

The background of the entire image is a dark blue sky filled with numerous white, star-like speckles, resembling a starry night sky. Below this, a city skyline is visible at night, with various skyscrapers and buildings illuminated with white and blue lights. The lights from the buildings create a bright, glowing effect at the bottom of the skyline. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, whites, and light blues.

***NOW YOU
SEE ME***

S.Y. Thompson

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by

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Quest Books

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Dedication

This is for my fan fiction fans and Jack, a loyal friend.

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Prologue

HE WANTED TO believe that she was perched in the chair by the window, quietly lost in daydreams. He tried to ignore the vacant stare of sightless eyes and the way her breath no longer fogged windows frigid with winter's kiss. Still, as much as he wanted to believe it, it wasn't true. Mary was gone and so was the light in his heart and his purpose for living. She was as dead as the leaves from the trees outside, all trapped in winter's embrace.

The worthless doctors hadn't been able to help her, even if they said they'd tried for months to halt the accelerated cancer growing inside of her. That disease, and the loss of his wife, was responsible for his fury now. He stood in the dark beside the small, still woman, facing out into the night, stewing in his anger and plotting what his next move should be.

Mary got sick because of that chemical research lab. Damned thing spews toxins into the air less than a mile away and the corporation says they aren't responsible, he thought angrily.

By trying to fight the ones responsible for the air that had polluted their bodies, he'd learned the hard way that no one cared. The lab meant jobs for people who were trying to make it in hard times so everyone had turned a blind eye.

Eventually, the money to fight the corporate lawyers ran out and he'd fallen into a pit of despair as he watched the life slowly drain from the only person that mattered to him. She required constant care in the end, and he couldn't even afford to hire a nurse. Left with no alternatives, he willingly took on the task, and thanked God every day for each breath that Mary took.

Too bad his blood-sucking employers hadn't agreed. They fired him for being late, with no compassion for a man in such a horrible situation. Not that he really cared. Working the road crew was hard and unforgiving work, no matter what the weather, and being unemployed gave him more time to spend at home.

That was the past. The time for staying at home was through. Now it was time to act and everyone would pay.

He stared into the window and focused on his reflection, and that of Mary. Not for the first time, he reflected on their differences. She was blonde and frail, a light visited on this world for a brief time to touch profoundly the lives of everyone she met. Mary had never known a stranger, easily speaking to anyone giving friendly offers of encouragement. Everyone had liked her.

In contrast, he was a mammoth of a man. He towered almost seven feet tall, and sported a dark shock of thick wavy hair with a heavy beard and mustache. When people looked at him, he could almost feel their terror. No one saw the gentle man who resided in the massive form, no one but darling Mary.

And now she was gone.

With a shift, he directed his focus outward, into the swirling snow. The barren landscape offered strange comfort, as hollow and forlorn as he felt. Windswept snow passed the window and he could almost taste the cold. The Christmas season was near and it had been Mary's favorite time of the year and, for a time, his as well. Now it was meaningless, just another day in a season where the world danced in death.

There was only one thing left to do. What became of him was unimportant. There was only revenge.

But who, he wondered briefly. Which of all those greedy sharks deserved punishment the most?

The research lab itself was incidental, and unimportant in making his anguish known. He had to cut the head off before the snake would die, and in this case, the snake was the corporate office located in downtown Chicago.

That's it. That's where I'll start.

Carefully, he leaned down and adjusted the throw on Mary's legs. He didn't want her to get cold, but he didn't have the heart to put her back to bed. She loved the view from here.

After making sure she was comfortable, he pulled on a heavy black overcoat before he kissed her on the temple. Then he whispered goodnight to his wife of fifteen years and quietly went out the door.

Chapter One

ERIN DONOVAN HUDDLED into the thick coat, her chin tucked under a scarf as the wind bit into her flesh without mercy. It whistled around her like a beast with fangs and claws and tried to penetrate the thin cloak of warmth before rushing up her knee-length black skirt to chill her to the bone. The earlier snow had surrendered to sleet, causing temperatures to plummet, making the Chicago winter even more harsh and relentless. Now the snow was slush underfoot on the busy byways as people scurried to work. They resembled ants in a colony.

She tried to ignore the damp chill and entered the protected courtyard that contained her office building. A gust of wind threw her hair into her face and Erin casually combed the red locks back into place, tucking some of the strands behind her ear. Her high winter boots beat a sharp tattoo on the cleared concrete as she walked around a giant fountain toward the double glass doors.

Normally the huge water-spewing double dolphins portrayed on the water feature caused her to stare in astonished horror as she passed, wondering who could have thought such a monstrosity was the least bit attractive. Today, in the frigid winter weather and with the fountain drained and turned off, she didn't spare it a glance. The double doors of the Holcomb Building were in sight, just up one more flight of stairs. Someone had thoughtfully cleared the steps of snow and ice but she still held carefully to the handrail.

Christmas lights decorated the tops of the doors and wound around the outside lampposts. With the holiday only a week away, the crowd inside was heavier than usual, no doubt engaged in last minute pursuit of the perfect gift.

Erin felt blessed in that regard. With few friends, there was only her father to buy for and he was easy. That left her free for more important details. Like work. Her career was absorbing and

fascinating. No matter how many years she worked as an attorney, it never got old or stagnant. Little mattered to her, except the legal and financial welfare of her clients.

I can't wait to get some hot coffee, she thought as she walked toward the doors, casting a look overhead. She was glad she decided to take a cab that morning. The weather looked like it was going to get worse and she would hate to have to try to drive in it that evening.

Her apartment building was only a fifteen-minute drive from work, but in this weather, it wasn't worth taking the risk. Too many people drove recklessly on the busy Chicago streets at the best of times and with a blizzard, as yet unborn but readily sensed, traffic would be a nightmare.

Erin closed in on her objective and reached out to push open the heavy doors. The door attendant beat her to it and she flashed him a grateful smile. The heat inside the building hit her full force, almost stifling in comparison to the frigid air outside. Condensation had beaded on the glass of the huge wall of windows.

She paused for a moment to unbutton her heavy coat, and adjust the purse on her shoulder before she cruised through the press of human traffic. Erin shifted her grasp on the briefcase clasped in the other hand as she crossed the lobby and glanced at, without really seeing, the paint crew perched on a scaffold overhead.

It seemed Holcomb Enterprises was constantly remodeling the structure, and there were workers everywhere. And not only paint crews. Rumor had it that contractors had gutted the entire top floor of the miniature high-rise. Erin really couldn't have cared less. She didn't work for Holcomb; her firm simply resided in the same structure, although her partners had discussed moving to the top floor after the refit was complete.

As one of the senior partners of Eldridge, Donovan, and White, Erin was a successful corporate attorney. She kept a busy schedule and today was running behind because of the weather. The other two partners were in court today with a client. That left her with the dubious honor of showing a new patron her future offices on the tenth floor. Normally, it wasn't a task Erin would lend herself to, but with the incredible amount of money the woman had offered the company, she didn't really think a small tour would hurt.

She hefted the contents of her briefcase and fumed a little as she took the escalator down one floor and crossed another lobby before she climbed into an elevator car. With three different sets of elevator banks that carried occupants in three different directions, it took a while for a person to remember the layout.

Honestly, why is this place so big, she wondered. And is it just the architect's perverse sense of humor to make me go down a level to get onto the elevator that will take me up to the sixth floor?

Erin sighed and squeezed into a corner of the lift to avoid the heavy press of bodies. When the doors closed, claustrophobia made a brief, unwelcome visit. She gritted her teeth and tried to pin her gaze on the floor, but it was difficult with so many feet obscuring her view.

Finally, the contraption stopped and Erin gratefully slid out of the small, confined space before the door finished opening properly. She walked briskly into her office lobby and heard the shrill ring of the telephone. The familiar sound was just what she needed to ease her stress level.

“Merry Christmas,” she said distantly to no one in particular as she crossed the room to enter her private office.

“Just a moment. I’ll see if she’s in.”

Amy, her secretary, spoke into the telephone handset. Her words made Erin cringe internally as she had hoped the call wasn’t for her. She kept walking. She had yet to enjoy her first cup of coffee and until she did, Erin wasn’t ready to talk business with anyone.

The secretary noticed the look on her boss’s face and told whoever was on the other end that Ms. Donovan was in a meeting and that she would have to take a message. Erin gave her a grateful look and her briefcase slipped out of her gloved fingers and dropped onto the floor.

Amy pretended not to notice and finished the phone call. After she had hung up, Amy handed Erin the slip of paper and smiled a greeting. As usual, the first thing she said was a recount of her previous night’s dream.

“I keep having this nightmare where the furnace goes kaplooeey. Then all the phones stop working and we’re just stuck here, slowly freezing to death. I’m telling you if the storm doesn’t let up soon I’m never going to get any sleep!”

Erin grinned at Amy’s account of her nocturnal struggles as she walked into her office and to the large teak desk. She retrieved her coffee mug before stepping through another door in the corner that led back into the rear of the receptionist’s area. The circuitous route was just another example of the architect’s perverted design.

“That sounds like quite an adventure.” Erin smiled as she walked ahead of Amy, who followed her boss into the small kitchen alcove.

Amy Dawson was in her early twenties, and already a professional businessperson, even if she did insist on too much make-up and bright red lipstick that contrasted sharply with her pale skin. Her nail polish today was a strange combination of orange and red.

“Yeah,” the young woman agreed. “Only it was the same one.” She leaned against the wall while Erin prepared her coffee. “Last night was the third time this week.”

Erin didn’t take the dream seriously. She concentrated on the first taste of her coffee. Amy’s very active imagination was always coming up with some new way in which the whole office

would be involved in mass suicide, or some other kind of death. Erin walked away from the alcove and sensed the secretary trailing her back to the office.

“I had a dream last night,” Erin said. “Only it was in August, and it was the air conditioning that went out. Everybody had to take their clothes off just to survive.”

While she spoke, Erin dropped her scarf and gloves onto her desk before hanging her coat on the tall coat rack. She paused for dramatic effect and turned toward her secretary to gauge her reaction.

“I like your dream even better. At least we’d all be warm.”

“That’s when Ed Cupper took his clothes off, and danced naked on his desk,” Erin continued with a mischievous grin. She was pleased when Amy threw her head back and laughed aloud.

Ed was a portly man with a receding hairline who took every opportunity to proposition the female employees. Usually he invited

them to his place to look at his etchings. If he weren’t the vice president of the corporation that owned Holcomb Enterprises, Erin had no doubt that he’d have been fired long ago for sexual harassment.

“That’s when I woke up,” Erin concluded as she picked up her mug for another sip. Her direct line chose that moment to ring. Irritated, she halted the rise of the much-needed brew to her lips.

“Yes,” she inquired after she checked the caller id and snatched up the handset.

Erin clamped down on her impatience since the call concerned Ray Eldridge’s new client that she’d been thinking about a few minutes ago.

After a short exchange with the caller, she hung up and turned to her secretary. “That was the information desk downstairs. Mr. Sloan has sent the electrician to look at the tenth floor offices. Have Mr. Evans show him to that floor, and please make sure he’s clear on exactly what the client wants and the proper placement. After that, could you have him come and see me? We need to get that discovery on Jameson going.”

“New client,” Amy asked.

Technically, it wasn’t any of her business and Erin knew that her partners would have considered it beneath them to answer the secretary, but she had never been one to stand on ceremony. She also found that if she didn’t act as if she was better than those who worked for her, it made her life easier. Often the receptionist or secretaries would overhear some critical bit of information the clients discussed in the lobby. These little tidbits would rarely reach Eldridge or White, but Erin always stayed in the loop.

“She’s really Mr. Eldridge’s client, but he’s in court this morning. Since Ms. Tierney insists that one of the senior partners show her the offices, I’m elected.”

The secretary shared a sympathetic look. “When is she supposed to be here?”

“In about an hour.”

“Tierney...Tierney. Is that Carson Tierney? Head of Delphi Technologies?”

She was clearly impressed, and Erin couldn’t blame her. The founder of Delphi Technologies was a prodigy in every respect. Ray Eldridge said that Carson Tierney skipped several grades in public school, going from eighth grade to twelfth in the same year. She was in college on a full scholarship at thirteen, had more degrees than Erin could count, and had started Delphi Technologies three years ago. The company had rocketed to the top almost overnight.

That Ms. Tierney went from being a poor girl on the wrong side of town to establishing a multi-million dollar company practically overnight was a testament to her intelligence and strict work ethic; a way of life that mirrored Erin’s own.

Erin smiled. “One and the same, so now you know why I have to show the space instead of letting one of the junior partners handle it.”

“Yeah, that’s a lot of money. They’re one of the leading computer research companies in the world.”

Erin finished her coffee and set the empty cup on her desk. That was enough gossip for the morning and now it was time to get down to business.

“Besides Ms. Tierney you probably have a pretty busy day planned, huh?”

Erin sat behind her desk and redirected her gaze to Amy. She’d already started to shift into business mode and found it difficult to resist the pull. Well aware of her reputation for working too hard, Erin focused with a little effort and replied.

“I suppose so, if you call reviewing two writs, a deposition, preparing a discovery, and three client meetings a busy day.”

“Ouch. In that case I’ll leave you to it.”

She was almost to the door when Erin added, “Oh Amy, would you bring me another coffee?”

“Sure.”

Erin had already started to boot her computer and hardly heard the response. She stopped for a moment to change from the heavy winter boots into footwear that was more traditional for a

corporate attorney. Her feet were cold from slugging through the snow and slush, and the high heels were almost a relief.

She grinned wryly at the thought of pumps being comfortable and knew that they wouldn't be by the end of the day. Erin settled behind her desk and logged into her computer.

For the next hour, she was lost in the world of corporate law. The intricacies of the work were a constant challenge that thrilled her daily with the new and innovative approaches to timeless problems. What she was working on today wasn't exactly precedent setting, but it was vital to one of her clients, and she didn't intend to let him down.

Mr. Jameson's wife was suing him for half the worth of his business ventures, a chain of high-end restaurants, and his IRA. She claimed that he divorced her after a torrid affair and refused to pay child support or alimony. The ex-Mrs. Jameson claimed that if she didn't receive full restitution she and her son would be living out of their Mercedes.

Garret Jameson had confided that Mrs. Jameson was the one having the affair and was better off with her own money than anything he could provide for her. He insisted he had been paying all child support required by the courts and even provided documentation to prove it.

Unfortunately, the legal system usually sided with the mother, which left her client's divorce attorney the difficult task of proving that Mrs. Jameson was trying to take him to the cleaners. Her husband had previously filed the discovery with his divorce lawyer, but then asked Erin to look at the results. He was concerned that she would somehow be able to get controlling interest in the chain of restaurants that he'd built from the ground up, and wanted to know if Erin thought his ex-wife had a case.

Erin frowned as she read Trudy Jameson's history and discovered an indirect relation to the Marsters family, owners of Marsters Research Corporation. The company kept a lab on the eleventh floor of Erin's own building. Mrs. Jameson was a first cousin to the president, Douglas Marsters. If Mr. Jameson hadn't provided her with a complete family history, which she had thought superfluous at the time, she never would have known it.

She vaguely remembered that Marsters was the company involved in a wrongful death lawsuit five years earlier. The charges were something to do with spewing toxins into the air from one of their chemical plants. Several people in a twenty-mile radius contracted a rare form of cancer and the families blamed the company.

Douglas Marsters asked Erin to represent them at the time, but after a preliminary investigation, she refused the case on moral grounds. Their safety protocols seemed to be non-existent and a lot of their research was labeled top secret. It smacked of clandestine military biological warfare, even though she wasn't able to uncover anything to prove it.

When she turned them down, another up and coming law firm eagerly snapped it up. No doubt, they received a huge retainer. Dickson and Dickson found a sympathetic judge and in the end, the Marsters Corporation only got a slap on the wrist. The victims' families received barely

enough to pay for the funerals. From what Erin understood, the cancer had been extremely virulent and incurable. Most of the victims had already succumbed to the disease.

If Mrs. Jameson really was a relative, she had to be loaded. Even after the settlement from the wrongful death case, the Marsters Corporation was worth billions.

Erin started at the sound of raised voices from just outside her closed door.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but you can’t go in there.”

Amy’s voice was high and frustrated, as though she had been arguing strenuously with the woman in question. The heavy oak door flew open and bounced off the wall. A tall, regal blonde woman, with severe features and immaculately tailored garments, stalked into the room.

“I am Carson Tierney. I am here to see the offices on the tenth floor.”

Chapter Two

ERIN STOOD UP slowly and appraised the woman on the other side of her desk. The rich bitch in the blue Armani power suit was undoubtedly accustomed to getting everything she wanted, when she wanted it and Erin felt her hackles rise. Their paths had crossed once before outside Ray Eldridge’s office. They hadn’t spoken, but Tierney’s infamous haughty, arrogant demeanor had rolled off her in waves. Even so, Erin couldn’t help thinking that she was still as gorgeous as she remembered. Being gorgeous, however, didn’t excuse bad manners.

“Are you in the habit of stalking into other people’s offices unannounced?”

Tierney’s cold expression remained solidly fixed. Accustomed to people backing down quickly when she used that tone, it irked Erin that the blonde woman wasn’t even fazed.

“For a five hundred thousand dollar retainer? Yes.”

Okay, she had a point, but Erin wasn’t quite ready to let it go. “Do you think you could at least stop disrespecting my people?”

The only response Erin got was a raised eyebrow and she felt the first throb of a headache. “Fine. Thank you, Amy. I’ll handle things from here.”

Amy shot her a grateful look and closed the door on her way out. Erin reached for a folder on the corner of her desk and passed it across to the new client.

What is she anyway, Erin wondered irritably, six feet? She ignored the fact that Ms. Tierney's Nordic beauty made her feel like an old frump.

"Here are the schematics for the offices on the tenth floor. They also include the locations of the new outlets and phone jacks that you requested."

Ms. Tierney abruptly snatched the folder from her hand and Erin had the sudden urge to slap the stranger across the face. She resisted the impulse and watched the executive shove the folder under her arm without glancing at it. A thick, fur-lined overcoat all but obscured the manila folder.

"My research team will look at the schematics. We will have the entire tenth floor, correct?"

Erin nodded.

"I will see the space...now," Tierney said.

It was not a request and Erin squashed another violent urge. How the hell did Ray put up with this?

Tugging down the hem of her jacket, Erin stepped from behind the desk. She could do this. It would only take twenty minutes, at the most, to show the annoying woman the tenth floor, and then she would never have to speak to Carson Tierney again.

I can do this.

Erin led Ms. Tierney to the nearest elevator bank. The cars would carry them directly to the tenth floor without any convoluted detours. Someone could even travel to the roof if they had the proper key. As a senior partner of Eldridge, Donovan, and White, Erin had a key but had never used it. She doubted she ever would.

"Here we are. The tenth floor."

Erin almost ran smack into James Evans when the doors opened. The law clerk had grime on his face and dark smudges on his white shirt. His suit jacket was nowhere in sight. She had forgotten that he was supposed to come to see her after he finished showing the electrician around.

"Mr. Evans! What are you still doing up here?"

"Um, I was helping the electrician. Nothing's too good for the client's satisfaction, right?"

Ms. Tierney breezed out of the elevator. "At least some of your staff has the proper attitude."

From the puppy look James lavished on the irrepressible Ms. Tierney, Erin doubted that it was only satisfaction he wanted to give her. Well, maybe that too.

“I pay you to assist the law firm, Mr. Evans, not learn another trade. I want those briefs prepared for the one o’clock meeting, finished and on my desk within the hour. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He answered respectfully, but his eyes still followed the computer executive as she wandered the tenth floor. Erin wanted to slap him on the back of the head. She’d never felt so many violent urges in such a short amount of time before. This was getting ridiculous!

She settled for pushing him back through the open elevator doors. “And clean your face,” she said.

It wasn’t the scathing retort she wanted, but he had the grace to flush and mumble an apology before the doors closed. Erin turned around and unexpectedly caught Ms. Tierney with an unguarded expression as she inspected the office space. She really couldn’t blame James. With the stony look gone, she really was quite beautiful.

Her eyes were the color of liquid ice, and her skin was fresh cream, pure and unblemished. Erin felt a sudden desire to run her thumb across the cleft of that proud chin. Lights from overhead made the blonde hair shine like summer wheat. A shiver of desire traveled up Erin’s spine.

For God’s sake, she’s the Ice Queen! What the hell’s wrong with me?

Erin shook the thoughts away and walked toward the client.

“There are seven private offices as well as a formal lobby and receptionist area on this floor. It also boasts a janitor’s closet, two supply niches, a large conference room with the additional outlets and phone jacks requested, and it even has a small kitchen. A lavatory at the end of the hall contains a locker room and a shower. You could practically live up here without the need to see the outside world.”

The sound of a hammer and power tools dimly filled the air from overhead and Erin realized that the construction crew was getting started for the day. With the building so well insulated and sound proofed, the noise was faint, but there was no mistaking it. She wondered if the client would suddenly tell her that the space was unacceptable and walk out.

Instead, Carson Tierney asked curiously, “What’s on the floor above us?”

Taken off guard by the civil tone, Erin answered softly. “The eleventh floor is being renovated with new windows, plumbing and carpet. Actually, the senior partners of my firm are thinking of relocating to that floor after the remodel is complete.”

Ms. Tierney only nodded and continued to wander from room to room. She seemed to be in no hurry and inspected every little nook and cranny. When she finally finished, Erin was convinced the woman had even counted every strand of the small spider web at the rear left corner of the hallway. It was all she could do not to tap her foot while she waited.

After the tenth time she checked her watch, Erin was ready to inform the woman that she was going to leave her on her own, but Ms. Tierney suddenly decided that she was finished. Erin wondered if she'd managed to notice her impatience.

“When did you plan on moving in?”

“When are you going to give me the keys?”

Erin tried not to flinch at the sarcasm and wordlessly held up the spare set. Ms. Tierney grabbed the keys in the same fashion as she had the folder and Erin honestly thought she would throttle her. It took a second to swallow her ire but then she handed Ray's client an elevator pass card.

“This one is temporary until your identification tag is finished. It will operate the elevators after they shut down at six. Digital readers are located inside the stairwell at each exit, but the cards will only work for your company's floor and the lobby after hours. That is, of course, a security measure due to the sensitive nature of the business conducted in this building. In the event of an emergency or power loss, all of the stairwell doors will unlock automatically.”

“I'll be back this afternoon to settle in.”

Not even an acknowledgment of my words, Erin thought. Can the woman get any ruder?

“I assume you mean you will send your crew to move you in?”

The snide remark was uncalled for, but she just couldn't help

herself. At first, Erin was proud of her quick retort but the brief, uncharacteristic flash of hurt on the woman's face made her wish she could bite off her own tongue. Then the look was gone and Erin wondered if it had been a product of her imagination.

Hurt feelings or not, Ms. Tierney was still an important client and Erin's behavior was bordering on unprofessional. She prided herself on not letting anyone get under her skin and this woman had managed it almost on sight. It was time to get things back under control.

The doors opened onto the sixth floor and Erin stepped off, but she turned and put her foot in the way of the sensor to prevent the doors from closing.

“If you need anything,” she said. “Please call me.”

Erin handed the executive her business card. One of the special ones given out only to a select few as it had her home number on the back. To her surprise, Ms. Tierney accepted the card gracefully and Erin stepped back. Just before the doors closed, their eyes made contact. Confusion swam in the blue depths and then Ms. Tierney was gone.

What the hell is going on?

Erin shook herself like a dog shedding water, trying to throw off the surreal experience that was Ms. Carson Tierney. She had work to do and it was time to concentrate.

AS SOON AS the elevator doors closed, Carson slumped against the wall and heaved a relieved sigh. She felt as if she'd just gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson.

That went well, she thought sarcastically.

She'd tried to prepare for this meeting all week and it had still caught her off guard. Carson just hadn't expected Erin Donovan to overwhelm her so completely even though she had insisted that the unexpectedly young senior partner show her the tenth floor when she learned that Ray wouldn't be available.

Her nerves had won out when Carson walked into Ms. Donovan's lobby and she didn't even wait for the secretary to announce her. She'd walked in as if she owned the place, and demanded that the attorney interrupt her busy day to accommodate her. The amazing amber brown eyes that she had fantasized about from the first time she saw the woman, turned to hard, cold stone and the change took the wind right out of Carson's sails.

When Ms. Donovan handed her the folder, she'd snatched it away out of fear that their fingers would touch. Carson knew she couldn't survive the electric contact, and she unwittingly made things even worse. She just wasn't good at some things. Mathematics was easy, especially the language of ones and zeros. What never made any sense were the social niceties. She hadn't ever understood them and had, inside thirty seconds, managed to alienate the first adult female she was attracted to.

The image of her father flashed briefly in her mind and Carson pushed the unwanted vision away. She tried not to blame him. Her mother died when she was just a small child and since then he had wanted nothing to do with her. He'd still gone to his job as a backhoe operator every day, but had left the girl to her own devices. He'd never tried to teach her anything about getting along with other people.

All Carson ever wanted was to get away from him and the ramshackle trailer in which they lived. Even at five years old, she realized the only way she could make that happen was through

school. Buried in the world of academia, Carson never considered people important in any fashion. All they did was cause her pain.

And I was successful, too, she thought. I started my own company by the time I was twenty.

Initially she focused on computer software development, but eventually diversified into testing and shoring up the security programs at other major software companies to prevent people from hacking into their programming. Now the company had grown to the point where working out of a warehouse was no longer sufficient or desirable. Carson needed a fresh, new, sophisticated look for Delphi.

She employed a large group of handpicked programmers and technicians who now needed more room to work. Ray Eldridge had come highly recommended by a colleague and she decided he was the one to protect her business interests. That he charged a healthy retainer didn't even cause her to flinch. She needed the best to look out for their legal welfare in order to prevent unexpected and frivolous suits.

So why is it that I can't even look at her without melting into the floor like a spineless pool of protoplasm, she wondered anxiously.

The first time she'd walked into the Holcomb Building to meet with Ray, Carson saw Erin. When he suggested the move to the tenth floor, it seemed an excellent opportunity to keep running into the redheaded goddess. She hadn't been able to get Erin out of her mind since then.

The elevator doors opened in the lobby and Carson immediately straightened from her slumped position. She let the cold mask of neutrality slide into place with practiced ease, and strode across the lobby. Men and women alike turned their heads when she walked past, but she ignored them and walked toward the condensation covered glass doors, unaware of the vision she created.

The door attendant called for her car, and she waited impatiently for the valet to pull the Lexus SUV around. At least it would be warm inside and she wouldn't have to wait for the engine to warm up.

Carson drove home on the slippery streets with great care. In her opinion, people just didn't know how to drive in this weather, and the holiday rush only compounded things. Dirty snow created huge banks on the sides of the roads and she refused to look at them.

She didn't care for Chicago in the wintertime, and had initially started to make plans to expand to California once the Chicago office was set up to her liking. The profits from Delphi ensured that she could comfortably expand three times without feeling the financial impact, and at least the weather would be better on the Pacific Coast.

Seeing Erin Donovan changed her focus. For the first time, the world of numbers had to move to one side and make a little room for her heart. Carson wasn't fooling herself. She knew

Ms. Donovan couldn't be remotely interested in her. She probably had a long line of male suitors waiting in the wings.

Though she wasn't exactly experienced in these things, Carson was well aware that her romantic interests leaned toward the feminine. She never understood the crushes her classmates claimed over boys their age. It just didn't make sense. Men were clumsy, lumbering and had an unpleasant aroma, even the ones who insisted they had just taken a shower.

When her first and only crush did finally come, it was in the form of a gorgeous dark haired female athlete in her freshman year of college. Carson had been very young at the time, only thirteen, but she still remembered the chiseled muscles of the beautiful track star.

Carson followed every major track and field event that year when she wasn't studying or in classes, but she was still destined to get her heart broken. One night as she was walking back to the dorm after studying at the library, she found her crush locked in the arms of a tall, male jock who looked as though he'd crawled out of a caveman movie.

She had seen the young man before at one of the track events, and knew many considered him handsome and quite a catch, but the only thing Carson caught when she saw them kissing was a case of unrequited puppy love. It took a while to get over it, but she knew that men were not anything she could ever seriously consider.

Years later, and after so much hard work that she hadn't time to explore the possibility of another relationship, she enlisted Ray Eldridge. That was when she saw Erin Donovan and her heart started to melt from the cold lump of ice it had become.

She was embarrassed to have made every excuse she could think of to visit the Holcomb Building during the past six months, just to see Ms. Donovan. She knew that Erin only spotted her a handful of times since she did her best to stay out of sight, but it was worth it. Erin possessed a classic beauty, similar to a film star from the forties or fifties. Her deep red hair was vibrant even under the glow of artificial lights, and Carson was firmly of the opinion that they just didn't make women like that anymore.

Lost in her daydreams, Carson took Interstate 94 North past the famous Wrigley Field before she exited onto the roadway that would take her along the scenic drive past Lake Michigan. For a few miles, traffic was bumper to bumper; another reminder of her desire for the quiet life. Maybe after she earned her second billion she would appoint a chairperson to run her company and hide quietly at home where she didn't have to drive anywhere.

Eventually she turned off onto a private lane and, two hundred yards up a narrow paved road, she pulled into a large driveway. The garage door opened automatically when she crossed the sensor and she drove into the triple-car heated garage, only slowing a little to accommodate the rise of the doors. When she finally stopped and shut off the engine, Carson sighed in relief.

This place was her sanctuary, and although she had paid almost three quarters of million dollars for it, it was worth every penny.

She smiled thinking how Joyce said the house was too big for her. Carson loved that it had two stories with a full basement that she had converted into a library and wine cellar. There were four bedrooms with three and a half baths. A fireplace took up one wall of the first floor family room, and all of the wood décor throughout was Brazilian cherry. Nine and a half foot ceilings gave the place a roomy feel, and the bubbling slate spa on the enclosed patio was a comfort on these cold, stormy days. The house was a world away from the cramped trailer from her youth.

On sunny days, Carson would stand on the Juliet balcony, situated on the top floor outside the other family room and gaze out across her property. The whole area was quiet and untainted by other humans and was often a balm to soothe her soul. Today, her thoughts and feelings were a little more maudlin.

She entered through the kitchen door and tried to ignore the loneliness of a place that usually comforted her. For the first time, the roominess reminded her that, of all the things she had achieved in life, the one thing she hadn't managed was someone to share it with. She thought of Erin Donovan and her heart clenched painfully.

Even the father she had never gotten along with had finally abandoned her altogether.

He never forgave me for Mom's death. Even after I succeeded with the company, he didn't want anything to do with me. I tried to buy him a new home, get him out of that dilapidated trailer, but he wouldn't even talk to me, she thought sadly.

They were never close and when he passed away, she was unsurprised that she didn't feel much of anything.

Carson growled and pushed the melancholy feelings away. She needed to change clothes and gather some of her things from the warehouse before she returned to the Holcomb Building. She swapped her Armani for a silk button-down shirt because she liked the feel of it. Quickly donning dark blue jeans, thick socks, and hiking boots with a heavy tread, she then exchanged the heavily furred overcoat for a fleece-lined leather bomber jacket.

No one would recognize her in her current garb, but this was what she preferred. She didn't care if instead of driving a Lexus SUV, she drove a beat up old truck in need of a muffler but she realized that she had an image to protect. If she persistently ran around in a vehicle that looked as though it had seen better days, her company would go down the drain eventually.

And it is nice to have the Bose stereo system and heated seats, she thought with a grin.

Carson moved nimbly down the stairs and walked into the well-supplied kitchen. A quick mocha from the espresso machine and she was out the door. Her heart thumped in anticipation of seeing Ms. Donovan again as she drove toward the warehouse district. In a few hours, she'd have the opportunity to glimpse Erin, and hopefully, this time she wouldn't act like a complete idiot.

She wondered just how bad an impression she'd made on the lawyer and whether she would ever be able to look her in the face again.

ACROSS TOWN, ERIN Donovan, corporate attorney at law, had all but forgotten about her encounter with the Armani clad businesswoman. The task of showing her partner's insufferable client around was complete and, as far as she was concerned, Carson Tierney was now officially Ray Eldridge's problem. If he needed another stand in, he could call on their other partner, Robert.

The day passed quickly as she concentrated on her work. She finished the discovery in record time, which was good as it turned out, since her first client meeting went long by an hour. When her schedule finally cleared, she found that James had completed the briefs she wanted and had already placed them on her desk for approval. Lunchtime came and went without notice as she perused the documents and signed them. Then it was time for her one o'clock appointment.

Erin stood up and pulled on the suit jacket she had draped over the back of her chair. It managed to give her a fresh and professional appearance, even if she felt as though she was ready to collapse from exhaustion. She didn't think the collapse was far off.

She'd barely been able to snag a bagel on the way to work this morning and her stomach had started to protest her strict caffeine diet. The heavy workload of the day and the encounter with the princess certainly hadn't helped.

Erin glanced at her watch again, hefted the folder with the material she needed for the meeting, and walked out of her office. Conference room one was just down the hall and she only had a few minutes or she would be late.

"Ms. Donovan," Amy said when she walked through the receptionist's office. "You were busy when the lunch cart went by so I got you a Reuben on rye."

The secretary held up a sandwich covered in clear wrap and waved it temptingly in the air.

"Bless you, Amy. You're a Godsend. Put it on my desk if you don't mind and I'll get to it when I finish with the meeting."

The secretary tisked at her and cast a worried look, but she knew better than try to lecture Ms. Donovan about her work ethics.

Erin entered the conference room to find that she was the final one to arrive. Her clients from Burlier Pharmaceuticals sat pensively around the huge oak table and watched her carefully for any sign she might give, good or bad. She tried not to show the elation that always came when she had good news for her clients. Instead, she slowly sat her heavy file on the table and sat down before she carefully met the gaze of all three men who waited for her.

She took a deep breath and began without preamble, “Legal and financial experts on the Eastern Seaboard favor the view that preliminary steps to a merger, even if they are in contractual form, are conditional and do not preclude later acceptance of better offers from third parties.”

Erin could see that she had not only gotten their attention, but that they all looked extremely disconcerted by this news. Undeterred, she continued. “Trade customs in large commercial centers assume prospective mergers are primarily concerned with maximizing shareholder benefits and are therefore open to competing offers until the deal is closed.”

Burlier Pharmaceuticals had been in preliminary negotiations with a local hospital to form a merger. The deal would have kept Burlier from filing bankruptcy, and helped the hospital reduce medicine costs. Before the deal finalized, Carcroft Industries had stepped in and underbid Burlier, stealing the deal and signing everything off before they knew what was happening. Burlier was now facing bankruptcy and went to Erin in a last ditch effort to find some legal loophole. From what she had just said, they didn’t have a leg to stand on. She saw the desperation in their faces, but she still had a trump up her sleeve.

“However, there is precedent on the books to the contrary. In 1984 during *Pennzoil v. Texaco*, the Supreme Court ruled that although the contract was verbal, it was still binding.”

Shocked expressions from the men sitting around the table delighted her beyond words. She had spent a great deal of time researching their dilemma, convinced in the beginning that they didn’t have a chance. After all, there was nothing on paper to indicate such a merger was in the process, and she just didn’t see what she could do to help them. Stumbling on the old case had been a welcome accident.

“What are you saying?” Rick Gardner, a palsied man in his sixties with a painfully receding hairline asked tremulously.

Erin saw the glimmer of carefully guarded hope in his rheumatic eyes, and grinned before she answered him. “It means that in this state a verbal agreement is just as good as a signed document. The hospital has already admitted that they were in preliminary negotiations with your company, and don’t seem to realize that was their tactical error. They can’t deny it now. In fact, during the case that I mentioned earlier, the Supreme Court required Texaco to pay an eleven million dollar penalty for the breach of contract. Of course they eventually settled out of court for three million rather than declare bankruptcy, but I see no reason why your case isn’t just as good.”

Chapter Three

IT TOOK A while for Erin to convince them that they weren't dreaming, but eventually she was successful. There was definitely a relieved bounce in their step when they finally left the conference room. Erin was tired, but happy, as she walked back toward her office.

Her empty stomach complained bitterly and her mouth salivated at the thought of the cold Reuben sandwich that waited on her desk. Erin hefted the folder and looked up just in time to avoid running smack into Amy, who was on her way out. The secretary stood in the hall waiting impatiently for the elevator.

Erin frowned in confusion and glanced at her watch. It was only three o'clock, and a little early for anyone to be leaving work. "Amy?"

"Scott is picking me up for the Christmas party with his family, remember?"

A nervous glint in her secretary's eye reminded Erin that Amy was not looking forward to this annual event. She asked off early for it every year, yet dreaded going to the forced celebration. Her husband's family didn't exactly like her, but Amy still kept trying.

"Don't worry," Erin said, smiling. "I'm sure you're wearing them down."

The chime sounded to let the women know that the car had arrived and the doors were ready to open. Amy smiled nervously at her boss.

"What about you? When are you going to find yourself a boyfriend, and have some fun instead of working all the time?"

Erin smirked and raised an eyebrow. "Don't you have something else to do besides worry about my private life, Amy?"

Her private life, or lack thereof, wasn't something she was in the habit of discussing with anyone. None of her business contacts knew of her orientation and she preferred to keep it that way. It was all right to have a woman corporate attorney represent your company, but most of her clients would no doubt run away, screaming, if they discovered that she was a lesbian.

The doors parted and Erin suddenly found herself looking into a pair of ice-blue eyes. She felt her features harden, and diligently ignored the curious look she noticed on Amy's face. Carson Tierney was in the car holding a huge cardboard box. Even loaded down, hair slightly mussed, and with a dark smudge on one cheek, she looked aggravatingly composed.

Carson hesitated for an instant before she stepped off the elevator and Amy took her place. They stood staring at one another until the lift doors closed and the secretary left them alone. Erin wondered what would have prompted the head of Delphi Technologies to initiate contact

with her after their earlier interaction. Maybe she expects me to carry her box, she thought hatefully.

CARSON WAITED UNCERTAINLY in front of the lawyer. From the instant the lift doors opened and she saw the smaller woman standing there, she knew she had to do something to mend the rift between them. Instead, she saw the walls coming up over hooded amber eyes. Carson started to back down, but then firmed her resolve. As inexperienced as she was with making overtures, she had to try.

“I...I wanted to apologize,” Carson began nervously. She saw that she had startled Ms. Donovan by her admission and forged ahead. “I wanted to say that I’m sorry. For earlier. I’m not usually quite so rude when I first meet someone. I...don’t know what came over me.”

Ms. Donovan didn’t seem to know what to make of the apology. She just stood there and looked at Carson. Apparently, the attorney wasn’t ready to forgive her, and if she was so petty that she couldn’t allow for one lapse in etiquette, maybe Carson was wrong about her. Perhaps it was time to be done with her crush on the pretty lawyer. It was sad really. Here she was experiencing her first real romantic interest in years, and the woman wasn’t as special as she thought.

“Well,” Carson finally said into the silence. “I suppose I should get back to it.”

She hefted the box of files by way of explanation and started to turn toward the elevators.

“Thank you, Ms. Tierney.”

Carson turned back around at the sound of the gravelly tones. What this woman could do to her insides with that voice.

“I appreciate that,” Erin continued. “You didn’t have to apologize...but thank you.”

Carson dipped her head in acknowledgment. “You’re welcome, and it’s Carson. Please.”

Erin smiled and Carson felt like the sun had broken through the clouds just for her.

Did it suddenly get hot in here? Butterflies swarmed in her stomach and she swallowed against an unusually dry throat.

“Only if you’ll agree to call me Erin.”

“Erin?” Carson was dazed by the brilliant smile directed her way. If she really was straight, it was such a terrible waste. “Oh, of course. Erin. Well, I should go.”

She felt inane for the lack of original comment, but the box was getting heavy. Carson leaned forward and pressed the button for the elevator car with her elbow. She turned back around to find that Erin was looking at her oddly. Just then, the dynamic attorney seemed to realize what she was doing and turned a bright red.

“Right, well, I should get back to work anyway,” Erin said.

Regardless of her words, Carson noticed that Ms. Donovan stood rooted in place, silently watching as the lift doors opened and she stepped inside. Their eyes met and held until the doors closed and Erin was gone.

The look in the soft brown eyes remained with her, especially how they had lightened. The flash of strong, white teeth had left her breathless, and Carson thought she might crawl out of her skin. It was a sensation she had never experienced before, and she finally understood what prompted countless poets to write about love throughout the ages. She wasn't saying she was in love with Erin Donovan, she barely knew her, but she also knew that she found the woman utterly captivating.

When she stepped off the elevator, the first thing she noticed was the continued sound of the renovation going on overhead. Even the pounding and continuous scraping couldn't dim her smile. The rest of the team wasn't due to arrive until next week, and surely they could put up with the inconvenience for a while. She knew it would certainly be worth it to her.

Carson sat the heavy box down in the hallway, and wandered from one office to the next. She had spent a considerable amount of time up here with Erin earlier, but really hadn't noticed the layout. As much as she pretended to survey the space, she'd been more interested in the corporate lawyer's features. She clearly remembered the light dusting of freckles across the pert nose when the fluorescent lights illuminated her face.

Tense lines around the eyes and lips hinted at the strain Erin was under, and Carson wondered if they were from working too hard or from her own rudeness. Each time Erin checked the time on her watch Carson noticed how small her hands were. Although they were tiny, they were strong and she found them fascinating. Just as she did everything else about Erin Donovan.

Abruptly Carson came back to the present and realized she was slumped against the wall lost in thought. Her hands were shaking when she lifted them and pushed the hair back from her face.

