

FRACTURED FUTURES



S.Y. Thompson

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by

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Silver Dragon Books by Regal Crest

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Dedication

For Dad. Also for my little pup, Jazz, who always makes me smile.

Chapter One

RONAN LEE'S EYES burned and she stifled the urge to yawn. She felt like she could sleep for a week and now that this nightmarish case had ended, maybe her commanding officer would actually allow it. She had enough leave time accumulated. Glancing around at the other exhausted faces in the bullpen, she quickly reconsidered. She wasn't the only one who could do with some time off. Leaning against the file cabinet, Ronan stared off into space, her thoughts preoccupied by what the city had endured.

It all started with a Status One emergency call and ended several months later with the arrest of a serial killer. On his hands were the murders of four women, the attempted killing of another and a city of terrified millions.

The Berlin Police force focused completely on the singular case, concentrating exclusively on the brutal slayings unless another urgent case popped up. When it did, as few detectives as possible worked the new crime to its conclusion. Once resolved, they returned to the major case that the rest of their sworn brethren worked on so hard. Yet, nothing they did drew them any closer to finding the animal that roamed the litter-infested streets.

Ronan remembered the pride she felt when she caught the case. In her eyes, it was about time the autocracy turned the file over to the Elite Detective Unit. Given a wide berth by top brass, she needed to find the perpetrator before panic spread throughout the city. Nevertheless, even with the case finally solved, it produced lasting repercussions for her if not Berlin. Now she had a problem that should have resolved with the case.

She had deduced early into the case that the killer was copycatting the murder of a well-known actress from the 21st century, Sidney Weaver. The original killing had occurred on a night in November 2012. Ironically, she was already familiar with the tragedy. Ronan heard about the death of the actress as a teenager. Her interest in that travesty led to a career in law enforcement. Unfortunately, it left her well-to-do family slightly unhappy. As part of the elite society of Berlin, her grandfather considered her choice an effrontery. When forced to acknowledge her decision, he frequently referred to her mixed heritage as the cause.

Ronan's father had been an American, but he'd died while she was still a teenager. Her mother passed away not long after, leaving the young woman's grandparents the task of raising her. However, she hadn't gone into law enforcement because she needed a job. She did it because she enjoyed the work and the sense of satisfaction it brought. Often accused of having too large a heart for this kind of work, she didn't see the victims she helped as just another case. They were real people who suffered real pain, and she found bringing their tormentors to justice extremely rewarding.

Soon she began to perceive the flow, the pattern of the work itself. From the beginning of the commission of a crime, through the sifting of clues, ending with the perpetrator nabbed and brought to justice, she sensed the rhythm that existed regardless of the type of case. Ronan found that flow strangely comforting and knew when she was on the wrong track because the rhythm didn't feel right.

After recognizing the similarities to the older case, her team solved things very quickly. Ronan anticipated that "The Butcher," as the media dubbed him, would not kill his latest victim immediately. With the help of her partner, she devised a plan to stop him before that could happen.

"Hey, Lee, you okay?"

Ronan looked at her partner, Boris Kinsky, without really seeing him. "Fine."

Though Ronan was caught up in mentally rehashing the nightmare, her lackluster response seemed to satisfy the other detective. Going over solved cases at their conclusion, she looked for

any weakness in procedure they could avoid in the future. However, what stayed with her most was the bloodiness of the crime scenes.

The appellation given the killer by the press was accurate. The Butcher apparently preferred a very sharp knife to make it easier to dismember his victims, like a Ginsu through a banana. Each of the scenes appeared more and more liberally smattered with blood, evidence that the maniac reveled in the “wet” work. The city felt like a powder keg, ready to explode and Ronan’s job became all the more difficult. She was even more determined to stop him.

During those four months, Ronan learned more about Sidney Weaver’s life than she’d ever thought possible. The elegant actress boasted a reputation for being a no-nonsense businesswoman who nevertheless charmed the people around her while she controlled them completely without their awareness. She had been married to a very important man named Roger Gentry, who’d been instrumental in the rise of the Neue Konservative Regime, but Sidney divorced him a few months prior to her death. Ronan secretly believed the ex-husband had something to do with her untimely demise.

Gentry held sensitive government information in his wife’s briefcase, Ronan presumed, out of the fear that the competition had targeted him for elimination. Later, his attempt to retrieve that material was unsuccessful. He must have assumed Sidney read the data contained on the computer disc and probably felt he had no other choice but to set her up for termination.

The fact that this most recent series of brutal murders mimicked the case that led her to joining the Elite Detective Unit seemed pure coincidence. However, solving this newest crime left her with an obsession. She couldn’t get Sidney Weaver out of her head.

Somewhere along the way, she’d fallen in love with the long-dead woman, haunted by the gray eyes and the husky laugh as she watched old holo-videos night after night. As she immersed herself in Sidney’s charisma, Ronan came to believe that if Sidney had lived it was very likely that the totalitarian rule of the Neue Konservative Regime would never have risen to power. This world of curfews and personal rights violations might never have come to be. The Conservatives could trace their origin directly to Gentry. Sidney Weaver must have known something that could have prevented their birth.

Ronan stood in the rear of the briefing room in front of an open file cabinet door, thinking how the government and the woman were interconnected. Although filing reports having to do with the recently closed case, she remembered other things brought to light that she had stumbled on. These things had little to do with the kidnapping but more about how the Regime did business. Ronan looked up, staring out the window wondering if the government could possibly be as corrupt as she’d begun to believe. Did people really just disappear if they outwardly disagreed with the neo-fascist party?

Vaguely, she noticed Lieutenant Gustav Sloan walk out of his office and stop in the center of the bullpen, staring at her as she stood in the corner. Ronan knew her hair looked slightly disarrayed and wisps stood out from her normally severe bun. Dark circles resided under her blue eyes and made her skin look even paler than usual. Ronan had witnessed the details herself when

she looked into the mirror while getting ready for work. Sloan was sharp enough to pick up on the signs of exhaustion.

Sloan wasn't a bleeding heart. He was a man of the Regime and did what the government asked of him without question. He was also, however, a good leader. He recognized the talent each of his people had, easily seeing their strengths and weaknesses. She knew he considered her one of his greatest assets. She could almost hear him say that if she didn't take care of herself she would keel over from exhaustion and deprive the Regime of a useful resource.

"Lee, you're on vacation. Immediately," he added when it looked like she would resist. "I'm not asking. Just look at you. You can barely stand up. When was the last time you slept?"

Ronan didn't answer and he took her silence as confirmation.

"Two weeks. Kinsky can pick up the slack."

She knew her inability to concentrate affected her current work routine, but she hadn't expected her supervisor to send her home on temporary leave. Even if he believed she was overworked, she felt uncomfortable giving such an impression. Suddenly, she realized this might be an opportunity.

However unwittingly, Sloan opened the door for Ronan to do something about her obsession and she decided not to argue with him. An hour later, she sat in her favorite armchair with her feet up, a snifter of Rémy Martin in her hand and a Sidney Weaver holo-vid on the monitor when a call came. Her computer beeped an incoming communication and a frown flitted briefly across the Nordic features. For a moment, she considered ignoring it but with her luck, it would be Boris and she'd never hear the end of it if she blew him off. Heaving a resigned sigh, she stood and walked over to the interface, still holding her glass.

"Activate," she said simply and watched as the grizzled features of Professor Albus Horton appeared on the huge screen.

A grin tugged reluctantly at the corners of her full-lipped mouth and honest affection for the old man touched her heart. Frizzy white hair stuck up randomly from the balding pate and a rumpled lab-coat hung off his thin frame. The man might be a mess, but he was utterly brilliant and possessed a heart of gold. Ronan considered him the grandfather of her heart, rather than the stern, disapproving man who truly occupied the position.

Professor Horton usually contacted her when he needed more funding with one of his research projects and she always granted him the money. Her faith in his abilities proved justified over the years and led to major breakthroughs in the holo-technologies that were so widely used, as well as ion propulsion that allowed starships to travel 200,000 miles per second through the galaxies to meet any new alien cultures. His latest project was in theoretical time travel. When he began the research over two years ago, Ronan hadn't believed it would go anywhere, but with his track record she was prepared to take a few things on faith.

“Professor,” she said with a grin as she noticed the food-spotted lab coat he wore. “You’re looking well.”

“Pish posh,” the man said with a smile, and then waved a hand in the air. “Don’t get smart with me, young lady.”

The commonplace banter between the two caused her smile to grow and she didn’t take offense when he got right down to business.

“I’m calling you because I’m ready to move into the testing phase of our gate and I thought you might want to be present. After all, it is your dime.”

“The time travel project?”

She jerked in surprise and whiskey sloshed over the rim of her glass. A million thoughts ran through her head at once as the potentials of such a device hit her. They were staggering. Even in the brief seconds she had to absorb the information, Ronan understood at least a glimpse of the magnitude. Events that appeared carved in stone didn’t seem so irrefutable anymore. Wars could be undone.

She had to fight the sensation of traveling down into a deep well of alarm at the horrors that the wrong people could perpetrate if they got hold of such a device. Ronan swallowed hard and squashed the urge to down the rest of her drink in a single gulp.

“You mean you actually got it to work?”

Horton frowned as though severely offended. “What? Did you think I used the money to pay for my elaborate lifestyle?”

Ronan regrouped quickly with a shake of her head. “Of course not, I apologize. You just caught me off guard. I didn’t expect you to have it ready so quickly. You’ve only been researching the project for two years, but of course, I would like to be there when you test your hypothesis. I assume this means you’ll need more...funding?”

“Ha,” the old man barked. He took off his wire-rimmed glasses and wiped the spotty specs with an equally dirty handkerchief. “I always said you were the smart one in the family. Come over in about an hour and I’ll show you what I have.”

He quickly terminated the communiqué. Ronan chuckled as she set the glass on a side table and prepared to leave the penthouse apartment. As an employee of the Detective Unit, Ronan would have lived in a decent place while the rest of the city lived in squalor, but it wouldn’t pay for this. However, her family’s personal finances let her live in relative luxury.

She walked down to her parking space in the underground garage while keeping her eyes firmly in front, trying to ignore the homeless, unwashed masses that milled about aimlessly in the underground shadows.

Ronan thought the totalitarian regime was responsible for a great deal of this reality, but she wasn't sure what one person could do.

An hour later, she pulled up into Professor Horton's driveway on her black BMW Avantgarde. The motorcycle was brand new and outfitted with all of the latest modern technology. Ronan had added a few modifications of her own to the 1200Z and the machine throbbed powerfully between her muscled legs. The ride over to Horton's residence was relatively short, but took slightly longer than it should since she did her best to avoid the random military checkpoints.

Switching off the bike, she removed the black helmet and looked at the man's house for a moment. Horton joked about his extravagant lifestyle but his home was quite the opposite. Ronan thought it had been new in the previous century.

Brick, two-story with simple yet elegant lines, it boasted enough ornate scrollwork along the eaves and support columns to decorate a gingerbread house. Nevertheless, years of neglect left the house with a missing stone here and there. One of the downstairs windowpanes had cracked and been poorly repaired, leaving it with a permanently rippled appearance, while cobwebs adorned every corner and eave. The driveway had fractured repeatedly from the weather over the years and lay buckled and broken in places.

Was she that self-centered or was she just always in such a hurry that she never bothered to look? Well, she noticed now and tomorrow she would arrange for the repairs. Professor Horton would complain, of course, but Ronan felt it was the least she could do to repay him for the inventions that made life a little easier for everyone.

Finally, she got off the motorcycle and walked up to the front door. She waited several minutes after knocking and realized that Doctor Horton had probably already forgotten about her in the pursuit of some interesting new bit of technology. Just when she was about to give up, the front door grudgingly opened and he impatiently ushered her inside.

"Come in, come in. Why didn't you just come in? You knew I was waiting for you."

Ronan grimaced as she passed his set of archaic weapons proudly displayed on the wall by the entrance, again baffled why such a scholarly gentleman insisted on collecting such artifacts. Long, wickedly curved blades, ornately carved swords, and bayonets adorned the walls. He even owned a suit of armor that stood silent sentry in a corner.

The professor had constructed the lab under his home, deep in the ground. He led her down the steps, and what she saw in the next hour had her jaw hanging open in absolute amazement.

The time gate was no "gate" at all. The device itself mimicked a large orb made of some kind of clear polymer. Two metal rails outfitted with electronics and flashing colored lights stood on each side of the orb. One of the rails held a control panel and emitted an electromagnetic field between the two rails that interfaced with the sphere to manipulate space/time.

Ronan didn't understand all of the technology used to operate the mechanism, but the tactile control console looked easy enough. Commands punched into a board on one of the rails set the destination, time, and date. The second console recorded return information.

The rails were two opposing pillars approximately six feet high and four feet long in total, although the professor thoughtfully fixed the control console at waist height. The dimensional portal locked on to anything within the orb's transmission range and sent it off in the wink of an eye.

Because the machine locked onto the matter signature of the last object transported through the gate, it was unnecessary to have a corresponding gate at the destination. All one required was a crystal that fit into the palm of the hand to activate the gate from wherever they had journeyed in time.

The ruby red crystal was octagonal, 1.27 millimeters thick. It had a dial in the center, which protruded slightly to ensure proper manipulation. One had to twist it counterclockwise and then press it to activate.

They sent a probe through to one hundred and fifty years in the past with a set time of twenty minutes. The probe was holographic and therefore made of transparent material, undetectable to the technology of the time destination. Professor Horton placed a homing beacon on the probe since the device was incapable of activating a return crystal as a human being could. In that manner, the time machine could lock onto the probe remotely.

When they retrieved the probe, Doctor Horton played back the images recorded into its database and Ronan was amazed that it actually worked. She watched as people walked through the Metroplex wearing dated clothing. She saw newspapers with ancient headlines that convinced her that the probe's recording was authentic. Her sharp eye for detail noticed there were few homeless and most looked clean, well fed, and happy.

The sky didn't look dirty and overcast as it did much of the time in Germany. Ronan wondered if that was just indicative of the location the probe had traveled to, or if they'd polluted their atmosphere so much since then that it had changed their climate.

Then they sent the probe forty years into the future and she waited anxiously for its return. Ronan wasn't sure she wanted to see how much worse things could get. It seemed like Mother Nature was already pretty pissed at them for whatever reason. Ronan feared where humanity might end up.

With the tool finally retrieved, she felt rewarded in her misgivings by what she saw. The image revealed a much older version of herself sitting on the porch of an urban home. She glared at everyone. Ronan was surprised at the bitterness in her countenance. The invisible probe followed when Ronan got up and hobbled into her domicile.

She could see that the dwelling resembled a shrine to the past. Pictures of Sidney Weaver covered nearly all of the available wall space, and when her ancient self gazed upon the faces that stared back at her, Ronan could see the first signs of humanity on the ancient visage.

The lined face relaxed and a melancholy smile graced the full lips. The older version of Ronan reached out with trembling, arthritic fingers and touched the frozen image. She knew with conviction that she was staring at what her future would become if she couldn't deal with the obsession that was just beginning.

"We will be ready for the next phase soon," Horton said.

His soft voice broke through the haze in her mind. He didn't seem to notice the identity of the subject in the recording, caring only that it worked. At least she hoped that he hadn't noticed, but perhaps he simply chose not to point it out. In any case, Ronan was relieved.

"Next phase?"

She was shocked at the husky tone of her voice. What she had just seen left her greatly shaken. She certainly didn't think she was above normal human failings, but she didn't really consider herself moody or just plain nasty. However, she supposed in a way she should be grateful for this glimpse of the future. Now she could make sure she didn't travel down the pathway to bitterness.

"Well, it may be a while, but eventually a person will have to go through to test the return properties of the crystal. First, there will have to be many more tests. We must be sure that there are no side effects so we should send through smaller life forms for the initial testing, perhaps a few rodents?"

By concentrating on Professor Horton, she was able to forget her potential wickedness and began to feel excitement for a new adventure. While someone could use the project for evil, it also promised wonderful rewards if they were willing to take the chance. Maybe they could even do this without messing with the environment the second time around.

Ronan was suddenly excited and she interrupted. "Why not now?"

"My dear." The old man was shocked. "That would be extremely dangerous. Anything could happen. The machinery could break down, the subject could develop some rare disease, or worst of all they might meet themselves at their destination if the timing is not set correctly."

She didn't follow the significance of such an occurrence. So what? Then she could tell her other self that she was destined to be a mean old biddy if she didn't stop holding on to her emotions so tightly.

"What would be so terrible about that?"

“They would cancel each other out,” he answered as though she should have known. “It would be like matter and anti-matter: they could not exist at the same time. Although I imagine the resulting explosion would be quite impressive.”

They discussed possible paradoxes for a considerable amount of time before the professor took the time to give her a crash course in how to operate the machinery in his absence. It was well after midnight before she left his residence.

“Before I forget to mention this at another time,” he said as they parted company at the front door, “I have programmed a safety protocol into the machine that will prevent a person from traveling to a specific location where they already exist. Should anyone attempt to do such a thing, they will simply return to the gate room.”

“That seems like a wise precaution. At least it will keep them from exploding.”

“Precisely,” he grinned and held up a finger.

She smiled and turned to go.

THE SHADOWS OF night effectively hid the operative assigned to see what the old man was doing. The Regime wasn't necessarily worried about him. He had been a loyal citizen to date, and his discoveries greatly increased their power. Still, prudence prevented carelessness and it looked as though their attention to detail was about to pay off. If this new technology fell into the hands of the disgruntled public, it could greatly undermine their authority. That wasn't something with which the present government was prepared to gamble.

Additionally, they'd allowed Detective Lee to profit from the patents placed on the technologies she funded, but this new device would never see implementation. His orders were to terminate the inventor. If an extremist idealist got hold of it, the Regime might end before it ever began, and that was unacceptable.

He waited until the lights from the motorcycle disappeared into the night and the engine could no longer be heard before he pried open a basement window and slipped quietly inside. The time machine was clearly visible as the most current project and took up the center of the huge room. Shelves of equipment and testing devices lined two walls, but the space was neat and well ordered, quite unlike the scientist who worked here.

Professor Horton had gone upstairs and the intruder could hear only an occasional bump as he moved around. With any luck, the old man would be in bed very soon and he could complete the assignment. At this late hour, his thoughts centered on a large pepperoni pizza and a six-pack as a reward once he completed the assignment.

Unfortunately, his employers didn't authorize destruction of the time machine. The Regime could keep the true nature of its existence secret in the past and use it for its own purposes, perhaps to begin the current regime during the Victorian era instead of waiting until originally begun in the 21st century. The possibilities were endless and proved why those more intelligent than he made the decisions. He was just a hired gun and not known for his creative thought processes.

Soon silence reigned throughout the house and the assassin made his move. His eyes had long-since adjusted to the darkness and he could see clearly walking up the stairs and into the main house. While Detective Lee and the professor were busy, he'd scouted the house. He knew the layout well enough to navigate to the master bedroom in the gloom.

A lump lay beneath the covers, illuminated by the moonlight streaming in through the window, and he could hear the professor snoring lightly in his sleep. The killer looked down as he fished a radon blast pistol out of his deep pocket and fitted a silencer to the end. When he looked back up his black knit mask had ridden up under his eyes and he had to adjust it before he could aim the weapon at the intended victim.

He fired two shots into the man as he slept, the pistol making only a loud hiss through the silencer. He separated the silencer from the weapon and placed both back into the jacket pockets. Purpose served, the mask came off and joined the blaster. The scientist had not wakened and no one had seen him while he carried out his mission.

The overcoat and gloves he kept on, their appearance easily explained by the cold weather outside. The black mask would have definitely caught the attention of anyone who happened to walk by at this late hour as he left the house. He certainly couldn't afford an interrogation from a curious police officer. Unfortunately, personal cloaking shields didn't function well in extreme temperatures.

With everything in order, he calmly prepared to leave the old man's house. He took the keys from a peg by the front door and locked up. He'd give the keys to his superiors who would see to the eventual placement of the time machine.

Chapter Two

THE ANNOYINGLY PERSISTENT buzz of the alarm combined with the almost constant chime of an incoming communications signal finally roused Ronan from a near-comatose sleep. She pushed herself out of bed with a groan and stumbled with half-closed eyes toward the

computer display. She had been with the professor until shortly after midnight and hadn't gotten to bed until almost one. A quick glance out the bedroom window told her that dawn had barely begun to break.

"This better be good. Activate," she snapped at the computer interface in irritation, but was completely awake a moment later when the image of her commander popped onto the view screen. Since she was on personal leave, his was the one face she hadn't expected to see.

"Sir?"

"Sorry to bother you off duty, Detective Lee, but I thought you should hear it from me rather than on the morning news."

Sloan's voice and the compassion in his eyes indicated that the news was not good and Ronan unconsciously braced herself for the worst.

"What is it?"

His eyes darted about for a moment as he clearly searched for a way to say the words. Then he met her gaze squarely. "I guess the only way to say it, is to just say it. Professor Horton is dead." Seeing the shock on her face, he added, "We believe that his research in time travel was seen as a potential threat and the Regime did what was necessary to ensure its survival."

Ronan started to ask how the government knew about the old man's research, and then remembered that he had never kept any of his research a secret. Since the professor was a loyalist, the Regime had always benefited from his discoveries. She looked up and realized that Lieutenant Sloan considered the actions of the government perfectly justified. Although sympathetic to her loss, he was a good soldier and fully supported whatever decisions his government thought necessary. Whether it was the murder of a single harmless old man or the genocide of an entire race, it made no difference to him.

His assumption that Ronan also shared his views that the ends justified the means couldn't have been more off the mark, but she knew better than to voice those differences. Her belief that the poor treatment of commoners by the hierarchy was wrong and had been growing for some time. It had taken the discovery of the details of Sidney Weaver's death, and now the murder of Professor Horton, to push her over the edge.

She choked back her rage and an immediate outburst in the interests of self-preservation. For long moments, she struggled not to scream at Sloan, to accuse him of monstrous loyalties to a seditious government. Finally, she forced herself to share platitudes about the unfortunate but necessary death of her oldest friend before she ended the communication.

Ronan stared dejectedly at her bare feet for several minutes as she grieved the loss. Tears ran down her cheeks, plopping onto the tile and her toes. Grief eventually turned back to anger and as she contemplated the world in which she lived, where life was meaningless in the pursuit of government supremacy, anger turned to fury.

Ronan vowed she wouldn't allow this anymore. With Professor Horton's discovery came the means to undo the atrocities that had become a way of life in the 24th century. All she had to do was get there first. Ronan deduced the exact timeframe when all of this had started on a downhill spiral of violated civil rights and government-condoned murder.

The recent case and the research into Sidney Weaver's death had uncovered that although a stalker had killed her, that had by no means been the end of the repercussions. Ronan now believed that if she could prevent the death of this woman she could undo all of this and Professor Horton would still live.

She worried someone had discovered the lab and destroyed it. Her heart lurched in her chest. She had to ensure that it hadn't been. She dressed quickly and was just about to leave the apartment when the computer chimed with a Priority One incoming message. Ronan frowned as she wondered what else the lieutenant had to say and turned back in aggravation, but the call was not from the Unit. The transmission was darkly shadowed and blurry around the edges, as though someone had deliberately distorted the image. The person on the screen remained effectively hidden, the voice altered for the sake of anonymity.

"Do not speak. Listen. Professor Horton was killed by the Regime not to prevent the research falling into the hands of resisters, but so that they could control it."

"Why would they do that and how do you know that he's dead? It hasn't even been on the news yet." She interrupted in spite of the warning, even though that same idea had already occurred to her. The caller went on as though she hadn't spoken.

"The Konservatives knew they would have difficulty controlling the Professor since he would want to share his discovery with the world. However, if they could utilize the technology for their own purposes, they would have access to go backward or forward to change anything they wanted. It would ensure their total power for eternity. You must be very careful. The Regime is not what it appears to be."

"What is it?"

She had already discovered over the past year that the Regime secretly continued to annihilate anyone who disagreed or resisted. Not on the scale of genocide during the Second World War, but clandestinely to avoid outraging the entire world. If she had known this from the start, Ronan would not have joined the Regime's Detective force, but would have done everything possible to undermine them. The dark image shifted nervously on the screen and she wondered if the caller would speak again or simply end the transmission.

"You'll find out."

"Who are you?" she pressed.

The transmission terminated abruptly, leaving Ronan with more questions than answers. Unfortunately now was not the time to pursue them. With Professor Horton dead, the Regime

would not hesitate to use his house as their own base of operations to work on the time machine. She had to get there first.

Ronan pulled her long hair back into a ponytail and grabbed her helmet before she rushed out of the apartment. She drove her motorcycle quickly to the Professor's home, cycled around the block once to ensure no one followed her or lay in wait. Even though the roar of the machine would obviously give her away, self-preservation was still a powerful instinct.

She parked the powerful bike out of sight behind a row of hedges and looked at the front of the house much as she had the night before. However, the night before the residence had merely looked pathetic in its disrepair. Today it looked threatening. Ronan knew she felt that way because of what had happened after she left last night.

Like the rest of the house, the front door and jamb were not new. A large gap showed around the door, at least an inch wide, and Ronan could see the edge of the latch bolt where the lock shot through. A credit card worked as a loid and she easily jimmied the door open. After looking around to ensure no one watched her, she went inside. Ronan rushed past the entryway of archaic killing tools and headed for the lab. It didn't appear that anyone had been there. Everything looked the same as it had. Obviously, there was no hurry to take over since the original occupant was out of the way. The Regime would know Ronan funded this project but since they considered her a loyalist, they wouldn't expect any resistance from her.

She stared at the rails and the transparent sphere, struck again by the anonymous tip she'd received before leaving the apartment.

There was no doubt in her mind that the government had been responsible for the current situation and that their intentions for the time machine were not benevolent.

She nodded to herself as she began to formulate a plan. She would take steps to ensure that such a totalitarian government never came to power, and at the same time prevent the death of an incredible woman who had made such an impression on her. Her evidence was thin but the ex-husband had too many friends connected to the Regime's infancy, and the timing of Weaver's demise was too much of a coincidence. Regardless what happened when she arrived at her destination, saving Sidney Weaver was the priority. The woman was the key to all of this. If her motives weren't completely selfless, she found comfort in the fact that her intentions were good and that she was only human.

The first step was to find the control crystal so she could return from her destination in the past. If things worked out in such a way that she couldn't return, she still couldn't leave the crystal lying around for the Regime to find. It would take a team of scientists to unravel the secrets of the machine without the professor around, and perhaps that was the reason they hadn't already swarmed all over the place. Ronan only hoped that without the control mechanism the government scientists wouldn't be able to figure out how to make the machine work if she failed.

"Now where would he keep it?"

Ronan walked around the lab and turned over bits of equipment. She checked the various drawers but that yielded no results. The last she had seen of the device, Albus Horton had placed it in the pocket of his lab coat. It had been quite late when they finished with their work but the coat wasn't anywhere in the basement.

She went back up the stairs where the rest of the house had an air of neglect and dust motes floated in the air, liberally covering the rickety wooden furniture. It held a singularly empty feeling reminiscent of a building that hadn't seen life in years rather than the home of her dearest friend. She knew it was probably a psychological reaction to losing him. He probably hadn't spent a great deal of time in the main house since he was so preoccupied with his work. Still, it made sense he would wear the coat upstairs when he retired.

Lieutenant Sloan said that Horton was murdered. Ronan assumed it had happened here since he rarely left his home. His greatest passion had been his work, and since that was conveniently located in the subterranean room, there was no need to leave the structure. Even with her homicide background, she didn't look forward to seeing where the crime had occurred.

She stood at the base of the winding stairs and noticed where they twisted out of sight to connect to the second floor. It was possible that someone could be waiting up there. Her imagination suggested that it could be a trap and that the Regime was just waiting to add her to their list of victims. The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood up, advising her that this might not be such a good idea.

That was ridiculous, she finally decided. The Regime knew where she lived. If they wanted to get her, they would come to her apartment.

Ronan pushed aside her qualms and started up the stairs. The irrational fear persisted and at any moment, she expected some dark assassin to lean around the landing and shoot at her. In her mind, she saw her service laser pistol where it sat on her nightstand and regretted her lack of foresight in leaving it behind.

No one leaned around the landing. No one shot at her and in just a few heartbeats she was on the second floor. It didn't take long to reach the master bedroom and she froze in horror at what she found.

Blood soaked the bedding and gathered in a pool beside the four-poster. Booted tracks led the way from the murder scene and drying marks indicated someone dragged Professor Horton through his own blood during the removal of the body. As a detective, she should have been better prepared to deal with this, but she lacked the hardened shell that many police officers developed over the years.

Her breath came in short bursts as she leaned against the doorway. She bent over with her hands on her knees as she tried to stifle the sobs. She had known what she would see, but the possibility of what she might find hadn't prepared her for the reality. Horton must have died instantly. The amount of gore was evidence enough that no one could have lingered even for a

few minutes with such tremendous blood loss. Ronan was thankful that he hadn't suffered, but still anguished by the loss of a man that had been more family than friend.

He had been such a kind person and had never raised his voice to anyone. He hadn't deserved this. Ronan vowed once again that they would pay as she lifted her head and looked around the room through tear-dimmed eyes.

It took a few minutes to get her bearings and then she saw it, the object that had brought her into this chamber of horrors. The lab coat rested over the back of a chair in the corner of the room and Ronan walked toward it. She quickly stepped over the pooled blood in an attempt at respect for the man who had been so dear to her. The crystal was deep in the pocket of the coat and Ronan palmed it in relief. Now she had to get out of there quickly, before the Regime came to set up shop. She looked around the room one last time and saw a small photograph of her and the professor sitting on a chest of drawers.

Ronan smiled wistfully and realized she hadn't considered him the sentimental sort. The photo showed the two of them arm in arm at a celebration for the release of another of his gadgets. He wore a tuxedo with a crooked red bow tie, and she was dressed in a shimmering silver gown. Both of them smiled happily into the camera.

Tears pricked the backs of her eyes and Ronan took the photo from the dresser. He would have no need of the picture anymore and she wanted a reminder of him. The Regime would probably just burn it along with the rest of his personal things. She slipped the picture and the crystal into her inside jacket pocket and left the house.

Ronan had preparations to make, and only a short time to make them. The first step would be to liquidate her accounts and other assets since she would need a lot of ready cash. Not only was there a lot to do in her current time, but many things to accomplish once she arrived at her destination if she was going to succeed. Fortunately, currency wasn't an issue since Headquarters had a "relic" annex building that contained storage of outdated cash found in investigations and drug busts from over the centuries as well as other antique objects lying around on shelves. Some of these old buildings never took out the trash, so to speak. Old courthouse basements even held records from the 1800's.

Ronan moved quickly but carefully over the rest of the day and the next. Finally, she parked the motorcycle inside the sphere. It had been fitted with large saddlebags that were loaded with supplies. Some of those supplies consisted of a sophisticated computer laptop, food rations until she could settle in, and various weapons. Ronan set the gate controls and transferred the bike to a remote location in the Midwest. She would drive the rest of the way to Baltimore from there.

She planned to purchase a small island somewhere in the Florida Keys as soon as she arrived in the past. It would serve as a refuge for a woman that she had never met but loved completely. Additionally, a remote location would provide safety from as yet unseen forces.

Her research from the time had indicated that the area was unpopulated and heavy with trees and vegetation. The holographic probe she sent with the bike returned a few moments later and

confirmed that data. Confident that her hiding place would be safe for the next few hours while she completed her tasks, Ronan moved on to the next phase. She had worked all day and it was late, but she would rest when she felt safe. She regretted not being able to destroy the Regime headquarters itself before she left, but bringing the building down would accomplish nothing. The urge stemmed from the desire for retribution and would only result in further loss of life. In the end, there was no point. They would only rebuild.

She was ready. All necessary provisions had been sent through the time portal. She was next and the idea that it was a one-way trip chilled her. She had no close family and the only thing that would miss her would be the Unit itself. They would easily accept her disappearance. It was a dangerous city full of nasty people. It was doubtful the Elite division would conduct more than a cursory search. Even her partner, Boris, wouldn't be bothered to search very hard. He was a good citizen of the government who accepted that these things happened. Her sole concern was that she didn't understand the world in Sidney Weaver's time, and that she'd stand out. At this point, it didn't really matter. With her course set, Ronan had come too far to back down. Sidney's life and the future of the world depended on her actions.

Her final task was to destroy the professor's home. Horton kept enough explosive material around the house for his work that she wouldn't need to risk a trip to the Regime's armory. Ronan gathered what she needed to cobble together a few devices and placed them around all corners of the basement, hoping to bring the building down on top of the lab. By doing that, she hoped to prevent the Regime from gaining access to the gate, at the very least. She mashed a double portion of the explosive on each control panel and then shoved detonators into each brick. She wanted nothing left of the house or lab. Once finished, Ronan set the timers to detonate an hour after her departure. If she'd planned to return to this point in time, destroying the gate might pose a problem. However, with the professor dead and no real ties to anyone here, that simply wasn't the case.

Holding onto her resolve, she took one last look around. The sight of the dilapidated residence caused her heart to twist briefly because of her mentor's unforgivable murder and what the government had taken from her. More than ever, she felt vindicated by her decision.

Her hair dampened with sweat, Ronan finally finished. She was ready to step into the sphere, but felt suddenly nervous and for a moment simply stared at the control console. The scores of dials, gauges, and graphs in the gate's support machinery all glowed softly. If she prevented the death of one woman, the Neue Konservative Regime might never happen. She had to hang onto that. Ronan hoped she had set the controls properly.

Approximately a year before Sidney's death should do it. She steeled herself to deal with the unknown. She took a deep breath and prepared to step from the world she understood and into a past where hope was more than a distant dream. Ronan twisted the dial on the console's simple timer and closed her eyes briefly, saying a silent prayer. Then she stepped into the sphere and into the past.

Chapter Three

THE GROUNDS OF the Governor's mansion were brightly lit for the Christmas fund-raising affair, revealing limousines lined up along the circular driveway. Celebrities hobnobbed with local and state politicians, using the glitter and excitement of Hollywood to raise money for AIDS research. The year 2011 was about to end and the December evening was bitterly cold in Baltimore, yet the interior of the mansion managed comfortable warmth without the usual accompanying stuffiness.

Everything inside gleamed new, shiny and fancy, from waiters in tuxes and tails to the emerald evening gown that sparkled around the small dark-haired woman wearing it. She held a glass of champagne in one hand and rested the other on Mayor Stewart's arm while she gazed up at the ineffectual man flirtatiously. Sidney Weaver had played this game many times and in a way, it proved part of the reason for her recent divorce. Her ex-husband, Roger Gentry, feigned anger and jealousy at her teasing banter with various heads of state, but in reality her easy manner had made it easier for him to move into political circles.

When he'd developed his own circle of incumbents, her usefulness disappeared. Not that she minded. Their relationship had never been passionate; it merely served a purpose. Sidney felt relieved that the sniveling man wasn't her problem anymore. She had her pride and it rankled that he'd used her gregarious nature as an excuse for the divorce. She had known for a very long time that they weren't in love and that Roger had "secret" affairs behind her back. He didn't need the excuse that he thought she might be unfaithful to end things. Sidney hadn't loved Roger, but raised by a deeply religious set of grandparents, she'd taken her vows seriously. She would never have cheated.

All Roger needed to do was ask her civilly for a divorce and she would have agreed.

Sidney felt that she had stroked Stewart's ego enough for one night and she turned to a passing waiter to exchange her now-empty glass for a full one. He carried the tray high above his shoulder, but paused with a smile so she could grab another. Stewart and his band of cronies had moved on. They pressed palms and made silly jokes with other influential individuals without having ever noticed that Sidney left the group. She breathed a sigh of boredom and brought the glass closer as she prepared to take a sip of the fruity bubbly but she made the mistake of glancing up and found herself mesmerized.

Who. Is. That?

The stranger leaned against the wall looking as bored as Sidney felt. She was dressed in a sophisticated black Armani business suit that tapered at the frighteningly narrow waist, and the wide lapels of the suit accentuated the stark white shirt she wore beneath that was open to the fourth button, showing an amazing amount of cleavage. Though well endowed, Sidney could see it wasn't artificial enhancement. In her line of work, she knew what the paid-for variety looked like. With her golden mane twisted into an almost severe bun, the stranger presented an image of stark contrast: at once cold and insolent, yet at the same time provocative and mysterious.

Sidney found her utterly captivating.

Unexpectedly the woman turned her head and their eyes met, gazes locked. Stunned by the electric connection, Sidney's stomach flip-flopped. Then she smiled and her whole face transformed. The sudden change rendered Sidney breathless as she realized she was looking at the most magnificent creature she'd ever seen.

A waiter bumped into Sidney as he attempted to navigate the press of bodies and caused her to look down as she tried to maintain her balance. She attempted not to spill her drink all over her front. When she looked back a moment later the stranger was gone. With the sudden loss of the stunning vision, Sidney wondered who she could have been. The stranger didn't appear to be with anyone in particular and she was too old to be the Stewarts' daughter. Sidney considered the woman could be a party crasher. She'd certainly run into one or two of those over the years.

Unaccountably depressed with the loss of the vision, Sidney attempted to immerse herself back into the party. She was embarrassed at her visceral reaction to the stranger in black and felt her face burn as she tried to mingle with the other guests. One more stupid joke from a drunken senator who kept trying to grab her backside convinced her that the magic of the party was gone. Twenty minutes later, she decided she'd had enough glitter for one night. Sidney left the mansion slightly intoxicated.

"Raise the glass, would you Jordy?"

Sidney pulled her stole closer about her shoulders and waited for the privacy shield to rise between herself and the driver. She didn't really have anything to hide from the sandy-haired young man, but the glass gave the impression of privacy that Sidney reveled in from time to time. Her life was so public that any amount of seclusion helped her breathe easier. She leaned back into the plush upholstery, rested her head back, and thought about the woman she had seen.

Who was she? Not a celebrity, Sidney was sure. She would have recognized that face if she had seen it before. Some politician's date for the evening perhaps? Maybe, but she didn't think so.

In her mind, Sidney could see again the way the business suit had hugged the slim form. The black trousers accentuated strong, powerful thighs, and lean hips. Sidney felt her face grow warm again. With her mind on the mysteriously sensual stranger, she felt her muscles start to relax and she drifted into a drowsy slumber as they rode through the relative darkness. The drive to her penthouse would take about an hour so there was no reason not to sleep.

A FEW MILES outside the city, the road became a narrow two-lane. Lights were sporadic and cast heavy shadows through the tree-lined lanes and across the sparse traffic of early morning commuters. Clouds overhead obscured any natural light. Behind the streamlined luxury vehicle, the dark sedan suddenly shot forward and swerved into the other lane. The chauffeur thought that the sedan was simply attempting to pass. He pressed lightly on the brake and rode the outside edge of the driving lane to allow the other car additional room.

The dark vehicle pulled up even with them. Jordy frowned and wondered why they didn't go ahead and pass. Were they trying to communicate with him? Maybe he had a flat tire or something. He saw the passenger window of the other car start to lower and was sure he'd guessed right, but just as he went to lower his own glass his eyes widened. His heartbeat tripled when he saw the shiny muzzle of an automatic weapon poke through.

RONAN HADN'T MEANT for Sidney to spot her, at least not so quickly, but when the amazingly expressive eyes locked with hers she couldn't resist smiling broadly in return. The open friendliness of the real person behind the actress had shown through the façade Sidney presented at the gala when she smiled. Just as quickly, Ronan grew nervous and took the opportunity to disappear when Sidney almost spilled her drink. She darted up the spiral staircase and used the crowd of bodies as camouflage to hide from Ms. Weaver. She was here for reconnaissance purposes only, just to keep a watch on Sidney. As soon as she'd heard about the gathering at the Governor's mansion Ronan had decided to crash the party. Since she had come in through an unlocked window on the second floor, no one noticed her sudden appearance.

Now she took the opportunity to lean against the upper railing and watch the dark-haired actress enchant everyone. With just a touch on the arm here and a smile there, Sidney Weaver made everyone she spoke with feel like they were the only one in the room. She played them like a Stradivarius. Although she had never spoken directly with the diminutive woman, Ronan thought Sidney looked a little tired. She knew from entertainment television that Sidney had just finished a series of tapings on a new movie scheduled for release in a few months.

From Ronan's future perspective, it was destined to be the last film Sidney ever shot, but she wasn't sure what her current contracts held. Whatever the cause, Sidney looked seriously overworked. When she began to make her exit twenty minutes later, Ronan wasn't surprised. She thought Sidney looked absolutely exquisite as she air-kissed Senator McKenzie's cheek.

Prepared for a hasty exit since she hadn't really spoken to anyone at the party, Ronan discreetly followed Sidney Weaver from the mansion. She hid in the shadows until Sidney's limousine pulled away from the curb. Then she heard raised voices and the squeal of rubber on

pavement. A black, unmarked vehicle shot away from the darkness of an overhanging willow and followed the luxury car. Maybe it was unrelated, Ronan allowed. Maybe whoever was in that car was in a hurry for another reason.

And maybe she could fly.

She wasn't about to take that chance. Ronan bolted down the steps toward her own vehicle, just to follow and make sure Sidney was safe.

GUNFIRE CHATTERED FROM the weapon and struck the side of the limousine. Some of the bullets lodged in the metal while others ricocheted off harmlessly. An instant later, the limousine careened out of control when a few of the rounds found their mark and one of the front tires exploded with a cannon-like bang. Jordy fought the shuddering wheel as he tried to maintain control over a ton of skidding, shrieking, and straining metal. He could hear Sidney yell from behind that she wanted to know "what the hell was going on." He lost the battle for control and the vehicle flew sideways off the road. It skidded through slush and snow before it came to an abrupt halt when it hit a guardrail, preventing it from a long fall over a sheer cliff.

Two gunmen leapt from the black sedan and ran toward them while streetlights flashed off the muzzles of their weapons. Their breaths puffed clouds of smoke into the frigid air.

He knew that the guardrail on one side and the thugs on the other trapped them, so Jordy did the only thing he could to protect the woman in his charge: he hit the button on his door that automatically locked all exits and then pressed the OnStar emergency call button on the console. Fortunately, the limo had been recently fitted with bulletproof glass. That upgrade had resulted from an over-enthusiastic fan that had begun to stalk Sidney, and Jordy was relieved that the rounds couldn't pass through the glass.

If they were very lucky, someone would have reported the incident or the OnStar would have connected with the authorities and the police were already on the way. A sudden flash of light reflected in the rearview mirror. It blinded Jordy before it shot out of his field of vision.

Chapter Four

SIDNEY SAW THE light that flashed from behind them and feared that the gunmen had brought reinforcements. In morbid fascination, she watched the scene as it unfolded next to her. The events seemed surreal. Sidney didn't think they could possibly be after her. She hadn't done anything.

The motorcycle was huge and menacingly black as it shot through the night and in front of the gunmen. The rider was all in black and wore helmet and gloves. No features were discernible. Captivated by something that looked like it was out of one of her movies, Sidney couldn't look away.

The rider squeezed the large bike's front brake hard and the rear of the machine rose off the turf. For a moment, Sidney was sure the rider would fall from the vehicle as it skidded on the slush but at the last second, the rider used his body weight to sling the rear of the bike around in midair. The tire connected solidly with the lead assassin's face. The man flew into the air and somersaulted backward before he landed heavily on the frozen ground. He didn't move again.

Undeterred, the other ruffian directed his gunfire toward Sidney's would-be savior. He left a trail of gunfire on the ground that led toward the rescuer. The bullets tore up bits of snow and frozen turf but before they could reach the motorcycle, the rider stopped the huge bike and reached for a concealed weapon inside the black jacket. Faster than Sidney's eyes could follow, a pistol emerged and one round was fired. The semi-automatic barked once into the night in sharp contrast to the staccato burst of the automatic rifle. The gunman pitched backward onto the ground. When he didn't move again, Sidney thought he might be dead.

She watched as the rider calmly turned off the machine and dismounted before pocketing the weapon and sauntering toward the limousine. Sidney was terrified that the nightmare hadn't ended and dove onto the floorboard. After all, it was a stretch to believe that a Good Samaritan was riding along in the middle of the night and just happened to pack a gun. Could this be her stalker? Was he determined to prevent anyone else from harming Sidney for the sake of doing so himself?

Her heart thumped in fear and she couldn't tear her eyes away as the dark rider neared the driver's door. Long-fingered hands reached up and fumbled with the chinstrap for a moment. Then the helmet came off and blonde hair cascaded down around the slender shoulders. Sidney was astonished that the rider was a woman. She was even more so when she recognized the woman from the party. The stranger smiled at the driver in a friendly manner and gestured for him to lower the window. For a moment, he hesitated, seeming unsure the threat was truly at an end.

Sidney sat up in the back and pressed the intercom button. "It's all right, Jordy. Lower the glass."

Although she didn't know this woman, had never even spoken to her, Sidney instinctively knew they were in no danger from her. After a moment of hesitation, Jordy followed her orders by lowering the privacy shield and then his own driver's window.

“Hi.” She squatted beside the limousine and briefly met the young driver’s eyes before she looked into the rear at Sidney. “Is everyone all right?”

The question was casual, just another day in Baltimore.

“Thanks to you,” Jordy said.

His comment was a self-mocking snort and Sidney felt sorry for him. He obviously felt that he hadn’t been up to the challenge of protecting her from harm, but he had done everything possible. She hadn’t hired Jordy as a bodyguard.

“You’re the woman from the party.” Sidney didn’t answer Ronan’s original question.

The woman smiled and nodded once before she shrugged. “I was bored and decided to leave. I saw them following you and decided to see what was up. I always was too curious for my own good.”

“And you just happen to ride a motorcycle like a stunt driver and carry a gun?” Sidney inquired with an arched brow of disbelief.

“A girl’s got to be able to take care of herself.”

Sidney didn’t quite know how to respond to the offbeat humor. “Yes, well...I owe you my life. I don’t know how I can ever thank you.”

Although she didn’t believe that was all there was to it, she was willing to let it go. If it hadn’t been for this woman, she would most likely be dead by now. She noticed that the woman had a slight accent and found it utterly charming.

Sidney’s offer of repayment had been sincere but she didn’t really expect the young stranger to take her up on it. She was surprised to hear, “How about a job?”

“How’s that?”

This woman was obviously well educated and dressed in a suit that screamed money. She didn’t look like someone that needed a job. Added to the fact that she had never seen her before tonight and Sidney couldn’t prevent her outburst. “I don’t even know your name.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Ronan Lee, and word has it that you’re in need of a pilot.”

It was a well-known fact that Sidney kept a pilot on her payroll because she was an impatient person and she didn’t like to wait if she needed to travel. Since she didn’t like crowded airports, that left only one alternative. She just wondered how this woman would know.

“And you just happen to be qualified?” Sidney made the question sound playful to eliminate any sting.

The wail of approaching sirens screamed in the background, and for a moment Ronan looked nervous. Then her shoulders relaxed and she answered Sidney's question.

"I just happen to be, yes. And you even have the fringe benefit of me being a fairly decent bodyguard in a pinch," she added, nodding toward the assailants.

Sidney followed Ronan's gaze and realized that she had enjoyed talking to the young woman so much that she had almost forgotten about the attack. "So I see. You're a woman of many skills. I just can't imagine why anyone would try to kill me."

"Neither can I." Ronan stared intently into her eyes and Sidney felt her heart thump. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to eliminate such a beautiful woman."

Speechless, Sidney blushed in pleased embarrassment. At that moment, an army of police cars surrounded them and a melee ensued while the uniforms attempted to sort out the mess. An officer took their statements while others cordoned the area off from curious bystanders and the media arrived like a pack of hungry hyena on the scent of wounded prey. The police confiscated Ronan's weapon for ballistics checks, but said that since her permit was up to date and only fired in self-defense, they would return it as soon as the investigation was complete.

The tall, cool woman seemed unconcerned and then the officers focused on Sidney's statement. In deference to her fame, the officers took her statement first. Next, Jordy spoke with the police. AAA showed up to replace the blown tire on the limo and Sidney made a mental note to reward Jordy for his foresight. She wasn't even aware he had phoned the car service. She was free to go long before Ronan finished with her part in the investigation. Unsure why she was so reluctant to leave the young stranger, Sidney approached her and held out a card.

"This has been such a crazy night that I'm just not up for anything else. But why don't you call me tomorrow and we'll talk about that pilot position?"

Ronan glanced down and took the card Sidney offered, one card complete with her private telephone number and her penthouse address. When she reached for the card, their fingertips brushed lightly and Sidney felt an electric tingle race up her arm from the point of contact. Again, their eyes met and something passed between them.

Sidney nervously broke the eye contact and searched for something neutral to say. "Nice bike. I've never seen anything like it. What kind is it?"

"It's a BMW Avantgarde," Ronan said. "I've always loved that machine, but now I have another reason. It just helped to save your life."

"Very nice," Sidney murmured as she glanced back at the woman again. She searched for something else to say. "Maybe I could go for a ride sometime?"

Just as quickly as she asked the question, Sidney realized no one would ever be able to convince her to climb onto the back of the suicide rocket. A slow sensual smile curled Ronan's full lips and Sidney forgot about the motorcycle.

"Sometime," Ronan agreed softly, and for a moment Sidney wasn't convinced they were both talking about the motorcycle.

I must be more intoxicated than I realized, Sidney thought as she cleared her throat and pulled her gaze away from Ronan's blue eyes.

"Yes, well..." She glanced away and saw with relief that Jordy was patiently standing by the limo with his hands folded. "I'm getting cold and it looks like my driver is ready. I guess I should go."

Ronan politely walked Sidney to her car and offered a hand to assist her into the vehicle. Sidney didn't need help but took the hand anyway. "Thank you, again," she said. Ronan closed the door for her.

Watching from the vehicle's side mirror, Sidney could have sworn Ronan spoke a single word. Always. Her thoughts were in a whirlwind.

She found herself fascinated by this person, a virtual stranger. Why? She could sense that the woman could be dangerous in the right circumstances, hell she had seen it herself, but Sidney felt safe with her. Weird. She tried to piece things together before deciding that she just felt grateful because Ronan had saved her life. Sidney shook her head. It was more than that. She had been captivated from the moment she'd seen the stranger at the Governor's mansion. On the plus side, if she did relent and employed Ronan as her pilot, she would see even more of her.

Sidney Weaver was not reluctant to show off a beautiful woman in the background and let everyone know she was not available. In a strictly professional capacity, of course.

Chapter Five

RONAN FORCED HERSELF to wait until midmorning to call Sidney. It had been hard but she knew Sidney had been up late the night before and had been slightly inebriated at the time. Finally, with shaking hands she dialed Sidney's personal number. Someone answered the call on the first ring. For a brief second, Ronan dared hope Sidney had been waiting for her to call.

“Hello?”

Sidney’s breathlessly husky voice spoke from the other end of the connection and Ronan grinned stupidly for a second before she remembered there was no visual interface.

“Hi,” she said, her voice rushed in concern that Sidney might think it was her stalker and break off the call. “This is Ronan Lee. I met you last night.”

Sidney laughed into the connection. The sound twisted around Ronan’s insides and she blushed furiously at her reaction.

“How could I forget? It’s not every day you get rescued by superwoman on a motorcycle.”

“It was rather memorable,” Ronan admitted. Then she decided to plunge in with both feet and get to the point of the phone call. “I really hate to bother you with this so soon after your ordeal, but I was wondering about what we talked about last night. About the pilot opening?”

Ronan couldn’t admit that she’d been responsible for the opening in the first place. Offering him a large sum of money and suggesting he take a permanent vacation might not have worked without the threat of bodily harm to go along with it. One look at a loaded MP5 with an extended magazine proved the incentive for him to agree to her terms. Of course, there was no way the man could know Ronan wouldn’t back up her threat.

“Of course,” Sidney said right away. “Why don’t you come by this morning and we’ll talk about it. Is an hour too soon?”

“Not at all. I’ll be there.”

Ronan was elated that she would be seeing Sidney so soon and decided to be grateful for the attempted murder the night before. It had allowed her to make a connection to a woman she’d been agonizing over since before arriving in this century. Ronan didn’t think she could have come up with a plausible excuse to get Sidney to trust her simply by applying for the job opening. She was horrified that someone had tried to kill Sidney and didn’t remember any of her files from the future mentioning such an incident. The fact that it occurred in this time line made Ronan worry that she’d already affected future events and not in a good way. Sidney distracted her from her thoughts when she spoke again. She gave Ronan directions that she didn’t need to the penthouse apartment and an hour later, they met in the parlor.

THE MEETING WAS completely unnecessary as far as Sidney was concerned. She had seen the young woman in action the night before and was ready to hire her on the spot. Still, she felt she ought to interview the woman if only for propriety’s sake. Sidney felt very self-conscious as the young woman walked through the front door and couldn’t explain why, exactly.

For heaven's sake, Sidney told herself, she's the one interviewing for a job.

"Come in," Sidney invited. "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

She walked back to the parlor with Ronan following, and sat on the sofa. A silver tea service rested on the coffee table and Sidney began to prepare a cup of tea for her visitor. She didn't even know if Miss Lee liked tea, but she was nervous and needed something to do with her hands.

"*Niet*," Ronan said. "Your directions were very clear."

Sidney glanced up at Ronan with an appreciative look. "That's a very interesting accent you have. Are you German?"

"Yes," Ronan nodded. "Half-German anyway. My father was American."

"Ah, that explains the last name. But you grew up in Germany," she prompted.

Ronan accepted the tea and seemed to weigh her words before she answered. Sidney had noticed the same tendency the night before. "Yes, I was raised in Germany. My mother refused to leave and my father loved her too much to argue. She was a German socialite and I always had the feeling that my grandfather never forgave her for marrying so far below her station."

Ronan had said the last bit lightly, but Sidney got the feeling that her grandfather's attitude had hurt the young woman very much. She decided a change of subject was in order.

"Your English is flawless. Have you been in the States long?" Sidney was simply curious and making small talk so she was surprised to see a light blush cover the pale cheeks.

