such a waste," Bruce told him, honestly.

"It's about power, Bruce. It's about who has the most influence and authority. Greatness isn't about being strong, Bruce, it's about how you use your strength."

"Yeah. I guess that makes sense," Bruce replied, hating this man even more now that he had gotten to know Jody a little better.

"Of course it does. Pay attention to me, Bruce, you'll learn a lot."

"I've learned a lot already."

"I need to get back to the main house, see what's happening. I'll be calling you later or tomorrow."

"When are we going to wrap this up?"

"Now you sound like Ramone. Soon. This will be over soon."

Noticing the finality tone to his voice, Bruce shivered, knowing exactly what his boss meant by that.

Bruce walked back to the two women. "They seized his office computer and he freaked out a little," he explained, holding up his phone.

"I'm surprised they didn't do that the first day," Tia said. "What will they find on it?"

"Nothing but MediMont business. But they'll be able to see that it's been messed with recently which will raise a big red flag."

"Does he know that?" Jody inquired.

"Yes. I told him to tell them that they had a hacker intrusion and he had to protect the privacy of his clientele," Bruce smiled.

"You know they won't buy that," Tia commented.

"Yeah, but *he* did and right now that's all that matters."

Agent Walter Sanborn had received an urgent message to return to his main office several hours after he had arrived at the Wainwright Estate. He could not have been more grateful. It had been an uncomfortable day all around. He had been chewed out in front of his subordinates by John Wainwright and he still hadn't recovered from it and was silently fuming. Agent Danny Marciano, a sharp kid who hadn't been with the Bureau too long, tried to give him a head's up but he had blown him off. Finding out that Marciano had also been humiliated in front of anyone within earshot twenty minutes before him made him decide to give the young agent a break and he requested that Marciano accompany him back to headquarters.

"Sir, may I speak frankly?" Marciano asked, once they had left the estate property.

"Please," Sanborn told him.

"I have a bad feeling about Montgomery."

Sanborn pursed his lips and cocked his head to the side. He also didn't have a good feeling about 'the husband' but he could never put his finger on why, especially since Montgomery kept coming up so damned clean. However, he knew that gut instinct was an insight to be nurtured in this profession. Too many people nowadays went by the book and not enough trusted their intuition. Maybe Marciano could put the situation into perspective for him. "Talk to me, Danny."

"I don't have anything concrete, Sir. Honestly? There is just something about him that makes my skin crawl. He's too calm, too smooth. His reactions feel practiced. And today, after the press conference, after I told him we were confiscating his office computer, he took a long walk on the estate grounds and spoke on his cell phone."

"Pull his cell records."

"We did. There were no pings from his personal cell phone. I can only assume he spoke on a prepaid wireless, Sir."

"Well, now, that's interesting. I wonder why he did that?"

"Exactly my thoughts, Sir."

"Let's see what the regional office has to say."

Unfortunately, Montgomery's DNA had not been on record with the government or anywhere else. So getting Montgomery's genetic information to match it with the two spots of blood that had been discovered in a separate location from the rest and had not yet been identified, was going to be a little more complicated than first thought. Javier Zamora already had the paperwork processing to pull all of Montgomery's files, including records from his last medical check up but no DNA. If they arrested Montgomery now, his lawyer would have him out on bail before they could finish analyzing the computer data Zamora had received that afternoon. According to regulations, Zamora did have probable cause as an eyewitness put Montgomery at the scene of the prostitute's murder which then mushroomed into the kidnapping of Jody Montgomery. When Zamora told his supervisor that a new confidential informant had explosive intel on the heiress' husband, he was asked why he did not turn this information over to the FBI and let them deal with it. Zamora advised him that it may be connected to something bigger in the DEA's field and he requested the latitude with which to explore it. With minor restrictions, his boss gave him carte blanche to investigate it. Zamora then called an associate who gave him the name of a trusted higher-up in the Bureau, to which Zamora then contacted him, gave him enough information to get the FBI man to start salivating and told him he needed good people who wouldn't tip their hand in this.

When Zamora, then Sanborn and Marciano reached the dirty, weather-beaten eleven story city building that housed the regional FBI offices, each agent was secretly hoping for the same thing - a speedy, successful outcome for their individual cases. When the two Bureau agents reached their headquarters' reception area, both had been quickly escorted to their field manager's office. After the door closed, they faced three men; their boss, his boss and Javier Zamora. He was identified as a DEA agent and his assignment required their assistance. Before he told them just exactly what he needed them to know he said, "Mrs. Montgomery is safe. She is in the protection of a colleague." He then glared at Sanborn and Marciano. "But that information doesn't leave this office." He observed the two men intently as their reaction to that news was very important. They looked sincerely relieved, which assuaged any reservation he may have had about them.

"Where is she?" Marciano inquired, feeling a release of anxiety physically exit his body.

"Not important at this time. Just know that she is alive and well and ready to cooperate with us." The last thing Zamora thought this kid would want to hear was that she had been on a boat he had personally checked.

"When was she rescued, Sir?" Sanborn asked his superior.

"She has actually been in the safety of my colleague since the day of her abduction," Zamora answered for the supervisor.

"What?!" Both Sanborn and Marciano said at the same time.

"Why weren't we told?" Sanborn continued, frustration dotting his tone. He looked at his boss, who nodded toward Zamora, deferring to the DEA agent at that time.

"We couldn't compromise her welfare by tipping off the person responsible." Zamora explained. "Mrs. Montgomery has been going along with everything until we have enough evidence to bring her home safely."

"Please, please tell me you suspect her husband is involved," Marciano blurted out.

Looking at him, sharply, Zamora said, " Why do you say that?"

Embarrassed at first by his unprofessional outburst, Marciano glanced around the room, only to see inquisitive eyes, not angry ones. He shrugged. "I just don't like the guy. I mean, he's cooperative and personable enough but...I don't know...something just does not set right."

"As well it shouldn't," Zamora agreed, solemnly.

Chapter Twenty-One

If you can't be content with what you have received, be thankful for what you have escaped.

The sun was setting on the horizon as Jody and Tia silently watched, from the foredeck. The heiress was sitting on the padded bench seat, her body between Tia's legs. Her feet were propped up and she leaned back against the solid body behind her, Tia's arms fastened around her waist, lips occasionally grazing her neck and hair, as the colors of the rainbow reflected in the sunset.

As darkness covered them, Tia was sparking Jody's libido to a full flame. Jody was still amazed that someone, anyone, could instill this reaction within her and this was what made her understand that she needed to explore her attraction to this woman more thoroughly. She never felt as safe and secure as she did when she was in Tia's embrace.

The day had been an awakening for her, for Tia, for Bruce and, hopefully, for her husband. Everything was happening so fast but it didn't make it feel any less right. She felt as though she was meant to be in the arms of Tia Ramone. As Jody allowed Tia's hands and lips to freely explore wherever they could comfortably reach, the two women remained in that position until the full moon was the only thing lighting up the cloudless sky.

"Jody?" Tia whispered in Jody's ear after gently gnawing on her lobe for a while.

"Yes?" Jody responded, breathlessly.

"Let's go downstairs to the master stateroom. I'm aching to make love to you."

"I don't want to go anywhere. Make love to me here, under the stars?"

"Yessss," Tia exhaled, turning Jody in her arms and lying flat, pulling the heiress on top of her. Placing her hand on the back of Jody's neck, Tia looked into Jody's eyes, which were darkened with need and desire, before she brought the heiress' face to hers and met Jody's eager lips with a deep, probing, passionate kiss. It was a kiss which made Jody's body once again respond in ways she never thought possible. The touch of Tia's lips to hers sent a jolt immediately to her center, eliciting a wetness that was instantaneous. She felt a tingling deep in her belly that was almost frightening in its intensity, causing her to quiver involuntarily. She had read about lovers provoking this type of reaction in each other but she thought it was just a fantasy created in the mind of the author. Until now.