This is silly!

As intriguing as Erin was, Carson still had work to do. This adolescent fawning was becoming too much of a distraction. She had a business to run and she wouldn't let her feelings interfere with that. Her work was her salvation, and had always been the one thing she could rely on, the one thing that had never let her down or judged her.

The most Carson could hope for from Erin Donovan was friendship, and a little harmless fantasy. Something physical was out of the question. Even if Erin would consider being with a

woman, there was no reason to think she would choose Carson. On top of that, how did she know that Erin wasn't already involved? Just because Erin wasn't wearing a ring didn't mean she wasn't seeing someone.

Carson pushed the thoughts away and began checking the offices with real interest. She finally settled on the fourth office on the left, away from the elevator banks. The office was also far enough away from the elevators and the conference room that she wouldn't be bothered by people passing by outside. It was by far the largest office with a fantastic view of the skyline. It was still early, yet dark outside because of the season, and Carson happily took in the city lights below.

The lavatory was at the other end of the hall, but she didn't mind the walk. Her office would be the closest to the actual lab where she had requested the additional power outlets and phone jacks. Satisfied with her decision, Carson went back into the hall and retrieved the cardboard box.

Desks came already furnished in all of the offices, as well as a large table and chairs in the conference room. Anything additional, like file cabinets and servers, they would have to install themselves.

After she sat the box on her desk, she ran her fingers lovingly across the mahogany desktop. She savored the feel of the expensive wood and wondered if Ray Eldridge had seen to the furnishings. If so, she couldn't knock his taste in decor, or his taste in partners.

Damn it, she swore internally as her thoughts came back around full circle.

Carson thrust thoughts of the attorney away and concentrated on unpacking her personal belongings. She had to organize the new work area, and that included deciding which of the people on her staff would have what offices, as well as deciding how many sets of keys to have made. They'd have to install phones, set up servers, and put security systems in place. Overall, there was a great deal to do.

After she unpacked, Carson began to make a list of things to do. Sometime later, she realized that the sounds of construction overhead had ceased.

She looked at her watch and saw that it was already five thirty. Time had completely gotten away from her, but she wasn't quite finished yet. She wanted to complete the list of tasks needed for her company to settle in and take some measurements before she stopped for the night and had some dinner.

For an instant, she wondered if Erin Donovan had gone home to a solitary meal or if she had someone waiting for her at home.

FOUR FLOORS DOWN, Erin had no idea that she had been the subject of intense concentration, but she did look up sharply when the overhead lights flickered on and off, and then returned to full power.

The flickering lights were a minor annoyance, but did make her look at her watch. She was surprised to find that it was already eight fifteen. It was long past the time she should have quit, but she wanted to complete the draft she was working on.

Her stomach was queasy from the cold, greasy sandwich she had eaten earlier, and if she had one more cup of coffee she would never get to sleep later. At least it was Friday and she wouldn't have to get up early tomorrow, but it was late and she would have to call for a cab soon.

The chime that announced the arrival of the elevator sounded and Erin looked up curiously. She had left the door to her office and the outer door open into the hallway, as was her habit when she worked alone in the evenings. The sound was clearly recognizable, but she didn't hear anyone get off. After a moment, she shrugged and turned back to the document on her computer.

A few seconds later, she heard the chime again...and then again.

“Who's playing with the damned elevator?” She got up from her desk. Since it was after hours, it had to be security or someone with access to the sixth floor.

Just as Erin reached the outer door that led into the corridor, the overhead lights blinked again and went out. For a moment, she stood frozen in the darkness before the glow of the red emergency lights kicked in.

Well, that explains the elevator, she thought dryly. More problems I will have to report to Holcomb. I swear this place has gremlins.

Erin stepped into the hall where there was more light and she spotted the elevator standing open a few feet down. Brighter light from inside the car illuminated a patch on the carpet but there was something funny about it. She frowned when she realized that something inside the elevator was casting a shadow onto the floor.

Curious but unafraid, she wandered toward the lift. The whole building seemed eerily quiet and she realized that, with the exception of security on the first floor, she could very well be the last one in the building. Then her vision seemed to narrow down to the spot directly in front of her.

An arm and a hand lay between the elevator doors. The fingers were curled somewhat and the hand was palm up on the commercial grade carpet. Worried that someone was hurt, Erin rushed toward the hand and dropped to her knees. She recognized Ed Cupper, vice president of the corporation that owned the building, as the unconscious man on the lift floor.

At least she prayed that he was merely unconscious.

“Ed? Ed, can you hear me?”

Erin reached out to his face and suddenly noticed the blood that had pooled all around his head and shoulders. His eyes stared sightlessly at nothing, and she realized that somehow he'd suffered a fatal head injury. The wound had bled profusely, soaking beneath him into the elevator's carpeting.

Her brain refused to work. Surely, this had to be some kind of terrible accident, didn't it?

She tried to believe that was what had happened, but the sheer amount of bloody handprints on the lift told her a different story.

Terror exploded in her mind and she whimpered unconsciously as she stumbled up and back before smacking into the wall. Erin shook her head in denial. Her mouth opened and her breath came in great shuddering gasps. She looked down and saw Ed's blood covering her hands. Her knees were sticky and Erin saw that she had unknowingly knelt in the pool on the floor.

Erin retched and then clenched her jaws, refusing to throw up. What she needed to do now was think. It was just so difficult with all of the cotton that suddenly filled her head. The police. She had to call the authorities.

She ignored the red fluid on her hands, and rushed back into the main lobby to grab the phone off Amy's desk. The handset was slippery in her sticky grasp. Erin punched in 911 and waited impatiently for the phone to ring on the other end. Instead, all she heard was static.

What the... The power outage shouldn't affect the phone lines. Erin pushed the disconnect button several times and prayed that the operator would answer. Nothing.

Cell phone!

She ran into her office and dove into her briefcase. It was only after she had flipped it open that she remembered that she couldn't get a signal from inside the building.

Damn!

When she finally conceded that phone calls were out of the question, something occurred to her with enough force to make her feel like someone had punched her in the stomach. Erin had wasted time trying to call the police and there was the distinct possibility that the killer was on the sixth floor with her. The elevator had stopped here and Ed's body was part of the way out of the car. But how had the killer made the car stop on this floor when only someone with access could utilize the lifts after hours?

He must have used Ed's pass card. Since Ed was one of the owners of the building, he would have access to everything.

Erin spun back around to face the open door. She couldn't see anyone and the building was frighteningly quiet with the power off. The sound of the wind howling outside was loud enough that she suddenly heard it above the terrified pounding of her heart. She looked and saw snow swirling heavily outside the window. The annoying winter storm had finally become a raging blizzard while she worked.

Could that be the real reason for the power outage? Could Ed's death merely be the product of some tragic accident after all? In light of this new information Erin let her breath out in a relieved rush and felt her heart beat start to take on a more natural cadence.

Killers and murder, Erin thought berating herself silently for her overactive imagination. She really needed to get a grip.

Erin thought of the abject terror she had experienced when she found the dead executive and was glad no one had been around to witness her embarrassment. Nevertheless, a man was still dead and regardless of the power outage, she had to report it.

The first step she took reminded Erin of her blood caked hands and knees. A quick glance down confirmed that her skirt and hose were ruined. The sight almost made her gag, but there would be time to wash up after she went downstairs to report the accident to security. Now that her fright had receded, she began quietly to mourn Ed's demise.

Tears stung the back of her eyes. Had it only been this morning that she teased her secretary with her dreams about him? Guilt hammered away at her when she thought of his sad attempts to hook up with any available female. He was just lonely and she had made fun of him. She had made light of his feelings in an attempt to ignore her own loneliness.

Who could possibly be interested in a middle-aged workaholic anyway, she thought mournfully.

Liquid blue eyes danced across her mind and Erin resolutely pushed the image away. The woman was irritating beyond words and Erin was most definitely not interested in Carson Tierney in any way. Besides, it's too late for me anyway and it's not important right now. I need to get downstairs.

After she spoke to security, she would go home to several healthy shots of Remy Martin. Even then, she feared that Ed's empty eyes would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Erin stepped into the hall and deliberately kept her eyes directly on the carpet in front of her. That wasn't enough and she saw more of the older man's body than she wanted when she walked by. Thankfully, she wouldn't have to step into the elevator. With the power out, she would have to take the stairs and she fixed her gaze on the red exit sign. Normally a six-story flight of stairs was a thing to avoid in high heels, but it was far more preferable than using the blood soaked elevator.

What could possibly have happened? Maybe he had taken a fall and gone in search of help before he succumbed to his injuries. It was common knowledge that Erin often worked late and it was possible he had been on his way to her office.

That didn't make sense though. He'd obviously been hurt before the power outage, so why hadn't he used a phone to call for an ambulance? Even confused and disoriented from a head injury, it was highly unlikely that he would crawl into the elevator. It made more sense that he would have wandered around on the first floor where his office was located. Security personnel were on the same floor and surely would have found him.

Erin frowned as she walked carefully down the narrow steps. Three-inch pumps weren't ideal footwear and she was more concerned with staying on her feet than checking to see if she was alone in the stairwell. She went around the fourth floor landing and froze when she heard a thump from below.

She wanted to believe that the storm outside caused the strange sound, but caution made her wait a few moments on the stairs. A second later, she heard the sound again. It was the reverberation of metal striking metal. Below her, on the third floor and just at the edge of the handrail, Erin spotted a shadow. She shrank back instinctively and held her breath when she saw a strange man come up the steps.

Her first thought was that help had arrived and it was only by the thinnest of margins that she kept from calling out immediately. That was when she noticed his hands. Covered in blood, he clutched a huge hammer in his right hand. The head of it curved into two wicked claws and looked like some kind of rock climbing axe. What had given his presence away was the head of the axe striking the handrail as he walked.

He was a big man, easily more than six feet tall. A bushy thick beard and dark hair obscured most of his features, but Erin thought he looked like pure evil. Then the stairwell door closed without him noticing her. He hadn't used any kind of pass card, and she realized it was because the power was out. All of the exit doors unlocked in the case of an emergency.

Erin's heart pounded in fear that he would suddenly come back out. She needed to get to the first floor and alert security, but she had to be very careful. Sound echoed on these stairs, and that was what had saved her, but it could condemn her too. Erin reached down and quickly pulled off her shoes. She carried them clutched against her as she trotted down the steps toward the first floor.

Her footing was slippery from the pantyhose, and she thought it would be just her luck if she fell and damaged her skull with the concrete steps.

Shit, she thought and tried to be as quiet as possible as she ran for security. Shit.

HER BODY'S INITIAL reaction to seeing Ed Cupper was right. Someone killed him. Now it looked as though the killer was still in the building and systematically searching the floor for other victims. That meant he hadn't been in the elevator with Ed. If so, he would have already searched that floor and killed her.

Panic fluttered at the edges of her vision, but Erin pushed it away. If she gave in to it now, she wouldn't survive the night. She could fall apart later.

Erin reached the first floor landing, leaving the concrete steps finally, and pushed the heavy release bar across the exit. It resisted at first but grudgingly gave way when she insisted.

She had never used the stairs before and it took a second to get her bearings. Then Erin quickly ran as fast as she could in her slippery hose toward the security offices. So far, she hadn't seen anyone else in the building, but she knew that security worked twenty-four hours a day and operated a bank of electronic surveillance cameras. With any luck, she and Ed had been the last two executives in the structure.

However, if she hoped to find rescue with the security guards that hope disappeared when she came around the corner outside their office. Erin wasn't sure how many guards were on duty after hours, but one of them lay face down outside the door.

"Oh no," Erin groaned and slumped for a moment against the wall. The pause was only for a few seconds before she straightened her back and pushed away from the wall.

All right, there's a killer loose in the building. I'm probably going to see a lot more of this before it's done, but I'll be damned if he's going to get me, she thought defiantly.

Erin was a child of the twentieth century and had seen her share of horror flicks. The cowering women in those films disgusted her when they always managed to trip right when the psycho killer was directly behind them. She didn't intend to be one of those nimrods and even if she was the only one left alive, or this really wasn't some nightmare, she wasn't going to let him win.

She wasn't stupid either and an unarmed woman against that great hulk of a man wasn't much of a match. There had to be something in the security office she could use as a weapon.

Erin swallowed her trepidation and stepped across the dead guard. He was sprawled in such a way that her calf slid over his shoulder before she could reach the floor on the other side. Her imagination insisted that he moved, but her common sense noticed the coldness in his body. He was dead and not going to suddenly come to life and grab her.

She closed her eyes for a second then she grasped the doorframe and stepped over him. Nevertheless, when she was in the office, her stubborn optimism wavered in the face of the carnage before her. Two more bodies were in the room. One of them was a woman who had never even made it out of her chair. From the look of things, Erin guessed that her neck was broken. She remembered the size of the killer's hands and knew that the thin woman in front of

the security monitors never stood a chance. Sadly, Erin turned to the other man to see if there was a chance that he was still alive. One look at the fire axe buried in his skull was enough to convince her otherwise.

Erin turned away quickly and pressed her hand to her lips to stifle a hysterical sob. Finally, she gathered her tattered courage and turned back to the dead security guards. The man lying on the floor had a gun in his hand, but Erin doubted he had ever fired it. The killer certainly hadn't appeared to be injured.

There was no way she was going to pry the gun from his hand, but if he had one so did the female guard.

Sure enough a gun resided undisturbed in the woman's leather holster. Erin was no expert with weapons, but she saw that it was a semi-automatic as she unsnapped the holster. She tucked her shoes under her arm and nervously wiped her hands on the corner of her blouse to blot the worst of the blood. Then she pulled the gun out of the holster to look at it more closely.

A few sessions on the firing range to be familiar with such things two years ago had given Erin just enough knowledge to shoot herself by accident. Very aware of that irony, she carefully inspected the weapon, and turned the safety off.

If she did suddenly have to defend herself, it would be better not to have to fumble with the catch at that time. After preparing the weapon to her satisfaction, Erin held firmly to the grip and kept her finger off the trigger. She reached up with the other hand to move the slide just enough to see inside the chamber. A round was already set to go and all she would have to do was pull the trigger. If absolutely necessary.

Erin swallowed nervously and wondered if she had suddenly lost her mind. She had never even pointed a gun at someone much less entertained the notion of shooting them. Still, if she had to, she thought she could defend herself.

Armed, the frightened businesswoman turned back to the security setup. The surveillance monitors were dark and useless to her. There was no way to know where the killer was now, but perhaps there was still a way to call for help. Erin thought of trying all of the phones in the building, and then saw that several junction boxes on the wall had been torn apart. No doubt, the lunatic had left nothing to chance and the electrical panels in the basement would have suffered a similar fate.

Surely, the guards needed a way to communicate with one another besides phones. What with spreading all about the building during the day and night, they had to carry walkie-talkies. Erin saw one sitting on the desk amidst the rubble and snatched it eagerly. She put the gun on the table and tried to figure out how to use the radio.

"Hello, is anyone there? Hello, this is an emergency," she said desperately.

When there was no response, Erin started turning the channel indicator on the top. She tried every frequency with the same result. Either none of the other guards remained alive or the killer had also sabotaged the radios. She thought it far more likely that only the three guards she found were working in the building that night.

“Fire alarm,” she whispered to herself suddenly. If she could trip the fire alarm, someone would come to investigate.

Erin dropped the radio onto the floor and picked up the gun. She ran into the hall, leaping over the fallen guard and toward one of the fire alarms on the wall. Beside it was a heavy glass case that once housed a fire axe. The case had been broken and glass littered the floor, shining malevolently in the red wash of the emergency lights. It was no longer a mystery where the fire axe that had been used to kill the guard came from.

She avoided the glass carefully and happily reached up to flip the red lever down. Nothing.

This is impossible, she thought desperately.

The only other thing she could think to do was hail a cab to drive down to the police station and tell them what was happening. If her purse and keys weren't back up on the sixth floor that was exactly what she would do. There was no way she was going back up there when she was so close to freedom, but she was very aware of time slipping away. Eventually the killer would come back downstairs and Erin needed to have a plan before then.

Well, if she couldn't drive to the police maybe she could find someone outside that would help her. It was worth a shot and it beat being cooped up in the deserted building with a crazy man on the loose.

Erin ran out of the hall and back into the main entrance. Feeling tremendously exposed, she ran across the empty lobby and toward the front doors. She ran up the stationary escalator and across the main lobby, cursing the building architect all the way.

Through the frosted panes of glass Erin saw a police cruiser as it drove slowly through the raging snowstorm, snow chains clinking softly on the tires. A rush of adrenaline gave her the extra push she needed and she made it to the door before he got past. But when Erin pushed on the doors, prepared to rush out into the blizzard in her shirtsleeves, she discovered them locked.

“Dammit, this can't be happening!”

Of course the doors are locked, it's a security precaution implemented automatically every night. That's why, when I leave late, one of the guards has to escort me to the doors and unlock them, she told herself miserably.

She considered pounding on the glass to get the police officer's attention then thought better of it. If she did that, there was no hope that the driver of the car would hear her. With the heavy

winter storm raging and his windows undoubtedly up, with the heater blasting away, it would be impossible. All that her banging would accomplish would be to bring the killer to her.

Erin turned back toward the inside of the structure so she could see what was going on around her. She didn't want to be caught unaware and, with that thought, came the realization that she was going to have to clamp down on her habit of talking to herself when frustrated. It would be a sure fire way to give her position away if the killer was nearby.

Carefully, she considered her options. With all of the doors locked, Erin looked to the glass panes, but they were bulletproof. It was a concession to their insurance company for all of the sensitive material kept on the premises. That meant there was no way out unless she could find the keys on one of the security guards. Assuming she did, she still had to brave the blizzard without a coat. She'd freeze to death.

None of the phones or the fire alarm worked, and there wasn't any power, so Erin couldn't send a 911 message by computer over the Internet. Her cell phone had no reception, and short of lighting a fire and sending up smoke signals, she couldn't think of a single way to get a message to the outside world.

It was late Friday night and, as she was in the middle of the business district, no one would be around until the storm passed. Or at least until it was time for the guards to change shift tomorrow morning.

The first and most important thing she could think of was to get somewhere safe and try to think of a way out. Erin had to remember that she knew the building and the killer probably didn't. That is to say, she knew her own floor. She worked there almost every day, including most weekends, and had a better chance to find a safe place to hide. If she went to any other floor, she would be a sitting duck while she wasted precious time trying to orient herself.

Even if she couldn't think of a way out tonight, she only needed to find somewhere secluded and safe and wait for the morning. When the next shift came on, they would find the other guards and sound the alarm. Surely, the killer would want to avoid capture and would be long gone by then.

That only left one problem as far as she could see. Erin had to get back to the sixth floor without a crazy murderer seeing her.

She took a calming breath and tried to think tactically. *Stay low and stay in the shadows.*

Luck had been with her so far. She had been running around without the killer seeing but she needed to be smarter than that if she was going to survive until morning.

Wait, she thought suddenly. The fire exits should still work!

Hope and adrenaline flooded her system and Erin turned back to the stairs she'd taken from the sixth floor. If she could descend one more level, the stairwell should end at the upper level of the parking garage.

Traversing her previous course, Erin bypassed the security hallway and continued on to the fire exit. She didn't need anything else to haul around; the weight of the gun was enough, so she left her shoes in a dark corner of the floor. She held the gun ready like she'd seen on television, but carefully kept her finger off the trigger while she listened from inside the fire door. When she didn't hear anything Erin stood up and glanced through the small window set in the heavy door. She jerked back quickly, but she didn't see anything so chanced a longer look. The killer was nowhere in sight.

Erin quietly pushed the doors open and had already taken the first three steps when she heard a soft noise below her.

How long was I at the security center? Did he come back down?

She had no way of knowing and wasn't eager to confront a lunatic head-on even if she was armed. As it was, Erin barely understood how the pistol worked and was smart enough to know that shooting on a range under controlled circumstances was a lot different from the situation she faced now. If she had to use the handgun, she would. Still, if she could avoid him until help arrived, that was by far the preferable scenario. With that in mind, Erin returned to her previously thought out tactics. It would be safer to return to her firm's floor and find somewhere to hide.

Slowly and carefully, she made her way back up the steps. The building creaked and groaned from the storm outside and every few minutes she was convinced the psycho with the climbing axe was coming after her. By the time Erin reached the sixth floor, she was sweating and shaking with terror. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears and her mouth was so dry, it was difficult to swallow.

Ed Cupper lay undisturbed where she had left him, and Erin tried to ignore the body as she headed for her lobby. If the chance did come to get out of the building, she didn't want to be unprepared. She went into her office and pulled on her jacket, overcoat and her winter boots. Then she slipped her useless cell phone into her coat pocket and checked to be sure that her keys were there too. Now where could she hide?

The sound of the stairwell door as it slammed back against the wall suddenly made her gasp and look around in fright. She was absolutely out of time and had to find somewhere now.

Erin slipped out of her office through the rear exit and into the kitchenette. Even in here, there was nowhere to hide, and she looked around frantically. Light from the hall cast a large shadowy figure. It was slowly coming toward her.

The room was small without even a table to provide concealment so she did the only thing she could think of. Erin tiptoed to the door and slid between it and the wall.

Hesitant steps moved toward the kitchenette door and Erin fought to bring her staccato breathing under control. Her mind was in a fog of terror, and sweat beaded on her upper lip as the dark figure moved closer. She opened her mouth to increase her intake of oxygen and try to silence her harsh breathing.

The figure moved into the door and Erin was sure the killer knew she was somewhere around and was waiting for any sound that would give her away.

The gun, she thought frantically. In her fear, she had almost forgotten the weapon, but now she silently delved into the deep coat pocket to search for it. Her keys made a slight jingling noise that sounded as loud as an explosion in her panicked state, but Erin finally got the gun into her hand.

Someone suddenly yanked the door away from the wall and a tall figure loomed above her. Erin thrust the gun toward the threat, fully intent on blowing whoever it was into the next century. She pressed the trigger under her finger, and had already started to squeeze it when she recognized Carson Tierney.

“Oh, thank God,” Erin sobbed, and dropped the gun down by her side.

Chapter Four

CARSON JERKED BACK reflexively when she saw the muzzle of a gun thrust unexpectedly into her face. An involuntary cry escaped her lips and she rocked back on her heels. The sudden shift in weight caused her to lose her footing and Carson fell on her butt. She raised an arm in an idiotic urge to shield herself from a bullet when she realized Erin Donovan stood above her with a gun at her side, and was trembling in some kind of shock.

“Oh, thank God,” Erin whispered shakily.

Carson lunged to her feet and grabbed Erin by the forearms. “What the hell are you doing? You could have killed me!”

Erin didn’t reply at first, and Carson saw that her mouth worked frantically, but she didn’t say anything.

“Hey, what is it? What’s happened?” She realized that Erin was trembling violently and near hysterics. Carson was tremendously worried about what could have possibly caused the normally contained woman to become unhinged in such a way.

Erin’s eyes were wide and frightened. Carson could see the whites around them and they flitted around constantly as if she was afraid of an unexpected attack at any second. Erin started to wave the gun around to gesture as she mumbled incoherently.

“Whoa,” Carson said and reached up to take hold of Erin’s hand. “Let me have that thing before you kill one of us. Now tell me what is going on. What has you so spooked?”

Erin focused on Carson finally and took a deep calming breath. The shivering in her limbs let up a little, but didn’t cease completely. Still, the fact that she was obviously trying to compose herself gave Carson hope that she hadn’t suffered a brain aneurysm.

“There’s a murderer in the building. He killed Ed Cupper and the security guards on the first floor then he cut the power. I thought you were him. We have to get help!”

She said the words so fast that it took Carson a moment to catch up. “What? A killer? Erin, what are you talking about? The power is out because there’s a blizzard outside.”

“No, didn’t you see Ed’s body in the elevator? You must have passed right by him when you came down the hall.” Erin was so insistent that she was starting to scare Carson.

Carson thought back briefly and tried to remember anything suspicious. There wasn’t anything. Carson had been settling into her office on the tenth floor and then began to make a list of things to do. After that, she had measured the offices and the server center to decide how to situate people and equipment.

When the power went out, she finally noticed the blizzard, and decided it was time to pack it in for the day. A strange noise at the end of the corridor distracted her and Carson decided to check it out. It turned out to be nothing more than a poorly shut off hot water tap. She noticed a red stain in the sink diminished by the flow of water into the basin. It looked like simple rust in the red wash of the emergency lights and she had thought nothing more of it.

Then Carson used the bathroom, and took the time to put on her jacket before she stared out across the city lights for a few minutes. With the power out the lights below were exceptionally pretty. She remembered thinking how they resembled the natural shine of Erin’s hair.

Carson tried not to blush when she remembered that and was happy the main power was out. With only the glow of the emergency lights, Erin probably wouldn’t notice her high color.

After that, she locked the offices and took the stairs down. She remembered from rumors and from her own informal surveillance of the corporate attorney that Erin often worked late. Carson was concerned that Erin was alone in the building without any power and stepped onto the sixth

floor to check on her. The stairs were right next to the elevator bank, and Carson walked right passed them. But she didn't remember any dead body.

“Erin, listen to me...there is no dead body in the elevator.”

“But I saw him!”

She saw that Erin was starting to get angry as well as scared and she held up both hands in a gesture of peace. “All right, you saw him. Let's walk down the hall together and you can show me.”

Carson didn't mean to treat Erin like a child, but it was important for her to see that no one was there. Maybe then, she would calm down.

“Come on, I'll show you.” She took hold of Erin's hand, and slid the gun into her coat pocket on the other side.

Slowly she urged the smaller woman out into the hall with her. Erin was skittish and jumped at every little creak the building made. Carson went slowly with her as she would a frightened colt.

Erin followed Carson willingly, but checked the shadows carefully. Carson led the way to the elevator but when they arrived, there was no body and the doors were closed.

“Not this elevator. I didn't even realize we were going the wrong way. He's down at the other end of the hall.”

She looked up at Carson with confusion and anger warring in her eyes. Something in her firm demeanor, even in the face of terror, finally got through to Carson. Stubborn, willful and even cutthroat when it came to business, Erin Donovan was also an honest and immensely intelligent woman. She would not make up something like this.

“I'm sorry...I just assumed. I came down the south stairwell. Let's check the other side, maybe he's not dead and there's something we can do for him.”

As soon as she said that, Erin visibly relaxed. Her shoulders slumped slightly and Carson could swear she saw the glint of tears in the low light.

“Thank you. I hope you're right.”

Carson held the pistol in her left hand inside the coat pocket, just in case, and directed Erin to walk behind her with the other. She walked softly down the hallway, trying to keep quiet in case there was a killer lying in wait somewhere. No one jumped out but she found Ed Cupper lying right where Erin had said he was. She felt badly for not believing Erin or for failing to notice the dead man's hand lying on the hall floor from a distance.

“Stay right here,” she said as they reached the lift. “I’ll check him. You don’t need to see that again.”

Erin nodded. “There was so much blood.”

She unbuttoned her overcoat and glanced down. Carson followed her gaze and after a moment saw the dried blood on the lawyer’s skirt and knees.

“Erin! Are you hurt?”

“It’s Ed’s blood. I tried to help him.”

Her voice was low, tremulous. She sounded so lost that Carson couldn’t help herself and reached out to pull Erin against her in support. There was nothing sexual in the gesture; it was simply one human being reaching out to offer comfort to another.

“All right,” Carson said softly into Erin’s ear. “Just hold on for a moment. Let me see if I can help him.”

Carson released Erin and turned back to the elevator. She took a deep breath, trying to steel herself for what she had to do next. Carefully avoiding the dark stain on the carpeting, Carson knelt next to the man she’d never seen before and checked for a pulse. After a moment, she closed her eyes and sighed. It was far too late.

She stood up and returned to where Erin leaned against the wall. Even before she spoke, Carson saw that Erin already knew what she would say. Tears filled Erin’s dark eyes and she lowered her head. Compassion made Carson reach out to embrace her once again.

“I’m so sorry. I wish there was something else we could do, but right now, we need to focus on getting out of here alive. I’m here, Erin, and I won’t leave you. I promise.”

Erin looked up at Carson as if she had never seen her before. “What happened to that snooty woman who barged into my office today?”

Carson started to be embarrassed then noticed the teasing glint in the light brown eyes. How could she tell Erin that she had been so nervous about meeting her that she had acted like a complete jerk?

“Public speaking isn’t one of my strong suits,” she joked back.

Erin chuckled a little and took a step back. “I have to admit that I feel a whole lot better now that I’m not in this alone. I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m not,” Carson said with a touch of irony. “But I’m glad you’re not alone either. So, any suggestions?”

“Do you have a cell phone? Mine doesn’t have any reception inside the building.”

Carson shook her head and with a touch of her customary arrogance said, “I don’t carry it around with me. I left it in my car. If someone wants to contact me, they have my work number.”

“And if you’re not there?”

“Then they may leave a message.”

“Perfect. I’m stuck in a building with a killer on the loose and my only backup is a computer geek that doesn’t even have a cell phone on her.”

Carson ignored the slightly sarcastic comment. “What about computers? Doesn’t the security contingent use them to monitor the building?”

“Yes, but I already checked. They’ve been damaged somehow and there’s no power anyway. Plus...the guards are...he was already there.”

Carson swallowed and tried to remain on track. It was disturbing how methodical the killer had been, taking out everyone that could possibly call for help. Thoughts like that wouldn’t help them now, so she concentrated on the things that could.

“True, but if I can get the power restored to at least the first floor I may be able to get the computers working again. Also, phones and computers aren’t on the same lines. Chances are that he disabled the phones at the main box. Otherwise, he would have had to cut each one manually. If he merely disconnected or yanked the wires loose from the phone box, I may be able to repair them.”

Erin reached out and took Carson’s hand in a strong grip. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

The eyes were more amber than light brown now, with a soft, gentle expression. Carson swallowed thickly. “Yes, well. Let’s get going, shall we?”

“We’ll have to be quiet. I saw the killer earlier and it looked like he was checking all the floors for other people.”

“You saw him? What does he look like?”

“He’s a big guy, taller than you and very stocky. I couldn’t really see his face because he has dark, bushy hair and a huge beard. He looked like Andre, the Giant.”

“Did he see you,” Carson asked worriedly.

Erin shook her head. “I saw him on the stairs. He was going onto the third floor and then later he was entering the parking garage.”

“Is that why you’re running around in your winter boots?”

Erin looked up sharply. She gave Carson a lopsided grin. “My pumps made too much noise on the stairs and the tile floors. I took them off and left them downstairs. I only put these on a few minutes ago.”

“Good thinking. Let’s get going. I don’t want to spend any more time in here with a killer than I have to.”

Erin nodded, but still held Carson’s hand. Though Carson knew she hadn’t even liked her just a few hours ago, now it was as though she couldn’t bear the idea of letting Carson out of her sight. It was just a normal reaction to a harrowing experience, she decided.

They entered the stairwell together with Carson leading the way. She held on to Erin’s hand and tried to reassure her with the warmth of the contact. Erin didn’t seem to mind following behind her.

Carson was impressed that Erin had managed to hold it together so well after what she had been through. She thought of what Erin had said concerning Ed, and the security guards, and being close enough to see the guilty party up close. Carson didn’t know if she could handle things that well if she had been in Erin’s shoes, but she did know that there was no way she was going to allow her to go first.

For all her mental discipline, Erin was an executive, and not skilled in hand-to-hand combat. She proved that when she almost shot Carson in the kitchenette.

On the other hand, Carson had grown up with an absentee father, in an impoverished area where all that kept someone from being a victim was cunning or the power behind one’s fists. Carson had never sought out physical altercations, but had needed to defend herself on more than one occasion. It hadn’t taken long for her to learn the fine arts of deception and deflection. Of the two of them, she was the one better suited for this kind of thing.

Quietly she led the way down the stairs. They reached the fifth floor landing when the exit door suddenly flew open and a great bear of a man stalked into view. Carson and Erin froze. The killer looked up, saw the two women, and jerked in surprise. Then his eyes hardened and he raised a mammoth axe above his head and let out a roar of pure hatred.

Carson let go of Erin’s hand and reached for the gun in her pocket. It snagged on the leather seam and she knew there was no time.

“Run, Erin,” she screamed and spun on her heel.

Erin was way ahead of her and had already turned to run back up the stairs. Her longer strides allowed Carson to catch up quickly and she grasped Erin under the arm to pull her along a little faster.

As big as he was, the man wasn't able to move as quickly. He lumbered clumsily up the stairs, but with great determination. It was only by the thinnest of margins that the women beat him back to the sixth floor and slammed the fire door in his face. They leaned back against the door just in time to prevent him from being able to push it open and Carson reached into her pocket again. This time she was able to pull out the weapon. She pointed the muzzle at the ceiling and a quick glance told her that the safety was off.

The door was inching open every time the killer banged into it and they wouldn't be able to hold it for very long. His rage, even through the door, was deafening as he screamed and cursed their existence.

"All of you, I'll kill all of you," he screamed.

They saw his twisted face through the small inset security window as he shouted. Spittle coated the inside of the glass, and he continued to push and pound on the inside of the door. When he finally realized he wasn't going to be able to push them away, he raised the axe and struck the window. It held under the first two blows, but on the third, the glass cracked. A look of glee crossed the crazed man's face and he drew back to strike again.

Between two narrow panes of glass, there was a thin inlay of mesh. The next blow with the axe cut through both panes and easily shredded the interior wire. The tip of it protruded through the glass only a few inches from Carson's face. The next one would shatter the glass completely and then he would be able to reach in with the weapon and cut them unless they moved away from the door. The latter option meant that he would get in anyway and likely overpower them in an instant.

Carson turned around, grasped the butt of the gun with both hands and pointed it at the maniac. The end of it trembled and she tried to still her shaking hands.

"Stop or I'll shoot."

The line sounded like something out of a cheesy cop show, but it seemed to get his attention. The killer paused and looked at her briefly in confusion. Then he took advantage of her being away from the door and shoved it open. Erin was unable to hold it by herself and stumbled away from the door. Then she turned toward him with her knees bent and her hands curled into claws.

Carson fired the pistol without thinking. The round tore through the window and missed the killer by a very thin margin, but it was enough. He flinched back and spun away before barreling back down the stairs.

Primal satisfaction shot through her veins as she watched him run. In that instant, she forgot Erin and stood panting in the aftermath of the adrenaline surge. It took the touch of a soft hand on her arm to draw Carson back to her companion.

"Are you okay?"

Erin nodded. Her eyes were haunted, and Carson wasn't convinced. It would take time to recover from such an ordeal. She held an arm out and was pleased when Erin stepped against her side.

“At least he's gone...for now.”

“Yes, and we still need to get to the phone box. Are you up for another trip down the fire escape?”

Erin's expression wasn't optimistic, but she replied in a steady voice. “Yes, as long as you're in the lead with the gun.”

Carson smiled and turned toward the stairs. She was still very afraid, but finding a way to communicate with the outside world was their only chance to get out of this building alive. “Stay close to me.” Thinking ahead, she decided that going to the security office was the last thing she wanted to do.

“I think we should go to the main phone box and repair the line first. We can call the police from any phone and I would rather you didn't have to see that again,” she said softly, hoping her voice wouldn't carry far.

“I would appreciate that,” Erin whispered, “but we'll still have to go back to the security office for the keys to the front door. We'll have to be there to let the police in.”

Carson nodded in understanding and led Erin to the lower level where the maintenance offices and the exit to the car park were located. They saw nothing of the killer and tried to move slowly and carefully. Once they reached the maintenance level, it didn't take long to find the main junction box and to see that the killer had merely ripped the wires loose.

Carson noticed the raised eyebrow when she casually pulled a pocketknife out of her coat pocket and stripped the wires on the damaged line. She suppressed a smile and repaired the damage in record time.

“There, that should do it.”

Erin nodded once. “You're handy to have around,” she said dryly.

“I'll remind you that you said that some time.”

Now hardly seemed the time to flirt, but the line just slipped out of her mouth. Carson covered her embarrassment by turning to walk back upstairs. “I suggest that we use the phone in the main lobby.”

“Right, main lobby,” Erin mumbled, still distracted by Carson's teasing remarks and the handy way she wielded the small foldout blade. Straight women didn't typically carry such things. Perhaps she needed to rethink her image of Carson Tierney.

“Trust me, I don’t want to. If he’s around, we’ll be making an easier target for him, but there’s no handset down here.”

As soon as they were in the main lobby Carson picked up the telephone, listened for a second and then smiled softly at Erin. She quickly dialed 911 and explained the situation to the dispatcher while she impressed on the man at the other end that the killer was still in the building.

“No, I don’t know where he is. I know only that I shot at him and he took off back down the stairs. It would be great if someone got here as fast as possible.”

Carson reassured the dispatcher that they would unlock the doors in a few moments, and that she would leave the gun on the desk once uniformed officers arrived.

“Time to get the keys?” Erin sounded scared when she asked the question, and she clearly did not want to go back to the security office.

“You can wait here if you like,” Carson said gently. “I can retrieve the keys alone.”

“That’s all right. I really don’t want to be alone right now. Let’s just hurry.”

CARSON’S SMILE SHOWED more in her eyes when she held her hand out for Erin again. With the killer no longer an immediate threat, her composure returned and she was tempted not to accept it. However, when she looked into Carson’s eyes, she decided that holding her hand during this ordeal had gotten her through so far, and it really wasn’t done yet. It wouldn’t be until the police arrived and took the killer into custody.

The hall outside the security office was still dark but didn’t seem quite so ominous. Erin heard Carson gasp when she saw the guard on the floor, but she knew it was just the shock of seeing a dead man. She recalled all too clearly how she herself had reacted to seeing Ed Cupper, and was impressed by Carson’s composure. She certainly held things together better than Erin had the first time she saw a dead man.

“We don’t need to go into the office. He should have a set of keys on his belt.”

Carson nodded and stepped over the man. She knelt down and reached for the guard’s waist. Erin noticed she was very gentle as she tried to move the jacket out of the way to look for the keys. Suddenly the guard’s hand shot out and grabbed Carson around the wrist.

Erin muffled a scream and leapt a foot away in surprise. Carson flinched and leaned away with wide-rimmed eyes, but she couldn’t extract herself from the man’s grip. When she realized

that he wasn't dead, she leaned forward with her free hand and brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"It's all right, you're all right," Carson assured him softly.

The guard groaned and rolled onto his back. Erin noticed a deep gash on his forehead and thought he was terribly lucky to be alive. She knelt down beside him on the other side and pressed him back down when he tried to sit.

She saw his nametag. "Please lie still, Manny, you've been injured. The police are on the way, but we need the keys to unlock the front door."

He nodded gingerly and let go of Carson's wrist before he reached for the keys that hung by a belt loop.

"Caught me by surprise," Manny muttered. "Came up from behind and hit me. The others? Suzanne and Jerry...are they okay?"

Carson took the keys while Erin answered. "Shh, don't worry about that right now. The police will be here soon."

She just couldn't answer his question directly, but it wasn't necessary. He had already lost consciousness again.

Erin decided to stay with the injured man while Carson went to unlock the doors. Even in the driving snow, the police had responded very quickly and a few minutes later, uniformed officers swarmed the place. Carson returned with two beefy officers while others moved throughout the building in a search for survivors.

One of the policemen knelt down to check Manny's pulse while the other stormed through the security door to check on the others. He came out a moment later and shook his head at his partner.

"Twenty-six Paul nine," the first officer said into his radio, "I need an ambulance and the coroner's van to the Holcomb Building. Notify homicide."

Then he looked up at Erin. "Are you injured, ma'am?"

"No, just scared out of my wits. But I must admit I feel a lot better now."

Northwestern Hospital was only a few minutes away and Erin prayed they would be in time to save the injured security guard.

Carson's hand reached out from behind and squeezed her shoulder gently. The officer nodded in understanding and informed them that they would need to wait until police finished searching the building. Then they'd be required to give preliminary statements to the homicide

detectives before they could leave. He suggested they wait in the main lobby until things settled down.

Both women were happy to follow that particular request, and settled into chairs along the side of the wall. As soon as they sat down Carson handed Erin her shoes.

“I found them against the wall when I went to open the doors.”

Erin sighed. “Thank you, again. I seem to be saying that a lot tonight.”

Emergency personnel rushed back and forth through the lobby. The ambulance arrived to take the injured guard to the hospital. There was no hurry to get to the others. *They weren't going anywhere*, Erin thought sadly.

More and more police officers arrived and they began to search the building in teams. Erin realized they were being very thorough as they looked for survivors and for the murderer. To take her mind off what was happening, Erin turned back to Carson.

“So, how did you come to be on the sixth floor just in the nick of time to save my hide?”

To her surprise, Carson blushed. She didn't expect such a reaction from the normally cool and contained young woman.

Carson cleared her throat. She seemed to be wrestling with her response. “I was in the office on the tenth floor when the lights went out. I...heard that you tend to work late on most nights and I wanted to check on you.”

She wanted to check on me? Why? Erin pondered.

Sudden clarity hit her like a train wreck and she intuitively understood what Carson hadn't said. There was still the possibility that

Erin was completely off the mark, but Carson had communicated a wealth of information with only two sentences. The first thing was that she was gay, and the second was that she was interested enough in Erin to pay attention to her habits.

Erin thought of all those times she ran into Carson in the corridors outside her office. Was that just happenstance? Or had she accidentally encountered Erin on purpose?

Careful in case she was wrong, Erin decided on a casual approach. “I'm delighted that you chose tonight to get settled into your office. I can't think of anyone who would have made a better body guard.”

Carson smiled. “I'm just lucky my brain didn't shut down once I found out what was happening. I've never considered being in a situation like this.”