"Actually, I have never been in America before. I was educated at the University of Berlin and they insisted that we learn perfect English."

"Is that for the purpose of infiltrating the United States if the need should arise?"

Ronan's eyes widened and she reeled slightly in surprise. Sidney felt bad for teasing her and quickly said, "I'm sorry, too many movies. However it happened, I'm glad it brought you here."

Sidney took a hasty sip of her own tea and tried to cover her embarrassment at the remark. If she weren't careful, Ronan would think she was flirting, but wasn't she? She frowned as she thought how easy she seemed to fall into this teasing behavior with Ronan.

"Thank you."

Ronan sipped her tea and then halted, swallowed hard and obviously resisted the urge to cough.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Ronan coughed again. “Usually I take tea with milk and no sugar. I’m afraid I was too distracted to add them this time.”

“My fault, I should have offered. I guess I’m a little nervous. I’m not accustomed to conducting interviews.”

Sidney tried not to look at Ronan directly. Seeing her color high from coughing made her think of things that had nothing to do with tea. She wondered if perhaps there was a mutual chemistry brewing, but that was impossible. She had only met Ronan last night and they didn’t even know each other. It didn’t matter, she realized. There was no way she would get involved with an employee. To allow them to get involved in anything more than a business relationship would lower her guard and put her professional career at risk. Sidney refused to be reduced to the level of an article in a tabloid magazine. That didn’t mean she couldn’t take advantage of Ronan’s skills.

“Germany, is that where you learned to pilot?” Sidney asked as she picked up the interview once she got her bearings. “I didn’t know universities taught such subjects.”

“Oh no.” Ronan sat her cup down. “My father was a pilot in the American military and stationed in Germany. He flew everything from helicopters to fighter jets and insisted that I learn as well. He would take me up with him in the small helicopters at first, teaching me how things worked. When I was sixteen he let me take the controls for the first time.”

Ronan’s expression had softened at the mention of her father and Sidney could see that she cherished her memories. “You’re very close then?”

“Alas, no,” Ronan said as tears suddenly shone in her cornflower-colored eyes. “My father died eight years ago. He died during training maneuvers when a landmine exploded. The government had used the field for years and thought all of the explosives detonated. They were wrong.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sidney said, moved by the woman’s loss. “And your mother?”

“Six months after Papa’s death she took to her bed with an illness. The doctors said that she had a blood disease, but I believe that she was missing Papa. She passed away shortly after that.”

Sidney had set her cup down while Ronan told the tragic story and now reached out compassionately to cover the trembling hands with her own. She didn’t know what to say and let the moment stretch out until her guest was ready to break the silence.

“So,” Ronan said as she took a deep breath and pulled away from Sidney’s touch. “Now I am in the United States. I admit that I am not too familiar with your customs, but I can fly a plane.”

Sidney chuckled, relieved that the tense moment had passed. “Well, it certainly sounds as if you’re qualified. When can you start?”

“Right away.”

“Great.” Sidney was happy that there wouldn’t be any delays to hamper her work. “I’m to start shooting a new movie the day after tomorrow and I’d really like to have you settled by then. The movie is about a widowed farmer struggling to keep the business running while taking care of a wheelchair-bound teenaged son. Since a lot of the movie is being shot in rural Kansas I’ll be flying back and forth a great deal.”

“I understand. You’ll have to let me know how you want to arrange the schedule. I’ve taken an apartment in the city, but it’s still almost an hour drive from here.”

“I’ll insist that you take the apartment one floor down. I own the building and the only other people living here are a couple on the first floor. They also work for me. One is my chauffeur, whom you met last night, and the other is his wife who is my housekeeper.

“I’ll expect you to be ready at a moment’s notice,” Sidney continued as she warmed to her subject and didn’t realize how bossy she was beginning to sound. “Also I’ll expect a certain amount of decorum on your part since I am fairly well known. It wouldn’t do for me to employ someone who throws wild parties and stays out all night. I don’t need a scandal.”

“I don’t party,” Ronan assured her with a smile, her eyes sparkling. “And as I already told you, I am new in America. I don’t even really know anyone.”

“Fine, fine,” Sidney said as she stood up. “If you’ll wait for a moment I’ll call Jordy and have him show you into the apartment.”

Both women smiled at the light tone and Sidney honestly tried not to flirt with Ronan again.

“Are you going to need help moving?” Sidney asked. “I can loan you Jordy and the car.”

“*Niet*,” Ronan declined with a shake of her head. “I have very little luggage. I am sure that I will manage.”

Chapter Six

“THANK YOU SO much for shopping with us today,” the clerk said, handing Ronan her change.

The girl couldn't have been more than twenty, and Ronan was impressed with the friendliness of the clerk. She came from a world of curfews and oppression and she wasn't accustomed to this. In the Germany of her time, the whole world of her time, people kept their heads down and voices quiet so they wouldn't attract the wrong kind of attention. The boisterous cashier met her eyes openly and requested that she “come again” as Ronan pocketed the change.

“Thank you.” Her gratitude was sincere and she wondered if she was supposed to tip the young woman.

In America of the 21st century a gratuity was expected, wasn't it? On second thought, Ronan remembered, it was only while dining out that she should tip. Even after six months, she wasn't quite accustomed to how things worked in this century.

Ronan shouldered her bag of groceries and walked out the front of the automated doors to put her purchases into the saddlebags of her motorcycle. The grocery store was very busy at five in the afternoon on a weekday, and she noticed the huge black bike attracted a lot of glances and outright stares from male and female customers alike. She looked the machine over, pleased by the freshly polished shine and the fact that there weren't any signs of rust on the metal pipes.

Although invented in this timeframe, this particular machine was a future model and contained a few upgrades. The engine didn't run on fossil fuel, but a nuclear reaction chamber housed inside what would be the gas tank. This one also boasted twin laser canons where the exhaust pipes would be, an onboard targeting computer with voice interface, and a bulletproof windshield. Ronan had made the modifications herself.

She didn't realize that dressed as she was on a beautiful summer day, she was getting as much attention as the BMW. She looked like a blonde supermodel in a black leather jacket with silver zippers, a white button-down shirt tapering at the waist, and hip-hugger black jeans. Ronan picked up her helmet and was about to stuff her long hair into it when she glanced up and straight into the brown eyes of an attractive woman walking toward the grocery store.

“Hi,” the woman said and met her eyes squarely with an open smile. Her manner was so friendly that Ronan wondered if she had met her somewhere before.

“Hello,” she answered and frowned slightly when the woman blushed and looked away. It was only after the stranger passed on her way into the store that Ronan realized she'd been flirting.

She blushed hard and jammed the helmet onto her head to hide her reddened cheeks. She was embarrassed at the attention, but strangely pleased at the same time. In her time that would never have happened and it left her feeling warm and attractive.

To date Sidney had flirted with her almost every time they were together and Ronan couldn't deny she felt there was some kind of attraction between them. Then again, she wasn't completely sure it hadn't just been Sidney being friendly. She could be reading something into the situation that wasn't there.

She had worked for Sidney as a pilot for several months now and saw a great deal of her. They flew regularly to a small airport in Kansas to continue to shoot Sidney's new movie, often for weeks at a time. At present, they were enjoying an unexpected hiatus because of a breakdown in some of the specialized film equipment. They weren't anticipating losing more than three or four days and then they would start flying back and forth again. Ronan took advantage of that downtime to buy some groceries and work on Sidney's plane.

She rode back to her apartment one floor below Sidney's, remembering the day after the assassination attempt when she had called to check on her and attempt to cultivate a closer relationship. It hadn't been difficult to get the position as Sidney's pilot, but she hadn't expected Sidney would want to spend much free time with her. She constantly invited Ronan to lunch at the penthouse or out to dinner with business associates when they weren't on location. Ronan was pleased but suspected residual fear on Sidney's part as the driving factor. She continued to receive anonymous notes from her stalker and Ronan assumed Sidney wanted her around to protect her. She didn't mind, except that she couldn't always be there.

When they weren't on location in the Midwest, her duties maintaining the plane and the hangar in Maryland took up a great deal of time, and her own plans still had to be set in motion. She also had a great amount of difficulty behaving around Ms. Weaver. Each time they went out together, Ronan flirted shamelessly with her. She'd started touching the small of Sidney's back. At first, the gesture had been unconscious, but Sidney hadn't protested.

Winter had finally given way to spring and then to summer. In that time, Ronan had prepared for the eventuality of Sidney's kidnapping as much as possible. She purchased and stashed provisions in key locations and had acquired a secluded hideaway that only two people knew about. Those two people didn't even know what they were party to, just that an eccentric woman had purchased an island and wanted the property kept up while she was away. Summer arrived with no further attempts on Sidney's life, but Ronan resisted the urge to give in to a false sense of security. It would happen.

Ronan pulled the motorcycle into her parking space in the secured garage. She dismounted and went upstairs to put the groceries away. She saw Jordy, the chauffeur, in the hallway near her apartment. As usual, he gave her entire body a once over, showing genuine appreciation. Ronan ignored it since the young man was harmless, and she knew his wife would kill him if she even suspected he looked at her in such a fashion. He never said anything out of line to her and behaved like a perfect gentleman. It was probably an unconscious appraisal, just part of the male animal psyche.

“Hi, Jordy.”

She set her bag down on the floor to pull out her security card. The card fit into a slot in the door and unlocked it, eliminating the need for a key. “What are you doing lurking about?”

“Hi, Ronan.” He smiled, his eyes crinkling. “Just getting ready to take Her Majesty to Sachs. She took today off from rehearsing scripts in the studio and said she needs some new things for summer. I’m sure she has a whole closet full of stuff, but you know those rich people. They won’t wear anything twice.”

His words sounded like a complaint, but Ronan knew he adored his employer and she smiled back at him as she hefted her groceries once again.

“What about you? Anything special going on?”

“No,” she said and shook her head. “I’m just planning for a quiet evening in, a little spaghetti and garlic bread, maybe a glass of wine. Do me a favor though, would you? Tomorrow I have to drive down to Brooklyn Park and do some maintenance on the plane. Keep an eye on Ms. Weaver and make sure she doesn’t take off alone. I’m very concerned about her stalker.”

Brooklyn Park wasn’t that far away, a little less than an hour, and Ronan drove down there every other day when they were in the city. Each time she did, she made the same request.

“No worries. She makes out like the stalker thing doesn’t bother her, that it’s just one of those things a celebrity deals with. I’m not so sure.”

His soft eyes showed the same concern that Ronan felt and she considered briefly taking him into her confidence. Sometimes it was so hard to keep her knowledge of what was destined to happen to herself. Then she decided against it, unsure what she could possibly say to convince him that she was from three hundred years in the future and there on the mission to save Sidney’s life. Instead, she settled for more platitudes.

“I agree, but you know how stubborn she can be. Well, I’ll see you later, Jordy.”

Ronan closed the door and prepared to make her solitary dinner, more worried than ever. It was June now and she couldn’t help but feel time was running out. Had she planned for every possible scenario?

She placed the groceries on the kitchen counter and pulled a knife out of the drawer to slice some vegetables for her meal. Soon sliced peppers and garlic were sautéing in olive oil. Hamburger was browning on the back of the stove and the spicy scents began to fill the apartment. Ronan had a small table set out on the balcony off the living room and planned to have her meal out there, which she did almost every night when she was home. Sometimes she would just sit out there and sip a glass of wine. She enjoyed the sense of freedom it gave her and the sights on the street below were less depressing than the ones she remembered from the future.

She had just sat down with her spaghetti and a glass of wine when she saw the limousine pull out from the underground garage.

Take care of her, Jordy, she thought. She is my world.

THE NONSTOP POUNDING on the apartment door made Ronan jump out of the shower and throw on a terry cloth robe. Rivulets of water streamed down her face and neck so she grabbed a towel and started toward the front door. She felt the robe clinging to her wet body like a second skin.

“I’m coming, just a minute.” What could possibly be so important that someone was about to knock her door off the hinges?

With the soft cotton wrapped turban style around her head, Ronan yanked the door open to a wide-eyed, obviously frightened chauffeur.

“Have you seen Ms. Weaver?” Jordy rushed into the apartment and looked around as if he actually expected to find the wayward woman there. He was shaking and positively frantic.

“No, isn’t she supposed to be rehearsing in studio today?”

Jordy nodded and explained. “They just called looking for her. She was supposed to be there at eight this morning. Velma said she never showed up.”

The overwrought man sank down onto a chair and dragged a hand through his sandy hair. Ronan knew he would never forgive himself if anything happened to Sidney. She had inside information, however, that nothing would happen to her for another few weeks. For that reason, she wasn’t quite as worried as Jordy was. If it weren’t for the still unmasked stalker, she doubted even he would be quite so upset. However, Vel was the producer of the film and would have known of a change in schedule.

Ronan glanced at the clock. “She should have been there two hours ago. Didn’t you drive her?”

“She said she wanted to take the Jaguar today.” Jordy looked miserable.

“Does she often just disappear without consulting anyone? If so, are there any places she usually goes?”

Jordy frowned as he thought about it. “Once in a while she’ll take off. She doesn’t always tell anyone, but I don’t know of any place she goes in particular. It could be anywhere.”

“All right, I’ll get dressed and try to track her down. First I’ll call the studio and see if anyone has any idea where she might have gone.”

Her words were confident and Jordy seemed reassured by them. She thought he relaxed a little under the belief she had everything under control. If only Ronan was so sure.

She showed him to the door quickly, promising she would phone him as soon as she knew anything. As soon as the door closed she flung the towel and bathrobe into a corner and started to dress as fast as her trembling hands would allow. Soon the phone book was out and she had already started to call all of the hospitals in the Manhattan area before she finished putting her shoes on. She felt only marginally better that no one who matched Sidney’s description had turned up in a hospital as she dialed the studio.

It took a few minutes to push through the thickheaded secretary, but finally Vel Prince’s level voice came on the line.

“Prince,” she answered, and managed to sound annoyed through the connection.

Ronan ignored the irritation from the obviously busy woman. “Vel this is Ronan Lee. I’m Sidney Weaver’s pilot.”

“Yes, dear. I know who you are. What can I do for you?”

The tone was much friendlier when the producer recognized the person to whom she was speaking. In fact, she sounded almost casual, a polar opposite of Jordy’s frantic concern.

Ronan frowned. “I received a visit from Sidney’s chauffeur about twenty minutes ago. He said the studio called looking for her when she failed to arrive for rehearsals. He seemed quite concerned.”

Vel actually chuckled into the phone. “I’m sure there’s nothing wrong. Sidney’s the standard for temperamental actresses. She does this kind of thing regularly. She’ll turn up in a few hours and wonder what all the fuss was about. At least she didn’t pull her great escape when we were actually filming.”

“I see.”

Ronan felt some of the tension leave her chest. Still she wouldn’t be completely reassured until she saw for sure that Sidney was unharmed.

“Well, I’m sorry for bothering you.”

“No problem. Give the chauffeur my apologies for causing a panic.”

Ronan just couldn’t sit around the apartment all day and wait for Sidney to return. It would drive her crazy to do nothing, especially if she was in some unknown trouble. She thought of the

assassination attempt the night of the Christmas party. That hadn't been a part of known history either, but it happened. Unfortunately, no one knew where Sidney took off to when she went on her getaways. All Ronan could do was drive around and look for her. She would try riding up and down the uptown district on the motorcycle first. Maybe Sidney had gone shopping and, with any luck, Ronan would spot the car.

After a few hours, it became apparent that driving at random was an exercise in futility. Sidney was not on the strip, and unless she had traveled to one of the malls located in the suburbs, she wasn't shopping. Ronan had no choice but to return to the apartment building and wait for her.

SIDNEY PULLED INTO the underground parking structure relaxed and with a smile on her face. She hadn't felt like going to the studio and decided to take another day off. If they were actually rolling film she wouldn't have done this, certainly not two days in a row, but sometimes she needed a break. She had behaved for most of the process on this particular film, but she still had a reputation to maintain. Occasionally people expected her to pull a stunt like this and Sidney had to admit it helped her to concentrate better if she took a little mental time out.

She pulled into her space and took off the sunglasses that made it almost impossible to see in the cavernous bay. Then she put the Jaguar in park, switched off the engine, and popped the trunk so she could remove her purchases. The first thing Sidney saw when she got out of the car was Ronan. The woman stood next to her large, black motorcycle. She leaned against the wall casually with her arms folded and legs crossed, but the expression on her face stopped Sidney in her tracks.

She looked furious.

"What?" Sidney wondered why Ronan would look at her like that.

Ronan pushed away from the wall and stalked across the garage to stand directly in front of Sidney. "Where have you been? Everyone has been worried about you?"

Sidney was astonished at the cold fury radiating from the blue eyes. More than that, she wasn't accustomed to people questioning her on her activities. The last time she had checked she was a grown woman and could do what she damn well pleased.

"Excuse me?"

It was apparent Ronan missed the warning tone in her voice.

“Jordy came to my apartment this morning looking for you. The studio called him and said you didn’t show up. He was worried you were dead somewhere. You do remember you have a stalker don’t you?”

“Now just a damn minute,” Sidney said. “Jordy should know better than to go off half-cocked. He’s worked for me long enough to know that sometimes I like to get away. I have no idea why he bothered you, but I doubt the studio was really all that worried.”

That seemed to slow Ronan down a little and finally she was able to respond. “That is beside the point. I think you forget that with this stalker on the loose anything could happen. You should be more careful.”

“And you forget your place.”

Sidney finally had enough of Ronan chastising her as if she was a small child. Who did this woman think she was? It was true Sidney liked her, and that a sort of bond had developed between the two. She even hoped the connection would grow into a deep and abiding friendship. Nevertheless, that friendship was new and fragile at this point. Mistrust and anger could easily damage a budding relationship. They needed to establish clear boundaries before she could commit totally to such an association. One of those boundaries would be the distinction between professional and personal business.

“You are my pilot. I hired you for that job. It is not your place to lecture me because I decide I need to take off for a little while. You are not my bodyguard.”

“I thought we were more than that,” Ronan admitted in a soft voice, taking some of the wind out of Sidney’s anger.

It actually sounded like Sidney had hurt her feelings. That hadn’t been her intention. She knew Ronan was just worried about her, but she would have to learn to approach her a little differently if she wanted to get her point across. Sidney didn’t appreciate a rebuke by anyone, not even a friend.

She reached up and gently clasped Ronan’s bicep. Her gaze softened and she said, “We are, or at least I hope we are. But Ronan, you are going to have to accept my need to get away from time to time. You’re also going to have to learn that I don’t like anyone speaking to me like that. It’s one surefire way to piss me off.”

Ronan had the grace to look slightly sheepish and Sidney was content that she had made her point. Unfortunately, Ronan wasn’t quite ready to concede the entire battle just yet.

“Just promise me something?”

“What?” Sidney asked, a little suspicious of what such a favor would be.

“The next time you feel the urge to escape, could you let me know about it first? I realize it may sound like a lot to ask, but I can’t help remembering the first night we met. Please, at least until the stalker has been identified?”

It was a big concession. Sidney knew Ronan didn’t realize how big. She valued her independence when her life had very little freedom to begin with. As an actress, she was a very public figure and it was hard to go anywhere that someone didn’t recognize her. She couldn’t even go grocery shopping without someone, or several people, interrupting her for an autograph. However, she knew Ronan had a valid point and the reminder of their first meeting hit close to home.

“All right,” she finally said. “I’ll try to let someone know the next time I feel the need for fresh air.”

Sidney knew it wasn’t the promise Ronan wanted, but it was the most she was going to get. Ronan seemed to know it too and sighed dramatically, but she nodded her head in acceptance.

“Now,” Sidney said. “Since you’re here, how about giving me a hand with a few packages?”

She flipped open the trunk of the car and almost laughed when Ronan’s eyes widened. The small space was completely jammed with shopping bags. Ronan hesitated for a second, cast Sidney a dumbfounded look, and then started grabbing the bags.

Chapter Seven

RONAN WORKED IN the hangar with her motorcycle parked nearby. Her duties included servicing the plane. The aircraft was archaic by Ronan’s standards since she knew soon they would be traveling to distant stars, but for now, it was a state-of-the-art piece of equipment. She forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand instead of allowing thoughts of Sidney to distract her. Ronan peered down into the guts of the Dassault Falcon 2000 from its frame, where she squatted on her knees. The hangar was located at an airstrip in Brooklyn Park, a suburb of Baltimore, but she wasn’t just performing simple maintenance on the craft. She also had to ensure no one tampered with it in her absence. With a faceless enemy on the loose, she wanted to keep her guard up.

Ronan nervously realized the date of Sidney’s disappearance was rapidly approaching and knew she would have to be prepared to drop everything on a moment’s notice. The assault could come from any direction and she wanted everything to be ready just in case.

She was also intelligent enough to know she had already altered the fabric of time. Professor Horton had told her during his demonstration of the machine that when someone pulled on a thread in time it could unravel the entire tapestry. One had to be very careful about altering anything. Therefore, there was no guarantee that the attack would occur the same way it had in Ronan's known history. Still, there was one thing she was sure of: Sidney's destiny included a violent death. Fate would make every attempt to ensure her destiny became reality.

Ronan felt more and more on edge as the dreaded day loomed nearer. She'd begun to have light panic attacks. She would start to have difficulty drawing breath and a light sheen of sweat would break out over her entire body. When she would come back to herself a few moments later, she felt as though she had run a marathon.

The tension was about to drive her crazy. She fervently hoped that what caused her symptoms was fear for the diminutive woman who'd stolen her heart and not some unforeseen side effect from time travel.

An insistent chirping suddenly erupted from the inside of her jacket. Ronan dropped the wrench she had been holding and vaguely heard it clatter as it ricocheted through the engine compartment and hit the concrete below. At the same time, she removed the remote monitor from her pocket.

"Damn it, not yet," she gasped as icy fear gripped her heart. She scrambled backward off the metal housing and hit the ground at a dead run, barely registering a slight twinge in her knee from hitting the concrete at an awkward angle.

The device she consulted was a remote tracker she had planted on Sidney's Jaguar the day after the woman's last joy ride three weeks ago. Since she had discovered Sidney Weaver had a habit of taking off on her own without informing anyone of her whereabouts or destination, Ronan had decided not to take any more chances. It was likely Sidney's tendency to take off on a whim allowed the kidnapper the opportunity to kill her in the previous time line. Ronan had prepared for such an eventuality by placing the homing beacon under the hood of her car. The only problem was, it was two days early and Ronan hadn't been prepared for things to happen so early. Her plans were to spend all day of the expected attack right next to Sidney.

She raced to her motorcycle, jammed the helmet on, and fired up the huge machine. The front tire rose off the ground impressively as Ronan tore out of the hangar, headed for the penthouse in the hope she could intercept Sidney on the way.

"Computer, activate remote tracking of Sidney Weaver. Display all possible routes of travel by automobile."

A transparent display schematic materialized over the windscreen to give Ronan access to the requested information without the need to remove her eyes from the road. A green blip indicating her current location appeared on the readout and a red blip representing Sidney's car materialized a substantial distance apart. The Jaguar moved steadily along highway Maryland 2 South and

Ronan increased the speed of her bike. She felt the rear tire slip a little before it grabbed the pavement. Desperately, she hoped to narrow the distance between them.

For a few minutes, it looked as though she might be successful, the two dots moving steadily closer to each other. Then Sidney's indicator made a sharp right turn and Ronan realized her intended destination. She felt her heart thump in horror.

Her grandparents had a country home in Rock Hall, which Sidney had inherited when they died. The getaway home was a secret she hadn't shared with anyone, not even her ex-husband. It was a place where she went to be alone but Ronan had done her research and knew about the place. Unfortunately, the highway Ronan was currently on added extra time to her drive, precious moments she simply couldn't afford. Still, she had no alternative since an intersecting path wouldn't come up for quite some time.

Resigned, she gunned the engine and raced at breakneck speed on the highway. She wanted to intersect with Sidney on Paul Pitcher Memorial Highway before it was too late. Luck, however, was not with her this day and her frustration mounted when Ronan spied the gridlock from an accident up ahead. She growled in anger and directed the massive bike onto the shoulder. Weaving past infuriated motorists, she finally navigated by an overturned eighteen-wheeler and shot off on an all but deserted section of roadway, due to the collision. She finally made it to the ferry on Gibson Island that would carry her across the bay and near Rock Hall.

Over an hour later after taking off on her frantic flight, Ronan had to slow on the residential streets. She didn't want any undue attention. The homing device had stopped twenty minutes earlier while she was still on the ferry and she feared she was already too late. Ronan switched off her headlight in the coming gloom of night to evade detection.

"Computer, cancel homing signal and activate thermal scan." Her voice was low in case anyone like a kidnapper/murderer was somewhere close by.

An image of the street she was currently on replaced the map overlay. Heat signatures from various individuals popped up inside their respective homes, but Ronan's eyes were pinned to the residence at the end of the winding road. Sidney's home rested on three rolling acres, setting it apart from the neighbors. She knew it afforded Sidney a sense of solitude that she craved, but at the moment, that privacy could spell disaster.

Her worst fears were realized when she saw two distinct forms on the radar image. One of the signatures was stationary. The other was on the move slowly on the outside of the dwelling. Undoubtedly, this was Sidney's stalker.

Ronan stopped the bike at the property entrance and dismounted, concerned the assassin would hear her approach. She would have to move on foot down the long driveway. She pushed the bike behind some large oaks where it would be out of sight from any prying eyes. She reached into a saddlebag, removed a laser pistol, and tucked it into her waistband before she expertly scaled the high fence and dropped lightly to the other side. Since the scan indicated she was alone here, Ronan wasn't as concerned about any noise she made.

She ran as quickly as she could for the home at the rear of the property and gasped in fear when she finally arrived to find the front door hanging open.

SIDNEY HAD ENJOYED the ride from Baltimore. Driving helped her relax and there was relatively little traffic. Without any distractions, her thoughts had centered on a beautiful blonde angel. Ronan Lee was a mystery and instinctively Sidney knew that conundrum had something to do with her. She just couldn't imagine what it could be, but sensed that it was not good and that idea caused the hair on the back of her neck to stand on end.

Still, she enjoyed Ronan's dry sense of humor as well as her accent, and made any excuse to be around her. She was sure that Ronan had been flirting with her recently, but had never stated anything directly. The possessive hand she placed on her back when they walked together made Sidney feel warm. As a public figure, Sidney shouldn't allow such familiarity. The paparazzi would relish the opportunity to gather any incriminating photos, but she couldn't seem to resist.

Sidney's feelings for Ronan were very intense, but she hadn't wanted to think about the implications before. Now, it was at the point where Ronan was all she could think about. She'd even dreamt of kissing her and awakened from the dreams tingling all over. Something about it bothered her so much that she'd taken off on this sudden flight in an effort to put some distance between them. When she reached the Rock Hall estate, she realized she'd just been overreacting and felt much better. All she had needed was a break from her regular routine to sort things out.

In the home she had known since childhood, Sidney felt more centered and ready for a short rest before dinner. There wasn't any staff at this country manor, which was just what she preferred and Sidney looked forward to making her own dinner. That didn't mean she allowed the house to go neglected. One call to a caretaker before leaving her apartment ensured it would be ready for brief occupancy. With the bed freshly made and a few groceries brought in, Sidney would be comfortable for a couple of days while she enjoyed some well-earned solitude.

First, she would take a nap.

Sidney showered quickly, looking forward to the feel of crisp, clean sheets against her body. She emerged from the upstairs bathroom, threw on a thick terrycloth robe, and padded barefoot across the hardwood floors while she rubbed at her wet hair with a towel. The house was comfortably heated and helped to settle her further.

When she inherited the house, she'd made it her own by redecorating the master bedroom in soft earth tones that never failed to relax her taut nerves. She breathed a sigh of contentment when she entered the room. Even though her grandparents had been dead for seven years, Sidney still believed she could smell the aftershave her grandfather wore. It seemed to linger in the air.

She smiled as she tossed the towel over the wing-backed chair in the corner and pulled back the covers. Night was beginning to fall and she felt her body relax into the downy comfort. She had just started to drift off when a noise roused her from the light sleep in which she'd been floating. Not quite awake, she drifted for a moment more. Then Sidney heard it again and her eyes flew open. The noise had been the unmistakable sound of stairs creaking under the weight of a body.

Sidney leapt out of the bed, and grabbed for her robe. She had received anonymous notes at her penthouse apartment for the better part of a year. Each detailed how Sidney would meet her "admirer," and each disturbed her more than the last. The notes outlined his hideous fantasies, and they typically ended with the stalker killing her in progressively more bloody ways. She wondered if he'd found out about the house and followed her there.

Shadows loomed from the hall and suddenly a large man filled the doorway. The light of the full moon illuminated his visage. He had a broad, flat face with sharp-edged features and lips so thin and hard that they seemed carved from stone. A two-inch scar marked his left cheek. His dark eyes had no depth, reminding her of nightmarish images of demons on celluloid horror films. He appeared seemingly from nowhere, not there one second and then suddenly there.

He smiled, but the expression seemed forced and unnatural. It imparted no warmth to his features. If anything, the attempt terrified her even more than finding a strange hulking man in her home, uninvited, but clearly on a mission. He held a large black weapon that vaguely resembled a rifle but carried a long, extended magazine. From her experience in the film industry, she suspected it was an automatic. She innately knew the letters she'd received were from him and that he was as dangerous as he was mentally unbalanced.

"Get out of my house," she demanded with as much false bravado as she could muster.

The intruder chuckled. "Finally we meet. I've been dreaming about you, Sidney. Have you been dreaming about me? Have you thought about the words I wrote to you in my letters? Fantasized as I have?"

She couldn't respond as he confirmed her worst fears, didn't know how, and could only stare at him, caught between the urge to stare at him in horrified fascination or flee in abject terror.

He hardly paused, saving her the necessity of responding. "Unfortunately, we don't have much time. Your girlfriend is coming and I really would prefer that we not be interrupted."

"Girlfriend," she repeated softly, frowning in confusion. Then comprehension flooded her and she felt a brief moment of relief. "Ronan? Ronan is coming?"

The bearish man frowned intently and Sidney thought she'd somehow confirmed his twisted suspicions with her innocent question. She could easily interpret his internal convictions from his furious expression. She was supposed to be his, supposed to save herself only for him. Now she had desecrated that bond and he couldn't allow her to go unpunished. An expression of almost sincere regret drifted across his face and then vanished.

“You betrayed me. You copulated with another and now you’re unclean. That is regrettable, Sidney.”

“Wait,” she shouted and threw up a hand in automatic self-defense. “I haven’t—”

The stranger shook his head, which stopped her cold. Sidney thought she could see unshed tears glisten in his dark eyes.

“Too late, my dear. You cannot deny what I so clearly see.”

She thought he might be some kind of religious nut. No one spoke like that.

Sidney could see his finger tighten on the trigger in the moonlight and steeled herself for what she knew was about to happen. Suddenly she heard pounding feet on the stairs.

“Ronan, I’m here,” she shouted as the intruder cast a surprised glance back before refocusing on the object of his twisted lust.

Determination colored his face and he opened up with the gun. Rounds tore through Sidney’s small frame and pitched her back into the closet door before she fell. Her head bounced slightly when she hit the ground, but she didn’t really feel it. She couldn’t feel any pain whatsoever, or sensation from the neck down except for a deep and abiding cold.

The gunfire ceased and Sidney heard a grunt and a loud thump. She could only move her head enough to watch Ronan battle with the burly man on the floor. Arms and legs flailed and kicked as each fought to outdo the other.

The killer thrust Ronan away from him with a foot to her chest before he jumped to his feet to flee the room. Ronan quickly rose and jumped on his back, wrapping her hands around his head and grasping his jaw. With a powerful twist, she snapped his neck and watched in satisfaction as he crumbled soundlessly to the wooden floor.

Ronan turned away from him immediately, ran to Sidney’s side, and lifted her into her arms. Tears fell unchecked from her eyes as she gazed down at Sidney’s broken form.

“It’s all right.” Weakened by the trauma, Sidney tried to reassure Ronan even in her deteriorating condition. “You stopped him. That’s all that counts. He’ll never do this to anyone else.”

Chapter Eight

SIDNEY COUGHED AND a dark ribbon of blood trailed from the corner of her mouth. She was going fast and Ronan knew there was nothing she could do. After everything she'd gone through to prevent this, Sidney was still about to die. Just then, Ronan felt an electric tingle like pins and needles covering her entire body. She'd felt this sensation only once before, when she traveled through the time gate. With Professor Horton dead, anyone pulling her back was an enemy. Sparkles filled her eyes. She was furious with fate for not giving her the one or two minutes she needed to say good-bye.

“No!”

Ronan reached for the laser pistol still tucked into her waistband while her body rematerialized. She recognized Professor Horton's basement and instinct prompted her to dive out of the opening of the time sphere. She narrowly avoided the stream of red-hot energy directed to the spot where she stood only seconds before. Ronan squatted down beside one of the control rails, opposite where her opponent hid. She hoped the barrier concealed her from his weapon's fire.

Boris Kinsky, her partner from the Guard, crouched next to the computer controls and fired steadily. His features seemed to ripple slightly, like asphalt on a hot summer day in the desert. Ronan hadn't expected hallucinations to be a side effect of traveling so abruptly back into her own time, and felt relieved when the sensation lasted only moments. The hatred in Kinsky's twisted features was the biggest shock. Ronan had always considered him calm and rational. It seemed she'd underestimated his loyalty and fanaticism to the government.

“I knew you were a traitor,” he bellowed in German. “I always suspected you were a bleeding heart for those mud races and tonight I saw you. I followed you here from your apartment and saw you set this lab for destruction. I disarmed the explosives you set, saving this technology for the glory of the Konservatives.”

Using a derogatory term to describe other races, Kinsky attempted to badger her. His ploy gave Ronan a lot of useful information, the most important being that time was not constant. Though gone for over six months, his ranting informed her that locally, only an hour or two had passed. He'd spent that time trying to figure out how to bring her back. She also learned that he was alone. She couldn't figure out why he was spying on her.

“Why did you bring me back?” she shouted back in her native language, anger and worry for Sidney warring within her. She had to get back there. By a miracle, Kinsky managed to bring her to the exact place where she had one more chance of rescuing her beloved. An idea came to her. Ronan crouched and backed to the rear of the side rail. With luck, she wouldn't make any discernible noise. She reached the end of the wall and leaned around the other side, fairly certain that she'd been successful. She could see the tip of Boris's laser pistol, still aimed at her previous location.

“How else can a traitor of the Regime be punished? I will make Colonel for this.”

Ronan thought it more likely he'd just gotten lucky and pushed the right button to retrieve her. The crystal was in her pocket since she carried it with her everywhere and he'd accidentally activated it.

“Why don't you come out of there, Ronan? I will make this as painless for you as I can, and you know you will never leave here alive.”

His efforts to distract her were unsuccessful. Ronan moved up the side of the other wall to close in on her adversary from his rear. He didn't hear her when she eased up behind him and stood to her full height with the laser aimed at his back. Some instinct must have warned him at the last moment and he spun to face her. Kinsky was too slow and even as he drew his weapon around to bear on her, she fired into his chest with her weapon on full power. A moment later, he was dead. In a way, it was unfortunate that the time machine still existed, but Ronan couldn't help feeling grateful for his timing. If he hadn't disabled the explosives, she wouldn't be able to try to save Sidney...again.

Fearing she might already be too late, Ronan shoved the pistol into her waistband at the small of her back and ran back to the controls. Her heart hammered, her hands shook, and for a long moment she stared at the console without really seeing. Finally, she remembered some of what the Professor had taught her. She turned a dial and pulled up the last set of coordinates leading back to the United States of the past. Grabbing a small handheld data reader off the console, Ronan pushed the on switch. Seconds later, a holographic display illuminated over the device and she started the inconceivably difficult equations, incorporating the coordinates automatically received when Kinsky pulled her back. At least she didn't have to work from scratch, and soon she had the information she needed to arrive back at Sidney's home in Rock Hall.

Ronan tried to set the gate for five minutes earlier than when she'd arrived last time, hoping to beat the stalker into the house. She knew what she needed to do but the images of Sidney's death played repeatedly in her head, shaking her so badly that she had to reset the data twice. Ronan had to calm down so she wouldn't blow this single chance to save Sidney. Ronan took a deep breath, reminding herself that if she could get there in time, none of this would ever have happened.

When she felt she had her emotions under control, Ronan entered the data. She grabbed both her laser pistol and Kinsky's, and she stepped up to the portal. Pressing the activation sensor on the disc she still carried, she felt blasts of air striking her body as the atmosphere collapsed in on the space where she stood. It felt as if all the air whooshed out of her lungs. Her atoms transmitted through space and time.

Disbelief and frustration flooded through her when she returned to the basement an instant later.

She stood for a moment inside the gate braces, surprised and confused. She knew she had entered the numbers correctly. Then the explanation hit her with such force that she actually

doubled over. She could not go back earlier because she had already been in that exact moment. Mentally, she could see Professor Horton's face as he explained paradox.

Panic seized her. She started shaking and pounded her hands against the console. Her mind felt like it tried to cave in on itself, there was just too much emotion for it to contain. Ronan quickly regained control. There had to be a way to save Sidney and she wouldn't let her down this time. She ran over to the professor's work area in the rear of the lab and looked for something to write a brief message. Fortunately, the professor had an abundance of paper.

The stalker is coming for you. Get away and hide.

I am coming.

Ronan

For a few seconds, she rummaged about the room for a weapon and then realized it was an exercise in futility. There was nothing here Sidney would be familiar with in her century and that included the laser pistols that Ronan currently held. Her whole body shook in defeat before an idea finally seized her. The professor's collection.

She raced up the steps, ran to the front entrance, and stared at the long knives bolted onto the wall. Ronan narrowed the confinement beam on her laser pistol and used it to melt the fastenings away from one of the sharpest blades. The weapon was deadly, but still small enough she felt Sidney could handle it easily. Then she ran back down into the lab and prepared to send the blade and the note back to Sidney.

From what she had seen in those few moments before, Sidney had been in bed when the intruder found her. Ronan needed to refine her calculations to deposit her gift onto the bed where Sidney would see it. She didn't know if she could get that close, but even if the blade fell onto the floor, Sidney had a chance. She pierced the note with the blade and slid it up near the hilt so it wouldn't come off.

Then she entered the gate, neared the transmission point, and set the object on the floor. Since it was an inanimate object, Ronan had to activate the machine from the control panel. As soon as she pushed the button, it winked out of sight. It didn't return.

Sweating and shaking, Ronan wiped at her forehead. Then she walked over to the professor's desk and sat down to work out the new computations. Now she had to get back.

SIDNEY LAY ON her side in bed, drifting half-asleep when something heavy landed in front of her face. She jerked in surprise and lunged from the sheets as she reached for the light on

the nightstand. The handle of a long, wickedly curved blade still trembled slightly from where the blade embedded itself into her pillow and even farther down into the mattress.

“Holy shit.”

The knife’s edge had narrowly missed the tip of her nose. Sidney jumped up onto her hands and knees, searching the room frantically for signs of an intruder. Her heart slowly assumed a normal rate when she didn’t find anyone. Sidney frowned in confusion as she bent to remove the paper from the blade and read the words. She didn’t know how this note got here, but she believed the words implicitly.

Somehow conscious that she had little time, Sidney snatched the dagger up and raced to the dresser. She pulled on a sweater and jeans while she listened intently for any movement from below. For all she knew, the stalker was already inside with her. A soft sound caught her attention and she froze for just a second, her eyes wide in fear. Silently walking on bare feet around the bed, she slipped into the adjoining bathroom. Another exit led onto the landing and she felt confident the intruder would check the bedroom first. It was the only lit room. As she peeked around the corner of the darkened chamber, she saw she’d guessed correctly. Her heart beat double time.

Sidney could see a stranger’s back as he paused in the entryway in confusion. As soon as he crossed the threshold into the room, she ran into the hallway. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t take him long to realize that the bedroom and the lavatory were empty. She had little time to find somewhere to hide. She couldn’t afford to go toward the stairs either since that would carry her toward him, but there was no other way off this floor.

That left her little choice but to hide in one of the other rooms. Sidney stayed against the wall hoping the shadows would conceal her, and tiptoed quickly down the hall before she ducked into the sewing parlor at the end. There weren’t any locks on the bedroom doors so she picked up a straight-backed chair and wedged it under the doorknob as quietly as she could.

She left the lights off and navigated only in moonlight. Frightened, she went into the closet and shut the door. Sidney was never afraid of the dark like many children, but right now, she couldn’t shake a “boogeyman’s-right-behind-you” feeling that made her crouch down on the floor and clutch the knife. She held it tightly, ready just in case she had to defend herself. If she were very lucky, he wouldn’t be able to get into the room. If he did, she fervently hoped he would never get the chance to check the closet.

Ronan was on her way and hopefully the police as well. Sidney desperately prayed for her friend to arrive in time. She prayed Ronan would hurry.

Chapter Nine

RONAN MATERIALIZED ON the front porch of the Rock Hall manor just thirty seconds later than she'd left the last time. There wasn't any chance to reset the explosives to destroy the time machine, but for the moment, she had other concerns. The door hung open just as it had before, yet this time she believed that Sidney still lived. Ronan palmed her laser and slipped into the darkened structure with all senses straining. A creak on the landing caught her attention and she barreled up the steps with all thoughts of stealth vanishing from her mind.

The landing was also empty, just as before. She raced for the bedroom. Things here were different and she could see a large frame silhouetted from a light that hadn't burned before. Her footsteps warned the intruder that he had company and he leaned quickly out of the chamber and fired off a spray of bullets in her general direction. Ronan pressed back against the wall, comforted by the fact that he didn't have a good enough angle to target her. Unfortunately, that also meant she didn't have a chance at him.

A moment later, she extended her arm and pressed the trigger of the pistol. Ruby light shot toward the bedroom and she heard the murderer curse as the beam found its mark. Then she heard the distinct sound of breaking glass. Ronan moved before she even realized it, bolting into the space to find it empty. Curtains flapped in the breeze from the open window.

Looking out from the second story, Ronan saw that the roof of the garage prevented the stalker from having to make a long and potentially hazardous drop. The snow beneath was deep and soft. His shadow raced across the lawn as he fled, but Ronan didn't think he ran away in defeat. He wasn't finished yet, the retreat nothing more than a tactical maneuver. According to events recorded in her time, this event wasn't preordained. Therefore, it wasn't the way fate meant for Sidney to die.

Ronan turned from the window disappointed that he hadn't at least broken a leg in the fall, but she was content to let him go for now, her only interest in finding Sidney. She began a systematic search of the floor.

"Sidney!" she shouted, not worried about being overheard.

She had to find her and get out of the manor. Unquestionably, a neighbor heard the stalker's automatic weapons fire and reported it to the police. They didn't have the time for authoritarian red tape. Ronan suspected Gentry knew about the stalker and had Sidney under surveillance as a preventive measure. She doubted concern for his beloved ex-wife motivated him, but she didn't put it past him to take advantage of the situation. It was an opportune moment to have his henchmen take care of the job the stalker had botched. She reached the door at the end of the hall and turned the handle easily but it wouldn't budge, as though something was wedged against it from the other side.

“Sidney, it’s me.”

Instantly, Ronan heard a scraping sound and then Sidney opened the door. She staggered back slightly when Sidney flew into her arms. Ronan wrapped her long arms protectively around the shaking shoulders and tried to comfort her.

“Shh, it’s all right now. I’ve got you.”

She allowed Sidney a moment of reassurance, while she closed her eyes and absorbed the warmth of her body before she pulled back to peer into gray eyes. She allowed tears of relief to show as she stared at the cherished features. Sidney wasn’t the only one needing reassurance.

“Did you recognize him?”

Sidney answered the soft question with a confused shake of her head and huddled closer against her.

Relieved to find her uninjured, Ronan finally gave in to the desire she’d felt for so long. She lowered her head and gently brushed her lips over Sidney’s trembling mouth. The kiss was soft, meant to convey the relief she felt that Sidney still lived, but it became something more when Sidney wrapped her arms around Ronan’s neck. Lips parted and she tasted Sidney deeply for the first time. She enjoyed the exquisite sensation for precious little time before she forced herself to stop.

Gently Ronan eased back from Sidney’s mouth, but couldn’t tear her eyes away from the passion-bruised lips.

“I hate to do this to you,” she finally said, resting her forehead against Sidney’s, “but we have to get moving.”

“Why?” Sidney pulled away in confusion. “He’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but no doubt the police are on their way and we don’t want to be here when they get here.”

“We haven’t done anything wrong. Why should we leave?”

She knew Sidney didn’t fully understand everything that happened and she was getting a little panicky. A crazy man had just broken into her house and tried to kill her and then Ronan showed up and chased him away. Ronan knew she’d be grateful for that, but wouldn’t understand why they should run from law enforcement.

Before Ronan could come up with an answer, Sidney started asking more uncomfortable questions.

“How did you know he was here? And how did you know I was here? I didn’t tell anyone. How did you get that message to me and what is that...thing in your hand?”

Ronan looked down, mortified to see that she still held her laser pistol.

“Too many questions.” She tucked the weapon back into her waistband. “I’ll explain as we go.”

Ronan attempted to propel Sidney down the hall, but Sidney planted her bare feet and crossed her arms.

“Not until you answer me.”

Finally, Ronan lost her patience and grabbed her by the upper arms. “Look, we don’t have time for this. All I can tell you is that man was not acting alone and the longer we stay here the easier a target we become. You are just going to have to trust me.”

Apparently mollified by the answer, and spurred on by the remark that they remained targets, Sidney walked quickly into her bedroom for footwear. Sirens wailed in the distance as she reached into the closet for a heavy brown leather jacket and gloves.

“Come on,” Ronan urged, a note of panic in her voice. “We have to go.”

“Keep your shirt on,” Sidney mumbled sarcastically. She reached down, grabbed her briefcase and then stuffed a few items into it before indicating she was ready.

They quickly walked downstairs and left the house by the back door, crouching low as they ran across the lawn headed for the trees. Manicured hedges hid their escape as police cars flew up the long drive. The police had the code to the gate in case of emergencies and it stood wide open. At least she didn’t have to climb back over. Sidney had the code in that instance, assuming she wouldn’t want to stand in the middle of the road and debate why she should open it.

“My bike is at the front gate,” Ronan said with a steadying hand on Sidney’s elbow. “I hid it behind some trees earlier.”

“Oh, goody,” Sidney retorted. “I finally get that ride I asked for. Why can’t we just get my car?”

“The place is swarming with police.”

The argument was sound, but Ronan thought Sidney deliberately reached for, and found, another reason to disagree with her plan. Looking balefully at the helmet she said, “That thing will muss my hair.”

Ronan responded with a stern glare and Sidney finally relented.

“Oh, all right. Calm down.” Testily, she snatched up the helmet and fiddled with it as long as she could until Ronan finally took over the task for her.

“Ever notice how that suggestion never works?”

The question was deliberately flippant as she hurriedly stuffed Sidney’s briefcase into her saddlebag. It barely fit, with Ronan having to turn the case up on its end and shoving for all she was worth to manage the feat. They could hear sounds of the police crunching through the brush and snow before they finished. Yet Sidney still found a way to delay them further when she saw the blinking lights of unfamiliar technology.

She had another struggle on her hands when Sidney asked, “What’s that?” in a loud stage whisper, her voice muffled through the visor.

Ronan fought not to roll her eyes at the woman’s timing. Now was not the appropriate time for twenty questions. “Just get on the bike so we can get to the ferry. I’ll answer all of your questions as soon as we’re clear.”

Sidney climbed onto the large machine and wrapped her arms around Ronan’s narrow waist. “Looks like you could use a meal,” she mumbled through the faceplate.

Ronan ignored the comment and Sidney had no choice but to hang on tightly as they sped off down the road. A few moments later, Sidney snuggled closer and Ronan felt her shiver. Even with the extra protection of coat and helmet, the night air was cold. Sidney was soft in all the right places and Ronan tingled where their bodies made contact. She remembered the earlier embrace and felt surprised that Sidney’s lean frame contained such strength. Then she recalled how she’d kissed her a few minutes before and her face burned. She wondered what she’d been thinking. As soon as the immediate danger passed, Sidney would fire her for inappropriate behavior.

It was just the stress, Ronan rationalized as she concentrated on driving back to Brooklyn Park. She felt Sidney hug closer against her back and gasped from the sensation that shot through her.

Can’t she sense the way she makes me feel?

She had no other choice but to push aside her internal struggle and focus on the half-hour ride to the ferry. Ronan worried they’d be late and have to wait for the next conveyance. The Gibson Island Ferry left for Baltimore every fifteen minutes and they couldn’t afford to miss the transport since someone else could be following. Ronan wasn’t naïve enough to believe the stalker was the only one looking for her companion. Whether the psychotic stalker acted alone or as a pawn for Gentry or the government, now wasn’t the time to wonder.

With only a few minutes to spare, they arrived at the Gibson Island transfer station. Purchasing tickets and the process of bustling the BMW onto the conveyance took up the spare

time and saved Ronan from having to provide any explanations to her impatient friend. However, when they finally settled down and the ferry started to move, she ran out of time for excuses.

Sidney dug in her heels and crossed her arms over her chest. “Hold on,” she said in her lowest register. “I’m not going any further until I get some answers.”

Ronan looked around the cramped deck in frustration before she finally grasped her by the arm and urged her over to the railing. If she told Sidney everything now she’d have another battle on her hands. With the deck of the ferry crowded with people, she didn’t want to get into that now. She would just have to appeal to Sidney’s sense of reason.

“Look, I can’t answer you now. There are too many people around. All I can tell you is that our meeting was not an accident and that your life is in danger. You already know that from the stalker’s attack. But I can promise that I will answer all of your questions as soon as we are on the plane.”

“The plane?” Sidney asked. “Why on the plane? Are we going somewhere?”

“Please, I’ll answer you then. Trust me?”

Chapter Ten

SIDNEY DIDN’T KNOW why, but she did trust this woman. As she gazed into the ice blue eyes of someone that had saved her life twice, she suddenly found that she was willing to grant a little leeway. “All right, until we’re on the plane but then I’ll want some answers.”

“You’ll have them,” Ronan assured her with a sudden grin that seemed to make the watery moonlight just a little brighter.

They left the ferry with no problems and soon the *Avantgarde* roared into the hangar at Brooklyn Park. The noise reverberated so intensely in the metal structure that Sidney thought her eardrums would explode even through the protection of the helmet. Then Ronan braked hard enough to slam Sidney against her and caused their helmets to bump before she switched off the engine. Sidney noticed the open engine cover and the tools scattered all around. It looked as though someone had stopped what they were doing and ran.

How exactly had Ronan known something was wrong? Sidney fumbled with the chinstrap and pulled the helmet off while she watched her friend and employee through narrowed eyes.

Ronan calmly closed the cover and picked up the scattered tools. She gave every appearance at being unconcerned with Sidney's surveillance. Sidney wasn't stupid and the words Ronan had spoken to her on the ferry came back to her. She said their meeting wasn't accidental and she recalled their first encounter. She first saw Ronan on the night when two assassins attempted to take her life. She'd come out of nowhere to rescue Sidney, and from the appearance of the hangar now, she'd somehow known she was in trouble again.

"You knew he was coming for me," she stated with certainty. "How?"

Ronan ignored the question, and walked past her. She removed the saddlebags from her motorcycle. "Unfortunately, we will have to leave the bike behind. The weight will slow the airplane too much."

It was an obvious attempt to change the subject and it worked. The comment effectively deflected Sidney as she tried to work out how much the weight of the bike would slow them or why Ronan would care since the Falcon 2000 traveled at 528 miles per hour.

"So? I've had as many as ten people on that plane and it never 'slowed us down' before."

"That was before you were running for your life," Ronan retorted and walked past Sidney to the door of the pilot's cabin. She turned back a second later and noticed Sidney still standing glued to the spot as her comment hit home.

"Coming?"

The gently mocking question caused Sidney's hackles to rise and she ground her teeth together as she climbed in behind her. Wordlessly she took her seat and locked the harness in place while she watched Ronan run through the preflight protocols.

RUNNING THROUGH THE procedures quickly, and skipping half of them, Ronan entered a false flight plan before she contacted the tower for a clear runway. The flight plan was a ruse in case Sidney's assailants were capable of tapping into the FAA's computers and discovering their direction of travel. Once they were airborne, Ronan would circle back and fly directly toward the Florida Keys. Sidney was unnaturally quiet, and Ronan cast a worried glance toward the woman occupying her thoughts. She wondered how much longer she would be able to put off answering Sidney's questions. The feisty woman deserved to know the truth where her own life was concerned, but Ronan just wasn't sure she could make Sidney believe her.

What could she possibly say? "I came from three hundred years in the future to save you from your ex-husband"?

She thought Sidney must be weary from the recent escape and wasn't even sure what to ask. Silence settled and Sidney laid her head back against the seat. Then she sat up and reached for her carryall behind the pilot's seat. She opened the case and retrieved an item Ronan had watched her hastily stuff inside. From the age and resemblance of the two figures captured on film, she guessed the people in the photo were Sidney's grandparents.

Sidney's eyes drifted from the photograph and rested on blinking amber, red and green lights. She seemed especially curious about the plane's control console and Ronan wondered if she'd ever been in the cockpit before. Ronan considered it a possibility that Sidney's curiosity was on high alert considering all they'd gone through in the last few hours. Sidney didn't say anything and eventually her focus returned to the photograph.

Allowing a quiet sigh of relief, Ronan concentrated on the instruments before her and eased the craft into a slight turn. With the turn complete, she gradually allowed the plane to descend to be out of the way of normal traffic. Their true course wasn't recorded anywhere and she didn't want to run into anyone. She wasn't paying attention to what Sidney was doing.

“Okay, care to explain?”