As Jody's tongue continued to lovingly spar with Tia's, her mind wandered briefly to speculate what, other than the phenomenal sex, drew her to this woman. They really had nothing in common, their cultural backgrounds were miles apart, Tia was of an entirely different mindset and...ohhh, God...when the hell had Tia slid her fingers *there*? Breaking the kiss, Jody gasped for breath as Tia expertly worked her fingers over Jody's sensitized clit. It was an awkward position for Tia to be able to manipulate her fingers so knowledgeably and successfully. "Jesus, Tia," Jody panted, as she felt the electricity radiate throughout her nether regions. She could feel her wetness soaking them both.

"All that moisture just for little ol' me?" Tia playfully asked, her voice low and husky.

Jody buried her face into Tia's shoulder, concentrating on the sensation that was building within her. She caressed Tia's neck and occasionally found the focus to nibble on Tia's throat. Just when Jody thought Tia should have been circling faster, her new lover slowed her pace. "Wh...why are you stopping?" Jody wondered, puffing, "I'm so close...so close..." She began rocking her body against Tia's fingers, trying to regain the rhythm.

"I'm not stopping," Tia murmured, thankful that Jody had donned just a bathrobe after swimming earlier and taking a quick shower. She pushed the open robe off Jody's shoulders with her free hand and Jody shed the rest of the terrycloth garment without disrupting Tia's hands, leaving herself completely naked. When the heiress began to sit up, Tia stopped her without altering her cadence. "Don't. I want you close to me when I make you come. I want to see your face, your expression." She pulled Jody to her, locking gazes, neither taking their eyes off the other one except to blink.

"Please. Faster."

"No," Tia whispered, rubbing noses with her gorgeous companion. "I want you slow and steady. I don't just want to get you off, I want it to build within you. And I want to watch that happen in your eyes."

Responding to the impossibly sexy growl in Tia's voice, Jody's breath caught. The feel of Tia's index and middle finger stroking methodically, with just enough pressure to incite her nerve endings to a frenzied state. Her heartbeat accelerated and she was almost there again, when Tia reduced her speed even more. "Oh, fuck, what are you doing?" Jody asked, loving and hating Tia's ministrations at the same time.

"You'll see." Cupping Jody's backside with her other hand, Tia forced Jody's lower body tightly to her own, trapping her working hand between them. She then used the pads of her two fingers to decrease pressure, making the minutest of movement. "Right there?"

"A little to the OH GOD, YES, *right there*..." It was as though Tia had pressed a magic button. By using the angle and the leverage Tia was, added to the sudden increased pace and barest of momentum, made Jody's insides erupt. She almost closed her eyes to accept her orgasm but Tia lightly bit on Jody's chin to get her attention. Watching the predatory expression on her lover's face, as Tia took in every nuance of Jody's climax, proceeded to make Jody come harder and longer.

Bruce grabbed one of his laptop computers, a couple changes of clothes and rented a motel room for the night. He wasn't sure what was going to go down and he did not want to be anywhere on Tony's radar when the shit hit the fan. After he had left The Quintessence, he went to his apartment, opened his safe, took out one set of copies of the evidence against his boss to keep

with him and then gave his other set of copies to Javier Zamora. The DEA agent had called Bruce to confirm what he had and to arrange a meeting to turn the CDs over. Zamora assured him that even if they could not connect Montgomery to the kidnapping right away, with what Bruce gave him, after reviewing it to sort out the correct charges, they would at least have Montgomery on the drug counts. Bruce also knew, though, that until an investigation could confirm what he had given the DEA, a good attorney would have Tony out of jail within hours and if Tony had already planned to zero him out, with the new knowledge that Bruce had overtly betrayed him, Tony would make it his life's mission to hunt him down and kill him.

He also knew Tony could order to have it done, too. However, he hoped that the FBI and DEA wouldn't jump the gun and, instead, have all their paperwork in order so they could get Tony before he knew what was happening and hang onto him. Then Bruce was sure he could fade into obscurity in the federal witness protection program. He didn't care about the millions his boss had promised him. He just wanted to walk away from this alive, with the promise that he had a good chance of staying alive unless he screwed up again. He was getting a second chance. How many people in the depths of hell that Bruce was in could say that?

Bruce knew his "new life" meant he would have to get off the steroids and return to the skinny, unpopular geek he once was. It was too bad Mrs. Montgomery wasn't going to need the services of a computer nerd at her beck and call. It didn't matter that she wouldn't look at him twice *that way*. He just suddenly felt that she and Tia Ramone would be the only two people to ever understand and appreciate him.

Tia Ramone. Boy, what a thunderbolt she turned out to be. He'd accessed a majority of Tia's history, he knew what she was capable of, knew that regardless of his strength, she could turn him into cat food with little effort. She should have been so angry with him and yet she was ready to wipe the slate clean if he helped them. Instead of a detonating bomb, she had been the calming force that said, 'together we can save all our asses.'

She would probably never realize what an inspiration to him she had been in just that short time they had interacted with each other. Maybe someday he would have the chance to tell her.

As he stretched out on his hard hotel bed, he clicked the remote until he found a news station. Seeing Tony's fake, grim face on CNN's Headlines News every fifteen minutes gave him an upset stomach. He searched the channels and settled on reruns of *Frasier*. It was the Valentine's Day episode, Bruce laughing hysterically at the beginning, thinking it was the funniest five minutes on television, ever. Goddamn, that Niles was just hilarious. Yes, watching *Frasier* was much better than the news.

"Ooooooooooh," Jody inhaled as one skilled finger entered her, then another. "Ohhhhhhhhhh, God, Tia....faster...harder..." She couldn't take much more of this sweet, exquisite torture. Her body was screaming for respite. She had climaxed repeatedly from Tia's masterful attention to her needs, to the point where she had literally almost passed out once. Jody had to give back at some stage, the thought of Tia's bucking, writhing form underneath hers clearly bringing her to the

brink once again. Stretched, well lubricated with her own juices, aching and ready, Jody asked for a third finger. Then a fourth. Feeling it inserted and joining the others, Jody rode Tia's hand only briefly before crying out her release and collapsing into strong, warm arms that enveloped her protectively.

"Madre de Dios, tu es tan seductora." *Mother of God, you are so seductive*, Tia told her, throatily, holding the heiress to her, kissing whatever flesh was exposed. "Tu tiene un cuerpo tan erótica y un alma tan hermosa. Si podría venir a casa a tu cada noche, juro que yo no sería donde soy. Pienso que yo podría amar tu, mi magnífico."

"God, that is so sexy when you whisper Spanish in my ear like that. What are you saying?" When Tia was silent, Jody lifted her head to look in her eyes. "Tell me. Please?"

Almost embarrassed, Tia repeated it in English. *You have such a seductive body and such a beautiful soul. If I could come home to you every night, I swear I wouldn't be where I am. I think I could love you, my magnificent one.*

Jody nodded, playing with a strand of Tia's silky, long black hair. "Thank you. So...um...you would really want to come home to someone like me every night?"

The question was asked with such a sense of modesty and humility, it caused Tia's heart to pound. Jody's absence of vanity and lack of self-importance was exactly one of the reasons, Tia was responding to her with such fervency. "Jesus, Jody...are you kidding? Who in their right mind wouldn't want to be with you?"

"Other than my own husband?"

"I said 'in their right mind.' He's a fucking dick. And, come on, you never really loved him anyway. You were accommodating your parents. Now it's time for you. Just because he had his own agenda is no reason for you not to fully explore and take advantage of what you have now discovered and acknowledged about yourself."

"What about you?"

"Me? I want to stop suffering from a severe case of inflammation of the wishbone."

"I think I want my life to include you in it. In fact," Jody gave Tia a heated kiss, accentuated with desire, "I know I do."

"We'll talk about that, okay? I have a lot to come to terms with, too. A lot to figure out. I don't know how I could possibly be good for you."

"Can I be the judge of that?"

Tia adjusted her position over the heiress, grinding her center into Jody's. "Can we discuss this later? Right now, I kind of have this crisis that only you can fix..."