Erin's face turned serious for a moment as a gurney with one of the dead security guards trundled past. "It certainly didn't shut down tonight. You saved my life."

She looked down when strong fingers reached for her hand. Their fingers intertwined and Erin strengthened the grasp. "How can I ever repay you?"

Carson caught her eye. "There is nothing to repay. Still, it would be nice if we could get something to eat. I'm starving. Would you care to join me for dinner?"

Erin laughed at the hopeful expression in the blue eyes. She remembered thinking how the cleft in that proud chin would feel under her thumb earlier and had to resist that urge again now. "How about breakfast instead, after we finish with the detectives? I'm sure it'll take that long to get all of this mess straightened out."

Something passed between them and it took a moment for them to realize that Officer Burleson, the man who called for the ambulance, was walking toward them. Another man in a dark suit accompanied him and it was the stranger that spoke.

"Ladies," he said politely. "I'm Detective Matt Hutchins with the Chicago Homicide Division. Why don't we go ahead and get those statements out of the way? I'm sure you two have had a long night and can't wait to get some sleep. If you like, I can have Officer Burleson here drive you down to the precinct."

"I have my car outside," Carson said. "To be honest I prefer to drive. I could take Ms. Donovan home once we finish."

Erin smiled at her new friend. "That would be fine with me."

"Are you sure you're up to it," Hutchins asked. "All of this must have been very frightening."

"Thank you, Officer," Erin said sincerely, "but we'll be fine. What I want to know is what about the killer? Did you find him?"

The detective's face went very still and Erin suddenly didn't want to hear what he was about to say. He cleared his throat. "We found Mr. Cupper in the elevator like you said, and of course you know about the security guards."

"But?"

"Ma'am, I just don't know how to tell you this, but we didn't find anyone else in the building."

"That's impossible!" Carson jumped to her feet. "He didn't just vanish into thin air. You must have missed him somewhere."

“I’m sorry, ma’am. We checked the place pretty thoroughly. There’s no one else here.”

“He got away,” Erin breathed in horror.

Chapter Five

THE PROCEEDINGS WITH the homicide detectives lasted for hours just as Erin had predicted. As soon as they entered the police station, two different officers escorted Carson and Erin to different rooms to give their statements. Detective Hutchins explained that such a thing was standard procedure and no reflection on their veracity. It was simply that by interviewing each woman alone they weren’t influenced by the other and were likely to give them more details.

With the statements out of the way, a uniformed officer escorted Carson and Erin to another room and asked them to look at mug shots. When that yielded no results, they met with a police sketch artist. They spent another hour and a half trying to describe the brutal killer in as much detail as possible.

Finally satisfied with the result, both women nodded and agreed that the sketch was indeed the man they had encountered.

“How big did you say this guy was?”

“About six and a half feet, perhaps a little taller.”

Carson nodded in agreement with Erin’s statement. “He was also very big though, stocky. One of his arms was easily the size of my waist.”

Erin raised an eyebrow at the comment, and got a funny look on her face as if she wanted to add something. She refrained and Carson wondered what she was thinking. Although most people considered her painfully thin, she still thought the comparison relevant.

The detective coughed. “Yes, well. That’s not really very big, is it?”

Carson was ready to make an indignant reply when Erin interjected. “The point is he was a very large man. His hands were the size of platters, and he had very little neck to speak of.”

“Would you say he was muscular or overweight?”

“A little of both,” Carson answered after a moment. “His midsection wasn’t protruding, but he was obviously carrying a lot of body fat.”

Hutchins nodded. “All right, I think we’ve got enough for now. We’ll get this description out over the wires and see what we get.”

“Have you found...anything else at the office building?”

From the hesitant way in which she asked the question, it was apparent that Erin was worried if anyone else had died. Carson noticed the darkened brown eyes and reached out a hand for support. Erin knew these people, and worked with them every day. Of course, she was more affected by their ordeal than Carson.

Carson had been able to distance herself from the events to a certain degree because she wasn’t personally acquainted with any of them except Erin. If things had been different and Erin one of the victims, she wasn’t sure how she would have reacted.

Just the thought of Erin’s possible death caused Carson’s heart to twist painfully in her chest and her grip tightened on Erin’s hand.

Detective Hutchins’ voice was gentle when he answered. “We didn’t find anyone else in the building. As for anything that would lead us to the killer, we just don’t know yet. The sheer volume of people that move through that place on a daily basis precludes lifting fingerprints so we’re concentrating on the individual crime scenes. We’re checking the elevator where Mr. Cupper died and the security office. That also includes the firebox where the glass was shattered and the handle of the axe. Hopefully we’ll get something from that, but it’ll take a while.”

“So he’s just running around free,” Carson said acidly, “and we have no idea who he is.”

“And he’s seen our faces. He knows that we can identify him.”

A shudder ran up Carson’s spine when Erin added that, but the detective tried to reassure them. “From your statements, he wasn’t wearing gloves. If he’s got a record, or been fingerprinted anywhere, we’ll find him.”

Hutchins sounded confident, but Carson didn’t miss how he worded his statement.

“And if he doesn’t have a file?”

“Then it will be harder.”

His words hung in the air for a moment, but one look at Erin and Carson decided they had experienced enough for one day. Erin had dark circles under her eyes and there was an unhealthy pallor to her normally vibrant features.

“If we are finished here, I believe we’ve had enough.”

“Of course. We’ve got your contact information and we’ll let you know as soon as we hear anything, or if we have any more questions.”

Carson nodded and released Erin’s hand. She stood up. “Thank you, Detective.”

She didn’t mean to sound so cold when she said the pleasantries, but at the moment, she didn’t care. She was tired, hungry, and concerned that Erin wasn’t doing as well as she pretended. Quietly, she led the way to the front door of the police station.

A small hand on her arm prevented her from exiting out the doors and into the parking lot.

She looked down at Erin curiously and noticed the hardness of her expression. It appeared that Erin had slammed down her corporate attorney façade over her emotions and Carson thought it was in an effort not to feel too much pain about what she had been through.

“Yes?”

“I know we talked about breakfast, but I really don’t feel up to it right now. All I want is a shower and bed so I think I’ll just call a cab.”

Carson wasn’t sure Erin could stand on her feet long enough to wait for one. “Why don’t you let me drive you? I assure you, it’s no trouble,” she added when she saw her hesitate.

“All right. Thank you.”

She had parked right outside the main entrance to the police station. Carson and Erin trudged through a foot of fresh snow to the passenger side of the vehicle. Dawn was just starting to break, but it lent no warmth to the air even though the blizzard had blown itself out. The sky was overcast and the sun invisible through the cloud cover.

Carson used the keyless entry to unlock the vehicle and pulled Erin’s door open for her. She insisted on waiting until Erin was inside before she went around to the driver’s side. As soon as the doors closed, she started the Lexus and turned on the heated seats. Erin still hadn’t said anything and Carson kept looking worriedly at her.

Small hands were clasped so hard in her lap that her knuckles were white, and Erin stared straight ahead rarely blinking. Carson was concerned that she was going into shock, but didn’t know what she could do to help.

“Where to,” she asked and shifted the Lexus into reverse.

“747 North Wabash.”

Carson wondered why the address sounded familiar, but obediently backed out of the parking space before she shifted gears. She listened to the studded tires thump on the snow as she expertly pulled into traffic and headed toward the downtown Chicago area.

Erin's tight voice concerned Carson more than ever, so she decided to try to get her thoughts off the events of the previous night.

"Is that in the Gold Coast area?"

Erin nodded, "Yes, I live in The Bernardin."

Carson's eyebrows lifted in surprise. She never realized that corporate law paid so well. The Bernardin was for very ritzy clientele, and the building was located just one city block from Chicago's premiere shopping district known as The Magnificent Mile. It also wasn't very far from the Holcomb Building, perhaps a fifteen-minute walk.

Rumor had it that a resident had everything they could ever want at their beck and call, even including a dry cleaner's service on the sixth floor, and really never needed to leave the building.

They reached the corner of North Wabash and Chicago Avenue. Erin directed Carson to drive around to the side of the building to an attached parking garage with controlled apartment access for the residents.

"There's valet service if you pull up to the front, but I'd rather avoid anyone seeing me like this."

Erin glanced down and Carson followed her gaze. Her hose were stuck against her knees from the dried blood, and stains covered the lower half of her skirt as well as her hands.

"I understand," Carson said. And she did.

Erin Donovan was sophisticated and conservative while accustomed to presenting a certain image. She would probably die of embarrassment if anyone saw her looking less than stellar or completely in control. It was at times like this that Carson wondered if the woman had a husband or boyfriend hidden in the wings. She had gotten a few vibes from Ms. Donovan that suggested her interests might not lean that way, but there was nothing definitive. Then Erin would withdraw into herself and leave Carson convinced that she couldn't even spell the word gay.

Carson pulled into a parking space and shut off the engine. She removed the key and disconnected her seatbelt to get out, but Erin stopped her.

"You don't have to follow me in. I'm fine," Erin said softly.

Erin got out and slammed the door. She had already turned to walk away when Carson spotted something she left on the floor. She grabbed the item and then got out of the Lexus.

"Sure, you're doing great. I guess that's why you forgot your shoes."

The sarcasm stopped Erin in her tracks and she turned around to look at Carson. The stricken look made Carson sorry she was being so harsh.

“I’m sorry. I’m just worried about you.” Carson walked to Erin and handed her the pumps. “Please, humor me. Let me walk you up. Besides, I’ve never been in The Bernardin, and you can’t let me come here and not satisfy my curiosity.”

The lightly spoken words seemed to penetrate where sarcasm or even seriousness did not. Erin smiled a little and nodded. She led them to an elevator and pushed the button for the twenty-sixth floor and the penthouse apartment.

Erin cleared her throat. “If you’ve never been here before I should give you the tour. The place really is amazing. It has pet sitting, on-site dry cleaning and even a yoga studio and a library.”

Even in her own private hell, Erin was trying to reach out, impressing Carson by the gesture. “Some other time perhaps? I think right now you could use a shower and something to eat.”

“The shower is a good idea, but I’m not much of a cook. I usually just go down to the RL Restaurant or have something delivered.”

“Well, I’m a pretty good cook,” Carson offered with a shrug. “Why don’t you let me make you something light while you’re in the shower?”

She didn’t want to appear too forward or have Erin think she was inviting herself in, but Carson was still very worried. She wanted to make sure Erin ate something, even if it was only a bite or two and she was sure that any minute now Erin was going to break down. Honestly, how thick was the armor she wore on a daily basis? No one could witness what she had, with people she knew, and not be affected emotionally.

After a minute, Erin finally answered. “I’m not sure what you’ll find that’s edible in my kitchen.”

It was not a refusal. A smile tugged gently at the corner of Carson’s lips.

“I’ll find something.”

The elevator stopped on several floors as people got on and off the conveyance while they traveled to the top floor, some cast curious glances at the disheveled women but no one spoke.

Each time the doors opened Carson was amazed at the opulence that surrounded her. Heavy fixtures and chandeliers hung from the ceilings, and fireplaces seemed to adorn every floor. Thick Berber style carpet was everywhere including the elevator. Everyone they saw was extremely well clothed.

Carson felt as though she had missed something, and she frowned in confusion. Erin was a very impressive woman, but she didn’t strike Carson as the rich, snobby type.

“Erin, this place is amazing. How did you manage to get in here?” She was well aware that such a place would have an enormous waiting list. However, while the luxury apartment building was impressive, she could never imagine living here. Carson preferred the freedom and seclusion offered by her comparatively modest home on private grounds.

Erin smiled and glanced at her. “I’m fortunate that my father was one of the first people in here.”

Carson couldn’t think of a reply so she merely raised an eyebrow.

Erin chuckled. “He was one of the original investors when The Bernardin was built. Since he was in on the ground floor, so to speak, he had his choice of the freshly designed units. A few years ago, he decided that the smog was too much for him, and the penthouse too large. He wanted to move to Arizona for his asthma, but didn’t want to give up the unit so I took it over.”

Carson sensed there was more to the story, but let it go. Her curiosity was satisfied enough and they had reached the twenty-sixth floor, but she did have to swallow the twinge of jealousy spawned from the casually uttered words.

It wasn’t Erin’s fault that she enjoyed an amicable relationship with her father. Something Carson could only dream of. She blinked back the slight sting of tears and concentrated on the fancy ‘B’ carved into the elevator doors before they slid open. There was only one unit entrance on the floor and Carson looked around in confusion.

Erin noticed the look. “The unit takes the whole floor. There are three other penthouses, but they’re located in the other towers.”

“Oh.”

She watched Erin produce a key card from her purse and pass it through a sensor. Then Erin pushed open the door, which was made of solid mahogany and polished to an impressive shine, and stepped casually inside.

Carson followed feeling a little uncomfortable. When she got up yesterday morning she certainly hadn’t expected to be accompanying the woman of her fantasies home, but here she was.

She entered a large, granite-tiled foyer and looked around at the tastefully furnished room before moving into the living area. A fireplace took up one wall and a glass door led out the other side onto a private balcony. She could just see a landscaped terrace and the glint of water from a lap pool. Though undoubtedly heated, Carson shuddered at the thought of having to emerge from the steaming liquid into the frigid chill of a Chicago winter.

More Berber style carpet covered the floors and she tried not to look too curious as she glanced around.

“Would you like the tour?”

She sounded polite, but Carson could hear the strain underneath. It was probably better if she let Erin try to pull herself together in private, and she was certain that a guided walk-around was the last thing Erin needed. Watery light from the overcast day shone through the balcony doors and highlighted the lines in Erin’s otherwise smooth features.

She looked tense, tired, and so fragile that she might shatter into a million pieces if anyone touched her.

“No,” Carson answered gently. “I just wanted to make sure you made it home all right. I should probably go.”

Erin surprised her by reaching out to touch her lightly on the forearm, but she suddenly seemed to have difficulty meeting her gaze.

“Do you think...I mean would you mind...”

Looking away self-consciously, Erin dropped her hand. “I know it’s irrational, but I can’t get that guy out of my mind. Do you think you could stay for a few minutes, just until after I get out of the shower? I really don’t want to be alone right now.”

Erin Donovan was normally so in control and Carson knew what that admission had cost her. She got the impression that she didn’t do vulnerable very well, and she had no desire to make her ask again. It was still early in the day and it wouldn’t hurt to stay for a while if Erin needed her.

“Sure. How about I give myself that tour while you take your shower? I’ll be right here if you need anything.”

She meant to be reassuring, but given her hidden feelings for Erin Carson hoped what she said didn’t sound like a come on. To her imagination it sounded like she just offered to scrub Erin’s back and she tried hard not to blush under the sudden scrutiny.

Finally, Erin must have decided to take what she said at face value. “Thank you,” she said, smiling tremulously before she turned and walked down a hall where Carson guessed the bedrooms and bathrooms must be.

She waited until she heard the shower start and slowly began to look around. She was curious about the layout, but didn’t intend to start opening doors or cupboards since that would be too intrusive.

They had entered through the tiled foyer and walked through a formal dining room before they emerged in the living room. A hallway led past the entrance for a short distance and Carson explored in that direction. A small coat closet on the right was the first thing she came to, but she passed it and soon reached the end of the corridor at the doorway to a half bath.

The hall turned left and Carson saw a utility room on her right and a doorway on her left as well as one straight ahead. She walked to the end of the short corridor and saw that it led into Erin's office. She only took a quick glance around but noticed how tidy, but well used the room seemed to be. A computer took up one side of the desk, and shelves full of hardback books lined the walls. Most of the books appeared to deal with corporate law, but she noticed one row of fiction on the bottom shelf.

Carson didn't feel it would be appropriate to go through Erin's books to find out what she liked to read so she turned and left the room.

She walked into another and found what must be a guestroom. A white chenille spread covered the queen-sized bed and another exit led onto another veranda. It was a smaller one than the balcony off the living room, but still offered a tremendous view.

She saw another entrance near the far corner and surmised that it was a bathroom.

Carson felt a little funny wandering around Erin's home, but couldn't stifle her curiosity. Erin had seemed not to mind, but Carson walked back to the living room anyway.

Erin had gone the opposite direction from the living room and Carson guessed that led the way to the master bedroom and bathroom. There was really no need to explore that end of the apartment, and she decided instead to check out the kitchen. She had offered to make Erin something to eat.

Granite islands in the kitchen matched the tile of the floor, and the appliances were stainless steel. Overall Carson found the place to be refined, and distinctive, yet elegantly conservative, not unlike Erin herself.

A coffee maker took up residence on one corner of the counter and Carson checked the cabinets above for coffee and mugs. She found eggs, bread and jam in the refrigerator but little else. A quick look through the other cupboards and Carson knew Erin was telling the truth. Cooking was definitely not her strong suit.

She doubted Erin could handle much right now and decided to make coffee, omelets and some toast. Perhaps that would be enough.

ERIN WAS RUNNING on remote. Her eyes were grainy with exhaustion and nothing around her felt real. Since she had stepped onto the elevator with Carson, her mind had begun to grow numb to the things going on around her. Maybe it was normal. Her body had been running on adrenaline since the whole nightmare started last night, and now she just didn't have anything left to give.

In the elevator, Carson asked how she came to live in such a wondrous apartment building and Erin had been barely able to mutter something about her father wanting her to have it. She hadn't been able to say that she missed her father, and the easy relationship they shared since he moved away. Not that she would tell that to just anyone anyway, but it was a struggle to share as much as she had.

Erin couldn't even think how out of character it was for the head of Delphi Technologies to be making such a concentrated effort to ensure her well-being, regardless of what they had experienced in the Holcomb Building. Most people would have cut and run as soon as the trauma was finished and she didn't understand why Carson was still with her. All she did know was that when faced with the prospect of being left alone in the massive apartment, she couldn't bear it. Erin swam up from her fog long enough to ask Carson to stay, even if only until she finished her shower.

Images of Ed and the dead guards still played in her mind. Erin was irrationally afraid that without someone in the other room watching out for her, the killer would miraculously show up in her apartment and murder her while she was in the shower.

She could speculate on what Carson's motives were for agreeing to stay, but she was simply too tired to care right now.

Erin walked numbly into the bathroom and quickly stripped her bloodied clothing from her body. The skirt and hose went directly into the trash before she stepped past the whirlpool tub and into the separate shower stall. She turned on the faucets and stepped under the water, gasping at the heat as it rained down on her. She braced her hands against the wall and lowered her forehead onto the cool tile, allowing the water to beat hard against her skull and flow across her body, as the tremors finally started.

Tears streamed from her closed eyes to mingle unnoticed with the water before they flowed down the drain. Sobs tore from her chest as Erin grieved for the people who had died. She understood that this was a natural reaction to what she had experienced, and she simply couldn't rein it in. The pain was too much and she gave into it until the sobs finally ceased and she couldn't cry any more.

The water was lukewarm by the time Erin pushed away from the wall and grabbed the bar of soap. She scrubbed until her skin was almost raw, convinced she would never get all of the blood off her hands and knees. Only after the water ran completely cold did Erin finally relent and step, shivering, out of the shower.

She grabbed a huge towel from the warming rack and gratefully covered her body. Erin dried quickly before she wrapped the Egyptian cotton around herself and walked back into the bedroom. She dressed in sweats and heavy socks before she put on a heavy terry cloth robe.

Erin knew that she was being silly, but she felt the need to cover herself from head to toe. In some primal way, she was ravaged by the violence she had witnessed and wanted nothing more than to hide from the rest of the world, even if only in this minute way.

The smell of fresh coffee and eggs filled the apartment and reminded Erin that she still had a guest. Erin combed her hair briefly and then took a deep breath, like she was preparing to go into battle, ready to come face to face with the virtual stranger making herself at home in her kitchen.

Erin walked into the room and noticed how natural Carson looked as she expertly slid an omelet from a fry pan onto a plate. A pile of toast sat on the counter with a full pot of coffee next to it.

Carson turned around when she heard Erin and smiled softly. If she noticed Erin's red and puffy eyes, she made no mention of it.

"Feeling better?"

Erin considered the question and dipped her head briefly. She was surprised that she did feel a little better after completely losing it in her shower. It helped that Carson, someone she was coming to trust completely, was in the apartment with her. She had never worried about being alone before, preferring her own company most of the time, but having Carson here made her feel safe.

"Yes, I do, and thank you for staying for a while. I know how busy you must be."

Erin filled a cup of coffee and raised the hot beverage to her lips, blowing briefly to cool it before she took a sip.

"It was no trouble. I wanted to make sure you had something to eat."

Carson picked up two plates and indicated that Erin should grab the toast. They took the food to the dining room and Erin saw that Carson had already set the table and had already carried her own coffee there.

"You didn't have any milk," Carson said conversationally and sat down. "But I did find some sugar in the cupboard. I wasn't sure what you take in your coffee."

Erin grimaced and then smiled. "I don't buy milk. It just spoils before I can use it."

"So what do you take in your coffee?"

"Nothing. Why spoil a perfectly good cup of black coffee?"

Carson wrinkled her nose and reached for the sugar container. She added two teaspoons to her coffee and stirred, not seeing the skeptical look on her companion's face.

They ate slowly, and avoided the topic of what had brought them together. Carson seemed to be deliberately trying to keep the conversation light and brought up topics from weather, to current events, to the logistics of how she planned to move her company into the tenth floor.

Erin was delighted to discover that Carson possessed a great sense of humor, it was an immensely dry one, but undeniable. By the time the meal was through, Erin had smiled more than she could remember doing in a long time and laughed aloud once. Carson's eyes were the lightest blue and although her own smile wasn't huge, it warmed Erin.

So much for first impressions, she thought.

Just spending time together made Erin feel a little more human and slowly the fog lifted from her brain. They finished their meal and she helped carry the dishes back to the kitchen and put them into the dishwasher. Finally, there were no more excuses to keep Carson around, and the first awkward moment came when it was time for her to leave.

"Thank you, again," Erin said nervously. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't..."

"It's all right," Carson ignored the stammering and graciously reassured her. "I wanted to."

They stared at one another for a few precious moments before Carson started slightly. "Oh, I wanted to give you my number in case you need anything."

Erin was surprised but turned to the table next to the entryway. She retrieved a pen and pad and watched Carson write down her home as well as her cell phone numbers.

"Give me a call, day or night, if you need anything." Carson gave her another smile and then she was gone.

The door closed and quiet descended all around her. It was as though all life had left the room along with Carson and Erin sighed heavily. A quick look at the clock told her it was almost six, and even though it was early in the day, she knew she needed some sleep. She would feel better after she got a little rest.

Chapter Six

CARSON JERKED AWAKE with a bitten off scream, and then lay panting for a few minutes as her heartbeat reluctantly slowed. Sweat dried on her skin and cooled her flushed face.

The digital display on the bedside alarm read eleven o'clock. Carson ran shaking hands across her face as she blew out a ragged breath. She had tossed and turned most of the night, and

when she finally fell into an exhausted sleep, it was to dream of dark, sinister figures bent on her destruction. In the dream, she ran through a maze with no way out. She could feel the killer's breath on her neck and her feet were heavy, as if caught in quicksand, pulling her down relentlessly as she struggled to escape.

She stared at the ceiling, as her thoughts swirled with questions about the killer.

Why was he in the Holcomb Building? How had he managed to get the drop on not one, but three security guards who were within ten feet of one another? What sort of person could mercilessly kill all of those people?

They were questions Carson might never know the answer to, and she decided to be happy that she and Erin had escaped relatively unharmed.

Philosophical was something Carson didn't do very well in the morning, especially after an almost sleepless night. She stumbled out of bed, half dragging the covers with her and walked in the general direction of the shower. Sleep-mussed, long blonde hair hung down in front of her face and obscured her vision. With only one eye cracked open, it hardly made a difference, and she stepped onto the cool tiles.

She wore a long sleep shirt that came to just above her knees and she stripped it off, carelessly dropping it to the floor before she fumbled with the shower controls. When the water was comfortably hot, Carson stepped under the spray and let it wash away the rest of her nightmares.

More awake when she emerged, her thoughts turned to Erin and Carson wondered how she had fared. Did she get any sleep at all? There was no doubt she was tough, but no one was indestructible and she'd seen the cracks in Erin's armor as they started to appear.

Carson did her best to make Erin laugh when they shared breakfast together, and even though she was somewhat successful, she still remembered the haunted look in the sable eyes that never completely went away. She doubted that it would for a very long time.

She dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved flannel shirt before making coffee. Easing out the back door, she took the brew out on the porch where she could sit and look down toward the duck pond. The air was frigid and the pond frozen, but even the desolate landscape was a reprieve from the dead eyes of the security guards. She heaved a frustrated sigh.

If it's this hard for me, how much harder is it for her? She really knew these people.

Overcome with sudden worry, Carson walked back into the house and to the overcoat she had discarded the day before. Erin's business card was in her pocket. She had slipped it there when Erin handed it to her on the elevator. She had forgotten it until now.

Torn between the desire to check on Erin or give her some space Carson tapped the card against her lips for a few moments.

Keep things light, she thought. It's just a friendly call to check on her, and then I'll leave her alone.

Carson picked up the cordless phone and dialed the number before she could talk herself out of it. Erin answered on the second ring and Carson shuddered when she heard the familiar husky tones.

"Hello?"

"Erin? It's Carson. I hope I didn't wake you."

To her relief, Erin chuckled. "Not even. I've been up for hours."

"Couldn't sleep, huh?" Carson smiled in understanding, suddenly glad she had taken the chance and called.

"Not very well. I...I just kept seeing Manny and the others. Every time I fell asleep, the nightmare would start all over again. I imagine that's normal, all things considered. I'm fine, really."

Carson thought of the injured security guard and tried to focus on something positive. "At least we know he'll recover. That's something."

"True. He was very lucky that he only suffered a concussion."

The conversation began to grow awkward and neither seemed to know what to say after that. "Yes, well...I just wanted to see how you were doing," Carson finally stammered.

Erin hesitated on the other end and then suddenly blurted out, "Did you have any plans for the day?"

Carson never expected that and quickly considered her answer. "There's a new exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum that I wanted to see." She had a feeling how much it had cost Erin to imply she didn't want to be alone and didn't want to make the proud woman beg. "I would prefer not to go alone."

Erin's answer was almost immediate. "The new Japanese exhibition?"

"Yes, it's called Flowing Streams. There are paintings from all ages that portray the phases of life alongside creeks and rivers."

"I'd love to tag along. Would you like me to pick you up?"

Carson shook her head slightly and tried to keep up with the conversation. She wouldn't mind showing Erin her home, but there was no reason for her to drive out to Carson's house and

then have to drive back into downtown Chicago. The museum was only a short distance from The Bernardin.

“It would probably be better if I picked you up. I live out near Lake Michigan past Wrigley Field.”

“Oh, all right.”

Erin sounded disappointed and Carson smirked unseen across the phone connection. She’d already figured out that Erin hated to relinquish control of any kind, but she couldn’t deny the practicality.

“It’s twelve now. What time should I pick you up?”

“Is two o’clock too early?”

“Not at all,” Carson returned. “I’ll meet you in the lobby at two.”

After a few more pleasantries, they hung up. Carson turned away from the phone with a smile, happy that she had given in to the impulse to call Erin. Then she looked down at her attire and grimaced. The exhibit would be an exclusive showing not open to the general public. She could hardly rub elbows with Chicago’s elite in jeans and a flannel shirt.

Oh well, she thought. It’s worth having to dress up a little to spend time with Erin.

Carson settled on a dark blue pantsuit with a cream linen shirt. Tiny satin buttons closed the shirt and she left the top one undone. She wore low, black leather boots because she liked the supple feel of the well-worn material and appreciated how they glinted in the light.

Rather than have her hair up in its customary severe bun or pulled back into a ponytail, she left it down and brushed it until it shone like spun gold. Carson disdained the use of makeup but fastened tiny pearl earrings in her pierced ears before she was satisfied with her appearance.

Carson glanced quickly out the bedroom window to check the weather. It wasn’t raining or snowing, but the day was very overcast. Fog drifted from the ground to obscure the roads, and the tree branches looked dead and brittle. A winter breeze tossed the limbs into chaos, a testament to how strong it was blowing. Condensation beaded in the center of the window and she shivered unconsciously from the perceived cold.

She finally left her house to pick Erin up. In keeping with the winter conditions, traffic on the freeway moved at a crawl. Finally, Carson turned onto Erin’s street and anticipation turned abruptly into a brief case of nerves.

This is ridiculous. She wants to see me. She asked if I had plans, for heaven’s sake.

At one fifty-five, Carson pulled up in front of the luxury apartment building and double-parked. Pulling her overcoat closer, she tucked her chin into the neckline and walked quickly toward the large glass doors. A door attendant with a face ruddy from the cold nodded politely and opened the door for her.

He didn't speak and Carson thought it likely that his vocal cords had frozen from the chill wind. How could he stand being in that frigid weather on a continual basis?

Because traffic had been so heavy, Carson only needed to wait a couple of minutes for Erin to meet her in the lobby. Even then, she couldn't bring herself to sit, instead pacing nervously across from the elevator banks. Each time the doors opened, she looked up eagerly expecting to see Erin walk toward her. Finally she was there and when she looked across the room and their eyes met, Carson's heart took one, slow deliberate thump before it kicked back in at an accelerated pace.

Erin was breathtaking.

She wore a black turtleneck and black slacks that tapered at her slim hips before they flared gently around her ankles. Dark hose and low-slung flats covered her feet. Diamonds shone from Erin's small ears and a solitary diamond pendant rested gently between her breasts. The gems sparkled in the overhead lights and rivaled the glint in her deep brown eyes. A blood red overcoat set off the wardrobe and highlighted the fire in Erin's red hair.

For one crazy minute, Carson thought things had gone into slow motion. Erin seemed to take an eternity to cross the room, until she blinked and then Erin was suddenly beside her. Carson was only more intoxicated as she inhaled the perfumed scent that wafted gently from Erin's body.

Carson wanted to offer an arm chivalrously and had to remember that this wasn't a date, no matter how she might wish otherwise.

"You look...beautiful."

She thought the halting words were inane but Erin didn't seem to notice. She smiled and her eyes crinkled a little before she laughed in pleased delight. Red lipstick glistened on the curve of her lips and Carson noticed that she even wore a little eye shadow and mascara.

"Thanks. You clean up pretty good yourself."

Carson's mind was in a whirl. Erin looked as though she had dressed to kill and Carson wondered if maybe she had missed something. Did Erin always dress like this when she went out in public, or was this a date? She didn't think it was. They didn't know one another well enough for that, and Erin couldn't know of Carson's suppressed feelings.

She didn't have enough information to judge what was going on and decided to take things at face value for now.

Carson led the way to the SUV and opened the door for Erin as she had the last time. She wasn't sure why she did it, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Erin acted as if this was normal behavior and didn't comment as she climbed into the Lexus.

Carson got in and pulled into traffic.

"This is a nice car," Erin commented. "I love the smell of leather."

Carson smiled. The last time Erin was in the vehicle she had been in shock and Carson doubted she remembered any of the details.

"You don't think it's too big? My friend, Joyce, always tells me it's too much for a computer executive."

"She doesn't think it presents the right image?"

"I suppose so." Carson shrugged. "I wanted something that presents a good image for my clients and I like the space it provides for equipment. Now that I've grown used to it, I can't imagine being without it."

Erin didn't respond right away and Carson glanced at her. Her expression was pensive while she thought about that assessment, and her eyes were on the traffic. Then she shook her head lightly. "After seeing you in action the other night, I don't think there's anything that could be considered too much for you. Besides, it's a very classy vehicle."

A sharp tingle in her stomach stole Carson's voice for a second. That sounded like a compliment, and not just a casual one.

Is Erin flirting with me? If so, she's subtle. Or maybe I just have a serious case of wishful thinking.

"Thank you." The response was all she could manage. They drove another block before she spoke again. "So, do you drive?"

"Oh, yes," Erin replied. "Even though I don't live far from work, I like the freedom that having a car offers me. Plus I don't care for mass transit."

"Too many people," they both said at the same time.

Carson laughed right along with Erin, pleased to see that they shared something in common.

"What kind of car do you have? I didn't notice it when I drove you home yesterday."

Since there wasn't a car in the assigned bay, she assumed Erin didn't drive. Perhaps the apartments allocated more than one space.

“I drive a Nissan 350Z.”

Carson gasped. “Was that the touring car that I saw across from where I pulled into? The black convertible?”

“That’s the one.”

Erin tried to go for casual, but Carson could hear the pride in her voice and couldn’t really blame her. She had noticed the other car and remembered the black shine from the body and the highly buffed chrome front end. It was obvious that Erin took a great deal of care with the vehicle’s maintenance.

The drive wasn’t long but traffic was slow on the slippery streets. There wasn’t any snow now but with Christmas only a week away, people had ventured out to look for that last minute perfect gift. Carson thought the weather was more suited to indoor activities, and Erin’s eyes sparkled in excitement and anticipation of the exhibition. Carson was pleased to see her eyes lightened from the muted brown they had been since the incident in the Holcomb Building.

They talked for a few more minutes, and then Carson turned onto 5th Avenue. The Chicago Metropolitan Museum of Art wasn’t far now.

“Do you know where the exhibition is being held,” Erin asked.

“Yes, the second floor in the northeast gallery.”

“Ah, the Sackler Wing.”

“You have been here before?”

“Yes, the Arts of Japan is one of my favorite galleries. The museum has quite a collection of its own as well as some impressive pieces on loan from private collectors.”

Carson parked in the large lot and they walked quickly up the steps and into the museum. The cold had flushed Erin’s cheeks and Carson thought she was even lovelier with her color high.

The exhibit hall had opened at two for a special invitation only showing and now at two-thirty the gallery was very crowded. Carson was happy it wasn’t open to the public or it would have been very unpleasant. As it was, she hardly noticed the press of bodies that would normally leave her feeling somewhat claustrophobic. With Erin beside her, she was comfortable in a crowd for the first time.

Carson enjoyed art, and Asian art in particular, but sharing it with someone made the experience all the more memorable. Joyce, her best friend and her first employee, was the only one she interacted with on a regular basis so this was a new, and not unwelcome, experience.

They took their time and looked around the massive hall, taking in the wonders of the displayed works. Since ancient times, the transitory flow of Japan's rivers and streams had linked to the nature of life and each of the paintings highlighted that element in their beauty and harmonious balance of color. Earth tones combined with bright reds and yellows, to show the artists' passion for life in general, and nature in particular.

There were several sculptures displayed on stands throughout the hall and one caught Carson's eye. She stopped in front of it and stared at the green shape in awe. She saw a small tag at the bottom and leaned to read it.

Krishna on Garuda, Central Javanese period (ca. 730-ca. 930),

Second half of the 9th century

Java, Indonesia

Bronze; w: 15 7/6 in. (39.2 cm)

Purchase, Lita Annenberg Hazen Charitable Trust Gift, 1992

(1992.135)

The piece was an archetype of symmetry and balance. It radiated strength and beauty, and Carson was struck with wonder. She wanted to trail her fingers lovingly across the contours, but somehow thought security would frown on that.

"Do you know this piece," she asked softly, remembering Erin had been to the Asian gallery often.

"Yes. It's part of the museum's permanent collection and one of my personal favorites. Would you like to know the history?"

Carson nodded mutely, struck by the idea that Erin enjoyed the artwork enough to research its history.

Erin pointed to the bottom of the sculpture where a humanoid creature squatted with its knees bent. The musculature implied the figure was male, but he had the head of a bird, large wings and a long tail.

“This figure represents the Hindu god, Garuda. He symbolizes the power of the sun, famous for slaying evil serpents. He’s represented, in art, as a vehicle for Vishnu. He’s squatted because he’s going to leap into flight.”

“And the figure standing on his shoulders?”

A much smaller humanoid stood on Garuda’s shoulders with one finger held up in a warning manner. In the other hand was a round disc that appeared to be a weapon of sorts.

“That’s Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu. He’s holding a war chakra. In the legends Krishna rode out on Garuda’s back to do battle many times.”

“It is very beautiful.”

“You have good taste.”

Carson overlooked the odd tone in Erin’s voice and looked closer at the base of the sculpture.

“What are the loops on Vishnu’s head and the one beneath Garuda for?”

Erin was staring at her and Carson only noticed when Erin turned her attention back to the artwork. She didn’t miss the smokier tones of Erin’s voice though when she replied. “This whole thing used to be part of a hanging oil lamp. A chain suspended it to the ceiling from the top and a cup of oil hung from the bottom loop.”

Carson looked at the piece for a few more moments before she looked at Erin. Warm brown eyes rested on her and the soft expression she found made Carson feel warm. She flushed a little and swallowed nervously.

“Thank you for explaining it to me.”

“You’re welcome,” Erin said quietly.

Erin’s stomach growled suddenly and broke the electric moment. She laughed and Carson smiled.

“Hungry?”

“Famished,” Erin admitted. “No lunch.”

Carson looked at her watch and was surprised that it was so late. Time had flown and most of the other patrons were already gone.

“It’s almost six. Would you like to join me for dinner?”

Carson felt a little out of her element inviting the sophisticated woman to share a meal with her and the words sounded more formal than she intended. She didn't try to take it back though, reluctant for their time together to end.

Erin delighted her by asking, "Where would you like to go?"

"I have no preference. Would you like to choose?"

"How about the RL?"

"The Ralph Lauren Restaurant? I have never been there."

"I adore it, and since it's only a block from my apartment I go there a lot."

"Don't you get tired of it?"

Erin shrugged and grinned. "No, not really. They have a core menu, but they also come up with new selections on a daily basis. Sometimes I just get take out and eat on the balcony."

"Considering the weather this time of year I suggest we dine in."

Erin laughed and led the way out of the museum of art. "I couldn't agree more."

Feeling content and balanced and a little warm under Erin's watchful eye Carson led the way back toward her car.

ERIN WALKED INTO the RL, very aware of the woman who was only a step away. In the museum, she had gotten to know Carson a little better and was impressed with the person that she sensed lurked beneath the cool, collected façade. Erin had already experienced her compassion and knew Carson was frighteningly brilliant, but the hinted layer of passion drew her unexpectedly.

The art exhibit had fascinated Carson, her eyes hungrily devouring the selected works until Erin was more interested in watching her than the priceless collection.

When Carson bent to examine the bronze sculpture, her rapt expression made it impossible for Erin to look away. The buzz in her fingertips at that moment surprised Erin with the sheer intensity, and insight flashed in her mind with the brilliance of the sun. Somehow, in the past two days Carson had completely enchanted her.

Carson's surface was always controlled, but glimpses into her soul allowed Erin to see that she possessed hidden depths, currents that would sweep Erin away and carry her into obscurity if she was ever allowed to explore those secrets.

Standing in the museum, she had watched Carson study the piece and knew she wanted to explore those mysteries. That knowledge stole her voice and when Carson asked her to describe the statue, she could only do so in the lowest registers. Erin fought to keep her voice steady and was grateful when it gained in strength as she explained the sculpture.

She sensed that Carson was gay. The signs were all there, even though they were subtle. The pocketknife she wielded so casually, the vehicle she chose, and a hundred other little things that Erin couldn't hope to articulate. What she didn't know was if Carson could ever be interested in her.

The moment faded away and her stomach saved her from making a fool of herself in front of anyone that cared to watch.

When Erin suggested the RL, she deliberately didn't mention the romantic atmosphere, and refused to dwell on it now. There was nothing wrong with taking a beautiful woman to a romantic restaurant, and enjoying her company during a sensual dinner.

Oh God, I am in so much trouble, Erin thought.

They waited briefly for the host to come back from seating someone else. Erin watched as Carson looked around at the warm rich interior featuring mahogany paneling and Persian rugs. Exotic plants gave the place an air of seduction and a huge fireplace roared along one wall. The façade was brick with marble floors. The lights were low and candles flickered on every table.

"Ah, Ms. Donovan. Welcome."

Morris recognized Erin as a regular and smiled when he saw her.

"Your usual table?"

Normally she sat at a small table against the wall near the front. Erin liked to see who came in and didn't appreciate any surprises. In short, she didn't like to feel exposed. Tonight was different, and she had the sudden desire to keep Carson to herself.

"I think we'd like a booth in the back tonight."

Morris blinked and his eyes drifted briefly to Carson. He smiled. "I know just the place."

He led them to a booth at the rear of the restaurant, next to another smaller fireplace. It pleased Erin that he'd positioned them so that they could see the fire, but no other patrons. Seating against the wall meant that no one needed to pass by them, and the only other person they would interact with would be their waiter.

“This is very nice,” Carson said after Morris walked away.

She caressed the top of the mahogany table with the palm of her hand and Erin watched the sensual display, carefully trying to keep her expression neutral.

“I can see why you like it.”

At that moment, a young man stepped toward them. He smiled as a precursor to his greeting. “Good evening, ladies. My name is Steve and I’ll be your waiter tonight. May I start you off with a beverage?”

“I’ll have a whiskey and soda,” Erin blurted out and ignored Carson’s startled look. She needed something to slow the thundering of her blood, and get her raging hormones under control. Besides, she wasn’t driving.

“Very good, ma’am. And what would you like?”

Steve looked at Carson and Erin saw the interest in his eyes. Carson was a beautiful woman and that fact didn’t appear lost on their waiter, but if Carson noticed, she gave no indication.

“Water will suffice.”

“Don’t you get tired of that,” Erin asked as the waiter left. She tried hard not to sound petty or possessive.

“Tired of what?” Carson realized what she was referencing and flushed. “Oh, Steve? I’ve grown used to it. I know that my unusual height intimidates people. They stare at me a lot, but there’s nothing I can do about it. I get my height from my father.”