The dangerously worded question caught Ronan's attention completely. With a fatalistic sense of dread, blue eyes turned to see what Sidney had discovered. Her small, elegant fingers wrapped around a data analyzer, a serious bit of 24th century industry. Ronan swallowed a groan and she wondered how she could possibly explain the advanced technology. Somehow, she knew that she had just run out of time. She would have to give Sidney at least a partial explanation.

Ronan fixed her eyes back on the windscreen and answered slowly and casually. “It's a tracking device.”

That was the truth, it just wasn't all of it. Ronan didn't think Sidney could handle the fact that the device could track, scan for medical problems, analyze bio-signatures, and even analyze the molecular breakdown of the atmosphere.

“Well, I admit that I don't know everything about modern technology. But this device certainly seems a little...advanced.”

Her words pointedly invited Ronan to reveal more than she had.

“It's a prototype,” Ronan hedged, falling into the necessary deception.

The display clearly showed readouts of atmospheric temperature in one corner and several buttons for inputting information, but there was nothing to indicate that it was more than Ronan had said it was. Still Sidney didn't seem convinced.

“Is this how you found me?”

Ronan had allowed the inspection of the analyzer to go uninterrupted. The more information that Sidney ingested by herself, the easier Ronan's tale would be later. As long as she remained calm and matter of fact, Sidney would listen.

"Not so much," she answered. "I know that you have a penchant for taking off without telling anyone so I put a device on your Jaguar that would activate as soon as the engine started."

Ronan held her breath, waiting for the explosion that was sure to come.

Sidney surprised her when she responded. "I guess it's lucky for me you already knew where I was going. Why else would you take the Gibson Island Ferry instead of trying to intercept me on the highway?"

Ronan stayed quiet for the moment since she realized the question was rhetorical. It saved her from having to explain about the onboard interface built into the motorcycle.

"You said we hadn't met accidentally, that you knew someone was...trying to kill me," Sidney continued, hesitating. "You show up on two separate occasions, just in the nick of time to save me. The advanced technology you possess...this," she held up the data analyzer. "The motorcycle. I've never seen anything like that bike. Are you a government agent?"

Ronan bit the inside of her cheek and fought the hysterical laugh that wanted to burst from her chest in relief. Of course, that was the most logical assumption: a female James Bond. It was certainly a lot easier than seeing the truth that was right in front of her, that Ronan was from the future.

"Not exactly," Ronan admitted a moment later when she had regained control of her mirth. "Sidney, what I have to tell you will be very difficult to believe."

"No doubt," her companion responded sharply in her smoky voice, causing Ronan to finally take her eyes off the view and look into Sidney's eyes.

What she saw was a sharp-minded woman who had the tenacity to work through even the most confusing problem and find the solution. For the first time, Ronan believed she could tell Sidney everything. Still, she had to be careful not to introduce too much too soon. The human brain could absorb only so much outlandish information at once and she knew this would be a lot to take in.

"I'm a homicide detective," Ronan began. When she saw she had surprised her friend yet again, she pushed on. "I...came across information that an attempt would be made on your life because of your husband."

"Roger," Sidney broke in. "But we're not married anymore and why would someone try to hurt me because of him?"

Ronan took a deep breath before she took the plunge. “I have come to believe that he is the one trying to have you killed.”

“What?” Sidney burst out. “That’s ridiculous. We may not have had the most civilized divorce in history, but it’s hardly any reason to kill me.”

“I know this is going to be difficult for you to hear, but I’ll try to tell you everything I know.”

“This better be good. I’ve known Roger since we were in college and it’s going to take a lot to convince me that he was behind this.”

“I’m aware that your marriage was initially one of convenience. You’re very famous on the society front and Mister Gentry used you to further his government contacts. Once he developed his own circle of associates, he had no further use for you. Now I will admit that in itself isn’t reason to kill you, but I believe that you have sensitive information in your possession that he can’t afford to have become public knowledge.”

Sidney looked at her as though she thought Ronan mentally unstable. “And exactly what is this information that I’m supposed to have?”

“I didn’t say that you knew what the information was, just that you have it, even if you aren’t aware of it.” Ronan shot Sidney an angry look before making some minor corrections to her navigational board. “Whatever it is, it’s something concerning how this country’s government will develop. It’s also large enough to affect the world, and that is something you do not want to see happen.”

“How do you know?”

Ronan didn’t have an easy answer that would satisfy her companion and chose to remain silent. After a few moments, Sidney tried a different track and impressed Ronan with the change in topic.

“And your superiors are aware of this plot? They’ve authorized you to protect me and stop Roger?”

“No. I resigned to protect you.”

“You did that for me?” Sidney asked in a small voice. “Why? Why would you do that, give up everything for me?”

Ronan simply looked at her and the expression in Sidney’s eyes showed how touched she was by the gesture. Sidney held her gaze for only a moment before she reached back into the briefcase. Ronan thought she was looking for a distraction in something familiar. The case wasn’t heavy, containing the few items Sidney had stuffed into it before they left the manor and she lifted it easily onto her lap.

Sidney picked up the photo she'd looked at earlier and studied the scene. The photo of these people seemed to calm her. A man and woman sat on a checkered cloth on the ground with their arms around each other and smiled into the camera. As nice as the photo was, something else caught Ronan's eye.

"What's that?"

"My grandparents," Sidney answered the soft question as she drew her fingertips lovingly over the glass. "I took this picture when I was just a kid. We went on a picnic one summer at the Rock Hall property."

She reached over Sidney's hand and into the briefcase. "Not that. This."

Ronan held a small computer disc that Sidney looked at as though she had never seen before.

"I don't know. It's been a long time since I used this case, but I'm sure it wasn't in there last time. It's probably something Roger tossed in there. He used to borrow the briefcase when he'd forgotten his own. But it can't be what you were talking about earlier since that disc had to have been in there for almost a year."

Ronan let it go, sensing Sidney had reached the limits of her endurance. "Why don't you try to get some sleep? I'll let you know if anything happens."

For a moment, Sidney just stared into Ronan's cornflower eyes and then shook her head in disbelief. "I just guess I'm going to have to get used to someone caring about me."

"Is that so hard to believe?" Ronan asked, frowning. "That someone could care for you?"

"More than you might believe." Sidney stood up and rested her hand briefly on Ronan's shoulder. "See you in a couple of hours."

Ronan knew there was a luxurious bedroom in the rear of the plane, cordoned off from the passenger seats, and she hoped Sidney could get some decent rest despite the troubling events of the night.

She engaged the autopilot now that they were on course, reached over, and grasped the saddlebags from where Sidney had laid them earlier. Ronan pulled her laptop out and sat it on the copilot's seat to boot up. It was one of the purchases made after arriving in this century, a necessary expense since a futuristic version wasn't compatible with the software of this century. It seemed to take an eternity for the infernal thing to boot, but finally it was ready and Ronan slipped the disc they had discovered into it.

At first, she wasn't sure what she was reading. It looked like a simple list of names. Most of them were names of people in the current government's cabinet and she couldn't understand what possible significance they could have with the conspiracy against Sidney Weaver. Then she scrolled to the bottom and things became abundantly clear.

For a while, Ronan just stared into the darkened night through the windscreen and planned what their next move would be.

Chapter Eleven

SIDNEY TOSSED AND turned on the bed in the rear of the plane. There was so much to absorb that she didn't know if she could take it all in. She wasn't even sure that she believed half of it. Roger trying to kill her? It seemed outlandish, but she had no reason to believe that Ronan would lie, either. In fact, she trusted her more than she trusted anyone ever before.

Then there was the stalker. She had told Roger about the man during their divorce. He became angry and accused her of sensationalism to prevent their separation, but his emotion had seemed forced. It was almost as if he was playing a part, and playing it badly. She wondered if he'd known about the man in advance, perhaps even hired him to terrorize her. If he'd been as desperate as Ronan insinuated it was certainly possible.

Thoughts of Ronan made Sidney consider what she'd said. If she was being truthful, Ronan had given up everything for her. It didn't make sense someone would do that for a perfect stranger. Sidney allowed the possibility that Ronan possessed a driving urge to protect someone, anyone, from a tragic destiny. Her logical side told her Ronan's motives were more involved. Ronan saw death all the time and it was unlikely Sidney was anyone special.

The care and concern Ronan had shown for Sidney's safety certainly insinuated there was a deeper meaning. Her thoughts naturally progressed to the kiss at the estate. Men had kissed her before, but they didn't compare to Ronan's gentle touch. Sidney couldn't ever remember clinging to someone as she had to Ronan then and she hadn't wanted it to end.

Finally, she admitted that she had more questions than answers and that sleep would be impossible. Sidney flung back the light coverlet and stood up. She walked out to the small galley to make some fresh coffee and wondered if Ronan would like something. By her count, neither of them had eaten anything in quite some time. A lopsided grin curled her lips when she realized that she could do something for Ronan. It wasn't exactly saving her life, but it would make Sidney feel better if she could contribute something toward Ronan's welfare. From the look of her, she tended to neglect her nutritional needs.

A few minutes later, Sidney entered the cockpit bearing a loaded tray.

“Where are we?” she asked casually and handed Ronan a plate. She eased into the seat beside Ronan and strapped on her seatbelt out of habit.

Ronan took the offered turkey sandwich and bit into it eagerly. She chewed for a few moments before she answered. Sidney was amused at the exuberance shown for the food.

“Just nearing the Florida Everglades,” Ronan mumbled around a mouthful. “Thank you for this, I’m starving.”

Sidney frowned and sipped her beverage. “You never did tell me how you managed to file a flight plan so quickly.”

“I have my ways.” Ronan added a wink, letting Sidney know she was deliberately being evasive. Sidney only rolled her eyes.

Suddenly, the jet shuddered. Smoke belched out of the engine compartment and red lights began to blink alarmingly on the control panel. Ronan tossed her plate aside, most of it landing in Sidney’s lap, and grasped tightly to the wheel.

“What’s happening?” Sidney yelled and flung her cup toward the rear compartment. A large brown stain spread down the front of her shirt.

“We’re losing fuel and hydraulics,” Ronan shouted, fighting the controls.

Sidney gritted her teeth against the sudden nausea generated when they dropped a hundred feet all at once. She fumbled with her harness, making sure it was properly buckled.

“I thought you checked everything.”

The image of the plane with an open engine cover crossed Sidney’s mind and she realized someone must have tinkered with the vessel while Ronan was off chasing her. She should have pointed it out when they got back to the hangar, but recent events had shaken her so badly that she didn’t consider it. Regardless, this was all her fault. If Sidney hadn’t taken off, no one would have gotten close enough to sabotage the plane.

“I did.”

The Nordic features looked even paler in the crimson illumination of emergency lights. “I can’t hold it. We’re going to have to try and set down somewhere before we run out of fuel completely.”

Sidney felt it when Ronan reduced air speed and began the difficult job of trying to land with mostly frozen controls. The Falcon was not about to cooperate. It shuddered and bucked like a wild animal trying to escape. Fear was a bitter taste in Sidney’s mouth as she watched Ronan struggle with the wheel.

Finally, they broke through the clouds into the middle of a thunderstorm. Lightning streaked the sky and thunder boomed all around them.

“This just keeps getting better and better.”

“Why do I get the feeling that the universe is testing me today?”

Sidney followed Ronan’s gaze and saw a blinking red fuel light. “What do we do now?”

Her fingers felt like they were becoming part of the upholstery since she held so tightly to the chair arms, but she couldn’t even think about letting go.

“We are going to land.”

Ronan almost sounded confident and reassuring, trying to convince Sidney that everything would be fine. It didn’t work.

“Where the hell are we going to land in the Everglades?”

“Look for a clearing.”

“A clearing? We need a landing strip, not a break in the trees!”

The Falcon, by design, could use a shorter runway than most jets but a clearing would never be large enough. Unfortunately, they were seriously out of options. Fear shot through her again when the small craft suddenly plummeted several hundred feet. The jungle rushed toward them at breakneck speed. Sidney’s stomach flip-flopped when the bottom of the Falcon started to scrape the tops of the trees. She knew Ronan could barely see through the rain and fog. Her eyes were squinted and she leaned far forward in the seat.

A flash of lightning abruptly lit up the night and Sidney spotted a narrow trail directly ahead of them. It wasn’t wide, but she hoped it would suffice.

“There.”

Ronan angled the craft down, to line up on the slightly curving trail and Sidney prayed the controls wouldn’t freeze completely.

The Falcon lurched when it hit the muddy ground, before it skidded left and took out a row of saplings with the wing. For a moment, she thought they would make it down in one piece, and then the right wing hit a massive cypress and ripped away from the body of the plane with a shriek of shredded metal. The impact jerked the craft sideways, straight toward a row of smaller trees.

“Hold on!” Ronan shouted.

Sidney threw her arms up to shield her face and felt the resistance when Ronan pressed down hard on the dual brake pedals.

The shouted warning was the last thing she heard before they hit a tree dead on. Then it uprooted and crashed through the windshield, branches striking her repeatedly. It was a bit of relief when the darkness claimed her.

Chapter Twelve

“HE FAILED.” THE gruff voice sounded angry over the crude telephone connection.

The recipient of the call was equally irked and he stuffed his free hand into the pocket of his pinstriped trousers. Angstrom’s first impulse had been to fling the telephone against the wall and thought perhaps he had been among these primitive Americans for too long.

“How?”

He saw his reflection in a picture that was hanging on the wall. In his ire, his features had rippled slightly and he brought his emotions under control with effort.

There, that’s better, he thought and looked at the dark hair that showed just a touch of gray at the temples. The Black Guard, secret enforcers of the Regime, wouldn’t be happy to know about his momentary lapse in concentration. Disturbed at his lack of control he focused on the call.

“The pilot showed up,” Sullivan reported. “Somehow, though, I suspect she’s more than just an air jockey. She may be a bodyguard. All I know is that she was right behind Brannon when he went into the house. They weren’t in there more than a few minutes before he jumped out the second story window. We picked him up a few minutes later and I had the other team take him back to the asylum. What are your orders now?”

Angstrom was furious that the assassin had failed. It had taken months to find someone whose psyche was weak enough for the hypnotic suggestion to work. After that, the Guard set their guinea pig free to go after Weaver. Fortunately, there were enough alternates now. They’d been looking for replacements ever since they created their first subject.

Government asylums here in the 21st century overflowed with former Navy Seals, Marine Recon, and Army Ranger personnel that had suffered various breakdowns over the years. They possessed just the right combination of loyalty and combat skills to serve the Regime effectively.

“Sir,” Sullivan prompted into the silence.

“They’ll try to go to ground somewhere. We need to stop them before that happens. How did the bodyguard get there?”

“She showed up on a motorcycle. They took off before the police arrived.”

“Good. I’ll have the team in Brooklyn Park plant a tracker on the plane as well as a small explosive. It won’t be enough to destroy the craft and, if this pilot is as skilled as you say, she should be able to bring it down in one piece.”

“I thought you wanted her dead.”

The disappointment and disbelief in his voice was obvious. Sullivan had a taste for blood. Angstrom thought he’d hung around at the Rock Hall estate hoping to see blood. He didn’t care how Sullivan got his thrills but the comment irritated Angstrom and he barely refrained from snapping at the hired thug.

“I did, but Brannon failed, didn’t he? Now, I’d like to find out what Weaver knows and if she’s shared that information with anyone else. Get to the airfield. A helicopter will be standing by. I want you to follow them and move in when the plane goes down. Bring Weaver back to me unharmed. The pilot is expendable. Do with her what you will.”

Angstrom was utilizing too many resources just to track down the actress but wasn’t overly concerned. The agents were as expendable as Weaver’s pilot and didn’t know the true reason behind killing Sidney Weaver. They were told she was a double agent, having ties with North Korea, and dangerous to the United States. The patriotic agents had asked no questions, responding in a way they probably considered heroic to their government’s need. For this reason, he felt that his final plan would be successful.

He’d just hung up when there was a sharp knock on the door. Supreme Court Chief Justice Barnhart walked in before Angstrom invited him. He wasn’t really a chief justice; he wasn’t even from this era. Barnhart was an impersonator, just as Angstrom was.

Swallowing his wrath at the botched murder, Angstrom tried to act casual with his Guard commander. “Any word from the fleet?”

Barnhart quietly walked around Angstrom’s desk, where he picked up the apple that sat on the corner. He wiped it on his sleeve before he bit into the fruit, the juice visible where his lips rested on the skin. Angstrom waited, trying to appear patient since he knew full well the judge heard him. He stood up straight and bore the scrutiny of a superior he knew didn’t think much of his abilities. Fortunately, the Delegator in charge of all of them disagreed with Barnhart’s assessment. If not for her, Barnhart would have eliminated Angstrom long ago.

The judge took only the single bite from the apple and sat it back on the desk. “They are holding position until we signal that we are ready. When will that be?”

Angstrom got the feeling he was being tested. He shrugged nonchalantly. "Once I've been sworn in as this country's president we can begin replacing other key individuals. It shouldn't be much longer before we can determine that the citizens from the future are undetectable to the Americans. We're still not sure if the cloaks developed in the future give off low enough energy signatures, but I'm confident that Phase Two can begin shortly after that. I don't think it will take more than a year to begin a full-scale replacement."

The Regime's discovery of Professor Horton's machine allowed them to send people into the past to correct the course of the future. Detective Lee had unknowingly helped them pinpoint this era by leaving the coordinates on the control panel. Research into her activities told them why Lee was here and highlighted Sidney Weaver's importance to the Regime's future. Now, they concentrated on setting key players into positions of power. Angstrom was impatient to have the entire Black Guard on the continent. Having them in place would ensure reinforcements when the time arrived. Just as important as having the Guard agents on station, Angstrom thought it more imperative that they move slowly in actually replacing politicians. There were no more than fifty thousand agents to take advantage of the economic crisis and political unrest that existed here and now to alter history.

"We have already been in America for two years. How much longer must we wait to conquer these weaklings?" Barnhart asked.

"Until Imperial Leader Odon is ready, I suppose. What does she think of my plan so far?" Angstrom wanted the Delegator on his side. If she was, he would take advantage of that favor as soon as possible by eliminating the mean little rodent that stood in front of him now.

Barnhart sat in the chair behind the massive oak desk. "You and I are expendable," he said rather than answer directly. "By gaining the trust of these people and occupying key positions, she will consider replacing them on a larger scale."

Barnhart routinely showed he felt direct confrontation was ill advised, proving to Angstrom that he was a coward. Angstrom had conceived a devious plan for the government's infiltration. He hadn't wanted to share it with Barnhart, but had no choice. The judge had Odon's ear for the time being. Unless Angstrom gained the support of his direct supervisor, his plan would never reach the Neue Konservative government.

"I've been researching the history of this country and I think I've found a way to annihilate this form of government without drawing too much attention," Angstrom said. "But we must move slowly and carefully once we have our people in place."

"Ah, that is why you are so eager for the rest of the Guard to arrive, to implement this plan of yours. Tell me of it, then. How can we replace hundreds of key politicians in this country, and incidentally that of the Fatherland, without arousing suspicion?"

"You are aware of the world conflict that took place eighty years before now? They called it World War II. During that time a visionary named Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany."

“I remember reading about it,” Barnhart nodded. “Through his determination he led his people out of a great economic depression and made them one of the leading super powers in this world, at least for a short time. If I remember correctly he was defeated.”

“Yes, it’s true. But we would be more cautious.”

“Continue,” Barnhart ordered. “How would we succeed where he failed?”

Angstrom had to outline all of the key points of the historical figure’s previous ideals that closely followed the new conservative beliefs of the Regime before he could answer that question.

“One thing Hitler would not abide was what he called the degenerate races. In our case, the degenerate races are the capitalist free thinkers of this era. Unfortunately, we will need their assistance if our plan is to succeed, but we can follow his example to eliminate most of our major adversaries.”

He saw he had the squatty official’s attention and warmed to his subject. “To him anyone not of pure blood, specifically anyone not of German descent, was exterminated. He killed millions of people in his death camps using every means at his disposal.”

“Surely you can’t be suggesting we do the same? From what I have seen since our arrival, these barbarians are disturbingly tolerant of almost any behavior. How would you prevent an uprising and our own defeat? I believe you are being too ambitious.”

Now came the part where Angstrom had to present an argument the other man would accept and take to Odon. “You’re right, of course,” he said in a smarmy attempt to ingratiate himself, pleased when the commander puffed up in ignorant pride.

“The world would not tolerate Hitler’s activities and rose up to resist him. In the end, he was defeated. But his ideals had merit and are still alive today, even if no one speaks of it.”

“Explain. How does this fit in with transforming this era of government?” Barnhart demanded.

“No matter what these people say, they are as prejudiced as Adolph Hitler. They cover it by spouting platitudes and enacting laws meant to protect the minorities. Hitler was just more honest about it. Now, here is the gist of my plan. First, we must replace all of the leaders of this country and Germany. After that occurs, other key officials in the cabinets of each world government will follow. We’ll enact laws over a period of time that will give total power to those officials. The voters won’t even know what they’re approving until it is too late.”

“And if they find out?”

Angstrom snorted in disgust. “The path is set already. This country alone has enacted a Patriot Act that opens the door. Every bit of technology they develop is another tool to facilitate

conquest. For example, did you realize that cellular phones have a chip inside that can triangulate their position from the satellites in orbit around this planet? If the phone is on, it's easy enough to pinpoint from space. They don't even know what they're doing to themselves. Then there's the Homeland Security department. People disappear through their doors every day and are never heard from again."

"It will take a very long time to realize just this part of your plan. In time, our own people can take over law enforcement and military positions. Once that happens we can begin bringing the true government of the Regime to bear."

Though his words sounded tentative, Angstrom could see that he was starting to sway in favor of the idea. "Yes, but we must be cautious. If it becomes common knowledge that we're killing the people we replace, we'd have a fight on our hands. Even if twenty-first century weapons are crude, these people are heavily armed. Also, the sheer number of people rising up against us might cause failure."

"Why shouldn't we fight?" Barnhart asked. "You said it yourself. Our weapons and technology are superior. I don't understand why we don't just bring in a Star Cruiser to annihilate these people from space."

"Now who is being impatient? We don't fight because we would lose. Even if we won a direct assault, this entire planet would become uninhabitable. People in this century may be bigoted and petty, but they will band together long enough to resist us."

Barnhart finally nodded. "And what of this Sidney Weaver? Why are you expending so many resources on her? She is merely an actor, someone who plays 'let's pretend'. You threaten our mission by having Sullivan and the others pursue her. If anything goes wrong we could all be exposed."

The senator growled in frustration. "Because that fool Gentry created a data disc and it has fallen into her possession. It contains a list of those in the government due for replacement. He also included all the information he had on our guards."

"What kind of information?"

"Everything. Culture, political views, where we originated, and why we're here."

"I told you not to trust that man with too much information. Now his ex-wife has the data, but I don't believe she's read it if she does. Otherwise, we'd already be incarcerated or dead."

"No, I don't think she knows what she has," Angstrom agreed, "but we can't be sure and we can't take the chance that she will find out. As for Gentry, I've taken steps to ensure he will no longer be able to compromise our operation."

"You've eliminated him?"

“Last night. An operative transported his body through the transmission point and requested a replacement. No one will know he’s one of us and if Sidney Weaver is ignorant of the information on the disc, she’ll never get a chance to find out.”

“Sullivan?”

“I sent him after her right before you entered the office.”

“You’ve done well, Mister President-elect. There is still much work to do until you’re sworn into office in January. Make sure there aren’t any more leaks or you may be transported next for your own replacement.”

Chapter Thirteen

GRAY EYES FLUTTERED open slowly and then Sidney slammed them closed again. Ronan had sat staring at her companion for the better part of an hour, praying for her to regain consciousness. Now that she had, Ronan could only guess at the size of her headache or concussion. Still, she breathed easier just seeing Sidney awake.

“Easy,” she said, resting a hand gently against her shoulder. “You took quite a blow.”

Sidney cracked her eyes open, propped up on one elbow, and looked around the wrecked interior of the Dassault. Ronan could understand the confused look. When Sidney lost consciousness, she’d been in the cockpit. Now she was in the rear of the Falcon on what remained of the bed. Ronan carried her there after the crash once she made sure it was safe. Lacking any broken bones or obvious signs of bleeding, Ronan wanted to move Sidney to a more comfortable place where she wouldn’t have branches poking into her shoulder.

She watched as Sidney looked around the damaged plane. Fractures spider-webbed along the interior of the bulkheads and the deck plating had buckled in several places. The smell of burnt ozone from ruptured power conduits permeated the air thickly, and Sidney coughed as she drew a breath of cool air.

“How long?”

The plane’s right wing wasn’t anywhere in sight. The darkness of night, the stars, and the sounds and smells of the Florida Everglades poured in through the gaping expanse. They were lucky that the plane had remained relatively intact. If the crash had been even a little worse,

sparks could have ignited an explosion that would have melted them into their seats. Ronan ignored the shudder that ran down her spine and concentrated on answering.

“A few hours.”

Ronan sat beside Sidney on the mattress and held up a canteen of water. Sidney took several long swallows from the flask before Ronan stopped her.

“Not too much, your body’s taken quite a beating and you don’t want to make yourself sick.”

Sidney nodded at the advice, handed the water back to Ronan and sat up to focus on their current reality. “So what’s the plan now?”

“Well,” Ronan didn’t say anything else for a moment and looked around at the vessel. “There’s really no way to repair this. I can’t see well enough in the dark to even begin to assess the damage so that would have to wait until morning. Even then, I don’t have the equipment to make any repairs. Regardless, it’s not like I happen to have a spare wing up my sleeve.”

“What are you saying?”

Ronan frowned at Sidney’s tremulous tones but saw no reason to sugarcoat the truth. “It’s getting dark so all we can do for the night is try to relax, stay warm, and conserve our strength. Since we have no other means of transportation, tomorrow we’ll have to walk out of the jungle.”

Sidney stared at her as if she’d grown an extra pair of arms. “Are you crazy?” Instantly, Sidney grabbed both sides of her head, illustrating the magnitude of her headache, but she stubbornly persisted in a slightly quieter voice. “We are in the Everglades. You know...alligators, snakes, swamps? What makes you think we can just walk out of here?”

Concentrating on the intent gaze directed at her, Ronan allowed herself to draw strength and patience from the love she felt for this magnificent woman. Last night she’d kissed Sidney in relief that she was still alive and she had responded, but Ronan was not fool enough to completely believe that she returned her feelings. She might never return them and now was not the time to let her know how she felt or to dwell on those emotions.

Nevertheless, she couldn’t keep the tenderness completely out of her expression when she finally answered. “I realize it’s dangerous, but we really have no choice. I know you’re scared, but I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Sidney went stock-still for a moment, frowning. Ronan wondered if she’d inadvertently revealed something with her choice of words, or the tone of her voice, or even her expression. Then Sidney’s curious expression faded and she raised a hand to her forehead.

“You’ve already saved my life three times. I believe you, and trust me, coming from me that’s quite a compliment. I don’t...trust...easily.” Her wonderfully husky tone reminded Ronan of whiskey and cigarettes. “You’re right when you say we have no choice. I’m just so tired.”

Slowly Sidney raised a hand to rub at her gritty eyes and Ronan couldn't pass up the opportunity to take Sidney in her arms. She felt Sidney relax into the embrace. Sidney was not by any means a weak woman, but she'd been through a tremendously stressful twelve hours. Ronan could feel some of the tension melt out of her muscles, but suddenly something changed.

Sidney's respirations increased and her body tensed again. At first, Ronan thought something had frightened her, but when Sidney looked up, she found desire in her eyes.

Must be the concussion, Ronan thought. In a few minutes, she'll be angry for letting her guard down, even for an instant. Ronan's mouth went dry as she waited for Sidney to act. She wanted that response, but was afraid to press for something more unless Sidney made the first move.

Sidney looked away, but didn't withdraw. Eventually, her body quieted and she grew still. Ronan looked around the area, her mind conjuring every scenario she could think of to help them out of this situation. Their resources were low, but she possessed some high technology that might ease their burden just a bit. Coupled with a little luck and resourcefulness, they just might make it out of the jungle alive.

Sidney started and sat up, leaving Ronan wondering if she'd heard something.

"What is it?" she asked loosening her hold slightly, but she didn't allow Sidney to move away completely.

"You're not supposed to sleep with a concussion, are you?"

Ronan smiled and released Sidney before she reached into her saddlebags. She pulled out the tracking device Sidney had examined earlier. Ronan aimed it at her and tapped several buttons quickly before checking the readout. A moment later, she nodded once, satisfied with what she found. Then she closed the instrument.

"Your injury is minor and I don't think it'll be dangerous for you to sleep for a few hours. In fact, after the day you've had, I suspect it would be good for you."

A dark eyebrow arched and thin lips twisted into a wry grin as Sidney clearly worked through Ronan's actions. "Tracking device, huh? I guess it has more than one purpose."

Ronan looked down at her hands where they lay in her lap and flushed slightly. "It...has more than one purpose, yes."

Sidney reached out and grasped Ronan's chin gently between thumb and forefinger, urging her to look up. "Tell me about it."

Ronan drifted for a moment in twin pools of liquid gray before she came to a decision. Sidney was an extremely intelligent woman. She wouldn't discount what her eyes told her just

because she had no previous experience with this type of situation before. Resigned, Ronan lifted the device and handed it to Sidney. While she examined it, Ronan explained.

“It is called a data analyzer. It has many functions, only one of which is a tracking device. In actuality, it is a scanning tool. The analyzer is capable of scanning for life forms up to a thirty-mile radius as well as analyzing the molecular structure of the atmosphere and any object in question. Additionally, it’s capable of assessing and diagnosing injuries and illnesses.”

“But not treating them?” Sidney turned the device over as she inspected each minute detail, from the unfamiliar casing to the multitude of flashing lights. “Quite an interesting piece of technology. Where did you come by it?”

The question was very pointed and Ronan wasn’t sure how to answer. “A friend of mine is...was...a scientist,” she said honestly, thinking of the photo she had at her new home on the island. “Many times I funded his research and was able to benefit from his discoveries.”

Although Ronan tried to cover it with her hurried explanation, Sidney seemed to catch on to the pain in her voice. “What happened to him?” she asked gently.

She didn’t point out the obvious fact that, from what she’d said, Ronan had money and hadn’t needed the pilot’s job in the first place. Warmed by the obvious sympathy and consideration, Ronan felt overcome with emotion. Tears stung her eyes and she turned her head away to grapple with her feelings. She fought the tightness in her throat and finally answered.

“He was killed by the government. They considered his discoveries dangerous.”

“Are they the same people that have been trying to kill me?”

“I believe they could be,” Ronan equivocated and refused to meet Sidney’s gaze.

“Do you know if they managed to follow us from the estate?”

Ronan nodded. “I took a scan just before you awakened. There are five life forms approximately nine miles from our present location. Right now they’re not moving, but I think that’s just because it’s too dangerous to travel through the swamps at night. They’ll be coming for us again at dawn.”

Telling Sidney the truth had seemed like the right idea, but then Ronan watched her eyes darken as anger flashed. “How do you know that those five life forms aren’t a search party? Someone might have seen the plane go down and believe it or not, I’m a celebrity. Is it so far-fetched to believe they would be looking for us to help?”

“No. That is not who they are—”

“How do you know?”

“Because I filed a false flight plan.”

The cabin was suddenly quiet as both weighed the ramifications of Ronan’s words. If this were a sanctioned search party, it would have been conducted somewhere along their expected route of travel. Since the unknown individuals trailed along their actual location, it indicated something more sinister. Sidney’s shoulders suddenly slumped in quiet defeat and Ronan felt her heart melt. She reached out and tried to hug her once more, but Sidney resisted.

“I guess we should get some sleep.” Sidney scooted back against the far side of the mattress.

Ronan sighed and realized that the moment of closeness had passed. With a heavy heart, she climbed in beside her companion.

She stopped for a moment to remove her boots and then pulled the dirty sheets over their reclining forms. When she settled back against the mattress she wondered how she would ever be able to sleep.

Sidney turned onto her side facing her and Ronan guessed she was trying to see her features in the dark. “I’m sorry. I guess my head is just spinning from everything that’s happened, but I want you to understand that I am grateful for everything that you’ve done. Can we just chalk my behavior up to temporary insanity?”

Ronan’s stomach flip-flopped before she could control her emotional response and the blood roared through her veins and centered in her groin. She hoped that Sidney couldn’t detect the sudden heat emanating from her body.

“Only temporary?”

Sidney chuckled and Ronan closed her eyes, prepared to try for a few hours of sleep. She felt Sidney move and then lean over her, her face drawing nearer. The slim form settled half on top of Ronan and then soft lips pressed against her own. The kiss was gentle and healing rather than passionate. Ronan lay there afraid to breathe and tried to return the chaste pressing of lips without starting something more passionate. This had to be up to Sidney.

Then it was over and Sidney settled down to rest her head on Ronan’s shoulder, one arm wrapped around the narrow waist. She snuggled closer to Ronan, muttered, “G’night,” and then settled right down to sleep.

Afraid to move, Ronan lay completely still while she felt Sidney’s body relax and her breath even out. Her heart pounded in her chest and she wondered how she could possibly sleep now. The kiss had been devoid of passion and she wondered if Sidney had been trying to tell her something without words or merely trying to thank her for saving her life yet again.

Eventually exhaustion won out and Ronan began to doze off. The heat of the warm body and her gentle nocturnal murmuring drew Ronan in. With the scent of the dark locks in her nostrils, she finally fell into a deep, restful slumber.

Chapter Fourteen

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Sidney awakened and took a long slow stretch before she remembered where she was. Sitting up, she noticed that Ronan was absent and the inside of the cabin had just begun to lighten with the coming of day. The sheets next to her were cold and she wondered how long Ronan had been gone. Just then, the object of her musing walked into the ruined doorway juggling a plate loaded with food in one hand and a mug of something that steamed in the other. Florida wasn't nearly as cool as Maryland, but the Everglades were quite chilly this morning. When Sidney saw what Ronan carried, she couldn't contain her joy.

"Oh, you're an angel." She reached for the cup before wincing slightly at the ache in her muscles. "How'd you manage this?"

"I raided the remains of the galley and made a fire outside on the ground. Here, it's not much, but it's something to eat."

Sidney thought the mound of skillet-fried potatoes, baked beans and toast looked wonderful and dug in with gusto. After a few bites, she realized Ronan was watching and began to grow self-conscious.

"You're not going to eat?" she asked around the mouthful of food.

Ronan smiled. "I ate before I came in. I apologize for staring, but I was wondering how your headache is?"

"Better," Sidney admitted taking a quick sip of her coffee. "I'm a little sore, but that could just as easily come from sleeping on the ground. My arms are a little bruised from the branches coming through the windshield, but all in all things could have been much worse."

Sidney stopped in the process of scooping up another mouthful of food and looked at Ronan. She hadn't complained about any injuries last night, simply taken care of Sidney when she regained consciousness. She'd fixed breakfast this morning like nothing was out of the ordinary. It had been dark after the crash and Sidney hadn't seen anything wrong with her, but in the light of day she could see where a bloody gash had dried on Ronan's cheek.

"You're hurt." Sidney reached out to touch the soft skin.

Ronan blushed and shook her head. "It's just a scratch."

She moved away to allow Sidney to eat in peace and pointedly ignored the look of concern flashed her way. Sidney watched as she walked around the truncated space of the interior, collecting various items that they might need for the next few days. Ronan filled the motorcycle's saddlebags with a small medical kit, cloth for bandages should the need arise, matches, food and various other sundries. She also filled the few canteens they had with the bottled drinking water that had fallen out onto the galley floor. Throughout all of this, she was quiet.

Then she looked around and her eyes settled on Sidney's briefcase. The battered leather container held very little except for a photograph and a computer disc. Sidney just watched her and offered no complaints when Ronan picked up the case to pack with supplies. Then Ronan picked up the data analyzer and walked back out of the plane.

Curious what she was up to, Sidney stood up with her plate and drifted over to the ruined hatch. She leaned against the frame with one shoulder, continuing to eat as she watched. As Ronan stepped across the spongy ground, Sidney noticed the damp smell of rot emanating from the jungle around them. Her nose wrinkled slightly in disgust. Ronan lifted the strange scanning device and aimed it out away from their location before moving around in a circle. Sidney assumed she was searching for the best way out of the marsh.

Ronan started and her eyes went wide when she looked down at the display. Spinning quickly on her heel, she sprinted back toward the darkened plane, almost knocking Sidney down as she passed.

"Let's move."

Ronan grabbed Sidney's shoes and tossed them toward her. Fortunately, she'd already finished her breakfast so it didn't matter when the plate bounced off the dirty carpeting. Sidney looked up at Ronan as if she'd lost her mind.

"What's wrong?"

"They're coming."

Ronan squatted down in front of Sidney and grabbed one of her shoes. She started pulling at the laces to loosen them. Adrenaline flooded Sidney's system and she snatched her shoe away from Ronan before stuffing her foot into it.

"I thought you said we had plenty of time? That they were nine miles away?"

"That was last night. Apparently they have some sort of transportation since their signals are moving steadily toward our location."

"Why can't you just say 'they're moving fast'?"

Ronan thrust the briefcase into her hands, grabbed her by the hand and hauled her out of the plane so fast that Sidney almost caught her thumb in her laces. She paused only long enough to grab the saddlebags by the center strap and Sidney's briefcase. Her urgency struck a chord of fear that propelled Sidney to hurry after her as Ronan raced away from the crash site.

After a good night's sleep, Sidney had started thinking they were overreacting. It was true that someone had broken into her house last night, but he was gone. This pell-mell flight over half the country was unnecessary. As for the plane going down, maybe Ronan hadn't been doing such a great job on maintenance after all. Sidney only had her word for it that someone was after them since she didn't know how to work the "tracking" device. For all she knew, Ronan could be making it all up. What did she really know about her anyway?

She's a great kisser.

She ignored her inner voice and decided to go along with Ronan for now. Since there really was no proof either way, Sidney didn't want to take the chance that she was right and end up dead. With that in mind, she let Ronan haul her out of the plane. She was so sore she really couldn't put up much of a fight anyway. She just went with it and waited while Ronan quickly kicked dirt over the small fire. Then she shoved Sidney toward the swamp.

As the sun rose, the air became even stickier. Morning gave way to a humid, sweltering day that sapped their energy quickly. Sidney's shirt clung to her in an annoying way. She tried to ignore the moisture gathering where the arms of her jacket were tied around her waist. Insects buzzed around her head and she slapped at them in irritation.

They had been moving at a breakneck speed through the trees and murky water for hours. Her stomach grumbled, sweat trickled in an irritating line down her back and saturated her clothes. She was tired. Her feet ached. Sidney's only view for the last hour was Ronan's swinging behind. The leggy woman's stride seemed to eat up the terrain, forcing Sidney to jog to keep up.

Not that she really minded the view. Sidney allowed her mind to drift back to the kiss the night before. Ronan had obviously been terrified that the stalker might hurt her. Sidney had heard Ronan call out for her and the fear in her voice had been genuine. It made her feel good in a silly sort of way that she cared so much. Then those wonderfully long arms had scooped her against Ronan's chest and held her tight.

Now that she thought back on the scene, Sidney could remember how her heart had pounded under her ear and she knew Ronan's reaction had been more than that of a concerned employee. Her reaction had been personal and she'd been terrified. Then she had kissed Sidney tenderly, lovingly, and Sidney remembered how she'd responded.

She was getting used to having strange feelings when she was around Ronan and didn't have the urge to gloss over it anymore. There was definitely an attraction between them. She didn't know where it was going or if it was brought on by the tension of the moment, but she wasn't

going to delude herself. Things would work out somehow and now was not the time to worry about it.

After a while she felt as though she had started to float in a fog and her eyes fixed on the one constant in her swaying world: Ronan's hips. Contrary to her previous decision not to worry about the development of their relationship, her eyes gravitated up over the lanky form. She had acknowledged from the moment she had seen Ronan that she found her attractive, but until this moment she hadn't realized how utterly exquisite she was. Those hips would definitely get any man's attention.

Not just any man but also any woman with eyes in her head.

She couldn't deny the kisses they had shared, but years of ingrained propriety kicked in. They didn't mean anything, she told herself. She had never been attracted to women, and couldn't imagine why she would think about such a thing now.

She explored the possibilities and thought back to sleeping in Ronan's arms the night before and how comforted she felt. It was like it had been centuries since she'd been that comfortable sleeping with someone, much less a woman. Usually she couldn't stand being in bed with anyone and started to feel claustrophobic from the body heat they generated. When that happened, all she wanted was to shove them onto the floor.

Last night had been completely different. She had drawn support from Ronan's presence, the sound of her heartbeat caused Sidney's muscles to relax and the tension to drain from her body. Sidney had to come to terms with the fact that she wasn't attracted to women, but she was attracted to Ronan.

With her attention divided, Sidney wasn't watching where she was going and she tripped over the thick, twisted root of a cypress tree. Unable to maintain her balance, she grunted and fell heavily to the ground. Instinctively she dropped the briefcase and thrust her arms out in front of her to break her fall. Sidney only succeeded in straining her wrist when it took the brunt of her weight on the hard ground.

"Damn." She rolled over and sat up to inspect the damage.

Ronan heard the crash as she hit the ground and Sidney saw her turn back to check on her. She had just clutched her right arm against her chest when suddenly Ronan squatted next her and aimed the analyzer at her wounded arm. She punched a series of buttons on the device, waited a moment, and then checked the results.

"Thankfully it's only a slight sprain."

Sidney had expected Ronan to pull out one of the bandages she had seen her pack into the saddlebags and was surprised when she withdrew another strange device from her bag. The tip of it glowed yellow as Ronan ran the light back and forth on her wrist and Sidney felt a slight tingling sensation. A few seconds later, Ronan put the instrument away.

“How does that feel?”

Sidney flexed her hand. “It doesn’t hurt anymore. What was that thing?”

“It’s called a myovascular knitter. It’s for healing soft tissue injuries,” Ronan answered, smiling slightly.

“Another of your friend’s inventions?”

At Ronan’s nod, Sidney continued wryly. “I’m beginning to see how the government might see him as a threat. With these kinds of inventions, the medical industry would be in shambles. No more prescriptions to treat symptoms while the body heals itself...no more endless tests that really don’t show anything but sure generate a lot of revenue.”

Ronan stared at Sidney, obviously surprised by her harsh words, but she couldn’t seem to help herself. She was hungry and miserable from walking around in sweat-soaked clothing.

“You’re tired. We should rest for a few minutes.” Without waiting for a response, Ronan handed Sidney the water canteen.

“How could you tell?” Sidney shot back sarcastically, but gratefully accepted the water.

“Because your cynicism is even more pointed than usual.”

Startled, Sidney looked into Ronan’s face, then noticed the arched brow and snorted at the dry humor. She reached out and playfully smacked Ronan on the leg. However, what she intended as a tap on the muscled thigh turned into a caress as Sidney felt tingles shooting out from her fingertips. She was surprised to see Ronan’s eyes dilate, the blue becoming a narrow band of color against the much larger pupil.

Ronan suddenly cleared her throat, picked up the analyzer and input a sequence of commands. Sidney guessed it was more for something to do than because she needed the information. Still, Ronan’s expression tightened as she analyzed the data.

“Will you show me how that works?”

Ronan smiled at her curiosity and held up the scanner, showing Sidney how to tap in different series of buttons to ascertain different findings. She tried to concentrate, but her thoughts were on something else. Sidney had seen Ronan’s desire, or thought she had. Now that the moment was over, she allowed for the slightest bit of doubt. Briefly.

No, that was definitely desire. She wants me, too.

“Watch carefully,” Ronan instructed gently and drew Sidney’s attention to what she was doing. “Enter this sequence to check on our adversaries’ progress.”

Sidney saw the readout on the small display and quickly derived a conclusion. Combined with the previous layout she'd seen on the Everglades, as well as their position within it, this wasn't good.

"They're so much closer." She grasped the scanner to see it more clearly. "How can this be right?"

"Clearly, they have some means of motorized transport."

"No, not motorized," Sidney disagreed. "Sound travels for miles through the jungle. If they had air-boats we'd know it."

Ronan frowned and Sidney was disconcerted at how adorable it made her companion look, even with dirt smudged on her skin and hair hanging damply around her aquiline features.

"Okay," Sidney said and tried to focus. "If not air-boats, then what?"

Speaking more to herself, Ronan asked aloud, "What would someone use to travel downriver without the aid of engines?"

"A canoe," Sidney exclaimed, comprehension dawning in her eyes. "They're traveling by canoe, that's why they're moving so fast."

"If that's true we can never outrun them." Ronan held up the analyzer. "Look here. The river will continue to wind around until it will eventually be in front of us. At one point, we would have to cross it to reach civilization. Somehow, I don't believe they'll allow that. It'll be much simpler to eliminate us in these swamps and allow the natural predators to dispose of the evidence."

"Well, that certainly paints a graphic picture." Sidney shuddered at the images generated in her mind. "Then we'll just have to make sure it doesn't come to that."

"What did you have in mind?"

A soft smile graced Sidney's lips and she reached up to gently brush Ronan's strong jaw. She could feel an almost imperceptible shiver travel through the whip-thin frame. "Honey, I may be an actress, but that doesn't mean that I'm stupid."

Ronan's eyes widened, but she listened as Sidney continued. "Since I met you, a lot of things just don't add up. You keep showing up just in the nick of time to rescue me...all these technological wonders that you wield as though they're common place...and you cannot tell me that motorcycle is factory standard. At least not from any factory around here."

Ronan started to interrupt, obviously prepared to fabricate any excuse she could think of, but Sidney stopped her by pressing a soft finger against her lips.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to demand more answers...at least not yet. But I do know there’s more to you than meets the eye, and I know you have some skills that would prove useful in a physical confrontation.”

Ronan pulled back to take a shaky breath before she said, “You’re right, but I fail to see how those abilities can assist us now. Our pursuers are too far away at present.”

“But they won’t be for long. The jungle is a dangerous place What if they ran into a few obstacles on the way?”

“Yes,” Ronan said softly, her eyes narrowing as she caught on to Sidney’s suggestion. “The jungle is indeed a dangerous place.”

Chapter Fifteen

“DAMN,” HE MUTTERED in irritation and swatted at the mosquitoes chewing on the back of his neck.

He wouldn’t even be out here if it weren’t for that fool Gentry. As far as he was concerned, they were better off without him anyway. Sullivan just wished his employers had left the task to him. He would have shot Gentry on the spot instead of trying to clean up his mess. Now the president-elect wanted this mistake rectified. Sullivan couldn’t understand what Gentry had been thinking, to put government secrets on a computer disc and let it fall into the hands of his ex-wife.

Senator Angstrom had made it quite clear that Sullivan and his little band of hunters were not to return without the Weaver woman and now they wouldn’t even let him kill her. The pilot, however, was free game. Sullivan wondered if he could create a little accident for the Weaver woman along the way. Angstrom would never know it had been deliberate. That possibility made Sullivan feel a little better, but he was still out in the swamps of the Everglades sweating his butt off as he tried to track the Weaver woman and her pilot.

Sullivan didn’t know the other four men on his team and that was just fine. The killer preferred to work with people he had no ties to; it was easier to intimidate them with his size and eliminate them if it became necessary.

They'd picked up the Seminole guide in a small village at the edge of the swamps. Picked up was the right expression. They weren't about to pay him and had "hired" him by flashing a gun in his face.

When he found the women it would be over quickly, maybe a little too quickly for his taste. Nevertheless, he had no doubt he'd find them soon. The women were on foot and their guide informed him there was only one path they could safely take out of the jungle. They'd already found the plane wreckage, but there weren't any bodies inside or any trace of blood. There was evidence that they had eaten as recently as this morning. There was a campfire ring, and obvious tracks on the ground showed that they had walked into the swamps. That meant they were in one piece, for the moment.

Sullivan glanced over at their guide. Billy definitely knew his business. Within hours of the plane going down they had found the wreckage. The man almost seemed to have a precognitive idea of where it was. Billy had informed Sullivan of the only way out of the marsh and that it was along a route that ran parallel to the river. At the southern end of the Everglades, the women would have to cross over that body of water where it was most shallow to reach a small town just at the edge of the swamps. Sullivan would make sure they never reached their destination.

Even if the guide was wrong, he had an infrared tracker that Angstrom had given him. It detected heat signatures and although there were literally hundreds of them in the swamps, human beings gave off their own unique signal. Sullivan didn't know where the senator had obtained such a piece of sophisticated equipment, but so far it showed Billy to be right on the money as to where the women were.

Two canoes followed each other closely down the narrow band of muddy water and drifted easily as though this were just a carefree summer day. He closed his eyes and listened to the frogs that croaked along the banks. He absorbed the feel of the sunshine against his face. It reminded him of fishing as a boy, and for a moment he was that child again who tortured small animals out of the sight of his father. A sudden shout from up ahead caught his attention and as he opened his eyes, the illusion shattered.

"Look out!" one of the men Sullivan didn't know shouted and pointed at the murky water. "There it is."

Sullivan was in the second canoe with Billy and another man and peered ahead to see a scaly body thrash through the water. The alligator was at least twelve feet long, its mouth open to display wickedly sharp teeth that gleamed in the sunlight. The skinny man that had shouted the warning stood up in his canoe, gibbered in fear, and moved in agitation as he reached for a shotgun. The small craft wobbled dangerously under his weight and dipped from side to side treacherously close to the swirling river.

"Sit down, idiot," Sullivan shouted. "You're going to tip over."

Suddenly, that's exactly what happened. The canoe flipped over completely and threw the three men into the fast-moving river. They disappeared from view before bobbing back into

sight. The river wasn't deep and two of the men swam-ran toward their companions in the other boat.

Skinny, as Sullivan now thought of him, stood in stunned horror as he pointed the shotgun toward the animal, but didn't try to fire. Sullivan pulled up his own shotgun and sighted down the barrel. He aimed at the swamp creature and pulled the trigger. He could easily see that he had hit the target, but the alligator didn't appear affected in the least. It lunged out of the water and snapped Skinny between its powerful jaws. One final scream of fear was the last anyone saw of the unfortunate man as the gator pulled him under the water.

Sullivan growled angrily at the man's stupidity, but grasped onto one of the other men's shirt to help haul him into the canoe. The other survivor climbed into the vessel by himself.

With the canoe overloaded by five men, Sullivan realized they would have to waste time to salvage the other one. They would also have to make time for the men to change into dry clothes. Still, it wouldn't matter. The women would not escape on foot.

Regardless of this latest setback, Sullivan felt confident that they were gaining on their quarry. His heat seeker detected the stronger signatures of the women as they drew closer and he breathed a sigh of anticipation that was almost sexual as the canoe gently rounded the curve in the riverbed. Then he heard Billy mutter an oath and he glanced ahead to see what the man was upset about. A huge tree had fallen across the waterway and successfully precluded them from continuing in the previous fashion, at least not without a bit of work.

"It doesn't matter," he grated with a husky, seldom-used voice. "We knew we'd have to go to ground sooner or later. Look up ahead. The waterway is getting too narrow to navigate by boat. This is as good a place as any and I have a feeling we're getting very close anyway."

When the two boats drew up to the riverbank, a new problem developed.

"I'm not going in there," Billy declared succinctly. "This area is very dangerous. Snakes in there that can eat a man whole. No good." He spit on the ground to emphasize his point. The Seminole folded his arms and stared stubbornly into Sullivan's gaze.

Sullivan couldn't have cared less. They weren't ten minutes behind their prey and he was tired of the constant complaining.

"Are you sure?" His eyes narrowed dangerously.

Billy swallowed hard, but nodded his head in obstinate affirmation. They were about to enter the thickest point in the Everglades. Alligators and snakes abounded in these woods and wouldn't hesitate for a moment before they made a meal of an unwitting man. Added to the fact that they weren't paying him for this job and that made for one very headstrong guide.

“Fine, have it your way.” Without hesitation, Sullivan reached under his heavy jacket and behind his back. He pulled out a Colt .45 and shot Billy once between the eyes then watched calmly as the body slumped back in the canoe.

“Bring the equipment.” He stepped off the canoe into the black gumbo mud of the Florida Everglades.

Hastily, the men shared a nervous look before grabbing the backpacks from the bottom and followed quickly. When they had gone only ten feet from the water, another mishap befell the rapidly diminishing band of cutthroats. One of the men snagged his foot on the trip wire.

As his ankle caught on the wire, the man looked up in sharp fear. A heavy limb swung toward him, released from where the strand had held it confined. Razor sharp branches tore into his midsection and slammed him back against another tree trunk, causing the wooden spikes to drive even deeper. He never had time to scream.

Sullivan growled into the humid air like an animal in a rage. He cared nothing for taking these men’s lives himself, but it infuriated him that a useless actress and her pilot would do it before him. He would make them pay dearly for this.

THE SOUND OF gunfire caused Sidney and Ronan to jerk in surprise. They cast fearful looks downriver and both knew they were quickly running out of time. Soon they would have to give up setting their booby traps and try to beat a hasty retreat.

“Let’s go,” Sidney urged, grabbing her briefcase and the saddlebags before she walked into the woods.

“Did you notice the waterway is starting to narrow? It looks like they won’t be aboard the canoes for much longer.”

“Then let’s get moving while we can.”

Sidney didn’t hesitate to lead the way into the swamps, amused when Ronan cut protectively in front of her. Aware of the way her companion kept frowning and checking the scanner’s readout, Sidney felt like the noose was slowly tightening around them.

“There are only four of them left,” Ronan reported, walking ahead through the swamp. “At least the odds are getting better.” “I guess they’re starting to turn on each other, huh?” “Maybe, but there are still enough of them to have me worried. I suggest we hurry.”

Hours later, night started to fall and Sidney started to stumble every other step. She was falling behind in the lengthening shadows and losing sight of Ronan. Maybe Ronan was

distracted by ideas about getting out of the swamps and how to proceed once they were, but Sidney realized she couldn't continue this way.

“Ronan, please... I need to stop.”

Ronan stopped immediately and turned toward her with a contrite expression. Even in the shadows, Sidney could see that she could also do with a break.