Zamora had grilled all present and accounted for FBI personnel about everything they knew and had discovered so far about Anthony Montgomery, his in-laws and the case. He, in turn, gave them what he could about Montgomery's involvement with the illegal steroid importation and distribution business. The thrilled look on Marciano's face was nearly worth the wait. Zamora was sure that, in addition to the most important thing - knowing Mrs. Montgomery was safe - the young agent felt a little rush of self-importance because his gut had been right about Montgomery and that he could also clearly see his advancement within the Bureau.

Finally, somewhere close to seven o'clock P.M., Zamora got the go ahead to arrest Montgomery, and while he was in custody, get his DNA.

Accompanying Sanborn and Marciano to the Montgomery property, Zamora took a Cohiba cigar out of his right breast inside pocket, ran his tongue over the tip he then put in his mouth and lightly clamped down on, holding it between his teeth, not lighting it. It was a four hundred dollar cigar, the purchase of which nearly caused his wife to divorce him. He knew, however, a time would come when his extravagance would pay off and that time was very soon. Smoking it was an honor and a commemorative luxury he would wait for and the bonus and the reward he would receive from this would certainly make up for his self-indulgence.

He would call Tia when Montgomery was safely behind bars. He wondered what she would do to celebrate.

They had still not left the foredeck. Their lovemaking had been so potent, concentrated and reciprocal that time seemed to stand still for hours. They just could not get enough of each other. Although, at one point, Tia wondered what was going on with the investigation, it was a fleeting thought that exited her head almost as quickly as it entered. All she wanted to do right now was satisfy the lovely woman in her arms again and again and again...

It had begun to get chilly and a cool breeze was starting to build but neither woman really noticed right away. Jody had just spent the last thirty minutes, working up a sweat by burying her face into Tia's crotch and just following her instincts to cater to Tia's precise needs. She was learning so much, most specifically that her own gratification was minor compared to what she could cause her lover's body to do. It was wonderful realizing that your own body had the capacity to respond in ways you never thought possible but what *power* to know that you could coax such reactions out of another human being, that you could literally render them nearly helpless with your sexual capabilities. When Jody finished, her indulging Tia resulting in the woman beneath her becoming momentarily weak, the heiress suggested they continue in the master stateroom.

When Tia advised Jody that her legs felt stable enough to stand on and walk downstairs, she agreed.

Once down in Jody's bedroom, after another drink and some creative making out up against the wall, Jody found herself being thrown on the bed. Lying on her back, looking up at Tia with a coquettishly panicked expression, Jody's breathing was labored by curiosity and excitement. Joining Jody on the bed, Tia looked at her, dominantly, and said, in a husky whisper, "Te la voy a meter de mira quien viene." Grabbing Jody's ankles, she turned her blonde companion over, then yanked her up so that Jody was on her hands and knees. Crouched between Jody's legs, Tia spread her, holding her apart with her knees against Jody's thighs. Gathering an abundance of moisture from Jody's center, Tia rimmed Jody's anus with her middle finger, then entered gradually, burying her finger deeper with each slow thrust. With her other hand, she fingered Jody to an almost violent orgasm that seemed to radiate from two areas at once.

"Oh, Jesus, Tia. Oh, my God, my God, *please* don't stop..."

When Jody settled down, Tia fucked her again in the same manner. While Jody let her body relax, collapsing on the bed, Tia went to the head and washed her hands. Returning before Jody even knew she was gone, the sable-haired beauty grinned. She turned Jody over so that the heiress was lying on her back "Te voy a hacer la tonto," Tia muttered, as she cupped both Jody's breasts. Positioning herself, she hovered over the reddish-blonde, neatly trimmed curls that sheltered Jody's sex, blowing on the dampness that clung to the soft fringe. Parting Jody with her thumbs, Tia proceeded to feast on Jody's aching center.

This kind of ecstasy couldn't be possible...could it? Jody really felt as though she had died and gone to heaven. She could not, *would not* lose this woman.

Hours later, Montgomery sighed as he sat out by his artificially lit pool area. With the exception of a few minor glitches, everything was going according to plan. Tomorrow would be the last day of fun and games and the next, would be dooms day for his wife, Bruce and that bitch, Ramone. His father-in-law was at his wits end and was getting the ransom money ready, which is precisely what he thought would happen. The FBI was scratching their collective heads. Bruce and Tia were trapped by their own addictions and his poor wife was just a victim of circumstance. But he *knew* his father-in-law would cave and pay the money and then he would be free of it all. People were just so predictable, he laughed to himself. As for Tony, he would be so 'grief-stricken' that he would appoint someone to run his company and he would sell this house and move somewhere to mourn. Somewhere tropical, of course.

"Inez, could you get me another Seven and Seven?" Tony asked his downstairs maid, as he held his glass out. "Fresh glass and easy on the ice this time."

"Yes, Mr. Montgomery," Inez responded, taking the glass from him. She stopped before

returning to the wet bar on the patio. "Mr. Montgomery?"

"Yes, Inez?"

"May I ask, please, if there is any news on Mrs. Montgomery?"

"No, Inez, I'm sorry. Just that the kidnappers still have her."

"We miss her very much, Mr. Montgomery. And Richard said that a couple of the dogs aren't eating."

"Everything will be fine, Inez. The FBI is doing everything they can and, if all else fails, Mrs. Montgomery's father is willing to pay the ransom. She'll be home soon, I'm sure of it."

"Mr. Montgomery, forgive me but Eeyore and Piglet are sleeping with me in my quarters at night," Inez informed him, referring to Jody's oldest cat and dog.

"That's okay. I'm sure Mrs. Montgomery would have wanted that, Inez. She knew how fond you were of them."

Inez nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Montgomery." She stepped over to the bar to make Tony his cocktail, disturbed by the fact that he just referred to Jody in the past tense. As she handed him his drink, Richard, the houseman, entered the pool area.

"Mr. Montgomery? Agents Sanborn and Marciano are here to see you. May I show them out here?"

"Certainly, Richard." Taking a sip of his drink, he nodded at Inez. "Perfect. Thank you." Standing up, Montgomery smoothed his wet hair back and took a deep breath. Had something gone wrong? Had that maniac Ramone flipped and killed Jody? Had that bitch jumped the gun on him so that he wouldn't get the payoff? Several scenarios were running through his brain at once, most centering on just exactly what he would do to Tia Ramone when he found her if she had fucked this up for him in any way. Facing the patio door that led into the house, Montgomery exhaled, smiled and greeted the two agents. "Gentlemen, what can I do for you? Is there news about my wife?"

"No, Sir, this is about you," Sanborn advised him.

They were joined by a tall man Montgomery had never seen before. He looked to be of Latin descent. He had a different air about him, a streetwise authority that didn't set at all well with Tony. "Me?" He genuinely looked stunned. Bruce had assured him everything incriminating had been taken off his computer and even if they had found something, Bruce had guaranteed that it would take a very long time to decipher it. Could Bruce have set him up? No. Maybe Ramone was insane enough to take things into her own hands but Bruce wanted that money too much. Not only that, he was a follower, not a leader. "Did you need to ask me more questions? I honestly can't think of anything more I can tell you."

"We can, Sir. We need to know about your association with a woman named Patricia Martindale," Walt Sanborn inquired.

Montgomery tried to look confused. "I can't help you gentlemen, I am not personally familiar with anyone by that name and, besides, I am a happily married man, I don't associate with prostitutes."

"How do you know she is a prostitute, Mr. Montgomery?" Sanborn asked, with a lift of his eyebrow.

"I heard about her on the news. It was the only other story making headlines the day the media stopped everything to report my wife's kidnapping. It was almost a relief to hear something other than the press speculating about my wife. So, of course I know the name. She was the hooker found dead in that car. I thought they were looking for some ex-CIA person in connection with that."

Maybe you know her better as Trisha," Marciano suggested.