“What? You think he was staring at you because you’re tall for a woman?”

Carson looked at the tabletop uncomfortably and asked in a small voice, “What else could it be?”

Erin was astonished. Carson thought people regarded her as an oddity. Maybe that explained why she always tried to project a cold exterior, as some kind of armor plating against the world. Could it really be that she didn’t know what a vision she was?

The cleft in her proud chin and the sunshine blue of her eyes had enchanted Erin long before she realized that she was attracted to Carson. Her body was strong, lean and feminine. Erin’s eyes rested on the full lips that begged to be kissed.

“That’s not why he was looking at you, or why anyone else stares at you,” Erin said in a husky voice. She had to be very careful here and not blurt out what she was really thinking. Fortunately, her conditioning as a lawyer bailed her out and she was able to respond easily. “They stare at you because you are a beautiful woman.”

Erin had barely acknowledged her attraction for Carson, and the feelings were so intense that she couldn't refrain from trying to ease the pain in Carson's voice. She didn't expect or want to jump into anything with the younger woman; she just wanted to assure Carson that she had nothing to be ashamed of.

Her tone was more casual than she really felt, and came out sounding like a friendly compliment.

It seemed to make her feel better and Carson smiled tremulously. "Thank you."

Steve came back with their drinks and placed them on the table with a flourish. "Have you decided on an appetizer?"

Erin and Carson exchanged looks. Since she'd never visited the RL before, Carson invited Erin to make their selections. Thrilled at treating her new friend to the restaurant's famous delicacies, Erin ordered the steamed mussels in fennel with tomato and basil chili flakes. The RL served the mussels in Pernod and Erin knew they were exquisite; the perfect start to what she was sure would be a wonderful meal.

After the waiter left again, they were both quiet and used the menu to cover the sudden awkwardness. Conversation was sporadic as the server returned for their dinner orders; herb crusted lamb chops in a lamb reduction sauce for Erin and jumbo sea scallops with cucumber and tomato salad for Carson. A white balsamic cream and balsamic reduction covered the scallops.

Erin selected a wine that would complement both dishes, a Riesling-Kabinett, Mosel-Saar-Ruwer '00.

Another man delivered the appetizers even as they placed the order for their entrees. Erin watched Carson's eyes widen. The mussels overflowed from a large white oval platter. Bits of fennel and basil liberally dusted the surface of the Pernod and the aroma of the steamed mussels was mouthwatering.

"Something wrong?" Erin smiled waiting to hear Carson's approval.

"This looks delicious."

Steve handed each of them a small fork and then set small plates on the table in front of them. He placed extra napkins and a bowl of water to the side. The water was to dip their fingers in if they chose to eat the mussels with their hands.

Erin approved a small sip of the wine and allowed the waiter to fill their glasses. When finally alone, Erin watched Carson raise the glass and take a small sip. Her expression of pleasure made Erin happy that she had selected the expensive wine. It was light with a hint of sweet fruit and no bitter aftertaste.

“If you think that’s good, try the mussels.” Erin used her fork to draw one of the shellfish onto her tiny plate.

Carson mimicked her actions but once the appetizer was on her plate she put the fork down and picked up the morsel with her fingers. Erin watched her lift it to her mouth and suck the mussel from the shell. Firelight glistened off Carson’s lips that were wet from the Pernod, and her cheeks had flushed slightly from the wine.

Erin had never considered eating to be a sexual experience but watching Carson was downright scandalous. Erin ate slowly and watched Carson from beneath lowered lashes.

She had almost forgotten how it felt to be so attracted to another woman; how every new experience was destined to become a cherished memory, each nuance reflected upon. She had especially forgotten the white-hot flash of desire that tingled in the pit of her stomach and caused the small hairs on her arms to stand.

Once the appetizer was finished, the waiter returned with more plates, and topped off the wine. Carson looked curiously at the jumbo scallops that Steve placed in front of her and inhaled the slightly pungent scent of the balsamic vinegar. She speared one of the scallops and raised it toward her mouth. Erin didn’t notice that her own lips parted in anticipation as strong white teeth bit into the morsel and their eyes met across the table.

Erin stifled a moan and swallowed hard before she looked away.

Honest to God!

She grabbed her glass and gulped down a healthy swig of the wine. Then she picked up her own fork and sliced into the lamb, refusing to look at Carson for a few minutes until she got her impulses under control.

“How did you get into corporate law,” Carson asked conversationally. She continued eating, obviously unaware of the effect she had on Erin.

Thankful for the distraction, Erin said, “Through my father, actually. He was a corporate attorney and I guess he passed the bug along to me. I’ve always loved the intricacies of corporate law and the satisfaction of knowing that I’ve protected my clients’ interests.”

“You must be very good to be a senior partner at such a young age.”

Erin smiled at the idea that Carson considered her young, despite the fact that Erin was at least ten years older. “I try. What about you? What gave you the idea to start your own software research company?”

They finished their meals and then sat sipping wine while they talked.

“I have an affinity for computers and mathematics so it was natural that I would pursue a career in these fields. After I received my doctorate, I decided I would rather work for myself.” Carson smiled as though she were going to share a great secret. “I started the business in a rundown warehouse in a not so great part of town. Joyce and I worked almost night and day until we could afford to move to a better neighborhood.”

“So, brilliant and driven,” Erin commented. She tried to ignore an unpleasant stab of jealousy and asked in what she hoped was a casual tone. “Who is Joyce?”

Was she a lover? Was it already too late for her with Carson? Throughout the time at the museum and during dinner, Erin thought she sensed a mutual interest from Carson, but she couldn’t get involved with someone who was already taken.

What am I thinking?

She couldn’t get involved at all, regardless what Carson’s situation was.

“Joyce Collins is my best friend. I met her in college and when I started Delphi Technologies, she agreed to become my first employee. I have never met a more talented programmer or software designer. And she makes me laugh.”

Erin was relieved that Joyce wasn’t a lover, and she asked softly, “Is that so hard?”

Carson flushed and glanced at the table. “I am not an easy person to get to know.”

“So I remember,” Erin said dryly and thought of their meeting to show Carson the tenth floor of the Holcomb Building.

The waiter interrupted and put the empty dishes on a tray before he took their dessert order. Carson asked for crême brulee in bourbon with Madagascar vanilla. It came with sliced strawberries on top and she requested a café latte.

Erin ordered New York cheesecake with Michigan cherries and a cup of black coffee.

He left again and Carson said, “You’ve mentioned your father before. It sounds as though you’re very close.”

“We are,” Erin said softly. “Since he moved to Arizona, I don’t get to see him very often. I miss him terribly.”

“And your mother?”

“I lost her a few years ago. Cancer.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Erin said, though it clearly wasn’t. “What about your family?”

“My mother died when I was very young. I hardly remember her. My father passed away six months ago.”

Carson took a hasty sip from her water glass, but Erin heard the pain in her voice. It didn’t sound like the pain of loss though. There was something more there.

“I take it you two didn’t get along?”

“My father had little use for a female child. After my mother died he provided a roof over my head, but little else.”

Carson tried to sound as though the neglect didn’t bother her but Erin knew better. Every child needed their parents’ approval, and the nurturing that only they could provide. From the sound of it, it was little wonder Carson built such a hard shell for others to penetrate. If he weren’t already dead, Erin would cheerfully have throttled Carson’s father for his selfishness.

She wanted to reach across and grasp Carson’s free hand where it rested on the tabletop, but refrained. What was it about this woman that threatened to crumble her carefully constructed world with ideas of passion?

As much as the idea appealed to her, Erin couldn’t let it happen. Her career was too important to jeopardize by becoming involved with a much younger woman. She would have to keep her surging hormones to herself until she could get control of them.

“That’s his loss.”

She caught Carson’s gaze and smiled at her. Carson’s eyes were bluer than they were at the museum and the air suddenly seemed electrically charged.

The dessert arrived, breaking the spell, and Erin turned to the sweets. She was slightly tipsy from the alcohol, and sipped her coffee slowly. She was enjoying the evening and didn’t want to do anything she would have to apologize for later. The cheesecake was incredible and Carson appeared to enjoy her crème brulee.

Pleasantly stuffed, Erin sat back and dabbed at her lips with a napkin. It had been a long time since she had shared a wonderful meal with an attractive woman.

“That was a fantastic dinner,” Carson said. “Thank you.”

Erin motioned for the waiter to bring the bill and reached for her purse.

Carson stopped her by saying, “Please, allow me to pay for our meal. It seems the least I can do in exchange for such a wonderful experience.”

Charmed, Erin smiled and closed her purse. Normally she would have protested, since she didn't like to feel as though she owed anyone. However, somewhere along the way, their outing had sparked a very new and possibly enduring friendship, and she had no desire to ruin the mood.

“All right.”

It was difficult to pull her eyes away from Carson's too blue gaze, but it was inevitable that the waiter return with Carson's credit card. She signed the slip and it was time to go.

Chapter Seven

THE DRIVE BACK to Erin's apartment wasn't long and before she knew it, she was standing in front of her door trying to figure out how to invite Carson in. On the short journey from the restaurant, she had become more and more occupied with thoughts of being alone again. Spending time with Carson, she was actually able to forget the horrors she had endured in the office building. Nevertheless, with the prospect of being alone in the apartment, those memories were returning in full force. Erin didn't want Carson to leave, but how in the world could she possibly ask her to stay?

The bloody elevator flashed into her mind and with it a fragment of a nightmare from last night. Carson threaded through the dream, woven intermittently with the visions of the dead. Several times Erin had come awake with a scream on her lips and Carson's severed head in her mind.

Erin dug the key card out of her bag to open the door. She was afraid Carson would suddenly leave and she blurted out, “Can you stay for a bit? I have a very nice wine that I haven't opened yet.”

“Is it the same kind we shared at dinner?”

Her enthusiasm made Erin laugh. At least she'd found a way to keep Carson around a little longer.

Carson walked into the apartment right behind her. Erin closed the door. “Actually, it's another white, Beyer Eguisheim Riesling Alsace '95, but I assure you it's just as good.”

“I'd like to try it.”

While Carson settled comfortably on the sofa, Erin got out the wine, a bucket of ice and a couple of glasses. She felt a little silly for giving in to the nameless dread that made her ask Carson to stay, but she was glad she had agreed. Erin was well aware that Carson seemed to be making a lot of concessions for her this weekend. After all, she was the head of a major technologies company and must be very busy. Yet through all this, Carson was there when Erin needed her.

This is the last time, Erin thought in disgust. Tomorrow I'm going to have to go to work, and I have to pull myself together.

Erin sat beside Carson and unloaded the accompanying wine paraphernalia before she sat the bottle on the table and picked up the corkscrew. She opened the beverage and poured a small amount into each glass, and then handed one to Carson. Erin sat the wine back in the bucket, watching her companion closely for her reaction. For some reason it was important to her that Carson enjoy the wine. In this setting, in the comfort of her home, it would be so easy to imagine this was an intimate exchange until Erin looked up and noticed the innocent curiosity in Carson's eyes.

Her expression showed none of the desire that burned through Erin's veins.

"What shall we drink to?"

What indeed, Erin considered. She had already decided at the restaurant that she couldn't afford to take chances with her heart. Her clients would never accept a lesbian attorney and it had been six long years since someone had betrayed her on a personal level...since Rose. She just couldn't go through that again, but what she could do was cultivate the tentative bond that was growing between them.

"How about to new friends?"

Carson tapped her glass to Erin's lightly. "To new friends."

After the first sip, Carson looked up at Erin. "This is just as good as the other. You seem to know a lot about choosing wine."

"It's a bit of a hobby. One of the few vices I allow myself."

"That and the black sludge you drink for coffee," Carson teased.

Erin shrugged. "It keeps me sharp," she said lightly.

They sipped at the wine for a few moments and Erin could feel the evening drawing to a close. She tried to think of something to say that would extend their time together and finally asked the question that had been burning in her mind all weekend.

"Why do you think he did it?"

Carson lowered the glass to rest her forearms on her knees. She looked as though she preferred not to discuss the subject. "I don't know," she said softly, "Maybe it was just a random event."

Erin shook her head. "I don't think so. If that were the case, it would be a lot easier to choose a less secure location. If he was just after money, there's an endless selection of convenience and liquor stores he could have hit."

"I agree. He wasn't after money. But what could be in your building that would make him willing to kill?"

Erin smiled. "It's your building now too, remember? But, yes, he must have had a reason."

"What's in Holcomb that could be so important? If we could figure out what would make such an attractive target, we might be able to figure out who he is."

Erin wanted to point out that they weren't detectives, but the prospect of identifying the killer outweighed her common sense.

What would a little idle speculation hurt?

"There's not really much in there, a few law firms and such. They gutted the eleventh floor for renovation so there's nothing there. Marsters Research has a lab on the twelfth floor. There are even a couple of stockbrokers in the building, but no actual cash."

"Well, it's obvious why he would take out the security guards, but he killed someone else."

"Yes, Ed Cupper."

"Was he someone that could have been a logical target?"

Erin experienced another tug of guilt for making fun of Ed right before he died, but pushed the feeling away for the moment. "He was one of the owners of the building, but he was basically just an office worker. The only thing significant was that his pass card worked on all the floors. Since the murderer cut the power, I can't see how that would be important enough to kill for."

"So you think Mr. Cupper was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

Erin nodded sadly. "The thing is, I'm sure I've seen him before."

"Of course, you probably saw him every day."

"No, not him. The killer."

"What?"

Carson jerked in surprise and sat her glass on the coffee table. “Why didn’t you mention this before? You have to tell Detective Hutchins.”

“I didn’t remember before. I guess I was just so frightened by what happened that I didn’t realize it at the time, but ever since...I keep getting this feeling that he’s familiar.”

“And the reason you haven’t told the homicide detective?”

Carson sounded a little angry and Erin was touched that she was so concerned for her safety.

“I tried to call him this morning, but he’s off duty. It is Sunday, you know.”

“You will call him first thing in the morning.”

Erin laughed at Carson’s demanding tone. “Yes, ma’am,” she said, and saluted playfully.

“This is not funny. You do recall that he has seen you, and knows that you work in the building?”

Erin relented a little. Carson was just worried for her, and she was right. The fact that the killer knew what they looked like was one of the things that had concerned Erin most since the whole nightmare began.

“I know. But, honestly, I doubt that he would come back to the building after the police have been swarming all over it. I’m sure security has been beefed up as well, and I promise that I’ll be careful.”

“Very well,” was Carson’s reply, but her expression made her look as though she was chewing on a lemon and the tone said, if you insist.

“Just promise me one thing,” Carson continued. “Promise me that you will leave work before it gets dark outside.”

“I can’t promise that. I have appointments all week long, and I can’t just suddenly cancel them. What would my clients think?”

“Fine, don’t cancel them; reschedule them. Just until the police catch him. Please, Erin.”

It was the softly uttered ‘please’ that made her break. Her schedule wasn’t really that busy since this was Christmas week, she just hadn’t wanted to give in. She could easily reschedule the few appointments that she did have, and this wouldn’t be for long. Surely, the maniac had left enough DNA evidence and fingerprints that the police would catch him quickly.

“All right. But only for the time being.”

“Thank you.”

Erin took a small sip from her glass and then ran a finger around the rim. She was distracted with the thought that Carson was so concerned for her, but maybe it was natural that two people would cling together after such an ordeal. Nevertheless, was Carson so unaffected by what had happened on a personal level that she was only concerned with Erin? Hadn't Carson felt something, fear, anger and even a little helplessness? It was true that she kept a shell in place to protect her feelings, but she wasn't completely untouched by such a trauma.

“Do you have nightmares, too?”

Erin's voice sounded frail, and she realized that she had admitted to certain vulnerability because of how she had worded the question.

Carson sat back against the sofa and stared at her feet. “Yes, of course. I do have a heart. But Erin, there is nothing weak about experiencing nightmares. You knew these people, so it is only natural. To be honest, I would have to question your humanity if their deaths left you unaffected.”

Erin's hands shook slightly and she hoped Carson wouldn't notice. To cover the tremors she reached for the bottle and refilled their glasses. Some of the wine slopped over the edge of a glass and Carson reached out to take the bottle from her.

“Erin, are you okay?”

She took a deep breath, tempted to reveal her inner turmoil. Finally, she clamped down on the urge. “Yes, I'm fine.”

Carson looked doubtful, but didn't challenge her. “With all the nightmares, you must not have gotten much sleep?”

“Not much,” Erin admitted reluctantly, and wondered where Carson was going with this.

“Me either. I didn't even know them, and I don't know how I would have survived if you hadn't been there.”

It had been a long day and the alcohol on top of that had to have Carson exhausted. It seemed too good an opportunity to be true, but she was still worried about being alone in the apartment. “It's late, but I must admit that I'm concerned about you driving home.”

“I am tired, and perhaps a little off balance.”

Erin smiled gently. “I have a spare bedroom. You could stay, assuming that you don't have other plans, or an early morning appointment.”

“One of the nice things about being the owner of a company,” Carson said slowly, “is that I will be where I wish to be, when I wish to be. And no, I am not supposed to meet anyone else.”

Had Carson just admitted that she wasn't seeing anyone, or only

that she wasn't seeing anyone tonight? Erin was compelled to find out and asked her. "But surely there's someone who must be wondering where you are?"

Carson suddenly smiled. "Why Erin Donovan, are you fishing?"

Erin blushed scarlet and looked away while Carson laughed aloud.

"I'm just curious," Erin said defensively. "There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"No, I guess not." Carson still had a smile on her face. "If we are going to be friends, it's only natural that we know certain things about one another. Very well, no, I'm not involved with anyone. To be truthful I have never been involved."

"Ever?" Erin was more than a little surprised. Carson was a gorgeous woman and could have anyone she wanted.

"No," Carson chuckled again. "School and my company have taken all of my time."

"Isn't there anyone you were ever interested in?" Erin was digging a hole, but the topic was too fascinating to drop.

"Once, but that was a very long time ago. I was a freshman in college."

This didn't sound like a happy story. From what Ray Eldridge had told Erin concerning his client, Carson had barely been a teenager when she started college. Most of the other students would have been at least five years older and interested in their own age bracket.

"What happened," she asked softly.

Carson hesitated for a moment and Erin wasn't sure she was going to answer. "I returned to the dorm late one night and she... Let's just say that the person I had feelings for was already involved elsewhere."

Well, that answered that question. Erin didn't know why it was so important to find out Carson's orientation, but now that she had, she was sorry she'd brought it up. The woman definitely played in the same league, but she was still off limits. Knowing she was gay was just going to make things that much harder.

"What about you," Carson asked. "Is there a boyfriend waiting in the wings somewhere?"

Good, she thinks I'm straight. That'll make it easier.

"No, no boyfriend." Erin grinned. "I work a lot."

“But surely there has been someone?”

God, she just won't quit!

“It's been a while,” Erin finally admitted. “About six years.”

“What happened? Did the knight in shining armor fall off his horse?”

Carson was trying to be lighthearted in her approach and Erin appreciated it. She didn't want any maudlin episodes either. They were just sharing personal histories in an attempt to get to know one another. In the course of their discussion, Carson had assumed she was straight. Erin didn't want to lie, but she couldn't admit the whole truth either so she settled on answering generically.

“The person I was involved with decided that I worked too much. They moved on to greener pastures.”

Carson's expression altered a little, but she didn't question Erin any further.

“So, I guess all this means we won't be interrupting any plans if you want to stay tonight.” There, Erin thought. She had managed to bring the conversation around to Carson spending the night without it sounding overly awkward or forced.

“No, but are you sure you don't mind? I know how easy it is to get accustomed to your own company.”

“It's no problem,” Erin assured her. “The truth is, as much as I have to be at work early tomorrow, I'm not looking forward to it. I don't want to disturb you too much by having to get up that early.”

“It's highly unlikely that you would disturb me since the guest room is at the opposite end of the apartment.”

“I'm glad to see that self-guided tour gave you some perspective. So, can I consider that a yes? That you'll stay the night?”

Carson returned Erin's shy smile and nodded. “Yes, I'll stay.”

None of her clothes could possibly fit Carson, but Erin was able to scrounge up a shirt she had bought for her father and hadn't sent yet. The sales tag still hung from a sleeve, and the shirt was large. Carson assured her that it would be fine.

Soon they were prepared to retire and Erin reluctantly said goodnight. After Carson walked down the hall toward the guestroom, Erin spent a few minutes cleaning up the wine glasses.

Her thoughts were in a whirl after the day spent with the computer executive. Carson was definitely more than Erin had bargained for when she first met her. At first, Erin had thought her annoying, egotistical and stuck-up. Now she knew better, and her heart struggled against her own common sense.

For so long she had allowed only work to intrude on her carefully constructed world. Then in one moment, she had met a woman that had turned her entire structure upside down. It was going to be so hard to go back to being the unfeeling workaholic she was renowned for, but there was no other choice. Erin would never put herself in the same position as before. She couldn't.

Rose was as different from Carson as night was from day, but the comparison was still relevant. Erin had trusted the small Italian woman completely, tendering her heart only to have it returned in one harsh moment when Rose informed her that she couldn't live without passion. She accused Erin of being uptight and rigid when Erin thought she had given everything she had. Well, at least everything she had after her work was complete.

In the next moment, Rose was gone, and Erin told herself never again. She couldn't go through another heartbreak, and her clients deserved better than an attorney who was distracted by her private life.

Now, along came Carson Tierney, computer geek, and Wonder Woman all rolled into one.

Erin still remembered how calm and contained Carson was during the Holcomb incident, as she had started to call that night in her mind. The woman was nothing short of amazing in a crisis, and filled with tenderness and an all-consuming passion. Erin could sense it simmering just beneath the surface. Erin could lose herself in such passion, and it was something she couldn't allow.

Erin heaved a frustrated sigh, and walked into her bedroom, very aware that Carson Tierney was at the other end of the apartment. Maybe a nice cold shower was just the thing she needed before she went to bed.

Chapter Eight

CARSON AWAKENED SUDDENLY and rolled over in the darkness. Surrounded by unfamiliar objects, for a moment she didn't know where she was. Then the memory of last night returned and she smiled as she relaxed back against the pillow. A slight headache throbbed

behind her eyelids from the unaccustomed amount of alcohol she had consumed, but even that couldn't dim the experience of spending the day with Erin Donovan.

Bits and pieces of their conversation flitted through her mind and she thought of Erin explaining her most recent unsuccessful relationship. Erin's careful gender-neutral wording hadn't escaped Carson's notice even if she hadn't commented on it, and she considered the implications now.

A straight woman would have said 'he', not 'they'. It was enough to convince Carson that Erin was a lesbian, but it was also obvious that she didn't want to acknowledge that. Carson didn't really mind. Erin didn't know her yet, and apparently wasn't comfortable sharing such a personal fact. She would just have to prove that she could be trusted and maybe one day Erin would let down her guard.

If she didn't, Carson would have to settle for secretly adoring her from a distance. Only her new knowledge gave her hope that if she was patient enough, Erin might one day notice her in a romantic way.

Carson turned and looked at the small clock on the nightstand. The red numerals glowed in the darkness and the time read five fifty.

Erin had said she needed to get up early, and Carson wondered if she was already gone. She got out of bed and straightened the covers before she walked down the dark hallway. Carson was familiar enough with the apartment to navigate the way with the aid of the light that came in from the windows. Quietly she walked into the kitchen and listened for any sounds from Erin's bedroom. Silence was all she heard.

She was tempted to stand in her doorway to find out if Erin was still asleep but decided against it. She padded on bare feet back into the living room and realized that there was a lumpy form on the leather sofa.

Erin was huddled into a shivering ball as she slept fretfully. She must have come out during the night and fallen asleep without retrieving a blanket. Carson wondered if she had experienced more nightmares.

Picking up the throw from the back of the sofa, Carson shook it out to place over the cold woman, but stopped before that. For a moment, she gazed at Erin, unable to tear her eyes away.

Erin wore a nightgown that shimmered in the low light, the color undetermined in the darkness, but the garment clung to the small figure and revealed small, firm breasts, a flat stomach and strong shoulders. Carson took a deep breath against the sudden tight feeling in her belly that caused her nipples to contract painfully. She quickly and carefully covered Erin before she walked back into the kitchen.

Oh God, I want to touch her.

Carson rested both hands against the marble-topped island and shuddered as she stared at the surface. She had never felt anything as strong as this, not even when she had fantasized about Gloria in college. She had wanted to be with the track star, to feel the softness of her skin and even dreamed about kissing the full, pouty lips, but just watching Erin sleep had brought out an almost painful yearning to touch her.

Last night during dinner and then later at the apartment she had wanted to touch or do something to make Erin notice her in a romantic way. That was nothing compared to the sharp stab of pure desire she'd experienced only moments ago, or the sudden pool of moisture between her thighs.

Carson pushed away from the island with shaky hands. She needed to do something to keep herself busy, and to prevent herself from rushing back into the living room and taking Erin into her arms.

Familiar with the layout of the kitchen, Carson started the coffee maker, and dug in the refrigerator for some breakfast items. As usual, Erin's cupboards were almost bare. It reminded Carson of a Mother Goose nursery rhyme and she smiled a little. There was little to choose from and she settled on English muffins, jam and butter to go with the coffee. A small sound at the doorway made her turn around.

Erin stood at the entrance to the kitchen with the throw wrapped around her shoulders and her hair mussed. She looked so beautiful that Carson had to force down another surge of passion that she hoped didn't show in her expression. She focused so intently on getting her own emotions under control, that she almost didn't notice Erin's eyes sweep up her legs to the hem of the long shirt. Almost.

Even partially asleep, Erin's chestnut gaze pinned her in place.

"I'm glad to see the shirt worked out all right."

Erin's voice was husky with sleep, and Carson turned quickly to reach for a coffee cup. Maybe it was just the fact that they'd spent the night in the same apartment, but sharing breakfast in their sleepwear lent an intimacy to the situation that had Carson reacting to every innocent look or comment. She needed to get herself under control or Erin was sure to notice something.

She poured coffee into the cup and then handed it to Erin. "Good morning. I didn't mean to wake you."

"No, I'm glad you did. I wouldn't have heard the alarm from the living room. I guess I just didn't expect to fall asleep out there."

"More bad dreams?"

Erin nodded and sipped her coffee. Then she helped Carson carry the muffins and jam to the table.

“This was very thoughtful of you,” Erin said casually as they sat down. “I could get used to having you around.”

Carson’s eyes bugged a little, but she kept her mouth shut while she slathered butter on her muffin. Honestly, what was wrong with her? Erin surely didn’t mean anything by her comment.

“You better go easy on that stuff or the next thing you’ll need is a heart bypass.”

Carson looked up to see the humor reflected in Erin’s eyes. Then she noticed that she had a heaping pile of butter on the muffin and flushed in embarrassment. Carson pushed the bulk of butter onto her plate and sat her knife down.

“I’m sorry,” Erin said softly. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“No, it’s all right. I guess I’m just a little distracted this morning.”

That’s an understatement.

Erin nodded. “Yes, I guess we both have a lot on our minds today. It seems like so much has happened since Friday.”

The haunted look was back and Erin was obviously thinking about returning to the Holcomb Building.

“It’ll be fine. The place will be full of people, there will be more security, and you’ll be leaving before it gets dark.”

Erin looked at her and smiled. “You’re not going to let me get away with working late, are you?”

“You did promise.” Carson raised a haughty eyebrow and got the laugh she had been trying for.

“Well, not to worry. This is Christmas week and there will be very little going on at work. I’m sure the few clients I have scheduled will be happy to postpone things until next week. What are your plans for the day?”

“I need to get ready for my staff to move in. I have to make keys for the individual offices, organize the identification tags, move the servers and get the electrician to run the special lines, as well as set the diagnostics running on the equipment.”

“Surely not all of that in one day,” Erin said in surprise.

Carson flushed a little. “Just the keys and identification tags today. However, we do need to start moving equipment and book the electrician. It will take until at least Wednesday to get

everything moved, and diagnostics will take a few more days. The main system won't be switched over until next week, but there is a lot to do before then."

"Just don't forget the Christmas party on Friday."

"Excuse me?" Carson frowned a little. She didn't know what Erin was talking about.

"Didn't Ray tell you? Every year the company hosts a Christmas party on the sixth floor. All of the businesses in the building are invited."

"Is this mandatory?"

"Well, no. But you are the new kid on the block, so to speak, and people will be looking for you to attend."

"You're saying it would have an effect on Delphi's image if we don't go?"

Erin chuckled. "Somehow I don't think you'd care in the slightest what people thought of you, but it would look like you're part of the team if you show up."

Part of the team? Was that true or perhaps Erin just wanted her to go.

"Are you going?"

"Of course," Erin said. "Who do you think got stuck setting the whole thing up? Please say you'll come."

The hopeful look on her face was enough for Carson. "Very well. What time?"

"The festivities will begin at one, and don't forget to bring a Secret Santa gift." Erin reached and patted Carson on the hand in a friendly gesture. "Now, I better get ready for work before I'm late."

Erin scurried into her bedroom, and Carson sat staring dumbfounded after her. What was it about Erin that left her feeling as if a steamroller had mashed her flat?

Carson looked at her watch, surprised to find that it was almost six thirty. It would be past seven before she got home and she had a lot to do today.

Secret Santa?

CARSON COULD STILL feel Erin's hand where she had patted it before she left the table. She thought they had grown closer than mere friendship during the weekend, and was somewhat disappointed that Monday had arrived. As she drove home to shower and change, she contemplated what her next move should be. That was when she realized she was determined to win Erin's affections.

Affections? What is this, a Shakespearean play?

Carson snorted at herself, but couldn't deny what she wanted. She wanted Erin, but it was more than simple desire. Everything about Erin affected Carson, from the way her eyes sparkled, to the little dimple in her cheek when she smiled. She saw the curve of Erin's lips in her mind and she gasped at the sudden rush of arousal.

A car honked and Carson jerked back to the present. She pressed down the brake pedal and came to a stop just past the line. The other driver sent her a disgusted look and then traveled on.

Carson focused solely on getting home safely after that and finally pulled into the heated garage. When she walked into the living room, the indicator light on the answering machine flashed insistently. There were six messages.

Who could possibly be calling her on the weekend? Carson pressed the button and got her answer immediately.

"Hi, it's Joyce. It's Friday night. Where the hell are you? Why do you have a cell phone if you never have it on? Call me back."

Carson smirked, deleted the message and listened to the next one.

"Hi, it's me again. It's Saturday morning. There's something going on at the new office building of yours. The news is still sketchy. Do you know what's going on? Call me."

From there the messages became more frantic as Joyce apparently found out that Carson was involved. In the last message, Joyce was just short of panicked.

"Carson, where are you? I'm worried sick! You call me as soon as you get this message!"

Carson picked up the handset and dialed Joyce's number. Joyce answered on the first ring.

"Hi, Joyce—"

Her best friend immediately interrupted her. "Carson! Where the hell have you been? Are you all right? Why didn't you call me back?"

"I'm sorry, Joyce. I haven't been answering the phone."

“No kidding? You didn’t think anyone might be worried about you after what happened? It’s been all over the news!”

Carson frowned. She didn’t listen to the news, and had no idea that this would happen. She thought the police were trying to keep things quiet, but then again, Detective Hutchins had said they would put out a description of the killer over the wires. Did those wires include the media? Apparently so, and she wondered what kind of circus Erin was walking into now.

“I didn’t mean to worry you, and yes, we’re okay?”

“We?” Then Joyce seemed to remember something from the newscast. “Oh, that’s right. There was someone else in there, an attorney, right? Ms. Donohue?”

“Donovan, yes. Erin Donovan was downstairs on the sixth floor when it started. All the power went out and she found a dead man right outside her office.”

Carson continued to tell Joyce all that had happened and how impressive and resourceful Erin had been throughout the whole ordeal. Joyce was uncharacteristically quiet while Carson recounted the tale, only interrupting to clarify a point or two.

When Carson finally finished, Joyce spoke quietly. “You sound quite taken with her.”

“She’s amazing,” Carson said in a dreamy voice and leaned back into the sofa.

“Carson Marie Tierney, you have a crush on her! In the middle of a crisis situation, no less.”

Carson laughed at her friend’s reaction. “Maybe, but it’s hopeless. She’s elegant and sophisticated and wouldn’t be interested in a geek like me. Anyway, if she isn’t straight, she’s so far back in the closet she might as well be.”

“But that’s not going to keep you from trying, is it?”

“When did you learn to read me so well?”

“It’s in your voice,” Joyce said as if it should be apparent. “Well, if it doesn’t work out I guess you’ll just have to worship her from afar.”

Carson frowned briefly and changed the subject. “We need to start moving the equipment today. The electrician is meeting us at one on the tenth floor to start running wires for the server extensions.”

“You do realize that I know you’re trying to distract me?”

She sighed. Carson should have known Joyce wouldn’t let her get away with anything. “Joyce, it’s not that I don’t trust you. You know I tell you everything. I’m just not sure she’ll

ever look at me that way. A couple of times this weekend I thought that she might be interested, but there was never anything clear.”

“You mean you spent the weekend with her? You have so got to tell me everything!”

“Joyce,” Carson said in frustration. “Can you just understand that I don’t want to jinx anything by talking about it right now?”

“Now you’re just being superstitious, but fine. Whatever. I’ll let it go for now and you can tell me all about her when I meet you at the Holcomb Building.”

Carson shook her head at Joyce’s insistence, but her friend was still talking. Once again, Carson had that impression of a steamroller bearing down on her. Joyce and Erin would get along famously.

“You get the keys made and I’ll meet you in front of the service entrance at eleven. That will give me and the boys time to load some of the equipment into the van. They can make another trip while we set up what we have.”

One of the things Carson appreciated in Joyce was her no-nonsense approach to problems that at first looked insurmountable. Joyce came in and started barking orders and miraculously problems disappeared and some semblance of order came to the chaos that had previously reigned.

“Okay, but Joyce don’t forget you need to go by security to get your identification tag made. And wear something besides a hippy t-shirt? They’ll need a picture.”

“Fine, I’ll try to dress the part, but just for today. You know us programmers don’t have to wear skirt suits like you yuppie desk jockeys do.”

Joyce wasn’t that old, but preferred to dress like a throwback to the sixties when peace, love and free-flowing drugs were the norm. To Carson’s knowledge, Joyce had never used illegal substances, but she still ascribed to the peace and love philosophy.

“I was never a desk jockey.” Carson smiled. “And I don’t wear skirts!”

“But you do still have the public image to uphold,” Joyce pointed out.

“I can’t argue with that.”

“Now you’re being smart. I’ll meet you at eleven.”

Carson agreed and hung up the phone. Joyce always managed to bring things back into perspective, and Carson was more relaxed than she’d been for the past week.

A quick shower, a change of clothes and another cup of coffee and Carson was back out the door. It seemed as though she was never home these days, and she wished she had more time to enjoy her house. Maybe she would get the chance once they finished the move.

Carson drove to the Holcomb Building and pulled around back to the service entrance. The van with the Delphi Technologies logo sat adjacent to the loading dock and Carson parked the Lexus in the small bay next to it.

The rear doors stood open and Carson saw three people moving equipment onto dollies. Joyce turned around, spotted her and waved. True to her word, she wasn't wearing a peace t-shirt. Instead, she had on a blue turtleneck that complimented her gray eyes, and a black leather jacket. Her curly brown hair bobbed in the breeze as she walked toward Carson with a huge grin on her face. Carson noticed that she still wore blue jeans, but since they were moving equipment, it didn't matter. Joyce rarely wore anything but jeans to work, and since the photo for the id tag was only from the shoulders up, they wouldn't even be visible.

"Hey, about time you showed up. I thought we were going to have to do everything ourselves."

"You mean you're not finished," Carson asked in mock disappointment. "I really thought I had waited long enough."

"Funny," Joyce teased her back. "Seriously though, that's the last load."

She nodded toward the two men. Jeremy and Mike waved at Carson and then pushed the cart through the service entrance.

Carson reached into her pocket. She fumbled past her cell phone and pulled out a set of keys. "We'll need to stop by security to have copies made, but I'd like you to have the office next to me. The guys can decide which one they want. While we're there I need to trade my loaner tag for my permanent." Carson indicated the generic ID that clipped to her lapel.

"Did you get your photo taken when you arrived?"

"You don't think I dressed up like this for no reason do you," Joyce asked.

Carson tried to ignore the cell phone that rested like a weight in her pocket. She didn't normally carry it around, but she had today in hopes that Erin would call her. There was no reason to think that she would, but Carson kept it with her just in case.

"Where are you putting the equipment? All the doors are locked."

"We're just piling it up in the hall for now since we got here a little

early to smile pretty for our mug shots. Figured you'd have to show up eventually with the keys."

“It’s not my fault you’re early,” Carson bantered back trying not to think how she and Erin had gone through files chock full of hundreds of photos looking for a killer. “And you know I’m never late.”

The two women walked through the service entrance and into the main lobby. Carson had become familiar with the elevator banks last Friday and led the way without thinking. When they moved inside, she halted with a visible start.

“Yeah,” Joyce said quietly, “Seeing it in person really gets your attention.”

Yellow crime scene tape still roped off one of the elevators until maintenance could get all of the blood cleaned up. More yellow tape barricaded the hallway that led to the security office and a guard stood next to it to keep the more adventurous from investigating on their own.

Guards stood everywhere in the lobby and Carson realized that Holcomb had gone a little overboard with security since Friday. A thin woman in a guard uniform also stood next to the information desk where Carson had called the police. The woman looked tiny in the uniform, and Carson shook her head. If this woman had encountered the murderer last week, she would not have survived.

“Carson.”

She turned at the sound of her name and found herself looking into Erin’s chestnut gaze.

Erin wore a blue skirt suit with a slit up one side of the skirt and three-inch pumps. Carson thought the garment was what people called a power suit, and it did indeed make Erin Donovan look powerful. Carson felt the world recede slightly as Erin walked closer, her glance flitting to take in Joyce before they returned to Carson.

“Here,” Erin said and handed her a cup of coffee. “You look like you need this more than me.”

She must have just come from the Starbucks kiosk in the corner of the lobby, Carson thought as she took the hot cup. She mumbled thanks and took a sip of the strong drink while Erin introduced herself to Joyce and shook hands.

“Are you all right,” Carson asked. “I didn’t realize how it would feel to walk in here today.”

Erin nodded. “Yes, I’m fine. It was a little disconcerting, but security insisted on escorting me to my office until the rest of the staff got here. And at least they kept the other elevator closed until they could get it cleaned up.”

The tightness around Erin’s eyes was a testament to how hard it had been for her to come back in and be confronted with such a vivid reminder of what they’d gone through.

The closeness from the weekend seemed to have diminished since their short time apart to the point that Erin was almost a stranger again. Carson felt the distance keenly and wondered if the weekend was really all Erin had needed from her, just some company until she could deal with her inner demons and find some sort of peace.

“I kept my cell phone on just in case you needed me,” Carson admitted.

There was no good reason to tell Erin that, Carson just wanted to reconnect with her somehow, to know that she hadn’t imagined the friendship and perhaps more that had begun to develop between them.

Erin looked as though she might say something, then hesitated and simply said, “Thank you. I appreciate that. Well, I’d better get back.” She turned to Joyce. “It was nice meeting you.”

Then she was gone. Erin’s long, confident stride carried her across the lobby and into a waiting elevator. She turned around and her eyes connected with Carson’s until the doors finally closed.

“Wow,” Joyce said softly.

“Tell me about it.”

Chapter Nine

ERIN STOOD AT the window to her office and looked down on the city of Chicago. Her palms were set against the windowsill, her shoulders hunched as though awaiting a blow from some unknown assailant.

It was almost three o’clock and time for her to keep her word to Carson and leave work before dark. In the winter, sunset usually came by four-thirty, and for some reason it was important to keep the promise she had made. Maybe because it had been so long since she had allowed someone into her personal circle, Erin considered.

Carson, she thought. What is it about her that gets to me so effectively?

Only this morning she was puttering around in her kitchen dressed in nothing but a long t-shirt. A shiver of residual heat trailed up Erin’s spine, just as her eyes had traced up those long, lean legs. She had wondered at the hidden treasures concealed beneath.

She had wanted Carson then with an intensity that frightened her and threatened to upset the balance of her carefully constructed world. Later, when Erin came out of the shower, she was disappointed to find Carson already gone and the borrowed shirt folded neatly on the guest bed.

What had Erin expected, for Carson to wait around with a kiss before she sent Erin to work with wishes for a good day?

No, Erin thought, but not this aching loneliness either.

On the heels of that perceived loss, Erin had remembered the scene she would probably walk in on at work, and was overwhelmed by a sudden trapped feeling. She opted to drive her car instead of call a cab. At least if she absolutely had to get out of the building, she would have an escape.

If Erin thought driving the car would help, she had been wrong. All of the crime scene tape she found when she walked into the main lobby, as well as what she knew lay behind it, almost made her phone Carson for support. And that was exactly the reason she didn't do it. She couldn't allow herself to need someone...anyone...this much.

At least it was quiet now. The complete opposite of what it was when she first walked into the office. It seemed everyone in the building had heard what happened on Friday and bombarded her with questions on sight.

After Erin had answered their questions, just enough to get them to leave her alone, things settled down a little until the nine-thirty meeting with her partners. They bombarded her with the same questions again until she finally pleaded a headache, very much real, and left Bob and Ray sitting with their mouths open as she retreated into her office.