“I'm sorry, I could kick myself. Here I've tried to do everything I can to save you and I'm rushing you into a dangerous marsh in the darkness.” Ronan walked back to Sidney, gently took her by the shoulders, and guided her to a fallen log. “I think I'm just so focused on getting out of here that I didn't realize how late it was getting.”

“I just wish I had your stamina,” Sidney panted before she poked Ronan in the stomach with a cold, dirty finger.

Ronan pulled the analyzer out of a pocket and took a quick reading to check on their adversaries' progress. Sidney felt a little irritated that Ronan kept scanning the area, but understood how important it was to make sure they could keep moving safely.

After a few moments, Sidney prompted impatiently, “Well?”

“I'm only reading three people now and they aren't moving, approximately two miles from our current location.”

Sidney mopped her sweaty brow with the back of a grimy hand. “It sounds like we've gained some space. Maybe luck is on our side and the Everglades have proven too dangerous for our enemies.”

Ronan conceded the point with a slight nod. “In any case, I would hazard a guess they'll have to stop for the night. I think it's a good idea for us do the same. We're both tired and it's too dangerous to travel any farther. I'll get a fire going. I'm not sure there are any predators around here, but I'd rather be safe than sorry.”

“Sounds marvelous. My feet are killing me and I could eat a horse.”

“Why don't you rest while I make a fire and start dinner?”

Sidney acquiesced, but wasn't capable of just watching while Ronan did all the work. She helped gather wood for the fire and then pulled a couple of blankets from one of the saddlebags. Sidney folded the blankets and made a simple sleeping pad fairly close to the fire ring that Ronan constructed.

The blankets Sidney used weren't thick and wouldn't be comfortable, but at least it was some protection from the cold, damp ground. Their combined body heat would make it more bearable. Sidney kept track of Ronan from the corner of her eye and ignored the shiver of arousal. She

couldn't help notice the smooth way she moved in these primitive surroundings. Sidney wanted to concentrate on survival, to shut out everything else and focus on what was most important but even in these circumstances, it was getting harder and harder to control her rampaging hormones.

Their quick supper was very quiet, both women too exhausted and lost in their own thoughts to talk much. As soon as it was finished, they lay down side by side to attempt to sleep. Sidney was apprehensive about sleeping against Ronan again, her emotions burning hot inside her. She was sure she wouldn't be able to sleep this time, but exhaustion won out and she was unconscious almost instantly. Images of passion-filled blue eyes and sweat-slick skin filled her dreams.

The next morning Sidney had difficulty moving. She grunted once aloud and winced as she tried to move off the sleeping pad. Ronan heard the stifled groan and Sidney could have sworn she saw a flash of irritation. The expression vanished as quickly as it appeared and Ronan moved toward her. No question Ronan was in good shape, but Sidney thought even she was starting to feel the toll of all their exertion. Her body had to be exhausted and reawakening in the swamps would do little to improve her temper. Ronan stopped briefly at the saddlebags and rummaged through their supplies. She found whatever she was looking for and walked over to where Sidney still sat stiffly by the fire.

"How do you feel?" Ronan asked, squatting down next to her.

Sidney snorted. "Like I've been hit by a bus. How do you expect me to feel? On top of that I hate to camp. Bugs, dirt in my coffee..." She looked up at Ronan and quickly glanced away again, her cheeks taking on a reddish hue.

Ronan held up an object that looked like an upside down inhaler. "Well, this should take the edge off."

She started to press the medicinal spray injector against her neck, but Sidney blocked her with a swift forearm. "What is it?"

"Don't worry. It is just a mild analgesic, but it'll make you feel better."

Sidney was reluctant, but she hurt just enough to try it. "Okay."

She waited stiffly as Ronan pressed the injector against her neck. The tool hissed slightly as Ronan administered the medication, but Sidney didn't feel any pain. Almost immediately, her muscles relaxed as the tension and stiffness drained away.

"Whoever your friend was, he should have been nominated for sainthood."

Ronan merely quirked her brow and smiled at Sidney's delight. She gave herself a dose in the neck and then started to make breakfast.

“Sorry,” Ronan apologized in advance. “Only dry rations and water for breakfast. We have to get moving.”

“Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a huge cup of steaming black coffee right now. How much longer do you think?”

“We covered quite a bit of ground yesterday, more than I thought we would. With a little luck we should reach the edges of the swamps by late afternoon.”

“Amazing what you can accomplish with the hounds of hell chasing you,” Sidney retorted, delighted that they wouldn’t be sleeping on the ground again tonight.

“You can say that again.”

Chapter Sixteen

SULLIVAN WATCHED SANTOS and Harper. He had only learned their names from watching them interact. Currently they led the way on the expedition along the route Sullivan had outlined. They had begun to squabble constantly, but instead of separating, they continued to walk together and argue. He began to think they enjoyed the bickering as something to occupy their time, but they were starting to get really annoying. If this continued, they’d become an impediment to the mission. When they finally moved in for the kill, Sullivan would have to ensure their quiet.

“Don’t you wish,” Santos said angrily in response to something his companion said. The slightly overweight, balding man turned around and continued to walk backward so he could fight with Harper face to face. “She only went out with you because I lied and told her you were rich.”

Harper rolled his eyes. “Well, even if that is true it’s not the reason she stayed with me. Face it, she has more sense than you give her credit for. Not to mention that she is much better looking than her little brother.”

Sullivan thought they must know each other well.

That was a serious mistake. These two were so familiar with each other that they’d fallen into an old squabble and forgotten about the hazards that surrounded them in this bog. It was just a prime example of why Sullivan never worked with people he knew. They were a distraction.

He saw it a moment before it happened and smiled in dark humor as the scene unfolded. Sullivan could have warned Santos, but then he wouldn't be free of this incessant chatter and it would teach Harper a valuable lesson: don't take the jungle for granted.

Santos walked two more steps before he realized that the ground underneath him was more spongy than usual. He frowned and stopped in his tracks, then stared down in stunned disbelief as he sank quickly to his knees in quicksand. His friend instinctively rushed to his aid as Santos struggled to free himself. Harper threw off his pack to allow more freedom to use his arms. He reached out to the other man, confident that he could pull him free.

“Grab my hand.”

Sullivan saw the opportunity to get rid of both of them and took it without a second thought. He caught Harper off guard with the boot on his rear end as he kicked him into the center of the sinkhole. Both men screamed and clawed for a way out while Sullivan watched them with a sinister smile on his face until they disappeared from view.

SIDNEY TRAILED RONAN by about ten feet. This part of the jungle was particularly heavy. Vines hung from the trees and overgrown brush made it difficult for them to walk. Tree trunks were closer together than before and blocked out most of the sun, casting ominous shadows that seemed to dance and mock the women's flight. All Sidney could do was concentrate on picking her way carefully behind Ronan. When she did have a few spare moments to relax on one of their infrequent breaks, thoughts of her companion swam in her head.

Ronan had said she had funded the professor's research. Sidney felt that the by-products of that research were the vital key in unlocking the mystery that surrounded Ronan. She had no reason to doubt Ronan's character. There was an air of honesty and innocence about her that Sidney didn't think anyone capable of faking. She was arrogant, insolent, and intelligent.

And absolutely gorgeous.

She was sure it was these other qualities more than her stunning beauty that drew Sidney irresistibly against her will. She'd never once heard Ronan talk about where she was from, except indirectly. Whenever the subject came up, she evaded the question or changed the subject. Moreover, she knew things, Sidney realized with a frown. Things a person could only know if...

Eyes going wide in shock, Sidney came to a standstill as she watched Ronan's retreating back. Suddenly things seemed to click into place. How and when Ronan would know what was going to happen to her, the extremely sophisticated motorcycle, and all of that futuristic equipment. The key word was futuristic.

Her heart pounded and her mouth was suddenly dry. She wondered if it could be true. Could this woman really be from the future? Sidney felt disoriented at the prospect, caught in the plot to one of her movies. She grasped her previously injured wrist and remembered how easily Ronan had healed her. Though far-fetched, it was a distinct possibility.

Sidney refocused on the present and could barely see Ronan in the gloom. Since she had the analyzer, it was a very real possibility that Sidney might get turned around in the jungle if she lost sight of her. She refocused her mind as she rushed to catch up, determined to pursue the time travel subject further when she had time. Only a few feet behind now, Sidney glanced ahead and saw another looping vine. This one was substantially thicker than the others and for some reason garnered her interest. She trailed the satiny black length of it with her eyes and found it terminated in a bobbing and weaving, hissing, diamond-shaped head. Ronan was about to walk right into a twelve-foot-long python.

“Look out!”

Sidney dropped her briefcase to leap toward Ronan. She wasn't sure what she had planned to do by racing toward her but a second later, everything spun out of control. The scene seemed to play out in slow motion as Sidney scrambled forward. She watched Ronan draw the pistol from her belt with lightning quick reflexes and cut the serpent in two.

Perhaps her momentum prevented her from being able to stop, or maybe it was just the unconscious desire to instigate an encounter. Whatever the reason Sidney was unable to cease her headlong rush and plowed right into Ronan. Both of them crashed heavily to the ground and in the tangle of arms and legs, Sidney suddenly found herself lying on top of the other woman. Soft breasts pressed against her chest and she suddenly had a great deal of trouble drawing breath.

“S...sorry,” she mumbled absently, caught in the cobalt web of desire she found reflected back at her.

For an unknown amount of time, she stared into the ice blue gaze before her eyes shifted lower and focused on the full lips. Ronan's mouth was open, her breath panting. She was so close Sidney could see the tiny wrinkles on the lips and wondered if they were still as soft as they looked. She saw her tongue move, the words forced out.

“Kiss me,” Ronan said in a breathless whisper.

The words ignited a fire in her core that Sidney had long since thought extinguished. With a groan of excitement that overwhelmed her, she lowered her head and captured the lush softness with her own. Heat flashed through her brain, exploding simultaneously in the center of her being. Lips explored gently at first and charted the tender flesh. Then Ronan's lips parted in a gasp and their tongues began to entwine in earnest as they absorbed, immersed in, and devoured each other.

Unconsciously she pressed closer to the strong body, as she tried to absorb every sensation that seared through her. Her mouth was insistent, almost bruising the soft flesh of Ronan's mouth as she tried to consume her. No thoughts remained, only this hungry excitement that rendered her breathless and caused her to moan into the mouth against her own. The satiny softness of Ronan's lips slid over her own provocatively and Sidney lost herself in the sensation. The outside world ceased to exist as Sidney thought of nothing, striving only to drown in the sweetness she tasted.

The hardness of the ground finally ended the moment. Branches and various objects dug into their overheated bodies, dampening the moment with the need for movement. Sidney drew away to see Ronan, eyes closed and mouth swollen with the strength of their passion, her lips still parted as she struggled to calm her breathing. Sidney's hands were on Ronan's chest and she was mortified to find that she had undone several shirt buttons in her desire.

Suddenly she felt extremely embarrassed by the wantonness of her kiss and lack of control. While it was true that Ronan had asked her to kiss her, the strength of Sidney's desire for another woman caught her off guard.

"I..." she managed, but then realized there was nothing she could say. She sighed, closed her eyes, and then reluctantly climbed off Ronan.

Oh God, what have I done?

She walked slowly back to pick up her briefcase. Her face flamed and Sidney stood with her arms folded as she stared down at the battered brown case. She started in surprise when long arms slid around her waist from behind and pulled back to rest against Ronan's strong frame.

"It's all right," Ronan reassured her with a gentle kiss against her temple. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Sidney pulled away from the comfort she had found in the embrace. Her feelings of vulnerability caused her to lash out. "No, it is not all right. I am not accustomed to behaving in such a manner. And certainly not with an employee."

Ronan's head snapped back at the comment and she stared at Sidney in wounded anger.

"Is that all I am to you, an employee?"

"What else would you be?" Sidney asked as she tried to deny her feelings. She knew she was hurting Ronan but was unable to stop. "You were hired as my pilot."

Ronan swallowed and responded softly. "I would have thought things had changed between us and that you would see me as a woman, not as a hired hand."

Sidney looked at her with as little sympathy as she could manage and said, "I'm sorry. I don't work that way."

“I see.” Ronan uttered the words as calmly as possible, but her face hardened. Her eyes landed on the battered briefcase that she’d been lugging through the swamps the past few days.

“Then perhaps we should focus on something you can understand, like saving your life.”

“What are you doing? That’s mine.”

Ronan grabbed the briefcase and squatted on the ground to open it. “You don’t need it. It’s slowing you down.” Ronan tossed various objects into different piles on the dirt, heedless of the mess she was making.

“But the supplies...” It was all she could think of to stop Ronan.

“What we have left will fit in the saddlebags.”

Ronan discarded anything extraneous and shoved the few necessary supplies into her own bags. When she reached the bottom, she grabbed the disc and shoved it into her shirt pocket before she picked up Sidney’s photograph of her grandparents. She looked up at that moment and their eyes met. Sidney watched Ronan through narrowed eyes. Her chest heaved in anger and hurt as she waited to see what Ronan would do next.

“Didn’t you just say that you would never hurt me?”

Ronan looked away, her eyes drifting to the ground. Sidney watched her jaw clench for a moment and then Ronan wordlessly placed Sidney’s photo into the pack before she picked up the discarded items and shoved them back into the leather case.

“We’ll have to find somewhere to hide this,” she said sullenly. “We’ll try to come back for it later.”

A loud boom sounded from somewhere close behind them in the jungle and bark exploded from the tree beside Ronan.

“No time.” Sidney grabbed Ronan by the arm and urged her to run, forgetting about what had just happened between them.

Ronan dropped the briefcase and ran with Sidney hot on her heels. They sprinted through the woods and jumped over fallen limbs and scrub as they evaded their pursuers. Low-hanging branches smacked wetly against their sweaty faces and adrenaline pumped through their systems.

Sidney was surprised to find that she suddenly didn’t feel so tired and pulled slightly ahead of Ronan.

“Wait,” Ronan called from behind and Sidney felt her grab the back of her shirt before hauling her to the left of the trail. “This way.”

Sidney realized belatedly that she had almost rushed straight into a two-foot high fire ant bed. If she'd kept going, she would have smacked right into it. A small bed lying on the ground wouldn't have caused much trouble, but tackling one of these mounds could mean a slow, painful death. She quickly caught on to what Ronan had in mind. If they could circle back in front of it and stay just in sight of their enemy, they might be able to lure their pursuer into the mound.

He'd fired the previous shot at them from too far away to be effective, and with any luck, he would still be too far away to become suspicious of them running in a wide circle.

When they got to the far side of the mound, Ronan pulled Sidney back on track directly in front of their attacker. If time weren't a primary concern, Sidney might have felt a little irritated at Ronan yanking her back and forth. With the foliage in the way, Sidney could just barely see bits and pieces of the attacker's clothing.

A few moments later, they heard a startled yelp and the sound of a dull thud as the man made the acquaintance of the deadly mound.

Sidney looked at Ronan and grinned. "Good thinking." She rested her hands on her hips and took several deep breaths to catch her wind.

Ronan glowed at the praise. "Thank you, but he may have only struck the outer rim and might be okay. If he is, he'll be coming after us soon enough. I think we should get out of here before that happens."

A gentle but insistent hand on her shoulder prevented Ronan from walking away. "Wait just a moment. I'm sorry...about earlier. You are more than an employee to me. It's been a long time since I was attracted to someone, and I'm not sure how to deal with all this."

Ronan smiled softly. "I'm sorry, too, and I'm sorry for throwing away your briefcase. It was childish of me. We're still close enough if you want to go back for it."

"No, you were right. It was slowing me down. I'm just glad you didn't throw away my picture."

"I couldn't bring myself to hurt you in that way. You must have been very close," Ronan finished.

"We were. I miss them very much."

Ronan held out a hand. "Friends again?"

Sidney took the hand with a smile and stared intently into the blue eyes. "That much, I can promise you."

Ronan flushed a little and changed the topic. “Then let’s put some distance between us and our uninvited guest.”

As they walked into the woods Sidney felt compelled to ask, “Ronan?”

“Hmm?”

“You are eventually going to tell me everything. Right?”

“You have my word.”

Chapter Seventeen

THE FIRST INDICATION they were approaching civilization were the sounds of intermittent traffic on a nearby roadway. Then they had to wade across the river where it intersected their path. Fortunately, the waterway narrowed and became much shallower at this point and reached only to mid-shin. Sidney grimaced in discomfort as her sneakers squished when they reached dry ground on the other side.

“Not long now,” Ronan assured her with a smile.

She proved to be right when ten minutes later they abruptly came to the edge of the blacktop. Ronan struck off as though she knew where she was going and Sidney happily assumed that she did since she quickly checked the analyzer before she put it in the pack. Sidney hoped they wouldn’t need it again anytime soon. Eventually they came to the outskirts of a small town, sparsely decorated with few businesses and even fewer people. To Sidney it didn’t seem very promising. She glanced down and Ronan caught the frown of frustration.

“Don’t worry. We haven’t reached the main business area, yet. We’re in Homestead, Florida which was actually a very well-known tourist area during the 21st century.”

Ronan took a few more steps before she froze, apparently realizing what she’d just said. After a brief hesitation, she continued walking as though nothing was out of the ordinary, leaving Sidney no choice but to jog to catch up.

She flushed hard a moment later when Sidney asked, “So, what’s it like on your planet?”

The abashed look on Ronan's face was priceless and Sidney could see the wheels spinning as she desperately sought an explanation for her slip. Mentally, Sidney rubbed her hands together in glee. *Gotcha, I knew you were from the future.*

Then she became serious as the implications hit her. How bad was their future if Ronan had felt compelled to give up everything to come back and correct it? How could she go back and correct it? She must have felt that things were dire enough to take matters into her own hands, but her focus thus far had appeared to center around Sidney.

Sidney wondered what she had to do with how the world turned out. She wasn't a politician, much less an activist. If all of this had something to do with her, wouldn't Ronan have already told her what it was? Maybe Ronan didn't think Sidney could handle it. That means things were even worse than they seemed.

Ronan didn't reply and Sidney decided she was too exhausted to pursue the topic anyway. Right now, they both needed to eat, bathe, and rest.

The hotel wasn't exactly five-star, but Sidney thought they were in heaven as they stepped through the double doors. The comfortably cool lobby had nothing that reminded her of the muck or grime they'd been slogging through the last two days. However, from the look on the clerk's face when they walked up to the hotel registry, she was sure he wouldn't allow them to stay. She had no doubt that they looked like a couple of street urchins in their dirty, torn clothing, with their hair plastered to their heads and grime liberally coating every inch of their visible, sunburned flesh.

"May I help you?" he asked with a sneer as he took in the grubby appearance of the women that stood before him.

His thinly veiled disgust quickly turned to studied politeness when Ronan pulled a platinum MasterCard from her wallet and plunked it down on the counter. When she applied a generous tip at the end of the transaction, he didn't even bother to ask if they had luggage, instead quickly signaling for a bellhop to show them to their room.

As soon as the door to the room clicked closed, Sidney burst out heartily, "Thank God. All I can think about is a shower and some sleep."

"Just let me wash my face and hands and the bathroom's all yours."

By the tone, Sidney just knew she was up to something and couldn't help but wonder what it was. "You planning something?"

"I'm just going to arrange for some transportation and some fresh clothing. Unless you prefer what you have on?"

The question was lightly teasing, causing Sidney to look down at her torn and filthy clothes. "I guess you have a point."

Her smile faded as worry for Ronan rose in her thoughts. She stepped closer and reached out a hand to cup her jaw, her thumb tracing the dimpled chin. "Please be careful. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you."

Ronan hesitated for a fraction of a second, as though there was something she wanted to say, before she abruptly retreated to the bathroom. Sidney saw the look of confusion on her face and berated herself. *Great*, she thought as the bathroom door closed. *We're running for our lives and I'm flirting with her. She probably thinks my behavior is completely inappropriate.*

She groaned as she sat on the edge of the bed and bent over to struggle with her knotted and wet shoelaces. Finally, she won the battle and removed her sneakers and socks. Sidney closed her eyes in bliss and wriggled her shriveled toes while she savored the feel of cool air on her overtired extremities. The flush of the toilet and the sound of running water told her Ronan had almost finished in the bathroom.

Soon, Ronan emerged looking much better than she had when she'd gone into the small room. She still smelled of the swamps, but Sidney realized there was nothing she could do about her clothes for the moment. At least she looked refreshed with her face and hands clean. With any luck, anyone Ronan interacted with would simply think she'd been hard at work that day.

"I'll try not to take too long. Please sleep if you can, but don't call for room service or use the telephone. More pursuers could arrive and we don't want to give them any advantage."

"Yes, ma'am," Sidney shot back, angered by the coolness she felt suddenly emanating from Ronan.

A moment ago, everything had seemed fine and now she spoke to Sidney as if she was a disobedient child. She should know better than to become interested in anyone. Experiencing this sharp stab of pain more than once in a lifetime should have been enough for the lesson to sink in. All they were ever interested in were games. She was very disappointed to find that Ronan wasn't so different after all.

"Any other orders you'd like to give before you just leave me here? Or maybe you'd like to show me another snazzy gadget your friend invented?"

"Sidney, I'm not trying to give you orders." Ronan looked confused by the sudden attack.

"No? That seems to be all you have done in the last two days."

"You know I'm trying to save your life."

"So you say. You make up some half-baked story about Roger trying to do away with me and use that man who broke into my home as sole proof."

"What about the man that was shooting at us and the other four men in the woods?"

“They were probably just hunters. That other guy probably didn’t see us clearly in the swamps and thought he was shooting at game. Now we’ve left him stranded and being eaten on a fire ant nest in the swamps. We’ll end up tried for murder,” she exclaimed being deliberately melodramatic.

“You don’t really believe that.”

Sidney couldn’t respond, already embarrassed by her outburst. Pride was one of her biggest shortcomings and made it hard for her to take the words back when she thought she was getting the cold shoulder.

“Please Sidney, do you really believe that?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” she admitted finally, and allowed some of the fear she had been feeling to show in her eyes. “You keep asking me to trust you, but you haven’t really told me anything. Roger and I were married for a long time and even though it wasn’t the best relationship, I have a hard time believing he would try to kill me.”

Sidney sat up on the bed and looked deeply into Ronan’s eyes. “Give me something. Even if you can’t tell me everything, just answer this. Where did all your gadgets come from?”

Ronan answered carefully. “I told you a friend of mine invented them.”

“And I assume this scientist friend of yours was also from the future?”

Startled by that, Ronan sputtered, “H...how did you...?”

Sidney smiled at the reaction. Her voice gentled unconsciously as she answered in a way that she hoped wouldn’t frighten her companion. “You made a comment about Homestead, Florida being a tourist attraction in the 21st century.”

Ronan was clearly flustered. “I just meant...”

Sidney stood and placed a finger against the full lips to halt the tirade before it could begin. “Shh,” she said gently. “It’s all right.”

Ronan’s breath came quicker as Sidney’s eyes fastened to her mouth. A slender finger stroked the line of the top lip and followed it around to trace the bow of the fuller lower one. Her tongue stroked her lower lip as she stared, mesmerizing Ronan with the action. They leaned slowly toward each other, the distance closed until their breaths ghosted gently over each other. The words Ronan had spoken in the swamps, “Kiss me,” played over again in Sidney’s mind and her stomach clinched in anticipation of tasting her again.

“I can’t...think...when you’re this close to me,” Ronan said softly.

Sidney stared into the blue eyes and admitted to herself that she wanted this to happen, had wanted it to happen almost from the moment she had met the dynamic woman. The only thing holding her back was that she didn't really know how Ronan felt. She hadn't even indicated an attraction for other women in general and the previous kisses were probably a result of all the recent emotional stress.

Sidney swallowed the trepidation and took a chance. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No, just unexpected."

"So...are you going to kiss me, or not," Sidney prompted with a small, but challenging grin.

A blonde eyebrow arched at the question and Ronan took a deep breath. She gently leaned closer until their cheeks rested gently together and she could whisper directly into Sidney's ear.

"Hold on to that thought and when I get back I'll be glad to take you up on it." Ronan's eyes fluttered gently closed as she sucked the tender lobe.

Sidney almost swooned at the feel of the warm, wet tongue that stroked her skin. She grabbed onto Ronan's shoulders tightly and held her close for a few more precious moments.

It was over much too quickly and Ronan drew slowly away. "I'll be back as fast as possible. Please sleep if you can."

Sidney nodded slowly, the words no longer sounded like a demand but a gentle plea from someone she had begun to care about more than she wanted to admit. "All right."

Chapter Eighteen

RELUCTANTLY, RONAN TURNED and walked to the door before she could change her mind, pull Sidney to her, and make passionate love to her for the rest of the night. Unable to resist completely, she cast one last look at her before she pulled the door gently closed. A few hours later, Ronan completed her tasks and was on her way back to the hotel. She was completely exhausted and her eyes burned, but she felt she had everything they would need to complete their journey.

A quick stop at a bank had been on her list of things to do first. She walked down the street and entered a local branch of one where she'd previously deposited funds. People that came into

and went out of the bank looked at her curiously. Ronan knew she appeared very contained and self-assured, but the state of her clothes didn't match the picture, and the smell coming off her body was a little disgusting.

She ignored them all and entered the bank as if she owned the place to take out a large withdrawal. When Sidney had suddenly taken off on her little excursion, she'd caught Ronan off guard. She had very little cash on her and was just lucky that she kept her wallet in her jacket pocket. At least she had identification. She didn't want to use credit cards since even in this period they would leave a trail that would be too easy to follow.

"Can I help you, miss?" a friendly teller asked. To her credit, she didn't seem to care what Ronan wore and was very eager to help.

"Yes." Ronan smiled at the woman who was really more of a girl. "I would like to withdraw twenty-thousand dollars from my account."

After she left the bank, her next stop had been to rent a car. Ronan was extremely careful about renting the nondescript white Buick with a credit card that identified her under a different name. She would have preferred to pay cash, but the agency required a credit card in case of damages. She was realistic enough to know that a card with a false name would do little good. Homestead, Florida wasn't very large and there would be few people renting cars. All their pursuers needed to do was check for any females that matched their description. They would be able to determine their destination and how much of a head start there was, which was precisely why Ronan lied.

She had given her destination as Macon, Georgia, which was completely in the opposite direction from her true destination...Marathon, Florida. When they arrived in Marathon, she would drop off the vehicle in the parking lot of the rental car agency before they continued on to the small island near No Name Key.

Anyone could run the plate to determine where the vehicle had originated from, but the false information would hopefully give the women the much-needed time to elude the hunters.

Then she stopped at the Goodwill and bought each of them some fresh clothes. Her previous research on Sidney came to her rescue as far as sizes. Ronan bought jeans, t-shirts, fresh underwear and socks. It was nothing fancy, but it was preferable to the dirty garments they had and it was easy to remain anonymous by shopping at the second hand store.

She quickly drove through the pickup lane of a fast food restaurant and heaved a sigh of exhaustion. Ruefully she acknowledged that she desperately needed sleep. She had been going almost nonstop for three days, staying awake to watch over Sidney while she slept and had barely managed to catch a few hours of rest a night. Finally, she pulled back into the parking lot and stopped the car directly in front of the main entrance. With her arms loaded with their supplies, she carefully walked to the doorway. Fortunately, a couple exiting the building held the door for her and she smiled her thanks.

The young brunette elbowed her boyfriend who openly drooled at the sight of the tall, curvaceous blonde. He rubbed his sore ribs and forced his eyes away to mutter an apology before he walked away. Ronan could only shake her head and smile. The attention she received didn't really bother her, she was used to it, but there was only one person whose opinion of her mattered. That woman was hopefully asleep in a room on the third floor.

She had to put the bags down on the floor outside the room before she could unlock the door. Then she opened it as quietly as possible, picked up the bags, and placed them just inside the room. The lights were off and she smiled when she heard Sidney's rhythmic breathing.

Ronan set the food on the small table before she went into the bathroom for her own shower. The warm water felt heavenly as it washed away days of filth. When she finally emerged, pink and clean from the shower, she felt almost human again.

She had little to change into and slipped into the new under things before she left the bathroom with the damp towel wrapped around her slender form. Even though Sidney was still fast asleep, Ronan somehow felt shy about walking around so scantily dressed.

There was only one queen-sized bed in the room and she was nervous about sharing it. In order to delay the inevitable, she picked up the phone and scheduled a wake-up call at the desk for two hours later. They needed more rest than that, but it was the most they could afford. The delay tactic took only a moment and then Ronan realized she was out of excuses. With a strange mix of excitement and trepidation, she eased back the covers and slid in beside the woman of her dreams, who as it turned out, was dressed in only a hotel towel.

Sidney seemed to sense the warmth of her body and turned toward her. She threw an arm over her and Ronan's heart raced at the contact. Even after Sidney had settled her head against her shoulder, she had difficulty breathing. The weight of Sidney's head was exquisite and something Ronan had never dreamed she would experience again once they left the swamps. With a happy smile, she drifted to sleep with Sidney in her arms.

AN ANNOYING RINGING sound slowly pervaded the depths of sleep. It grudgingly drew her up from the incredibly erotic dreams. With a frown of disappointment at being disturbed and a small groan of exhaustion, Sidney opened her eyes to a darkened hotel room. It took a moment to realize that the sound she heard was the telephone ringing.

Sidney glanced down, surprised to see that Ronan continued to sleep undisturbed by the call. The phone sat on the far side, leaving Sidney no choice but to lean over Ronan to reach for the handset. The warmth and scent of the clean form assaulted her senses and she almost didn't hear the automated wake up message before she placed it back into the cradle. She would never know if the closeness of her own body was what did the trick, but suddenly Ronan was awake and

staring up at her with a heavy, hooded expression. Her gaze smoldered as it riveted Sidney's attention.

Then they moved at the same time, surging against each other as mouths collided in a hungry kiss. Lips and tongues slipped and tasted. Sidney felt Ronan's almost-naked body crushed beneath her. Ronan held her head firmly with both hands wound into her hair.

It was the most amazing kiss Sidney had ever experienced. Her entire body came alive as electricity surged along her veins and fire ignited in her belly. Suddenly she found herself on her back with Ronan above her. Their mouths separated as Ronan planted searing kisses all over her face before trailing down Sidney's throat. Ronan nibbled and sucked the tender flesh she found there, driving Sidney crazy with the sensations.

Sidney moaned loudly, aroused to a fever pitch as she held Ronan tightly against her. Their lips met again as Ronan came back to taste her, seemingly unable to stop kissing her for very long. Eager hands explored Sidney's body from shoulder to hip, then slowly back again until Ronan finally cupped a small breast in her hand and the nipple hardened almost painfully.

Tearing her mouth away, Sidney could only gasp.

The audible expression had the opposite effect Sidney intended. Ronan's touch gentled, calming rather than inciting passion. After a few moments, she drew back, looked down into Sidney's eyes and smiled.

"Don't you want to?" Sidney suddenly felt embarrassed at her passion. Afraid that she had overstepped her bounds and mortified at the possibility, she turned her head and tried to pull away.

"Wait."

Ronan stopped her with a hand on the shoulder, but Sidney couldn't meet her eyes. Full lips grazed her cheek and she closed her eyes.

"Of course I want to. How could I not?"

"Then, why did you stop?"

"Believe me, Sidney, it's not because I don't want you. It's because I want you so badly that I know that if I let myself go, I'll never be able to stop."

Sidney looked up at Ronan through her lashes and asked the same question she had before. "Is that such a terrible thing?"

Ronan could only gape at her in bewilderment. "Making love to you could never be anything but wonderful. And when it does happen, I don't want to think about anything but you for days on end."

“Sweet talker.” Sidney grinned and suddenly felt a lot better.

“Yes, well...” Ronan mumbled and looked down at where their bodies were intimately pressed together. “I think that we’d better get some clothes on before I change my mind.”

Sidney flushed before Ronan rolled away. She kept her gaze on neutral objects with difficulty, afraid that if she looked before Ronan put clothes on that she wouldn’t be able to help herself.

Ronan walked over to the bags she had brought in earlier. “I bought some clean clothing.”

Sidney climbed out of bed and put on a robe that came with the room. Curious about everything Ronan had purchased she walked over beside her. That was when she saw a bucket of food. At the same time, the smell hit her so hard she salivated. Without thinking about anything else, she tore the cover off and dove into the unexpected treat. She groaned almost involuntarily, but was only aware of how erotic the sound was when Ronan turned to look at her devouring the drumstick. She mumbled around the food, “Finger lickin’ good.”

Ronan shook her head and laughed before she reached back into the bags.

The two dressed and ate quickly, before they decided to get moving as soon as possible. Sidney went to the restroom before they left and was thrilled to see a new toothbrush and toothpaste sitting on the sink. She tore the package open and happily scrubbed her teeth clean for the first time in three days. In the middle of brushing her teeth, she realized they’d been kissing passionately with morning breath and was flustered by the thought. Then she remembered that Ronan hadn’t seemed to mind and decided to forget it.

She was so thrilled at the clean clothes that she didn’t even question how Ronan knew her sizes or where they came from. Soon they were on the way with Sidney driving at Ronan’s direction. Ronan sat in the passenger seat and Sidney felt strangely protective when she suddenly yawned in exhaustion. She reached over and gently grasped Ronan’s hand where it lay in her lap.

“Why don’t you try and get some sleep.”

Ronan nodded once and held tighter to the smaller hand in her own before she said, “I will, but first I feel I owe you some answers. I think some of this will be hard to believe, but please trust me when I tell you that I would never lie to you. All I ask is that you hear me out.”

Ronan took a deep breath before she launched into her story without looking at Sidney. Sidney didn’t know if Ronan was deliberately procrastinating or if she didn’t know where to start. When she finally did begin to speak, Sidney was shocked by what she heard.

“I am from the year 2375.”

At that little tidbit of information, the Buick lurched slightly left and drifted over the bumps in the center of the road. Sidney quickly regained her composure, let go of Ronan’s hand and

pulled back into the proper lane, but didn't comment or voice her surprise. Since she already suspected time travel might somehow be involved, her surprise truly stemmed from how far in the future.

Ronan didn't remark on the reaction. She paused for a moment so Sidney could adjust before she went on. "I told you the truth when I said that I was a homicide detective. The last case I was involved in concerned a serial killer who copycatted a very famous murder. Yours."

Sidney couldn't prevent the swift intake of breath but Ronan continued without giving her a chance to speak. Sidney suspected that if Ronan didn't finish this story now, she never would. Glancing from the corner of her eye, she saw that Ronan's gaze was fixed on the darkened scenery visible through the passenger's window.

"After solving that case...I found myself obsessed with you. Your fire and compassion. I couldn't think of anything else. My commanding officer thought I was overworked and sent me home. But it didn't help. It only gave me more time to immerse myself in my obsession."

Her voice had started to tremble and Ronan took a steadying breath. "I funded many of Professor Horton's scientific endeavors: warp propulsion, analyzers, you get the idea. He contacted me while I was on leave saying he had something he wanted to show me. It was a time gate. It sounded fantastic and I was so excited at first. Then I realized the potential it had for good and evil."

"You were concerned it would be used for nefarious purposes and decided to prevent it," Sidney guessed.

Perhaps a little disconcerted by her response, Ronan nevertheless attempted to answer. "Partly. By preventing your death, I could prevent the rise of the Neue Konservative Regime, but my main concern was not the prevention of a corrupt government."

Sidney wished the answer was that simple. Preventing such a government's rise to power seemed like an extremely important issue. Hearing that Ronan's primary concern was her safety made Sidney feel a little guilty.

"I don't understand," Sidney interrupted. "Why was it so important to prevent my death? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you decided it could fit into your plans, but you could have accomplished your objective without that. Yet from everything you've said you went out of your way to find me, be hired by me, and protect me. That's more than just incidentally preventing my death."

"You are not incidental," Ronan burst out hotly and turned to look at Sidney.

Just as quickly, she looked away again. For a moment both were quiet as Ronan gathered her composure and Sidney sorted through what she said.

Finally, Ronan went on. "I fell in love with you across time...through space. Even though I had never met you, your death devastated me, left me feeling hollow and numb. I saw the gate as the means to prevent that tragedy. I planned very carefully for several months before I approached you. I knew you'd be attending the party that night and hoped to be able to talk to you. Unfortunately, there were too many people and I couldn't find a way to do so. Then, when you left, I saw the car follow you and I knew it was starting."

Ronan's voice fell to silence and Sidney struggled to put things into perspective.

She loves me.

Sidney didn't respond at first, but then she said, "Okay, I don't want to seem like I'm making light of your feelings for me and trust me, we're going to come back to that, but I think we need to save that for a time we can concentrate on it without any distractions. First, I need to ask you something else. You said Roger was in on this. How?"

If Ronan was disappointed that they didn't continue the discussion on a more personal level she hid it well. "Two years ago, from your point of view, individuals that wished to infiltrate this world's government approached him."

"You're not talking about aliens, are you?" she asked in amazement with just a hint of disbelief.

"We are talking about three hundred years in the future, but no. I'm a little confused about the intricacies of time travel, but sometime after I left through the gate, someone else used it. I think they came back to a point in time that actually caused the problems that I came back to correct."

"I know that I need to give you some documented evidence so you'll see this as something real versus science fiction, but bear with me. The information I am giving you will be important for you to understand where I am going."

Sidney nodded and agreed to keep quiet until she had all the facts.

"I looked at the disc we found inside your briefcase while you were asleep on the plane. I remembered to take it with us before I threw the case away in the swamps."

"Why didn't you tell me?" At her glance, Sidney looked back toward the road. "Sorry go ahead."

"One of the stops I made today was the local library. I found information that leads me to believe some of the more radical factions of my own government thought it would be a good idea to come back and set the world government on track for their own agendas. Maybe they thought our future economy would be in better condition if the Konservative party came to power sooner."

“You’re not sure?”

“At least you aren’t asking me if I’m crazy,” Ronan said. “I didn’t really have time to go over it fully. Some people came in and I didn’t want to take a chance. We’ll have to take a closer look later.”

“I believe you,” Sidney said simply. “Don’t get me wrong, time travel still sounds a little too far-fetched, but I’ve seen so much since you came into my life. It’s really the only explanation for everything.”

Ronan let out a relieved sigh and looked at Sidney. “Thank you.”

“The only question I have is if you think our current government is in on the plan with people from your time?”

Ronan shrugged. “I don’t think so. From what I gathered looking at the data, I think members of the Black Guard are replacing them. It’s doubtful government officials would go along with that kind of thing. Before you ask, The Black Guard is my government’s version of the secret police, the enforcers.”

“I see. So, Roger is in on all of this? Did he know these individuals were from another time when this started?”

“I seriously doubt it. I think he didn’t find out until it was too late to back out of their arrangement. When he did find out, he made the disc as a form of insurance. Somehow it ended up in your possession and whoever is running things came to see you as a threat.”

“But I never saw the information on that disc,” Sidney protested.

“I know, but apparently they couldn’t take the chance.”

“Why did they pick Roger?”

“His thirst for power made him the perfect one to assist them and when the offer was presented he jumped to get in on the ground floor. He didn’t realize that he was simply a pawn. The Guard had to begin slowly, so that if the public ever discovered what was happening it would be too late to resist.”

“Such a project couldn’t happen overnight. They’d have to be very careful.”

“True, it would take a long time before they’d be able to come to full power, but all they need is to start the ball rolling. After enough laws are passed, the eventual outcome would be predetermined.”

“So what do we do now?”

“I bought a little place near No Name Key. I think we should head out there and finish looking at the rest of the information on the disc. Depending on what we find, I was thinking you could use your contacts in Washington to let them know what’s happening. Once we reach Marathon, we’ll take a boat out to the island.”

Sidney looked at her quickly. “What do you know about my contacts?”

Ronan smiled and Sidney shifted her gaze back to the roadway. “I know that you’ve made friends with people in high places because of your marriage. You’ve interacted with very influential politicians at some of the more upscale parties and you’re not someone that’s easy to forget.”

“Thank you. I think. I still think that you’re wrong about Roger, though. Even if he made the disc that may be as far as it went for him. In fact, he might have uncovered all of this but didn’t know who to inform.”

Ronan didn’t respond directly. “Why don’t you pull over so we can switch drivers? Maybe you can try to sleep for a while. We’ll talk some more later.” Gently she reached over and squeezed Sidney’s hand before releasing her.

“No that’s all right. You go ahead. I’m afraid I have too much to think about right now to sleep.”

Ronan rested her head against the doorframe and settled in for a nap, trusting Sidney to get them to Marathon safely.

Chapter Nineteen

FOR A WHILE, Sidney listened to the gentle breathing of the woman beside her. She almost couldn’t believe the tenderness she felt for someone she’d only known for a few months. Everything Ronan did or said only added to these growing emotions. What was even more impressive was that stopping the infiltration of their world should be the most important thing on Ronan’s mind. The fact that it was something she considered a fringe benefit, and that saving Sidney was her main objective, left Sidney feeling humble. It was not a familiar sensation for an actress.

Ronan said she loved her. The thought of those words spoken warmed her through, but Sidney wasn’t sure how she felt in return. She knew she was attracted to Ronan and wanted to be

with her physically. Yet she was hesitant to make a similar declaration for fear that she was simply reacting to a fierce attraction that she hadn't experienced in many years, if ever. She glanced over in the darkness and watched the shadows play over Ronan's classic features. It was hard to deny the emotions that washed over her whenever she thought of her. Sidney considered the possibility that she really loved Ronan. If not, it was something very much like it.

Sidney slowed the car as she approached a red traffic light. She'd passed the sign welcoming her to Marathon five minutes ago and took the light as an indicator that she truly had reached their destination. She was aware when Ronan awakened slowly, undoubtedly alerted when the vehicle stopped. She looked up and glanced at the light before smiling at Sidney. The sun had just started to breach the horizon.

"Good morning," Ronan said in a voice husky from disuse. Sidney felt a shiver trail down her spine at the erotic images that voice brought to mind.

"Good morning, sleepy head. Welcome to Marathon. You have good timing. This was as far as I could go without more direction since I've never been this far down in the Keys before."

Ronan scrubbed the sleep from her face with both hands. "Wow, I can't believe I slept for so long."

The light turned green and she prompted Ronan with an arched brow.

"Oh, yeah, turn right at the next signal."

Sidney pulled slowly away from the light and followed Ronan's directions. The road narrowed as it approached the beach until it became little more than a trail. A rental car agency stood on the corner just before the sands began. Ronan suggested they leave the car in the parking lot. They'd walk the last few blocks to their destination.

While they gathered their meager belongings from the trunk Ronan said, "I have a boat docked at the marina."

"Do you think we have time for a bathroom break and some breakfast?"

"Of course, I'm sorry. Would you like to sleep a little before we go on? We could rent a hotel room?"

"I'm fine, darling. If we just take a small break, I think I'll make it the rest of the way just fine."

Sidney touched her upper arm, her fingers caressing the suppleness of the leather jacket Ronan wore. She was tired and didn't realize what she'd said until a few seconds later, but she didn't try to take the words back. Instead, she followed as Ronan led her toward a small café at the base of a pier. The short walk to the café was just what they needed to stretch their legs and shake off some of the fog caused by riding in the car for so long. The front of the restaurant was

weather-beaten, the paint faded from the salt air, and Sidney thought it was enchanting in an old-time kind of way.

Though sparsely populated in the early morning hours, that didn't prevent the few male patrons of The Oar from watching the women walk toward a table in the back. Sidney didn't miss the appreciative glances and couldn't prevent the smug smile on her face at the attention her girlfriend received.

Girlfriend. Where did that come from? Sidney found it a little amusing that she thought of Ronan that way, but decided just to enjoy spending time in her company.

They sat down at the small table. Sidney took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of salt and sea. It was like a breath of heaven that whetted her appetite for more than just food. She looked over to where Ronan sat across from her and felt the hormones surge through her veins.

Ronan looked up unexpectedly and caught the predatory look in her eyes. She froze and Sidney found herself staring into deep blue depths. It was too easy for her to believe that they were a couple of lovers out for an early breakfast after an intense, passionate night of lovemaking. The sound of the bell over the door broke the spell as an elderly man entered and headed for a spot at the counter. At the same time, the waitress came over to take their order.

Sidney stammered for a moment before she ordered without a look at the menu. She hid a smile behind her hand when Ronan simply told the woman she would have the same. From the look on her face, she was having trouble concentrating and Sidney was happy to be the cause of the confusion. The sexual tension between them was almost palpable and she decided to let up on Ronan by redirecting her attention once the server walked away.

“So, what’s the plan now?”

Ronan shrugged. “I’m not really sure, other than taking the boat over to the island and taking a look at the rest of the information on the data file.”

“And after that?”

They stopped briefly while their coffees arrived and it gave Ronan a moment to think.

“I’ve been thinking about that. We need to devise a way to uncover who these people are. If they’re hiding in the wings, that’s going to be hard to do. I seriously doubt they’re out in the open. Without identification on these people, we won’t know where to start.”

Sidney frowned. “All right, I guess we wait and see. The presidential inauguration is coming up. I could talk to some people and see if I can arrange a couple of invitations. Surely your friend has some fancy gadget to detect when someone is out of phase or something.”

“Out of phase? I’m not quite sure it works that way, but it’s something to keep in mind. I do think it’s a good idea to get a look on the inside, though. With attendance by invitation only, we

could never get close enough without having Secret Service all over us if we tried to do this on our own. I'm afraid we'll have to trust someone."

Ronan leaned back as their server delivered a huge breakfast of bacon, scrambled eggs, home fries, toast, and the largest pot of coffee Sidney had ever seen. She tucked into her food with enthusiasm, sparing only a glance at her companion before she scooped up a forkful of eggs. After they finished, Sidney sat back to enjoy a steaming cup of coffee.

"Are you ready to go?" Ronan was looking around as if she expected assassins to drop out of the trees or materialize from around buildings.

Sidney signaled for the bill and asked for a Styrofoam cup. The young woman was kind enough to bring an extra large cup and Sidney grinned as she filled it to the rim with her favorite beverage. She followed Ronan to the counter, sipping while Ronan paid for their food.

She saw the humorous look cast her way as they left the restaurant. "What? I need caffeine."

Ronan just shook her head as she led the way back to the docks. The boat turned out to be a sporty, sixty horsepower Catalina with twin pilot chairs behind the windscreen. As a speedboat, it didn't boast a lower cabin, but the trip lasted only about twenty minutes. When they arrived, Sidney was surprised to see no other human beings. That's when Ronan dropped the next bombshell on her.

"I bought the island several six months ago."

"The whole thing? Why?" Sidney couldn't imagine how much that must have set Ronan back.

"I can afford it and it was important to know we had somewhere safe to go."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't want to be worried about attackers so I bought the island and installed a very sophisticated alarm system."

Six Dobermans met them at the pier and for a moment Sidney thought that was what Ronan was talking about, but Ronan corrected her. "Not just the dogs. I also have a security perimeter around the island that is active twenty-four hours a day. Then I hired two women to maintain the house and care for the animals. I contacted them from Homestead to let them know their contract ended this morning."

She held up the analyzer that Sidney had seen in the swamps and scanned the area. "There hasn't been a breach in the alarm and there aren't any other life forms present."

"Wait just a minute," Sidney said and held up a hand. "You mean to tell me you bought a whole island just to protect me?"

Ronan turned to Sidney and held her gaze. Then she walked over to stand as close to Sidney as she could amidst the swaying of the boat. "I love you. I think I've always loved you. I would do anything to keep you safe."

She leaned forward slowly, almost as if she was giving Sidney time to pull back, but Sidney had no intention of drawing away from this. She'd longed for the feel of Ronan's full lips since their last kiss. She slipped her arms around Ronan's narrow waist to anchor her in a world that seemed suddenly unstable. Ronan's body helped to steady her, her own arms encircling Sidney's shoulders as their lips slowly came together. There was no urgency in this embrace, simply a slow merging as each sought to convey without words what the other meant to them.

Only when Sidney's knees threatened to buckle did she draw away, reluctant to break the connection. Ronan resisted briefly and sucked Sidney's full lower lip into her mouth to nibble gently before she finally released her.

"Come on. If you purchased an entire island to protect me, I can't wait to see the house."

The house appeared to be an elegant yet simple cabana-style structure, but Sidney soon learned that appearances were deceptive. The interior was warm, decorated in earthy colors and highly polished hardwood floors gleamed under their feet. Sidney learned that while the top floor of the structure was standard and tastefully decorated, Ronan had made a few modifications.

Ronan had added a sublevel to the residence that held highly advanced computer banks and medical laboratory equipment. With a whistle of astonishment Sidney said, "Don't tell me you brought all of this stuff with you."

"No. Most of this equipment is quite...modern. I simply modified it to perform at peak efficiency."

Soon, Sidney had completed the tour. Her head whirled and she decided that she needed some sleep after all. Ronan led her back onto the main floor and to a bedroom decorated with warm cherry wood. A cool white blanket with tassels adorned the four-poster bed and Sidney longed to climb between the crisp sheets.

"The bathroom is just over there." Ronan pointed to a door in the corner of the room. "I've taken the liberty of stocking the closet and dresser with clothing for you."

"You've really gone out of your way for me."

"I've had plenty of time to prepare." With those parting words, Ronan left her to her own devices saying she would be in the lab.

Sidney stripped out of the clothes she'd worn for almost twenty-four hours and let them drop onto the floor before she turned the water on in the tub. She found several different types of bath oils on a shelf by the tub and added a generous portion to the water. After watching it foam for a

moment, she wandered back into the bedroom and waited for the tub to fill. She opened the drawers of the dresser and found stacks of underwear, socks, shirts, and nightwear.

She chose a garment of emerald green and held it up to find that it was a long, flowing nightgown of silk. The coolness and light weight of the garment appealed to her and she held the silk against her face for a moment.

A photograph on the dresser caught her attention. She recognized Ronan right away though she appeared a few years younger. She stood next to an older man who wore a spotted white lab-coat. Wisps of gray hair stuck up all around his head. He had an arm around Ronan's waist and was clearly quite fond of her.

Professor Horton.

She set the picture back down carefully and walked back into the bathroom. Sidney put the nightgown on a low table before she turned off the taps and sank blissfully into the water. With an ecstatic groan, she felt the knots in her shoulders begin to relax and savored the sensation. After relaxing for a few minutes, her mind started to wander and drifted to thoughts of a tall, cool blonde. Rather than push the erotic thoughts away, she welcomed them, embraced them.

Visions of Ronan kissing her in the hotel room resurfaced and she carried the experience further in her mind. Instead of stopping their embrace as she had in reality, Ronan loosened the towel Sidney wore, moving the flaps aside to explore the tender flesh below.

Sidney's breath came faster as her fingers trailed down her body, soft and slick from the mix of oil and water. Her fingers dipped lower and followed the phantom hands of her fantasy lover until they swirled over her swollen clitoris. She jerked as she made contact with hardened flesh, imagining that somehow Ronan's mouth traveled to that very place. When the first swipe of Ronan's phantom tongue stroked over her, Sidney jerked and convulsed in orgasm. She was barely able to bite back the cry of release for fear that Ronan would investigate the cause of her distress.

Finally, the sensations subsided and Sidney relaxed back into the bath, feeling completely lethargic in the aftermath. It was quite some time before she could force her relaxed muscles to support her enough to climb out of the cooling water. After she dried off Sidney slipped on the nightgown, enjoying the feel of silk against her skin. She raised a brow at the rakish slit on one side of the gown that traveled to the top of her left thigh and wondered if Ronan had purchased the garment with an ulterior motive.

Warm, relaxed, and feeling loved, Sidney pulled back the covers and climbed between the sheets. She was asleep as soon as her eyes closed.

AS SOON AS she left Sidney in her bedroom, Ronan went down to the basement where she'd set up her most advanced computer. Sidney would probably sleep for a while so she decided to see what was on the data disc. What she found left her astonished. Somehow, sometime, Professor Horton had designed a cloaking technology that allowed the user to take on the appearance of anyone they chose.

The image of how Boris Kinsky's face contorted in rage when he had pulled her back to Germany swirled through her head. His features had rippled slightly in his emotional state and she had passed it off as the by-product of gate travel. What if the man who fired on her wasn't really her old partner? Could it be possible someone had used his face to gather intelligence on her that they intended to report to the government? If so, it meant another trip to the future when all of this was over to ensure they identified all the players. For now, Ronan needed to figure out a way to expose these people.

Several questions occurred to her. Did Boris's face shimmer because he was upset or was it a glitch in the professor's technology? Was there a frequency that would jam a concealing cloak's transmitter? If she remembered her university advanced technologies class right, it was a distinct possibility.

The Guard had orders to infiltrate key positions within the American populace. For all she knew that included medical and scientific as well as government individuals. Who else would they go to if they needed help in this time frame? Even if that was true, the Black Guard was only the muscle behind whoever was really pulling the strings.

Since there was nothing she could do about that now, Ronan set to work on a jamming device. The good thing about going back into the past was that the technology lacked sophistication, making it easy to work on. Unfortunately, there wasn't any way to test the jammer except by using it face to face with one of the imposters, but she had to try.

Hours later, Ronan's eyes started to burn from strain but she felt as though she was close to a breakthrough. She was also starting to lose her concentration. All she could think about now was the woman asleep upstairs. She wondered what Sidney had chosen to sleep in from among the new things and how she looked in whatever it was. She hoped Sidney chose the elegant emerald green silk Ronan had deliberately placed on the top of the stack.

Wishful thinking.

Finally tired and bleary-eyed from staring into a high-powered microscope for so long, Ronan stood and stretched. Then she walked away from the desk. As she left the lab, she thought about Sidney. Maybe she should stop by and check on her... just to make sure she was all right.

The door to the bedroom stood half-open, leading Ronan to believe Sidney was perfectly comfortable with her and didn't feel the need for barriers. She eased gently through the open door and walked over to stare down at the beloved face. Sidney lay on her side with a hand cupped under her cheek, facing toward the door. She looked completely at peace in the green

nightgown and Ronan couldn't resist sitting on the edge of the bed to bask in her calming presence.