Montgomery swallowed hard, trying to keep his cool. "I told you, Agent Marciano," he said, trying to remain calm, "I don't associate with prostitutes. I mean, you've seen pictures of my wife, why would I have to?"

Marciano appeared as though he was on the verge of smirking. "Mr. Montgomery, that is like a rapist saying, 'I can get any girl I want, why would I have to rape anyone?' You need to come clean with us, Sir, and you need to do it now." The younger agent's voice wasn't threatening but it was firm.

"I don't like what you are implying," Montgomery spit out, indignantly.

"Then you'll like this even less," the DEA agent was less diplomatic than Marciano. He did smirk.

"I'm sorry...and you are?" Montgomery was starting to sweat even while trying to maintain being offended.

"Agent Zamora, DEA."

"The Drug Enforcement Administration? Why are you here?" *Oh, no...no, no, no, no...*

"I have a message from Tia Ramone: Looks like your little Scorpion just stung you."

His face fell and drained of all color immediately. "Ramone? I don't know who that is..."

"Funny, you didn't know Patricia Martindale, either, but you remembered her name from the news. Yet you don't remember Tia Ramone's name?" he asked Montgomery,

"Oh...oh, wait, Ramone...that's the name, the CIA person who -"

"Save it," Zamora held his hand up to Montgomery. "What you *will* remember about Tia Ramone is that she is the one who is responsible for bringing you down. By the way...didn't anyone ever tell you to never underestimate a woman scorned?"

Montgomery's eyes grew wide as three uniformed police officers appeared on the patio from behind the three government agents. Since he was dressed only in a Speedo water polo swimsuit, it was obvious he wasn't hiding anything and didn't need to be frisked. Seeing a pair of handcuffs being pulled from a woven leather holster, Montgomery took a step back. "Now wait a minute! Are you going to arrest me? What in the hell for?"

"Anthony Holt Montgomery, Jr., you are under arrest for Conspiracy to Import Anabolic Steroids, Conspiracy to Distribute Anabolic Steroids, Conspiracy to Launder Money and Criminal Forfeiture. You are also being arrested on suspicion of violating the Federal Kidnapping Act." Zamora purposely omitted the murder charges as that was not his jurisdiction. That was a local police matter and they had yet to match Montgomery's DNA with that of the unidentified spot in the car, although, he had no doubt that they would.

"What?! This is nuts! You can't..." He took deep breaths to calm himself. "Okay. All right. Let me at least get dressed and call my lawyer."

Richard, the houseman, suddenly stepped next to Montgomery, a shirt and slacks slung over his outstretched arm. "Your clothes, Sir." Richard seemed to be irritatingly smug.

Although laughing incredulously, Montgomery was cooperative. He took his clothes and put them on over his bathing suit. "Richard, call my attorney, please. Have him meet me at where? The FBI offices?"

"The police station, the harbor precinct. We'll book you there and transport you following your arraignment," Sanborn said.

Montgomery looked at Marciano. "You guys are making a huge mistake. I didn't do anything, Danny. Don't fuck up your career over this. You are too young to go down in flames like this." Inside, Montgomery was imploding. *How could this have happened? How did that fucking bitch, Ramone, find out about the drugs?*

Leaning in closely, Marciano squinted at the swarthy suspect, "Honestly, Mr. Montgomery? Nothing gives me more pleasure than to do what I am doing right now."

Montgomery seemed to have regained his composure but the beads of sweat above his lip contradicted that demeanor. "Dan, Dan...I'm telling you, this is a mistake..."

"Tony, Tony," Marciano mocked him, "We have so much against you, you might never see the light of day again."

Losing his 'nice guy' persona, his face contorted in outrage. "You stupid little son-of-a-bitch! You are so going down for this! When my lawyer is finished with you, you won't be allowed to direct traffic...!"

Leaning close to Montgomery's ear, so that only Montgomery could hear him, Marciano said, "Yeah, speaking of going down, a pretty boy like you is going to be very popular in federal prison. When we're finished with you, your asshole is going to pucker to the size of a pinpoint," Marciano smirked. "But...don't worry, I'll send you a big jar of Vaseline. Where you're going, you'll need it." Placing handcuffs around Montgomery's wrists, Marciano began to recite, "You have the right to remain silent..."

Exhausted, the lovers had fallen asleep wrapped up in each other. Jody couldn't speak for Tia but she was quite sure she would not be able to walk correctly for a while, she had been so thoroughly ravished. The sex had been rowdy, to say the least. And she had enjoyed every second of it. No one had ever excited her as much as the woman in her arms had and Jody held onto Tia tightly in case this was the last time they would be able to be together for a while. She wondered what was going on with the investigation, wondered if she would be home tomorrow, wondered if Tia would be taken away from her or worse, if Tia would leave on her own. She dozed off not fifteen minutes after Tia had started to lightly snore.

Neither heard Tia's cell phone ring some time around four A.M.

"Tia," Zamora's message said, on her voice mail, "It's done. We've got him. Stick that proverbial fork in him. He's done. I'm coming out there to get you two. We're bringing you home."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Anyone who angers you, conquers you

Waking up to use the head, Tia checked her phone for messages. Hearing Zamora's voice telling her they were on their way and why, caused the ex-operative to forget all about her full bladder. The time the message was sent was about twenty minutes earlier. "Shit." Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes with a sense of relief she had not felt in a long time, Tia knelt by Jody's side of the bed. "Hey..." She shook the heiress gently, her voice low as not to startle her lover. "Jody, wake up..."

Stretching languidly, Jody reacted to her body's response to her marathon sexual aerobics that

had stopped just an hour earlier. "Owwwww. Ooooh." She blinked to focus on Tia's smiling face. "Need more sleep...and a chiropractor..." she mumbled.

"There'll be plenty of time for that. Tony's been arrested and Javier and the feds are on their way out here -"

"They have him!?" She sat up, quickly, and immediately regretted it. "Fuck. And I thought I was in shape," she commented, rubbing her lower back.

Tia leaned over and kissed her. "Oh, you are. Trust me on that." Winking at her, she pulled back. "They should be here any minute. I'm going to go to the room I was originally sleeping in and mess it up to make it look like I spent the night there. I'm also going to shower off quickly." Her lips pursed into a smirk. "I suggest you do the same. And maybe strip the bed and throw the sheets into the washer? We don't need any possible appearances of collusion to cloud this. I'll be back to help you remake the bed."

Jody got out of the berth and began pulling at the bedding. "Tia?"

"Yes?"

"What happens now?"

"You'll be debriefed by the FBI and then-"

"No," she interrupted, reaching for Tia's wrist, "I mean, between us?"

"I...I don't know, Jody. That will be up to you. I have a lot of demons that I need to exorcise before I do anything. I'm not whole right now and you deserve someone who is. These are extraordinary circumstances and under normal conditions, we might not even like each other."

"I doubt that," Jody smiled, fondly.

Tia doubted it, too. She didn't want to leave her new lover but, surprised that Javier wasn't already there, she knew she needed to discipline herself to move. Now. She leaned over and tenderly kissed Jody once more, hopefully not for the last time.

It had turned into a media frenzy. Some department's PIO had contacted the press and suddenly helicopters were everywhere, spotlights illuminating The Quintessence as the federal agents boarded, disappeared inside and returned with the kidnapped heiress. Tia followed, Javier at her side. The 'rescue' was being broadcast live all over the world, as well as the news that Jody's husband had been arrested on suspicion of being connected to the abduction, among other serious charges. As Tia and Javier stepped onto the designated federal water transport, Zamora leaned into Tia and said, "Damn, woman, you're still a ladykiller, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about?" She tried to look innocent but she knew exactly what he meant.

"Jefa, you can take as many showers as you want, you can wash those sheets a thousand times, you can spray all the Fabreze in there that the manufacturers have to offer but that room still smelled like sex." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

Rolling her eyes, a slight blush coloring her cheeks, she said, "Shut up, Javi. You always did have an extra sensitive nose."