People finally left her alone about the horrific events and after a half hour Erin went downstairs for a cup of decent coffee. Only two elevators worked so she had to wait a few minutes, but the delay was well worth it when she saw Carson in the lobby. Just the sight of her astounded Erin. She should have left unseen then, gone back to her office as if nothing ever happened. Instead, Erin broke her cardinal rule for mixing business with pleasure.

She still managed to keep things brief and only offered Carson her coffee with the lame excuse that she looked as though she needed it more.

Confusion swam in Carson's blue eyes at the distance Erin imposed between them, but it was the best she could do at work.

"Ms. Donovan?"

Erin started in surprise and knocked the coffee cup next to her off the windowsill. Cold coffee splashed onto the carpet, but fortunately, the cup was Styrofoam.

"Amy! You scared me to death!"

“I’m sorry, Ms. Donovan. I buzzed you and knocked on the door. When you didn’t answer I got worried.”

Erin ran a nervous hand through her auburn hair and swallowed the irrational fear. “It’s all right. I guess I’m still a little jumpy. What did you need?”

“Perfectly understandable,” Amy reassured her boss sympathetically. “I just wanted to let you know Mr. Jameson is on line one.”

“Thanks, Amy. I’ll take it, but after that please hold any other calls. I’m leaving early today.”

A surprised look flitted across the secretary’s face, but she wisely didn’t say anything about the change in her workaholic employer’s routine. “After you leave, I’ll have maintenance up to look at that spot.”

Erin nodded and picked up the phone as her secretary closed the door.

Twenty minutes later, she hung up from another satisfied client after she reassured him that his ex-wife didn’t seem to have much of a case for usurping half his business enterprises. Then Erin put on her suit jacket and draped her overcoat over her arm before she walked out to the receptionist area. Amy sat dutifully behind her desk trying very hard to look busy. It was difficult since the phone wasn’t ringing and the schedule was fairly light during the holiday week.

All that the young woman managed to do was look a little bored.

“You never did tell me how the Christmas party went with Scott’s family.”

Amy smiled and her thick lipstick shone wetly in the fluorescent lights. “Same as usual.” She shrugged. “Scott’s father ignored me while his mother made some vague reference to the grandchildren she still doesn’t have. Michael had a stomach bug and gave it to everyone, so I spent all weekend throwing up and sleeping. Just the normal holiday with the in-laws.”

“Ah,” Erin said sympathetically. “You’re a more patient woman than I am. Listen, there’s not much going on, and you’ve been sick all weekend. Why don’t you go home early today? I know I am.”

Amy looked relieved. “Oh, thank you. That would be wonderful. I’m still feeling a little weak.”

Erin smiled. “Go ahead and switch over to the answering service. Maintenance can look at that stain later.”

By the time Erin reached the door, Amy had already punched in the code to transfer incoming calls and had begun collecting her belongings. Erin didn’t have anything pressing at home and she was at a loss. What would she possibly do, watch movies?

Maybe Carson would like to join her for a drink somewhere. She should still be on the tenth floor moving in equipment so Erin thought she would casually swing by and invite her. The most Carson could do was say no.

Seconds later, Erin stepped off the elevator and into the mother of chaos. Equipment filled the hall, and electrical cords hung everywhere like looped serpents. She could see the lower half of a man's legs where he stood on a tall ladder; his torso concealed above the drop-down ceiling.

Two men down at the far end of the hall were wrestling a large set of shelves into the room Carson called the computer lab. Someone bumped into her from behind and she almost fell.

"Oops, sorry about that."

A strong hand steadied her and Erin turned around to see a familiar face. "You're Joyce, aren't you? I met you downstairs with Carson earlier."

"That's right." Joyce beamed at her with a huge, friendly smile. "Sorry about the mess. The electrician is running wires for all of the equipment, and it's a real zoo around here."

"So I see. How long is it going to take to get it all straightened out?"

"Well, let's see. We have to run lines for servers, extensions, monitors, towers...Oh, maybe by this time next week everything will be in place."

Joyce's friendly open manner appealed to Erin. She could understand why Carson thought so highly of her. She also knew that if Carson hadn't introduced them, it was unlikely she would have gotten even that much information out of Joyce. By Carson's account, Joyce was no slacker in the mental arena, and security for Delphi Technologies would be necessarily tight.

"Sounds like you're all going to be here for a while tonight," Erin observed, slightly disappointed. If they were that busy, Carson probably wouldn't be able to get away.

"Oh no," Joyce assured her. "Most of the equipment has already been moved in, and with the lines being run through the ceiling it'll be easy enough to lock up."

Joyce glanced down at her watch, "In fact I have an appointment and I'm going to have to get out of here in the next ten minutes. Well, I had better go. If you're looking for Carson, she's in her office." Joyce waved and walked away.

Apparently, Erin wasn't interrupting after all. However, just because she had promised to leave work early didn't mean that Carson would. She was just as much of a workhorse as Erin.

She grinned thinking she would just have to charm her into it.

Determined, she walked toward Carson's office. The door stood ajar and she leaned around the door to peek inside.

Carson's office was in just as much chaos as the hallway. Empty cardboard boxes, cords and equipment was strewn everywhere. Heavy mahogany shelves lined the wall behind the desk and two new comfortable looking leather chairs sat in their proper spots. One of the chairs was behind the desk and the other sat in front for visiting clients.

Carson held a hammer in her left hand and was pounding a nail into the wall.

I didn't know she was left-handed. For some reason that fact seemed to make Carson even sexier.

Erin spied several framed diplomas leaning against the wall. Carson wore jeans and a flannel shirt with her blonde hair pulled back into a once-tidy ponytail.

Erin waited until the hammering stopped and then tapped lightly on the door with one knuckle. She grinned when Carson's head whipped around and their eyes met.

Carson lowered the hammer to her side and returned Erin's smile. "Come on in. What time is it?"

"Almost four."

Erin walked into the room, and stepped carefully over the myriad debris. "In fact, I was just on my way out since my day pass has expired."

They both smiled at the small joke, and Carson flushed a little. Erin wondered if Carson was embarrassed for eliciting the promise from her to leave early. Maybe Carson felt she was a little presumptuous, but Erin warmed to the idea that someone would care enough to extract that agreement.

"I'm glad to hear it," Carson admitted. "I was afraid that you would try to break curfew."

"Not this time, but I don't know for how long I can force myself to leave early. You're just lucky this is Christmas week and there's nothing to do anyway."

Erin stepped around some of the clutter, and in front of the leather chair. She indicated Carson's diplomas with a nod. "Do you need some help there?"

"No, it can wait. I'm just trying to settle into my new office. This is a far cry from a warehouse office where the only window looks out over a concrete bay."

"I can imagine." Erin grinned and looked around. "But it's going to look very nice. I like that desk."

Carson glanced at the heavy piece. "The credit for that goes to Ray. All of the offices already had them."

Erin's eyebrows lifted to her hairline. "He must be very impressed with you. I've never known him to give expensive furniture to any other client."

"Really? Then I'll try not to let him down," Carson teased and laid the hammer on the desk, careful not to scar the wood. "Did you stop by just to let me know you were leaving?"

"Actually, I had an ulterior motive."

Carson stood only a few steps away, and the light blue eyes captivated Erin. Carson quirked one eye curiously and her lips curved into a small smile. Erin studied the tiny lines in the full lips and unconsciously licked her suddenly dry lips. For a moment, it was difficult to look away, until Erin reminded herself that she was still at work and pulled her professional mantle back together.

"Oh," Carson prompted softly.

Why was this so difficult, Erin wondered? Granted it had been a while, but surely she could ask a friend to have a drink with her.

Maybe because I want her to be more than a friend, an inner voice presented.

Erin ignored the tiny voice. "Um, I was wondering if I could persuade you to leave early and join me for a drink."

"Hmm, let me think," Carson said playfully. "Stay here and hang dull documents on the wall, or share a pleasant drink with an intelligent and attractive lady? I think I'll take the drink."

Carson took a step toward Erin and because she wasn't looking where she was going, stepped right into an empty cardboard box. Her foot wedged in the bottom and her other leg tripped on the open flaps. Carson stumbled forward, and Erin, who was only a few steps in front of her, tried to step back out of the way. That turned out to be a fatal error when she staggered over a pile of books and started to fall backward.

Erin landed sprawled in the leather chair with Carson headed right for her. Carson tried to stop her fall and grabbed for the arms of the chair. Her breath came out with a whoosh when her stomach hit the leather-covered arm, and ghosted across Erin's mouth.

Inches separated them, and their eyes locked. They were so close Erin could see the blue eyes dilate and darken with...need. An answering surge grew in the pit of her stomach and her lips parted with her panting breath.

It had been six long years, but she still remembered what desire looked like. Carson's eyes drifted lower on her face and settled on Erin's lips. Erin was aware of the blood hammering in her veins and looked again at Carson's mouth.

Was it as soft as it looked?

She watched spellbound as Carson's eyes fluttered half-closed, and her sweet breath whispered softly into Erin's own mouth.

She was so close Erin could feel the heat from her body, and a deep inhalation would press their upper bodies together. Erin thought Carson would kiss her, and she wanted it. Instinctively she leaned closer, slowly drawn toward the softness. Then Carson closed her eyes and pushed back from the chair.

"That was really clumsy of me," Carson said and bent down to extricate herself from the box. "Sorry about that."

Her voice was huskier than usual, and she wouldn't look at Erin, for which Erin was immeasurably grateful. Maybe that drink wasn't such a good idea.

"It's all right," Erin assured her quickly and stood up. "With all this clutter it's a wonder you didn't break your leg." She meant to make the comment humorous, to try and lighten the mood. Instead, it came out a little harsh, and Carson looked at her with a wounded expression. "Well, I guess I should go."

Erin stood and headed for the door, intent on a fast getaway to somewhere that she could get her emotions under control.

"What about that drink?"

The soft question stopped her before she reached the door and Erin turned back to Carson. Pinned in place by the blue-eyed gaze Erin's stomach flip-flopped helplessly. Painfully aware of the questioning, hurt gaze, Erin felt like an absolute heel. It wasn't Carson's fault Erin was over-reacting. If Carson hadn't pulled away, Erin knew she would have kissed her.

Erin wanted to feel justified for running out the door by claiming that she had worked too hard to allow an office indiscretion to ruin her reputation, but it didn't work. Carson didn't work for her, and there would be nothing wrong with getting involved with her. Even if Erin refused to allow anything to happen at work, it was clear that Carson felt something, too.

Erin took a deep breath and looked at her again. Carson could have anyone she wanted, man or woman, and Erin knew that she wanted to be the one Carson chose.

She had grown to know Carson during the weekend. She knew that Carson came from a harsh upbringing, was calm and determined, that she was brave, compassionate and gentle. Erin was more than a little attracted to Carson's strength of character, but it was more than that. Even now, Carson waited quietly to allow Erin to come to a decision without feeling pushed. It was exactly the right thing to do.

Carson had a dark smudge across one cheek, and her flannel shirt hinted at the full curves beneath. Her mussed hair had some of the wisps sticking up, and Erin thought her the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

I'm falling for her.

Desire was one thing, but this was different. It was deep, and intense, and Erin didn't want to fight it. She wouldn't have a public display at work, but she didn't think Carson was the type to carry on public displays of affection. Besides, Erin realized, she was getting a little ahead of herself. It was very possible that it had only been a momentary lapse on Carson's part. There was no evidence to support the idea that the Carson might want to get involved with her, but she would never know if she didn't take a chance.

Erin tried to still the nervous shaking in her fingertips. "I'm game if you are."

She wasn't sure if she was only talking about a drink.

Carson smiled. "It's my turn to pick the place, and I know just the right spot. It's a little old-fashioned Irish pub downtown."

"Your car or mine?"

It seemed that now that she had acknowledged her attraction, Erin couldn't resist flirting. Carson didn't seem to notice as she picked up her overcoat from where she had slung it across her chair and reached for her purse.

"How about yours? I've been dreaming of riding in it since you told me it was yours."

"You fantasize about my car?" Erin laughed.

"Oh yes," Carson answered softly in an odd tone and waited for Erin to walk out ahead of her. She pulled the door shut and then locked it.

CARSON WENT INTO the bathroom to comb her hair and wash the smudge from her face. Freshening up was an excuse but Carson needed a few minutes for the shaking in her limbs to stop.

I can't believe I almost kissed her. I can't believe she almost let me! Then, the light flirting that had followed was obvious enough that even Carson, as inexperienced as she was, caught on to it.

The only reason Carson turned away at the last moment was fear. She was afraid to disappoint Erin by her inept kisses. Erin was older and had been involved in romantic relationships while Carson had never been in the position to kiss anyone. Unsure and frightened, she had pulled away.

Stupid, she berated herself silently as she scrubbed at the dark spot on her cheek. I should have just kissed her. We both wanted it, and if she wants me, then she would put up with a little awkwardness.

Something tells me I wouldn't be inexperienced for long!

Carson smiled into the mirror. The image of Erin's lips pressed against hers threatened to heat her blood again. She pushed the mental picture away and left the bathroom. She stepped into the hall and Erin's gaze flickered and warmed when she saw Carson.

"Ready to go?"

Carson nodded and followed Erin to the parking garage. The 350Z was a beautiful car with leather and wood grain interior. Erin turned on the heated seats, and allowed the heater to warm up for a minute before she shifted into gear and pulled out of the concrete structure.

"So, where's this pub you like to go to?"

Carson laughed. "I don't go there a lot, but it's a very quaint place called Grace O'Malley's. Head downtown and I'll direct you as we go."

Erin glanced at Carson playfully, obviously enjoying herself. "Sounds mysterious."

Relieved that Erin seemed comfortable with her after what had happened in the office, Carson smiled back. "Not really, but it is a very small place. It's a little dark, and definitely not a place visited by upper society. I like it because to everyone else, I am just another patron. No one even seems to notice me when I go there."

"Ah, anonymity. I understand completely. What about the name? I've heard of places called O'Malley's but not Grace O'Malley."

"It's named after a sixteenth century lady pirate," Carson informed her with a wink. "I think you'll like it."

"It sounds intriguing. I can't wait."

THE MOMENT IN Carson's office seemed to have broken the ice between them in a critical way, and Erin was glad she stopped by with the invitation. The atmosphere in the car was warm, the air heavy with mutual chemistry. Erin kept her eyes on the road partly to follow Carson's direction and partly because she knew that if she looked at Carson now, she wouldn't be able to look away.

Before long, Carson directed her into a sharp left turn that Erin wouldn't even have seen if she hadn't pointed it out. The bar was small, but well-kept and in a nice suburban neighborhood. As was typical of most bars, it was dark and smelled of ale, but the furnishings were clean and fresh. Erin saw the owner had decorated appropriately after an Irish female pirate, with a seafaring motif throughout. Gaffs, rusty anchors, and battered wooden oars adorned the walls.

Soft Celtic music played in the background.

Erin thought it was indeed quaint, as Carson had warned her, but she adored it. Carson led her toward the back in the darkness to a small circular table against the rear corner of the room. A solitary candle flickered on the table and cast a red hue on Carson's features.

"There aren't many people here right now," Carson said, "Which I guess is normal for a Monday. But it gets very busy on the weekends."

Erin nodded and looked over a low wall situated just behind them toward the bar. A young woman drew beer on tap and laughed with the other patrons. Erin enjoyed the friendly and relaxed atmosphere, and even though the two sat in an open room, the low wall behind lent a feeling of seclusion and intimacy.

A young woman stepped up to the table and took their order. She didn't linger, but headed quickly to get their drinks.

"I can see why you like this place. It's very homey, but tell me about the pirate it's named after. I thought pirates considered it bad luck to have a woman on a ship. How'd she get away with it?"

Acting pleased that Erin was enjoying herself Carson answered. "It was, but interestingly enough, Grace O'Malley wasn't just on a ship. She was the captain."

Erin leaned forward on her elbows, captivated by the story, and a broad grin crossed Carson's face before she continued with her story.

"It seems that Grace's father was an Irish trader who sailed the seas. She kept pestering him to allow her to go with him on the ships, but he refused. One day she cut all her hair off, dressed in boy's clothes, and stowed away on the vessel. Her father was so astonished, and impressed, that he allowed her to accompany him from then on."

The waitress returned at that moment and deposited their drinks before leaving them alone again.

"And the pirate thing," Erin asked. "What did she do to be considered a pirate?"

Carson shrugged. "Not so much really. Ireland was battling the English at that time on the seas, and anyone who fought against the English was labeled a pirate. She did engage in battles with other pirates though, and was considered quite the swordswoman."

“That’s a fascinating story,” Erin said and sipped at her beer.

What was more interesting was the animated way Carson had recited it. Her eyes that were usually so cool and even sparkled with fire. A wave of attraction for Carson hit so strongly that it eclipsed what Erin had experienced earlier. It was so intense that for a moment she was tempted to lean across the table and act on the raw impulses that cascaded through her.

She watched full, red lips touch to the frosted glass and imagined how they would taste. The flash of the pink tongue made her gasp.

“If you keep looking at me like that I will not be responsible for the consequences.”

Erin flushed in embarrassment and looked away quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

Have I misjudged what is happening between us? Is this all just a fantasy, something I want to happen so badly that I’m projecting my emotions onto her?

Soft fingers closed on her hand and drew Erin’s attention back across the table. Carson’s eyes were gentle, and a small smile curved her full lips.

“I never said I was uncomfortable.”

Carson had leaned a little to stretch across the table. The position strained the neckline of her shirt and exposed a hint of her full cleavage. Erin blinked and suddenly had trouble swallowing. She forced her eyes back to Carson’s face, but Carson was looking at their hands. Erin glanced around and pulled away with a regretful look that told Carson that Erin was uncomfortable holding hands in public.

“I wanted to do that with you at the RL,” Carson said.

“You did,” Erin asked. “I...I had no idea.” Then she admitted, “So did I.”

Both were quiet for a moment as they sipped their drinks, and simply enjoyed the company and the atmosphere. Even though lost in their own thoughts, their eyes wandered slowly across one another. The glances were almost physical and Erin could clearly feel the visual caress on her skin.

She wanted to see more of Carson away from work and wondered what she would enjoy doing. Did she like to ski, or ice-skate? Or was she more of the indoor type?

“I really enjoyed the RL,” Carson said. “Shellfish is one of my all-time favorites, and the wine was impeccable. Do you think we could go back there sometime?”

“I think that could be arranged,” Erin said softly. Apparently, they were both thinking along the same lines. “What else do you like to do? I know you like sweet, white wine, and Japanese art, and intimate Irish pubs, but I’d like to know more. What kind of music do you enjoy?”

She saw that the question pleased Carson and that she smiled before she answered. “I like all kinds of music from soft jazz, to light rock and even some of the old Big Band music. What I do not care for is hip-hop, rap, acid or country.”

“Too whiny,” Erin smiled. “I like jazz, too.”

“What else do you enjoy? Do you like any sports?”

Erin considered the question while she lifted her drink. “Not on television. The only thing I watch on television is football, and even that is only occasionally. As for sports I like to participate in, I like to snow ski, and I’ve even been known to do some equestrian riding.”

“That looks difficult with all those hedges,” Carson said. “Aren’t you afraid that you’ll fall?”

Erin laughed. “Sometimes. People can get very competitive, but I really enjoy it. Do you ride?”

“Only western style. I considered having stables put in on my property but finally decided against it. I’m just not around enough to take care of horses.”

“And horses do require a lot of work.”

Carson nodded in agreement. “But I do like to snow ski. I also play racquetball, pool, and I like to swim.”

The idea of Carson’s beautiful body revealed in a swimsuit threatened to heat Erin up again, and she drained the last of her ale.

“Would you like another,” Carson asked politely.

“Better not,” Erin said regrettably. “It’s a school night.” And I wouldn’t be able to control myself if I had much more.

Her own glass empty, Carson laid a bill on the table for the waitress and asked if Erin was ready to go. Back in the car, Carson didn’t hesitate to reach for Erin’s hand after she shifted into drive.

Carson’s fingers were strong and warm in her hand, and Erin held her gently, almost afraid that she would break the spell between them. After a moment, she released Carson’s hand since she didn’t want her to feel pressured.

Erin wanted to take Carson somewhere private so that she could kiss her goodnight, and was disappointed that she couldn't. Instead, she would have to drive back to the Holcomb Building so Carson could retrieve her car.

Few cars remained in the underground structure and even though most people were gone for the day, Erin couldn't take the chance. She refused to be caught in a compromising position by anyone who could spread rumors at the workplace. Carson seemed to understand that and spared an understanding look as they sat parked next to her Lexus.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Carson offered shyly and was pleased when Erin squeezed her fingers gently, then let go quickly.

"Yes," Erin said softly. "Tomorrow,"

The word sounded like a promise of so much more and it was obviously hard for Carson to open the door and walk away.

Chapter Ten

THE WEEK RUSHED by for Carson and suddenly, it was already Wednesday. She was so busy settling in that she barely saw Erin long enough to say hello. When she did, it was only in passing, with long lingering looks passing between them and little else. Each time Erin had her customary cup of coffee and Carson had come to believe it was practically an extension of her body. Each of the looks they shared threatened to set her blood on fire, but Carson thought her reactions to Erin's gaze were all in her mind.

It was doubtful Erin would ever compromise her work ethics by casting passionate looks in her direction, even if Carson thought Erin might be interested in her in a romantic way.

She had no experience to go by in these matters, but Carson's instincts insisted there was something between them. Without anything said directly though, she was willing to concede that she might be reading more in to it than there was.

And I am so attracted to her that I would likely imagine things if she caught my eye in a board of directors meeting!

At least Carson might be able to see Erin for a few minutes this afternoon. She had a meeting scheduled with her attorney, Ray Eldridge, concerning a new contract and if she was lucky, Erin would be available.

Twenty minutes before she was due in Mr. Eldridge's office, Carson took the elevator to the sixth floor and walked into the receptionist's area. The same blonde secretary sat in front of Erin's door that Carson remembered from the last time she had been there. She had her wavy hair pulled back into an untidy bun and fuchsia fingernails clacked at a computer keyboard.

The young woman looked up when Carson came in and a guarded look immediately settled on her face. Well, she couldn't really blame her after the last time Carson had practically stalked in here.

"Amy, is it," Carson asked politely. The secretary looked a little surprised at the unexpected display of manners and nodded uncertainly. "Is Ms. Donovan busy at the moment?"

"Um, well, she's not in any meetings or anything. Did you want to see her?"

"Yes, if it's all right, would you mind finding out if she can spare a little time?"

Carson was uncomfortable exchanging pleasantries with the secretary. She wasn't much of a people person, but she tried to keep in mind that the young woman worked for Erin, and if she kept her around, Amy must be good at her job. Erin Donovan wasn't the sort to tolerate incompetence in any degree.

"Sure, Ms. Tierney. Let me find out if she's free."

Amy pushed the tiny intercom button on her desk and Carson could hear Erin's voice on the speaker.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Donovan, Ms. Tierney is here to see you."

Despite the normal cloak of cool reserve that she pulled into place around her, Carson smiled when she heard Erin's delighted voice on the intercom system. "Of course. Show her in, please."

Amy started to stand up, but Carson waved her away in a friendly gesture. "It's all right. After the last time I shanghaied my way past you, I can get the door myself."

Again, she saw she had surprised Amy and was quite pleased with herself. See, Carson thought. I can do charming.

Erin was already half standing when Carson opened the door and looked around the edge. For a moment they simply exchanged smiles before Carson spoke. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

“Not at all. Coming to make sure I’m leaving work? It’s a little early in the day, isn’t it?”

Carson closed the door and stepped to Erin’s desk, enjoying the playful banter. The fact that Erin brought up her altered schedule let Carson know that she hadn’t forgotten her promise, and that she didn’t resent it.

“Actually, not this time, but I’m glad to see that you remembered it. I have an appointment to see Mr. Eldridge in a few minutes, but I wanted to see you first. I haven’t had a chance to talk with you much this week, what with moving in upstairs and all.”

Erin’s eyes shaded to a lighter brown, and her gaze softened. She indicated that Carson should sit in her visitor’s chair and she sat down as well. “I’m glad you did,” Erin admitted. “I was beginning to think you had forgotten me.”

So, she hadn’t been imagining things all week! Erin was doing more than merely acknowledging her presence when they met in the elevators, and the halls.

“Absolutely not. I don’t think that’s possible.”

What was it about Erin that made her want to flirt as soon as she saw her, Carson wondered.

“Good, I’d hate to be the only one preoccupied.”

“You, preoccupied at work?” Carson teased. “I didn’t think that was possible.”

Erin laughed and the sound sent shivers up Carson’s spine.

“Normally, I make it a rule never to be distracted at work, and I absolutely draw the line at office affairs. Nevertheless, I have to admit that doesn’t stop my mind from wandering on occasion. After all, I am only human.”

Affair? Was that what Erin wanted, an affair? Carson almost choked on the thought, but Erin didn’t notice and continued.

“How’s the move going? Are you getting settled in all right?”

“Oh, yes,” Carson said. “In fact, now that you bring it up I wanted to give you something.”

She handed Erin one of her new business cards. “I just got these back from the printer. They have the new office number as well as my direct line, my cell phone number, and home phone.”

Erin looked at the embossed card for a second. “I can’t imagine you giving these out to just anyone.”

“No,” Carson admitted a little shyly. “These are the special ones that are only handed out to a select few. The others only have the office number and the fax line.”

From the look on Erin's face when she said that, Carson would have sworn that she had just given her a precious gift. A thought suddenly occurred to her and Carson felt the blood start to drain from her head.

Oh no. Christmas is in less than a week! Am I supposed to get her something? Are we more than friends? Girlfriends doesn't sound like the right term, at least not yet, and I have no idea what she thinks of that idea. However, she did just mention affairs, and suggested that she was thinking along those lines in regards to us. Oh, what am I going to do?

Erin was asking something and Carson had to focus again with an effort. "So, you were going to tell me about the move."

"Right," Carson had a little trouble keeping up with the conversation, because of all the distracting thoughts in her own head. "The electrician has finished running all the wires and all the equipment is in place. Now we just have to get all of the systems integrated, and ready the mainframe to switch everything over next week. I just needed to see Mr. Eldridge to finalize some details on a new contract."

"Oh? Should I ask?"

Touched that Erin would ask if she was infringing on security, Carson reassured her, "No, it's fine. Delphi Technologies is just doing some security research with the defense department. The contract itself isn't secret, but no doubt some of the details will be."

"That's quite a coup, isn't it? Doing research for the government?"

Erin was clearly impressed and Carson glanced down at the desk as she fought not to turn scarlet with pleased embarrassment. An old inkwell and fountain pen took up one corner of Erin's desk. From the scratches, Carson could tell that the set had seen better days.

She wondered about the significance of the ancient writing device. "Well, who if not our own government would need security?"

"You're very modest, but something tells me the Department of Defense would only go to the best and the brightest."

Finally, Carson lost her composure and met Erin's eye with a grin. "You are going to make me blush if you keep stroking my ego in such a fashion."

Erin laughed and threw up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay, but you can't blame me if I'm impressed."

Altogether too pleased, Carson smiled and looked down at her watch. She only had a couple of minutes before she had to meet her attorney but she had to ask one final question.

"What is the significance of the inkwell?" She nodded to indicate the device.

It was Erin's turn to look a little uncomfortable. "One piece of advice that my father gave me was never to forget that we all come from humble beginnings. Using the inkwell helps me feel grounded, and I think it gives things a more personal touch for me to sign everything that crosses my desk with it."

Sometimes Carson thought she had Erin Donovan completely figured out, and then at other times, like now, she realized what an enigma Erin really was. Nevertheless, moments such as these that gave Carson an unexpected glimpse into the depths of her personality.

"You are a romantic."

A completely mischievous look crossed Erin's face. "Guilty as charged, but don't tell anyone. If my clients realized what a soft, jelly center I really have, they would take total advantage of me."

Carson laughed and stood up. "Your secret is safe with me, but I better get going or I will be late."

"I'm glad you came by," Erin said as she also stood up behind her desk. "I've wanted to drop by to see you, but I couldn't think of a good excuse."

"You don't need an excuse. I want to see you as well."

Carson was just as surprised by her admission as Erin apparently was, and tried to pass it off by quickly saying, "I should go."

"I'll see you at the Christmas party on Friday then?"

"I'll be there. Call me if you need anything." Carson indicated the card in Erin's hand and then walked out of the office.

Call me if you need anything? What was I thinking? That sounded like a pick-up line if there ever was one! Carson groaned internally and resisted the urge to thump her head against the wall. What must Erin think of her?

CALL ME IF you need anything?

As soon as the door closed, Erin sank to her chair and her forehead struck the desk with a muted thud. She could think of several things she needed from Carson and none of them had anything to do with work.

The kiss that had never materialized on Monday evening was the first thing that came to mind, just as it had all week.

I'd love to start with that kiss, and see just how soft those full lips are. Or maybe we could share a moonlit swim on my terrace, sans the clothing, of course.

Erin saw it all in her mind, Carson, as she emerged naked from the heated pool. The water as it cascaded from Carson's body in a rain of light and steam in the cold, winter air. Her nipples would be hard, aching, and begging to be touched.

Erin swallowed thickly and stood up. The office was no place for these kinds of thoughts, and she needed to get Carson out of her head for the time being. There was too much work to do to allow these fantasies here.

This year it was her firm's turn to plan the annual Christmas party and there was still a lot to do before Friday. Especially since her partners had summarily decided that, as a woman, she would naturally be better at planning such things. Erin was aware that it was only an excuse, but she didn't really blame them.

Nevertheless, she still had to finalize the arrangements with the caterer, see that the decorations were brought in and set up on time, and a host of other things she would likely forget until the last minute. In addition, there was the minor inconvenience of even attempting to practice corporate law.

Coffee, Erin decided. The Starbucks kiosk had a mocha frappuccino with her name on it. I will not think about Carson Tierney's very sexy body or how her skin would look underneath mine...No!

Coffee, coffee...

With that mantra firmly repeated, Erin took the elevator to the lobby. Distracted by how Carson had managed to become such a large figure in her life, Erin almost didn't notice the crowd of the ever-present working class.

The doors opened on the main floor and Erin stepped off, automatically destined for the coffee corner in the front of the building. She noticed a dark figure from the corner of her eye that struck an instinctive cord of fear in her psyche, and without thought, her eyes snapped to the left.

There! Down the corridor to the security offices still cordoned off with yellow tape, was a dark shadow that Erin could just make out. The figure was large with dark, bushy hair, and fear burned a bitter acid taste in her mouth. Erin shrank back against the wall no longer concerned with mundane thoughts of caffeine or love.

People continued to move past her, on and off the lift. Some even took a moment out of their busy lives to spare a curious glance to a woman who seemed to have temporarily forgotten her destination before they moved on.

Then the man turned to the left as he reached the end of the hall and his profile was illuminated. It was only Bill Turner, Holcomb's chief of security.

Erin took a long, shuddering breath and then another. Adrenaline caused her limbs to shake and she felt like a fool.

No doubt, Bill was completing his investigation before he reopened main security. Maintenance would have to replace the fire axe since the other had been confiscated for evidence, and the shattered containment box would have to be repaired. Of course, he would be here!

As foolish as she felt, the incident had reminded Erin of something vital. In the excitement of a possible relationship with Carson, Erin had forgotten the murderer, and more importantly, that something about him was familiar.

Starbucks forgotten, Erin was more determined than ever to figure out who he was. Her subconscious insisted she knew something vital. Otherwise, she wouldn't have this nagging sensation in her gut, and Erin never ignored her instincts. They had come to her aid more than once, and she didn't intend to ignore them now.

Erin hadn't heard from Detective Hutchins and could only assume that the police hadn't learned anything more. She pushed away from the wall and walked back toward the elevator.

It was time to do some old-fashioned investigating of her own.

Chapter Eleven

FRIDAY DAWNED CLEAR and bright, although the air was still at the freezing mark. The forecast called for temperatures to climb into the forties, and Carson thought that was practically a balmy day for Chicago in the wintertime. She remained skeptical, however, of the weatherman's predictions for warmth.

Her breath plumed and the frigid air needled deeply into her flesh as she crossed the underground garage to the elevator. She could hear the wind howl against the concrete abutment and could only imagine how much worse it would be in the open air.

Even with the frigid environment, Carson walked with a bounce in her step. A small brightly wrapped package rested inside her coat pocket, and she was already looking forward to the Christmas party. It would be the first time all week that she could spend time with Erin other than the shared ale on Monday and the few minutes in her office on Wednesday.

She only hoped Erin wouldn't be too busy to spend a little time with her. Carson noticed that Erin had kept to her curfew all week even though Carson needed to work late every day. It was late when Carson left work, and each time she noticed that Erin's car was already gone from the parking structure.

Today Carson had only one appointment, but it would no doubt be a long one with the department of defense aide. It was also a critical meeting for Delphi Technologies and the contract potentially worth millions.

Out of habit, she glanced and saw Erin's car already in its space. Erin was notorious for getting to work early, and the sight of the vehicle solidified the feeling that all was right in the world.

The doors closed and the elevator whisked Carson up to start another productive day.

“YOU’VE GOT TO be kidding me!”

Why did I even agree to take care of these arrangements, Erin wondered. She was so stressed that Amy had started avoiding her.

The caterer flinched. “I assure you, ma’am, one of my people is already on the way. He’ll be here very soon.”

“It’s twelve o’clock,” Erin pointed out succinctly to the man dressed in a white chef’s uniform. “The party is due to start in an hour. Please, tell me how it’s possible to forget eggnog and champagne for a Christmas party!”

He cringed again and his face turned red. Obviously, the caterer was holding in a hot response, but the elevator pinged and his face cleared when the doors opened.

“Ah! He’s here.”

A young boy pushed a loaded cart out of the lift toward them. Erin thought he couldn't be more than twelve and bore a striking resemblance to the caterer. Must be his son. Probably a family business.

Erin wanted to make a comment on labor laws and ask if the boy was old enough to work, but bit her tongue. She let it go, just glad that everything was finally being finished. She would just be venting now and there was still too much to do.

“Let it go before you have a stroke.”

Erin turned around to find that Ray Eldridge had come up behind her. It was funny that he hadn't been around all week, but showed up an hour before the festivities were to start. Figures.

Ray was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his late fifties. He took care with his appearance, was always clean-shaven and dressed in an expensive suit, and he made quite an impression with his clients, especially the lady ones. Yet Ray had been married for twenty-seven years, and as far as Erin knew had always been faithful to his wife.

Erin had started to work for him when Ray established the law firm, and was soon asked to be his partner. That was six years ago, and she never regretted that decision. But that didn't mean she had to be happy about his untimely arrival, after forcing Erin to make all of the arrangements for the party.

“Where did you come from,” she asked irritably.

Ray grinned, obviously unrepentant, at her acerbic tone. His brown eyes sparkled as he looked around at the festive décor and she knew he thought it had been the right decision to put Erin in charge this year. He didn't have any artistic tendencies and generally left any such chores in the capable hands of his wife, Martha.

The long conference table had been removed to make way for smaller, linen covered tables against one wall. The canapés looked delicious, the champagne frosty and the eggnog gently spiked with rum. A large ice sculpture took center place, and every minute detail had been attended to. There was only one thing he saw was missing.

“Where's the mistletoe?”

Erin looked at Ray fully for the first time since he walked in the door. She hadn't even thought of mistletoe.

“Amy!”

The young secretary turned to her with an expression of dread, and Erin realized how harsh she sounded.

“Yes, Ms. Donovan?”

Erin deliberately schooled her voice to be calm. “Do we have any mistletoe?”

Prepared for the worst, Erin was relieved when Amy smiled. “Getting ready to put it up now.”

Erin relaxed for what seemed like the first time in hours. “What would I do without you?”

“Probably work even longer hours than you do now.”

Amy tapped James Evans, Erin’s law clerk, on the shoulder to enlist him to put the final touches of mistletoe over all three entryways into the large conference room. If they went a little overboard with the greenery, Erin thought, at least it hadn’t been completely forgotten.

Ten minutes before the official start of the party, the room began to fill up. Erin started to check the door every few minutes for a blonde head, and started to wonder if Carson would make it.

“Looking for someone,” Ray asked curiously as he handed Erin a cup of eggnog.

In what she hoped was a casual tone, she said, “I was just wondering if your newest client was going to make an appearance.”

“Ms. Tierney? She said she would, but I haven’t really talked with her much since Wednesday.”

Erin nodded and took the cup. Maybe the rum in it would help her relax a little. She had something she wanted to give Carson, but as time passed, Erin started to second-guess her decision. What if it was too soon to give Carson a Christmas present? They hadn’t known one another very long, and she didn’t want to do anything that might make Carson uncomfortable. The younger woman could be a little shy.

Erin thought it was an adorable quality.

She had called Carson a few times on her cell phone during the week with lame excuses to pass a few words between clients and appointments. Each time the call had gone to voicemail only for Carson to call her back a few moments later apologizing that her cell phone had been stuck in the bottom of her coat pocket. Erin thought it cute, although a little annoying, but it did help decide what to get Carson for Christmas.

Movement in the doorway caught Erin’s eye and her heart chose to relocate to her throat as their eyes met across the crowded room. A small, gentle smile graced Carson’s lips. Erin’s nerves suddenly settled, and she was sure her decision was the right one. It was just a small gift anyway.

Erin started across the room to Carson.

CARSON MADE A beeline across the crowded room straight toward Erin. Even from a distance of ten feet, Carson could feel the mutual attraction and wondered if it was as obvious to others as it was to her. That possibility disturbed Carson and she frowned briefly. Erin's professional ethics bordered on obsessive, and if she thought they were obvious in any way, Carson was concerned that Erin would withdraw.

Above all, Carson wanted to avoid that. Even as new as she was at this, she knew they had the potential for something special, and she didn't want Erin to back away because of some perceived impropriety.

Carson forgot all of her concerns when she stood in front of Erin, and was captured by dark eyes. They met in the doorway of the side entrance. The party dropped away, and the sole communication between them was of the silent variety.

"Hi," Erin finally said.

"Hi, back."

Erin handed her a cup of some spiced liquid Carson assumed to be eggnog, and she took it without thought.

"Sorry I'm late. I had a meeting that went over."

"I'm just glad you're here," Erin admitted softly, still caught in the spell between them. It was so hard to maintain the professional façade with Carson so close. "I'm not sure I could survive this party without a friendly face around."

"Don't tell me you don't enjoy parties," Carson teased.

"Only the intimate variety meant for two."

She's flirting with me in the middle of a crowded room? Carson was almost lightheaded, and the familiar heat spread in her stomach. It always happened when she was with Erin.

"I'll have to see what I can do to accommodate you."

THEY WERE STANDING close together in the doorway. Carson's head bent down toward her, while Erin looked up into gentle blue eyes.

“Ms. Tierney! How are you?”

The women looked up as Ray approached with the other third of the firm.

“I’m fine, Mr. Eldridge.”

Erin was surprised by the sudden cold façade Carson displayed toward Ray. She had grown used to Carson’s warmth, and tenderness, and she frowned in confusion. Ray was a nice man, and Carson was a smart lady. The sudden tension didn’t make any sense, but she shrugged it off after a moment. Sometimes people just didn’t get along for whatever reason, but Erin decided to keep an eye on things so she could step in if need be.

“This is Robert White,” Ray introduced his companion and watched while the other two shook hands.

Erin noticed humor flash in Carson’s eyes when she was told Bob’s name, and cringed when Carson opened her mouth to respond.

Trying not to laugh, Carson said, “Bob White?” She wondered if the man had ever wanted to strangle his parents, or were they so oblivious that they hadn’t realized they had named their child after a bird?

Fortunately, Bob had a good sense of humor, and merely raised a hand to stop her. “I know, I know. But, believe it or not, I like my name. No one ever forgets it, and it’s a great opening for dry speeches. And please, call me Bob.”

He winked and Carson laughed.

“By the way,” Bob said and pointed toward the door facing. “You might want to watch your step around here. It looks as though Erin got carried away with the decorations.”

Erin looked up when Carson did and her face burned in embarrassment. They were standing right under a sprig of mistletoe. Together they stepped out of the doorway and for an awkward moment refused to look at one another. Bob and Ray laughed.

“Ray tells me you’re quite the computer whiz,” Bob said. “I’ll have to have you come by to look at mine. I keep getting these ads popping up and I can’t seem to get rid of them.”

“Sounds like you might have some spy-ware on your hard drive. I’ll be happy to stop by some time and take a look,” Carson said.

“Thanks. Well, I had better get back over to Mr. Morrison. He’s a new client and didn’t really want to attend. Now he’s looking a little pensive and I’m afraid he might bolt at any second. Maybe a little more champagne.”

Bob walked away

“I’d better get back to the party, too,” Ray said. “Ms. Tierney, it was nice seeing you.”

“Is something wrong,” Erin asked, as soon as he was gone.

“No, why would you ask?”

“It just seemed that there was some tension between you and Ray.”

“It’s nothing,” Carson assured her. “But after Wednesday’s meeting I’m just not sure that he’s the right one to protect Delphi Technologies’ interests.”

That did surprise Erin. Ray was a very competent attorney, and if she ever needed anyone to protect her investments, Ray would be the first one she would turn to.

Carson shook her head. “Don’t get me wrong, Mr. Eldridge is a good attorney, but he doesn’t seem to understand the intricacies of information technology as it pertains to the government.”

The response was a little over Erin’s head, but she took Carson’s explanation at face value. The woman was extremely intelligent and she had the right to whatever representation she deemed appropriate.

Carson surprised Erin when she suddenly said, “Are you enjoying the party?”

“No, not really. I’m not one for crowds.”

“Would you like to leave?”