Ronan watched a small frown cross the elegant features as though Sidney somehow sensed her. Then dark eyes opened in confusion before settling on Ronan's stationary form. The expression on the beautiful face slowly changed from confusion to something more primal, heated. Blood surged through Ronan's veins like wildfire when Sidney suddenly extended a hand in invitation. Ronan looked up quickly to see if she was mistaken, but the hungry look in the eyes gazing back at her left no room for doubt. Almost shyly, she reached out with trembling fingers to take Sidney's smaller hand. Her grip was sure and steady as she drew Ronan forward to lie on top of her.

"Sidney..."

"Shh," she whispered. "Don't talk. Love me."

What little resistance Ronan might have had crumbled when Sidney raised up to capture her lips in a tender kiss. Small hands avidly caressed her back before sliding down to cup her buttocks and pull Ronan against her.

Ronan groaned aloud at the sensation that shot through her body. Tongues tangled and danced sweetly as Ronan eagerly explored the inside of Sidney's mouth, tracing the curve of bone and teeth before she moved away to taste the sensitive skin of her throat. The pulse under her lips pounded in excitement. Ronan sucked more avidly on the tender flesh and forced a moan from her lover's throat.

"I need to feel you," Sidney rasped thickly and smiled when Ronan quickly sat up and began removing her clothes.

Sidney sat up and started to remove the nightgown when Ronan stopped her. "No, let me."

Ronan rested her hand over her thundering heart and watched in fascination as Sidney's nipples hardened under the silken material. She slid her hand down, brushing over the taut body until she reached the hem and eased underneath to caress the soft skin of Sidney's inner thigh.

"Please, don't make me wait."

Ronan pushed the gown up until she could pull it over Sidney's head and then dropped it to the floor. Lying down by Sidney's side, Ronan kissed her again as she began to slowly explore her body. She could feel Sidney's urgency but she had waited far too long to rush this incredible moment.

Pulling away for only a moment, she whispered, "Relax, trust me. I'll take care of you."

While she spoke, she moved her fingers to the juncture between Sidney's legs, dipping into the heat and wetness she found there. Ronan caught the gasp of arousal in her own mouth and

slowly penetrated Sidney with one long, slender finger. Hips lifted off the mattress as she tried to encourage Ronan to move.

Sidney tore her mouth away. "Please...deeper."

Fingers dug painfully into Ronan's shoulders and she decided to have mercy on Sidney, to give her what she so desperately needed. She slid another finger inside and pushed gently, gratified when Sidney's pulsing body countered the rhythm and thrust strongly back against her. Their lovemaking became almost frenzied as each unleashed the passion they'd held back for days, causing them to thrash over the entire expanse of the bed in unguarded lust.

Unconsciously, Ronan began to rub herself against a muscled thigh, becoming more excited when Sidney raised her leg to press firmly against her heated center. Suddenly, Sidney arched and cried out as the orgasm seized her. The rapture on her face as she peaked along with the feel of warm flesh that skidded deliciously against her swollen clitoris triggered Ronan's own release. It carried her along on a tide of pleasure until she lay limp and unable to move.

Finally, she felt Sidney stir beneath her and reluctantly pulled her fingers free. She smiled when Sidney immediately snuggled against her with tears shining in her eyes and declared, "My God, that was incredible."

The musky scent of sex in the air and the sweet stickiness of their intimate embrace was enough to stir Ronan's passion once more.

"Does that mean you're finished?" she asked in a husky growl.

Startled, Sidney looked up at her. "Not a chance."

She eagerly grabbed hold of her partner as Ronan crushed her in a passionate embrace.

Chapter Twenty

OVER THE NEXT few weeks, Ronan and Sidney spent lots of time working on how to deploy the transmitter and even more time making love and getting to know each other. Ronan was happier than she could ever remember being. But Sidney had yet to say that she loved her in return. Ronan tried to ignore the ache it caused in her heart and concentrated on the bliss of having her here, alive and in her arms. In any century, it was wonderful.

“What are you thinking about?” Sidney walked out onto the back porch and paused to plant a kiss on her temple.

Even though the morning was brisk, it was quite clear and sunny. The beautiful day made them decide to enjoy a morning outdoors rather than cooped up inside. Sidney carried a large pot of coffee and two mugs that she placed on the patio table. Ronan had just sat down after depositing their breakfast. Ronan realized she’d been very quiet this morning and from Sidney’s response, she was starting to pick up on it.

“Ronan,” Sidney started, sitting down beside her. “Is something wrong? I mean with us?”

Closing her eyes briefly, Ronan felt bad for making Sidney doubt her devotion. “I’m thinking about how soft and sweet your lips are.”

Sidney almost dropped the coffee pot and smiled as she sat it on the table. “You always manage to surprise me.” She reached over and squeezed Ronan’s hand before picking up her cup and taking a sip. “How did you sleep?”

“Wonderfully. I’ve never slept better in my life than I have for these past weeks.”

Ronan watched as Sidney reach down to pet a male Doberman. The dogs were very friendly toward her, taking to her right away. Ronan never would have expected such behavior for watchdogs, but they were clearly smitten.

“You know, I didn’t realize what a romantic you were when I met you.”

“There were a lot of things you never realized when you met me.”

“Too true.”

Ronan loved Sidney more than she ever thought possible, but their physical relationship couldn’t be explained by sentiment alone. They were almost desperate when they were intimate, each trying to gain as much sensation as they could during their encounters. She realized that part of that intensity stemmed from the threat they faced. Whether subconscious or not, being the only ones who knew about the Black Guard and the potential for disaster that loomed before them was a heavy burden to bear.

“So,” Sidney said. “What’s our next move?”

They had a distinct difference of opinion as to how to go about bringing down the potential start of The Neue Konservative Regime. Sidney insisted that Ronan wouldn’t be able to get close enough to these people to do any good without placing herself in extreme danger, but Ronan thought she could. It had been the source of some very heated discussions over the last few days.

“Sidney,” Ronan said, only to be interrupted.

“Hold on.” Sidney raised a hand. “Just hear me out, please. I’ve been thinking about it and I have an idea.”

After a tense moment, Ronan dipped her head to indicate that she was at least willing to listen. Sidney took another sip of her coffee, Ronan suspected it was a delay tactic and automatically assumed it wasn’t something she would want to hear.

“As you mentioned before, the presidential inauguration is coming up. From the information you showed me from the disc, our president-elect is one of the replacements.”

“Your point?” Ronan asked, not following the logic.

“As you know, I am...acquainted with several top officials including the new vice president. What better time and place to expose these individuals for who they are?”

Ronan shook her head in exasperation. “Why don’t you spell it out for me? The only way to get close enough during such an event is to be invited. How do you intend to do that? The ceremony takes place in only a few days.”

“Oh, that’s easy. I can get David Abrams to invite me. His wife is expecting their first child and is very close to term. It would be unseemly for him to attend such a ceremony unaccompanied. So I give him a call and get us invited.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Sidney, you’re not thinking this out.”

Sidney argued, “Why? Because this isn’t your idea, I’m not thinking things out?”

Ronan stood so quickly that her chair toppled over backward and crashed to the concrete so hard that both women started in surprise. “I can’t lose you.”

Standing slowly, Sidney stepped up closer to her and cupped her cheek. “You’re not going to lose me.”

Ronan leaned down to kiss her. She tried to absorb the taste and texture of the sweet mouth before resting her forehead against Sidney’s. “Okay, let’s hear the rest of your cockamamie plan.”

“Great but first I need more coffee.”

Sidney sat back down and watched Ronan pick up her chair. She waited until she settled before she shared the rest of her idea.

“David can get us invited and I will be with him up on the platform. As tradition dictates, he will be sworn in first and then say something to the president-elect in front of the media. Since I will be with him, I’ll be able to expose him at that moment.”

Sidney looked triumphant after her declaration but Ronan almost choked on a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“That’s it? Are you going to switch on the cloak jammer in his face and say ‘here, how does this feel’? Then how do you plan to get the rest of the Guard to expose themselves?”

“No, that’s not it,” Sidney declared heatedly. “All the rest of the Guards are in key positions. Secretary of Defense, directors of the FBI and CIA, and they should be there as well. Can’t you come up with some deployment method that would work within say...a thirty-foot radius?”

Ronan carefully considered what she asked. She knew she had to come up with another method, but doubted Sidney would acquiesce. Instead, she tried to weigh the plan objectively.

“Well, there are only six of them currently in place...that we know of. Their main strategy seems to be getting Angstrom in place as president before they begin the primary replacements. If we can stymie them publicly, and show that we have the means to defeat them, they should decide to forgo their plan. At least I hope so.”

“If they have any sense of self-preservation you mean.”

Ronan didn’t like to admit it, but she finally had no choice. “Your scheme does have merit.”

“Great.” Sidney took a large self-congratulatory swig of coffee. “All we need to do now is make a phone call.”

“Not from here,” Ronan stated emphatically. “This is the only safe haven we have at the moment. I will not risk a trace by the Guard or any of their agents. We’ll have to go to the mainland to place the call. There is one other thing we’ll need to do.”

“What is it?”

“We still have to go back to the hangar in Bridgeport for my motorcycle. I hope that it’s still there since it has a great deal of sophisticated equipment. I can’t let it fall into anyone’s hands.”

“How *sophisticated* is it?”

Ronan felt like a teenager, preparing to be chastised by her mother. She fiddled with the tablecloth, unable to meet Sidney’s eyes. “Oh nothing much, really. It has pulse cannons and onboard computer interface ...things like that.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? We’ve got to get that bike.”

“I wanted our trail to grow cold before we went back there. If we’d made a play to rush back to the hangar, someone might have caught on that there was something important hidden there.”

“Okay, what about the airplane? Is there anything I need to know about that?”

“No, the plane was never modified. Besides, someone probably discovered the wreckage soon after it crashed. We should make that call as soon as we can. You can let your friend know that you’re still alive and he can *accidentally* leak the information to the media.”

“That’s a good idea. This should do wonders for my career. *‘Actress Survives the Everglades.’*” Sidney mimicked reading headlines with a grin. “We should also consider arranging our travel plans for going to Washington. The swearing-in ceremony is scheduled for four days from now.”

“Are you sure it isn’t too short notice to pull this off?” Suddenly Ronan was a little unsure.

“No, it’ll be fine. After all, you are talking about the next vice president of the United States and I think that between the two of us, we should be able to charter a plane. Don’t you?”

That wasn’t all Ronan was concerned about, but she dropped the discussion for now. A few hours later they had pulled up to the main pier at Key West where Ronan kept a berth rented for times when she had to conduct business or purchase groceries. Sidney placed the call to Vice President-elect Abrams and he agreed to meet them that evening at a restaurant in Georgetown.

Now all they had left to do was to charter the plane that would carry them to Washington, D. C. where they could rent a car. Ronan called the two women she kept on payroll to have them watch the dogs before she called the airport. She wasn’t happy to leave the Keys, but she was looking forward to putting this whole thing behind them. If the fates were willing, she would even be able to start a future with the fiery actress, but that was another uncertain factor in a sea of uncertainty.

Would Sidney even want a future with her? Although she was extremely enthusiastic during lovemaking, that didn’t mean she wanted to spend her life with Ronan. She’d certainly never said as much. Ronan came out of her reverie briefly as they boarded the plane for Washington when Sidney reached out and grasped her hand.

“You okay?”

Ronan nodded and answered distractedly. “Yes, just thinking.”

“Should I leave you alone?”

“No, but I don’t see how you can make my fears disappear. I just have to deal with them myself.”

The concerned expression on Sidney's face caused Ronan to gentle her voice and squeeze the small hand lovingly. "It's enough that you're here with me, supporting me, and I love you for it."

"I...I'm glad I can do that for you."

It was clear Sidney was still unable to utter the words Ronan so desperately wanted to hear. She tried not to let her disappointment show at another missed opportunity to hear the precious words. Instead, she just nodded her head and boarded the plane.

Ronan found David Abrams to be likeable enough, although he was confused by Sidney's claims of time traveling secret police that had infiltrated the government. He was gratified and delighted that she was still alive after the publicized plane crash in the Everglades. Beyond that, Ronan saw the skepticism on his face when he heard all that had happened since Sidney disappeared from the public eye. It took a lot to convince him otherwise, but when Ronan presented the information they had obtained on the disc he slowly began to change his mind.

"Well, I guess I have no choice," he finally said, scratching his thinning hair absently. "At least the upside of this crazy scheme is that if it works, I get to be president."

Even though he sounded facetious, a little of his grief still came through and Ronan understood why. Angstrom, the real Angstrom, had been his colleague for a long time. Their families had been friends for years before that. Ronan knew from his online biography that Abrams was more than a politician. He had fought in Vietnam and had seen too much in the ways of death and destruction. Abrams had watched his entire squad cut down and been the only one to survive.

He knew of duty and loss but from what she had heard, Ronan understood that he also knew of courage. She didn't doubt that he would do what was necessary. Especially since this war was for the good of not only the nation, but also the entire world. Just speaking with him for such a short time gave her a feel for his character. Duty was clearly something very important to him.

Ronan relaxed into her seat, relieved to have one obstacle overcome. She was preoccupied about the next step and almost didn't realize the server had just deposited their dinner. Worried, she pushed the food around on her plate while Sidney caught up with her old friend and finalized the arrangements for their invitations to the ceremony.

Sidney thought she would be making a decisive blow against the futuristic intruders when she stepped up onto that stage and set off a transmitter that would reveal the true identity of the next president and any of the others that were nearby. Unfortunately, Ronan knew that wouldn't be good enough. Her jammer would only cover a four-foot radius at the most. There was no guarantee that the other Guards would be that close. For that reason, Ronan would have to come up with a backup plan. She already had one in the making, but doubted that Sidney would approve of what she had in mind.

Looking across the table at Sidney's animated features, she knew she would never tell her. The most she would accomplish would be to make Sidney worry. Since there was nothing

positive in doing such a thing, she couldn't see the point. Ronan wanted so much for everything to be perfect between them, but the next few days would be very hard. Not only would she scheme with Sidney and Abrams, but she also had plans of her own.

Her hidden agenda was ambitious and dangerous, and she only hoped she could make full use of the time they had together before the ceremony. Especially since the chances were very good that she wouldn't survive it. At least Sidney would be safe and they might thwart the Konservative Government's plans. In the end, that was all that mattered.

After dinner, Ronan and Sidney returned to their hotel room. Sidney had just come out of the bathroom and stopped when she noticed Ronan had changed clothes. Ronan wore a pair of black, combat-style boots with heavy tread, a long-sleeved black sweater, and dark jeans.

"What's going on?" Sidney asked curiously.

It was quite late and she would naturally wonder what could be so important at this time of night. Ronan stood up and began to pull her hair back into a ponytail to keep it out of her face.

"I thought now might be a good time to get the motorcycle. I'll take a cab to the hangar, get the bike, and be back here before you know it."

Sidney didn't respond and Ronan turned to look at her. While she waited, Ronan finished off her outfit with a long black coat and a pair of gloves.

"Don't look at me like that." Sidney looked like she might cry. Ronan walked over to her and took her into her arms. "It'll be okay. You know we have to get that bike."

Sidney tightened her arms around Ronan's waist. "I know we do. Just promise me that you'll be careful."

"I will." Ronan gave Sidney one last squeeze before she pulled away and walked to the door.

"Why don't you just call Jordy?" Sidney suggested before Ronan could leave. "It's better than calling a cab. He can wait for you to make sure you get started back safely."

Ronan shook her head, touched by the gesture. "I want to get the bike before anyone can find out we're here. Someone probably tapped your home line, as well as your employees' phones. If we make a call to them, we could be endangering them needlessly. I'll be back soon."

She'd told Sidney that everything would be fine, but walking to the elevator Ronan wasn't so sure. These people seemed to know what they were going to do before they did it. When the stalker failed to eliminate Sidney, they'd managed to plant a homing device and an explosive on the plane before Ronan even thought to use the aircraft. Then they had a group of hunters ready to track them through the Everglades. Ronan and Sidney had barely managed to get away and left one of the assassins covered with deadly fire ants. She wasn't about to delude herself that they'd managed anything except through blind luck.

A cabstand was right outside the entrance to the Lincoln Hotel and Ronan quickly jumped into a taxi. She couldn't suppress the feeling that she was exposed to anyone who happened to look her way.

"Brooklyn Park," she said to the cab driver.

She would have him drop her off a mile from the hangar and walk the rest of the way. Experience had taught her never to drive right up on the scene of one's destination. It was better to approach silently and have time to scope out what was going on. That theory proved sound about an hour later. The hangar was somewhat isolated since the landing strip was away from any residential housing. At eleven at night, it was somewhat unusual to see a light on in the hangar. Ronan knew that Sidney employed other maintenance personnel and they would have been around even in her absence, but they would not have left the lights on after the end of their shift.

Crouching down, she used the cover of night to run up to the outside edge of the building. Deep shadows concealed her as she moved down the side of the hangar to a low window. The sound of muffled voices told her she had guessed right. Someone was inside keeping watch. She just had no way to know if there had been a guard posted every night since they disappeared or if their adversaries already knew they were in town.

Three men sat around a plastic card table on folding chairs. They were playing poker and from the bored expressions on their faces, Ronan guessed that this had become a nightly ritual. One of the men chewed on an unlit cigar.

Good, she thought. If they've been doing this every night for weeks, they'll be complacent.

That was her initial impression, but she was afraid she might be seeing only what she wanted to see. Carefully, she looked around and saw other things to support her hypothesis. A large black truck sat parked in place of the missing aircraft. The tailgate was down and a large cooler rested on it.

"Want one?" a man offered as he stood up and stretched. He had a huge black mustache that curled out to cover half of his face and obscured his mouth completely. His head was completely bald but from the dark stubble, Ronan guessed that he shaved.

Another man started to shuffle the cards while the third responded to the query. "Sure. Angstrom would kill us if he knew we were drinking on the job but it's not like anything is going to happen. How much longer are we going to have to put up with this shit anyway?"

The first man grinned and walked over to the cooler. He pulled out three cans of beer before walking back over to his friends. "Deal the cards already, will ya?"

Ronan crouched down and weighed her options. She didn't want to kill these men if she didn't have to. These guys were just hired to do a job and probably had no idea what was at

stake. Unfortunately, her laser pistol, tucked into the rear waistband of her jeans, didn't have a stun setting.

The pickup was too close to the men to disable it without someone seeing her. Finally, she had a plan, although it was a risky one. She just hoped Sidney didn't find out. She'd never let Ronan live it down.

Staying in the shadows, Ronan walked down to the far end of the hangar away from the three strangers. The motorcycle was closest to the end where she was but with no plane in the hangar, she would be clearly visible when she made her move. She squatted near the entry and pulled the analyzer out of her coat pocket. From this angle, it would be difficult to inspect the bike but she would have to try. A few quick scans didn't reveal any homing signals attached to the machine. It would have to be good enough for now, she decided. Once she had the bike and was safely away, she would have to find somewhere to pull over and take a more detailed look.

The sound of a car approaching caused her to leap away from the hangar and back into the shadows. She watched as a long, black sedan pulled up to the front of the hangar and two men got out. Ronan lay down flat, pressing herself against the side of the building. She held her breath and hoped they wouldn't see her. A light flared briefly as one of them lit a cigarette and then the two paused to exchange a few words.

"Do the men know what's going on?" the one with the cigarette asked.

"No way, Angstrom won't chance it. By design, there are only a few of us that know everything. If someone goes shooting their mouth off, they'll be next in line to be replaced."

"Hah, like Gentry?"

"Idiot. I can't believe he actually made a disc about all of this. No wonder Angstrom had him replaced."

The taller man took a deep drag off his smoke."So the replacement has already arrived from the Delegator?"

"I think so. Once the person's body goes back through to the Fatherland, it only takes a few days to transmit the replacement. The Guard took Gentry out as soon as Angstrom found out about the disc. That was at least three weeks ago."

The smoking man finished his cigarette and flicked it into the grass. It landed a few feet away from Ronan and she could smell the smoke floating from the still-burning butt. Her nose tickled from the odor and she quickly cupped her hand over her face while she fought the urge to sneeze.

"Well, go check on the men. I'll wait in the car."

Ronan wondered why he'd bothered to walk toward the hangar with his companion if he wasn't going in and then decided he hadn't wanted the driver to overhear their conversation. The

men walked in different directions, the shorter of the two entering the hangar to check on the poker players. Ronan was close enough to hear the conversation.

“Hey, guys. Anything exciting happening?” he asked as he walked up next to them.

“Nah,” mustache man said. “It’s quiet, just like it’s been every night.”

The shorter man in the suit and tie nodded his head and didn’t comment on the beer cans. Instead, he looked at the poker hand of the man he stood behind and said, “Wow, nice hand, Smitty.”

Instantly, a round of “I fold,” and “I’m out,” sounded from the other two.

Smitty asked, “Hey, Barnes, why’d you do that? There was a hundred bucks in that pot.” Frustrated, the large bear of a man smoothed his hand across his bald pate.

Barnes chuckled. “Make sure you keep your eyes open. Word has it that those two are back in the neighborhood.”

“Will do, boss,” one of the other men acknowledged.

Smitty threw his cards down on the table. “Is it true that Sullivan was found on top of a fire ant mound down in Florida?”

“Yeah, it’s true. I don’t think Barnhart was too happy with him anyway.”

“Barnhart? You mean Chief Justice Barnhart? What’s he got to do with this?” Smitty asked. “Is he the man in charge?”

Doubtful, Ronan thought. It had to go significantly higher than an imposter filling a Supreme Court Judge’s shoes.

“You ask too many questions, Smitty,” Barnes growled. “Just keep your eyes open.”

Angered, the smaller man left the hangar and got back into the black sedan. He was so furious that Ronan doubted he would have seen her if she had jumped up in front of him. Obviously, the three poker players weren’t concerned about keeping their eyes open either. As soon as the sedan was gone, they delved back into their game.

Ronan waited fifteen minutes to set her plan in motion, just to make sure the men had enough time to become complacent again. Then she pulled her pistol from her pocket and tensed in preparation. Her chance came a moment later when there was a loud shout from the other end of the room. One of the men had won the hand and leaned over the table to scoop up his winnings. The other two complained and accused him of cheating. It was a small diversion, but gave Ronan a chance to sneak inside the hangar. She stayed low and close to the wall, trying to use the motorcycle as a shield. Once she reached the large bike, she knew things would happen quickly.

She held the laser pistol tight in her sweaty palm. Her mouth was dry in fear and all Ronan could see in her mind was Sidney. She tried to hang on to that image to bolster her courage and soon squatted next to the motorcycle. Ronan flipped on the switch for the power cell. The advanced machine boasted a nuclear powered engine. She'd opted for that choice so she'd never have to worry about running out of fuel at a critical moment. Ronan realized she was procrastinating and she had to make a move or be a sitting duck. She wouldn't have time to put on her helmet because once she stood up they would spot her instantly. At least the windshield would protect her enough until she could get somewhere to pull over for a scan. She would put the helmet on then.

Jumping up, Ronan straddled the huge bike. Simultaneously someone shouted. "Look out!"

She looked over her shoulder and fired the laser pistol. A couple of tires on the pickup blew out. Two of the men ran toward her while Smitty climbed into the truck and started the engine. Snarling and shaking, he tried to follow his companions before he realized he had two flats.

They were gaining on her fast when Ronan started the motorcycle. She didn't have time to put the pistol away because the men were only a few feet from her when she shifted the motorcycle into gear and tore out of the hangar. Ronan's heart thumped painfully and hair flew into her eyes, obscuring her vision. To drive the bike with a pistol in one hand was difficult enough, but the hair in her eyes and the darkness added poor visibility to the equation.

She slowed just enough to glance over her shoulder and could see that the men had followed her quite a distance from the hangar. They were on their way back inside now and she had no doubt they would be on the phone immediately. She stopped long enough to tuck the weapon into her waistband and jam on a helmet. Twenty minutes from the hangar, Ronan pulled off the busy highway into a downtown industrial park. She figured that someone was watching the main roadways and she needed to find an alternate route. First, she needed to make sure the bike was safe. If someone planted a homing device on the motorcycle, there would be no need to try to intercept her. The killers would simply wait until she led them back to Sidney. If the bike was clean, they would try to catch her on the roadway.

Ronan drove behind a large warehouse and down into a loading bay. If security were to drive by, it was unlikely they would spot the woman dressed all in black. She climbed off the motorcycle and removed the helmet before she finally let out a sigh of relief. This high-tension night was far from over, but the human body could only maintain an adrenaline high for so long.

She fished the analyzer out of her deep coat pocket, squatted down and took a more thorough scan, slowly and carefully. A beep sounded as she reached the back of the engine. She peered closely in the darkness and spotted a small, round, metallic device magnetically attached to the engine compartment. Thankfully, it wasn't an explosive, but it also meant that someone was tracking her.

Ronan pulled the tracker off and crushed it under her heel. She glanced around quickly before she put the helmet back on, convinced her enemies already surrounded her. Fear had become her constant companion over the last few hours and her bladder protested loudly. She'd

learned long ago that one of her body's fear responses was the sudden urge to urinate, but now was not the time. She ignored the urge, climbed back onto the motorcycle and gunned the engine.

“Computer, display alternate routes of travel to the downtown Washington, D. C. area.”

Instantly holographic lines appeared on the windshield and Ronan weighed her options as she drove out of the industrial park. “Display other active vehicles along those routes.”

Quite a few automobiles popped up on the display. Ronan chose the least-occupied routes of travel and began to work her way back to Sidney. The route was long and circuitous, taking far longer than she wanted. Ronan thought it was the safest course of action as she kept Sidney's image fixed firmly in her mind.

Finally, she parked the motorcycle in the underground garage and took the elevator up to the seventh floor of the hotel. She slid the key card into the lock and opened the door at two thirty in the morning. She hadn't even closed the door properly when she suddenly had her arms full of an angry, frightened, and worried woman.

“Where the hell have you been?” Sidney asked and choked back tears as she held onto Ronan. “I've been worried sick. You said you wouldn't be gone long. Do you know what time it is?”

Ronan clung to her warmth and closed her eyes to bask in her scent. Sidney hadn't even finished ranting off her questions when Ronan felt small hands exploring her body. It took a moment for her to understand that she was looking for injuries.

“I'm all right,” she said in a shaky voice. “But it was a lot scarier than I thought it would be.”

Sidney pulled back and looked into her eyes. Ronan thought she probably looked like she had a mild case of shock. She certainly felt shaky and unsteady on her feet. Sidney grasped her leather-covered hands and urged Ronan to follow her across the room. She made her sit down in a chair and squatted at her feet. A bottle of her favorite beverage, Remy Martin, sat on the table. Sidney reached for it and poured a healthy measure into a glass before she held it up to Ronan's full lips.

“Drink this. All of it.”

Ronan almost took the glass from her, but decided that she needed contact. She reached out a trembling hand, rested it over Sidney's, and allowed her to hold the glass while she drank from it. Only after it was gone and some color had come back to her pale cheeks did Sidney prompt her for information.

“Tell me what happened.”

Sidney pulled the gloves off Ronan's hands. While she listened, she massaged Ronan's hands, trying to rub some warmth back into them. She stayed quiet as Ronan described what happened. The description of her activities came out in stuttered, sometimes almost painful words but she left nothing out. Sidney looked shattered when Ronan spoke about Gentry's replacement, yet knew Sidney had to be relieved that she hadn't been so wrong about the man. She had enough class to not say "I told you so" and just listened as Ronan described her harrowing getaway.

"I don't think I was followed but I did find a homing device on the motorcycle. I destroyed it and then took a very long route back here. I think we're safe. At least we know you were right. Roger was being used and was not a willing party to world domination." Ronan offered her an apologetic grin.

"Yes," Sidney agreed softly. "At least there's that."

Ronan had no doubt that they were safe and she wouldn't ever take chances with her safety. Still, Angstrom and his cronies knew now for certain they were in the area.

"I guess this means we'll have to stay indoors until this thing is over. There may be some things I have to do to set our plan in motion. I have to leave you alone while I do that."

"What kinds of things? And why can't I come with you?"

"I need to scout the area of the inauguration and make sure we can safely carry out your crazy plan," Ronan reminded her. "And you can't come with me because it will be easier for me to get around by myself."

"Ronan..."

She held up a hand to stop Sidney from arguing with her and played her trump card, not above using her emotions to keep the woman safe. "Please, Sidney. If you're with me, I'll have my attention divided. I'm simply too afraid that it would put us both in danger."

Sidney frowned, and looked at Ronan for long moments before responding.

"All right, but if you get hurt, I am going to be very angry."

Chapter Twenty-One

THE DAY OF the inauguration dawned bright and clear, although there was a decided bite to the January cool air. Sidney's stomach felt queasy as she got ready to attend the ceremony, and for a time she thought she might actually get sick. She'd never been one to get stage fright, but today's performance was conceivably out of her league. Since this whole plan of attack had been her idea, she didn't feel she could share her nervousness with Ronan. She glanced across the hotel room where she dressed and had to admit there were other reasons she didn't want to confess her fears.

Since they'd arrived in Washington, Ronan seemed preoccupied and reticent. Sidney could understand the distraction, but she felt there was something else that she had missed. That and the fact that she felt jealous because Ronan could come and go as she pleased while Sidney was virtually a prisoner of their room, elegant though it was, for fear that she would be recognized or put them in danger. It left her with the feeling that this wasn't quite real; like a dream where she didn't know who the players were or if the players she did know about were what they seemed.

Even now, Ronan seemed focused on the weather report for the Washington, D.C. area. Sidney didn't see what was so fascinating. It was just another brisk day but at least the forecast called for clear weather. Deciding on a tasteful wrap to compliment her outfit, she closed her eyes to steel herself for the task of the day.

Warm hands came down on her shoulders and caused her to jump in surprise. She looked up quickly into the mirror to see her lover watching her with a slight grin.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I guess I'm just a little nervous.”

Ronan bent down and placed a kiss on top of her head. “Me too. Only natural I guess since we are trying to save the world.”

Sidney smiled and some of the tension eased in her chest. She felt as if she'd just reconnected with Ronan and it went a long way toward steeling her determination and helping her refocus on their objectives.

She turned and slipped her arms around Ronan's waist. “Thank you. I needed to hear you say that.”

Ronan kissed her gently. Sidney welcomed the intimate caress and let it soothe her fears and lend her the courage and conviction that what they were doing was not only right, but also the only possible choice.

Ronan finally pulled away and suggested they finish dressing since David Abrams would call for them shortly. “You might want to retouch your lipstick since I just smeared it so nicely for you.”

“If anyone is allowed to smear it, it's you.”

Ronan kept an eye on her while Sidney slipped her gown over her head. Sidney felt her watching and hoped she liked what she saw. She'd chosen to wear a shimmering turquoise blue gown with spaghetti straps that fell to just above her knees. She completed the ensemble with spiked, four-inch heels, hose, and expensive pearl earrings. Light makeup and a touch of perfume, and she was ready to go. She turned to look at Ronan and caught the heady look of desire on her face.

"Later," she promised with a wink and then pulled on a heavy fur coat just as someone knocked on the door.

In the limousine, Sidney sat on one side of Abrams and Ronan the other. She thought it was a good idea that he was between them or she would probably be straddling Ronan's lap about now performing some very unseemly acts in public.

Ronan was a beautiful woman regardless of what she wore, but today she was breathtaking. She'd pulled her hair up into a French twist that showed the long, elegant line of her neck and the diamond earrings only served to enhance the vision. Although Ronan wore a black pantsuit, it was formally cut with wide satin lapels and the shirt underneath was stark white with ruffles fringed in scarlet. A simple, yet exquisitely cut black overcoat belted at her narrow waist. Honestly, if the woman insisted on looking this good how could Sidney possibly be expected to focus on their task at hand?

"I've got a bottle of Dom Perignon for after the ceremony," Abrams promised with a smile and patted Sidney on the hand.

"What about for now?" she asked dryly. "I could sure use something to cool off."

He apparently mistook the comment as a reference to what was about to happen and sought to reassure her. "Don't worry, everything will work out."

Sidney only snorted in response and stared out at the passing landscape.

RONAN WAS LOST in thought about the upcoming day. She kept going over every possible outcome and few of them were optimistic. Over the last few days, she'd made preparations without Sidney learning the finer details. Surveying the street in front of the Capitol building where the ceremony was to take place, she'd determined that there was nowhere optimal to set off the jammer. Contemporary technology wasn't like futuristic equipment. A simple EM pulse wouldn't work for interrupting the signal projected by the cloaking devices. That's why she still wasn't sure of the transmitter.

As an underwriter of Professor Horton's work, she knew much of his technological advances operated through the use of nanobots, microscopic machines with the code embedded. They

carried out multiple tasks all at once and weren't susceptible to standard methods of interruption. Based on what she knew, Ronan engineered the jammer to work at the quantum level. Unfortunately, it wouldn't work from a distance of more than thirty feet and she'd have to be less than five feet away to remotely activate the transmitter. Secret Service agents would incapacitate or shoot anyone who tried to move in so closely and they'd no doubt be covering the area. Ronan had no choice but to make an extremely risky move.

The previous night, Ronan slipped out to set her plan in motion and then returned to their room while Sidney slept. Ronan wouldn't tell her until all of this was over that she'd left their room to plant a transmitter under the mesh cover of the microphone that would be used for the ceremony.

Electrical crews had started work in the early morning hours to set up speakers, microphones, and cameras in key places for the scheduled one o'clock inauguration. Ronan had anticipated their activities and arrived just as they finished their duties. A security team would go over the area very thoroughly before the politicians arrived, searching for weapons or anything that didn't belong. The mechanism she'd planted in the mesh was made of a synthetic poly-resin blend, and would be undetectable to the scanning devices of the present day.

A blast shield rested a safe distance in front of the presidential nominee and party to protect them in the case of a gunman in the crowd or sniper from a nearby street. Unfortunately, there were few security precautions in place for someone who might attack from within the political party itself. To that end, Ronan had secreted a remote in her pocket. It too was made of an undetectable material, but she would have to remove it from her trousers in order to use it. She would have to move quickly and hope the press of bodies on the platform would prevent anyone from spotting her.

Soon, they pulled up in front of the Capitol amidst a throng of reporters, thrill seekers, and sightseers. Ronan, always uncomfortable in a crowd, clung gratefully to the arm that Abrams graciously offered her and Sidney. Bulbs flashed and microphones appeared in their faces as rapid-fire questions hurtled toward them, not just about the inauguration, but because Sidney was recognized. Many had assumed she died in the plane crash and were understandably curious.

"I'll be glad to comment on Ms. Weaver's timely rescue after we conclude the inaugural address," Abrams remarked with a friendly smile, dutifully ignoring all other questions as the trio mounted the steps of the historical building.

People milled around while they waited for the president-elect and contingent to arrive. Ronan felt like she was going to chew her fingernails down to the nub. The remote felt like it weighed a ton as it pressed against her leg, but she knew it was too small for the casual observer to see. She only prayed that the signal choice she'd programmed in was one necessary to reveal in seconds all of the Black Guard impersonators who might be on stage.

Ronan almost chuckled at the archaic microphones in their ears that were state of the art equipment in this century. For a moment, she could almost believe she was viewing an old holo-vid. She frowned as she realized that holo-vids were something she might never see again. Even

with all of its problems, there were certain things she would miss from her own century. A husky laugh drew her attention and her eyes glittered as she realized there were definitely other things that more than compensated for that loss.

Everything finally in place, Sidney stepped up near the rest of the inaugural committee while David Abrams stepped up to the podium. Tradition dictated that the vice president be sworn in first and Ronan wondered if her nerves would be able to handle the delay. Warily, she worked her way into the middle of the crowd down front and hoped the people would conceal her presence.

The chief justice of the United States walked slowly up the steps and the crowd came to an expectant hush. Flashes went off, cameras rolled while below the steps hundreds of Americans and well-wishers watched the proceedings with a sense of pride. A few dissenters were also present and held signs of protest that their own candidate had lost, but even they were silent as they witnessed the historical moment.

So that's Barnhart.

From what she had overheard, he was the true ringleader and Angstrom reported to him. In this slightly chubby, seventyish body, no one would have pegged him as a time traveling fascist threat.

Chief Justice Barnhart held out a Bible and requested that Abrams place his left hand on it and raise his right. Abrams readily repeated the oath of office in a dignified voice while Ronan watched. She felt as though she was in a fog and knew it was terror at what would follow next that caused the sensation. At the conclusion of the oath, applause thundered and died away reluctantly as the new vice president began his acceptance speech.

“My fellow countrymen, on this occasion the oath I have taken before you and before God is not mine alone, but ours together. We are one nation and one people. Our fate as a nation and our future as a people do not rest upon one citizen, but upon all citizens.”

The well-spoken man continued for several long minutes, until Ronan detected the speech was about to end. Her hands shook, her body tensed and her eyes fixed on Sidney, standing proudly next to the vice president. She needed the strength she took from watching her beloved.

“For myself, I ask only in the words of an ancient leader: give me now wisdom and knowledge that I may go out and come in before this people. For who can judge this, thy people, that is so great?”

The resounding cheers at the end seemed to wake Ronan up a little, especially when President-elect Vince Angstrom took his place at the podium. He appeared dignified and proud to take the oath, but she knew the imposter had his own agenda.

Angstrom eagerly placed his hand on the Bible and for a moment, Ronan expected him to recoil in pain at what she considered the epitome of blasphemy. Then he began his own oath,

which he quickly concluded. In fact, he seemed eager to get on with the proceedings rather than address his constituents. Justice Barnhart remained at his side when the impersonator began his own acceptance speech.

Ronan had seen the man cast a glance between her and Sidney. His expression seemed curious, but unconcerned and Ronan wondered if this doppelganger even knew what the actress, Sidney Weaver, looked like. Chances were that if he did, he wouldn't be so relaxed as he began his gracious acceptance as the leader of the American people. It was more likely that he had ordered her assassination sight unseen.

“I ask you today to share with me the majesty of this moment. In the orderly transfer of power, we celebrate the unity that keeps us free.”

The time travelling detective found it ironic that he would talk about a “transfer of power” and “freedom” in the same sentence. The words rekindled the sense of outrage she had first experienced when she learned of the Konservative government's infiltration scheme. Ordinarily she would have been more than happy to accept visitors from her own century, but these weren't benevolent travelers. They were parasites that planned to take over the government by means of subterfuge and would eventually subjugate the people and destroy the environment. She'd seen it firsthand, the grey mist that hung over her beloved Berlin, enshrouding it like a burial covering until she could barely see the sun through the fog of pollution.

Her ire helped clear the last tendrils of mist from her mind and with a heightened sense of reality, she watched Sidney take hold of Abrams's arm. The speech ended and the duo stepped forward to stand next to the new president. Abrams stepped up to the microphone to address the American public.

“I would like to take this opportunity to announce another historical moment. As many of you know, Sidney Weaver and her pilot disappeared over the Florida Everglades several weeks ago.

Everyone thought both of them died in the crash. As you can see, that is clearly not the case and I invite you to join with me now in welcoming her back into our embrace.”

The eloquently spoken words, although touching, should have been a rather commonplace welcome to a public figure that had survived a plane crash, but Angstrom didn't react that way. His eyes widened in sudden surprise and he jerked slightly. Ronan wondered if he'd started to bolt from the stage. He stopped at the last moment, tried to appear relaxed and gracious. He probably realized Sidney couldn't exactly accuse the newly elected president of the United States of attempting to kill her, especially without any proof.

Sidney's eyes traversed the crowd and their gazes met and locked. For just a second, she looked quite pleased with how things were going. Then again, she thought Ronan was going to set off the transmitter from the safety of the throng and the entire world would witness the transformation of the imposters. That was the plan, anyway. Unfortunately, that wasn't the

reality. She must have seen something of the truth in Ronan's eyes. Her smile faded and a slight frown took up residence on her expression.

David nudged her gently and Ronan watched Sidney take a deep breath. Then she spoke into the microphone. "Thank you, for all of your well-wishes. As you can see, thanks to her skills, my pilot and I are very much alive. I'd like to say that it's amazing what can happen to you when you least expect it. We lived through an amazing adventure, and I'm happy to be home."

Ronan took a few steps forward and three Secret Service agents took notice of her presence. They started toward her and Ronan felt nervous sweat break out over her skin. If they detained her before she could get close enough to trigger the transmitter, it would be over. Sidney must have caught on too, improvising quite impressively.

"This," she said, extending a hand toward Ronan, "is my pilot. I wouldn't be here without her."

The agents stopped and looked around, clearly not completely reassured that Ronan was harmless but willing to go along with things for now.

The onlookers started clapping and Ronan smiled a little nervously at the introduction. Cameras flashed and swiveled in her direction. Ronan didn't mind the public watching as she revealed the men from the future, but she hadn't planned to take center stage. At least now, she had an excuse to approach the party leaders. Ronan took her hand out of her pocket, absently noticing how her damp palm slipped against the jammer's housing. It was small enough to conceal, but she was more concerned about dropping it.

Steeling her nerves, Ronan stepped toward the small group. She stopped when she was close enough to see the gold flakes in Sidney's eyes. Sidney was speaking into the microphone and looking fondly at her, but Ronan couldn't hear anything for the blood surging in her ears. It took a second to register that Sidney had finished and was clapping along with the others. Ronan gave her a sad smile and held up a hand as though to wave. Instead, she pressed the trigger on the transmitter.

A screech almost high enough to shatter glass ripped from the microphone and people stopped clapping to slap their hands over their ears. Ronan saw Sidney wince, she watched as both the president and chief justice reacted and was aware of the exact moment that the Secret Service people started forward.

Both men clutched their heads as their features started to blur. Abrams reacted quickly, clutching Sidney to him. He shielded her with his body as personal guards surrounded them. He'd known that Sidney might become a target for anyone else involved with the insurgency plot and had prepared to protect her.

In the chaos of screams and general bedlam that ensued, Ronan looked around to see that three other men and a woman were among those affected by the jammer. The agents had stopped moving toward her and started toward the stage. She let out a relieved breath that they apparently

hadn't seen the device she carried and didn't connect her to the drama unfolding on the Capitol steps.

Ronan stood still, waiting to see what would happen next and who would try to slip unnoticed from the scene. When they did, she'd have to take steps to ensure they didn't get away. She'd prepared for this contingency, but she had also deliberately kept the second part of her plan from Sidney. If she was right, things were going to head south quickly and she didn't want Sidney to try to stop her. As long as she was safe and Ronan prevented the premature rise of the Konservative fascists, that was all that mattered.

Chapter Twenty-Two

PRESIDENT ANGSTROM AND Chief Justice Barnhart dropped onto their hands and knees and bent forward until their foreheads almost touched the ground. From where she stood, Ronan watched as features rippled and shimmered, though she wasn't sure others noticed the difference yet. Then, slowly, the bodies thickened and Barnhart's form shortened. When they looked up, two complete strangers knelt on the steps.

Abrams kept a protective arm around Sidney. Holding her closely against him, he turned to address the stunned crowd and spoke into the microphone. Ronan had to give him kudos as he stuck to the script.

"As you can see," he began in a shaky voice that strengthened as he spoke. "These...gentlemen...were not who they claimed to be. The government has known for some time that, through advanced technology, persons unknown were infiltrating the government in an effort to seize control and take power for themselves. We owe an extreme debt of gratitude to patriots like Sidney Weaver in determining who these imposters are and to the other governments of the world for allowing us to make a decisive blow against them here today."

Of course, other governments of the world hadn't known anything of the sort but as a politician, Ronan knew Abrams was motivated to help smooth over any feelings of hostility and to present other countries in a positive light. While he spoke, Secret Service agents swarmed the podium and took the two strangers into custody, hustling them away in the wink of an eye.

Questions began to fly fast and furious while Abrams sought to assure the public that the government had known about everything from the start and that Sidney had been a voluntary tool to help bring about the demise of the interlopers. The purpose was to keep attention focused on the political party instead of Ronan. Just as she knew they would, the other secretive Guard

members took the opportunity presented by the media circus, and began edging away from the platform toward an escape.

Ronan quickly calculated the trajectory of the device she had planted under the lip of an adjacent manhole cover. She knew she would have to make her move now. In her other pocket, rested the remote to activate the projectile. Once she pressed the switch, the missile would launch to approximately fifteen feet in the air and compromise any infiltrators within a forty-foot radius. When she pulled the trigger out, she was only vaguely aware of the warning shouts issued from Secret Service and CIA agents. Peripherally, she saw weapons brought to bear upon her. Coming on the heels of the previous revelation, the agents weren't in the mood to allow any latitude. Ronan flipped back the cover on the small, plastic box that could be mistaken as the detonator for an explosive. A bullet took her in the shoulder before she could press the button, another hit her mid-thigh.

She heard Sidney and Abrams both shout that she was "one of them" and to stop shooting, but nerves were tightly strung. A few were unable to comply with their orders immediately. Two more rounds caught Ronan in the leg. She dropped to her knees and one hand. Every breath was agony as she forced her thumb to move over the red button and press it. In satisfaction, Ronan watched the small capsule shoot up from the metal disc and burst open with a spark just above the entourage. The high-pitched wail emitted made the last one seem weak in comparison. She lost consciousness and fell heavily to the ground before she could see the results of her actions.

SIDNEY NOTICED THAT the device hovered in the air for a few seconds and then fell harmlessly to the ground. The jammer revealed four more imposters. Suddenly, she noticed Ronan no longer stood in front of the crowd. Sidney shook off the fear that paralyzed her before she bolted to Ronan's side. Blood liberally smeared the beloved features and she wasn't even sure she was still alive. Now she knew why Ronan kept disappearing even after she'd retrieved the motorcycle. She had her own agenda to keep and it hadn't ended at scouting the area.

"Ronan," she sobbed breathlessly, dropping to her knees and sliding her arms around the unconscious woman. "Ronan, please...answer me."

The blue eyes lay closed against a very pale face. Sidney felt like her heart was ripped from her chest. Tears filled her eyes before they coursed down hot cheeks. Ronan had given up so much to save her and their world and now it would appear she had even sacrificed her own life.

She held Ronan close and whispered in her ear. "Please, you have to wake up. You can't leave me, not after all we've been through."

Sidney thought of all the times she had argued with this woman, all the times she had stubbornly refused to do what Ronan asked of her and all along she'd been prepared to make the

ultimate sacrifice. She had steadfastly protected Sidney and led her to this courageous moment of self-sacrifice.

And I didn't even have the guts to tell you that I love you.

“She’s still alive,” Abrams said, his fingertips pressing against the side of Ronan’s neck. “Get an ambulance,” he shouted to the nearest confused agent who at least had the composure to follow his instructions.

“She’s alive?” Sidney asked in disbelief. She saw the cautious look in her friend’s eyes, and realized he was trying not to give her false hope but she felt overjoyed by the information.

“Ronan?” She reached up to cup a soft cheek. “You’re going to be all right. Do you hear me?” Her voice grew stronger as she dared Ronan to defy her. “You’re going to be all right.”

Suddenly, men in blue uniforms pushed her out of the way and inserted I.V. tubes and other gadgets Sidney couldn’t identify. Two men wheeled a gurney over and gently hoisted Ronan onto it. They quickly pushed her toward the waiting ambulance. Sidney heard Abrams direct two of his men to the hospital to keep watch on Ronan as she scurried to the back of the hospital-bound vehicle.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Only family members are permitted to ride in the back of the ambulance.”

“I am family,” she stated in a voice so deadly that no one would even think of arguing with her.

The ride to the hospital was the longest twelve minutes of her life as she held Ronan’s hand. For hours after that, Sidney paced in the hospital waiting room in fearful anticipation of Ronan’s prognosis. When they’d arrived at the emergency room, doctors and hospital staff whisked her straight into surgery. Since then no one had contacted Sidney with any information. She’d seen many people come and go from the operating theatre, but no one responded to any of her urgent questions. Finally, she marched up to the head nurse at the desk and demanded someone answer her questions. She didn’t know whether Ronan would be all right and wondered what was taking so long.

The white-garbed nurse stood to her full height, which towered over Sidney, before she answered in a stern but calm voice that Ronan’s doctor would speak with her as soon as she came out of surgery. Abrams had shown up soon after and offered her a cup of coffee just when she thought she might keel over.

“What? Taking care of your investment?” Sidney immediately felt guilty about her caustic attitude when his face closed up. “I’m sorry, David. I’m just worried. What the hell is going on in there?” She dragged her fingers through her hair.

The surgeon walked in just then. He reached up and rubbed a hand over his tired face. Sidney was on him before he had a chance to realize anyone was there.

“How is she? Is she all right? When can I see her?”

Dr. Morrison shook his head in confusion. “Easy,” he advised and held up his hands in mock self-defense. “I’ll be glad to fill you in, Ms. Weaver, although to be honest I wish the circumstances were better. “

“ Ronan,” she prodded impatiently.

“Oh, yes.” He scratched his head absently and Sidney wondered if he was addle-brained, worried that he had just operated on her lover. “She’s still in critical condition. I’m afraid we won’t know for sure for another twenty-four hours. Still, I believe we got all of the bullet fragments out and that she’ll make a full recovery. She was a very lucky young lady.”

“What do you mean you *believe* you got all of the bullet fragments? Don’t you know?” Sidney felt flabbergasted. “Aren’t you a surgeon?”

“Hold on, Sidney,” Abrams advised and put a hand on her arm. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

“I really do think she’ll be fine. I hesitate to promise you something and not be able to deliver. My experience tells me that most people prefer to know the truth and from the few minutes I’ve spoken with you, I daresay you’re no exception,” the doctor assured her.

His words had the intended effect of connecting with Sidney’s logical side. She took a breath, trying to relax and listen to what he had to say, even if it wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

“I’m sorry, doctor. Of course, please continue.”

He looked at the floor for a moment. “She was lucky in that none of the bullets pierced any vital organs.”

“Or the Secret Service has some really terrible marksmen,” Sidney shot back sarcastically before she could help herself. “Sorry, Doctor. Go on.”

“Yes, well. Just because there wasn’t any damage to her organs doesn’t mean she’s completely out of the woods. Infection could easily set in and is generally the main cause for concern. She’ll have difficulty walking for a time as one of the bullets damaged the largest muscle of the thigh. Another round dislocated her shoulder and blood pressure is understandably low because of the blood loss. Still, barring any complications I see no reason why she shouldn’t make a full recovery.”

Sidney stayed at Ronan’s bedside from the first moment the hospital staff allowed it until she opened her eyes three days later. She filled those hours talking to Ronan about anything in general just to let her know she was there, speaking words to the unconscious woman that she

had no way of knowing she could hear let alone understand. On the third day, she'd run out of informational tidbits about the uprising in Washington and began speaking from her heart.

"I've never told you how I feel about you," Sidney said sadly, a catch in her throat. "It took you getting shot for me to be able to say the words aloud. The truth is I love you and I've never had feelings for another woman before. I'm afraid of that. Pretty cowardly when I hear it out loud, especially after you almost died saving the world, but that's the long and short of it. I'm scared. Why, you ask?" Sidney's short bark of laughter morphed into a sob.

"I'm afraid because everyone I've ever cared for has left me. I'm not even really sure I've loved anyone before, only that I wanted so much to be with someone so I settled on men who I thought were reliable, strong, compassionate. I guess I was only fooling myself. And then you came along and turned my world upside down."

She took a moment to compose herself and wiped away the tears that ran down her cheeks before she continued. She felt the need to unburden her soul, even if she could never utter the words to the one that mattered most, not when she was awake anyway.

"And...I fell in love with you...so hard. I know it's the most intense, all-encompassing feeling I've ever experienced. I only hope I can show you exactly how much, for the rest of our lives if you're willing."

Amazingly, white-blond eyelashes began to flutter when Sidney concluded her speech. A look of confusion reigned in the icy depths until they focused on her. Ronan's expression quickly warmed and a smile tugged at the corner of full lips.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"HEY," SIDNEY WHISPERED in that wonderfully husky voice that sent shivers down Ronan's spine. "I thought you were going to sleep forever. About time you woke up."

She tried to speak and coughed against a dry throat when suddenly Sidney thrust a cup of water with a straw in front of her. Gratefully, Ronan sipped the cool liquid for a moment before she fell weakly back against the sheets.

"Don't you ever do that to me again."

Ronan knew she'd frightened Sidney very badly and that was why she was angry. She deftly took it in stride, unaccountably pleased that Sidney looked exhausted from sitting at her side. She had no doubt Sidney had done exactly that. Ronan had a definite sense that she hadn't been alone for a very long time.

Humor quirked her full lips before she responded. "I won't."

After all, it wasn't every day that one had to save the world against a time travelling fascist Black Guard and Ronan felt pretty comfortable with the promise. Exhaustion pulled her back down into the depths of healing slumber. Many hours later, Ronan awakened from a dark, dreamless sleep. The acrid scent of antiseptic reminded her that she was in the hospital and prompted memories of what happened to account for her current residence. She remembered the sharp, biting pain from the bullets that had struck her body and was surprised to be alive. The last thing she remembered was Sidney's worried face hovering over her as the vice president shouted for an ambulance. How long ago was that?

She frowned and knew there was something they'd missed. If she could only think, but she couldn't with all the weight pressing down on her chest. Ronan opened her eyes and glanced down to see Sidney's head resting on her. She smiled tenderly when she recalled she had been there all along. Even when Ronan drifted in and out of her anesthesia-induced haze, Sidney was there. Sidney's upper body pinned Ronan's left arm to the bed. Instead, Ronan reached over to stroke the thick strands of hair. At her soft touch, Sidney lifted her head and looked groggily at Ronan. An almost shy smile graced the wine-shaded lips.

"Hey there," she said and clasped Ronan's hand between her own. "How was your nap?"

"Long." Ronan watched Sidney press small kisses onto her knuckles. "How long was I out?"

"Since the last time you were awake? Two days."

Her stark expression made Ronan wonder if those days were worse for Sidney than when Sullivan chased them through the swamp. She thought it was possible and, though the comparison might be unfair, the idea made her feel warm inside. Hope burned bright that Sidney's feelings for her had grown.