Throwing his head back, Zamora let go with a hearty laugh. "Perro." He then gestured Tia onto the lower deck.

Tia seated herself opposite Jody, who was flanked by two FBI agents. At several points, their eyes met, locked, and conveyed so much that words never could. If this exchange had been openly detected, no one made mention of it. The agents were speaking to the heiress the entire thirty minute journey back to shore to which Tia saw Jody either nod or shake her head.

Once they docked, there were cameras and microphones shoved into their faces, questions, insinuations, accusations thrown at them from every direction, pushing and shoving but until they were both safely ensconced into separate SVUs, the only words spoken were, "No comment."

The Wainwrights watched the entire event unfold on live TV. Neither John nor Sondra could speak, both for different reasons. John was nearly bawling like a baby when he saw his beautiful daughter emerge onto the aft deck landing and be courteously assisted onto the government vessel. She looked unharmed but tired. He could not hold his emotions back, regardless of who was in the room.

Sondra remained phlegmatic but found herself, appallingly, choked up, something she would never personally acknowledge or publicly admit to anyone. They had already been informed that Montgomery had been arrested. Sondra had scoffed at John's shock but, deep down inside, she was also surprised that her son-in-law had risked so much. Both she and John assumed it had been about the money and no other reason. Sondra understood revenge but only if it had dollar signs attached to it.

They had not traded any conversation and remained glued to the news networks, while listening intently to each reporter's speculation of what had happened, what was currently happening and what would most likely happen in the immediate future. Staff, acquaintances, assigned media and law enforcement officials alike were all offering their relief and congratulations to Jody's parents. Everyone quietly watched the huge television screen in the entertainment room as film of Jody being escorted into the regional FBI headquarters were intercut with snippets of Montgomery, in shackles, being led into the harbor police station. The trailer seemed to be on a continuous loop while the news anchor narrated over it.

Several hours later, interrogated out but happy to be alive, Jody was escorted by federal security agents into her parents' home. Her reuniting with her father had been tearful, sweet and precious. She knew how much and how sincerely her father loved her. "Daddy, I'm fine," she assured him. "Officer Ramone was very protective and knowledgeable. I was very, very lucky to have had her at the right place at the right time. Without her, I would be dead." That finalization of that last word made them both blubber. Gaining control, Jody freed herself from her father and approached her mother.

Her reunion with her mother was altogether different. She hugged her mother for the cameras, her lips very close to Sondra's ear. For the first time she addressed her mother the way she'd previously never had the guts to. "You cold, insufferable bitch. I watched you on the news. You could not have cared less if I returned safely. Don't worry...I won't lay a straw in your way but if you think, for one minute, I am going to continue to tolerate your insecurities toward me, you can think again. Get your shit together, Mother. I'm warning you. I'm not the little girl who was under your thumb less than a week ago."

There was an authority in Jody's voice that Sondra would not have dared argue with and, despite everything, she almost felt solace that her daughter had been returned safely, revealing a maternal instinct she never thought she possessed. Suddenly, she tightened her grip on Jody. "I'm so glad, so very glad you were not hurt or killed. Please believe that, Jody."

Swallowing hard, Jody slowly pushed back from Sondra. "I wish I could believe that." She turned to face the cameras. "I'm just very grateful to be home. That's all I have to say for now." And, with that, Jody, John and Sondra walked arm-in-arm into John's private study, where there was no press. A line of police officers prevented anyone from following them.

Tia felt being raked over hot coals would have been quicker and less painful. First, she had to speak to the FBI. It took hours to satisfy those agents that she had not been working with Tony Montgomery and that she *had* been working with Bruce Wechsler and Javier Zamora to bring Tony down. She explained to them that Montgomery had solicited them separately and that they both realized the only way they could bring him down was to work together. What she had to tell them was just too compelling and her story was not only backed up by Wechsler, it was supported by Jody Montgomery, as well.

Bruce was in another room, recounting his tale to a delegation of DEA agents. They already had possession of Bruce's CDs and what he was telling them added up. There were some personnel annoyed that he had been promised immunity but there were others who knew Bruce was the little fish in the Big Pond who could help them catch the current Big Fish.

Later that day, Bruce was snapped up into government protection, Tia was escorted to her

residence where she packed all of her minimal belongings and was driven to an undisclosed location arranged by Javier and Jody went home. After a sincerely warm welcome by her staff, Jody checked on all of her animals, praising Richard, his daughter and whoever else helped keep them fed, exercised and healthy.

That evening, Jody took a relaxing swim with her lab/beagle mix, Piglet, who attempted laps with her and Eeyore, her grey Maltese cat, carefully supervising. When she finally went to bed, her faithful companions snuggled in with her, she could not believe the intensity of emotion she felt due to Tia's absence.

Twenty miles away, sipping on a club soda, watching herself on the news with the mute button activated, Tia could not believe how much she missed Jody. It was as though a piece of her had been forever vanquished and the emptiness she felt was almost unbearable. She settled in, propping herself against the headboard and began flipping channels. She took another swallow of club soda. Her head was amazingly clear. She hadn't had a drop of alcohol in more than twenty-four hours. That must have been a record for her. The fact that the CIA had contacted her to praise her on her actions and asked for her forgiveness was one thing. But when they told her they would expunge her 'record' and asked her to come back to work was quite another. After telling them in no uncertain terms to do something anatomically impossible with their offer, she felt better than she ever had in her life.

Montgomery sat in jail, awaiting his extradition to a federal penitentiary. How could all of this have gone so wrong so quickly? He'd had everything under control. Or so he thought. He had to admit that the evidence against him had been pretty damned overwhelming. He had underestimated Tia Ramone's persuasive abilities. Especially on his wife.

Jody. He should have been happy she wasn't dead. After all, she had really only been a pawn in his game. But he wasn't. He felt a fury raging inside him unlike anything he had ever experienced. Ramone had used his wife's innocence and vulnerability against him and it had worked. She should have been loyal to him, yet she wasn't. She had turned against him in the blink of an eye. He still could not believe that she had been so ready to sell him out at the words of Bruce and Ramone. They were degenerates and yet she sided with them. And the worst of it was, Jody was still alive, which meant Wainwright wasn't suffering.

He knew she must have been feeling quite betrayed, to say the least, so when he was informed that Jody was there, requesting a visit with him, he was more than stunned.

They had been seated in a private room with nothing dividing them but a narrow, marked and dented metal table. Guards were everywhere. Clenching her teeth, restraining herself from slapping him across the face, it was Jody who finally spoke first, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "I won't ask you why, Tony, after everything I have been told and everything I have read, it is clear to me why."

"It wasn't about you," he told her, his voice monotone.

"Was it ever?" She asked him, knowing he really didn't need to answer.

"Why are you here?" His voice was undisguised resentment, his attitude one of pure indignation. "You want me to say I'm sorry? Don't hold your breath. I won't because I'm not."

Jody studied the man she had been married to. She didn't recognize him anymore. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing." Montgomery sat back. He expression and posture told her their conversation was over.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Love is an unusual game. There are either two winners or none.

One week later, Tia had emerged from one hundred twenty-eight hours of intense, concentrated rehabilitation. She felt well. A little lost in her sobriety but clear-headed, nonetheless. The first person she called was the heiress, Joanne Dyson Wainwright Montgomery. She wanted to know where she stood. Both women had had enough time to evaluate their lives and situations, especially since they'd had no contact with each other after the rescue. When Jody accepted her call instantly and, seemingly without reservation, Tia's heart nearly burst with emotion for the smaller blonde woman who had surrendered to her so willingly and lovingly a little over a week before.

"Oh Lord, Tia, you have no idea how much I have missed you," Jody breathed on the phone, ecstatic to hear her lover's voice.

"I think I might have a little idea..." Tia grinned, pleased that Jody's tone sounded so sincere.

"When am I going to see you?"

"Hopefully sometime between yesterday and tomorrow."

"Please," Jody begged, "come to me now."

"Ohhhh, as much as I would love to, I think we need to consider your reputation."