The hair on Erin’s arms stood up in reaction to the question. “What did you have in mind?”

Carson smiled. “I have something for you in my office.”

“A Christmas present?”

Erin was delighted, and happily followed Carson to the tenth floor. It seemed that they were both on the same wavelength, and there had been no cause for concern after all. Carson closed the door and walked to her chair. Her overcoat was draped across the chair, and Carson reached into the pocket.

“Merry Christmas!” Carson grinned and handed her a small, red package with a huge bow.

Tears stung her eyes. The wave of affection hit her without warning as she looked up at Carson. “Thank you. But I don’t want to open it just yet. I have something for you in my office, and I would like it if we could open them at the same time.”

“I’d like that,” Carson said softly.

Erin held the package in both hands as they took the elevator to her floor. She was very aware of Carson right behind her all the way, the heat from her body, the sweet scent of her skin. The air seemed to grow heavier as Erin walked into her office and carefully closed the door. She handed Carson a small, rectangular package in blue paper.

“Merry Christmas, Carson.”

Erin had the definite feeling of being in a dream as Carson took the package. Time seemed to fade out as Carson stared at her, and then eagerly tore into the paper. Erin followed suit and unwrapped her own gift.

She opened a brown box and grinned at what she saw. The package held a stainless steel coffee mug with the words Coffeeholic engraved on the side and a small plastic square tied onto it with a red ribbon.

“A gift card for Starbucks?” Erin grinned. She thought it was the most thoughtful gift she had received in a long time. “Thank you.”

Carson had opened her own present and an embarrassed smile curved her lips. “Thank you, as well. Now I don’t have any excuses for missing your calls.”

She held a leather phone case that would clip to her trousers. Neither of them had spent a great deal on the gifts, but both were touched by the other’s thoughtfulness. Their choices were both personal, and practical.

Carson’s blue eyes twinkled with affection and possibly something more. Erin knew an answering expression was in her own gaze and she instinctively drew Carson closer. Her arms slipped around the narrow waist and then she hugged Carson warmly.

The gesture was appropriate, but Erin hadn’t considered how it would feel to hold Carson in her arms.

Carson’s shirt was warm from body heat under Erin’s fingers, and her cheek pressed against a strong shoulder. Carson’s chin rested against her hair and her arms slowly encircled Erin’s shoulders. Her hands were strong, but gentle, and Erin felt as though she had fallen into an abyss. Then she was overwhelmed by a myriad of emotions...excitement, security and boundless happiness.

I’m falling in love with her.

The thought was so sweet and true that tears stung the back of Erin’s eyes. And, it feels so wonderful.

Reluctantly Erin pulled away, but she wasn’t quite able to let go just yet. Her hand lingered on Carson’s upper arm as she met her gaze again. More of the fire she was growing accustomed to passed between them, and for an instant her eyes drifted down to Carson’s lips.

She clamped down on the strong urge to pull Carson close again and kiss her. She wanted it, and she thought Carson might just want it too, but Erin wanted to do this right. She wanted things to happen when Carson was sure. Being the innocent in this situation, Carson should have the right to set the pace.

“Thank you.”

SHE’S GOING TO kiss me, Carson thought when she saw Erin’s eyes start to drift closed. She leaned forward instinctively toward slightly parted lips. Then Erin seemed to change her mind and pulled away, and thanked her. It was hard to push her hormones back under control, but Carson steadied herself and decided she didn’t want their time together to end after the gift exchange. But, what could she come up with to get Erin to stay with her?

“Are...are you finished with your Christmas shopping?”

Erin shook her head. “Not really. I still want to pick up something for my father. I know it’s going to be late, but he’s hard to shop for. If he wants something, he just goes and gets it. What about you?”

“I wanted to pick something up for Joyce. I thought maybe we could go to Watertown Place to do some shopping.”

The mall was only a block from Erin’s apartment and Carson hoped that would entice her to go. She couldn’t seem to take her eyes off Erin after the hug, and it was hard not to reach out to her again. It was more than a physical attraction to Erin’s quiet beauty. It was sweet, and sharp, and so much more than a childish crush.

Carson wanted to be with Erin in every way possible, and after tonight, she thought that perhaps Erin wanted it too. Carson was terrified, and excited, and her frightening intelligence turned itself to the conundrum of how to court Erin.

“I’d love to,” Erin said softly. “Why don’t we drop my car at The Bernardin, and take the SUV to the mall?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Carson followed behind Erin’s Nissan and waited for her to park in the underground structure of her apartment building. Then she placed her cell phone into the new case and clipped it to her waist while she waited for the smaller woman to get into her Lexus.

The entire time Carson had difficulty concentrating on her actions and wanted only to stare at Erin, to drink in her features and get lost in her eyes.

“Are you all right,” Erin finally asked as they parked.

Carson looked at her gently. “I’m fine. Everything just seems a little unreal at the moment.”

“How so?”

“I feel like I’m in a fairy tale and that I’ve just met Prince Charming, or in this case Princess Charming.”

Erin smiled and glanced away shyly. Even in the gloom of moonlight, Carson could have sworn she blushed. Carson unsnapped the seatbelt and reached to place her fingers against Erin’s chin. She encouraged her to look up, and was pinned in place when their eyes met.

“Am I wrong?”

“What, about me being Princess Charming?”

Erin tried to joke, but Carson could sense that she was half-serious. “No, about what is between us.”

Erin hesitated then shook her head. “No, I don’t think you’re wrong. Is this too much for you?”

Carson thought Erin really meant to ask if she was frightened. Erin was aware that she hadn’t been involved before, and her concern touched Carson. In a way, it convinced her more than anything else that what was happening between them was the only possible outcome.

“Not too much, but I have to admit that it is a little ...scary.”

“I understand.” Erin reached up and took Carson’s hand, squeezing it gently before releasing it.

They shared another smile and then silently agreed to leave it at that. They got out of the Lexus and Carson engaged the alarm before they went into the large structure. After several stops, Erin dropped into a cigar shop for her father and Carson went across the hall to pick up a gift for Joyce. They agreed to meet back by the fountain in fifteen minutes.

Carson arrived at the fountain before Erin and sat on the stone bench. Her eyes were fixed on the flowing water and the shine of coins people had tossed into the basin as wishes were made. Carson had no such need for wishes since she thought everything she could possibly wish for had been granted.

Her abusive father was no longer a factor in her life, her business was a success and a beautiful and intelligent woman had claimed her heart. What more was there to ask for?

“Hey there. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

Carson looked up and smiled at Erin. “Not at all. What did you get your father?”

“I found a humidior made of Brazilian cherry wood, and got some Cohibas and Montecristos to put in it. Do you think he’ll like it?”

Carson stood up and looked into Erin’s bag. Erin’s cheeks were flushed in excitement and her eyes sparkled like a child’s eyes. It was all Carson could do not to touch her again in the midst of the last-minute holiday shoppers.

“Impressive,” she answered honestly. “I think he will like it very much.”

Erin smiled and they started back down the mall toward the end of the structure. There was no hurry and they shamelessly window-shopped as they strolled along. Erin stopped in front of a large glass display, and Carson, curious, stopped beside her. She looked at the display to see what Erin was looking at, but didn’t see anything special.

It was a clothing shop and two mannequins were on display wearing the latest Paris fashions. Christmas lights shone through the display along with a small, decorated tree and brightly wrapped packages. Fake snow covered the floor and there was even a mannequin dog lying under the tree. The male and female dummies faced one another in an embrace, their plastic lips scant millimeters apart, and a sprig of mistletoe hanging over their heads.

“I believe you owe me a kiss,” Erin said softly.

Carson looked at her in surprise. Erin had a lopsided grin on her face and one eyebrow was raised in a challenging fashion.

Carson was more than happy to take up the challenge and raised her own eyebrow in response. She reached for Erin’s hand and raised it to her lips. Carson placed a tender kiss on Erin’s knuckles. “I believe I do.”

It was time to go and they were both more than ready. Window-shopping was forgotten in the rush to get back to the Lexus. Packages were stored in the back seat, and then Carson pulled away from the parking lot and out into traffic.

Erin’s soft hand startled Carson when she placed it on Carson’s leg. Carson jerked slightly and then looked apologetically at Erin. “Sorry, nervous I guess.”

“Backing down?”

There was still a bit of challenge there and it made Carson smile again. “Not a chance.”

Carson parked next to Erin’s car and waited while she retrieved her packages. Then Carson followed Erin up to her apartment. Very little was said as both of them started to feel a little nervous. Even Erin, who was more experienced, seemed suddenly shy, and Carson wondered if it

was too early for this. Then they were at the apartment and Erin had opened the door. She turned to look at Carson expectantly, and Carson made a sudden decision.

The whole floor was part of Erin's apartment so there was no other traffic in the hall. Carson still wanted to kiss Erin, but if she followed Erin into her apartment Carson was afraid she wouldn't be able to control herself.

What if she sees how clumsy I am and changes her mind about getting involved with me?

Erin sat her packages on the floor inside the door and turned toward her. "Are you coming in?"

Carson startled herself when she grabbed Erin by both arms and pulled her close. Her lips pressed against Erin's long enough to feel the softness and heat. The feelings that kissing Erin generated were so much more than Carson had expected. Her lips tingled, and her stomach clenched. Finally, her nerves won out.

Carson pulled away quickly. "I should go."

"Oh, no you don't."

Erin's voice was smokier than Carson had ever heard it, and shivers traveled up her spine just before strong hands tangled in her hair. Erin pulled Carson toward her and into the foyer. Their lips met again and Carson's eyes closed as she followed Erin's lead.

Erin kicked the door closed and then pressed Carson back against it as she gentled the kiss. Carson was glad for the support behind her and thought her legs would have collapsed if she hadn't had the structure to lean against. Then she didn't think about anything else but the feel of Erin's mouth.

Carson unconsciously ran her hands lightly across Erin's back to explore the warm flesh and heated curves. The kiss was exquisite, soft and gentle at first so that Carson could hardly feel Erin's lips. Carson thought Erin was being careful not to frighten her, but she suddenly wanted more. Her hands clasped Erin harder and communicated her need. Erin responded to Carson's insistence as she slowly caressed the full, slightly parted lips with her tongue.

Lazily, they explored one another's lips, tongues and teeth until the passion between them began to escalate. Carson could feel Erin shake as she tried to control her ardor and allow Carson the opportunity to stop if she wanted to, but it only made Carson want her more.

Carson became more eager, and pulled Erin's firm body tightly against her. She whimpered as Erin's mouth moved to her neck and nipped the smooth skin lightly, sending little shivers across her flesh. Erin tightened her hold and returned to Carson's lips. Just when Carson thought she would pass out from a lack of oxygen Erin released her and slowly drew away.

"Do you want to stay?"

Carson stiffened and then forced herself to relax. “I do want to stay. I want to be with you, but...”

“It’s too soon. I understand,” Erin said gently. “Will you call me tomorrow?”

Carson could only nod wordlessly. Then she swallowed and pulled Erin against her in a tight hug. “Thank you, for understanding.”

Erin turned her head and kissed Carson’s cheek gently. “There’s no rush, Carson. I’m here when you’re ready.”

Reluctantly Carson let Erin go and spent a moment looking down into her loving face. “Goodnight,” she said finally and walked out the door.

After the door closed, Erin slumped against it and closed her eyes. She could still smell Carson’s perfume, and taste the sweetness of her lips. She remembered the soft sounds Carson made when lost in passion and her stomach clenched helplessly.

Oh God, why did I let her leave? I should have shown her how wonderful making love can be. Now, I’ll have a cold shower and hot dreams to look forward to.

But, Carson was worth it, and Erin knew she would wait as long as it took. She could only hope Carson didn’t want to wait very long.

Chapter Twelve

CARSON WAITED FOR as long as possible on Saturday morning to call Erin. Finally, at ten o’clock she couldn’t stand it anymore. Surely, ten o’clock was late enough and Erin would be up by now.

The events of last night played repeatedly in her mind. She had only meant to kiss Erin quickly and leave, just to familiarize herself with the feel of Erin’s lips and break the ice between them. Both of them felt the attraction, of that she was sure, but the longer things went on without a physical connection the more tension developed.

Carson thought if she kissed Erin quickly she could leave with the tension broken and a new bond established. Erin had other ideas, and after that first press of lips wouldn’t let Carson just walk away.

Her stomach tightened in remembered passion and Carson stumbled against the kitchen counter. She braced her hands against the cool surface and let the events play again in her head. Erin had shoved her passionately back against the door and explored her mouth thoroughly while Carson had been helpless to do anything but cling to her. When it was done, Carson's blood pumped with fire and all she wanted was to make love to Erin.

The minor attraction to a track athlete in college dimmed in comparison to the raw and savage pleasure Erin could generate with just a touch or a look, and Carson understood the difference between a crush and being in love.

That was the moment I realized that I was falling in love.

Carson smiled and closed her eyes as she relived Erin's passionate embrace again. The knowledge that she was in love for the first time was like some kind of rite of passage, as if she was finally an adult. It was silly, but that was the way it was.

Christmas was only a few days away, and she wanted nothing more than to spend that special day with Erin. But, I wonder if she already has plans?

Carson walked out into the living room and sat on the leather sofa. The phone was an arm's length away, and it only took a moment to reach a decision. She would just have to find out if Erin had plans, and if not, find a way to get Erin to spend the day with her.

She had only called Erin at home once, but that was enough for her numbers-oriented brain to remember the sequence. Carson dialed it without thought and the call was picked up halfway through the first ring. Had Erin been waiting for her call?

"Carson?"

Carson smiled into the phone. Apparently, Erin had caller id, and was eager to speak with her.

"Hi," Carson said breathlessly. "How did you sleep?"

"Better than I have for a very long time. You?"

Thoughts of her erotic dreams flashed through Carson's mind, and she blushed unseen across the connection. Her dreams had given her a glimpse of Erin's bare flesh, coral nipples and a flash of red hair at the apex of her thighs. Carson dreamt of things she had never experienced, and her bare toes tingled from the mental images.

"I had very good dreams," she answered honestly.

Erin chuckled. "I know exactly what you mean."

It was so easy to fall into this flirting banter, and Carson was pleased that neither of them sought to deny what had happened last night.

“So what are you doing today,” Erin asked.

“Nothing special. I haven’t spent much time at home lately, so I just thought I’d stay here today. I might take a walk or do some reading. This afternoon I’ll have to go shopping for a turkey, but other than that I intend to be here.”

“You’re going to make a turkey for Christmas? Are you having guests?”

Erin sounded surprised and Carson remembered that she didn’t like to cook. Perhaps this was the opportunity she had been looking for.

“No, no guests. I just always make a turkey. I feel Christmas is a special day and should be celebrated, even if I do it alone. What about you? Any plans for tomorrow?”

“Not for tomorrow. Unfortunately, I told Ray that I would go to his house tonight. They have to drive to Dayton to see Martha’s parents tomorrow, but she wanted to have a small gathering before they did the family thing. To be honest I think she just felt sorry for me. Usually I just spend Christmas day working at home in my office.”

That was all the invitation Carson needed. Erin had no plans for tomorrow or Christmas day, and the success of her plan hinged on not giving Erin time to back out.

“So you have no plans other than tonight?”

“No, why?”

“This year will not be spent working,” Carson said quickly. “I will pick you up at twelve o’clock tomorrow, and you will spend the holiday with me.”

Stunned silence greeted her, but then Erin said, “I will?”

“Yes. You can help me decorate the tree, and then on Christmas day we will open gifts and have turkey for dinner.”

“But that means...”

“It means that you will spend the night here.”

“Carson...” Erin sputtered.

“I will see you at noon. Don’t forget to pack a bag.”

Carson could hear Erin stammer across the connection, but hung up before she could refuse.

Doubts assailed Carson after she ended the call. What if Erin didn't want to spend the day with her? Had she just gone too far, and pushed her away? What would she do if Erin called back and told her she wasn't coming?

If that happened she would deal with it, Carson decided. Until then she had a hundred things to do. She didn't even have a tree yet, much less decorations or brightly colored gifts. Usually she just made the traditional turkey dinner and left it at that. So much for her walk!

With so many things to do, Carson would need help, and she could think of only one person to call. She picked up the phone and dialed Joyce's number. It rang four times and just when Carson decided her friend wasn't home, Joyce answered.

"Hello?"

The older woman sounded a little flustered, and Carson spared a hope that she hadn't interrupted anything, but her own panic overrode any other concerns.

"Hi, Joyce. It's Carson. Are you free today?"

"Well, I was just going to clean my carpets. I've already got the shampoo out."

"Good, so you're not busy. Can you go shopping with me?"

"Huh? Carson slow down, you sound like you're freaking out."

Carson took a deep breath and explained what happened. By the time she finished Joyce was in almost hysterical laughter.

"Oh, that's good. You just steam rolled over your new girlfriend before you thought about the consequences. That is so not like you."

Carson waited a few seconds for Joyce's laughter to taper off again. "She is not my girlfriend, well, at least not yet. Now are you going to help me or not?"

"Are you kidding? I've been waiting years for you to hook up so I could give you a hard time about it. I wouldn't miss it for the world. Pick me up in an hour, and we'll go to that little Christmas tree lot on Sheridan Road. Jeremy says they have a lot of really nice trees to choose from."

"Thank you, Joyce. I owe you one."

"Yes, you do. And don't think I'll let you forget it."

Joyce hung up without saying goodbye. That was typical of her friend, and Carson thought nothing of it as she rushed to get dressed. She was still in her robe and pajamas, and it would take twenty minutes to get to Joyce's apartment.

EXACTLY ONE HOUR later, Carson pulled up in front of the apartment building on Prince Street. Joyce was already outside with a huge grin on her face, and Carson knew she was in for it. Joyce would be having fun at her expense for the foreseeable future.

The door opened and Joyce climbed up in the Lexus. For a moment, all Carson could see was the top of her salt and pepper head. Then she saw the flash of white teeth and steeled herself for the first comment.

“So, did you decide what to get your girlfriend for Christmas? She’s no slouch, you know.”

“I am very well aware of that fact,” Carson said dryly. “Perhaps we could start with the tree and go from there?”

“In other words you have no idea what to get her.” Joyce burst out laughing while Carson pulled out into traffic. “This is going to be fun!”

Carson rolled her eyes. Fun for whom?

They spent all day shopping. Carson settled on a seven-foot tree, but Joyce insisted that she purchase a Douglas fir because they were a fuller-looking tree. The lot attendant tied it to the roof of the Lexus and Carson was glad she had purchased the optional luggage rack that would protect the paint job.

“Don’t forget the tree stand,” Joyce reminded her.

After that they drove to the mall where Carson purchased so many tree decorations that Joyce was in stitches again, and claimed the tree would never hold that many lights, tinsel, or ornaments. Outside colored lights and yard décor were added to the purchase before they left the Christmas shop. Both of them were loaded with bags and the women had to go back to the SUV to unload before they went back in.

“Don’t you think you’re overdoing it a little here,” Joyce asked at one point.

Carson shrugged. “Too many decorations are better than too few. Besides, I don’t know what Erin likes.”

“So you want to cover all your bases, is that it?”

The computer exec ignored Joyce’s double meaning, and walked toward the food court. “Are you hungry?”

They went to the small pseudo Chinese kiosk and got some lunch. After they sat down to eat, Joyce questioned her again about the gift for Erin. Carson already knew what she had in mind and mentioned the idea to her friend. Joyce steered her toward a high-end stationary store at the back of the mall and eventually Carson had just the thing she'd been looking for. They were almost out of the mall when something else caught her eye. Part of the joy of Christmas was opening gifts, and she wanted to get Erin something else.

Joyce's delighted laugh followed Carson into the store, but at least her friend refrained from any comments.

Once finished with the shopping spree, Carson suggested a stop by the market to pick up her turkey, and all the trimmings. Throughout the entire day, Joyce gamely went along with all suggestions, even coming up with a few of her own along the way without complaint. Joyce also recommended spiced rum, eggnog and mistletoe.

Joyce looked at her funny when Carson blushed at the mention of mistletoe, but Carson wordlessly walked away and refused to elaborate.

Finally, Carson had everything on her list as well as several other things that hadn't been listed. In fact, the SUV was so loaded she was convinced they couldn't have fit anything else inside if they tried. It was almost dark when she pulled up in front of Joyce's building.

"Thanks for the day," Joyce said grinning. "I haven't laughed that hard in a long time."

"Glad you enjoyed yourself," Carson responded dryly. Then she stopped Joyce with a touch on the arm before she could get out of the car. "Wait a minute. I have something for you."

Curious Joyce turned back toward her. Carson pulled a small gold wrapped box from beneath her seat and handed it to her best friend. "Merry Christmas."

"What's this?"

The question was rhetorical. Joyce took the small box and eagerly ripped it open to reveal a baby blue box with a white ribbon. Joyce was quiet for the first time since Carson had known her as she opened the box to see what was inside. Then she looked up with a suspicious glint in her eyes.

"Carson?"

"You are the best friend I have ever had," Carson said softly. "Even when I was considered the class geek you were there for me, and have always been someone I could count on. I consider you family, Joyce."

Joyce leaned across the leather seats and hugged Carson close. She wasn't a woman given to physical gestures, and Carson realized how moved she was by the present.

Joyce pulled back and took the Rolex out of the box. She carefully strapped the heavy, silver watch to her wrist before she looked back up at Carson.

“You really are a special person. I hope Erin realizes what a lucky woman she is. Merry Christmas, Carson.”

“Merry Christmas, Joyce.”

Joyce got out of the Lexus but before she closed the door she said, “Have fun unloading all that stuff by yourself.”

Visions of unloading the tree alone flashed through Carson’s mind and her eyes went wide. The sound of Joyce’s laugh rang in her ears long after she drove away from Prince Street.

It was completely dark by the time Carson finished unloading the car. When she unloaded the tree it scraped against the side of the Lexus, and Carson was afraid she had scratched the paint. She complained all the while, and thought she should have waited until she unpacked before taking Joyce home.

Eventually everything was inside and Carson struggled to set the tree into the stand before she filled the basin with water. Now where would be the best place for it? Maybe Erin would enjoy it beside the fireplace.

Carson dragged the whole contraption a few feet, and moved the Persian rug out of the way. When she stood back to survey her handiwork, she thought it was perfect. The groceries were put away, and the wine was in the chiller. The tree ornaments were stacked neatly in a corner, and all there was left was to wrap Erin’s gifts and put them out of sight until the tree was decorated.

It was getting late and Carson was worn out. All she wanted now was a shower, a glass of wine and her bed. She could wrap the gifts in the morning.

There wasn’t a message on her machine so Erin hadn’t called to back out, and Carson felt her heart skip a beat. She would spend Christmas with someone else for the first time since she’d left home, and not just anyone, but a very beautiful woman who she was hopelessly in love with.

ERIN NERVOUSLY PACED the living room of the penthouse apartment. Her bags were packed to spend the holiday weekend with Carson, and she still couldn’t help but wonder how she found herself in this position. What began as a very pleasant conversation with a young woman that she had fallen for in the space of a week had ended with the unexpected date for the entire weekend. Dinner was one thing, but Erin wasn’t sure Carson was ready for anything that spending a weekend together might imply.

Several times, Erin considered calling back to cancel but changed her mind. She wanted to see Carson, and was curious where she lived. There was so much Erin needed to know about Carson... what was her favorite color? Did Carson prefer baths or showers? It would be safer for both of them to keep things light for a while and embark on normal dating endeavors such as dinner, coffee or even a movie, but Erin didn't want that. She wanted so much more, but had to remind herself that if Carson wanted to go slow then they would go slow. This was too important to rush and possibly ruin.

This was simply a case of two women who happened to be attracted to one another sharing Christmas rather than celebrating it alone. Erin had to remember that and not allow her own desire to frighten the young woman who was discovering love for the first time. At least Erin hoped it was love on Carson's part. She didn't know what she would do if she fell any deeper for the younger woman only to have Carson unable to return her emotions.

Nervously she replayed the events of last night in her mind. Erin didn't know why she practically dragged Carson into her apartment to kiss her. All she knew was that Carson was going to run away after merely smashing their lips together for a few precious seconds, and Erin wasn't willing to settle for that. Anticipation got the best of her and made Erin throw caution to the wind, and she had been rewarded with countless minutes of passion that made her forget Carson's fear. From the way Carson responded she had forgotten it, too.

Then Erin had invited Carson to stay the night, her intentions very clear and Erin watched the panic rush back into the younger woman's face. Erin could have kicked herself.

Now, Carson had invited Erin to spend Christmas with her and Erin was confused.

She's a grown woman and I can feel that she wants me as much as I want her, she thought. That's probably why she's so frightened, at least part of it. Carson must have enough pent up sexual energy to power a small mid-western city. But does she have any idea how hard this is going to be for me? To not pounce on her?

It wasn't as if Carson gave her much of a choice. She just requested that Erin bring an overnight bag and she would pick her up at noon.

The doorbell rang and Erin jumped at the sound. Her heart accelerated almost painfully, and she was suddenly out of time to decide.

"Come in."

Carson walked through the door looking entirely too wonderful and for a moment all Erin could do was stare.

She was dressed casually in jeans, white tennis shoes, and a blue button-down shirt covered by a denim jacket. Carson's blonde hair spilled gloriously around her shoulders, and Erin remembered how the thick strands had felt between her fingers.

“Hi,” she said softly, shyly.

“Hi,” Carson returned. “Are you ready to go?”

Erin nodded and put on her jacket before she picked up her bags. One was a black, leather duffel, and the other was a shoulder bag. The shoulder bag held the gifts Erin had run out for after talking with Carson on the phone. She could hardly spend Christmas with Carson and not get presents.

Carson took the duffel bag from her, and Erin carried her purse.

“You look wonderful,” Carson said. “This is the first time I haven’t seen you in a skirt.”

Erin looked down reflexively at her faded jeans and hiking boots. She wore a purple sweater, and a leather coat.

“Well, you said you live out on one of the old estates so I wanted to be prepared.”

“I live on an estate, Erin, not on a farm. You won’t have to worry about slogging through the mud.”

Humor threaded Carson’s voice and Erin laughed. “You’re just going to have to show me this place so I’ll know what to expect next time.”

Erin wondered if Carson thought she was presumptuous for implying there would be a next time, but she didn’t say anything. Carson merely smiled that gentle smile that glowed in her eyes and walked out into the hall. Erin locked the door and they walked down to the lobby.

Carson had used valet parking and they had to wait a few minutes while the Lexus was brought around to the front. Erin followed Carson to the car. They were out of the city in minutes. Sunlight glinted off the great lake as Carson drove up the Kennedy Expressway, and Erin relaxed against the heated seats. The atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been to this part of the city,” Erin admitted softly as she looked out across the water at the gray mist. In the deep summer, people enjoyed sailing schooners and catamarans, and Erin appreciated the vivid colors against the blue water, but now the water was too cold for outdoor excursions.

“How long?”

“Hmm, at least two years,” Erin admitted with some surprise. “Since before I took over the penthouse from my dad. The summer before that I went to Paris for a symposium, but it only lasted three days.”

“That’s not much time for sightseeing. I have never been to Paris.”

Erin barely refrained from commenting that they could go together some time. “You should go. The Eiffel Tower is amazing.”

“Is it true that the Eiffel Tower used to be a radio station?”

Erin nodded. “Yes. It had been abandoned for years and the French government almost tore it down before it was turned into a tourist attraction. Now they make far too much from the proceeds to even consider it.”

“Not to mention the tourism trade it draws to the city itself.”

“Very true. Have you ever been out of the United States,” Erin asked curiously. She knew Carson spent most of her young life in school and developing the company, but Erin didn’t know if she had ever taken any time off.

“Sadly, no. But someday I would like to go on the haunted castle tour in England. I hear it is an amazing experience.”

“That sounds like fun.”

Carson turned on her blinker and Erin sat up a little straighter, more interested in their surroundings. They turned onto a small, tree-lined road and Erin felt as though they had done more than just leave the city. A lot of the trees here were evergreens, and the sudden contrast of color against the usual bleak winter backdrop gave her a surreal feeling.

A few hundred yards up the lane Carson turned into a private drive and had to stop for a moment while a black wrought iron security gate opened. Then they drove through and the lane made a sharp cut back to the right.

Erin gasped at the first sight of Carson’s home. The façade of the house was brick and it rested up on a pad higher than the surrounding property. It had two stories, and Erin counted three chimneys from the front. Smoke drifted from the chimney closest to the entrance, and Erin guessed that was where the living area was. In warmer weather, the smoke of a fire would have been invisible, but in the intense cold, it stood out like a brush fire. In the distance, she could just make out the glint of water.

“You have a private lake?”

“It’s more of a duck pond, really.”

Then they went around the corner and Erin had the full view of Lake Michigan. Even through the construction equipment currently employed to build the sea wall, the view was impressive.

“You didn’t tell me about this!”

“I wanted you to be surprised.”

Erin could hear the pride in Carson’s voice and couldn’t blame her. “This place is amazing.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s the heavy equipment for?”

“Right now they’re building a sea wall,” Carson said. “I just didn’t feel safe being so close to the lake without protection. There will be a lot of other work done as well, but I don’t anticipate it taking as long as the sea wall has so far.”

They must have driven past a sensor because, although Erin didn’t see Carson press any buttons, the huge doors to the garage began to rise. Lights came on automatically as they pulled inside, and the doors lowered again.

Even the garage was quite roomy. A tool cart sat at one end, and a large freezer took up another corner, but other than that, the garage was empty.

Erin got out of the car and was surprised again when she felt heated air instead of the usual cool dampness typical of a carport. *A heated garage?*

“Let me help get your bags.”

Bags in hand, Carson led the way to a door and they emerged in the kitchen. Erin followed and her eyes popped as she looked around.

“This kitchen is huge, not to mention well-stocked. You must have every cooking gadget known to man.”

Right off Erin identified an espresso machine, food processor, and a wrought iron rack so loaded with various cooking pots she thought it was a wonder it didn’t fall from the ceiling. Some things she couldn’t identify and she walked up to one of the mystery gadgets curiously.

“It’s a pasta press.”

“You make your own pasta? Isn’t that very time consuming?”

“Very,” Carson agreed. “But I did tell you I like to cook.”

“Yes, you did. I just had no idea how serious you were about it. I’m surprised you didn’t become a chef instead of a computer whiz.”

“I’ll remind you of that later,” Carson said with gentle humor. “You might change your mind.”

Erin had a feeling Carson was being modest. The well-equipped room hinted at a love of cooking that went beyond mere food preparation. The gadgets, obviously frequently used, were kept immaculately clean. That much love of something creative was indicative of a tender, sensitive soul, and Erin looked at Carson with fresh eyes.

Everything the young woman did, she did completely with a focused intensity that would drown out the world around her. When Carson finally fell hard enough, would she bring that fervor to making love? If she were ever lucky enough to be the recipient of that intensity, Erin didn't know if she could survive it. But what a way to go!

A shiver traveled up her spine. "When do I get the honor of taking you up on that," Erin said in a gravelly voice.

Carson's eyes darkened and Erin wondered if she had noticed the undertones that laced the question.

"Tonight, actually. Since we are having a traditional holiday meal tomorrow, I thought we could just grill steaks tonight. Do you like steak?"

"I adore it," Erin admitted and wasn't sure she was talking about meat. "Oh, that reminds me."

Erin sat her bags down and reached into the one that held Carson's present. She carefully pulled out another large bag wrapped in plastic to keep from wetting the gift-wrapping.

"I didn't want to come empty handed, so I brought the wine."

"You brought a red and a white?"

Erin grinned. "Well, I didn't know what we'd be having."

"So you planned for every possibility," Carson finished. "Good thinking. I'll put the wine away and then show you to your room so you can settle in."

"All right, but after that do you mind if I have the tour. I would love to see the rest of your home."

Erin saw that she had said the right thing. Carson got that little shy smile on her face that barely curved her lips, but shone most brilliantly in her eyes.

"I'd like that."

Carson put the white wine in a refrigerated cooler under the massive kitchen island, and placed the red in a wine rack set beneath a cupboard. Then she picked up Erin's duffle bag and led the way through her house toward the guest room. Carson had never used the room before and hoped it would be to Erin's liking.

When they walked through the living room Erin gasped, and Carson looked back to see what was wrong.

“That’s the biggest tree I’ve ever seen, at least in someone’s house!”

“Wait until we decorate it.”

Carson stifled a laugh as Erin’s eyes bugged, and started toward the bedroom again. She sat the duffle on the bed and then turned to her guest.

“There is a private bathroom in the corner,” she said, pointing. “And that door leads out to the back deck. Towels are in a cupboard in the bathroom, but I have taken the liberty of laying out a few for you. My room is directly across the hall.”

The last bit she added in a rush, and hoped she didn’t sound too awkward. What she really wanted was for Erin to sleep in her room, or perhaps more than sleep, but it was entirely too soon for that. Still, just the thought of Erin sleeping across the hall would probably be enough to keep her up all night.

The room was an array of blues and silvers. A nautical theme of tiny sailboats, and seashells adorned the wall shelves, and a ship in a bottle sat in the center of the dresser. An old-fashioned white life preserver hung on the wall on the far side, but the bed linens were far from rustic. The blue chenille spread was turned down at the top to reveal creamy white sheets and pillows that looked like clouds.

“It’s lovely. Thank you.”

Carson thought she could fall into those eyes. “Well, get settled in, and I’ll show you around a little.” Then she left before she did something to make a fool of herself.

With Erin just down the hall, Carson didn’t know what to do with her hands. This is ridiculous! This is my home, and I should just do what I would if she wasn’t here. Okay, what would I do? Music!

Carson had picked out several CD’s when Erin joined her a few minutes later. Erin clasped her hands, and looked as nervous as Carson. To ease the tension a little, Carson asked, “What kind of music would you like?”

“I’d like some oldies, or perhaps a little jazz,” Erin suggested.

Carson looked at the discs she had selected. “How about Diana Krall, Kenny G, and Enigma to start?”

“Sounds good.”

Erin looked around the room while Carson put on the stereo. With the music in the background, Erin reminded Carson again of the tour. They started on the lower floor, most of which Erin had already seen, before they went upstairs. Off the second floor family room, Carson opened the French doors and stepped out onto the Juliet balcony. Erin was only a step behind her, and Carson watched her closely for a reaction.

Awe was the word that came to Carson's mind.

Erin's hands gripped the wooden railing as she looked out across the distance of the property. There was a duck pond a little to the left of the house that was frozen, but that didn't keep cardinals from landing and taking off again, and then straight out was the view of the great lake. From Carson's balcony it looked as though it went on forever.

"It's like something out of a painting. How can you ever bear to leave?"

To Carson it seemed Erin tore her eyes away from the scene with great difficulty to look at her.

"It is hard on some days. On those days I remind myself that I would not have this if not for my company, and it's a little easier. On days like today, with you here, it would not be possible."

She hadn't meant to admit that, and Carson was nervous about the reaction she would get, but Erin didn't seem to mind. She stepped toward her, and for a second Carson wondered if Erin would kiss her again. Instead, Erin slid her arms inside Carson's coat and hugged her gently.

Carson wrapped her longer arms around Erin's shoulders, and held her as she relished the feel of the warm body. Red hair tickled her cheek and chin, and Carson inhaled the flowery scent of her shampoo.

After a moment Erin spoke. "Carson?"

"Hmm?"

"Can we go back inside before my toes freeze?"

Carson laughed and pulled away. "Of course. Let me show you the rest."

"There's more?"

"Oh yes, much more. You haven't seen the solarium, the spa, or my library yet."

"Oh dear!"

Thirty minutes later, the tour was complete and they were sitting on the couch. Their coats were deposited in the coat closet and Carson had lit a fire in the stone fireplace and made a pot of

coffee. The coffee and cups sat on a silver tray near at hand along with a sugar and milk dispenser.

Carson poured coffee into the fine china before she handed a cup to Erin.

“To first Christmases together.”

Erin’s eyes sparkled when she lifted her cup to return the toast. “First Christmases.”

They sipped the strong brew quietly. Erin spotted the boxes of decorations piled in one corner. “Good Lord! Are we really going to try and get all of that on the tree?”

“Well maybe not all of it, but I did want us to have a good selection. Would you like to start?”

Erin considered for a second before she grinned. “Why not?”

Carson eagerly knelt in front of the boxes with Erin beside her and started to dig through the assortment. Then she decided she wanted to be comfortable and sat down to take off her shoes. Erin laughed at how childlike Carson looked before she dropped to the floor, and followed suit.

The next few hours were spent drinking coffee and decorating the tree. They strung the lights first, but when Carson plugged them into the wall, nothing happened. Erin doubled in delighted laughter while Carson frowned mightily. Now there was no choice, but to pull the whole strand off and try to find the burned out bulb.

The lights were strung out all the way to the kitchen, and both women were on their hands and knees to find the culprit. Carson was back toward the tree while Erin had gone the other direction. The triumphant cry made Carson look up to get an eye full of Erin’s rounded cheeks.

Riveted by the sight of Erin’s jean-clad rear end, Carson could only stare. “Found it,” Erin said. “One of the bulbs is broken. Can you bring me one of the spares?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

When they were finished Carson and Erin stood back to take stock of their handy work.

“It’s perfect.”

Erin nodded her agreement. “All it needs are some gifts underneath. I have yours,” she added eagerly and tore off through the house toward the guest room.

Carson guffawed at the enthusiastic way the normally composed attorney ran on stocking feet toward the bedroom. “I have yours, too,” she shouted.

It took longer for Carson to retrieve her packages, and Erin beat her back to the tree. When she returned, Erin had already placed two bundles beneath the tree, one was very large and one was very small and rectangular shaped.

Carson placed her own boxes under the tree before she looked significantly at the smaller package Erin had brought, and then back up to her. “Don’t tell me you gave me cigars, too?”

Erin easily caught on to the reference of shopping in the mall together. Erin had gone into the cigar store to get a humidor for her father, and mentioned that she had also bought cigars.

“Nice try, but I’m not going to tell you what’s inside.”

Chapter Thirteen

“ARE YOU HUNGRY yet?”

“Famished,” Erin admitted with some surprise.

She looked at her watch and was shocked to see it was almost five o’clock. Time had a way of passing quickly when she was with Carson, and they had been so busy with the tree that Erin hadn’t even thought about food.

“How do grilled steaks with sautéed mushrooms sound?”

“Like heaven, but isn’t it a little cold to grill steaks outside?”

“Well, it is cold, but I think it’s worth it. I usually step out and light the grill and come back in until it’s ready.”

“If you’re sure,” Erin relented. “I don’t want you to freeze just for me.”

Carson shook her head and smiled. “I do this all the time. Sometimes I even sit out on the deck and watch the duck pond. It’s frozen right now, but other animals still play on it.”

So Carson was a nature lover, and that was why she owned a big old house so far out from the city. From what she knew of Carson’s childhood, Erin guessed she also wasn’t a big fan of large crowds.

“I’d like to see the duck pond,” Erin said softly.

“We’re going to need our coats.”

Erin followed Carson to the coat closet and they bundled up before they went outside. A door off the family room led out to a large wooden deck, and Carson flipped some wall switches as they passed through. Lights came on out on the deck, and Erin was enchanted by the view. The ground sloped away and two hundred yards from the house Erin could see the large pond that was really a small lake. It was frozen, just as Carson had said, and a low mist hovered above it.

No wildlife was in sight at the moment, but large trees came down to the edge. Erin could imagine in the spring and summer the place would be booming with all manner of wildlife.

A covered patio table, surrounded by four chairs, took up center stage on the deck. The cushions had been removed for the winter and all but one of them had been tilted so that the backrest was against the table to keep the rain off them. Erin could almost see Carson out here sipping coffee as she relaxed and took in the day. Down by the water’s edge, near where the sea wall was being built, there was an old boathouse, and a dock.

“Do you go out on the lake a lot?”

Carson nodded in answer while she concentrated on removing the grill cover. She lifted the lid and pushed the ignition switch. Flames flared in the bottom of the grill, and Carson adjusted the heat control before she lowered the lid.

“I like to fish when it’s warm enough,” Carson admitted, “but strictly on a catch and release basis. I’m allergic to freshwater fish. Do you like to fish?”

Erin shrugged and put her hands in her pockets. “It’s been years since I’ve been. The last time my dad took me, I was ten years old, so I don’t remember much about it, just being on the water with him.”

“Are they pleasant memories?”

Erin couldn’t detect any hidden meaning behind the question, and guessed that Carson was merely curious. She didn’t seem jealous of Erin’s close relationship with her father, something Erin knew Carson hadn’t experienced with her own father.

“Oh yes.” Erin grinned. “Once, I remember we were going down the Ohio River on an old bass boat he had restored. My dad insisted he knew the best fishing spot, and it turned out to be a little eddy completely filled with submerged tree stumps. He was standing in the front when the boat hit one of the stumps, and he flew head over heels into the water.”

Erin laughed at the memory, and Carson chuckled along with her. “I was the only one with him, and he was yelling at me to turn off the motor. By the time I had it shut off, and he swam to the boat, he was exhausted!”

“You’re very lucky to have memories like those,” Carson said and slipped an arm around Erin’s shoulders.

For a moment they just stood there and looked down at the pond, each lost in their own thoughts. “Would you like to go fishing again sometime,” Carson asked.

“I’d love to.” Erin looked at Carson and smiled. “But not until it warms up a little, huh?”

“Good point. Now, what do you say that we go inside while the grill heats up?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Back inside, they deposited their coats on a chair since they would be needed again, and Erin followed Carson into the kitchen.

“I’ve already made the salads, and they’re in the refrigerator.”