"Have you been here the whole time?"

"Yes, I just couldn't leave until I knew you were going to be all right."

"Sidney, you need sleep," Ronan admonished gently.

"What do you think I was doing when you woke me up? Besides, even if I'd wanted to leave I couldn't. It's just too dangerous." Sidney cringed and became serious. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. You need all your strength to recover."

"Tell me, Sidney."

Ronan could see something was wrong. Whatever she was holding back might explain the nagging feeling she had that they had missed something.

Sidney took a deep breath and hesitated. “We can talk about this in a few days, once you feel a little better.”

“No, I need to know. Please.”

Wordlessly, Sidney reached for the television remote that hung by a cord from Ronan’s bed. Scenes filled the screen of fires burning and people running through the streets. The words “Breaking News” ran across the bottom of the screen.

“This is Chris Irvin for CNX News. Rioting continues in downtown Baltimore, New York, and Los Angeles following the presidential inauguration five days ago. China, Russia, and France have also reported rioting and mass-hysteria that threaten to destroy the countries.

“As you know by now, all of this began when six members of the United States’s leading political party, including President-elect Angstrom, were exposed as impersonators though no one has revealed their country of origin or whether this was part of a terrorist agenda. The government continues to assure the people of the world that the threat was eliminated, yet pandemonium continues. All of us are asking, where did these people come from and what was their intent?”

Sidney lowered the volume and turned back toward Ronan.

“They don’t believe the authorities,” Ronan said. “They think there are more Guard members and the government is concealing information.”

“I guess we should have done this differently, concealed the truth about infiltrators from the public. We obviously couldn’t handle the truth.” Sidney looked back at the image-filled screen.

“This is my fault. I thought we were stronger than this. How arrogant of me to make that decision for everyone.”

“Hey,” Sidney said, sounding angry. “If you’re going to start laying blame then you’d better move over on that pity wagon. I seem to recall it was my idea to expose them on national television.”

Ronan started to argue but couldn’t. It had been Sidney’s idea, even if Ronan had gone along with it. Now, they needed to figure out a way to fix this. She knew they could, she had done something similar before. Hindsight was usually a luxury but in this case, it was critical.

She began to formulate a plan, or at least half of a plan. As Ronan connected the dots, she realized what had been bothering her. Even though they had revealed the Guard on the steps, their mission failed. It failed because not all of the imposters on Earth had been there. They’d replaced Gentry, yet he hadn’t been part of the political attaché. The Conservatives still had a

foothold on the planet. Given the current state of things with the mass-riots and general chaos, it would be the perfect time for them to invade full-force and they wouldn't need to bother with disguises. In trying to preserve their way of life, she and Sidney had made a bad situation worse.

“We have to go back.”

“Go back? What are you talking about?”

Angry at her own arrogance, Ronan tried to get out of the bed only to be held down by Sidney's strong hands. “I have to fix this, damn it. I have to try something.”

“How? There is no way to fix this. All we can do is wait for things to settle down.”

“And when the Guard invades, what then? I tell you, it does not have to be this way. I can change things.”

“You mean like you did before?” Sidney asked. “When you came back in time to save me from being killed?”

Ronan nodded. “Yes, and even once again since then. Only last time I tried to save you, I was too late. You left for Rock Hall two days before you had in my original time line. By the time I arrived, the stalker had already been there. You died in my arms.”

Sidney shivered at this new information. “That was twice I died violently.” “Fate has a way of trying to set its original plan back in motion.” “But you went back to your time so you could come back and try again?”

“I very nearly failed again,” Ronan admitted. “I tried to come through a few minutes earlier than before but I bounced back to the gate. It's one of the paradoxes of time travel. You can't go back to a time where you might encounter yourself. I had to settle for sending you a warning and returning a few minutes later than I wanted.”

“The knife. Well, that explains how it got in my bed. Hang on, if we can't go back to a time where we've already been, how are we going to undo all of this?”

Ronan shook her head. “I don't know, but I know we have no choice. I have to go if only to know if we were successful. We missed at least one of the secret police because Gentry wasn't there and the longer we stay here the less likely we'll be able to change anything later. Since we missed one, the Konservative government could still come to power.”

Sidney nodded. “All right, I'll go along with your idea but with one change. I'm coming with you.”

Ronan felt relieved. In her current condition, she'd need all the help she could get. She was still belching anesthesia. “Thank you. I don't want to go back to a world without you in it.”

SIDNEY WAS SURPRISED, but happy that Ronan wasn't going to argue with her. She was far too deep into this mess and felt just as responsible for what was going on outside. The rioters had left the hospital untouched for now but if they continued, it would only be a matter of time. Many lives were at stake and Sidney was no shrinking violet. Someone had to take a stand and she was in the right position to do so.

“Good. Now, we just have to wait until you're recovered and plan what to do next.”

“No, we have to go now.”

“What? You've been unconscious for two days. You were shot five times. They're not just going to let you waltz out of here. I'm not going to let you waltz out of here.”

“Haven't you been listening to me?” Ronan shouted back and winced from a lance of pain. “We don't have the luxury of time, not from this end. Look at that television and tell me you want to wait.”

Sidney couldn't say it. She looked at the screen and saw that things hadn't improved in the last few minutes. The newscaster still gave constant updates on the muted set, but the scene had switched to show a burning skyline. Crimson washed the entire scene in the gloom of night and a caption underneath read, “Los Angeles.”

We did this.

She turned back to her lover. “Tomorrow, we wait until morning. But if you pull those stitches loose I will say ‘I told you so’ this time.”

“Agreed,” Ronan said and then smiled. “Now do you think I could have some water?”

Sidney rushed to get a glass of water for her and held the straw. “Any idea how to pull this off? This place is surrounded by the media, not to mention the general state of public unrest.”

Ronan pushed the glass away. “There was a red crystal in my jacket pocket. It's octagonal shaped. We'll need that since the time gate locks onto its signature for retrieval. If we have that, we can leave from this room.”

“I'll check with the head nurse. I'm sure they've stored your clothes somewhere, but what about transportation? Won't we need your motorcycle to get around once we get to your time?”

“No. We can use the professor's car. One thing I learned from my previous jump is that time is not constant. I'd been gone for several months but the explosives I planted around the gate hadn't gone off yet.”

“Explosives? I think maybe you’d better fill me in and this time don’t skip any details.”

A nurse came in to check Ronan’s vital signs and interrupted them. The woman was very friendly and pressed some pills into Ronan’s hand but she didn’t say what they were for. She stayed and watched until she obediently took them.

“That’s a mild sedative,” she informed them belatedly, missing the worried look on their faces. “It’ll help you sleep. I’ll let your doctor know that you’re ready to see him. He’s making his rounds right now.”

She left the room and Ronan groaned in frustration. “The last thing I need to do right now is sleep. We have plans to make.”

“Don’t worry, darling.” Sidney took her hand. Secretly she was glad Ronan would get some rest before morning. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if she lay awake all night worrying. “I’ll find that crystal and get us some clothing while you’re sleeping. You can fill me in on the other details in the morning.”

“Anything will do as long as I don’t have a slit all the way up my backside,” Ronan said sarcastically, referring to the hospital gown she currently wore. “When we get to the time gate we can take the professor’s car to my apartment. I’ll have clothing there that will make us less conspicuous.”

Sidney pressed a tender kiss onto Ronan’s forehead. “Get some rest and leave everything else to me.”

It didn’t take long for Ronan to fall asleep with the help of the sedative. After she had, Sidney used her cell phone to contact her agent. She let Joanne Dupree know that she would be unavailable for the next few days though it really wasn’t necessary considering the state of panic gripping the country. Still, she had to keep up appearances. Sidney didn’t quite know how this time travel thing really worked anyway. From what Ronan said, she’d been able to return from her own time within minutes of leaving. Depending on how things worked out next, Sidney wasn’t sure when they would return to the 21st century...if ever.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“ARE YOU SURE this is such a great idea?” Sidney asked, puffing from exertion.

She'd agreed to this last night but after only twenty minutes of trying to set their scheme in motion, she knew she'd been right the first time. This was dumb. Already Sidney was queasy from trying to help Ronan remove her I.V. More accurately, Ronan finally removed it on her own. Sidney had only been able to press down on the area with gauze while her lover pulled out the needle. The idea of pulling the thing out of her arm made Sidney's stomach clench unpleasantly.

The only thing going right so far was that her doctor had stopped by last night and removed the heart monitor. At least they didn't have to contend with any alarms because Ronan had disconnected herself.

"We don't really have a choice," Ronan reminded her again and clenched in pain. She leaned heavily on Sidney, her cheeks flushed from the effort of dressing. At least they were finally ready.

"Ronan, you can barely walk. Are you sure we can't wait just a few days?"

"Too late. I'm not putting that tube back in and I highly doubt that you could. Besides, I'll be fine. There is technology in my own time that can help repair these injuries."

"Right." Sidney thought of all the fancy gadgets she'd seen since meeting Ronan. That didn't mean she was just going to give up and go merrily along with this harebrained scheme. "What about blood loss? Can any of these devices replace the blood you lost or help you get some strength back?" It would be incredibly dangerous to try to confront their adversaries unless Ronan was healthy.

"I'm afraid only time can do that and you are my strength. The injuries, however, are another story. You're right when you say I need medical assistance, but not from these archaic practices. If I'd been conscious I wouldn't have let you bring me to a hospital."

Miffed by Ronan's ungrateful attitude, Sidney huffed, "Well, pardon me for interrupting your death. Did you ever think that death might spoil your master plan, too?"

Ronan looked instantly contrite and wrapped her arms around Sidney. "I'm sorry," she said looking for forgiveness in Sidney's stormy eyes. "I didn't mean to sound so thankless. I'm just frustrated. I'm afraid I'm not very good at feeling helpless."

Sidney knew Ronan didn't like to feel dependent on anyone. She sighed and let go of her anger before returning the embrace. "You can't help it if you're bossy."

Ronan smiled back at her and leaned down, slowly pressing her lips to Sidney's. Both took the time to savor the taste and softness of the other's lips before they reluctantly separated.

"Okay, you're forgiven. Now let's get out of here before we get busted."

"At least I don't have to transport back with a slit up my dress."

Sidney had managed to scrounge a pair of scrubs from somewhere, but Ronan was still barefoot. It had been hard enough for her to get the control crystal from the head nurse. If she'd asked for Ronan's shoes, it would have seemed very suspicious.

Besides, she'd definitely attract attention in hospital scrubs and dress shoes.

Ronan turned so that her back was against Sidney's front. Sidney looked around her shoulder so she could see what happened next. Ronan held the crystal in her right hand and prepared to turn the dial with her left. Briefly, Sidney wondered if they had everything they needed.

"Okay, I'm ready."

"I realize you're trying not to hurt me," Ronan said, turning to look down at her, "but you might want to hold on a little tighter, unless you want to be left behind?"

Sidney's grip tightened significantly as she waited for Ronan to activate the device. A pop of displaced air rushed in to fill the void where the two women had stood.

Sidney swallowed and slowly opened her eyes. Apprehension made her tighten her grip around Ronan's waist. From their earlier discussion, she knew Ronan didn't know what they'd find anymore than Sidney did. Since time wasn't a constant, any number of possible scenarios could be waiting for them. They might transport back and find the Professor's basement still lined with explosives. Still again, it was possible that the explosives had already gone off and there would be nothing to transport to, in which case they would simply return to Ronan's hospital room.

Her most fervent hope was that they wouldn't materialize in a room surrounded by Black Guards.

During the brief transport, Sidney felt like her insides were trying to be on the outside. Her skin tingled and all of the hair stood up on her arms. A great weight seemed to be pressing down, making it all but impossible to breathe. There was a loud pop and everything went dark for an instant. Then she was standing somewhere else.

Sidney looked around curiously, her blood thundering through her veins because of the sudden adrenaline surge. The room was just as Ronan described it and they appeared to be standing in the middle of a transparent bubble. She couldn't see any explosives.

"I don't believe it," she said. "We're alive."

Ronan turned and looked at her with an amused expression before she tried to walk out of the sphere. "This dome is new."

Sidney reluctantly released Ronan and followed her. The basement turned out to be a cavernous room with many shelves and benches lining all four walls. The room was in a

somewhat organized state of disarray and left her with the impression that whoever worked here knew exactly where every object was located.

While Ronan looked around briefly, Sidney wandered over to one of the workbenches. Bits of gears, springs, and gadgets she couldn't identify decorated the surface as well as tools and smudges of grease.

The Professor must have been a very busy person.

"There are no signs of explosives." Ronan's voice came from behind her and Sidney turned to look at her. "Nor are there any signs of Kinsky."

Since Ronan had told her of the gunfight with her former partner, and that she hadn't had time to remove his body before she returned to Sidney's own time, it meant things had changed.

"Maybe he isn't dead anymore."

Ronan nodded in agreement. "Perhaps, and if that is true no doubt other things are different as well."

"Such as?"

The sound of footsteps caused Sidney's eyes to widen in panic. She ducked behind one of the time machine's rails without waiting for Ronan's answer.

She wondered if the Black Guard or other agents of the Neue Konservatives finally arrived to take control of the time apparatus. On the other hand, maybe they'd been here all along and were now coming to investigate the sound of voices. Sidney didn't know but from what Ronan had told her about this century, she wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

"Ronan," she whispered loudly. "Get over here."

It was too late and Ronan was apparently too sore to move very quickly. Sidney regretted that they'd been standing so far apart, because she was powerless to help. She could only watch as Ronan visibly calmed her features and stood up straight to face whoever was about to come through the door.

Sidney couldn't see who entered the room because of where she hid, but she could clearly see her lover's face. To say that she was surprised would have been an understatement. Ronan went stock-still and her mouth fell open though no words came out. For a moment, Sidney thought she was in some kind of shock.

Then Ronan said in a soft voice that trembled, "Professor Horton? Is it really you?"

Sidney leaned around the edge of the rail and recognized the face of a man she'd only seen in a photograph. She thought he was dead, and although he was clearly a few years older than he had been in the photo, it was undoubtedly the same man.

“Mein lieber?” the old man asked, obviously confused. He'd stopped just inside the door to the lab and the expression on his grizzled old face mirrored Ronan's. *“Aber das ist unmöglich. Sie verlassen.”*

Sidney heard the professor speak but it was in German and she couldn't understand a word. Then she saw Ronan shake her head, as though she was trying to clear it of some kind of fog before she replied in her native language. Sidney still didn't understand, but whatever it was the professor looked as though he'd been stunned. Sidney gathered she told him he was supposed to be dead.

Then Ronan stumbled and Sidney scooted out from behind the rail to help her. She was too slow and the professor beat her to Ronan. He supported her long, slender frame with his own rather weak arms. Then he saw Sidney and his head snapped back in surprise.

“It's all right, Professor,” Ronan reassured him in English. “She's with me. What do you mean that I just left?”

Sidney smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. “I'm Sidney Weaver. I know this is all a little confusing, but I assure you that we can explain.”

Still, they had to start somewhere and Sidney was confident that they could piece all of their various histories together to make some sense of what was happening.

Professor Horton helped Ronan over to sit on a stool with Sidney's assistance. He didn't comment any further and from the frown on his face, she thought he was also trying to piece things together. He'd blurted out that Ronan had just left, but now here she was, injured in the basement. Not to mention that she had shown up with a friend he had never seen before and Sidney could understand how it might be a lot to take in all at once.

“What happened to you?” he finally asked in slightly accented English. Sidney didn't have to listen very closely to understand him, which only proved to her that what Ronan had said was true. English was just as common as German in the Fatherland of the future, where all countries were governed by the same politics.

“How did you end up in this condition and how did you come to be in the basement when I know that I just walked you to the front door?”

While the scientist asked his questions, he lifted up Ronan's shirt to see the injury over which she'd protectively placed her hand. His breath hissed between his lips when he saw the stitches in her side. Sidney knew they only represented one of the many places where doctors had removed bullets from the tender frame.

“What the devil?”

Sidney ignored what he obviously intended as a rhetorical question. “Maybe you should tell him what has happened?”

Ronan nodded and thought for a moment before she began to speak. It didn’t take long before Sidney realized she’d decided to go for the abridged version of events.

“About seven months ago you showed me how to work the time machine. Shortly after I left that night the Konservatives...had you killed.”

Professor Horton didn’t interrupt her, but Sidney heard another surprised gasp.

“Lieutenant Sloan told me about it the next morning. I’d already uncovered evidence that the Regime wasn’t what it appeared to be, that in secret they were totalitarian extremists bent on world conquest through population control. At the time, I believed that such control was meant to be in the form of political government. I found out that an actress from the 21st century had been used as a pawn for the launch of our government, but there was nothing I could do about it.

“Then you showed me the time machine and an assassin, I suspect a member of the Guard, killed you. I decided that they wouldn’t get away with it. I used your device to travel back in time and tried to change past events.”

“Let me guess,” the professor interrupted sarcastically. “Things didn’t work out as you expected. That is what happens when you fool around with time as if it’s your own private playground. People’s lives are being affected by what you did, Ronan.”

Sidney started to interrupt in defense of her lover, but Ronan beat her to it. “I know, but you don’t understand. I found out that the Konservatives were not just men bent on political control, but men bent on world domination. Their idea of population control is to begin the Regime’s reign in the 21st century so that none can ever defeat them. Once they are in place, they’ll begin exterminating entire groups of people that might constitute a threat.”

Ronan looked at her for support then and Sidney squeezed her arm gently. Silently, she encouraged her to continue and hoped Ronan could draw strength from her touch.

“Sidney and I tried to stop them, but I’m afraid we’ve made an awful mess of things.”

“Ronan, the secret police are hardly invaders or anarchists. They are our friends, who wish only the best for us. If they are visiting the past, I’m sure it is in an effort to make life better for all of us.”

Sidney was shocked to hear the professor’s calm statement. Ronan’s expression showed that she was just as surprised and Sidney wondered exactly how much they had changed in their attempt to thwart the infiltration in her own time. Instead of a heavy replacement tactic, the political machine had decided to take the “We come in Peace” approach.

“It’s not true,” Sidney protested. “Perhaps they’ve been revisiting our past but these men are invading, insidiously and bit by bit, but the goal is the same: to take over another time and wipe out liberty at any cost. In my time, they were trying to infiltrate the government so they would have people in key positions until they could take over completely. That way they could stop any emergency actions that might prevent their success.”

Horton stared at her as though her comments were beyond consideration. Finally, he said, “We will discuss the government’s intentions later. For now, I have other concerns. What are these?” The professors indicated the stitches all over Ronan’s torso.

“Bullet wounds,” Sidney offered. “Ronan was shot several times by the Secret Service. When she attacked the Guard imposters, the government guys got a little trigger happy.”

She tried to keep the stony anger out of her voice, but didn’t quite succeed. It still irked her that Ronan had almost been killed by people she had tried to protect.

The professor took a deep breath and looked into Sidney’s eyes. For a second she wondered what he was looking for but whatever it was, it seemed he was satisfied. After a moment, he nodded. “I’m not sure I believe you, at least not your take on things, but before we finish this discussion I suggest we repair this damage.”

He walked over to a cabinet that Sidney hadn’t noticed before. Mounted on the wall beside the entryway, it looked like a medicine cabinet that one would find on the wall of a bathroom. Professor Horton opened the doors and rummaged around for a second before he came back with a few things. One of them Sidney recognized as a data analyzer and another was a medicinal spray like the one Ronan had used on her in the swamps. It had dispensed an analgesic directly into her blood stream that had made her feel better instantly. At least Ronan would be out of pain, but Sidney didn’t know what the other items he carried were.

The professor lifted the edge of Ronan’s shirt and began to run the mystery object back and forth over the wound. Sidney saw that he didn’t actually touch the skin; rather a yellow light erupted from the pencil-thin device and traced over the stitches. After a few seconds, the threads began to lighten from a dark black, to a lighter gray and then they disappeared altogether.

Sidney was astounded. The stitches were gone and there wasn’t a single scar left to mark the bullet wounds. Professor Horton continued until he’d attended to all of the damage on her body. Throughout all of this, he was silent as he concentrated on mending Ronan, but when he finished and straightened up that changed. Sidney’s ears almost flattened against her head as he chastised his young friend.

“If you insist on traversing into dangerous history, do you think you might avoid being treated by Josef Mengele? Honestly, did they use leeches on you, too? This is absolutely barbaric.”

Ronan surprised Sidney by reaching up to hug the man’s neck. “I missed you too, Professor.”

The professor allowed the embrace for a second before he pulled away with a flushed face. He looked almost embarrassed and then he cleared his throat and put the medical instruments down on the worktable.

“As far as what you were saying earlier, I did show you how to work the time machine, but that was just this evening. Then I showed you to the door. You said in the original time line the Regime had me killed. Since I know that many of them are a bunch of cowards that operate in the dead of night, I can only assume that they intended to finish me off after I went to bed. However, I still find it hard to believe they would contemplate such a thing.”

“It’s true,” Ronan assured him.

“But we’ve changed things,” Sidney said. “By attempting to stop the government three hundred years ago, they may operate differently now. Ronan said she’s come back once before to the basement. When she did, you were still dead, the basement was still rigged to explode, and she had to kill her partner with...some kind of a laser. There may not be an assassin this time around.”

Professor Horton looked like he’d been stunned by the revelation of all this new information. “Well, you’ve certainly been busy, haven’t you? I think I’ll make some tea. Would you care to join me?”

He led the way out of the basement saying, “After the tea is made I’ll expect you to start again from the beginning...slowly.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

THEY TALKED OVER tea and cookies for hours while Ronan attempted to tell her old friend everything she could remember. Sidney filled in a few details but for the most part was content to sit back and listen. Professor Horton, as a scientist, was a skeptic by nature but he’d known Ronan a long time. He easily believed what she told him she experienced, but it was much harder to convince him that the Neue Konservatives were responsible for everything she had been through.

He pointed out that the government was capable of such a thing since political extremists made up the party, but the government was not the Guard and hadn’t even existed in Sidney’s century. He contended that the secret police might be acting without authorization. Lacking the disc that contained their intelligence on the infiltrators, they had no proof.

“So what are you going to do? Do you have a plan or are you going to continue to play cowgirl without any consideration to your actions?”

Ronan winced a little at the implied rebuke, but Sidney had learned over the course of the last few hours that the old man was only trying to get her to think. Sidney answered the question she thought the professor really wanted to ask.

“Respectfully, I feel certain that the party leaders are behind this. What possible purpose would the Guard have for acting on their own? Where would they get the funding they need? We have to find out who is really pulling the strings and how far the government’s policies for population control have gone since they had an early start in my century. We believed we killed the initial recon team, but then realized we missed someone. That act probably slowed them down, but it obviously didn’t stop them or the Konservative government wouldn’t have come to power.”

“Did you ever consider that it did work,” the professor argued. “Maybe this is what human destiny was meant to be. How can you be sure?”

“We can’t, but Ronan and I have to know that all of this isn’t the result of our actions.”

“Personally, I am sure the Konservatives are a hostile invasion force,” Ronan added. “Even if they have sugar-coated things, I refuse to believe our destiny is one of bigotry and hatred and casually murdering helpless old men in their sleep. I know you don’t want to believe it, Professor, but I know these things to be true, and I need to stop them.”

Horton smiled at Ronan’s passionate words. “I would like to think we are better than that. What I see in the streets has disturbed me for years, but you’ll forgive me if I think that the Regime and the Guard are unrelated until I see some real proof. Still, speaking of casual murder there is something you should know before you leave. The police caught a group of rebels sneaking into the government headquarters last night with a bag of explosives. They were planning on leveling the building.”

“What?” Ronan said, astounded. “You can’t sneak into the headquarters. It’s a fortress.”

“So the Guard discovered them. They’re due for execution at three o’clock this afternoon. All citizens are mandated to watch as a reminder that treason will not be tolerated.”

“An execution just like that? Don’t they even get a trial,” Sidney demanded and turned to Ronan. “You didn’t tell me this kind of thing happened.”

“That’s because it doesn’t. This is the first time I’ve heard of a public execution although I’d begun to suspect the government of killing any outspoken dissenters in secret.”

Professor Horton seemed surprised by her denial. “Ronan, how can you say that? Any insurgents caught by the Regime are always publicly executed.”

“Maybe they are now. It seems we changed things for the worse by killing that Guard contingent.”

“They realized the most effective way of dealing with open opposition was public slaying. People would think twice about rocking the boat,” Sidney speculated.

Horton frowned as he began to come around to their position. “After you revealed those men on broadcast television, what was the public’s reaction?”

“Pandemonium, chaos, rioting in the streets...” Sidney replied, ashamed of what had resulted from their actions.

Ronan picked up the thread. “We were going to come back and see how strong a foothold the Conservatives had gotten or if we’d been successful in stopping them. Then we were going to try to go back and eliminate them some other way to avoid the mass hysteria created before. I just haven’t yet figured out how. We can’t go back to an earlier time because we’ve already been there.”

Professor Horton reached out to rest a hand on the young detective’s shoulder. “Ronan, you are smarter than this. What were you thinking by acting so rashly?”

Ronan looked at Sidney for support and Sidney realized she’d risk hell’s fury to protect her. The old man didn’t miss the look that passed between them.

“Ah, I see. I love you like my own daughter, but I have always thought your sentimental heart would get you in trouble. I would ask you to plan carefully, but I may have answers to at least one of your problems. Excuse me for a moment.”

Professor Horton left the room while Ronan and Sidney exchanged curious glances. A few seconds later, he came back with a strange-looking device. Sidney had seen the gadget on the workbench before, but not paid it any attention.

“What is it?”

“I call it a phase inducer. When I showed you the time machine, I explained that a person could not travel to a point in the past where they’d already been. This device takes the person slightly out of phase so that the paradox is eliminated.”

“Two places at once?” Ronan asked with a smile. “It’s just like you to attempt what anyone else would consider impossible.”

“More or less that is the answer,” he responded. “By being out of phase you would not be visible to anyone else. But might I suggest something?”

Ronan nodded and Sidney looked intrigued.

“When you go back, try for a time before all of this happened. I’m not denying what you say is true, but if it is you must take care of the problem quietly.” He turned to Sidney. “Come and see me later after you get some sleep. Perhaps by then I will have rigged another one for you.”

Finally, he told them to let him think on the situation and offered them the use of his car to return to Ronan’s apartment. Sidney noticed that her lover already moved easier as they walked toward the front door, but she sensed some hesitation about leaving.

“Ronan, is something wrong?”

“It’s just that I might attract a little attention running around in scrubs and barefoot.”

Professor Horton snorted. “Wait just a moment.”

He walked over to a closet and brought back a large black overcoat and a set of worn house shoes. “They might be a little big, but they should do until you get home.”

Ronan hugged the man again and pulled on the garments. He handed her the keys to his car and surprised her when he hugged her too. “Be careful and don’t be stopped on the way to your apartment. You don’t have your papers on you and I don’t think you want to come under military scrutiny.”

Ronan drove the battered old station wagon slowly over slick streets. Rain came down in steady sheets in the pitch-blackness and the street lamps did little to brighten the landscape. Everywhere she looked Sidney saw trash billowing along the deserted streets and things seemed ill kept and dreary. The city had a deserted air to it and no other cars passed on the road.

“Is it always this quiet?” Sidney asked. Even though the weather was bad and it was quite late, she was accustomed to seeing other people out and about.

Ronan’s expression looked pinched with worry, but she answered. “Yes, there is a curfew in effect. There is no one allowed on the streets after ten without special authority. I actually have that authority, but I don’t have my authorization papers on me.”

“Where are they?”

“I have a copy of them in the apartment. Let’s just hope we don’t run into a checkpoint.”

“But wouldn’t you know where a checkpoint is?” Sidney asked. “Wouldn’t they always be in the same spot?”

“What would be the point in that? If you knew where a checkpoint was always going to be, you could just avoid it.”

Good point, Sidney thought. From that moment on, she was a nervous wreck and conversation was out of the question until they finally pulled into an underground structure and

Ronan switched off the engine. A quick elevator trip and they stood outside Ronan's penthouse apartment. Sidney could see from the plush décor that this definitely wasn't a run-of-the-mill apartment structure. Large windows on one side of the hallway offered a view of the city and the bay. Up close, the city had looked dank and dirty but from the top floor where they stood, the lights gave it a magnificent glow.

Plush carpet lined the floors. It was so thick Sidney could feel her feet sinking into the piles even with her shoes on. Paintings in gilt-edged frames lined the walls, and from the look of them, they were not reproductions. The inside of the apartment was even more spectacular and she could see that Ronan had wonderful taste. The house in the Florida Keys had been homey, comfortable, and beautiful, but this apartment was even more amazing.

A large fireplace took up most of the outside wall next to another huge window. A leather sofa and chairs looked comfortable enough to sink into and sleep for days. The mix of blues and silvers made her feel soothed and she wondered if that was the intention of the decorator. After a long day of fighting crime in a dark and dreary city where crime was all many people had, it made sense that Ronan would want to leave that world outside when she came home.

"This is wonderful."

She felt Ronan slide up behind her and then warm, strong arms embraced Sidney from behind. Gratefully, she leaned back against her lover and let her head fall back against Ronan's shoulder. She hadn't even known she needed the embrace until Ronan reached out to her. Sidney had felt overwhelmed since this whole joyride began, focused on simply defeating the futuristic imposters. Now she realized that this was what they were fighting for. Not just for their freedom, but for the right to love and live.

The Guard invaders would take all of that and more from the people of the Earth if given half a chance. They would not get it, not if she had anything to say.

"I'm going to shower," Ronan said, and placed a kiss on the top of Sidney's head. "Do you want to look around a little?"

"Yes." Sidney saw the monitor on the end wall and asked, "Is that a television?"

Ronan looked over and grinned before she answered. "In a way. It's also a communications panel, what you would call a telephone."

"That's some phone."

"It is, but the main difference is that you can see who is calling and they can see you. It might be prudent for you not to answer any incoming calls while we're here."

Sidney noticed that Ronan said "while we're here." It would seem that she intended to return to Sidney's time with her. With all the technological marvels of this era, she felt very loved that Ronan would be agreeable to give all of that up just to be with her.

“You’ll just have to make sure you show me how to use it.”

Ronan stepped around Sidney so she could lean down and rest their foreheads together with her eyes closed. Sidney could feel the tension in her body and recognized it as the same emotion she had seen on her face in the car.

“What’s wrong?”

Ronan sighed gustily. “You’re very intuitive, you know that?”

“If that was meant to be a distraction it didn’t work.”

The chuckle in her ear made Sidney smile slightly but still Ronan didn’t answer. She had started to wonder if she would when she finally spoke.

“What are we going to do about the rebels? We can’t just let them be killed.”

Ronan’s voice was tortured and Sidney knew she somehow blamed herself for their capture. There was no point in verbalizing that. She tightened her arms around Ronan’s waist briefly and then pulled away.

“Take your shower. I’ll just have a little look around.”

“There’s coffee in the kitchen.”

Coffee was one of Sidney’s favorite vices. It could help her calm down as easily as it could energize her, but it wasn’t anything she was interested in now.

“How about after we both have a shower, you help me relax in other ways?”

Ronan’s eyebrow rose sharply, but a feral grin curled the corner of her mouth. She suddenly leaned down and captured Sidney’s lips in a quick, hungry kiss. Then she pulled back and looked into her eyes.

“I’ll hurry.”

“You’d better.”

Soon both had showered and climbed into Ronan’s queen-sized bed without clothes. Sidney started to shiver in anticipation. They hadn’t made love in almost a week, before Ronan’s courageous decision that almost ended up getting her killed. Sidney was dying to have her in her arms again.

Ronan leaned over her on one elbow but instead of a kiss, Sidney watched her raise her face and say, “Computer, wake me up at 6 a.m.”

A beep sounded overhead. Sidney glanced toward the headboard and saw some mechanical device, apparently their version of an alarm clock.

“That’s handy.” She slipped her hands down Ronan’s naked back. Muscles rippled under her fingers and goose bumps broke out on Sidney’s arms as she shivered again in arousal. Ronan lowered her head to capture Sidney’s lips in a soft kiss.

Sidney groaned as she slipped her tongue into Ronan’s mouth and felt the full breasts press against her. A hot, sizzling current of desire shuddered through her. She felt as if she were about to drown as she melted into Ronan’s sweet mouth.

Answering the groan of desire, Ronan reached a long arm behind Sidney to cup her buttocks. She pulled her up, pressing closely to join their burning centers. Hungrily, blindly, Sidney sought Ronan’s lips again and again. Sidney moaned again, eager for her touch. Ronan bent to run her lips below the fringe of dark lashes as she kissed Sidney’s cheekbones. Sidney closed the gap between them. Their lips met tentatively, then with passion. Ronan’s tongue explored Sidney’s mouth and probed deeper as she demanded a response. Finally drawing away, Ronan stroked her hands slowly down Sidney’s body.

Eyes glazed, stunned with passion, Ronan trembled. “Sidney.”

They kissed again and suddenly Ronan’s hands were on her, hot and urgent. Sidney felt her body grow taut with need. Under the lips and tongue, her own mouth answered. A rush, fiery and wet, exploded from her core and she trembled. Sidney absorbed the guttural cries of Ronan’s passion. She was a woman consumed, desperate to consume in return. Urgently she reached for Ronan’s shoulders as she kissed and tasted the strong, hot body. Ronan treated the bare flesh of her neck to light nipping and the fluttering of her tongue. Sidney arched her back in response.

“I’ve missed touching you,” Ronan told her between kisses. “Let me love you, Sidney.”

She began to kiss her way from Sidney’s neck down to her breasts. Sidney felt her nipples harden as Ronan’s lips and tongue suddenly found them. She held on to her as she groaned her pleasure, encouraging a stronger touch. Ronan’s tongue swirled downward and Sidney’s stomach muscles tightened at the caresses that teased. She realized that Ronan was making love to her as though it would be the last time and she grabbed hold of her shoulders to steady herself.

“Ronan,” Sidney cried out when she felt the young woman’s hot breath at the juncture of her thighs.

Then she shut her eyes as stars exploded in the darkness. Suddenly she felt the most sensitive part of her body smoothly enveloped in wet, searing heat as Ronan’s knowing mouth sucked her in and lovingly worshipped her.

Sidney grasped at the comforter as she shivered violently. Ronan slowed and entered the pulsating opening below with one finger as she sought and found the place inside that made Sidney crazy. She pressed upward against Sidney’s core.

“Oh,” Sidney cried out again, and arched her spine to give Ronan better access. Her body thrashed on the bed under her expert manipulation. Her hips responded instinctively and started to counter against Ronan’s hand.

“Oh, yes, so good,” she groaned. “Please don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.”

Ronan’s tongue pressed Sidney’s clit hard against her pelvis and she thrust deeply inside her lover. Sidney cried out repeatedly as her body burst into ecstatic release. Finally, her head lolled back against the pillows. Breathing heavily, she welcomed Ronan into her embrace as she hugged and kissed her as her heart finally began to slow down.

Ronan kissed her passionately as she stretched out on Sidney’s form. Their legs entwined together and Sidney could feel the copious moisture at her center soaking her thigh. She felt desire resurge through her veins and urged Ronan onto her back. She lowered herself to lie on top of her strong body. She slowly moved against Ronan, pulled away, and pressed down again. She circled her hips rhythmically, touching and not touching, mercilessly teasing.

“Please,” Ronan gasped. “I’m burning up.”

With a gentle knee, Sidney parted Ronan’s legs and pressed her thigh against the liquid heat. Ronan moaned and grasped hold of Sidney’s buttocks as she arched up into her.

“Tell me what you want,” Sidney invited huskily into the aroused woman’s ear. She traced the delicate shell with her tongue, and was pleased when she felt her tremble.

Ronan had to swallow twice before she could respond. “T...touch my breasts.”

Sidney shifted and propped herself on an elbow with her body draped over her lover. She slid a palm over the smooth plane of Ronan’s chest until her hand filled with one breast. It was a creamy heaviness, curving and pliant, overflowing, and incredibly sweet as she lowered her head and took a satiny nipple into her mouth. Her hand drifted over to tease the other nipple and she pinched the taut bud between her fingertips.

Sidney knew how incredibly sensitive Ronan’s breasts were and took her time as she teased them with almost harsh pinches and tender swipes of her tongue until Ronan moaned.

Ronan pulled Sidney’s head back up with her fingers buried in her hair. Her kiss was aggressive as she devoured her mouth. Then Sidney’s hands were back on her breasts as she stroked slowly and sweetly. Ronan’s body jerked as one of the small hands found the moisture between her legs. She shuddered as the fingers began to stroke and Sidney heard the sound of her breath as it caught in her throat.

Urgently rotating her hips, Ronan suddenly stopped as two long fingers penetrated past the tight muscles and slid deep inside. Sidney’s tongue thrust in and out of her mouth as her hand matched the urgent lift of Ronan’s hips. Sidney felt Ronan shudder with the intensity of the

sensations in her body as she pressed against her. Then her body began to quiver with the force of her pleasure.

Ronan groaned as the spasms tore through her. Slowly she settled against the sheets. Sidney slid up into her arms and they relaxed into mutual contentment. The respite was temporary and then they immersed themselves again in the scent and texture of each other, trying to satiate a hunger.

Several exquisite hours later, Sidney felt her muscles start to relax into slumber and dimly heard Ronan mumble from somewhere far away, “Good night, my love.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

THAT NIGHT SIDNEY enjoyed the best sleep she could remember in a very long time. She didn't wake up once through the night, but was somehow aware that Ronan's arms never left her. The next morning, she awakened snuggled deep into Ronan's bountiful breasts and thought she had died in her sleep and gone to heaven. Then the computer activated the alarm and ruined the illusion. All too soon, Ronan was dressed and on her way to the office.

“Why?” Sidney asked, concerned that she was about to walk into the lion's den. She was still in a robe that Ronan had lent her and sat on the sofa with a cup of coffee.

“If this reality is so much more open that they conduct public executions, I may be able to overhear something vital.”

“What am I supposed to do while you're gone? I came to help, not hide in a closet.”

“And you will help,” Ronan assured her. “But you cannot come to work with me. That would draw attention that we don't want. I need you to stay here, but you won't be sitting around.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Watch the news. I'll show you how to work the broadcast feeds. Just make sure you don't accidentally accept any incoming calls. It may sound like I'm giving you busywork, but you can find out a lot about a society from the news feeds. You might learn something that could save our lives later.”

Ronan walked over to the huge monitor and picked up the remote. “This monitor allows you to see who is calling as well as be seen by them.”

“You told me that last night. I’ll be careful, but what am I listening for?”

Ronan shrugged. “Anything that helps you to understand the functioning of this government can only help us. More important though are any broadcasts of troop or police movements, executions, or public announcements. Most of the broadcasts will be in German so I’ll turn on the translation matrix.”

“Translation matrix, huh? That’ll definitely help. Subtitles, but spoken instead of written.”

Ronan smiled and shared a long, lingering kiss before she turned to the door. “I promise I’ll be back in about an hour. We still have to do something about that execution this afternoon.”

Sidney knew Ronan was making light of the situation, like what they had to do later was easy stuff. She appreciated the attempt to help her feel better and decided not to make a big deal out of things right now.

Turning on the huge set, Sidney retrieved another cup of coffee and settled in to watch. As she watched a news channel something suddenly struck her as unusual: no one had visible tattoos, earrings, eyebrow rings, nose rings, lip rings or had subjected their tongues to piercing. Everyone interviewed or seen on the street was subdued, keeping their heads down to avoid undue attention. It all seemed a little weird to her and she started to feel like she was under scrutiny even inside the safety of Ronan’s apartment.

Although she was in a strange environment watching bizarre societal interactions, she felt comforted by Ronan’s familiar scent that lingered in the air. With little to do but worry about her welfare or try to find a distraction, Sidney carefully watched the broadcasts to try to glean some feel for the world in which she suddenly found herself adrift. After a while, the magnitude of their situation began to creep into her mind. Sidney started to wonder what she was doing here, in this time and in this place. They were only two women willing and eager to go up against a fascist government that had operated with autonomy. In addition, they had the secret police to consider. All things being equal, she thought it a possibility that she and Ronan were out of their minds.

For a second it was a narrow escape whether or not she would panic. Sidney’s heart rate suddenly doubled, her blood pressure shot up so high she wondered if this was what a heart attack felt like.

“It’s just anxiety,” she said aloud and took a deep breath. “I need to take a break from watching the news.”

She stood up and went into the bathroom to take a shower, hoping the steam would help clear her mind. The warm water ran over her curves like a lover’s caress and Sidney suddenly had a mental image of Ronan’s hands on her skin. Arousal shot through her and she gasped at the

sensation before she pulled back from the spray and opened her eyes. Now was not the time to indulge in fantasy. Ronan would be back soon and she wanted to be dressed and ready. Sidney reached out and switched the water to a temperature cold enough to make her wince. She was shivering and her teeth had begun to chatter when she emerged a few minutes later and grabbed for a towel.

She dressed in blue jeans, a long-sleeved flannel shirt, thick socks and sturdy hiking boots. The jeans and boots were the same ones she'd worn from her own time, but she dug through Ronan's closet to find the oversize shirt. Sidney needed to roll the sleeves up a little to fit properly, but the cloth still carried Ronan's scent and it comforted her.

Whatever happened this afternoon, she would be ready. Then she went back into the living room to brush up some more on this century's news. Sidney sat back in the deep wing-backed chair and picked up the remote. An image of Ronan flashed through her head and she wondered what her partner was up to at that moment. The thought threatened to set her heart tripping again and she quickly began to flip through the channels. There wasn't anything she could do to help right now, except to trust in Ronan's abilities. The time would come when Sidney would have to help in whatever plan her partner devised. To that end, it was important that she learn as much about her environment as possible. She needed to focus.

Sidney found a news program and listened intently to the ever-prevalent stories of mayhem and robbery. Near the end of the broadcast, a political story aired and her attention sharpened when she heard the name Sloan.

"Sloan? Isn't that the name of Ronan's superior?"

Listening intently, Sidney learned that the man had announced his intention to run for Delegator of the Neue Konservative Regime. She wondered if it was just her, or did such a position seem like the perfect place to implement the government's threat?

A clip of Gustav Sloan ran as he waved to cheering supporters, kissed babies, and generally ran through the whole political shtick. Sidney felt a sense of dread as soon as she saw him. He was a tall, slender man with a swarthy complexion and slicked back blonde hair. The first word that came to mind when she saw him was snaky. While she watched the screen, the voice-over from the newscaster filled her in on the man's background.

"In an unprecedented move Lieutenant Gustav Sloan of the Neue Konservative Regime has announced his bid to become Supreme Ruler of the Fatherland."

An image of Sloan and another man came onto the screen.

"Sloan was born into a farming family in Skierbieszow, Poland. In early 2245, his family fled to Germany to avoid advancing Chinese troops. They lived near Leipzig until Sloan entered the military service in 2263. Decorated for valor during the Russian Blitzkrieg, he received the Order of Merit of the Federal Public of Germany."

“In 2297, he joined the Neue Konservative Regime, climbing quickly to his present position. Lieutenant Sloan has served as advisor to the current Federal German leader, Delegator Weizsacker.

“The election in three months will decide which of these men will be the new Delegator. Will Weizsacker be re-elected or will Germany see a new face of power under Lieutenant Gustav Sloan?”

Sidney stood up with her head buzzing. Was Sloan a member of those responsible for the infiltrators? If so, she had to wonder if his political agenda was the first move in an attempt to usurp power. Did it mean the Guard hadn't yet achieved full infiltration? Maybe they had done some good after all, slowed the invaders down, and made them more cautious about taking over past government leaders. Maybe the Regime had decided to start somewhere more innocuous. With thoughts running rampant, Sidney walked into the kitchen to make a fresh pot of coffee. She looked at the clock and noticed it was getting late.

Where was Ronan?

The loud crack of splintered wood suddenly filled the room as something rammed the front door. Sidney dropped the empty coffee pot and hardly noticed as it shattered on the tile floor. Military troops wearing black tactical gear, including full-face helmets, swarmed in and she turned to run but there was nowhere to go. In seconds, they had her surrounded.

“What do you want?” Sidney faced them squarely, hoping she could bluff her way through. They could hardly know who she was and it was more likely that they had the wrong place. Ronan was an officer of the law and they wouldn't break down her door if they knew that.

A tall German in dress uniform and cap entered and walked over to her. He stood quietly for a moment and smiled cruelly. Then he removed his leather gloves slowly and struck Sidney viciously across the face. “You will not speak unless you are asked a direct question. You are under arrest.”

The man switched to German and said something to his men. Two of them grabbed her by the arms and started to drag her from the room. Sidney struggled uselessly as they hauled her out of the apartment.

“Who are you?” she demanded, ignoring his orders. “Why are you doing this? You have the wrong person.”

He didn't answer her questions and watched as his men hauled Sidney into the cold, rainy, overcast day without a coat. Powerless to resist the men, she could only worry about what might have happened to Ronan and how they'd found out about her. Even more frightful was the possibility that one more might have been added to the list of intended victims for the scheduled execution.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

RONAN HATED TO leave Sidney alone in the apartment. She understood that she wanted to help and was resistant to the idea of just waiting around, but it was necessary. In this world of curfews and paranoia, papers were mandatory. Sidney had none.

Before she went to the office, Ronan intended to meet with her informant at his usual haunt. Although considered just another snitch by many of the other detectives Ronan knew, he had a lot of contacts. If anyone could get what she needed it would be him. She had let him go several times when she had caught him in the vicinity of a crime and he was indebted to her. Unfortunately, the favor she intended to ask of him meant they would be even.

A few blocks west of her apartment, she took the steps leading down to the subway platform. Public transport supplied the anonymity she required and she took the train that would carry her into the heart of the homeless district. The train stopped a few times on the way to let passengers on and off. With each stop, Ronan felt she had traveled farther into the heart of evil. The platforms were littered with debris. Lights flickered uncertainly and shadows loomed. Each time the doors parted, she could see shapes move within the shadows like whoever dwelled there avoided the light. The solid feel of a laser pistol in the shoulder holster made her feel better, but she hoped she wouldn't need it.

The passengers were bedraggled and snaggletoothed, their garments tattered with half-finger gloves. Ronan ignored the stench of unwashed bodies and stared at a fixed point near the exit. Finally, the train stopped and she could just make out a sign in the gloom that let her know she'd arrived. She was through the doors almost before they parted and she heaved a sigh of relief. She headed for the stairs and took them two at a time until she was outside in the overcast day. Even with rain hanging heavy overhead and the chill in the air, she basked in the light that felt like tropical sunshine after confinement in the tunnels. Ronan leaned against the side of the building and closed her eyes for a few moments. She stood upright and pushed away from the support before looking around warily.

In this part of town, Ronan felt it was prudent to stay sharp. Few people were on the streets, most tended to lurk in doorways and dark alleys. When unsuspecting prey wandered into their territory, they quickly became another statistic. The crime rate was high, but hope and morality were low. Ronan consciously attempted to adopt a threatening air of her own and strode quickly down the street to where she would be likely to find her contact. As she walked block after block she would catch flickers of movement out of the corners of her eye, but no one dared to approach. She was too alert to be easy prey.

Another block and Ronan turned down an alley that was wider than most. Schultz wasn't known for his bravery, preferring to hang out in the most deserted areas where he could see any threat coming far in advance. The high stone structures that lined this alley magnified sound, and since most of the gangs traveled in packs, he would have plenty of time to scabble into hiding.

True to form, he was nowhere in sight, but that didn't mean he wasn't here. Ronan's senses told her that he was very close and at just the right moment to leave an impression he would pop out. She walked slowly down the alley, freezing near the end. Where the shadows were thickest, she could just see him. He stood with his arms folded casually as he leaned against the corner of a building.

"Hello, Schultz."

Her greeting was casual as though she had known all along that he stood there. He would not be pleased that she'd forestalled his entrance, but she didn't have time to muck about. Ronan still needed to get to the office and then back to the apartment where Sidney waited.

Schultz stepped into the watery daylight with his hands jammed into his coat pockets. He was a thin man, almost emaciated, and had black hair and deep-set brown eyes. He dressed well enough for people from this low-end district, his garments less tattered than most. His coat was heavy, while his gloves were thick and intact. Schultz wore a hat that Ronan thought of as a fedora low over his eyes and twirled a toothpick casually between his yellow teeth.

"Something I can do for you, Detective Lee? This isn't your usual haunt."

"I need a favor," she said without preamble and watched as his eyes narrowed. No doubt, he was calculating how much he could charge for this favor. Ronan stopped any reply by holding out a wad of cash between her index and middle fingers. "I need papers for a friend. They need to be good quality. Impeccable."

Schultz reached for the cash and Ronan pulled her hand back to get his attention. "I need them by this afternoon."

The informant hissed between his teeth. "They won't be cheap."

"They better not be," she told him. "If they're cheap, they're no good. Get them to me at Detective headquarters. There's a bonus in it for you if you're there by one o'clock."

"Ah, Lee, you know how much I hate to go into that place."

Ronan ignored the complaints, knowing that the guards would never let this low-life into the structure.

"I'll meet you behind the building, in the alley on the east side. Don't be late," she advised, finally handing over the wad.

Schultz scanned the crisp bills quickly and his dark eyes lit up. There was enough money there to qualify as his bonus already, but Sidney was worth so much more and Ronan wasn't about to quibble.

Her mind already on other things, Ronan dismissed him and quickly headed back for the main intersection near the subway. The ride back would be more pleasant since she would be riding out of the depression this place inspired. She'd used up most of the hour she promised Sidney by the time she arrived back at her office. She told herself that she would only be a few minutes, ten at the most, and then she could head back to the apartment. These next few minutes might provide answers to a lot of questions and she had to try to find out where the secret police held the rebels. In this period, many things were different and that included the public executions. Since she wasn't familiar with such things, she would have to find out as unobtrusively as possible.

Ronan showed her badge to the slot in the metal door at detective headquarters and a few seconds later the guard inside pulled it open. It was a good thing she'd left the badge in her apartment when she'd gone back to Sidney's time.

This guard wasn't very friendly. He let her in without a word and then turned back to a crumpled magazine. That was fine since she'd started to sweat nervously. She never thought she would be inside this place again and wondered if somehow her perfidy was visible. She almost expected someone to point at her and shout "Traitor!" but no one did. Everyone she passed ignored her completely as they went about their normal routine.

She took the elevator up to the third floor and to her office. Ronan stepped into the lobby, greeted by the sight of secretaries and beat cops as they poured cups of coffee. A few raised their hand in greeting, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

She noticed that her partner, Boris Kinsky, wasn't in his office. She wondered at that, but tried to look casual as she walked toward her own. As she passed by Lieutenant Sloan's closed door, she heard a low voice. It didn't sound like the lieutenant, but she couldn't listen at the door without attracting attention. Instead, Ronan went into her office and closed the door firmly. Her office was next to the lieutenant's and she might be able to hear them through the wall.

The buildings were old and not well insulated. Ronan considered that it was a possibility so she pressed her ear to the wall and listened. The voice belonged to Kinsky. She hadn't killed him after all. She couldn't hear everything, but what she did hear gave her an insight that chilled her. Kinsky was definitely one of the pawns working for the government, but more than that, from what she could make out he was in charge of things. He gave commands to an unknown individual that Ronan could only assume was Sloan. Why else would they be in his office?

Things began to heat up in the other room and her partner raised his voice. His passion made it easier for Ronan to hear what he said.

"I told you not to trust Lee. Our spies tell us she was at the professor's home last night. He hasn't been converted yet and who knows what she has learned from him?"

“Who cares what she knows?” Sloan asked. “Even if she does know of our true mission, he’ll convince her that we are harmless. By the time they learn otherwise it will be too late.”

There was a pause while Boris seemed to consider this viewpoint. Then he asked, “Is the execution still on schedule?”

“Yes. We’ll move the rebels from the warehouse on Sixth Street at two thirty. Guard members will take them by van to Konamin Square where they will be executed at three o’clock. Any other resistors will see that their actions have serious consequences.”

“It won’t matter after today, anyway,” Kinsky said. “I will contact the fleet this evening, and they will be on the ground by morning. Our people are in place to round up the undesirables of this country and they’ll all be dead by the end of the week. Did you recall our agents from the past? We can’t afford to have anyone else revealed as long as the actress and Lee are unaccounted for.”

“Just as you ordered, sir. All operatives are standing by on the space station, along with the Delegator and the other party leaders. Our plans will be realized and all those who oppose our destiny will be crushed.”

Both men chuckled nastily for a moment. “I think you’re right. No one knows about our ships in orbit and once we launch the main prong of our assault, the shields will go up. No one can get inside or even around the barrier unless they know about the transport matrix.”

“What about Lee?” Sloan asked. “No one’s seen her yet. Until we find her, she’ll continue to be a threat.”

“Lee’s an idealist. She’s never really embraced the superiority of the Neue Konservative Regime. After today, we won’t have to worry about her. Have your men gone to her apartment, yet? If she goes anywhere it will be there and it would be better to have her out of the way before the executions.”

“Yes, Dutrov should be there by now. He’ll call as soon as he has her in custody.”

Blood thundered in Ronan’s ears and she pulled away quickly from the wall. Dutrov was one of the nastier men that hung around the Black Guard. Ronan had never really understood exactly what his job was, but now it seemed clear. He took care of loose ends and they considered her one, but Sidney was alone in the apartment, without Ronan to protect her.

Ronan had to get back out of the building without Kinsky or Sloan seeing her. She hoped they had more to talk about and made for the office door. Ronan eased it quietly shut and walked as fast as she could out of the lobby and down the stairs. The elevator would be too slow and she had to make tracks. Once outside, Ronan considered running for the subway but gave it up when she saw a police car idling near the entrance.

When she was safely on the roadway, she flipped on the lights and siren to clear what little traffic there was from her path. Sloan said that Dutrov should already be at the apartment. She was so glad she had pulled on the laser pistol before she'd left. Once they found Sidney alone, they would probably lay a trap for Ronan.