"Fuck my reputation."

Tia smiled. "It's not exactly your reputation I'm interested in fucking. Where are you?"

Tia's words, accompanied by a brief graphic visual, caused Jody to tingle all over with an

electricity only the former operative could elicit within her. "The Quintessence. I had to get away from everything. I know it must sound silly, but being here makes me feel closer to you."

"No," Tia responded, warmly. "It doesn't sound silly at all. I'm surprised The Quintessence still isn't impounded for evidence."

"They released it back to me yesterday and -"

"Do you have your security person back?"

"Kevin? No. Kevin fell and shattered his leg three-quarters of the way on his climb. Poor guy never made it to the summit. He'll be laid up for a while. I actually had an advanced security system installed. There are sensors everywhere that will alert me if any object comes within twenty-five hundred feet of the yacht. My father insisted that I hire armed bodyguards to be with me because he said a security system is pretty useless if there is no one around to respond to it but then that kind of negates the 'getting away' part, you know?"

"So did you resolve that?"

"I rented them a nice little boat of their own so they are keeping an eye on me from a distance. If any person or object penetrates the perimeter, they are automatically notified and on it immediately. My guess would be until they hear that alarm go off, they're relaxing and taking advantage of that big screen TV in the salon." Jody sighed in anticipation and hesitation. "I can disarm the system until you get on board but the press is still all around here..."

"Unless I can come up with something, we may have to wait."

"The thought of one more day without you in my arms is torture."

Tia smiled at that. "You can't always get what you want when you want it, you know," Tia teased.

"Oh, somehow I doubt that if you were here," Jody teased back.

The first two days following Jody's liberation and after the yacht had been seized, the media flooded the area of the vessel with cameras and crews to do their individual reports but following that, there was little flurry as it no longer seemed relevant to the current story. Yet, there were still residual members of the press who lingered just in case. Now that the heiress had retrieved The Quintessence and taken it back out, there seemed to be more interest in and activity surrounding the yacht again. It did seem the perfect place to reunite with Tia but Jody was concerned about the reunion turning into a salacious circus if reporters found out Tia was there with her. However, she had neither the strength nor desire to tell Tia to wait until a more appropriate time because there would never be a more appropriate time. Tia seemed to have much more restraint which must have come from all her CIA training. Knowing her lover was so

close yet seemed so far, frustrated and depressed her. She could take the yacht back in and meet with Tia but there would be no way she could do that in a stealthy manner and not have the news all over it. Suddenly she was brought out of her distraction by a constant beeping from the alarm that indicated a malfunction.

Her phone rang immediately. Answering it as she approached the alarm panel, she saw that the activation light was blinking. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Montgomery, this is Phillip," he announced, unnecessarily. At least the guards were on the ball. "We got a signal that your perimeter protection is down."

"Yes, I'm looking at the panel now..."

"We're on our way over. Stay on the phone with me until we get there. Go back into the master stateroom and lock yourself in until we have checked everything out. Any idea how it could have deactivated?"

Coming up out of the water to board the yacht, the emerging body barely made a sound or a ripple. The intruder could hear Jody, talking on her cell phone, conversing with someone. "No, I can't figure out how it could deactivate, either." When Jody walked into the master stateroom, her shock at seeing there was now another person on the yacht with her was communicated by a large gasp.

"Mrs. Montgomery? What's wrong?" the voice over the phone asked.

Jody couldn't believe her lover was there, naked and toweling off. Green eyes greeted a seductive grin and immediately misted over. "Stop, don't come, everything's fine. I see the problem Let me try to fix it."

"Mrs. Montgomery, you know the code words. If you are in danger, say it, if you are not, say it."

"Eeyore," Jody told them, giving them the password she had chosen to advise them everything was fine. "Listen, I'm resetting it right now. If that doesn't work, I always have my little panic button."

"Are you sure you don't want us to at least do a perimeter check and walk-through?"

"I'm positive. Thanks." Snapping her phone shut, she flew into Tia's arms, nearly sobbing. "I am so happy to see you."

"Shhhh, shhhh, it's okay, baby," Tia cooed, squeezing Jody to her, swaying them back and forth slightly. "I'm happy to see you, too." She kissed Jody on the top of the head. "Let's reactivate that alarm system before we have visitors." She watched as the heiress pressed a six number combination on the panel, heard a beep and saw the 'perimeter ready' green light move to the 'perimeter armed' red light. Turning Jody around, facing her, Tia stepped backward, pulling Jody slowly to the berth. They fell back onto the cushioned softness of the bedcovers and began to

kiss, intently. Tia rolled over onto Jody, easily capturing the dominant position as Jody buried her hands in Tia's damp hair.

"How did you do that?" Jody asked, between being deliciously assaulted by Tia's lips on hers.

"Does it really matter?"

"Absolutely not."

Being a certified expert diver, Tia had been successfully covert in her mission to get to The Quintessence without detection. She had retained the knowledge to disarm small scale laser and infrared beams connected with alarm systems. She knew that most body temperature of fish were the same as the water they were in and that the system would alert on her warm-blooded form if she invaded the circumference, so she simply used a device she had, leftover from her Agency tools, and neutralized the signal, causing it to read as a deactivation.

Kissing Tia passionately, Jody fit her bare thigh between Tia's long legs, feeling heat and wetness there. Taking a break to catch their breath, Jody stared at Tia reverently as Tia gently traced Jody's facial features with her hand.

"What?" Tia asked, Jody's awed expression stopping her.

"I fell in love with you the minute I saw you, you know," Jody told her.

"I know," Tia smiled, receiving a sharp yank on her hair in response.

"Aren't we just the cocky one?" Jody teased.

"Ow," Tia laughed, turning her head and kissing the inside of Jody's wrist several times until Jody eased her grip. "Come on, you like 'em dangerous and you like it rough but you have to be clandestine about it. It doesn't take being cocky to know I'm the woman for you." Leaning her face down into Jody's again, kissing her, Tia started riding her thigh.

"Tia, let me get undressed..."

"No," Tia told her, her concentration now on her inflamed center as she rocked on Jody's upper leg. "Should have worn your robe," Tia panted.

Jody had unconsciously begun to move in tandem with Tia. "Oh, Jesus, Tia, please..."

"Please what?" Tia breathed, as she pressed her body snugly to Jody's, pushing her thigh into Jody's crotch, causing the heiress to exhale a surprised gasp. "Please *what*?" Tia forcefully whispered in her ear, increasing her momentum, grinding harder as she felt Jody latch on, powerfully.

"Oh, God, please fuck me, please fuck me right now...!"

It was going to be a long, glorious night.

Jody was ready for this and she wasn't. She'd been dealing with the media all her life but nothing was ever concentrated on *her*, personally. Usually, any publicity she dealt with had to do with her pedigree or her charities. She had been asked to do exclusive interviews with Larry King and Barbara Walters, among others, but she politely declined. The weekly news and entertainment magazines were also vying in heavy bidding wars to get a print interview with her but again, she wasn't interested. She wanted to forget it and move on but Tia wisely advised her that she needed to give the media *something*, otherwise she would never get any peace. *They* would never get any peace. Finally giving in, Jody met with her father's legal team and law enforcement representatives and arranged a press conference.

With Tia waiting in another room, watching the pandemonium unfold on the TV monitors, the taciturn ex-CIA officer admired the aplomb with which the heiress handled the media and, with Jody's host of family attorneys at her side, Jody walked out and sat behind a long desk, equipped with a microphone, facing national and international news and television reporters. She hoped the press would buy into everything she was about to tell them.

With an introduction from Danny Marciano, and a brief statement from the DEA, the floor had been opened to the media.

"Mrs. Montgomery, how are you doing?" A young male reporter she recognized from the network news asked.

"Actually, I'm fine, considering. Thank you for asking." Jody was gracious and charming.

"Mrs. Montgomery, can you tell us how you came to meet Tia Ramone?" He asked, forcing another question through, before the others.