Carson lifted some plastic wrap off a bowl, and two of the biggest steaks Erin had ever seen were marinating inside. Carson didn’t notice Erin’s eyes popping, and continued. “I was thinking we could have baked potatoes on the side, and I made a chocolate caramel cheesecake for dessert. That bottle of red wine you brought would go perfectly with our meal.”

“And after that we could have a heart by-pass,” Erin added dryly.

Carson looked at her quickly with a question in her eyes. “Would you prefer something else?”

“I’m sorry,” Erin said instantly contrite. She walked to Carson and slipped her arms around her waist. Carson returned the embrace and pulled Erin’s head onto her shoulder. “It all sounds lovely. I’m just not accustomed to someone taking care of all the details for me.”

“Does it bother you?”

“No,” Erin shook her head minutely. “To be honest, I rather like it. It’s just not easy for me to let someone else make the decisions. I’m used to being in charge, and the one that everyone else goes to.”

Carson held her gently for a few seconds. “You don’t need to be in control all the time with me. I like doing things for you.”

Erin laughed and pulled away so she could look up at Carson. “Something tells me that you wouldn’t let me get away with it anyway.”

“You are correct.”

Something hot and primal flashed between them, and Erin's breath came faster when Carson's eyes lowered to her mouth. Erin reached up and touched each side of Carson's face to pull her down to her waiting lips. As their lips met, Erin tried to reach up with her entire body to merge with Carson.

The kiss deepened quickly as Erin's mouth engulfed Carson's and her tongue pushed gently against full lips. Instinctively Carson parted her lips and a wave of new sensations, more intense than any she'd felt before filled her completely. She moaned involuntarily as her desire expanded.

For long moments the world around dropped away and Carson absorbed the taste of Erin's lips and the almost rough stroking of the tongue inside her mouth. Slowly she came back to herself and eased away from the delicious contact.

Carson's eyes were dark with desire, and she took deep, open-mouthed breaths to regain her equilibrium. Thoughts of dinner went out the window as she tried to capture Erin's lips again in another heated kiss, but Erin turned her head to the side and embraced Carson instead.

"Erin?"

The hesitant question twisted Erin's heart. She wanted nothing more than to make love with Carson, but she knew it was too soon.

"I'm sorry, darling. I guess I'm just a little nervous."

"It's all right. I'm nervous, too, but I do enjoy kissing you."

Erin clung to her helplessly before she answered with a smile. "I love kissing you, too. That's what scares me, how easy this is between us."

"Easy? At least you've done this before. I'm so afraid you'll decide I'm inept at this, and head for greener pastures!"

Erin laughed gently and pulled away from Carson. Then she stood on tiptoe and kissed the tip of her nose. "I don't think you have to worry about that. Your kisses are wonderful, and I'm already hooked on them. Now, how about dinner, and maybe we'll have more of those delicious kisses later?"

"All right," Carson agreed with a small smile. "But, I hope dinner goes quickly."

She took a deep breath and stepped completely out of Erin's embrace. "I'll get the potatoes ready for the microwave, and then put the steaks on."

"Would you like for me to set the table?"

Carson was pleased to note that Erin's voice wasn't very steady. Just the idea that Erin was more affected than she let on helped steady Carson in a way that all the thoughts of having patience couldn't.

"That would be great. Wine glasses are in the top cupboard above the espresso machine, and plates are on the opposite side."

Erin smiled at her, and the rest of Carson's tension drained away. Each of them was busy the next few minutes and conversation was deliberately light with comments on the winter storm expected in later that night.

Carson pierced the potatoes with a fork and put them into the microwave while Erin set the table. Erin even pulled out the wine and opened it up to breathe as Carson took the steaks and a pair of tongs out onto the deck.

As was her custom, Carson walked out onto the deck in her shirtsleeves. She was very aware of Erin's eyes on her as she walked outside. The air was cold, but there wasn't any wind at the moment, and Carson enjoyed the extreme temperatures. She lifted the lid and placed the steaks on the grill before her eyes wandered down to the frozen pond.

A curious sensation came on her unexpectedly. It wasn't a pleasant feeling by any means, and she frowned wondering what it could be. Carson closed her eyes to concentrate on the feeling rather than push it away as most people might have done. It was her usual way to solve problems, and always worked for her as it did now.

The feeling was fear, but it was more specific than that and was directly related to their experiences in Erin's office building. Goosebumps broke out on her arms and Carson shivered at the memory. She didn't know why she thought of him now, and guessed it had to do with the frigid temperatures to which she had deliberately exposed herself. Carson had felt a similar cold in the Holcomb Building, but it was a chilly sensation of dread that had little to do with the actual temperature. Dark and dreadful shapes flickered in her mind, and it was the memory of the dead and injured security guards.

Carson wondered if Erin had thought of the killer again, and hoped not, though she didn't think it was possible merely to forget it. Memories such as those were not easy to dispel.

She shivered again, and Erin startled her. "You're going to freeze to death. I brought your coat. What are you doing?"

Carson opened her eyes and smiled. "Thank you." She put her coat on, and answered. "Nothing, just thinking."

"From your expression, I'd say they weren't pleasant thoughts."

Carson turned the steaks to buy time. "The steaks will be done in a few minutes. How do you like yours done?" The change of subject wasn't very subtle, but she hoped Erin would just let it

go. Carson wasn't sure she could articulate what was bothering her, and she didn't want to worry Erin unnecessarily.

"Medium rare."

"Ah, in that case they will be done sooner than expected."

"You like yours medium rare, too?"

"Yes," Carson nodded. "I know that from a strictly religious standpoint rare meat is unacceptable, but I think the meat is too tough if it's too well done."

"I agree, and religion has nothing to do with how tender I like my steak."

Carson poked at the meat with a fork a few minutes later and announced that they were done.

Dinner was pleasant, and the wine flowed freely. Carson wasn't able to hold onto the fear she had experienced on the deck, and it disappeared as if it had never been. Instead, being near Erin brought back the earlier feelings of warmth and heightened sensation Carson had begun to associate with her.

After dinner, they stacked the dishes in the dishwasher, and settled on the sofa with coffee and dessert.

"Delicious," Erin said after the first mouthful.

Carson concealed her pleased smile as she concentrated on her own dessert. Finally, dessert was finished and they sat back on the sofa to enjoy the fire. Erin surprised her when she snuggled up against her chest. Carson happily wrapped her arms around Erin, and inhaled the scent of her perfume as they stared into the fire.

"This is nice," Erin mumbled.

"Hmm."

Erin lifted her head, and Carson took immediate advantage. She closed the short distance and captured Erin's lips in a soft kiss. For a moment she held her breath, nervously afraid that Erin would pull away, but she needn't have worried. Erin groaned into her mouth, and the sound set Carson's blood on fire.

When Erin moaned, her lips had parted and Carson felt her tongue, warm and gentle, touch her upper lip. Her arms circled Carson's waist and pulled her into the lean, strong body. Then they were kissing deeply, mouths open and tongues tangling sweetly.

Carson's breath came in soft sighs as Erin teased her lips with gentle tugs and tender nips. Her tongue stroked Carson's soft lips and Carson moaned with desire.

Carson leaned forward to lay Erin back onto the sofa cushions, and Erin's arms slid around her neck to hold her tightly. Erin's legs parted to welcome Carson deeper into her embrace as she circled her hips.

Carson shuddered at the feel of Erin's soft breasts pressing against her. She released Erin's bruised lips and sucked gently at the elegant throat. Carson felt Erin shudder as she panted helplessly and slid the fingers of one hand into her hair.

"Carson."

Carson didn't respond as she started to caress the soft skin beneath her with one hand. Her mouth explored Erin's neck then she moved up to lick gently at the shell of the small ear, while her hand moved slowly toward the soft breasts that she had wanted to touch for so long.

"Carson!"

Erin tensed, and this time Carson pulled away to see what was wrong. Erin's eyes were closed, and her tongue darted out to wet her lips nervously. Slowly she opened her eyes and looked up at Carson. Erin raised one hand to Carson's cheek and stroked softly with the back of her fingers as she smiled tremulously.

"Do you need to stop," Carson asked.

Erin looked away quickly, caught by her hesitance before she looked back up at Carson. "If we don't, I won't be able to. Things are going just a little too quickly for me. Is that all right?"

"I won't say that I'm happy to stop," Carson admitted gently, "but I understand. I know you want me, I can feel it and I can taste it in your kiss. Right now, that's enough. Can you tell me why you are afraid to be with me?"

"Because there will be repercussions. Carson, you haven't been with anyone before, and if we do this, there will be consequences. Maybe you'll think that you will feel more than what you do because of a physical relationship, and then later you'll regret what happened. I couldn't bear that. I guess I just want you to be sure."

Carson pulled away slowly and sat up. Her hands folded between her knees and she stared into the fire while Erin sat up beside her.

"You sound as though you've been through this before, like someone hurt you very much." Carson looked away from the fire and into Erin's sad eyes. "But I am not this other woman, and I know how I feel."

"I'm sure you think you do," Erin acknowledged gently. "And it's true that this has happened to me before. I thought she loved me, I thought we were both in love. Later she told me that it had all been a mistake, and that she wasn't in love with me. Six months later, she married a man that she worked with. That was six years ago."

Carson was torn by the story. On one hand, her heart went out to the woman that she knew she loved completely, but at the same time, she was concerned that Erin would judge her by her ex-girlfriend's actions.

"What was her name," Carson asked trying very hard to keep her voice neutral.

"Rose. Rosemarie Cantorri."

Erin's expression was so bleak that Carson was sure she was reliving her experience in her mind. Carson was sympathetic to Erin's fear, but she was also frustrated with passion. What she mostly felt, at that moment, was her own burning need, and her disappointment that Erin was unable to move beyond the past. If Erin wasn't ready to move forward, Carson had to be content with that but it was important for Erin to look at what was developing between them with fresh eyes.

Carson put an arm around Erin's shoulder and pulled her close against her side. She rested her cheek against Erin's soft hair, and thought about what Erin had told her.

"All along you've been saying that you want me to be sure, but that isn't true." Carson said gently. "You want you to be sure. I can't help you with that, Erin. But, make no mistake, I know how I feel, and I know that I want to be with you. When you're ready, let me know."

Carson's voice lowered the more she spoke and when she finished it was barely above a whisper. Maybe it was time to call it a night before things got too serious. She squeezed Erin's shoulders gently, placed a kiss on top of her head, and stood up. Carson looked down at Erin's bent head before she offered her a hand to stand up.

Erin stood and looked into her eyes and Carson lowered her head briefly for a gentle kiss.

"Goodnight, Erin. Sleep well."

THAT NIGHT THE use of hot water in Carson's house was minimal as both women opted for cold showers, and even though the bed in Carson's guestroom was comfortable, Erin tossed and turned most of the night.

The softness of Carson's skin and the feel of her full breasts as they pressed against Erin's own smaller offerings played again and again in her mind.

Why the hell had she insisted that they slow down anyway, Erin wondered? Clearly, Carson was more than ready for a more intimate relationship, and Erin was only using Carson's innocence as an excuse. What was worse, Carson had figured it out. Erin was the one afraid. She

was frightened that Carson would hurt her just as Rose had years ago. But Erin wasn't being fair. Carson wasn't Rose, and Erin knew very well that there were no guarantees in love.

And that's what this is, isn't it? I'm already so in love with her, and one thing is for sure; if I don't take a chance I'll never know if things could work out between us.

There and then Erin almost got out of bed to see if Carson was still interested in consummating their relationship. Instantly she changed her mind and rolled over to thump her pillow. It was late and Carson was probably already asleep.

Eventually Erin did fall into a fitful sleep, but it was to dream of soft pink nipples and heated embraces. In her dream, there were no doubts or fears. The fantasies of her waking thoughts intruded into her subconscious.

Erin could feel Carson's full lips as they surrounded her nipples, and the sharp bite of teeth that tugged at the hardened nubs. Carson's hands were sure and knowing as they slid down her body and opened the soft folds gently. Her passion was soft, but insistent as it translated itself through sweet caresses that ignited fire wherever Carson touched. Erin arched and groaned as Carson entered her expertly. Erin moved against her, arching then thrusting while Carson countered the movement, sliding deeply into her before withdrawing, and quickly pushing back again.

Gentle hands held Erin down with loving strength while the storm gathered in her loins. The impending storm broke and Erin cried out, her voice low and thick with hunger. She cried out again as she came awake literally and abruptly.

"Carson," she said again hoarsely, reluctant to leave the erotic dreamscape of passionate kisses and flesh wet with desire. It was the soft whoosh of the central heat as it swished on that brought her fully awake.

Erin's throat was dry and she had the distinct impression that she had been panting in her sleep. She pushed back the covers and walked out into the hallway on bare feet. A glass of water would help her calm down, and maybe she could get back to sleep. Erin raised a trembling hand to her mouth and was surprised to find sweat beaded on her upper lip. The wetness between her legs cooled, and made her shiver.

In the hallway, she saw Carson's partially closed bedroom door, and stopped as she contemplated her actions. She was so tempted to walk in there, to eliminate the distance between them and fulfill the desires they both longed for. The urge was so strong that Erin walked to the doorway and raised a hand to push the door open just a little more.

She could hardly see anything in great detail. Light from the window cast shadows across the bed, and Erin could only make out the lump of Carson's body. Carson didn't move, and Erin could hear soft, even breathing. Just watching Carson sleep brought back the feelings from her dream, and Erin swallowed thickly against raging desire. She knew she should walk away, but all Erin wanted was to be near the younger woman.

No, that's not true. I want her, and damn the consequences. It was a feeling she had denied herself after Rose, and thought she would never feel again. The desire somehow made her feel more human than she had in years.

Erin's fingernails dug into the soft wood of the doorframe as she struggled to control her passion. She had to walk away now, while she still could.

"Erin?"

Carson's sleep husky voice brought Erin's full attention to where Carson lay. Carson propped up on one elbow to observe her more easily. For a second Erin could believe that their eyes met and held in the darkness before Carson finally moved. She raised the covers to invite Erin into the bed with her, and that was all it took.

Erin heard the groan come from her own lips, but she had already crossed the room and slid into the bed.

"Carson."

"Shh," Carson whispered. "Just sleep here with me."

Erin snuggled into Carson's strong body and settled her face comfortably just above her breasts. She wanted to make love to Carson, but just couldn't get past the horrifying idea that what Carson felt was only infatuation. If something happened between them, and then Carson changed her mind, Erin knew it would break her heart. She was just grateful that Carson was willing to wait, even if she didn't necessarily agree with it.

Warm and safe in Carson's arms Erin fell into the best sleep she had enjoyed in a very long time.

Chapter Fourteen

CARSON HEARD THE murmured delight in Erin's voice from where she stood in the kitchen, and smiled indulgently. Erin had still been asleep when Carson left her side to plug in the lights on the tree and start a pot of coffee.

She had learned many of the sounds Erin made in pleasure during the night, and shuddered delicately at the memories. Erin was not a quiet sleeper and tended to giggle and converse with

herself while she dreamt. Carson had lain awake most of the night simply holding her, and laughing softly at the sounds she made.

At the moment however, she thought Erin's delight had more to do with the huge fire in the fireplace and the lights on the tree. Carson poured two cups of coffee, and walked into the living room, eager to see the expression on Erin's face.

Erin sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the coffee table. Her feet were bare and she wore flannel pajamas and a robe. Carson was suddenly aware of her own meager clothing and experienced a soft flush of arousal. She was also dressed in sleepwear, but as tempting as Erin was, Carson had made a silent promise to go at her pace. Eventually Erin would realize that what Carson felt wasn't fleeting. Just sleeping in her arms was enough for the moment.

Erin heard Carson come in and glanced over her shoulder with a warm smile. "Good morning," she said softly, almost shyly.

Carson sat the coffee cups on the table before she knelt down next to Erin and slipped her arms around her. She placed a kiss on the soft cheek and fought the urge to giggle while she murmured her own greeting.

"What's so funny?"

Amusement threaded Erin's voice as she asked the question, and Carson pulled away to look at her semi-seriously.

"Erin, I have seen you first thing in the morning on three separate occasions, and you always look as though you have been pushed out of bed."

"So I'm not a morning person," Erin groused good-naturedly. "So shoot me."

"I would rather kiss you."

Erin gulped loudly and looked intently into Carson's eyes before she whispered, "Sounds good to me."

Carson slowly lowered her head, maintaining eye contact with Erin for as long as possible until she gently took possession of Erin's lips. After all the practice from last night on the sofa, Carson knew exactly how Erin liked to be kissed, and took advantage of that knowledge to kiss Erin until she trembled.

Finally, Carson pulled away and waited for Erin's eyes to flutter open before she said softly, "Merry Christmas, Erin."

"Oh, yes. It's definitely that."

Carson grinned at the heartfelt response and released Erin to hand her a coffee.

“You’re too good to me.”

“I know,” Carson teased back. Then unable to stop herself, Carson teased further. “Of course, if I enjoyed sleeping as much as you do I would hate to wake up, too.”

Erin froze with the cup halfway to her mouth. “What do you mean?”

“Oh nothing, but if you’re going to talk in your sleep the least you could do is speak up so that I can understand what you’re saying.”

“Huh? I don’t talk in my sleep.”

Carson laughed at the indignant tone. “Actually, you do. And you giggle, and grin. It’s very cute.”

“I most certainly do not giggle!”

“Of course you don’t.”

Erin eyed the grin on Carson’s face, and tried to scowl at her but it didn’t work. Eventually she settled on looking bemused. “Well, I’m glad you were at least entertained.”

Carson rested a hand on Erin’s thigh. “It was the best night of my life.”

They sipped their coffee quietly for a moment, and Carson wondered how much longer Erin could stand it. Erin couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from the tree, and Carson remembered how she had decorated the tree with almost childlike enthusiasm. Even now, Erin’s eyes were wide with curiosity and Carson was forced to smother another chuckle.

After a few more minutes, she decided to take pity on her and sat the cup on the table. Carson grinned. “Would you like to open your gifts now?”

Erin fairly thrust her cup into Carson’s hands, and coffee sloshed dangerously close to the rim before Carson managed to sit it down.

“Well, I didn’t want to rush things,” Erin said already across the room on her knees, “but since you asked, sure. Why not?”

Carson did laugh then, and scooted next to Erin on the carpet. Erin was so eager Carson was surprised she wasn’t rubbing her hands together in glee.

“And since it is my idea, I shall pick the one you may open first.”

“Okay,” Erin nodded in acceptance. “Then I get to pick yours.”

Erin leaned over on her hands and knees and plucked the smaller package she had brought for Carson. It was the one Carson had indicated might contain cigars, and Erin couldn't resist the mischievous smirk that settled on her lips.

"You can open this one."

Carson accepted the small package, and considered that turnabout was fair play. Just for that Erin could wait for her bigger gift too. She picked up the small package and handed it to Erin just as she was assailed by doubts. Was her gift too childish?

Last night Carson had considered the gift to be a small gesture of her affection for the fiery redhead. Now she wondered if it wasn't just a touch juvenile. Perhaps she should have let Erin open the larger package, after all. Unfortunately, it was too late. Erin had already snagged the small package from her and had eagerly started to rip into the decorative paper.

Carson bit her lower lip in worry, and hoped that if Erin didn't like it she would at least refrain from laughing.

Holiday paper was discarded messily and Erin struggled with the tape that held the box closed before she finally got it loose. She looked into the box, and her smile faded. If possible, Carson felt even worse. Obviously the gift was so childish that Erin didn't know what to say, and was undoubtedly trying to come up with something gracious.

Carson held her breath while Erin reached into the box and pulled out a fluffy white teddy bear. The teddy bear was scented with Carson's own perfume, and around its neck was a silver bracelet from the same jewelry store where she had purchased Joyce's watch.

A single charm hung from the bracelet, and was the kanji symbol for longevity.

Erin met her eyes softly. "Carson?"

Carson cleared her throat. It was done. All she could do now was go along with it, and act as though nothing was wrong. Her stomach fluttered, and she tried to hide her disappointment that Erin didn't like the gift.

"The symbol is for long life. If you don't like silver, I can always exchange it for a gold one."

"What? Are you crazy? I love it!"

Erin flung her arms around Carson's neck and flattened her against the carpet before she kissed her breathless. She released Carson's lips and planted several small kisses on her face saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Carson held on to Erin and laughed at her reaction. "You're welcome, I assure you."

Eventually Erin climbed off Carson and removed the bracelet from the bear, before she offered it to Carson to help her put it on. Erin sat for a moment simply enjoying the shine of the bracelet from the firelight. Then she looked up at Carson. “Your turn.”

Carson picked up the gift and shook it slightly while she affected a curious look. “You’re sure it’s not cigars?”

“Brat,” Erin pushed her leg with her toes. “Just open it.”

Carson removed the paper in a much more refined way, but when the paper was off, she tore into the box with just as much enthusiasm as Erin had shown. She was greeted by a small leather case, and she opened it carefully.

“They are beautiful, Erin. Thank you.”

Carson was almost speechless from the simple elegance of the pen and pencil set. She picked up the pen and noticed that her initials had been engraved into the side. No one had ever given her anything like it and she looked at Erin with shining eyes.

“Hey,” Erin said. “It’s just a writing set.”

“No, it isn’t.” Carson shook her head. “It is wonderful.”

How could Erin ever understand the poverty Carson had grown up with, and the lack of generosity her father had shown his only child?

There had never been Christmas dinner, or a tree, or the magnitude of gifts most children enjoyed. Usually Carson had spent Christmas alone with a meal of macaroni and cheese, and barely an acknowledgment of the day from her father before he headed out to the bar. He preferred drinking beer with his buddies and watching football to spending the holiday with the only family he had left.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry,” Erin said worriedly.

Carson realized tears were running down her face and she sat the writing set aside before she gathered Erin into her arms.

“They’re tears of joy, Erin.”

Erin’s arms tightened around her neck. “I’m glad. I never want to cause you pain.”

“Then you should release me,” Carson squawked. “You’re choking me.”

Erin laughed and pulled away. She hadn’t meant to squeeze so hard. “Sorry about that. Now, we still have gifts to open.”

“Right!”

Carson and Erin reached for their gifts for one another at the same time and butted heads. Carson saw stars and sat back to rub the sore spot on the top of her head. After her vision returned properly, Carson shook her head. “Perhaps you should go first.”

Erin was lying flat on the floor, laughing uproariously, and Carson smiled indulgently. Then Erin sat up and handed Carson her final gift. Carson handed Erin a large package and they agreed to open them at the same time.

From the shape and texture beneath the paper, Carson guessed hers was some type of framed picture. She opened the gift slowly, more interested in seeing Erin’s reaction to her present. The gasp that greeted her didn’t disappointment.

“Oh my! Carson, I don’t know what to say. This is amazing!”

Erin pulled the fountain pen desk set out of the box and stared at it intently. The desk set was mounted on polished cherry wood. It boasted a clock, and calendar as well as the traditional fountain pen and ink well.

“You truly like it,” Carson asked softly. She hadn’t been sure that replacing Erin’s old set was the right thing to do. What if it had been a gift from her father? Erin had mentioned him when Carson asked about the old-fashioned writing instrument.

“Oh yes. The other one’s almost worn out, and I wasn’t sure where I was going to find another one. Where did you get it?”

Erin looked at her wondrously, and Carson smiled. “No way. I can’t give away all my secrets.”

“Fine, I guess I’ll just have to keep you around in case I need another one of these beauties. Now, don’t keep me waiting.”

Erin indicated Carson’s present with her chin and Carson finished ripping the paper away. When she saw what it was, she couldn’t believe it. Erin had given her a print from one of the major works they had seen during the Japanese Exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A stream wound through the background surrounded by trees and men fishing. Fish jumped in the stream, and the colors were so vibrant that Carson felt the scene had come to life.

Carson swallowed the lump in her throat and looked at Erin. A tender expression rested in the soft brown eyes and Carson basked in their connection through that gaze.

“Thank you. I shall cherish it always.”

Erin reached and cupped Carson's cheek. Then she pushed a strand of blond hair behind an ear and reached behind Carson's head to pull her closer. The kiss was soft, tender, and completely without passion. It was an expression of gratitude and genuine caring.

"You're welcome. Are you going to tell me where you'll hang it?"

"Hmm. If I put it here no one else will be able to enjoy it, so I think I'll hang it in my office."

"Sounds fair," Erin said. "After all, my gift will be on my desk, too."

With everything settled, they cleaned up the wrapping paper and settled back to sip coffee. An hour later, Carson announced that she had to get things going or Christmas dinner would be late.

"Oh no," Erin exclaimed. "Isn't it too late for the turkey to go in?"

Carson looked at her strangely for a moment. "Erin, I got up at five o'clock this morning and put the turkey in. Didn't you feel me get out of bed?"

Erin flushed slightly and waved a hand dismissively. "I guess I must have been out of it."

"You must have needed it. Now, why don't you go take a shower and I'll start cooking."

Erin left for her shower and Carson began to peel yams and prepare them for baking. Besides turkey and sweet potatoes, Carson had dressing, green bean casserole, dinner rolls, and fruit salad planned. She had already begun seasoning the dressing when Erin returned.

"Anything I can do to help?"

Carson looked over her shoulder and smiled. The heat of the shower had flushed Erin's skin, and her eyes sparkled with her good mood. She was dressed in dark jeans, and a slate blue turtleneck sweater. With sneakers on her feet, Erin was dressed more casually than Carson could remember seeing her.

"You can start peeling apples if you want." Carson nodded toward the dining room table. She had already laid out apples, oranges, bananas, and a bag of walnuts.

"Where are the knives?"

Erin came up behind Carson and slipped her arms around her waist. The soft nibbles on her ear caused Carson to shudder pleasantly. "If you keep that up I won't be able to concentrate."

"So who said I wanted you to concentrate?"

Carson turned her head and met Erin's lips in a tender kiss. The caress lasted only a moment before Erin smiled against her lips.

“What are you thinking,” Carson asked.

“Just that I can’t believe how good it is to be here...with you.”

Erin tightened her arms briefly before she released Carson. Carson wanted to return the embrace, but her hands were covered in dressing. Soon, she promised herself.

“I’m glad you’re comfortable. I’m not used to having anyone here, but it just seems so natural with you.”

Erin smiled broadly, and then asked, “Knives?”

“That drawer,” Carson indicated with her chin.

Erin opened the drawer and selected a paring knife before Carson warned her to be careful. It was a new knife, and Carson knew the company that made it had a reputation for fine, sharp cutlery.

The atmosphere was positively domestic. Erin sat at the table peeling and chopping fruit while Carson prepared the dressing. It gave Carson a sense of home such as she had never experienced before, and her heart warmed. Constantly aware of Erin at the table behind her, Carson used a couple of potholders and took the turkey from the oven. It only needed another hour to be done, and she judged it was time to add the stuffing. She had found through experience that if she added the stuffing too early it would be dry, and hard.

Carson sat the twelve-pound bird on the stovetop, and started to scoop dressing into the cavity. When it was full, she added the rest of the stuffing around the sides and re-covered the turkey before she placed it back into the oven. Erin was separating segments of orange and putting them into the bowl of chopped apples.

“I’m going to take a shower now,” Carson said. “You all right for a while?”

“I’m fine. I know I’m not much of a cook, but even I can chop fruit without too much trouble.”

Erin smiled that lopsided smile that Carson had grown fond of, and Carson could only smile back before she left the room.

AFTER HER SHOWER, Carson returned to the kitchen to finish the other side dishes. By one o’clock, the table was set and they settled down to a wonderful Christmas dinner.

Carson and Erin clinked their tea glasses together in silent toast.

“This all looks delicious,” Erin said. “I don’t remember the last time I had a home cooked Christmas dinner.”

“Especially one that you helped to create?”

“Har har,” Erin said dryly. She didn’t mind being teased by Carson and had to admit to a sense of accomplishment. Cooking wasn’t one of her favorite pastimes, but she was proud to have helped prepare their meal even if all she had done was to make the fruit salad.

Later they sat together on the sofa. The fire crackled warmly as they sat with their arms around one another. The day was almost done and for Carson the experience had been almost magical.

“You know you’re going to have to take me home soon, right?”

Erin hated to spoil the mood, but Tuesday was a workday and she needed to examine some briefs before her ten o’clock meeting. What a way to spoil a mood!

Carson snuggled into Erin’s hair. “Are you sure you have to go?”

The huskiness of Carson’s voice hit Erin’s midsection like a physical blow. No, the last thing she wanted was to go home, but she had no choice. Work came first, even if it was awfully tempting.

“Don’t ask me that. You know I don’t want to go.”

“But work comes first.”

Carson kissed the top of Erin’s head and tightened her hold. “It’s all right. I understand.”

Carson said she understood, but Erin could hear the reluctance in her voice. She concurred completely, and the last thing she wanted was to leave this warm, soft spot in a beautiful woman’s arms.

Finally, Carson relented and reluctantly drove Erin to her apartment. After a lingering kiss, and meaningful gaze between them, Carson left the penthouse floor. Although Erin had stuck to her guns where her work was concerned, she regretted the decision, and knew it was going to be a long night before she saw Carson again at work the next day.

Sometimes Erin really questioned her decision not to let romantic relationships interfere with business. Then again, if she hadn’t made that resolution she wouldn’t be a senior partner at a prestigious law firm. With success came consequences, and fortunately, it seemed as though Carson was all right with that.

Erin unpacked her bag and took a shower before she dressed in a silk green nightgown. Then she sat down at her home office to complete the briefs for tomorrow’s meeting. It took less time

than she thought it would and Erin was in bed before ten. The sheets were cold and lonely without Carson beside her.

It was a surprise to her that one night spent in Carson's arms, even platonically, seemed to make the woman indispensable to her. Erin huddled in the center of her bed and wished that Carson were behind her just as she had been last night. Eventually Erin fell into a cold, restless sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

CARSON STEPPED BACK from the wall to examine her handy work. The print given to her by Erin for Christmas hung in the center of the wall behind her desk. It was perfect...just like Erin as far as Carson was concerned, although the print didn't have the lawyer's wonderful warm brown eyes or that husky laugh that could send shivers up Carson's spine.

She had just put the hammer down on the corner of her desk when there was a knock at the door. "Come in." Joyce breezed into the door with a huge grin on her face. Her salt and pepper hair bounced as she walked, and Carson couldn't help the smile on her face when she spotted her friend. The Rolex glinted brightly and she carried a newspaper in her left hand, but Carson didn't think anything of it.

"So, did you get any?"

"Joyce!"

"Oh, I guess not."

Joyce smirked at the blush that settled on Carson's face, and then she tossed the newspaper onto Carson's desk and settled herself comfortably into the client chair. "I thought you should check out the paper, but maybe you should sit down first."

Carson could tell from Joyce's tone that she was only half teasing, and she was intrigued about what could make her happy-go-lucky friend so serious. Carson sat down behind the desk and picked up the paper. It was turned to the local news section on page twelve, and the headline screamed out at her. Carson's heartbeat accelerated until she could feel it in her throat.

Marsters Research Corporation Hit Again

On Saturday, December 23rd, Marsters Research Corporation took another hit when the main lab in South Chicago was set on fire. One guard was killed in the blaze, although fire suppression systems activated and extinguished the fire. Property damage was minimal.

One week earlier, the Marsters lab housed in the Holcomb Building in downtown Chicago, was ransacked. Two security guards inside the office building were murdered in that incident, and one other was seriously injured. One man working late inside the building was also murdered while two other people who were working late barely managed to escape with their lives.

Erin Donovan of the Eldridge, Donovan and White Law Association, and Carson Tierney, founder of Delphi Technologies, were unavailable for comment.

It is interesting to note that five years ago to the day, Marsters was charged in a wrongful death suit when six people living within a mile of the main lab contracted a rare form of cancer. The claimants asserted that Marsters' safety protocols were negligent, and that the corporation was guilty of leaking toxins into the air that caused the disease.

Marsters was cleared of any wrong doing, but since then all six people have perished from their affliction.

Sources say there could be a connection between the killings from one week ago and the most recent vandalism, but Chicago's Homicide Division refused to comment.

Carson's blood ran cold as she read the words. What if Erin read this or heard of it from someone else? She remembered the expression of fear on Erin's face when Carson had found her hiding in the kitchenette that night. Erin had almost shot her thinking Carson was the killer. Things had gotten much better since that night, but whenever the subject came up a haunted look would flit across Erin's face. Whenever that happened, Carson would again realize that Erin was merely putting on a front.

How dare the reporter mention their names in the article so carelessly? She couldn't take the chance that Erin would hear it from inner office gossip, and stood up from her desk. "I have to see Erin." For once Joyce saved her flippant remarks, and stayed quiet while Carson stood up and took the paper with her. Carson was already in the elevator on the way down when it occurred to her that Erin might be too busy to see her.

She stalked into Erin's outer office unaware that in her fear she projected the same cold air she had the first time. Amy glanced up and saw Carson. When she visibly blanched, Carson hesitated and forced a friendly expression before she walked to her.

"Amy, is Ms. Donovan free by any chance?"

The young woman's emotions were so clear on her face that it was almost comical. Carson saw wariness turn to dislike before it segued to curiosity, and then became a professional mask. Of course, Amy's mask had nothing on Erin's, and it was all Carson could do not to chuckle at the secretary's dilemma. If it weren't for the seriousness of her visit, she might have given in to that urge.

"I'll check with her, Ms. Tierney. Won't you have a seat?"

Carson didn't want to have a seat. She wanted to stalk through those doors and see Erin now. Fortunately, she didn't have long to wait.

"Ms. Tierney? You can go right in."

Now that she'd been granted access, Carson strode quickly into Erin's office and carefully shut the door. She was halfway across the room when she noticed the tight look on Erin's face. Carson slowed down and walked carefully to the chair in front of Erin's desk. Even though she had granted her access, Erin looked as though she wasn't quite aware of Carson's presence.

"Erin? What is it?"

Erin started briefly, and then looked up at her.

"I just came from a meeting with Ray."

"Why does that not sound like good news?"

"No, it is." Erin didn't sound very convinced. Then she shook her head. "He says that his wife, Martha, is ill and he wants to take some time off. He called Bob and me in so that he could split his caseload between us."

Carson frowned. If Ray Eldridge split his caseload between his two partners, it would create extra work for Erin, but she wasn't the type of person to balk at a little hard work so there was something else Carson didn't know yet.

"Is there something you're not telling me," Carson asked gently.

"He said since you and I get along so well he's giving me your file."

Ah, so that was it. Erin was worried that she would allow her personal feelings to influence her judgment. Carson understood her concern, but she wasn't worried. She had been unhappy with Ray's representation of her company, and couldn't think of a better person to represent her.

"I can't do it," Erin said, confirming Carson's suspicions. "What if I let myself be influenced by...this...us."

Carson considered Erin's point carefully. She had the feeling that an emotional plea at this point would be counterproductive.

"Just the fact that you're worried proves that you would never allow it. You're too professional for that. I trust you."

"But I don't trust myself! Don't you see?"

Erin stood abruptly, and stalked around the desk to perch on the edge in front of Carson.

"Where you're concerned I don't trust myself, at least not in a business sense. If I represent you, I am going to be so focused on anything that might be a threat to you that I might..."

"Might what?"

Erin looked down at the floor briefly before she looked back up. "Let's just say that it might become a little obvious how I feel about you."

"I see. And that would make you feel vulnerable?"

"Exactly. Carson, you own your company. If your reputation takes a little hit, you can just shrug it off. You're the best in the business, and people are still going to go to you even if they find out that you're a ..."

"A lesbian? Why can't you say it?"

"Because I've worked so hard not to let my personal life affect my work. I can't afford it. If people find out about me, I lose business. There are plenty of other lawyers out there, and the conservative businessmen I represent aren't going to want to be associated with a lesbian."

"You underestimate yourself, Erin. First of all, I don't believe you would allow yourself to act unprofessionally no matter what the circumstances. And, if you are so focused on anything that would be a threat to my company, how would that be different than how you represent any of your other clients? That's what makes you so good at what you do."

Erin listened intently, and Carson thought she might be getting through to her.

“As far as other people figuring out how we feel about one another, that’s up to us. Isn’t it? I think we’re both adult enough to keep our relationship out of the workplace. As far as I’m concerned it’s not anyone’s business, but I will not act as though we’re not friends.”

“But we’re so much more than that, aren’t we?”

Carson reached up to clasp Erin’s hand gently. “Yes, we are. And, if you think we can hide that completely then you’re wrong. For that reason I think it’s important that people know we’re friends.”

“That way they’re not looking for something more?”

“Yes.” Carson smiled up at Erin sweetly. “Make no mistake, I couldn’t care less if people knew how we feel about one another, but I know this is important to you.”

Erin squeezed Carson’s hand a little tighter, and finally released her. “You’re right of course. I am panicking a little.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Not going to let me get away with a thing, are you?”

“Would you expect anything less?”

Erin chuckled and stood up. “Thank you for that. I have to admit I feel a little better. Now, what did you want to see me about?”

Carson looked down at the paper in her hand, and regretted what she was going to do. “Joyce came by to see me a few minutes ago.”

“Oh?”

Wordlessly, Carson handed Erin the paper and watched her carefully for a reaction. Erin’s eyes widened in stunned amazement, but there was not the fear in her expression that Carson had expected. When Erin finished the article, she looked angrily at Carson.

“This is outrageous! It’s bad enough that a crazy man has seen who we are, but now he knows our names and who we work for. Not to mention the fact that this article says we were unavailable for comment. I don’t know about you, but no one called me concerning an interview!

And why are we just now hearing about this? The Holcomb Building is like our own little world, and people can’t keep secrets around here. Granted, this incident didn’t take place in the building, but it is associated.”

“I don’t know,” Carson shrugged. “Maybe after what happened last time, security is trying to keep things quiet.”

“Or maybe since there were no dead bodies this time, people aren’t as interested.”

Carson was a little surprised by the sharp tone. It wasn’t like Erin to be so acerbic, and Carson thought she was feeling a little overwhelmed.

“You don’t mean that.”

“No, I don’t.” Erin closed her eyes for a moment, and her anger drained away. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me. I guess I’m just feeling frustrated. I thought all of this was over, but now I find it’s not.”

Erin walked back around her desk and sat down. She threw the paper onto the desktop and looked at Carson. “Regardless, I am not about to take this article lying down.”

She picked the phone and started punching numbers from memory.

“Erin, who are you calling?”

“The newspaper.” Just that moment the call must have been answered. “Yes, this is Erin Donovan of Eldridge, Donovan and White Law Association. I need to speak to your editor in chief.”

The person on the other end must have been trying to give her the run around because the next thing Erin said was, “Well, he’d better get un-busy very quickly or your paper is going to find itself slapped with a lawsuit for libel!”

Another pause. “Yes, I’ll hold.”

Carson chuckled and raised a hand to cover her mouth. She’d never seen Erin so forceful or commanding and found it extremely sexy.

An instant later, the editor of the paper must have picked up because Erin launched into a tirade. “Your paper printed a story on page twelve of the local news section that mentioned me and one of my clients directly in the article. The way this story was written not only gives out personal information about victims of a crime, but implies that we might have some information about the killer that was inside the Holcomb Building.”

Erin went on to explain that not only did they have no information of any kind, but that the reporter had placed them in extreme danger by revealing their identities. She demanded that the paper print a full retraction by the next morning, and pointed out that they were not even contacted by the reporter.

“In addition you will hold a press conference in the Holcomb Building at ten in the morning and admit to shoddy, tabloid reporting. The story will run on your news station at noon and again at six. If you don’t, I will slap you with a libel suit so hard you won’t know what hit you.”

Carson could hear the editor's desperate apologies from where she sat in the visitor's chair and stifled her laughter with both hands pressed to her mouth.

When he stopped groveling long enough, Erin smiled, but the smile imparted no warmth to her features. "Yes, both Ms. Tierney and I will be ready for you at ten o'clock in the conference room on the sixth floor."

Erin didn't say goodbye, but merely hung up the phone. She sat quiet for a second. "Any thoughts on this?"

"Only that you're amazing when you're pissed off!"

Both of them burst out laughing, but after their mirth had tapered off, Carson said, "The article is a little sensational, but it did bring up a good point."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Are the two incidents related? That first night when you and I were in the building we didn't know anything about the killer's actions on the eleventh floor."

"That's true, but if you recall we had other things on our minds...such as getting out of the building alive. I'm more concerned that he could come back here. Because of this article, the killer knows who we are now."

"What do you mean," Carson asked.

Erin's expression hardened. "We know the killer had the opportunity to take Ed Cupper's security card. He would have access to every floor, and if someone forgot to cancel that card he would still have access."

"It makes sense." Carson frowned in worry.

Erin began to tap her fingertips on the desk, and Carson wondered what she was thinking. "Erin?"

"Remember I told you that I thought the killer looked familiar, but I couldn't remember where I might have seen him?"

"Yes. Are you telling me that you remember now?"

"No," Erin shook her head. "Nothing like that. But Marsters approached me about five years ago to represent their company when they were sued for spewing toxins into the air. It was the same incident mentioned in the newspaper article. I refused, but there were a lot of demonstrations at the time and a lot of people picketing on the front steps."

“You’re thinking that one of the protestors is the killer? That’s a long shot, Erin, and just because someone disagrees with chemical research companies, that doesn’t make them a killer.”

“That’s true,” Erin admitted after a moment. “I’m sure I’m just grasping at straws.”

“In any case, I’m going to go out on a limb and remind you that you have a curfew.”

Erin responded immediately. “Uh uh, I only agreed to that before

Christmas. Christmas is over now.”