She parked near the curb a block from the apartment so that if Dutrov's thugs were still there they wouldn't see her. Ronan pocketed the keys, prepared for the eventuality that she would continue to need the car, and then jogged down the street toward her building. At the alleyway, she slipped around the corner to take the back entrance and the emergency stairs up to her own floor.

The whole scene reminded her of Sidney's rescue at the Rock Hall estate when a serial killer was already inside. A chill swept up her spine that had nothing to do with the weather and Ronan tried to ignore the sensation. At the top of the stairs, she stopped at the fire door to peer through the glass onto the landing. No one was in the hallway and all seemed quiet. Carefully, Ronan opened the door, glanced right and left, and then slipped noiselessly toward her apartment.

The door was ajar, the molding hanging askew from where someone had kicked it in. She instinctively crouched down to make herself a smaller target. She pulled the laser pistol from the shoulder holster and kept the muzzle pointed at the sky so the tip wouldn't poke through the doorway and give her away. She reached up with her free hand and pushed on the door. It opened smoothly with no squeaks. There were no sounds from inside.

Ronan frowned and wondered if the apartment was empty. She felt slighted that Dutrov hadn't considered her enough of a threat to lay a trap, but appearances could deceive. Leaning forward quickly, Ronan scanned the room before she pulled back. When there was no reaction, she poked her head into the room again and took a long look around. No one waited inside.

Quietly she stood and walked into the apartment with her pistol held ready in front of her, both hands on the grip although some instinct prompted her to remain quiet. There was no obvious sign of a struggle in the outer living area and she wandered into the kitchen. A shattered coffee pot lay on the tiles. Ronan checked the area carefully, but didn't see any bloodstains that might indicate any injuries.

She hoped that meant Sidney was alive and unharmed. Ronan thought of the flashing grey eyes and quirky smile and her heart seized. Sidney was alive. She had to be. Ronan just needed to figure out where they would take her. The only place she could think of was the warehouse she'd heard mentioned between Kinsky and Sloan. It was where they held the rebels until the scheduled execution. With this form of government so comfortable with executions, they might kill Sidney too. She would be seen as one more obstacle the government should eliminate.

It seemed the most likely answer and Ronan felt her blood run cold as she stalked into her bedroom. Ronan had dressed for a casual day at the office, now she needed to choose an outfit for stealth. Nothing would happen to the woman that had stolen her heart.

The bedroom was dark, but she saw no need to adjust the illumination. The bathroom light burned and it lit the area well enough. Sidney's scent as well as heavy humidity hung in the air. She must have just finished a shower before they broke in.

Ronan hoped she'd had time to dress, and couldn't imagine how much worse things could get if they'd dragged Sidney out in a robe. She knew Sidney would fight back with every ounce of strength at her disposal, but it would be hard to do unarmed and dressed only in a robe.

Kicking off her dress shoes, she threw her jacket and shoulder holster on the foot of the bed. She lay the pistol down on top of the holster before she opened a dresser drawer and pulled out a long-sleeved, black turtleneck. She had just pulled it on and pushed her arms through the sleeves when a sound made her freeze.

Ronan started to turn but a thin metal wire suddenly dropped over her head. The assassin hauled her back against his chest as he drew the wire taught. The garrote rested against her throat just under her jaw, biting cruelly into her skin. The man tightened his hold and Ronan felt her mind start to numb from lack of oxygen.

Desperate, Ronan surprised the assassin when she suddenly dropped to her knees. His grip loosened for just a second, but before he could tighten it again Ronan drove her elbow into his crotch. He yelped, but didn't go down as she had hoped.

"Bitch, I'm going to kill you for that."

You were going to kill me before, Ronan thought insanely while she gulped in air. *What's changed?*

He hauled back on the wire and cut off her air again, but since Ronan was now on her knees, she could launch her own attack. She reached back and hooked an arm around his knee. She yanked his leg out from under him and felt the killer fall backward. One of his hands released the wire and Ronan lurched forward toward the bed where she had dropped the pistol.

Her attacker didn't waste time by trying to stand. Instead, he grabbed her ankle and yanked her away from the weapon. Ronan barely grasped the strap of the shoulder harness with her fingertips. The whole contraption thudded to the floor in front of her and the pistol bounced down within easy reach. She grabbed the handle of the laser even as she felt the man move up to straddle her back. In another second he would have the garrote around her throat again. Pinned to the ground, he would kill her in seconds.

Ronan pulled the laser up and managed to turn on her side before he could slip the wire back into place. Her breath wheezed as she gagged and choked. Darkness clouded her vision, but she finally had the laser aimed in his general direction. It was difficult to see with an oxygen-starved brain and she hoped she wouldn't shoot herself. She pulled the trigger and the killer cursed and tightened his hold. She pulled it again and he silently fell off her. For a few seconds no one moved. Ronan took in great gulps of air and her vision finally began to clear. Slowly, she crawled away from the stranger until she could sit with her back against the bed and look at him.

Ronan didn't know if he was dead, but he didn't move in the minutes it took for her to catch her breath. She coughed and winced at the burn that stung along her throat while she tried to figure out where he'd come from. She thought she was alone in the apartment, but apparently he just waited until he had a clean move. He must have hid in the closet and tiptoed out after she took off her shirt.

"Pervert," she spat, shocked at how raw her voice sounded.

He still didn't move and she wondered if he was playing dead. It didn't matter; perhaps he could still be useful. Since he'd probably been one of Dutrov's team, he should know where they'd taken Sidney. Ronan would get that information out of him if she had to torture him to do it. Fury seethed into her veins and she stood up over the man.

"Where's Sidney?"

There was no answer so she pushed against his ribs with her bare toes. The body shifted, but there was no other movement. Not dissuaded, Ronan reached down and grabbed a beefy arm to roll the guy over. Sightless eyes stared back at her. The laser had caught him center-mass and killed him instantly.

"Shit." She couldn't exactly torture a dead guy for information.

Ronan sat on the foot of the bed and wondered if she had ever seen this man before, perhaps even worked on a case with him. His blonde hair was short, but not crew cut. He was well muscled and Ronan thought it was only her own good physical condition that had kept her alive. As much as she stared at him, his features remained unfamiliar. She didn't remember him, but the only relief in that was she hadn't killed someone she might have considered a friend.

Ronan decided she had pulled herself together as much as she could for now. She finished dressing and tried to ignore the dead man on the floor. Then she put her shoulder holster on and tucked the laser into it. She finished by strapping a backup pistol onto her ankle. With no other ideas, she chose to start with the obvious. The warehouse should be easy enough to spot even though she'd never been there. Ronan knew it was on Sixth Street and there would probably be guards posted all around.

She stepped casually over the dead assassin and walked out of the apartment, carefully closing the door behind her.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

SIDNEY WOKE UP and groaned, raising a hand to touch the back of her head. Her fingers came away sticky and she reminded herself that the next time she was kidnapped to keep the sarcasm to a minimum. Dutrov hadn't appreciated it when she had questioned his parentage. She hadn't even registered his slight nod to one of his henchmen until movement from behind warned her an instant before the blow was delivered.

"Oh," she groaned again and tried to sit up.

"Easy."

Sidney opened her eyes and saw a slight young man crouched in front of her. He rested a hand cautiously on her forearm and offered a smile. The brown eyes were equally friendly and Sidney detected no threat in them.

"What happened? The last thing I remember was being stuffed into the back of a car by a mafia hit man."

"Not mafia. That was Dutrov. He works for the Black Guard and does all of the dirty jobs no one else can be relied on to do."

Sidney nodded and winced. "Except that I get the feeling that he enjoys his work a little too much."

"There's no question of that. He's famous for his bloodthirsty approach."

The young man offered her a hand that Sidney gratefully accepted. As he helped her to her feet, Sidney glanced around and noticed they seemed to be in a large open building.

"I'm Franz, by the way. Franz Johan."

For the first time, Sidney took a good look at the young man. He wasn't overly tall, standing only a couple of inches taller than she was. He had dark hair and brown eyes and his skin was a beautiful golden bronze. Counter to his youthful features, his clothes were slightly tattered and he had a hungry air about him.

"You're not German," she said absently.

Sidney glanced around saw three others scattered nearby. The building resembled a metal warehouse, large and open with a concrete floor. Huge windows allowed in vast amounts of gray daylight. She assumed all the exits were locked since these people would hardly stand around if there were a viable way out.

“No, I’m French.” The young man indicated his companions who all nodded back as he made introductions. “This is Olga, Heinrich, and Ben Crowder.”

“You guys are the rebels that were caught trying to blow up the Konservative headquarters.”

Sidney still felt a little groggy from the blow to the back of her head and tried to shake it off as she moved around a little. To her surprise, Franz flushed slightly and she had to wonder about his age. She would have to guess he was in his early twenties. None of the others looked much older.

He nodded. “We had a man inside who was supposed to open the door for us. I assume the Guard captured him. Someone else opened the door and the next thing we knew they had us surrounded. I still don’t know what happened to Boris.”

“Boris?” Sidney recognized the name. “Boris Kinsky?”

“You know him?”

Franz sounded excited at the possibility and Sidney hated to dash his hopes, but that paled in comparison to the perfidy of someone Ronan had trusted at one time. She wasn’t sure how much the young rebels knew about the government’s goals and hesitated to tell him the truth. If she claimed time-traveling involvement to stop a neo-fascist order coming to power, they were liable to decide she had hit her head too hard.

“I know that he is no sympathizer. From what I understand, he’s one of the top men in the Konservative government.”

Franz frowned at her. “Are you sure? He seemed so...fervent. In fact he approached us.”

“It was a setup. Somehow he learned about your group and decided to use you to set an example.”

His shoulders slumped as he turned quietly away from her. After a moment, he picked up his head and looked back at her. “He told us that if anything happened he would see that we were rescued. Was that a lie as well?”

There was only one thing she could think of to say. “I’m sorry.”

Franz dropped his head and walked away toward his friends. Left with few options, Sidney started to look for a way out. She was damned if she was going to go down without a fight. Ronan had to know that she was missing by now. She was resourceful and would find out where the Guard was holding them. Sidney had to make sure that when the time came they were ready to make their own move. On the off chance that Ronan couldn’t find them in time, they would have to prepare for that, too. As much as she would like to give Franz time to commiserate with his friends, there just wasn’t any to spare. The execution was set for three o’clock. She doubted if

they knew that since they seemed to think Boris Kinsky, white knight, was going to ride to their rescue.

“Franz, do you know how many guards are around this place?” she asked in a sharp tone that immediately got his attention.

“Yes, there are two at each side of the building.”

Not so good, she thought. Someone could easily spot them if they just went out a door or through an opening in the metal walls.

She scanned the area and noticed another possibility.

“What about that ladder?” She pointed at it with her chin.

Franz shrugged but before he could answer, Olga chimed in. The woman spoke with a slightly nasal accent but was very clear. “It leads to a trapdoor in the ceiling. I haven’t been through it, but I assume it leads to the roof.”

Sidney raised her eyebrow for more information and wasn’t disappointed when the wiry girl said, “We weren’t all as gullible as Franz here. This is the big, bad world where nasty things happen.”

“So, why did you continue with the plan if you didn’t trust Kinsky completely?”

Olga just looked at her for a second before responding. “When you decide to make a difference, sometimes you have to take a chance. Germany is worth taking the chance.”

Sidney couldn’t argue with that. She felt the same way about the United States and she was sure the others did as well. With that in mind, she decided to focus on the present. “Let’s hope the ladder doesn’t lead to a ventilation shaft. I need all of you to choose a side and keep watch for the guards.”

For a moment, the others just stared back at her and then Olga nodded once and walked away. The men followed her lead and Sidney thought perhaps they just needed someone to take control of the situation that wasn’t blindly willing to wait for fate to rescue them. She didn’t know if she was the right choice to be leader, but someone had to take the initiative and it might as well be her. She began to climb the ladder. A quick look at her wristwatch told her they didn’t have much time left. Kinsky and his thugs would probably show up within the hour and she intended to be long gone by then.

RONAN NEEDED A way in that wouldn't attract too much attention. She thought about the problem while she drove toward the warehouse district on Sixth Street and an idea occurred to her. Unfortunately, she couldn't go to the office to get the city plans so she reached in her pocket and pulled out her cellular phone. The one person she could always count on, for a price, was Schultz. She dialed the number she had for him and left a brief message on his message mail before she hung up to wait for a reply. If he were willing to help her, the return call would come quickly. Thirty seconds passed and she began to worry that he wouldn't call. A full minute went by and she began to chant, "Come on, come on..."

When she had finally decided that she was on her own and prepared to storm the office for the much-needed plans, her phone rang. She checked the caller display and let out a whoop of relief.

"What took so long?" she asked by way of greeting.

"I wasn't sure I wanted the job."

"And now you are?"

"For a price."

"That goes without saying," she said sharply. Ronan tried to remember that she needed his help and forced herself to adopt a slightly friendlier tone. "I need the plans for the city's water reclamation system but things have changed. I'll come by there to pick everything up including the papers I talked to you about earlier. Do you have them yet?"

"Demanding thing, aren't you?" he asked with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Schultz, this is no laughing matter. Something has happened to a friend of mine and I need that stuff. If you get it for me earlier than planned there'll be a nice bonus in it for you."

"Well, you certainly know the way to my heart." Then he relented in the face of promised monetary compensation. "I already have the papers so you can come by now if you want. At least I don't have to go down there. I'll have you know that's a full hour and a half earlier than you requested. As for the plans, that's child's play. I'll have them before you get here."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Ronan hung up without waiting for a response and turned the squad car toward the slums. Without the delays of public transportation or the congestion of heavier traffic common to the outer areas of the city, she made better time than expected. Ronan drove straight up into the alley five minutes ahead of schedule. She had started to fidget in her seat while Schultz waited the full amount of the allotted time before he stepped out of the shadows. He had a smarmy grin on his thin face and Ronan knew he had waited on purpose.

“Damn it, man, I told you it was an emergency,” she growled as she got out of the car and slammed the door.

“I thought you were kidding, trying to make it sound more important than it was so I would hurry.”

“Argh.”

She thrust a wad of cash into his hand and he passed her a folder stuffed with blueprints and then another smaller envelope. She assumed those were Sidney’s papers and took a quick look to verify that they would pass inspection. He had outdone himself and she was impressed. If she didn’t know better, she would swear the papers were authentic.

“These are the blueprints to the water reclamation system?”

“Yes, I took the liberty of placing the blueprints for the area around the warehouse district on top.”

Something in his voice made her look up at him. When their eyes met, she realized he knew exactly what she was up to. Or did he just hope? “You’re part of the resistance.”

Her comment indicated certainty and he couldn’t deny the charge. To her surprise, his cheeks colored. “I deal with you, Detective Lee, because you are one of the few members of the police force who has a conscience. Anyone with moral fiber would know that this public execution is wrong. Since you want blueprints of the underground runoff systems, I can only assume that you are planning a rescue. If that’s true, I would be willing to help you...no charge.”

Ronan felt tears prick the corners of her eyes and suppressed them with effort.

“Thank you, but I think it would be easier with fewer people involved.”

Schultz nodded. “Good luck. I hope to see you again.”

Ronan drove directly toward the warehouse district. She parked the squad car amid some dumpsters behind an abandoned factory and took a second to look at the dilapidated façade. Vandals had broken out windows long ago and the entire structure resembled a burnt-out husk. She was tempted to question why they continued to fight then remembered smoke-gray eyes and a quirky smile. That was enough, she decided. Sidney was enough.

A quick glance at the dashboard clock reminded her that she was on borrowed time. Ronan jumped out of the car with the city plans in hand. She checked them again and looked around the area before she headed west. Within minutes, she found what she needed. At first glance, the small shed looked like a gardener’s storage facility but there were no gardens in this area of steel and concrete. A sign hung on the metal door that remained in good enough condition to look out of place.

Berlin Water Reclamation System

Public Utilities Commission

Ronan wasn't about to crawl through human waste but the reclamation system was another story. Berlin received so much rain that city engineers devised a method to direct the runoff to the river instead of flooding the streets. The system employed huge concrete tunnels that ran beneath the city. With the right plans and a little luck you could get anywhere in Berlin without seeing the sky.

She had the plans, now she needed a little luck.

An expensive, heavy-duty padlock secured the door to prevent anyone from entering the tunnels but Ronan's laser made short work of that. A quick glance assured her that no one else was around to see her and she pulled the door carefully closed behind her. The shed was small, little more than camouflage for a ladder that led straight down. The phrase "depths of hell" flitted through her mind but she pushed it resolutely away.

Ronan's feet landed in two inches of water. Berlin had received a steady drizzle for the last twenty-four hours, but she wasn't surprised to find the water so low. The automated reclamation system prevented flooding and once the water rose to a certain level, it would trigger a switch to release the gates. No doubt, as she wandered farther into the system, there would be deeper areas.

Lights ran the length overhead, interspersed by manhole covers at regular intervals. Ronan guessed the lights were for maintenance personnel should the need arise. She ignored the eerie echo of her own waterlogged footsteps and set off down the tunnel. Her sneakers squished unpleasantly and she was glad there had been an entrance so close to her objective. She only had four blocks to go before she needed to leave the labyrinth. Then she would exit through a manhole cover at the rear of the warehouse.

The sound of rushing water echoed louder and she stopped to check the blueprints. A junction of converging tunnels lay directly ahead, which accounted for the deafening roar. When she walked into the juncture, she couldn't help her gasp of apprehension. Water flooded into the center of a huge collection reservoir fed by five adjacent tunnels. A flood marker stood in the center of the pool and Ronan noted that the water lapped at the six-foot line. Since the marker only reached eight feet, it was safe to assume the trigger would activate soon.

A suspended catwalk ran over the top of the raging water and she shuddered at how narrow it was. It was no wonder the city automated this system. Otherwise, people would drown every day.

“Damn, the things I do for love.”

Ronan swiped a hand over her face, swallowed nervously, and climbed a small flight of steps onto the catwalk. She clutched the whisper-thin strands of chain that were a poor imitation of a safety rail and pinned her eyes on her destination. Though it was only a short distance, she panted as if she'd run a marathon by the time she reached the end. She looked back at the water and wiped at the sweat that pearly on her upper lip. If she had fallen into that torrent, she wouldn't have been able to fight the undertow.

Ronan turned around and walked down the tunnel. Three manhole covers later, she reached her exit. A slippery ladder attached to the wall was the only way out. Ronan stepped carefully onto the rungs and began to climb toward the surface. Her wet sneakers slipped a little on the rusty ladder but she soon reached the top. Daylight filtered through the holes around the cover and she looked through them to survey the area as best she could. Unable to really see anything, she looked down at her watch. It was 2:20 and the Black Guard would be there for Sidney and the others very soon.

Ronan climbed to the highest rung so that her body scrunched up between the ladder and the metal cover. She would need leverage to lift the heavy disc, built to withstand the weight of a two-ton truck. Properly braced, she put both hands and shoulders against the cover and pushed. It refused to budge at first and she resisted the urge to grunt under the strain. When it finally came free, it shrieked loud enough to wake the dead and she felt like her muscles would shred.

She froze and cursed a blue streak in her head, worried she'd alerted a nearby lookout. When nothing happened, she lifted again and was able to peer under the edge for at least half of the perimeter. She couldn't turn around to check the other side as her abilities hadn't evolved to the point where she could stand on thin air. It didn't matter though. The Guard wasn't typically subtle. If they were around or knew she was here, they already would have pounced.

She strained hard and lifted until the heavy disc finally slid free. Then she pushed it over until there was just enough room for her to scoot out of the tunnel. Ronan left the manhole cover where it was. They would use the tunnels to escape and there was no sense wasting time by moving the heavy thing back and forth.

Ronan darted for the side of an adjacent building to give her a vantage point where she could scope out the warehouse. A guard was supposed to be on duty behind the building, but now he stood near the far corner with another man. Apparently, the sentries had grown bored and decided a little chitchat wouldn't hurt anything. With his back to her, she took the opportunity to get out of the tunnels unseen. Now she had to figure out how to free the prisoners.

The roof was likely the best bet. The structures here sat closely together but she didn't know the condition of the people inside. If anyone inside was injured, they would hardly be able to leap from one rooftop to another. The first objective was to get inside.

A heavy fire escape clamped into the wall next to her and she climbed it silently. If it weren't for the squish and slide of her socks inside the wet shoes, she might even have been comfortable. At least blisters weren't life threatening.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

SIDNEY POUNDED AGAINST the ceiling in frustration. There was an escape hatch as she had hoped, but it locked from the outside. Short of a blowtorch, there was nothing else she could do from here. There had to be a way out of the building, but if not the roof then what? The concrete floor presented little hope and guards occupied all sides of the warehouse.

"Why does it always have to be hard?" She walked over to the steps and started to climb down when there was a commotion from below.

"They're coming," Olga told her.

Sidney saw the young band of rebels huddled together in fear near the center of the structure. She was scared too and looked quickly at her watch. It was 2:36. Where was Ronan? She'd saved Sidney's life repeatedly in the other time line and showed up every time a cat was stuck in a tree. On the heels of that thought, Sidney heard a loud clank from overhead.

Finally.

"Sidney, are you down there? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, we're here."

Sidney ran back toward the sound of her lover's voice. Ronan lay on the roof of the building with only her head and shoulders stuck through the open hatchway. The laser pistol in her hand where she braced against the edge told Sidney how she'd managed to open the small, square door.

"It's about time. They're coming for us."

Ronan smiled at the testy tone. “Nice to see you, too, honey. Now why don’t you get the others and let’s get out of here?”

Engines reverberated loudly outside from a motorcade and Sidney ran back to the edge of the stairs. The rebels hadn’t moved and looked more like a frightened band of children. There wasn’t time to tell them that everything would be all right and Sidney wasn’t so sure she believed that anyway.

“Get up here,” she said instead. “We have a way out.”

Four heads turned to look at her and then the kids ran for the stairs. Sidney waited and urgently gestured for them to hurry. The vehicle brakes squeaked to a halt outside and then the engines shut off. As they neared the top of the steps, Sidney turned and ran back toward Ronan. A metal ladder attached to the wall showed the way out and she didn’t waste time as she leaped onto it. Sidney climbed as quickly as she could with the others so close behind that they bumped into her. Ronan grabbed her by the arm and helped her through the small aperture and then the others in turn.

“Follow me,” Ronan said in a loud whisper.

Sidney followed her example and bent over to run along the rooftop. She didn’t know if it would help to make a smaller target by hunching over, but it certainly couldn’t hurt. A fire escape was Ronan’s destination and she quickly led the way down. Just as Ronan put her foot onto the metal rung, Sidney heard a shout of alarm from inside the building.

“They know we’re gone.”

Ronan worriedly met her eyes. “Hurry.”

The small band scaled down the ladder to the ground. Ben Crowder brought up the rear, and was in such a hurry that he slipped a few feet from the bottom, and fell the rest of the way to the ground. Sidney heard him land with a thud and turned back to help the young man.

“Ben, are you all right?”

She crouched next to him with a hand on his shoulder. Footsteps pounded on the ground and she heard commands shouted in German as Kinsky deployed his people.

“Twisted my knee.”

“Can you make it?”

Ben shot a look over his shoulder at the alternative. “I’d better.”

He struggled to stand up and Sidney slid an arm around his waist. Ronan appeared on the other side and took most of the weight from her.

“Come on,” Ronan urged. “It’s not far.”

Sidney looked around, but didn’t see the “it” Ronan mentioned.

“Where are we going?”

“Just trust me and run.”

It wasn’t like her to be so short, but under the circumstances Sidney wasn’t about to argue.

“Halt!”

Sidney turned and recognized Kinsky from the news footage she had seen earlier. He was alone for now and hot on their heels.

Ronan tugged on Ben from the other side, urging them all into the middle of the street. “Get in.”

Seeing the open manhole cover, Sidney didn’t stop to question her instructions. All she could think of was out of sight, out of mind. The others had already started to climb down the slippery ladder, but she had to help Ben into the tunnel. Behind her, Ronan dropped to one knee and laid down cover fire with her laser. Kinsky dove behind a dumpster just in time to avoid a well-aimed blast.

The injured rebel crawled down the tunnel with Sidney right behind him. As soon as she cleared the edge of the utility hole, she shouted up to Ronan to let her know they were clear. A second later, Ronan scooted into the tunnel. In her haste, her foot scraped against Sidney’s forehead, causing her to flinch. When she did, the side of her head thudded against the tunnel wall. Sidney shook off the sharp pain and slid down the ladder. She had made room for Ronan barely in time as a ruby lance of light from Kinsky’s weapon hit the wall where she’d just been.

At the bottom of the stairs, they grabbed onto Ben again and Ronan urged them down the tunnel.

“How’s your knee?” Olga asked from up ahead.

“I’m fine,” Ben grunted through clenched teeth. “Don’t worry about me.”

“She’s not worried about you, she’s worried about us. You’re going to slow us down.” Franz’s tone was sarcastic and Sidney thought it was also more than a little self-indulgent.

“No wonder you people got caught. If you can’t even support each other, you’re not the heroes you think you are.”

Another ruby blast caused the small group to dive to the narrow floor.

“Lee, give up now and I promise to kill you quickly.”

Kinsky’s voice came from around the bend where he huddled against the wall for cover. Ronan let go of Ben and headed back toward her former partner.

“Keep going. I’ll try to slow him down.”

“Ronan...”

Fear was obvious in her voice and Ronan met her eyes briefly. “I’ll be right with you,” she promised softly. Then she was gone.

Sidney longed to chase after her, but Ronan trusted her to lead the rebels out of the tunnels. Although she didn’t know the way, all she could do was travel the path Ronan had set them on. She had to have faith that she would overpower Kinsky and re-join them before Sidney managed to get them lost down here. At least they weren’t in a sewer.

RONAN KNEW SHE had to stall Kinsky to allow time for Sidney and the others to get away. She remembered how she felt when she’d killed him before, and she hoped to avoid that now. Still, if it came down to it, she would do whatever it took to protect her lover. She had tried to sound confident when she told Sidney that she would be right behind her, but Kinsky was a deadly adversary. To underestimate him would be a huge mistake.

When she darted back down the tunnel, Ronan expected an immediate shootout of the old west variety. But it wasn’t high noon and they weren’t on Main Street in front of the livery. The bad guy did not wear a black hat and he did not react as expected. Instead, he turned and ran back the way they’d come, which led Ronan to believe he hadn’t received a copy of that particular script.

Kinsky reached the pile of waste near the manhole cover and dove behind it. It was only then that the reasons for his behavior became clear. There was very little concealment in these tunnels and when he dashed behind the pile of refuse, he took advantage of the only camouflage available. Ronan barely had time to duck back around the corner to avoid a laser blast. Her skin burned where the shot grazed the side of her face and singed the hair at her temple.

“Knew you’d follow me back, Lee. You’re nothing if not predictable.” Kinsky’s jibe caught her attention. If he was a part of the altered time line, he couldn’t know anything about her. “How can you predict anything? You’re just a parasite that looks like my partner. You’re not the real Boris Kinsky.” “Very good, you’re smarter than I thought, but how do you know that your partner wasn’t a willing participant?”

“Hah,” Ronan shot back. “I doubt he was willing to be killed so you could fill his shoes. So what’s the plan? I heard you and Sloan talking in the office. Why do you want to go back in time and start the Konservative government then? Why is it so important to kill so many people?”

To her surprise, he answered. “Because the people of the past are weak, they are looking for strong leadership and we will give it to them. The Neue Konservative Regime will be the most powerful government of all time. Anyone who stands in our way must be eliminated.”

“Where’s the transport matrix, Kinsky, or whatever your name really is?”

The man was quiet for a moment and Ronan figured she must have gone too far. He confirmed her suspicions a moment later. “Do you think I’m stupid? If you overheard our conversation then you know how to destroy our cause. I will not allow you to leave these tunnels alive.”

Kinsky stood up and fired down the tunnel. Ronan ducked and hoped his energy cell wasn’t fully charged. Sidney and the others must have had time to get to the exit by now, and she didn’t plan to stay here until he killed her.

The threat of the knowledge Ronan possessed proved too much. Kinsky came out from behind the trash pile and rushed toward her. Although desperate, he still wasn’t ignorant enough to make a good target of himself. Huddled near the tunnel wall, he used the shadows for concealment as he hurried toward her. Ronan turned and ran down the concrete maze.

Ruby lances of light shot past her all around while Ronan tucked her head down and ran. One of the bolts of energy came a little too close and Ronan bit off a curse as pain seared her left shoulder.

The sound of whitewater came from just around the corner. It was the containment pool but she didn’t have time to worry about how narrow the overhead catwalk was. Instead, she hoped that what lay just ahead would catch him off guard and it would give her a few more seconds to get away.

Ronan ignored the stab of pain from her injury and ran toward the sound. Seconds later the catwalk came into view and she hesitated at the sight before her. The water had risen to just below the suspended catwalk. Splashes went over the edge of the platform, making footing dangerous. The water was all the way to the top of the marker and yellow warning lights had started to flash. The system was only seconds away from releasing the torrent into the flood tubes, but with the killer behind she was out of options. Ronan leapt forward onto the catwalk.

Grasping tightly to the thin rails, she moved as quickly as possible. With the sound of the water in her ears, Ronan couldn’t hear Kinsky, but knew that he must be close behind her. She ducked down to present a smaller target of herself just in time. Another shot went over her head and struck the side of the tunnel. Concrete dust flew into the air while a large chunk crashed to the floor. Ronan squinted to keep the rock dust out of her eyes and kept moving. Her foot slipped on the next step and she fell into the side of the narrow platform.

Then Kinsky was standing over her. He shoved his laser into the holster. "As much fun as it would be to shoot you, I think I'd like a more personal touch."

He wrapped an arm around Ronan's neck from behind and put his other hand on the back of her head. With her squatted against the edge of the rail and him standing behind her, Ronan knew that it would take only an instant for him to snap her neck.

"Maybe after I kill you, I'll have your body replaced. How would you like that, Lee? I'll send someone else back to your precious girlfriend."

That was too much. Ronan felt anger mount swiftly in her chest, outweighing the fear of death and she suddenly had an idea. Kinsky was holding her on the swaying platform without any other support. She had hold of the wire rail. As flimsy as her grip was, it was better than his.

Ronan moved so quickly that she caught him completely unprepared. She lunged up and out toward the rushing water, but made sure to keep her hands wrapped tightly around the support. Things went almost exactly as planned. Kinsky had his arm wrapped so tightly around her neck that he flew over her body with the movement and toward the raging flood. If he'd just let go, everything would have been perfect. Instead, his strong hold dragged her with him. Ronan found herself hanging by the rail with Kinsky holding onto her legs tighter than ever, this time in panic.

"Let go of me, damn it." Ronan tried to kick Kinsky away. He was too close to get a good shot and she could feel her hands starting to slip. "I can't hold on."

"Good. At least I'll have the pleasure of taking you with me."

Kinsky's words proved prophetic as Ronan's left hand slipped off the wire. She tried to grab hold again, but at that moment an alarm sounded and the yellow caution lights turned to red. The floodgate came down and the water surged all around them. Kinsky clinging to her, the sodden clothing, and a one-handed grip were too much to overcome. Ronan slipped away from the rail with a shout and the rip of a fingernail.

The surging tide carried them both away and she lost sight of her adversary in the sudden fight against kinetic forces. Water rushed over her and pushed her toward the bottom of the concrete trench. The top of her head scraped against stone and she raised her arms to protect herself. Flipped end over end, she wasn't sure which way was up. Ronan tried to relax and let her body float toward what must be the surface. Her lungs burned with the urge to breath and her vision had started to grow dim around the edges when her head suddenly popped above the water.

She took in a few quick gulps of air before the white rapids pushed under again, but this time she was oriented enough and had lost her passenger so she was able to stay near the surface. She kicked hard and cleared the surface once more. The water wasn't as chaotic now as it had been during the initial release and she managed to keep her head up, but there was no way she could fight the current. All she could do was go with it and hope she would spot a way out before the

water poured into the river. She had been able to see that particular junction on the blueprints and didn't relish the thought of falling twenty meters and landing on who knows what.

Ronan looked around and tried to find Kinsky but he was nowhere in sight. Maybe if she were very lucky he had drowned at the bottom of the deluge. Just then, he popped up only a few feet away and looked directly at her.

Perfect.

Kinsky fumbled in his jacket looking for his laser pistol. From the look of rage on his face, Ronan guessed he must have lost it. Then he started splashing toward her with murderous intent.

"Forget replacing you. You're too much of a pain in the ass. But I am going to kill you."

Ronan glanced ahead and saw something that made her heart pound. A discarded plastic chair had gotten wedged against a corner very near where the runoff dropped straight down. It was colored bright yellow, just a child's toy, but the color made it stand out like a beacon. If she could just get to it, maybe she would have a chance.

"Not today, Kinsky."

Ronan struggled against the tow. By swimming diagonally, she was able to let the surge carry her toward her anchor. Swimming proved difficult with her shoulder injury, but Ronan tried to ignore the pain. Kinsky hadn't heard her comment over the sound of the water and probably assumed she was trying to get away from him. The water propelled her directly into the legs of the small chair and she felt it move under the impact of her body. A quick glance told her only the lip of the concrete wall held the chair in place and it wouldn't take much to pull it loose. Quickly Ronan reached out and grasped the concrete ledge in case the chair popped free. An instant later, she felt a hand close over her ankle and attempt to jerk her back into the rushing water. She refused to let go of the concrete protrusion.

This time she was far enough away from Kinsky that she used her free leg to kick him in the chest. The first kick did little more than push him farther away, but the third one knocked him loose. The last thing Ronan saw of him was Kinsky going over the edge of the waterfall clutching the little yellow chair. Ronan panted in exertion and her arms trembled from hanging on to the edge of the platform. She knew that eventually the torrent would pass and she would be able to walk out of here. If only she could hold on that long.

"Ronan."

She was sure she was hearing things. It sounded like Sidney's voice, but she was gone. She had led the rebels out of the tunnels when Ronan went back for Kinsky.

"Ronan, darling. Please, hold on. I'm coming."

She finally looked up toward the voice and saw that it was Sidney. The water had gone down far enough for her and the rebels to walk down the tunnels toward the runoff point. She lay on her stomach only a few feet above Ronan's head while the youths hung on to her legs.

"Give me your hand."

Ronan was terrified to let go of her tenuous hold. If she missed Sidney's hand, she doubted she would be able to hold on and the remaining water would carry her away.

Sidney picked up her hesitation. "Trust me, Ronan. You've saved my life so many times, please let me save yours."

She looked at the outstretched hand and then into the eyes of her lover. She'd always been the strong one, the one people counted on in a pinch, but Ronan had difficulty putting her life in another's hands. Still, this wasn't just anyone and if she were ever going to trust someone it was this woman. Ronan tightened her hold with one hand and reached for Sidney with the other. The hand that met hers was strong and sure. Sidney's eyes never left hers as she grabbed for Ronan. Reassured that she wasn't going to slip away, Ronan let go and reached for Sidney. As soon as Sidney had hold of her, the rebels went into action.

"Pull!" Franz shouted, and they all hauled back on Sidney together.

When they had managed to get Ronan to the edge, Ben let go of Sidney. He limped to the side and dropped down on his belly to help pull Ronan from the water. With her sodden clothing pulling her down it wasn't an easy task, but they managed to haul her up. Finally, Ronan lay in Sidney's arms while Ben sat against the wall trying to get his breath back. Olga and Franz just smiled at Ronan, glad that she was alive.

"I guess," Ronan panted, "that you four finally learned to work as a team."

Her comment had the three youngsters looking at each other in surprise.

"Yeah," Olga said slowly. "I guess we did."

Sidney pushed the wet hair back from Ronan's face and then bent down to kiss her slowly. The kiss was almost chaste, just a press of the lips meant to convey how very much Ronan meant to her and Sidney's relief that she was alive.

After a moment or two, Ben cleared his throat and said, "I don't mean to rush you or anything, but do you think we could get out of here now?"

Sidney chuckled and helped Ronan to stand on shaky legs while Franz walked over to support Ben with an arm around his waist. The walk out of the tunnel was uneventful after that. All of the water was gone and only the wet concrete remained as testament to Ronan's struggle with the imposter.

Ronan had a plan in mind now that she had gotten a little information from Kinsky but needed the rebels to stay out of things from here on out. She couldn't give them the whole story, but they already knew of the Regime's plans so at least she wouldn't have to lie to them.

"I need you guys to promise me that you'll lay low for now."

"What? You can't be serious."

"Ben, just listen to her for a minute," Olga urged, clearly the more cautious of the four.

"You know these people are not benevolent and I realize it is hard for you to just do nothing," Ronan acknowledged, "but I need for you to stay out of the way for a few days. Right now, you're on their radar and they will be looking for you. I have a plan, but if you start going off half-cocked you'll only get yourselves in trouble again and I don't have time for any more rescues."

The words were a little sharp, but she wanted to make a point. From the embarrassed looks on their faces, she knew she had made it.

"Besides," Franz said, "you're hurt, Ben. We won't be able to do anything until you've healed."

Ben looked ready to argue and Ronan couldn't fault his bravery, but finally common sense won out. "Fine, but only for one week. After that, if we haven't heard from you we'll have to do what we think is right."

"Agreed."

Ronan hugged Sidney closer with the arm around her waist. Hopefully, they would set things right again in the next few days and there would be no need for Ben to remember his promise.

Chapter Thirty

THEY MADE IT to the squad car without attracting any attention, but expected the streets to be flooded with military, Guard, and police vehicles at any time. It wouldn't be long before an alarm sounded to indicate that the rebels had escaped and then searches would begin in earnest. Since they were in a police vehicle, it would buy them a little time but they had to hurry.

Ronan sat in a puddle of water on the cloth seat and tried not to shiver as she drove to the downtown district. The laser blast from Kinsky's pistol had cauterized the wound even as it burned and she felt the pain more intensely now. Ronan kept her arm as still as possible knowing she could heal the wound once she arrived back at the apartment. She dropped the rebels off near Schultz's location and waited until she was back on the road to fill Sidney in on everything she'd learned. At least that was her intention and she surprised herself by what she actually said.

"I was so scared when I found out they had taken you. Don't you ever do that to me again."

She gripped the steering wheel hard to conceal how her hands shook, trying to concentrate on traffic as they headed back into the more populated sections of the city. Her heart pounded in her chest and she couldn't look at Sidney, didn't dare to or she would release the flood of tears. After a few seconds of quiet, she felt Sidney's hand rest on her thigh and gently squeeze. Somehow, Sidney understood what truly generated Ronan's anger, the circumstances that could have culminated in her death.

"I'm sorry you were frightened, but I was pretty scared, too. I'm just glad you came after me."

Ronan let out a shuddering breath and ignored the tears that swam in her eyes. Relief gradually took over and the anger melted away. She turned her head to look into gray eyes. "I will always come after you."

Sidney smiled and listened as Ronan began to fill her in. "I went to my office at EDU headquarters and overheard Sloan and Kinsky talking."

"EDU?"

"Elite Detective Unit." Ronan flashed a grin. "I never said we were very creative when it came to naming things. Anyway..."

"Then they were both in on what's happening."

"Yes. I heard them say that tonight would begin the major part of the infiltration. I'm assuming that means that once they feel all the loose ends are tied up they plan to send a full-scale replacement regiment into the past. Kinsky said that after that, no matter what we did it would be too late."

"So whatever we're going to do, we had better do it fast. I don't suppose you overheard something we can use against them?"

"Actually, yes. I heard them say that the leaders of this little insurrection, along with the bulk of their followers, have retreated to a vessel in synchronous orbit above the planet."

"You have that kind of technology?" Sidney asked in surprise.

“We even have ships capable of traveling outside the solar system.”

“When this is over, you are going to tell me everything.”

“I promise.” Ronan gave her a fond look before returning her attention to the debris-laden streets. “If anything happens to the vessel, it would destroy their movement or at least set them back a few decades. We have to get to that ship, plant some explosives, and get out of there before it goes up.”

“That easy, huh?” Sidney’s eyebrows rose. “I don’t suppose you have transporter pads like something out of Star Trek standing by to beam us aboard?”

Ronan ignored the sarcasm. “They have some sort of a matrix that they use to send bodies to the ship for replacement. If we could find out where that matrix is we might be able to use it to get there ourselves.”

Sidney was silent for a few minutes and Ronan allowed her the time to think about the situation. Perhaps she could come up with something Ronan hadn’t thought of. Then she remembered the package she had picked up from Schultz. Ronan started to lean over to get the papers from the glove compartment when a military vehicle suddenly swung in behind her and began flashing its lights.

“What is it?”

Sidney sounded worried and had every right to be. Ronan was very concerned as well. She wondered if the Regime knew she’d been involved in freeing the rebels. Then she remembered the overheard conversation between Sloan and her former partner. The Guard and anyone else in on their plans already considered her a target. For a second she considered trying to outrun them, but gave it up almost immediately. Chances were good that only Kinsky had seen her at the warehouse and if she did run, the military was capable of surrounding her very quickly. She would have to act as if nothing was wrong and hope they got lucky.

“Don’t say anything,” she directed as she began to pull over. “Let me do the talking, but hand me the envelope in the glove compartment.”

Sidney handed her the forged papers and Ronan pulled her own out of her wet hip pocket. She plastered on a smile and rolled down the window.

“Yes,” she politely addressed the guard. “Is there something wrong?”

“Papers, please.”

The guard was young, but his life in the military had obviously hardened him. There was no smile in his eyes, only a brooding suspicion as he surveyed the two women. Ronan felt that he looked right through her and knew that she was a fugitive. She kept up her calm front, but it was

hard to do. Ronan tried to convince herself that he was just a foot soldier, not high enough up the chain of command to know anything of true importance.

After a quick vehicle inspection, he turned his attention to their identification. Ronan had pulled Sidney's new papers out and shoved the envelope under her butt before he walked back around to her door.

"Why are you and your documents so wet?"

"I...I was pushed into a swimming pool," she replied quickly. "You know how people can be when they don't appreciate law enforcement."

His dead eyes looked up at her and Ronan wondered if he could tell that she was lying. Then he handed her back the documents. "You should have arrested them. That's assault, you know. They could have joined the execution at Konamin Square, but I just heard a few minutes ago that the rebel scum have escaped somehow. Make sure you keep a look out for them. They are dangerous to the Regime."

"Of course."

Ronan tried not to shudder at the casual proclamation that someone should die for pushing her into a swimming pool. What was this world coming to? Still she felt a slight wave of relief when the guard walked away.

"Why didn't you tell me you had papers for me? I almost had a heart attack when he pulled us over."

"Sorry about that," Ronan responded, amused in spite of the situation. "We've been a little busy."

"Yeah, well, don't let it happen again."

She smiled to let Ronan know she was teasing. Ronan drove away from the curb and Sidney said, "I've been thinking about the transport device."

"Yes?"

"I would suggest that we question Sloan about where this thing is, but it would be too dangerous for you to go back to the EDU at this point, or for that matter even be seen in public. Also, this time frame is so confusing for me that I'm liable to make a blunder and get us into some serious trouble. Instead, I think we should go back to my time and make our move from there."

"What can we do there? The only members of the Black Guard we know about are already dead."

“Yes, but remember the professor’s phase inducers? We can go back to just before we revealed them. We know who they are now and we can use their transporter to destroy the ship there. The Regime must have another ship in orbit in my time because they would need a base of operations. They can’t just be seen lugging bodies around. I just can’t figure out how they’d hide such a thing.”

“That part is easy. Cloaking technology could easily hide such a craft. My question is how they would have transported it back to the 21st century,” Ronan speculated. “A space vessel is much too big to fit between the rails of the professor’s time machine.”

“You’ve got me on that one. Maybe we need to have another chat with your professor and find out if he knows something. He seems pretty friendly with the current government.”

Ronan felt stunned at the idea that Professor Horton might be in league with these people. “He’s not like them, Sidney. If he’s helped them then it’s because he’s been deceived.”

“I’m not suggesting that he is, only that he might be able to give us some information. Ronan, there is something that I’ve been wondering about.”

“Yes?”

“I’m no scientist and I’m sure you know more about this than I do, but it seems to me that we’re going about all this the hard way.”

“How so?”

“Didn’t Einstein propose that time isn’t constant, that it bends and flows like a river?”

“Something like that,” Ronan allowed, intrigued by Sidney’s line of reasoning. “Why?”

“Every time we go back and forth, we change something. Your world wasn’t like this when you left the first time, at least not to quite this degree. And I highly doubt the president-elect of the United States of America was supposed to be a time-traveling bandit bent on ushering in a fascist government.”

“So each time we use the gate, it’s like diverting the flow of the river?” Ronan took a frustrated breath. “If that’s true then I set all of this in motion the first time I used the machine, but Sidney you have to know that I don’t regret it. I couldn’t just let you die.”

Sidney took her hand. “I know and in a way that makes me just as responsible.”

“Any idea how we turn back time?”

“Not yet,” Sidney admitted. “I just know that things on this end are too complicated. If we can stop them from the 21st century, I think that’s what we need to do.”

“You’re taking a lot on faith. What if there is no space ship back there, or a transport matrix?”

“There has to be,” Sidney shrugged. “I can’t explain how, but I just know it.”

Ronan thought about the situation while she drove toward her apartment. They couldn’t go back to just before the previous assassination as Sidney suggested. That had been the day of the inauguration and if anything went wrong, they wouldn’t have time to adjust. It would have to be sooner, but it would have to be a time when Sidney’s friends and colleagues already knew her. If they went back before that, people would question where she’d come from. Ronan wanted things to be as seamless this time around as possible.

“How about if we go back to just after I started working for you? If we do that, my presence won’t be questioned and the plane ride through the Everglades would never have happened.”

Ronan drove into the underground parking garage and sat in silence for a moment before she switched off the engine.

“That might work,” Sidney agreed. “Roger won’t have been replaced and that incident with the stalker will never have occurred, but what happens after that? How do we integrate with our other selves once it’s over?”

“From what I understand, once we remove the phase inducers we’ll simply merge back into our existing selves. Of course, we can’t be in the same location or we’ll explode. The professor says it’s like matter and anti-matter. From a distance, we should be okay. We’ll still have our memories, but over time what happened before will begin to fade.”

“So we won’t remember our first kiss or the first time we made love?”

Sidney sounded distressed and Ronan reached over to take her hands. “Eventually we won’t remember those things, no. But eventually we won’t remember the stalker either and eventually I won’t remember holding your broken body in my arms after he killed you. That’s a memory I can live without.”

Sidney looked deeply into Ronan’s blue eyes for a moment before she suddenly leaned forward. She buried her face against Ronan’s chest and hugged her close. Ronan flinched slightly at the pain in her shoulder but wrapped her arms around Sidney, and held her tightly.

“Oh, darling, what are we going to do?”

“It’s all right. We’ll just have to make some new memories.”

Sidney chuckled and pulled away. Ronan noticed the glint of tears in her eyes but didn’t comment. Instead, she leaned down and gently kissed Sidney. What she intended as gentle reassurance became something more when Sidney parted her lips and her tongue stroked

Ronan's full lips. The kiss deepened and she clutched Sidney against her. Passion flared as it usually did, but the seatbelts hindered free movement.

Ronan pulled back and smiled a little tremulously. "Don't worry, it will work out."

"Do you really believe that or are you telling me what you think I need to hear?"

"No, I mean it. I believe in you, Sidney, and I know that we will get through this."

Sidney watched her for a moment as though assessing her veracity before she nodded and sat back. Somehow, she'd concluded that Ronan's confidence was enough. She started to unbuckle the seatbelt but Ronan stopped her.

"Before we go upstairs I need to warn you about something."

"Yes?"

"There...there's no easy way to say this. When I came back here looking for you earlier, I had a visitor. Actually he was hiding in my closet and tried to kill me when I turned my back."

"Ronan, are you all right? He didn't hurt you?"

"I'm fine," she answered and smiled in reassurance. "But the assassin can't say the same thing. He's dead. I shot him, but I didn't mean to kill him. It would have been better if I'd been able to question him."

Ronan was honestly regretful that she had killed the man. Taking another life wasn't something she did lightly and was something that had been required far too often from her lately. If she expected Sidney to agree with her on this one, she was doomed to disappointment.

"Good." Her face was grim with anger when she continued. "If you hadn't killed him I would have had to rip his throat out with my teeth."

"Sidney."

"Don't sound so surprised. I can't stand the thought that anyone might hurt you. I've already watched you put your life on the line to rescue me more times than I can count and I had to watch when they shot you. You can't blame me for wanting to hurt someone that tried to kill you."

"You're right. To be honest, I have to admit it makes me feel pretty good that you're so protective of me."

Ronan reached up to cup Sidney's cheek in her palm. She reveled in the sensation of warm flesh as she leaned into the touch for a second. "I suggest we get up to the apartment and take whatever we need before someone shows up looking for the guy."

“Agreed. Where do you think we should go, the professor’s house?”

Ronan nodded and got out of the car. “I really don’t want to stay very long there either. Sloan knows he and I are friends. It’s probably not safe for him to have us around for very long, but we need to get those phase inducers.”

“Okay. We can get my clothes and head straight over.”

“I did notice that you seemed to have taken a liking to my things,” Ronan said lightly.

Sidney merely grinned back at her and didn’t reply.

Although they were trying to keep their moods light, both were aware that there was little time. Black Guards could show up at any second so the plan was to get whatever they needed and get out.

“One more thing,” Ronan added as they climbed the stairs. “We’ll have to go back to the EDU before we go to the professor’s.”

“Whatever for? They’re probably already looking for us even if Kinsky didn’t have time to report in. I bet patrols and checkpoints have already been enhanced. Why do we have to go back there?”

“When we get back to the 21st century we’ll still have to take out the Regime’s ship. Space vessels in this century are technologically sophisticated, at least more so than they were in your day. The only thing I can think of that would do the job properly is a half dozen plasma charges. Unless you’ve been hiding a few of those in your apartment, we’ll have to bring them with us. Besides, the faster we get them the better the chance that no one has reported us yet.”

From the set of her jaw, Ronan could tell that Sidney wasn’t happy but she didn’t say anything and Ronan didn’t want to upset her anymore than she already had. With the teasing banter gone, they quietly walked down the hall to Ronan’s apartment.

Chapter Thirty-One

THE DOOR TO the apartment was ajar and with a quick hand signal Ronan indicated that Sidney should stop and be quiet. Sidney complied immediately with her eyes round in fear. All that she’d been through in the last few months had made her cautious and Ronan was pleased to

see her crouch down against the wall to make a smaller target for anyone that might be waiting just inside.

Ronan also squatted down near the doorway and pulled her laser pistol from her shoulder holster. She'd been very lucky she hadn't lost it when the water swept her and Kinsky down through the underground tunnels. She tightly gripped the comforting metal handgrips. Listening intently, Ronan didn't hear a sound from inside the apartment. Years of honing her instincts told her there wasn't anyone inside, at least not anyone alive, but someone had been here recently. When she was sure it was safe, she quickly leaned forward and pushed the door open farther. The hinges didn't squeak and Ronan hadn't pushed it hard enough to hit the wall. Still there was no reaction so she dipped forward quickly and glanced inside before she pulled back again.

No one shot at her and there was no startled shout. Heartened at the continued quiet she peered around the doorjamb again and scanned an empty room.

"Wait here," she whispered to Sidney.

Sidney merely nodded and Ronan slipped inside the apartment. Quietly, carefully, Ronan moved from room to room but she found nothing out of the ordinary other than the broken coffee pot she'd discovered earlier. The bedroom was the last place she searched with the memory of her recent attacker fresh in her mind. The closet door still stood open from the previous assault and she could see that no one lurked inside. With few other hiding places available, Ronan stood erect and walked into the room. The assassin was gone. While she had been out someone had come inside her apartment and removed the body.

Without a doubt, more evidence had been removed. At least Sidney wouldn't have to endure the grisly sight.

Reassured that no one was waiting for them, but aware that someone could show up at any second she went back for Sidney. "It's okay. There's no one here. Someone cleaned up."

Sidney stood up with a relieved look on her face. "That was considerate of them."

Ronan nodded. "Yes, but I still think we should hurry."

"No argument there."

Ronan closed and locked the apartment door while Sidney hurried into the bedroom for her things. While she waited for her lover to return, Ronan listened intently for any sounds coming from the hallway. A second later, she jumped at the chime of an incoming communication. Torn between whether she should answer the call or not, Ronan hesitated. If she didn't answer it might look suspicious, yet if she did and an APB had been issued for her arrest, she'd be telling the authorities exactly where to look. She waited too long and the answering machine came on. The answering protocol showed the caller, but wouldn't return a visual feed. It was the ultimate in call screening.

The figure on the imager was distorted and darkened as though someone was deliberately trying to conceal their identity. Ronan frowned at the familiarity of the image before it clicked into place. She'd received a similar call months ago before she had ever started on her quest to save Sidney and eventually the fate of mankind. When the voice started to speak, she was convinced it was the same person.

"I know you're there, Lee. I saw you enter the apartment, but it's probably better this way. By now, you know the truth, but you don't have the full picture. You require more information to eliminate them. I assume you want to use plasma charges to destroy the ship. You don't need them and all you would do is endanger yourself by returning to the EDU to obtain them."

Ronan wondered how this person could know so much about her plans and she squinted closer at the screen. Unseen by the caller she walked over to the console and began to tinker with the resolution and contrast controls as she tried to enhance the image.

"Return to your friend's time. Any imposters in that period will be in important positions and will have a transport matrix near them. It will look like a small pyramid with a green crystal at the top, small enough to sit on a desk like a paperweight. You'll have to touch the green crystal and press the small indentation on the base to activate it. Don't worry where you'll end up, it only goes one place: to the mother ship."

The image had lightened considerably and Ronan began to tinker with resolution filters. The snow on the screen began to dissipate until she could barely make out a male face. He had brown hair and very pale skin, but she still couldn't see all of the details.