Jody smiled. She was very poised. "Yes, I was contacted by Ms. Ramone the evening of August second. She advised me of my husband's plans to have me abducted, held for ransom and then murdered."

"What made you believe her?" Another perfectly coiffed, well-modulated reporter inquired.

"Honestly, I didn't, at first. She advised me that on the following night, August third, my husband would take me out to dinner at The Cypress, which he did, and he would drug my glass of wine, which he did. She further advised me that he had planned out my route and knew I would feel the effects of the drug somewhere near the Dillon rest stop on Dillon Highway and that I would pull over at that location. Which I did."

"You drank the drugged wine?"

"Yes. I initially thought that Ms. Ramone's knowledge of my dinner date with my husband could have been something she may have overheard. Therefore, I drank a glass of wine with dinner, as I usually do. When I began to get sleepy approaching the Dillon rest stop, I knew then that Ms. Ramone was telling the truth. Before I passed out, Ms. Ramone met me at the rest stop and I willingly agreed to accompany her to my yacht until I had a clear head and we could figure things out."

"How did he know you would take Dillon Highway?"

"Because that's the most direct route from The Cypress to my house and the route I have taken many times in the past."

"Mrs. Montgomery, how did you know whether or not you could trust Tia Ramone?"

"In the situation I found myself in, I didn't have much of a choice."

"Mrs. Montgomery, why didn't you contact your parents and tell them that you were okay?"

"I was advised by the DEA agent working on this case to stay silent until they could build a solid enough case against my husband. It was safer for everyone involved if I did."

"Would that be Agent Zamora?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Montgomery, how did Agent Zamora get involved?"

"When Ms. Ramone uncovered information about my husband's, um, other business, she immediately contacted Agent Zamora, providing him with this information. From that point on, we deferred to Agent Zamora's expertise and direction."

"When did Agent Zamora contact the FBI to advise them that you were alive and well?"

"That is a question you would have to ask Agent Zamora."

"Have you had contact with your husband since his arrest?"

"Yes, I went to see him before he was transferred to federal custody."

"Would you like to expound on that meeting for us?"

"I would not," Jody smiled politely but firmly.

"Are you going to maintain an association with Tia Ramone?"

"Absolutely. I have hired her as my personal security consultant. She will be accompanying me everywhere, which, after the last two weeks, I think is needed."

"Mrs. Montgomery, there is a rumor that you and Ms. Ramone got rather, uh, *close* during this ordeal. Care to elaborate on that?"

Knowing what the reporter was asking, Jody thought she would be able to turn the subject in another direction. "Ms. Ramone saved my life while putting her own at risk. She had to guard me 24/7 until this case was concluded. There was no one on that yacht except Ms. Ramone and myself, so, yes, I would say you could qualify that as getting close."

"Your husband has said in his statements that you and Ms. Ramone had become lovers. Is that true?"

"What paper did you say you were with? The Enquirer?" That got a laugh from the crowd of reporters. "My husband will say anything right now to take the focus off himself. If he wants to put his little fantasy into the forefront, thinking that will make him look less guilty, then more power to him."

"You didn't answer the question, Mrs. Montgomery," the reporter persisted.

Leveling him with a cool gaze, Jody said, "I believe I did." She pointed to a female on the other side of the room. "Next question?"

"Do you know why your husband thought Ms. Ramone would go along with him in the first place?"

"If you are looking for a specific answer, that is something you will have to ask him. I do know that Ms. Ramone told me that he approached her after the anonymous witness he first approached refused to kidnap and murder me. This witness then provided my husband with Ms. Ramone's name and that's when my husband trapped her -" She heard a lawyer behind her clear his throat. "Excuse me, I mean *allegedly* trapped her into going along with him."

"How did the anonymous witness know of Ms. Ramone?"

"From what I understand, he had heard her name through a relative. I don't know any more than that."

"Mrs. Montgomery," the tabloid reporter spoke up again, obviously annoying his competition, "Tia Ramone has admitted that she freely went to the vehicle where the meeting took place with your husband with a now deceased prostitute for the sole purpose of having sex. How do you feel about that?"

"I feel that is none of my business." But the idea of it gnawed at her just the same. The thought of Tia with anyone else, regardless of who, tweaked her. Was it just barely what amounted to days ago that Tia had been so self-destructive?

"Mrs. Montgomery, will you expedite the divorce proceedings to your marriage?"

"If I can find a legal way, absolutely."

"Is that so you can be with Tia Ramone?" that rag magazine reporter obstinately asked.

Jody took a deep breath and then put on her most patient smile. She knew she had to choose her words carefully. The last thing she needed to do was jeopardize the case against Tony and cause him to be freed on some idiotic technicality. She knew what she wanted to say but a tirade at this point would have made her look naive and foolish. Well...*more* naive and foolish than Tony had already made her look. "You heard the list of federal charges against my husband. Those kidnapping and solicitation and conspiracy charges were about me. The evidence and witness statements allege that he wanted to murder me. And you think I want to divorce him so that I can be with someone else?" There was dead silence in the room as she stared down the reporter. "Are there any other *legitimate* questions?"

Not even having the decency to look embarrassed, he smirked and scribbled something in his little pocket notebook.

"Mrs. Montgomery, are you saying you had no idea your husband was involved in any of this activity?" It was a female correspondent who had pulled Jody's focus away from the tabloid reporter.

"I had absolutely none. Tony and I were married yes but we had different interests and basically led separate lives."

"Are you saying you had a marriage in name only?" It was Mr. RagMag again.

"No. We were married in every sense of the word, what I am saying is the man sitting in federal custody right now is not the man I thought I was married to." This reporter was really getting on her nerves. When he attempted to jump in with another question, Jody ignored him.

This happened two more times before the reporter shouted over everyone, "Mrs. Montgomery, why don't you want to answer my questions?"

"I am answering your questions, Sir, as ridiculously lurid as they are. But when we have limited time here, I think you should give your colleagues a chance to--"

"I am pursuing a legitimate story, regardless of how uncomfortable it might be for you. A good reporter needs to speak up to be heard," he sneered.

"And shut up to be appreciated. Now, I don't have to be here. I am granting this press conference which means I can just as easily get up right now, thank you all and say goodbye, which would leave you to have to face your peers who didn't get to ask their questions. I'm done talking to you. I'm not answering any questions about my sex life as that is not up for debate."

Tia grinned at the monitor, admiring the way Jody never lost her temper, not once. Tia would have knocked out all his teeth and pounded him into the ground by now. The way Jody confidently took command of that room was just plain hot, Tia thought. This was the public side of her lover, a side Jody had been groomed for since birth, a side Tia was unfamiliar with. A side that made Tia want to whisk Jody out of the conference hall and back to The Quintessence.

When the grueling inquisition was over and Jody entered the back room where Tia was waiting for her, Tia was leaning casually against the wall, smiling at Jody, eyes twinkling, arms crossed. Finding an immediate moment of connection, Tia mouthed the words, 'I love you' to the heiress who was followed by an unwanted but needed entourage of official men.

Nodding slightly, grinning confidently, Jody mouthed back, 'I know.'

Tia's heart lurched and her legs nearly gave out as suddenly it hit her full force.

She hadn't saved Jody's life, Jody had saved hers.

Chapter Twenty-Four

True love doesn't consist of holding hands - it consists of holding hearts.

Three years later.

The Aegean Islands

Jody stepped out onto the private balcony off the forward master stateroom. She could have stayed inside the huge bedroom suite and watched the distant village lights from the panoramic two hundred seventy degree view but she decided she would rather look at the sky in the mildly breezy, balmy, night air. The two hundred foot chartered yacht was anchored off Santorini, somewhere between Athinios and Fira in the Cycladic Sea, so the vista was stunning from any perspective be it day or night.

She and her new spouse had strolled hand-in-hand from the private dining area on the master deck to the pool with a two-level waterfall, where they stripped and swam naked, savoring the Mediterranean sunset as they leisurely enjoyed the warmth of the late spring evening. In between the sun disappearing into the offing and the full moon rising to illuminate the darkness, they then moved to the king-sized berth and gently made love.

They had not been able to take a honeymoon after the wedding, as Tony's trials only recently

ended, following months and months of testimony, resulting in Montgomery being sentenced to more than a century of prison time from being found guilty on all his respective charges. When she wasn't testifying or meeting with several different law enforcement agencies, attorneys, accountants and publicists, she had been busy turning the Montgomery estate into a no-kill pet shelter, helping to hire staff and get the business off the ground. Life the last three years seemed like a whirlwind of passing days, multifarious changes, triumphs and disappointments. There never seemed to be enough hours in a day for the newlyweds to be alone which was why they were now basking in every moment they could spend in each other's presence, as far away from her recent past as Jody could get.

Jody's life had been hectic and complicated, knowing in the end that, infatuation aside, everything had worked out the way it was obviously supposed to. Smiling about the many events that had happened, especially lately, Jody murmured a warm moan as she was approached from behind and, feeling a silk robe placed over her shoulders, she snuggled back into the naked form behind her. "It's beautiful here, isn't it?"

"I've never seen anything quite like it."

"Did you want me to come back to bed?" Jody grinned, hopefully.

"Eventually. The air feels good." Arms encircled Jody, caressing her swollen belly. "Besides, our son needs a break."

"Our son will be fine, he knows you're being gentle and the doctor said we can have sex right up until I deliver."

"He also said your sex drive would decrease the further along you got."

"No, he said it *should* decrease but so far my desire for you hasn't so..." Hearing a deep, rich laugh in her ear, Jody felt her shoulders being kissed. Jody leaned back, her head resting just under a strong chin. Hands lovingly massaged Jody's stomach. "He seems to like it when you touch me. He always calms down."

"That's because he knows I'm going to be the disciplinarian in the family. I've seen how your pets have so easily wrapped you around their paws, I can't imagine how you're going to be around our baby. You'll be putty in his tiny little hands."

"Oh...and you won't?"

"Only if he comes out looking exactly like you. Then he might be a little hard to resist."

"Just a little? You're quickly losing points here," Jody teased.

"All I'm saying is that he may be being born into one of the wealthiest families in the universe and he may be privileged but I don't want him growing up acting as though he has an automatic sense of entitlement."

"I would never raise him like that," Jody replied, sounding slightly defensive.

The conciliatory voice said, "I know *you* won't. I know we are in full agreement on this. I also know your parents, especially your father, will spoil the sense out of their grandson and you know it, too."

Nodding, Jody found a smile and patted the strong hand resting on her belly. "Maybe you should be their disciplinarian, too."

"I think it's a little too late for that. Well...maybe it won't be so bad. They did a pretty good job with you."

"Just pretty good? This honeymoon is getting shorter by the minute..." Jody baited, playfully.

Circling Jody without letting her go, Tia was now standing in front of her, hands holding Jody's face and kissing her lips with all the passion and tenderness a soul could possess. "What can I do to make it up to you, to get things back on track?"

"That's a good start," Jody breathlessly responded as she was slowly led her back into the bedroom.

"Admit it. You can't quit me," Tia's eyes sparkled at her.

"You're right. I can't. And don't want to."

In two months, they were going to have a son, a legal Wainwright heir they were going to name Tristan John. Jody had reclaimed her maiden name when the divorce from Tony was final and openly declared her love for Tia soon afterward. It had caused another media feeding frenzy, along with speculation of possible impropriety in connection to the abduction. However, the high-powered, even more highly paid Wainwright family attorneys put that rumor to rest by reissuing statements of actual evidence the government had against Montgomery, which were indisputable. Still, every once and a while, Tia and Jody became the tabloid story du jour, not that it made one bit of difference in their lives or the Wainwright business contracts and arrangements. Even the most conservative and prejudiced businessperson transacting with John or Jody knew where his or her bread was buttered and when it came to dealing with the Wainwrights, they seemed to find a way to put their biases aside because if they wanted to be successful, hate was a luxury no one could afford.

As time passed, Jody became more sure of and cemented in her love of and devotion to Tia, who constantly amazed her with her strength and tenacity. At first Jody's parents were appalled at the idea of Jody being in a lesbian relationship, complicated by with whom. Maybe if Tia's last name had been Trump, Gates or Buffett, it might have been a little easier to digest but a common, former alcoholic, ex-CIA spook who wasn't even White Anglo-Saxon Protestant? Wainwright kept having to remind himself that, despite all that was 'unacceptable' about Tia, she had saved his daughter's life, not to mention that his little girl was obviously and completely head-over-

heels in love with Tia. He could try to convince himself that it was a 'phase' all he wanted but the reality was, this was the real thing for Jody and he knew it. Then the more John got to know Tia, the more he recognized that Tia was a much better "son-in-law" than Montgomery had ever been and much more committed to his daughter, realizing that Tia was everything in a person that he wanted for Jody - faithful, devoted, protective and secure. The only thing he could eventually find wrong with the relationship was that Tia could not help Jody produce a Wainwright heir. Leave it to his headstrong daughter to prove him wrong.

The couple had not told John and Sondra that they had been trying to get pregnant, so when Jody conceived through in vitro fertilization, it was as much of a shock to the Wainwrights as it had been when Jody declared a month earlier that she and Tia were actually going to get married. "So much for your phase, John," Sondra had ribbed him. John and Sondra had been invited to dinner on The Quintessence and, after dinner, the two women made the announcement that Jody would be delivering an heir in approximately seven and a half months. Thrilled but curious about the father, the Wainwrights were told that because both Jody and Tia wanted the baby to have half of Tia's heritage, a man named Javier Zamora had donated sperm. He had signed a non-disclosure agreement and a binding contract that he would claim no parental rights to the child and, in return, he and his immediate family would be well compensated for the rest of their lives. With a deal like that, Zamora advised them to not hesitate to call on him again.

Sondra was doing her best to do a one hundred eighty degree turn after the abduction. It was a slow, painful process for her but she was trying. Instead of being icy and detached, Sondra was now almost annoyingly hospitable and solicitous. Of course, as Jody had suspected, she had been threatened by John to start acting like Jody's mother or she would find herself divorced and stigmatized, he would make sure of it. Family interaction was very tense in the beginning but Sondra discovered that once she began spending quality time with her daughter and stopped viewing her as competition, she occasionally enjoyed Jody's company. The relationship would always be strained but Sondra also saw that Tia's presence in her daughter's life was a powerfully neutralizing one and what was once laden with anxiety and hostility was now a few degrees above tolerable. She was actually more friendly to Tia than John was and John genuinely *liked* his daughter-in-law. Truth be told, Sondra was petrified of Tia, even though Tia had never even uttered a cross word to her. Tia didn't have to. There was a certain look Tia got on her face when Sondra was stepping over a line that stopped Sondra dead in her tracks. Reevaluating her personal ethics, Sondra started to open up once she realized that her daughter wasn't so bad, after all. In the last six months, she was running like hell to catch up with her conscience, hoping to at least make it appear as though she were to make up for all the years she mistreated her daughter. She really didn't think Jody bought it but, fortunately, Jody was a very forgiving person and preferred to live in the present and not in the past.

Tia was hopelessly in love with Jody and found something new every day that made her fall in love with her precious wife a little bit more. However, Tia was also quietly terrified of the responsibility and obligation that went with that love. She told herself that she wasn't up to the challenge, that she wasn't in Jody's league, that she was too ordinary and not special enough to hold on to such a gem. She told herself that she didn't deserve to have a life this good, that she hadn't earned this kind of happiness, that things that seemed too good to be true usually were. But as she cradled Jody to her while the mother-to-be slept soundly against her breast, Tia felt a

rush of pride and euphoria surge through her that always amazed and reassured her that this was exactly where she was meant to be.

And that the loudest lies had always been the ones she had told to herself.

The End

[Cheyne's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)