"You will be transported to a small room inside the ship. No one is in there unless they're arriving or departing the ship. Get out of that room quickly. Turn to your right in the hall and go down two doors. Go into the room on your left. That is the engine room. The mother ship is vulnerable to attack and can be damaged with an ancient explosive device. The only problem you'll have is avoiding the patrols. They will be heavy and they will kill you on sight."

Finally the screen was clearing up, just a little more. There.

Ronan stared at the screen in utter disbelief just before the image of Lieutenant Sloan winked off. She only saw him for a brief instant but there was no question as to her caller's identity.

She was tempted not to believe it, but the conversation she'd overheard between Sloan and Kinsky at the office came back to nag her. She had to admit that on second thought Sloan's words of caution could be construed as an attempt to talk Kinsky out of being so aggressive toward the populace. She also remembered working for the man, how fair and honest he'd always seemed to her. Her instincts told her she could trust him and over the years, she'd learned to trust her intuition. If they didn't have to invite disaster by going back to headquarters unnecessarily, so much the better. Ronan turned and found Sidney staring at her from the bedroom doorway.

"What do you think?"

Ronan considered the question from all angles quickly but held with her original reaction. “I think we can believe him. He went to too much trouble to conceal his identity for this to be a setup and I think he was the one who warned me of the Regime before I ever met you. Of course, that doesn’t mean we won’t still be very careful.”

“At least we don’t have to go back to your office. I really didn’t like that idea.”

Ronan nodded. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. Nothing personal, but this place scares me. I’m ready to go home.”

“Then let’s go home. Give me a minute though. I need to take care of something.”

Sidney frowned and realized Ronan wasn’t moving as freely as she usually did. “What happened to your arm?”

“Kinsky got in a lucky shot down in the tunnel. Don’t worry,” she continued when Sidney blanched. “He only grazed me. I’m just going to mend this before we take off. I don’t need even a minor wound slowing us down.”

Sidney didn’t comment. She quietly helped Ronan remove her shirt and heal the wound with an instrument taken from the medicine cabinet. Ronan thought Sidney was either becoming accustomed to her being injured or was making an effort not to dwell on things she couldn’t change. Considering all they’d been through in the last few months, Ronan was impressed with her fortitude. Once finished, she smiled and led Sidney out of the apartment and down to the parking garage. Their luck held and they didn’t encounter any more checkpoints. Ronan actually started to feel that things were looking up. That feeling intensified when they drove into the professor’s driveway and he opened the door to greet them with a smile.

“I WAS BEGINNING to wonder if you were going to bring the old girl back.”

Sidney smiled at the grizzled professor’s reference to his battered old sedan, but in spite of his jovial tone, she saw the strain around his eyes. Either he’d been very worried for them or news of their latest escapade had already leaked out. She didn’t know which and chose not to pursue the topic unless he brought it up. The less he knew, the safer he would be. She’d once heard such a thing referred to as plausible deniability.

“It even has a full tank but the driver’s seat is a little damp.”

While Ronan bantered with the scientist, Sidney was more intrigued with the smells that permeated the air. Her stomach spoke up noisily, reminding her that she had only had a cup of coffee all day.

“What smells so good?” she finally interrupted, unable to help herself.

Professor Horton merely grinned. “You’re just in time. I made tea.”

“You mean you can cook, too?” Ronan asked in feigned surprise.

“My, dear, I assure you that I can do anything I feel like doing. Even if I am nearly seventy-eight.”

Sidney could see that the two clearly adored each other and the friendly teasing was a normal part of their interaction. But as cute as she thought they were, her stomach insisted that she find out what there was to eat. A few minutes later, she learned that the “tea” the professor referred to was actually a full meal. The professor had set the table for three people and the aromas that circulated in the air made her mouth water.

“Now have a seat,” Horton invited. “Everything is ready. I just need to get it out of the oven.”

Sidney took a moment to look around the room in wonder. She had easily accepted Professor Horton as a brilliant scientist. All of the sophisticated technology Ronan had displayed time and again as well as the fully outfitted lab she had seen for herself proved it. She just had a hard time connecting this cozy kitchen with its hanging pots and pans, potted plants, and modern cooking appliances with the same person.

In a wink, Horton placed a large roast beef with all the trimmings in the center of the table, quickly followed by mashed potatoes, cream gravy, corn, baby carrots with a brown sugar glaze and dinner rolls. Sidney felt like she was in a scene from a Harry Potter movie and had just set down to a feast at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

“This is amazing.” She loaded her plate. “You must have cooked all day.”

“Professor, how did you learn to make cream gravy?” Ronan asked. “It’s not exactly a European delicacy.”

The old man waited until Sidney had taken her first bite of mashed potatoes and gravy to answer. Once he saw the delight in her eyes, he answered Ronan’s question.

“Our friend here is an American. I wanted her to feel at home in our land.”

“Well, you certainly outdid yourself,” Sidney complimented around a mouthful. “This is delicious.”

“So glad you approve, my dear,” he said before he tucked into his own meal. After a minute, he remembered something else. “So sorry, I forgot the wine.”

Before he could get up Ronan stood. “I’ll get it, Professor, but I think I’d better stick with something non-alcoholic for now. By the way, four o’clock is a little late in the day for tea and too early for supper. Is there something we should know?”

Ronan’s back was to the man and she couldn’t see the effect her words had on him, but Sidney was facing him and she stopped with the fork halfway to her mouth. His complexion had taken on an odd pallor that told her something was terribly wrong. His eyes met hers and seemed to plead with her to go along with him for now.

“I...I decided you would bring my car back sometime today and since I know how you hate to cook, I thought I would save you the trouble.”

Sidney watched Ronan’s back stiffen and knew she had easily seen through the professor’s attempt at casual. She expected her to confront him at once and was surprised when she said nothing. Instead, Ronan finished collecting beverages for all of them, wine for the professor and two glasses of iced tea, before she sat back down.

Sidney sensed Horton had another bomb to drop and suddenly wished for something stronger than iced tea. Then she realized that it would be better for her to be sober to handle whatever was coming.

“You do realize that I’m going to question you on that after we eat?” Ronan’s voice was soft, but left little doubt that she was completely serious. Professor Horton understood and reached over to pat his friend on the hand.

“Finish your supper, Ronan. There is nothing that cannot wait until after we have eaten.”

Sidney was happy to see her nod acceptance of his terms. Just once she wanted to relax and eat a meal in this messed up time without wondering who was about to burst through the door. Still, the look on Professor Horton’s expression lingered in her mind and the sumptuous repast turned to bitter ashes in her stomach. She forced herself to clean her plate since she had the feeling she was about to need all of the energy her body could store. The rest of the meal was a quiet affair during which the air seemed to grow heavier with the weight of whatever the man concealed. Eventually Sidney couldn’t hope to swallow another bite and pushed her half-full plate away. She noticed that the other two pushed their food around absently and decided that was enough.

“All right, Professor, out with it.”

Horton sat up straight but his gaze never left the table. “I received a communiqué a little after ten o’clock this morning from someone skilled enough to mask their identity.” He stopped speaking and took a large gulp of wine. “It seems that I owe you an apology, both of you. He told me a story that convinces me that the Neue Konservatives are not the friends I believed them to be.”

“Were you able to figure out who this guy was?” Ronan asked although she and Sidney both thought they knew the answer to that question.

Sloan had known that Ronan and the professor were good friends. He knew about the time gate and Horton’s creative genius in all things technological. He also knew that Professor Horton was just about the only person Ronan would trust if she were in danger.

“Unfortunately, no. He only said that Kinsky and the Regime knew that you were a threat and they would do whatever it took to destroy you. I was also told it was only a matter of time before they would send a death squad here to look for you.”

“Dutrov’s men, no doubt,” Sidney said bitterly. She vividly recalled the treatment she had received at his hands and didn’t look forward to another encounter.

“Perfect. So the reason they weren’t waiting for us at the apartment is that they knew where we would go.” She stood up suddenly from the table and looked at Sidney. “Come on, we have to get out of here.”

“What?”

“Sidney, for all we know they’ve already got us surrounded. I’m not going to sit here and endanger the professor again.”

“I’ve been involved from the beginning,” he interrupted. “Besides, I have something to show you.”

Professor Horton stood and motioned for them to follow. He led them straight to the lab and walked over to a workbench filled with assorted components Sidney hadn’t seen before. On the end of the table there were two bands fitted with funny black boxes. Horton picked one of them up and turned toward Sidney and Ronan.

“These are the phase inducers I told you about.”

He passed it over to Ronan. The other he handed to Sidney. Sidney noticed that the band was small and lightweight. It would be easy to conceal it under a shirtsleeve. The small square box was also remarkably light and she assumed it was some kind of control interface.

“I’ve taken the liberty of presetting the coordinates into the band. We need only refine the exact time you wish to reappear in the past.”

“Do you input the information in here?” Ronan asked and tapped the box with a fingernail.

“Yes, here let me show you.”

Horton pointed out a small dial with a set of hash marks and a digital readout. A small computer chip inside the mechanism was already set with the geographical location for North

America and a general target date for the year 2012. All they needed to do was set the appropriate date and time.

Sidney and Ronan settled on June 15. It was well after the time Ronan had started working for her and before the stalker's attack. Sidney would phone her producer, Vel Prince, and claim illness for taking a few days off since she'd still been filming a movie at that time. Ronan would drop an anonymous tip to the police about the identity of Sidney's stalker. Once both of those obstacles were out of the way, they could concentrate on their nefarious visitors.

"I guess all there is to do now is step through the gate."

Ronan's voice quivered and Sidney felt her eyes water in response. Ronan was about to say good-bye again to her oldest friend, very likely for the last time. Sidney had come to know him well from spending time with him the last few days and felt like she was losing a good friend as well. Professor Horton didn't say anything but spread his arms wide. Both women stepped into a hug and fought the sting of tears. Finally, he released them and cleared his throat before he stepped up to the control panel.

"Don't forget that you will be slightly out of phase when you arrive," he reminded them while he keyed in the necessary information.

Sidney took Ronan's hand as they stepped toward the transmission point. "We won't forget," she said looking back at him.

The sound of numerous vehicles pulling up in front of the house interrupted the tearful good-bye and all three looked at each other in sudden fright. A second later the front door shattered, hammered open by a battering ram and the sound of booted feet running toward them reverberated through the house.

"Quickly!" Professor Horton shouted and finished inputting the numbers.

Sidney would have run back and helped defend the scientist from the invading military but Ronan pushed her toward the shimmering temporal field with an arm around her shoulders.

"We have to go now, Sidney. There is no time."

Just before she stepped through the vortex, she watched Dutrov burst into the lab with a pistol aimed straight at her. Professor Horton stepped into the line of fire and absorbed the laser fire that would have killed her instantly.

"No!" she shouted even as sparkles filled her eyes and her skin tingled with the sensation of falling through time and space.

Chapter Thirty-Two

THE FAMILIAR CONFINES of Sidney's penthouse apartment solidified around them, but her heart still cried for the old man that she had just seen murdered. The knowledge that both she and Ronan were safe was no consolation. Sidney's pain turned inward and she sank to the ground with her arms wrapped around her midsection.

She rocked back and forth with her eyes closed moaning, "No, no."

Nothing else mattered in that moment but all of the horror she had seen since this whole nightmare began. She felt like things had started slow and now seemed to move faster and faster, like a roller coaster headed downhill. They had no control and they were fooling themselves to believe they could stop an entire army from invading. The Regime would find them. Somehow, they probably already knew where they were. If Horton could invent a time machine, why couldn't the Neue Konservatives? Heck, if they were so advanced they could probably put one together as easily as she put on her underwear. It would be like a child's building blocks to them.

Gradually she calmed. Her face was pressed against a warm, cloth-covered breast, and gentle arms wrapped around her shoulders.

Sidney pulled away and looked into Ronan's face. "What have we done? He didn't deserve that."

"I know, but it will be all right."

As gentle as Ronan's words were, Sidney felt ignited by anger. "All right? How can you say that?"

She stood and wiped at the streaks of tears on her face. She knew that her words were unfair but she couldn't prevent them. She was so angry and frightened that she just wanted to strike back and Ronan happened to be a convenient target.

"Don't you care that they just murdered a sweet old man for no other reason than he happened to be there? It is not all right. Not by a long shot. They know about us, Ronan. They are going to come in here and slaughter us just like they slaughtered Professor Horton and you know what the worst part is? There isn't a damn thing we can do about it."

"Sidney, I know it's terrible about the professor. How do you think I feel? He was like a father to me, but he's not really dead. Don't you see? We're in the past now and he hasn't even been born. We can change things."

“Hah!” Sidney shouted. “How many times have we tried this Ronan? And don’t you see? We’ve tipped our hand. Now that they know about us in the future, what makes you think they can’t build their own machine and send agents back after us?”

Ronan went dead still and Sidney knew she had made her point. Her anger was still at the boiling point but slightly mollified, she walked away to wash her face. Suddenly the silence was broken as someone began to pound on the door. Both women jumped in fear and turned to look at each other. Then they heard Jordy’s concerned voice and relaxed slightly. Sidney walked over and opened the door to greet her worried chauffeur.

“What’s going on in here?” he asked as he stepped into the room and looked around for an obvious perpetrator. When he saw only Ronan, he looked at his employer in confusion. “Ms. Weaver, are you okay? I heard shouting and I thought that stalker guy must have gotten in.”

Sidney glanced over at Ronan. With everything that had happened, she’d completely forgotten about the stalker. In this century, she was still shooting a picture and the plane crash had never happened.

“Everything is fine, Jordy,” she said and reached out to put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Ronan and I were just...rehearsing a scene together for the movie.”

“For the movie?”

At first he didn’t sound like he believed her, but finally he let out a breath and drew a hand through his sandy hair. “Geez, Ms. Weaver, if that’s rehearsal I just have to see the movie. You sure had me convinced.”

Sidney smiled and moved toward the door with her untidy employee in tow. She gestured him through the door and said, “Thanks for checking on me, but we really should get back to work. You know how Vel can be when I forget my lines.”

“Huh? Oh, sure Ms. Weaver, whatever you say. Just try not to scare the bejesus out of me again, okay?”

“I’ll try,” Sidney said in a light, teasing tone. “But no promises.”

As soon as the door closed, she turned back toward Ronan. The smile that had never reached her eyes left her lips. She could see immediately that Ronan had something to say and she doubted that it was about Jordy. “What? Spit it out.”

“You’re right about the Conservatives. Fortunately, we do have a head start. Since they killed...the professor...they’re going to have to figure out the time machine from scratch. Perhaps that will buy us the time we need to fix things from this end.”

Sidney noticed how Ronan hesitated over the painful words of the professor's demise, but she was still too upset to comment on it again. Instead, she decided that the proper thing to do was concentrate on the matter at hand.

"Then I suggest we get to it."

"At least there aren't any riots."

She looked sharply at Ronan and noticed the glimmer in her eyes. "Was that a joke?"

Ronan seldom joked and Sidney had gotten used to the somber young woman's manner. The joke now, delivered at just the right time, somehow managed to dissipate her anger where a more solemn attitude would have just made it worse. With the anger gone, she started to feel a little more positive about their odds of success. Ronan was right. The Regime and their Black Guards weren't omnipotent, just advanced. If they had to start from scratch, what were the odds that they would know exactly when to go back to?

"Right, well, what should we do first? I have a feeling that whatever it is things will be over quickly once we make the first move."

"I think that's probably true," Ronan said as she sat down on the sofa. "We have to be very careful this time, plan well, and hope we get it right."

Sidney sat down close to her until their knees nearly touched. "This is the last chance we have, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's like you said. We've given ourselves away and they'll be looking for a way to eliminate us. Besides, I don't know about you, but I'm getting a little tired of all this time travel."

"Ready to settle down?" Sidney asked, feeling somewhat amused that Ronan had apparently just decided she'd had enough.

"Definitely," Ronan answered as she picked up the glint of humor in Sidney's eyes.

"Ready for the white picket fence, the house in the suburbs and two point three children?"

"Exactly."

Suddenly the room felt ten degrees hotter than it had only moments before. Sidney wondered how they had gone from frightened and angry to being aroused beyond belief. She shifted closer to Ronan until her breast lightly touched her arm. Sidney looked deeply into blue eyes and said, "I'm a little old for child bearing. Would you settle for two point three dogs?"

"I would never consider anything as settling where you're concerned. But about the child bearing?"

“Yes?”

“There’s no reason we can’t practice.”

Sidney’s breath left her body in a sudden flash of desire just before Ronan’s lips crushed against her own. Her fingers entwined in the long, golden strands of hair as she pulled Ronan tighter and practically climbed onto her lap. Straddled over Ronan’s legs, Sidney pushed her against the armrest and luxuriated in the feel of the silken tongue. After a few delicious minutes, Sidney pulled away to gaze down into the eyes of her lover. Everything came rushing back and she buried her face against Ronan’s neck.

“What are we doing? We need to try and save the world and here we are making out like two hormone-filled teenagers.”

“There is always time for love, Sidney.”

Ronan’s tender words and strong embrace gave her the excuse she needed to seek solace in her warmth for a few minutes. Sidney absorbed everything her senses could tell her in that time and she fervently hoped it wouldn’t be the last. The scent of Ronan’s skin, her breath against Sidney’s neck, the warmth and strength of her arms were what would see her through the next little while, and she knew there were only two possible outcomes for what they were about to do. Either they would succeed and destroy the mother ship or they would die.

“Tell me we’ll still be around when all of this is over,” she whispered against Ronan’s neck.

At first, there was no response but finally Ronan answered. “We will succeed.”

That wasn’t the same thing at all and served only to confirm Sidney’s worst fears. She clutched Ronan harder against her and felt the long arms tighten. Grateful, she accepted the support until she could finally pull her emotions back together. Eventually she climbed off Ronan’s lap and sat beside her again. She tried to ignore the concerned look and scrubbed at the stiff tracks left from her dried tears with the palms of her hands.

“Yes, well, I guess we should get back to it.” Sidney took a steadying breath. “I’ve been thinking that the first thing we need to do is concentrate on getting to the mother ship. All of the other details, the stalker, the imposters on earth, those things will work themselves out.”

“I agree, and with the information we were able to get from our informant it should be easy enough to find a transport matrix with one of the Guards living in this time.”

Sidney knew very well that nothing about this was going to be easy, but confidence in their abilities was paramount to keep them focused at this point. “So the question is who do you think will be the easiest target?”

“Not President-elect Angstrom,” Ronan replied immediately. “He’s too well protected. Gentry is also out of the question since he hasn’t yet been replaced.”

The mention of Roger brought Sidney up short. So much had happened that she'd forgotten about his murder and the imposter in the previous time line. At least one good thing had come from this. Roger was alive again and if it were up to her, she would make sure no more innocent lives were lost.

"That leaves Chief Justice Barnhart."

If Ronan noticed the huskiness of her voice, she didn't comment on it. "Any idea how we get past all that security?"

"Hey, I was just an ordinary actress until I hooked up with you. You're the one who's Lara Croft with a D cup. You tell me."

Ronan smiled but let the remark go. "If I were Barnhart, I'd probably keep the matrix with me wherever I went. From Sloan's description it's small enough to be carried in a pocket."

"So what's the least defensible location, his house or his office?"

Either decision was a serious risk. If they broke into his office there would be security everywhere. The Justice Building was a thirty-story high rise filled with cameras and hundreds of people. Unquestionably, his home would also have security but at night there would be fewer guards and the cover of darkness.

"His house," Sidney said.

"His office," Ronan responded at the same time.

"What? You can't be serious."

"Think about it, Sidney. At his house, other Guard members will surround him. Not to mention the fact that he probably knows every inch of his property. If we were to trip a security alarm, he'd know the most likely place to find us hiding. If we do get caught, I'd rather it be by the police than some futuristic megalomaniacs bent on world conquest."

"But the security in the Justice Building," Sidney argued. "You have to go through a metal detector just to get in the front doors and there are people everywhere."

"You've been there?" Ronan asked with an odd look.

"Yes, David gave me a tour of it once." Sidney realized almost at once that her mention of the vice president-elect had just lost her this argument.

"Good. Tell me everything you remember."

Sidney told Ronan everything she could think of. When she finished Ronan asked her for a pen and paper and jotted down copious notes while she went through it all again. Still not

satisfied, she had Sidney boot up her computer where Ronan hacked into restricted government schematics for the Justice Building's layout.

"Isn't that illegal?" Sidney asked, amazed that her lover possessed such skills at all.

"It is if you get caught."

Sidney blinked in shock and blurted, "But you're supposed to be an officer of the law."

Ronan ignored her and began to print off what she'd found. For hours, they went over the blueprints until Sidney finally decided it was time for a lunch break. With all of the skipping around in time they'd been doing, her body couldn't decide whether it was day or night. The clock told her it was barely midday, but her eyes burned with exhaustion.

After lunch, the two women sat back down to finalize their plans. They decided to move as soon as dusk approached but just before the building closed down normal operations for the day. With any luck, there would be fewer people inside. Finally, Sidney just couldn't absorb anymore.

"I'm sorry, Ronan. I just feel like I'm in a fog."

"You're tired. Why don't we try to get a few hours of sleep? I think we've gone over things as much as we can for now anyway."

"Do we have the time?"

Sidney ignored the unintentional pun while she awaited Ronan's answer. Not only was she worried about wasting any head start they had, but also that some death squad might break into the apartment while they slept. Ronan seemed to understand her concerns and gently reached out to touch her cheek.

"We need to rest, darling. We can't afford to go in there with our minds cloudy."

Sidney relented and they retired to her bedroom. As soon as they crossed the threshold, it occurred to her that Ronan had never been in her bedroom before. They'd only become lovers after they had gone on the run from her stalker and Barnhart's men. As she looked around with fresh eyes, she realized the room could easily be thought of as decadent. Especially in comparison to the more conservative style her grandparents had used to decorate the Rock Hall estate.

She turned to Ronan and saw her standing in the doorway with a stunned look on her face. One eyebrow slowly rose in amusement when she saw the custom-made bed that took up half the room. A fireplace filled much of one wall while a minibar occupied the corner. A huge synthetic fur rug in front of the fireplace and a low serving table beside it completed the look.

"Nice."

The single word spoke volumes and Sidney walked quietly toward the bed. With her back to Ronan, maybe she wouldn't see the crimson blush that covered her face. No one spoke again as they took off their shoes and climbed fully clothed beneath the over-sized sheets and comforter. Finally, they lay wrapped together with Sidney tucked snuggly under Ronan's chin.

"So, what made you decide on this décor or were you unintentionally going for the love den approach? Somehow, it doesn't seem like you."

Sidney sighed dramatically, but finally decided to answer honestly. "Sometimes it very much is me. I got this place just after Roger and I split up. Life was always so conservative with him that for once I wanted to do something crazy. I knew the rest of the apartment would have to be maintained for appearances sake but in here, in this room, I wanted it to be just for me."

"You've never had anyone else in here?"

"No, you're the first."

"Seems a shame to let the opportunity to break it in go to waste," Ronan suggested quietly.

Sidney's libido responded to the suggestive tone, but only sluggishly. It did seem a shame but her eyes had already started to close.

"Too bad we're so tired," Ronan finished before yawning impressively.

It only took a few more seconds before both of them were sound asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Three

AFTER A FEW hours, Ronan felt rejuvenated and if not exactly eager to get things moving, at least better mentally prepared. As they dressed, Sidney continued to question Ronan's approach to entering the Justice Building.

"Are you sure this is your best idea? I don't mean to be critical, but it doesn't exactly seem covert."

Since Sidney had said the same thing about twelve times in the last two hours, Ronan wondered if she was being sarcastic. She took a long-suffering breath and tried to explain...again.

This time she didn't quite manage to keep the ire out of her voice. "If we go in there wearing ski masks and black clothing they are bound to think we're up to something."

"All right," Sidney said and threw her hands up in surrender. "But do you really think waltzing in like we own the place is very smart? Shouldn't we at least try to keep from being seen?"

"No, we should walk right in the front door in normal business attire like we have nothing to hide. That way no one will give us a second look."

With all of her advanced equipment on the Florida Keys, Ronan could have forged IDs that would have allowed them to carry a bazooka inside but there was no time. Under the circumstances, hiding in plain sight would have to do.

Sidney subsided into silence but Ronan didn't think she was convinced the plan would work. The only thing that the police would find on them if they got caught were the inducers they wore around their upper arms. That would look suspicious. At least they could conceal them beneath their jackets and remove the inducers to meld back into their counterparts in this century if they were successful. So far, they'd been lucky and not run into their doubles and now that they were taking different paths, it was unlikely to happen.

Thirty minutes later, she drove Sidney's Jaguar into the parking structure under the Justice Building. She calmly took a parking stub from the meter and waited for the plastic guard-arm to lift so she could drive in. It was significantly darker in the parking structure and with dusk starting to approach, Ronan had to remove her sunglasses to see properly. The lot had begun to empty but a great many cars remained. The FBI and Drug Enforcement Agency both had offices inside the building and they undoubtedly maintained a twenty-four hour shift rotation. Ronan was happy about that since it not only meant a skeleton crew inside, but also that the parking gates wouldn't lock at a certain time. At least they didn't have to worry about being barricaded inside if they needed to make a quick getaway.

She parked on the top level of the concrete garage in order to be closer to their target. Barnhart's office was on the twenty-sixth floor, but they needed supplies before visiting his private sanctum. Before she could unlock her safety belt, she felt Sidney's strong grip on her forearm.

"Are you sure?"

The look on Ronan's face was apparently response enough and Sidney released her.

"Okay, you're sure. But we don't have any weapons, or even any of the frequency jammers we used before. What happens if we run into Barnhart or one of his cronies?"

Sidney's sudden attack of nerves confused Ronan. She thought they'd discussed all of this. Only persons with authorized access could get to the floor where the FBI and DEA had their offices.

From their research, Ronan and Sidney knew there was an armory on that floor with enough weapons to take over a small country. They didn't intend to shoot anyone, but they would need a few explosives to destroy the spacecraft. Then it hit her. She had forgotten to tell Sidney how they would get past the electronic door to the armory. It was a measure of Sidney's trust that she had come this far without that bit of knowledge.

"I'm sorry, darling. Here, you remember this?"

Ronan pulled a small plastic box out of her blazer pocket. Red and green lights flashed on it and there was a small metallic toggle switch on one end, not large enough to set off a metal detector. She flipped a lid and showed Sidney the wires housed inside.

"The wires are inserted into the locking mechanism on the door. When the switch is flipped it emits a minute electronic pulse that will disable the door lock."

"Won't that set off some kind of alarm?"

"No, the system will think someone used a key."

"Oh." Sidney looked relieved, then joked, "I guess that's why you didn't bring the battering ram."

"Sometimes it's just easier to turn off the power."

Getting to the right floor proved no trouble. They passed few people and the ones they did seemed too busy to look at them twice. They left the elevator and Ronan glanced around quickly to make sure they were alone before they ducked onto the stairwell. She didn't mind anyone seeing them on the lower floors, but from this point on it was better if they weren't spotted.

Finally, they stood on the landing in front of the heavy door with the electronic lock. The hair on the back of Ronan's neck prickled just as she started to think things were going a little too easy, but she kept going. A quick insertion of the wires and a flip of the switch disengaged the lock and she met Sidney's eyes briefly. A small furrow rested between her eyes and she wondered if she had that same prickly feeling. Mentally, Ronan shrugged and pocketed the device before she walked past the door. Again, no one was in sight and she led the way toward the end of the hall and the armory.

"Hey."

Ronan's heart thudded against her ribs at the sound of the voice behind them. She and Sidney froze before they turned to confront the man. No doubt they were about to be hauled away and questioned as to how they'd gained access into a restricted government area.

The man they saw in the hall had neatly trimmed brown hair and wore a black suit and tie. He must have stepped out of the office and spotted them walking down the hallway. As he approached, his expression remained curiously open and friendly.

“Agent John Rhodes,” he introduced himself and held out his hand. “You must be the new agent everyone’s been talking about. Let me be the first to welcome you.”

The Twin Towers had been destroyed and this man obviously hadn’t learned a thing. “Ronan Lee,” she responded quickly and grasped his hand. “I’m just giving my friend, Doctor Weaver, a tour.”

“Oh, you must be one of the squints from the lab,” Rhodes commented with a glance at Sidney before he turned back to Ronan. “I guess you are new if you don’t know the policy about visitors. No one but agents up here without the Assistant Director’s express approval.”

“I see.” Ronan tried to look appreciative. “I’ll remember that and thank you for letting me know.”

“No problem. Well, I guess I’d better get back to work. See you around.”

Ronan held her breath until the office door closed behind him, then turned her head to meet Sidney’s incredulous stare. “What’s a ‘squint’?”

“Scientist type, now let’s find that armory so we can get the hell out of here.”

Ronan bypassed the electronic lock on the armory door and went in while Sidney stood watch outside. She’d left the door ajar in case Agent Rhodes or someone else came down the hall so that Sidney could duck inside if she needed cover. As soon as she was in, Ronan did a double take. Three narrow aisles covered the room from floor to ceiling, packed with every weapon and firearm conceivable. It looked organized but the sheer volume would prevent a quick search and she couldn’t leave Sidney hanging out in the hall. Ronan grunted in frustration and turned back to the door. She jerked it open and reached out to grab the front of Sidney’s shirt to haul her inside.

“What did you do that for?”

With the door closed, Ronan felt free to answer in a normal tone. “Look at this place.”

Sidney’s eyes popped as she looked around. “This is going to take forever.”

“Maybe not. Look here, the ends of the rows are labeled.”

Someone had the foresight to realize how confusing the weapons room would get and had thoughtfully separated the contents with labels such as “combat gear,” “body armor,” “projectile weapons,” “explosives,” etc. Ronan took off down the explosives aisle while Sidney wandered the other direction. She would trust that Sidney would quickly hide if someone opened the door or came in.

Ronan passed hand grenades, Claymore mines, and a multitude of other deadly explosives before she found what she needed. The grenades would have been nice and simple, but there

would be no way to detonate them simultaneously. She found what she needed listed on the end of a sealed ammo box and looked around for something to pry it open with.

“Try this.” Sidney handed a huge hunting knife over her shoulder.

Startled, Ronan turned too quickly and fell into the packed shelves. Mines clattered to the floor with enough noise to wake the dead. Fortunately, no timers had been set so there weren't any explosions but the cacophony was enough to send both women scurrying to the end of the aisle to hide. After a few minutes, it became apparent that no one was going to investigate and Ronan let out a relieved breath that the room was apparently sound proof.

“You scared me to death. What were you thinking sneaking up on me like that?”

“Sorry.” Sidney held out the huge knife she'd offered Ronan before.

From the repressed giggles, Ronan didn't really think Sidney was sorry at all but she took the knife and walked back to the crate with as much dignity as she could muster. A few seconds later, the lid was off and both of them started to fill their pockets with bricks of C-4 and detonators. Then they picked up the mess Ronan had made but before she could walk back to the door, Sidney stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“Come look at this.”

Curious, Ronan followed. Sidney led her to the aisle that contained body armor.

“Think those are for the female agents?”

Ronan followed where Sidney pointed and started to smile. “Apparently. I think that as long as we're shopping, we should pick up a couple of those for ourselves.”

“I agree,” Sidney said. “Whole-heartedly, emphatically, undeniably...”

Getting back to the twenty-sixth floor with their booty proved just as easy, minus the run-in with errant FBI agents. Ronan and Sidney had their pockets loaded with just what they needed to ensure the invading insurgents would soon be a distant memory. The body armor fit under their shirts with barely a bulge.

“Looks like this place is just about empty,” Sidney remarked as they traveled without interruption toward Barnhart's office.

Ronan merely nodded and tried her best to look calm. She was supposed to be the fearless detective and it wouldn't look good if she showed how nervous she truly was. Sidney was right, she thought. The elevator hadn't stopped for any more passengers and as the doors opened onto the twenty-sixth floor, no one else was in sight. She looked both ways down the hall just to be sure and then struck off in the direction she knew the chief justice's office would be.

“I hope he’s still here,” she admitted in a low voice.

The door to the outer office was closed but not locked. Ronan froze for a moment as she realized she hadn’t accounted for his secretary. If Barnhart’s secretary was still here, she would be an unfortunate witness. She hesitated briefly before she decided that was unlikely. Even if public officials tended to work late, their secretaries and receptionists usually left by five o’clock. Their plan wouldn’t work if he’d gone home early.

The office entrance was indeed empty and they walked in unobserved.

“Wow, nice digs for a judge,” Sidney said.

Expensive artwork covered the two sides of the office and directly ahead, about twenty feet away, bookshelves lined the wall on each side of another doorway. Shelves of mahogany wood, polished to a blinding sheen, held so many books Ronan was surprised they didn’t collapse. The secretary’s desk, also constructed of heavy mahogany, sat directly in front of the bookshelf. A high light fixture covered with sculpted, frosted glass and encircled with bronze lent an Italian feel to the décor.

Ronan decided not to announce herself and opened the door to the judge’s inner office without knocking. The room was empty and it appeared that they had already missed Barnhart. Ronan shrugged and decided it was the perfect opportunity to search his office just in case he’d left the matrix here.

“Look around and see if you can spot anything like what Sloan described.”

Ronan pulled at the desk drawers, disappointed to find them secured. The electronic device she’d brought wouldn’t work on these locks since they were the old-fashioned type normally attributed to such an antique. She looked around the office for anything to jimmy the drawers when she noticed the framed diplomas on the walls.

Yale... Stanford...it was obvious that the real Barnhart had been an extremely educated man. There was a photograph of him with former President Bush on a yacht. A huge swordfish easily as tall as the men hung neatly in the foreground and a woman stood close to Barnhart. All of them were smiling happily at their prize and Barnhart had an arm around the woman’s waist. Was it his wife?

Ronan wondered what had happened to her after the imposter took over her husband. Was she still alive, blissfully unaware of the creature that had replaced her spouse, or was she eliminated like so much garbage? Outrage rose inside her and she almost missed the sound of the doorknob rattling as someone started to enter the office. She used the anger inside her to fuel her adrenaline and bounded for the door just as it opened and an unsuspecting man entered the room. Ronan took pleasure at the startled look on the wrinkled visage before she slammed her right fist square into his face with all the force she could muster. Barnhart crumpled soundlessly to the ground and Ronan reached under his arms to drag him further into the room.

“Close the door and then help me tie him up.”

“With what?” Sidney asked, clearly dumbfounded by the fury that fairly radiated off her partner.

“We’ll use his belt and his shoelaces. Quick, before he wakes up.”

Ronan dragged the unconscious man toward the coat closet while Sidney shut the door. She removed his belt and then turned him onto his stomach to tie his hands behind him. She needed to tie his feet, but that would have to wait until she searched his pockets for a key to the desk. Inside his left jacket pocket she felt something hard, smooth, and with a curiously pointed tip. Unexpectedly, she found what they were looking for: the matrix.

Ronan pulled the object out, impressed by the ordinariness of it. Had she seen the matrix sitting on a desktop she wouldn’t have given it a second glance. The pyramid was clear and looked like a cheap crystal easily found in any bauble shop. The green tip, however, was another story. This was the central portion of the matrix that interacted with a mechanism housed inside the pyramid. It looked like a very large emerald.

Barnhart began to stir and Ronan quickly sat the matrix aside on the floor. She pulled the handkerchief out of her breast pocket and stuffed it in his mouth so he couldn’t shout for help. The old man began to struggle and she had difficulty holding his shoulders to the ground. He was surprisingly strong for someone as old as he was supposed to be. Of course, with the holographic technology utilized to change his appearance, the man could be any age and she wouldn’t know the difference.

“Get his shoelaces off.”

“I’m trying.”

Ronan flinched in sympathy as Barnhart clocked Sidney on the forehead with one of his flailing feet. She took hold of his right arm and forced it up to a painful angle.

“Keep kicking and I’ll break it for you,” she promised.

Barnhart stopped trying to kick Sidney and winced in pain until Ronan eased the pressure somewhat. She still kept his arm lifted where she could easily apply pressure if he started to struggle again.

Sidney quickly removed his shoelaces. “Now what?”

“Tie his ankles together and bend his feet up toward me.”

A few seconds later Ronan used the end of the belt and the shoelaces to tie his hands and feet together. He didn’t look very comfortable but she remembered the image of his smiling wife in the photograph and couldn’t find it in her to be sympathetic.

“Sidney, help me drag him into the closet. We don’t want anyone to find him before we finish what we started.”

Sidney nodded and bent down to pocket the matrix before she walked over to help Ronan. She wiped at a small trickle of blood from the cut on her forehead and stepped to the other side of the faux judge. Both women grasped an arm and dragged him toward the coat closet. Sidney opened the door and they stuffed him inside. Sidney, who hadn’t lived through the horrors the German people of the future had, apparently felt more sympathy for the man and turned him on his side so he wouldn’t asphyxiate before they shut the door.

That little gesture of compassion reminded Ronan why she had fallen in love with this woman and why they were doing this. Remorse flashed through her that she had become so hardened as to forget her own compassion for another living being, even if it was only for a moment.

“Are you ready?” Sidney handed Ronan the matrix.

“It’s a little late for second thoughts.” She smiled and accepted the device as Sidney linked her arm through Ronan’s elbow.

“Let’s get it over with. Energize the damn thing.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

“OUCH.”

“ARE YOU all right?” Ronan asked from out of the darkness. Somehow, they’d transported into a remarkably dark and stuffy room.

“Yeah, great. I just hit my funny bone. Where are we? Where’d you get that from?” Sidney asked as Ronan clicked on a small flashlight.

“You know the old adage. Always be prepared.”

“Cute.”

Ronan looked around in the gloom in disbelief before she said. “That’s perfect. We transport onto a spacecraft hovering hundreds of miles above Earth and we land in a broom closet.”

“Could be worse,” Sidney offered.

“How?”

“We could have transported into the middle of a group of Black Guards armed with ray-guns.”

“Yes, well...there is that. Sloan did say that we would arrive in a small room. I just didn’t expect it to be a closet. Let’s get moving before someone else transports.” Ronan leaned against the door to try to determine if they were alone.

To her consummate shock, the door swished back at her proximity and slid into a pocket in the wall. With her weight already leaning forward in preparation to rest against the door she almost fell on the floor. Ronan staggered and managed to keep her balance. They’d come out into the hallway Sloan had mentioned. Fortunately, there weren’t any patrols in sight but Ronan felt that was just luck on their part. He said the patrols were heavy.

“I wonder if all the doors are like that,” Sidney whispered.

“I hope not. This is really going to slow us down. We’re going to have to be extra careful.”

The engine room was supposed to be two doors down on the left. Ronan headed that way, but Sidney suddenly grabbed her and pulled her into the doorway of the next room. Even as the door swished open, they ducked inside and Ronan heard heavy footsteps headed their way. When they were just past the sensor range of the door it closed seamlessly and she listened as multiple booted feet walked past. She could have kicked herself for not hearing the patrol.

“What is this room?”

Ronan turned with a frown to see what Sidney meant. A horseshoe-shaped console stood before a giant monitor that took up the entire space of one wall. Sidney had wandered over and was looking down at the display. For some reason, the room was empty at present but Ronan didn’t think it would stay that way for long.

“It looks like some kind of observation room. We’d better get out of here before someone comes back.”

“Wait a second. Look at this.”

Frustrated but curious, Ronan looked over Sidney’s shoulder. Many of the controls were in a code she couldn’t understand, but the readout next to it was clear enough without words. Earth stood out clearly on the display. The image of the planet boasted a handful of red dots and the rest were green. Somehow, she understood that the dots indicated people replaced by the Neue Konservative Regime’s own personnel.

“We have to go, now.” Sidney warned.

Ronan turned as the door opened and a uniformed man entered. A look of surprise crossed his face and he hesitated for a brief second before running toward a panel on the wall.

“Don’t!” Ronan shouted.

She threw the flashlight hard and hit him on the back of the head. He staggered and dropped to the floor, stunned but conscious. Unfortunately, it was too late. An alarm sounded deafeningly overhead and she ran toward the sentry as he struggled to his feet. A quick right cross ended his threat temporarily, but Ronan was more concerned with how to get out of the room.

“It won’t open,” Sidney said as she pushed against the door.

“The lock probably engaged when the alarm went off.”

The panel that triggered the alarm might be the way to unlock the exit, Ronan guessed. She ran toward the controls but she didn’t know which buttons to push to shut the damn thing off.

“Come on, you’re from the future. Can’t you figure this out?”

“I’m not a human translator,” Ronan complained, “and I damn sure don’t speak whatever kind of code this is.”

She started to push switches at random and the alarm suddenly shut off.

“Wow, I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. I didn’t do it.”

The door slid open and Ronan groaned expecting a patrol to burst in on them. A second later, she was gapping in surprise at Lieutenant Gustav Sloan.

“Come with me.”

He didn’t wait for a response and they rushed to keep up as he led them into another small chamber a few doors down. This room had the look and feel of living quarters and Ronan took her first deep breath since they’d transported aboard. How had Sloan gotten here?

“I turned off the alarm and made it look like an accident, but the Delegator will insist on a search of the ship anyway. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“How did you get here?” Sidney asked, beating Ronan to the question.

“After you transported I used the gate to follow you. Then I used my own matrix to transport on board. I told Dutrov to destroy the gate and that I was following you to kill you in order to eliminate the threat against the Regime’s certain victory.”

“Do you think he did it?” Ronan asked.

“Dutrov follows orders implicitly.” Although the words might have sounded like a compliment, there was no denying the look of disgust on Sloan’s face.

“But your appearance here, won’t it draw unwanted attention?”

“No, they believe I’m a loyal Konservative.”

“Okay, that works in our favor,” Sidney said dryly. “But if you’re so loyal, why are you helping us?”

“You know nothing,” Sloan spat contemptuously. “Once the world’s Neue Konservative government was proud. All people across the globe lived in peace until one man decided he wanted more. He wanted total control. Professor Horton’s gate gave him that. At first, I didn’t think it was so bad. One government with one purpose would unify all people. Everyone would be equal. Only it didn’t stop at that. The Delegator wanted to crush anyone who opposed him and Kinsky was just as power hungry. Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I had to act.”

“I don’t understand,” Ronan said. “Why would they want to conquer Earth of the past? Why go to such lengths to implement their idea of the perfect government in the 21st century?”

Sloan shook his head sadly. “It’s not just the Delegator of Germany. Once the chancellors of the other regions learned of his plan, they decided they liked how it sounded. Six world leaders would have total control, answerable to no one. Democracy wouldn’t exist anymore.”

Ronan shook her head in disgust.

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely,” Sidney said softly.

“Exactly, but I can’t allow this to continue.”

“That’s what kept nagging at me before,” Sidney said, turning excitedly toward Ronan and then back to Sloan. “You want Dutrov to destroy the gate because then everything will go back to how it’s supposed to be. Without the device to activate the time stream and then keep it open, none of this will have happened.”

“You’re smarter than you look.”

Ronan remembered the conversation about time flowing like a river and caught on to what they were saying. “But how did you know I’d gone into the past to begin with?”

“I was there,” Sloan admitted, “that first day. I had great respect for Professor Horton and went to his house to pay my respects after his death. I saw you go inside and I was curious so I followed you. I saw you use the gate. At first, I didn’t know what happened but little by little

after that, things began to change. The professor was suddenly alive again and I was the only person who remembered things differently.”

“How confusing all of this must have been for you,” Ronan said. “I admire how you’ve kept fighting, despite the odds.”

Sloan cleared his throat before he spoke but his voice was husky from emotion. “We all do what we must. I just hope that by destroying the ship, we eliminate anyone from the future working in this century. Dutrov and his men will see that the gate is destroyed and hopefully this nightmare will be over.”

“But you’ll die,” Sidney pointed out.

“If that’s the price I have to pay.”

“Maybe not,” Ronan interrupted. “Sidney and I have phase inducers to keep us in this time, but once the gate is gone...who knows.”

“Then you have a decision to make.”

“Why are you so eager to kill yourself?” Sidney asked.

“Trust me, I’m not. But, I took an oath to uphold the law and to protect life. I won’t turn my back on that.”

Ronan appreciated the sacrifice he was willing to make and regretted ever doubting him. Lieutenant Sloan had always been good to her and she lamented that things had to end this way. To honor him, she decided not to try to talk him out of his decision.

“We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s get these explosives planted.”

“I’ll stay here and make sure the charges go off,” Sloan offered.

He led the way to the engine room, back the direction they’d come, without allowing time for them to argue. He took what seemed like a circuitous route around corners, scouting the way first, until they were in the heart of the vessel. Other people wandered to and fro as they carried out various tasks, but they were careful and no one spotted them. Sloan slipped behind some panels where they could hide and the women quickly set to work. Ronan pulled bricks of C-4 from her pocket and pressed them under the panels he indicated.

Ronan thought it ironic that the same hand signals they’d used while they worked together in law enforcement easily transitioned over here. Yet their history made it possible for them to work quietly and efficiently. Sidney didn’t say anything as she pushed detonators into the explosives. With both women planting explosives, the area quickly became crowded and Sloan moved over to the front of the consoles to keep watch. He adopted a relaxed stance apparently meant to imply that his presence wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

Suddenly his posture stiffened and he spoke to someone unseen.

Sidney and Ronan froze while the man engaged in a conversation and from his tone of voice; he was trying to direct the other person to another work area. Unfortunately, the man didn't seem to want to comply and his voice rose in obvious anger. The exchange grew more heated and just when Ronan feared the man would push past Sloan he gave up the argument and walked away.

Sloan relaxed only marginally and leaned down to whisper. "You'd better hurry. I told him this workstation was off limits and he's gone to inform his superior. Two more charges will do, they'll cause a chain reaction when they explode."

Ronan quickly placed the last two explosives and set the detonator for a ten-minute countdown. If they didn't manage to get out of here before then, it wasn't likely to matter anyway.

"Done," she whispered as Sidney pushed the last detonator into place.

Sloan glanced down nervously and nodded before he began working back toward the exit. Ronan and Sidney stayed crouched and followed behind him slowly. They were right behind him when the doors to the engine room suddenly parted and the disgruntled maintenance worker returned with not only his superior but also a full patrol right behind him.

"Nehmen Sie sie in Gewahrsam."

The patrol swept around the startled supervisor and leveled heavy rifles at them. Ronan and Sidney looked at each other and swallowed nervously before they stood to their full height. Ronan managed to slip the detonator control, still counting down the minutes, into her pocket without anyone seeing.

"Halt," one of the guards shouted.

Another person, without the guards' equipment, swooped around the patrol and confronted Sloan. The woman was small, barely as tall as Sidney was. Blonde hair pulled back into a severe bun, she sported a mean smile that curved the corners of her mouth. She didn't seem surprised to see the trio.

"I am the imperial leader of the newly commissioned Konservative fleet, Odon, and I see we have a traitor. When I heard a stranger was giving orders in the engine room, I knew it had something to do with the supposed false alarm we experienced earlier. You have brought these people onto our ship to destroy us and end our rightful rule."

Faster than anyone could anticipate, Sloan reached under his jacket and pulled out a laser pistol. He fired quickly and dove to the side.

"Lee, you have to get out."

The patrol returned fire as they scattered to the sides. One of them got in a lucky shot and Ronan heard Sloan cry out in pain. She and Sidney were pinned down beside him and she couldn't see another way out.

Sloan grabbed onto her arm as laser fire flew over their heads. "Use the matrix."

The matrix. Ronan had forgotten about it. Quickly she reached into her pocket and pulled out the device. As she reached for the green control at the top, a shot of red-hot energy creased the side of her leg and caused her to jerk and pull back. Ronan dropped the crystal as she grabbed her injured leg. The matrix hit the ground heavily and she was dismayed to see a small chip fly off the side of the emerald crystal.

"Damn," Sidney cursed and reached for the matrix. "It's busted."

"Use it before we all die," Sloan said.

Ronan hooked one arm through Sidney's and grabbed hold of Sloan's wrist. She did not intend to leave him behind. Sidney activated the device and the engine room suddenly disappeared. With the matrix damaged, she wondered if it would work and hoped that if it did, they would actually end up back on the planet instead of drifting in space. Seconds later, they were looking up from a chilly mountaintop. It was near dark and crickets sang merrily in the shadows. From the familiar sounds, Ronan could only assume that they had indeed arrived in the right destination. Sloan grunted in pain and drew her attention.

"Hang on," she said. "We'll get you to a hospital."

Sloan actually chuckled. "And then what? I don't exactly have insurance or proper identification. It doesn't matter anyway. In a moment, the ship will explode and I'm pretty sure I won't survive my wounds. Either way, it's all over."

There wasn't any comfort she could offer. This man had been her friend in the beginning, had become the faceless enemy, and come back around full circle to being an ally. Yet she was powerless to help him without any of the medical equipment from her own century. Sidney slipped her arms around Ronan and held her from behind while the three of them gazed up into the night sky. Suddenly, an orange light flared briefly before it arced into space and disappeared. To the casual observer it would look like nothing more than a shooting star.

Ronan looked down at Sloan. He offered her a smile. "It's better this way. After all, how would I explain my presence?"

His passing was almost anticlimactic. Sloan simply closed his eyes and stopped breathing. For many long moments, Ronan sat in the grass beside him and just looked down at the friend she used to know. Gradually, she realized he appeared less real...less there. At first, she thought she imagined it, but then she realized he'd begun to fade. Soon, she could see the grass where it lay matted beneath him. Then he disappeared from view. Ronan didn't know what to think, but Sidney supplied the answer.

“Dutrov must have destroyed the gate. Everything is going back to how it should be.”

Sidney held on as she shook in reaction. Sloan might have been misguided, but he'd never been an enemy. If it hadn't been for him, they probably would have died within the first ten minutes on the ship.

Ronan gathered the tattered remnants of her composure while Sidney held her. The night deepened and the sounds of nocturnal creatures rustled all around them. The moon rose high overhead before Ronan finally pulled away from Sidney and stood. Her face was quiet, but the stains of her dried tear tracks shone on her cheeks in the moonlight.

Sidney indicated the phase inducers they both wore beneath their jackets and asked, “Should we take these things off?”

“No, not yet. I don't want us to merge with our counterparts and risk pulling them here onto this mountaintop. Let's wait until we get home.”

Sidney nodded and they started to walk toward the lights of a nearby town. They found a dusty country road that led in the right direction and walked quietly for a while. Ronan absently noticed that Sidney's muscles had hardened over the time she had known her and she seemed quite comfortable after their exertion.

After a while Sidney asked, “Why do you think they wanted to impose a despotic government?”

Ronan thought about the question carefully before she answered. “I think you were right before, power goes to some people's heads. They get a little taste and they want more. They want everyone to see how much better they are, how much they deserve to lord over the little people.” She slid an arm around Sidney's shoulders and pulled her close. “At least now the professor will live again...and Sloan.”

“I don't want to think about this anymore right now. I have a movie to finish and we have new memories to make when we get home. That's what I want to focus on. Do you think we'll forget everything we've been through?”

“I don't know. The professor said our consciousness would merge, but I expect we'll remember quite a lot. It might seem a little foggy, almost like a dream.”

“As long as we don't forget each other. Did I ever tell you how sexy your accent is?”

Ronan squeezed her slightly. “You might have mentioned it once or twice.”

IT HAD BEEN seven months since the damaged matrix had deposited them onto a mountaintop in rural Utah and they'd since merged with their counterparts. Sidney finished her movie and Ronan moved in with her. Brannon, Sidney's stalker, had been captured and Roger was safe. The only uproar had been that a few public figures disappeared under mysterious circumstances and the FBI feared kidnapping. Strangely, no ransom notes ever appeared. With the disappearance of President-elect Angstrom, Congress swore David Abrams in as Commander-in-Chief.

Sidney was happy not to have involved him the second time around in the Regime fiasco and best of all there had been no riots or shimmering Guard imposters revealed on the steps of the Capitol. Memories began to haze over a little, but Sidney retained enough to remember Ronan's incredible gadgets and to know that she was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her.

Lying in Ronan's arms with the scent of their lovemaking heavy in the air, she couldn't think of anywhere she'd rather be. They'd been through hell and high water and still managed to come out all right.

"What are you thinking about?" Ronan asked, gently tracing her lips along Sidney's jaw.

"Us. I was just thinking that I don't know what kind of life we're going to have together, but I don't think being with you will ever be boring."

Ronan smiled and rolled over to lie on top of Sidney. She planted kisses on the corners of Sidney's mouth, rekindling the passion that simmered just beneath the surface.

"No," she agreed breathlessly. "Never boring."

About the Author

S. Y. joined the Marine Corps at the age of seventeen and spent ten years serving her country. After two tours in Lebanon and participation in the invasion of Grenada, she returned to the States and decided it was time to lay down roots. Instead she joined the San Diego Sheriff's Department and spent another seven years in law enforcement before an on-the-job injury forced retirement. S. Y. returned to Texas, her home of record, and wrote Janeway/Seven fan fiction for ten years before deciding to publish. She is now a full-time student and a senior at Texas A&M. S. Y. is studying criminology with a minor in psychology. Her days are filled with writing, going to school and playing with her two dogs and four cats (plus the strays that drop by for dinner on a daily basis).

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Lee discovers that her aunt was a central part of this community and that she possesses the woman's unique abilities. She and Jamison are falling for each other, but things take a turn for the worse when the murderer sets his sights on Lee and a cure for his condition which he believes her to be harboring. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that the killer isn't even human. Neither is Jamison

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Coal black hair, piercing grey eyes and skin the color of fresh cream threaten Vanessa's professional boundaries, but focus she must when faced with repeated attempts on Cade's life. The fate of millions and the threat of galactic war rest on Van's shoulders. Whatever the outcome, their lives will never be the same.

Look for it in July 2014

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Jess Drake is an agent for Interforce, a small and exclusive special forces organization that still possesses access to technology. Her job is to protect and serve the citizens of the American continent who are in conflict with those left on the European continent. The struggle for resources is brutal, and when a rogue agent nearly destroys everything, Interforce decides to trust no one. They send Jess a biologically-created agent who has been artificially devised and given knowledge using specialized brain programming techniques.

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