“Erin, please, humor me? The holidays aren’t over yet, and business won’t pick up until after the New Year. We both thought that first incident was an isolated event, but the fact that Marsters has been vandalized again, even if it wasn’t in this building, proves that it wasn’t. Until the police catch this guy you need to be careful.”

“The police? Are you kidding me? I haven’t even heard from Detective Hutchins. The police couldn’t catch a cold.”

“Nevertheless, they are all we have.”

“Are they?”

“Erin?” Carson didn’t follow where she was going with this, but she didn’t think she liked the destination Erin had in mind.

“Just hear me out,” Erin said with a raised hand. “We already know that the police don’t have a clue, but you and I might. We also have access to the building, and the security personnel. I know Holcomb’s chief of security personally. Bill told me he had installed new cameras all over the building just before we were attacked here. Since the police were focused on the first floor, sixth, and eleventh floors they might not have seen all of the tapes.”

“Then we need to tell them. They don’t have all the facts so of course they won’t be able to find the suspect.”

“No, I don’t want to tell them.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because if we tell them, we won’t be able to find out who it is?”

Carson lunged to her feet. “Erin, we can’t go around playing Nancy Drew!”

“Why? We can figure this out.”

“You are going to get yourself killed, that’s why. I won’t let you do it!” Carson was surprised that Erin would even consider such a thing. “Don’t you remember what it was like before? That guy is strong, and not altogether sane. He will kill you without a second thought.”

That last statement seemed to hit home, and Erin’s expression tightened briefly with remembered fear. All the wind went out of her, and Erin finally relented. “You’re right, he would. Okay, you make a valid argument, but if I’m still on curfew, so are you.”

“Beg your pardon?”

Erin put her fists on her hips, and stubbornly jutted out her chin. “That’s the way it is. I’ll draft a memo to all of the firm’s personnel telling them that until this guy is caught, everyone will be out of the building by five-thirty. And that includes you. Agreed?”

It only took a moment for Carson to concede. “Agreed. I’ll do the same with my people. Our new contract doesn’t go into effect until after the first anyway, and most of the preparatory work is already finished.”

“Good. Now, I’d better get back to work.”

Carson nodded and took the paper when Erin offered it to her. She was almost to the door when Erin spoke. “Oh, Carson? Since we want people to understand that we’re friends, how does lunch sound?”

Carson turned around and her stomach tingled at the look in Erin’s eyes. Her expression said that friendship wasn’t the only reason she wanted to have lunch together. Carson nodded. “I’ll stop by to get you at twelve. There’s a little bistro down the street I’ve been wanting to try.”

“Make it twelve-thirty, and you’ve got yourself a date.”

A date, huh? So much for friendship!

“Twelve-thirty,” Carson agreed.

Erin sat in her chair for a few minutes after Carson left. She was more afraid than she had let on, but Erin was also tired of being scared. She didn’t like to feel weak, and had learned that when she felt that way, she needed to do something to take control. That was why she insisted that they be the ones to unravel the mystery. She could understand why Carson wouldn’t want to do this, but once Erin found some concrete evidence, she was sure that Carson would go along with her.

Something else occurred to her, and Erin reached for her phone to speak with Amy. The secretary picked up immediately.

“Amy, I’ll be taking over Mr. Eldridge’s account for Ms. Tierney. If I’m not busy when she comes to see me you can show her in.”

Amy sounded a little surprised when she said she understood, but Erin was focused already on other things.

Erin hung up the phone and walked to the small filing cabinet she kept in the corner. As a rule, she held onto every document that crossed her desk for three years. Most of them were kept in the archives downstairs after the one-year mark, but anything that was particularly significant she kept in the bottom drawer. The wrongful death information connected with Marsters Research Corporation fell into that category, and even though it was more than three years old, she had held onto all of the research she had conducted on it.

For some reason Erin was convinced that all of this was connected to that original lawsuit, and it nagged at her like a toothache.

The file was extensive, and contained information for Marster's safety protocols, employee records, and blueprints for the main lab. In addition, Erin had kept all of the newspaper clippings when the protests started. The newspaper articles contained photographs of the demonstrators, and Erin skimmed through everything very quickly. In the end, all she did was familiarize herself with the case from the past. There were no pictures of the killer, and she didn't find anything solid to connect anyone to the recent attacks. She really didn't have the time right now to go through everything as closely as she wanted. Erin still had to go through the client files Ray had presented her with, and get familiar with each of them before she could hope to represent the clients properly.

Carson had said that everything could be unrelated, but Erin had a gut feeling it wasn't true. Somehow, she knew they were related, but she was missing the vital connection.

Maybe what she needed was a fresh set of eyes. Erin would bring the subject up with Carson during lunch and see if she would be willing to take a look at the information Erin had on Marsters. Maybe she would find something that Erin had missed.

Erin tucked the Marsters information away in her briefcase, intent on studying them at home later when she had time. After that, she sat down at her desk and focused on getting some work done.

Time passed quickly while she worked and it came as something of a surprise when there was a light tap on the door.

Erin looked up from the piles of paper on her desk and frowned at the door. "Come in."

To her delight, Carson was back. Carson leaned around the edge of the door and smiled at her. Apparently, Amy had taken her words to heart, and told Carson to go on in.

"Hey there," Erin said with a soft smile. "Is it time already?"

Carson stepped the rest of the way into the room and closed the door behind her before she answered. "I knew you would lose track of time so I figured I would come to get you."

“Good idea. I did lose track of time.”

Erin stood and retrieved her overcoat from the coat rack in the corner. She left the stack of files where they lay on her desk since she intended to get right back to them after lunch. Erin’s only meeting that day was scheduled for two so she would have plenty of time to get the files organized and put away in her filing cabinet.

“So where’s this amazing bistro you wanted to try?”

“It’s just down the block,” Carson said. “DeLaurenta’s, have you heard of it?”

“Yeah. I hear it’s pretty good, although I haven’t been there myself.”

“That’s good. Finally, a place that neither one of us knows.”

Erin ignored the curious look she got from Amy as the two women walked out the door. “We’re going to lunch, Amy. If anyone calls, just take a message.”

“Of course, Ms. Donovan.”

They walked down the street bundled up in coats and scarves. Even in the frigid winter air, the crowd was thick and they had to walk closely together. The wind bit into their skin, but like most people who lived in Chicago, it was just part of a typical winter day.

Erin cast a glance overhead at the gray sky. The sun wasn’t even visible, and the air held a faint scent that told her another storm was only hours away. It wasn’t anything quantifiable, just something that one who lived for years in colder climates became accustomed to. It was almost like a sixth sense.

“Have you heard the forecast today,” she asked Carson.

“We’re supposed to get more lake-effect snow. I was planning on leaving work a little early to try to avoid the worst of the traffic. Ah, here we are.”

The little Italian bistro was already humming with business, but they managed to find a small table in the back. In no time, a waitress came and dropped off two glasses of water before she took their order. When she was gone, Erin took advantage of the momentary lull to bring up the Marsters thing with Carson again.

“I’ve been thinking about what we talked about before, and I went back through the files and pulled everything I have on Marsters Research Corporation.”

“I thought we had that settled.”

Erin ignored the frown and kept talking as if she hadn't heard Carson speak. "And I didn't really notice anything that could tell us who is doing this, but I thought that maybe you could take a look. You know, a fresh set of eyes and all that."

"You're just not going to let this go, are you?"

Erin grinned. "If I say no, will you help me?"

Carson heaved a mighty sigh, but Erin thought it was more for effect than because she was annoyed. She sat patiently and waited for Carson to come to a decision.

"All right. I'm probably out of my mind, but I'll help you with your cockamamie scheme. Now, tell me. What did you have in mind?"

Erin fought the urge to rub her hands together in triumph. "Well, I thought I'd bring the file home and go over it more closely. If you want, you could come by tonight and look at it with me."

"I don't know, Erin. That storm is supposed to hit by early evening, and I don't want to be out late in it."

She hadn't thought of that, but Erin didn't want Carson to drive in bad weather either. Still she was convinced this was important, and wanted to examine the file as soon as possible.

"What if you stayed at my place tonight? You could bring some things to leave at my apartment so you don't always have to worry about planning ahead. That way you don't have to drive in the storm, and we can go over the information together."

"Thought of everything, haven't you," Carson teased with an uplifted eyebrow. "Are you sure that's not just a way to get me into your clutches?"

Erin enjoyed the banter and easily fell into it with Carson. "If I get you in my clutches, you'll know it."

"Oh, I already know," Carson assured her. Then Carson became serious, and shifted in her chair. "I'll help you look through the files, Erin. But if we find anything you have to promise me that we'll turn the information over to the police."

"Of course." Erin just hoped Carson couldn't hear how insincere the assurance was. "What time are you leaving work," she asked to change the subject.

Carson frowned at her as if she knew what Erin was doing, but let it pass. "I thought I'd leave about four, but I'll have to go out to the house and get some things before I come to your place. I'll probably go ahead and do that as soon as we finish lunch. What about you? I didn't see your car in the underground lot. Did you take a cab today?"

“No, I couldn’t get one. I guess all of the cab services are really busy because of the weather, so I decided to walk.”

“You walked in this weather?”

“It’s not that far.”

The waitress dropped off their lunch plates and left quickly to wait on other patrons.

“Why don’t you let me drive you home then,” Carson asked and picked up her sandwich.

“All right. Come down and get me on your way out of the building.”

“You don’t have any meetings that I’ll be interrupting?”

“Not today. I only have one meeting, and it should be done long before that.”

“Okay,” Carson smiled. “I’ll pick you up on the way down.”

They spent a nice lunch together in one another’s company. The food was merely adequate, but the company was exceptional. All too soon, it was time to go back to work. The sky had darkened considerably while they were gone, and Erin thought the storm might be coming in sooner than expected.

“What time did you say this storm is supposed to hit?”

“The report I heard said by seven o’clock, but from the way the sky looks I’d say it will be here before that.”

“I agree,” Erin said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it gets here by four.”

They stepped into the elevator with six other people, and the car started upward.

“Do you want me to stop by earlier?”

“No, it’s not that far. Even if the snow starts before then I think we’ll be all right.”

The doors opened at the sixth floor and they parted company. Erin and Carson shared a brief smile before the elevator carried Carson up four more floors.

Chapter Sixteen

”BRRR, IT’S FREEZING out there! Tell me again why I walked to work this morning?”

Carson smiled at the rhetorical question and followed Erin into the penthouse apartment of The Bernardin. She carried a large duffel bag and a suit of clothes over her shoulder. They were the things she would need for work tomorrow, and the press conference that Erin had planned with the Chicago Tribune.

Erin put her briefcase and a sack full of groceries that Carson had picked up at the market on the floor by the entryway, and took off her overcoat.

“Why don’t you go take a hot shower and warm up while I unpack the groceries and get settled in the guest room,” Carson asked as she hooked her fresh suit on the coat rack. Erin put her coat next to Carson’s. She knew how bare Erin’s cupboards usually were and had suggested they stop by the market for some breakfast items. They hadn’t bothered with dinner because they planned to order from the RL.

Erin turned toward Carson mid-way through taking her coat off. She had a frown on her face and Carson wondered what she had said wrong. “The guest room? Why in there?”

Carson shook her head. “I just assumed that was where I would stay.”

Erin walked up to Carson and took the duffel bag from her. She sat it on the floor, and then reached up to cup a soft cheek. “I had thought we were past that. After Sunday night, I guess I just assumed that you would stay in my room...with me.”

“I guess I didn’t expect that,” Carson admitted shyly. She suddenly seemed to have difficulty meeting Erin’s eyes and looked down at the tops of her shoes. “You said you wanted to go slow.”

Erin quietly assessed the expression on Carson’s face. She saw an uncertainty in the younger woman’s expression that she wasn’t accustomed to. It bothered her to think that Carson might think she was unworthy of Erin’s love, or that Erin was holding back because she thought Carson wasn’t experienced enough for her.

“I do. It feels so good to take our time with this, and just enjoy being together without any pressure of something more. But, if you’re going to spend the night in my apartment, I really would like to sleep in the bed with you. If you want to, that is.”

Carson’s eyes burned when she looked at Erin. “I would like that.”

“Good. Then it’s settled. Unfortunately, there isn’t any room in my drawers for your clothes, so if you want to unpack, the guestroom dresser is empty. I think I’m going to take a quick shower while you do that.”

“Okay.”

Carson started to walk down the hall to unpack, but Erin stopped her.

“Wait a minute, you forgot something.”

A gentle hand on her arm pulled Carson into Erin’s smaller frame. Erin stood on tiptoe, and kissed Carson gently. As usual, the feel of Carson’s lips captured Erin utterly. She forgot everything except the texture, and sweetness. Carson’s tongue explored the small creases in Erin’s lips before she deepened the kiss.

Erin had meant the kiss to be short and sweet, but it deepened until it threatened to set her on fire. The need for oxygen finally forced her to pull away.

They stared into one another’s eyes for a moment before Erin swallowed hard, and said; “I guess I should take that shower now.”

CARSON COULD ONLY nod and watch Erin walk away. When Erin turned the corner and went out of sight Carson took a deep breath. She needed to unpack and take a very cold shower.

And I’m expected to sleep with her?

For the next twenty minutes Carson unpacked, and waited for Erin to get out of the shower. She selected a pair of silk pajamas, and white socks to put on later. She laid the clothes across the bed, and took her toothbrush back toward the other end of the apartment. If she was going to spend the night in Erin’s bedroom, it only made sense to put her toothbrush in that bathroom.

Erin was ruffling her hair with a towel when Carson walked into the living room. She wore a white terry cloth robe, and had nothing on her feet. Carson wondered if she had anything on beneath the robe.

“You look relaxed.”

Erin turned her head and grinned. “And you look tense. Something wrong?”

“Nothing a cold shower won’t cure,” Carson mumbled under her breath.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. I think I’m going to take a shower.”

“I thought we should order something from the RL early,” Erin said to her back.

“Sounds great.” Carson turned back toward Erin and tried to keep her eyes off Erin’s chest. “Why don’t you order for both of us? I trust your judgment just no freshwater fish, right?”

The lights came on in Erin’s eyes and she said, “Right. You’re allergic.”

“Right.”

“Where are you going?”

“To take a shower.” Carson looked confused.

“I thought you were going to use my room.”

Carson hadn’t considered that meant using Erin’s shower as well, but she wasn’t going to admit that. Instead, she said, “I’m just going to get my clothes. Unless you prefer that I walk through the apartment in my birthday suit after I take my shower.”

Erin’s eyes went wide, and blood rushed into her face at the mental picture she suddenly envisioned. Then she let her breath out in a rush. “You did that on purpose.”

“Of course,” Carson said mischievously, and walked saucily down the hall.

Carson retrieved her clothes and passed by Erin on her way back to the bedroom. Erin was on the phone with the RL, and had her back to the hallway. Carson couldn’t help looking at the strong legs under the short robe. Erin’s legs were lean, and well-muscled. It was obvious that she exercised regularly, and Carson wondered if she used the gym on the lobby floor.

She cast an openly loving look at Erin before she walked into the bedroom. It was the first time Carson had been in Erin’s bedroom, and she looked around curiously. She felt like an intruder even though Erin obviously wanted her here. The room was dark, and sultry, decorated in burgundy and cherry wood. The mattress on the bed was thick and covered in a heavy down comforter.

Decadent was the only possible description for what she found, and Carson swallowed hard. She noticed the door in the corner and walked into the bathroom. It was similarly elegant to the bedroom with the same colors of burgundy, and ochre. A heated towel rack stood against the wall between the oversized tub, and the separate shower stall.

Carson put her clothes on the back of the toilet, and her toothbrush in the holder next to Erin’s before she looked around more closely. A shelf next to the tub held several bottles of perfumed oils, and the tub was large enough to accommodate two people. Carson shivered at the thought of sharing the tub with Erin.

She turned her back on the tub and opened the shower door. Carson was surprised to see that even the shower had jets on the sides.

Carson thought of the impression that Erin gave the outside world, conservative, professional and perhaps even a little rigid. From the things she had learned by getting closer, Carson knew differently. She knew that Erin was really a free spirit when not locked into the world of corporate law.

She knew that Erin laughed in her sleep, and hated to get up in the mornings. Erin was a hopeless romantic with a hedonistic streak, and the passion that swirled just beneath the surface could quite possibly capture Carson in a whirlpool and carry her helplessly away.

Carson pushed the thoughts away with difficulty and turned the water on. If she didn't stop thinking about Erin in a sexual way she would never be able to get through the night without doing something to embarrass herself.

When Carson emerged from the shower, Erin was dressed in a red sweat suit, and had on sports socks. Carson raised an eyebrow at the definite change in style from the short terrycloth robe.

“Can't exactly answer the door in a robe, can I,” Erin teased.

The doorbell rang a few minutes later. Erin had called down to the concierge and informed him that the RL would be making a delivery. The women settled at Erin's small kitchen table, and sat down to a wonderful dinner. Erin had ordered a rack of lamb, steamed vegetables and two Caesar salads. Carson wasn't a huge fan of lamb, but it had been expertly prepared in a light mushroom and saffron sauce.

Erin also chose a heavy red wine that perfectly complimented the meal. Dinner was a leisurely affair, and neither of them felt the need to rush. It was nice just to spend time together. Eventually the meal came to an end, and they retired to the living room.

Carson noticed Erin make a quick stop by her briefcase, and she took a breath to steel herself for what was to happen. Obviously, Erin had decided it was time to study the file she had mentioned earlier. Carson didn't really think the old case could be connected, but she had promised to go through the file with her.

Erin sat down closely beside her and opened the folder up on the coffee table. Carson was impressed by the size of the file. She noticed that Erin had even included press clippings related to the wrongful death suit.

By the time Carson finished reading the newspaper stories, she was convinced that Marsters should have been found guilty, but was sharp enough to realize that the press could make a nun look like a mafia hit man. Still, even if most of the information was true, Marsters must have paid someone off to literally have gotten away with murder.

“Why didn’t the EPA get involved in this?”

“They did.” Erin dug deeper into the file and retrieved another document that she offered to Carson. “The Environmental Protection Agency had an injunction issued against Marsters after they were cleared by the courts. Marsters may have gotten off light where the victims were concerned, but the EPA is something else altogether. Marsters’ research lab was forced to shut down until more stringent safety protocols were instituted.”

“But it was too little, too late,” Carson said. “If the victims were correct and it was the research company’s fault that they got sick, new safety procedures would have been little comfort.”

“True, but there really was no way to prove the company was guilty of any wrong-doing. I mean, how do you prove why someone gets cancer?”

Carson had to admit the truth of that, but if one of the victim’s relatives came to the conclusion that Marsters was involved, what lengths would they go to in order to exact revenge?

For the next hour, Erin and Carson reviewed the file. They looked for anything that might explain why the company was continually targeted, and even studied the pictures of protestors in the newspaper clippings in the hopes that they would see a familiar figure.

In the end, they found nothing definitive to link the events.

“I still think it’s all just a coincidence. It does look as though someone has it in for the research company, but it could have nothing to do with what happened five years ago. People protest chemical research companies all the time.”

Carson could tell by Erin’s expression that she was disappointed not to find the connection, and she resisted the urge to smile. Erin was a bulldog when she latched onto an idea, and Carson thought she would have made an excellent detective.

“I guess you’re right.” Erin put all the documents back into the folder and pushed it away. “Maybe I’m just grasping at straws.”

Carson slid an arm around Erin’s shoulder and hugged the smaller woman against her side. “It’s understandable to want an explanation for what happened to us, but we may never know. Right now, it’s enough for me that I’m here with you.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

Erin looked deeply into Carson’s eyes, and Carson decided she didn’t want to think about the research lab anymore. All she wanted was the feel of Erin’s lips pressed against her own. Carson had just started to lower her head to kiss her when Erin suddenly had to stifle a huge yawn.

Carson grinned. “It’s late, and you’re tired. Why don’t we get ready for bed?”

“Umm, sounds wonderful.”

Erin released her and stood up from the couch. She offered a hand to Carson who didn't really need it, but took it nonetheless. Erin let Carson brush her teeth first while she pulled down the covers on the bed. When Carson returned to the bedroom, she quickly slipped beneath the sheets while Erin got ready for bed.

When Erin came out of the bathroom a few minutes later she stopped suddenly, and looked down at Carson with an unfathomable expression on her face.

“Do you prefer this side,” Carson asked confused.

Erin smiled and shook her head. “No, it's not that. I was just thinking how strange and wonderful it is to come in this room and see you lying there.”

“Come to bed,” Carson said softly and lifted the covers invitingly as she had at her own house on Sunday.

Just as quickly as she had on that previous occasion, Erin got into bed and snuggled close to Carson. Carson had to lean over her to turn off the bedside lamp, and pressed their bodies even closer together.

Erin stifled a moan when Carson's full breasts crushed against her, but she could do nothing to prevent the slow burn that started in her veins. Carson must have sensed the sudden tension in Erin's body. After the light was out Carson moved even closer until Erin was flat against the mattress with Carson lying on top of her. Carson rested most of her weight on her elbows, and placed her lips close to Erin's.

Carson's breath whispered against Erin's lips, and she waited for the kiss she knew was coming. When it didn't, she opened her eyes to see Carson watching her in the darkness.

“What are you waiting for,” Erin asked breathlessly.

Carson didn't answer. Instead, she kissed Erin slowly, but gently, careful not to let the caress escalate out of control. Eventually Carson drew back, and Erin opened her eyes. She could feel Carson tremble against her, but after a few moments, Carson lay back against the sheets. Erin cuddled against her, and finally fell asleep with Carson's arms wrapped around her.

CARSON CAME AWAKE slowly and reluctantly. She was nestled in a warm cocoon of flesh amidst tousled covers. It was still dark, and for a moment she was confused about what had awakened her. Then Erin shifted again from where she slept atop Carson's prone form and pressed her breasts against Carson's.

A soft gasp escaped parted lips when Erin wriggled sensually against her.

She realized Erin was only partially awake and was moving against her in a hypnotic, half-dream state in which her body was simply responding to its desire. But that didn't make lying motionless any easier.

Carson tried to stay still and let Erin come fully awake, or settle back into sleep, but she couldn't prevent her body's response. Blood surged through her veins, and her nipples hardened beneath the pajama top. Her arms had come up instinctively to hold Erin to her and now she felt them tremble.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and gritted her teeth to hold in the sounds she wanted to make. Two of the top buttons of her shirt had come unbuttoned during the night and Erin's cheek lay against her exposed chest.

Erin moved again and mumbled something Carson couldn't understand before she lifted slightly and pressed her lips against Carson's breastbone. Erin's tongue slipped between her lips and Carson felt the heated touch on her tender skin.

"Erin," Carson whispered softly.

The sound of her name seemed to awaken Erin more fully and she raised her head to look into Carson's eyes. Instead of stopping as Carson expected her to, Erin held her gaze and slowly closed the distance between them. Even in the dark, Carson saw the heat of desire in Erin's eyes. Her lips touched Carson's gently, and Carson moaned into the kiss.

The kiss was gentle, exploring, and Carson's arms tightened around her. Erin shifted against Carson again, and her legs parted to straddle a muscled thigh. Her right hand slid up Carson's ribcage to the opening of her pajamas. Carson shuddered when Erin's strong fingers began to stroke her skin.

Carson knew this wouldn't be happening if Erin were fully awake and had her defenses up, and that she should stop her before Erin did something she would regret, but she couldn't. She wanted Erin too badly to push her away.

Erin slowly released Carson's lips and slid down to kiss and nip the soft flesh of her neck. The sensations were so intense that Carson didn't notice what Erin was doing with her hand. Sharp, white teeth closed on the lobe of her ear at the same time that she slid under the shirt and grasped Carson's breast in a full-handed hold.

Carson cried out again and arched into the touch. Erin smiled against her before she slid down the long, lean form to place gentle kisses in a line across Carson's chest.

Erin raised her head again and stared into Carson's eyes. She released the breast and kept Carson pinned with her gaze as she finished unbuttoning the shirt. Folds were parted. Carson's

upper body was exposed completely in the moonlight before Erin released her gaze, and looked down to see the creamy expanse of delicate soft skin she had exposed.

“So beautiful,” Erin whispered.

Without warning Erin dipped down and took as much of Carson’s breast into her mouth as she could. Erin sucked at the soft flesh, and swirled her tongue around Carson’s hardened nipple.

Carson grunted and pressed a hand against the back of Erin’s head.

Erin wasn’t still during all this. The taste and feel of Carson was too much for her. The pounding pressure between her legs was getting harder to ignore, and she just needed to ease the sharp sensations a little. Erin pushed against Carson’s thigh, and the sudden intense jolt took her by surprise. She groaned against Carson, and started to move against the strong leg.

Erin’s pressed her thigh up against Carson’s center, and both women gasped. Erin could feel Carson’s heat and moisture against her bare thigh as her nightgown rode up, and she writhed in response.

The movement of Erin’s thigh made Carson aware of the new sensations that exploded in her body. Carson immediately slid her hands down Erin’s back and grasped her hips firmly.

Erin’s mouth left Carson’s nipple and she threw her head back. “Oh, yes.”

With her hands braced on either side of Carson’s body, Erin closed her eyes and rocked against her unashamedly. Their bodies merged, and became one in sense and feeling. Erin opened her eyes, their gazes met and held as Carson moved her hands from Erin’s hips to cup rounded breasts. It was the first time she had touched Erin’s intimate flesh directly and she gasped at the softness.

The sight of Erin moving above her was incredible. She watched Erin’s eyes half close, her mouth open, heat pouring into Erin’s cheeks as she bit her lower lip and stroked herself back and forth across Carson’s leg. Erin’s chest heaved as she moved faster and faster.

Carson watched Erin’s breathing become harsh, and wondered if she was near release. The idea titillated her, and was so overwhelming that she released Erin’s hips to brace one arm against the small of her back to increase the contact. Erin gasped again, and Carson moved her other hand to the place where Erin rode against her leg.

“Oh, yes, Carson. Touch me.”

Carson whimpered, and slid her hand between Erin’s body and her leg. Erin pressed down against her and started to move when the moment was abruptly shattered.

A sudden, strident ring stopped Erin in mid-stroke, and her eyes opened in confusion. For an instant that was an eternity, she couldn't seem to make sense of the horrendous noise that filled the air. Then both of them realized it was the telephone.

"Oh no," Carson groaned, trembling harshly in her desire. "Oh no, Erin. Don't answer that."

Erin's expression was stricken, but she responded, "I have to. I'm so sorry." It was obvious that Erin couldn't quite bear to leave Carson's embrace. She lowered her body against Carson, whose long fingers still pressed against her, to answer the call.

Erin stretched across the bed to reach for the phone on the nightstand. She could just barely reach it with her fingertips, but finally managed to get hold of it. A quick glance at the clock on the nightstand told her it was just after six.

"Hello," Erin said harshly into the receiver. Erin propped up on one elbow, and pushed her mussed hair away from her face with her free hand.

Carson was still caught up in the feel of the woman in her arms. She began to press small kisses everywhere she could reach on the nightgown-clad shoulder. Her fingers were still against Erin and she couldn't resist moving them just a little to get a response. She was delighted when Erin shuddered and pressed against her hand. Then she froze and leaned away from Carson.

"Yes, sir. I'm all right."

From her tone, and the tension suddenly present in her body Carson understood that there was something special about this call, and that their incredible lovemaking had just come to an abrupt end.

Erin slowly, but insistently pulled away from Carson. She lay down against the mattress with Carson at her side while she listened to the person on the other end.

"But Daddy, I really am fine. I'm sorry you had to hear it from him, but that article was just a sensational bit of tabloid journalism. We're having a press conference later today, and the Tribune is going to recant their story."

Another pause and Carson could only guess what was being said on the other end.

"Yes, it's true that we were in the building."

"Yes, some of the people inside were killed, but we're fi..."

"What? Forty minutes? But Daddy, it's still dark outside. I'm not even out of bed!"

"Yes sir. I understand. Goodbye."

Erin slowly hung up the phone and rolled over to rest her head on Carson's chest. Carson held Erin against her and inhaled the scent of her skin.

"Three guesses who that was."

"I only need one," Carson replied huskily.

Her tone made Erin lift her head and look worriedly into her eyes. "I'm so sorry, my darling. I would give anything if he hadn't called."

Erin's soft knuckles brushed against Carson's cheek. She rose up to kiss Carson again, gently and slowly. Passion threatened to bloom again and Carson pulled away shakily.

"What did he say?"

"Hmm? Oh. Daddy said his old partner read the paper and saw the article about us. He phoned and told my father everything." Erin kissed the corner of Carson's mouth. "Daddy took the redeye out of Phoenix and is at the airport now."

Erin kissed the corner of her mouth again, but closer to the full lips and Carson panted a little with renewed passion. She turned her head and claimed Erin's lips in a smoldering kiss. Erin groaned into her mouth and rolled fully onto Carson's body, seemingly intent on taking up where they had left off before the phone call.

Carson was only able to hold onto the reality of their situation by the thinnest of margins.

"Um, Erin? Erin!" Carson gasped when Erin bit gently into her neck.

"Yes, darling?" Erin sucked Carson's earlobe into her mouth.

It was difficult to process information with Erin's wet tongue swirling around the shell of her ear, but Carson pushed on. "Shouldn't we stop?"

"Why," Erin asked softly.

"Isn't your father going to be here soon?"

Erin froze, and drew back to stare into Carson's eyes in something akin to terror. "Oh my God, you're right. He's taking a cab and is going

to be here in forty minutes!"

"I don't think it would be a good idea for him to find a half-naked woman in your bed," Carson teased with a wicked smile.

She watched Erin flush crimson even in the new morning light, and couldn't help but laugh at the woman's plight.

"You're very funny."

From the way she sounded, Carson knew Erin didn't really mean it and decided to have pity on her.

Both of them scrambled out of the bed, and Carson remade the bed while Erin rushed into the shower. Within ten minutes, Carson was dressed and had collected all of her belongings. Erin took a quick shower and was wrapped in a robe with a towel around her head, turban style, by the time Carson was ready to go.

Carson said a quick goodbye and was headed for the door when Erin grabbed her arm from behind to stop her.

"What is it?"

Erin slipped her arms around her neck and nuzzled against Carson's chest, before she whispered, "I didn't plan what happened earlier, I'm just sorry we were interrupted."

"So am I."

Carson held Erin against her for a few delightful moments. Then she kissed the top of her head. "Another time?"

"Oh, you can count on that." Erin reached up and kissed Carson gently, careful not to let passion get the best of her again. She pulled away. "Please don't leave. I'd really like for you to meet my father."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure it might be a little awkward, but if I chased you out of here I would feel like we were doing something wrong." Erin's eyes darkened. "Not that I'm ready to flaunt a relationship in front of my father so a certain amount of decorum is called for, but I think we can handle it."

Carson thought about it for a minute and decided Erin was right. It would be no different than if a friend had slept over at the penthouse, and there was no way Mr. Donovan could tell what they had been doing simply by looking at them.

"In that case I need to get a shower. Quickly."

The corners of Erin's eyes crinkled when she smiled, and she reached up to kiss Carson's nose playfully. "You'd better hurry if you're going to unload that bag again."

Carson quickly unpacked in the guestroom and decided to take a shower there in interests of time. She could only towel dry her hair, and comb out the long strands, but by the time she emerged Erin was dressed for work, and already had the coffee ready.

“How much time do we have,” Carson asked as she walked up behind Erin at the kitchen counter and slid her arms around her waist.

Erin glanced at her wristwatch. “Less than twenty minutes.”

“Good. Since I’m going to meet your father I’d like to make a good impression.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Carson didn’t miss the amused tone and brushed a kiss on the top of Erin’s head. “I was thinking I could make breakfast.”

Erin turned around carefully in her arms. “Darling, that really isn’t necessary. I’m sure he doesn’t expect it.”

“Nevertheless, we all require a good meal, and it will give me something to do besides fidget.”

Erin’s expression grew concerned and she squeezed Carson gently. “I didn’t even consider that you would be uncomfortable. Would you prefer to meet him another time?”

“No. To be honest I’m looking forward to meeting your father, but I am still a little nervous about it.”

“Don’t worry, darling. I’m sure he’ll love you.” Erin started to say something else but caught herself just in time. “I’ll tell you what, why don’t I help you and it’ll be ready when he gets here?”

“Can you make toast?”

Carson’s tone was serious and for a moment Erin looked outraged by the question. Then she saw the sparkle of humor in Carson’s eyes, and poked her in the stomach.

“I think I can manage.”

Chapter Seventeen

A KNOCK SOUNDED on the door and the women exchanged a nervous look. Erin saw a brief look of fear pass across Carson's face before she drew on her neutral business face that made her look icy at times.

"Don't worry," Erin told her, and patted Carson's forearm. "It'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say."

Erin opened the door, and smiled a welcome before she was grabbed in a bear hug. She was assailed by the familiar scent of Sean Donovan's aftershave and pulled away after a moment to look at him. His eyes twinkled merrily, and he had a healthy tan. Her father's once dark brown hair was just starting to gray at the temples with a few streaks throughout, and Erin thought he looked rather dashing in his three-piece suit.

"It looks like Arizona agrees with you."

Sean stepped into the penthouse and took off his overcoat before he said, "I had forgotten what an icebox Chicago can be this time of year. Hello. Who's this," he asked in a friendly voice.

Erin looked back and forth between her father and the woman she loved. She hadn't mentioned Carson when she spoke to her father on the phone, but her dad looked open and friendly while Carson was frozen to the spot. She looked even more pale than usual, and for a split-second Erin wondered if Carson was going to pass out.

"Dad, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. This is Carson Tierney, head of Delphi Technologies."

Sean stuck out his hand, and Carson seemed to come out of her trance.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Donovan."

"Sean, please," he corrected. "I've heard of your company, very impressive."

"Come on in, Dad. We can talk during breakfast."

Sean allowed Erin to take his overcoat before he surprised both of them by taking Carson's arm. "Is that what smells so good? Erin, I don't remember you even knowing how to cook. What's changed?"

Accustomed to his teasing banter, Erin merely laughed and led the way to the dining room. "Nothing has changed. Carson is the cook. I definitely think I'm getting the better end of this friendship."

They sat down to a veritable feast, and Erin was suddenly glad that Carson had gone out of her way with the meal. There were blueberry pancakes with butter and syrup, crisp bacon, and western omelets. On the side of each dish, Carson had placed a bowl of strawberries and fresh cream. Erin's contribution to the meal, a plate of toast, sat center along with a carafe of hot coffee.

"Delightful!" Sean rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Remind me to drop by unannounced more often."

Erin thought about what they would have been caught doing had he not called first, and ignored the embarrassment that sent the rush of blood to her ears as they tucked into the meal. Carson finally began to relax a little as they ate. Conversation centered at first on the fierceness of Chicago winters, but eventually came around to the reason for Sean Donovan's visit.

"As I said earlier on the phone, an old colleague of mine, John Rasor, called me last night to ask if I'd heard what was happening here. He told me about the killings at Holcomb, and asked me if you were all right. Of course I had to tell him that you hadn't even mentioned it."

Erin cleared her throat and looked away when he raised a brow in silent inquiry. "Anyone want more coffee?"

Since Carson's cup was full, and her father merely raised his eyebrow further. Erin took that as a no.

"Really, Dad. I'm sorry that I worried you, but things just happened so fast that I didn't have time to tell you."

He looked at her blankly for a moment before he said, "Erin, it happened before Christmas, more than a week ago. I would think that sometime in the past week you could have called me. You do still have my phone number, don't you?"

"Of course," Erin said weakly. How could she tell him that she'd been too busy falling in love to fill him in on everything? Finally, she relented. "What do you want to know?"

"Not much. Just everything. How did you come to be alone in that high rise with a lunatic? How did you escape when everyone else was killed?"

Erin could hear an edge of panic to his voice even though it was obvious that she was perfectly healthy. She must have scared the wits out of him to take a red eye out of Tucson, and rush to her side instead of just calling. Suddenly she felt like the worst kind of daughter, and wanted to make it up to him somehow. The first step would be to tell him everything that had transpired, even if she didn't really want to dwell on those terrible memories.

Staring down at the tabletop because she couldn't quite meet his eyes, Erin said quietly, "I wasn't alone."

“Ah, that’s right. John mentioned that another person was inside with you.”

“Not just anyone,” Erin said softly, and looked up to meet her father’s gaze. “Carson was with me.”

Sean’s eyes darted quickly to the quiet blonde, and then refocused on his daughter.

“She saved my life. If Carson hadn’t been there, I probably would have been just another victim to that guy.” Erin turned to Carson and held her gaze. “I was alone at first, and frightened. I found a dead man on the elevator right outside my office door. Was the killer there when the elevator opened? I don’t know. If he was, I can’t tell you why he didn’t check that floor first. All I know is that a woman I had only known for a few hours suddenly came through my door, took me under her wing, and kept me safe.”

“After you almost shot me in the face,” Carson amended wryly.

“Come again?”

Erin looked back toward her father as she heard his shocked tone.

“Let me explain.”

Erin started again at the beginning and filled Sean in on all the details. By the time she was finished Sean was looking at Carson with new eyes. She had known he was impressed by Carson’s reputation in the computer world, but now she sensed something else.

When she was finished, he sat quietly for a moment lost in thought. His coffee had grown cold while he was riveted on the tale. Then he looked up at Carson with shining eyes. “I’m grateful. I don’t know what else to say. Erin’s all I have left since her mother died. If I had lost her...” Sean’s voice cracked and he looked away for a second.

“Mr. Donovan,” Carson began. “Sean. The experience was very frightening, for both of us, but I’m afraid Erin is exaggerating slightly. She was very composed throughout the whole ordeal, and I am grateful that she was there. If Erin hadn’t warned me that a killer was loose inside the building, no doubt I would have walked right into him. You would have been proud of her.”

“I’m always proud of her. But the question is...what could he have been after? Why kill a bunch of people for no reason in a secured building?”

“We actually have a theory about that. Come on into the living room and I’ll show you the file. Carson stayed here last night so we could look at it, but we didn’t find anything definitive. Maybe you could offer a fresh perspective.”

Erin ignored Carson's undignified snort, and led the way out into the living room. She settled onto the sofa and her father sat down beside her. Erin could tell by his expression that he was fascinated, just like her. Carson didn't appear as enthusiastic.

"Unfortunately, I have an early meeting with Joyce. My programmer," she explained when Sean looked at her blankly. "I have to be going."

This time Carson extended her hand first. "It was very nice meeting you, Sean."

"And you, Carson. I hope to see you again soon."

Carson and Erin merely exchanged glances before the blonde dipped her head briefly, and walked to the door. She paused to grab her overcoat, and then she was gone.

Erin and her father spent the better part of the next hour going through the file. When they finished, they were no closer than before, but her father did have an idea. He mentioned a former business acquaintance that might be able to give them more detailed information. Apparently, the friend was connected to the old case in some way, and Sean promised to speak with the man in a few hours.

They sat the files aside and spent the next few minutes catching up. Erin was really enjoying their conversation when he blind-sided her.

"So, seeing anyone?"

Erin had just taken a sip of coffee and started to choke on the hot beverage. Her father grinned, and waited for an answer.

"When would I have the time?"

"You're being evasive. I know. I perfected the art."

"My, look at the time. I told you we're having that press conference this morning, so I better get ready."

"All right, all right," Sean laughed. "I'll let you off the hook. But seriously, Erin, how long has it been since Rose? Five years, six? I just want to see you happy."

"I know, Dad." Erin stood up and so did her father. "And I thank you for that sentiment, but I guess I'll just have to muddle along in my own way."

"So you're hinting that I should mind my own business." It wasn't a question, but Sean seemed more amused than insulted.

"I would never be so presumptuous." Erin kissed her father on the cheek and took her coffee cup into the kitchen.

“You go ahead,” Sean said. “I’ll clean up here. I still have my key.”

A special key was required to allow the elevator access to the penthouse. Otherwise, the concierge had to intercede to allow guests to the twenty-sixth floor.

“Thanks, Dad. I should get going. Are you coming to the press conference?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he said conversationally as he followed her to the door. “Who’s going to do the talking? I don’t imagine you would want to be seen by the press.”

“Hardly. Photos of Carson and I would be plastered all over the headlines by noon. Bob said he would speak for us, but we have to be present at the meeting beforehand in the conference room.”

“I’ll see you later then.”

Erin had her overcoat and briefcase, but before she could close the door, her father stopped her.

“Oh, and Erin? If you want my opinion, that Carson sure is a nice girl.”

Erin wasn’t used to getting advice on her love life from her father, and was flustered enough not to point out that Carson was hardly a girl. Instead she chose to take the comment differently than he intended. “She is nice, isn’t she?”

HE WATCHED THE press conference from the hotel room on the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio. Robert White, one of the senior partners from Eldridge, Donovan and White, spoke for the women, and extolled their ignorance of the killer’s identity while he questioned the integrity of the journalist responsible for the questionable story.

Gamely, White ignored the flash of cameras and paraded his arrogance for the media. “And I assure you that Ms. Donovan and Ms. Tierney have absolutely no knowledge of the suspect’s identity or his motives for the attack.”

The Chicago Tribune’s Chief Editor, Ed Gilbert, stood next to the attorney, but a little to the rear. It was clear that his presence was intended to reinforce White’s position, but both of the women were conspicuously absent.

Why was that? He had already seen them. Did they have something to hide?

He was distracted when the reporters suddenly began to fire questions at the lawyer.

“Mr. White, how do you account for the fact that both women were inside the building where three people were killed, yet they managed to escape without a scratch?”

Yes, very good question. He had promised Mary that anyone connected to Marsters would pay, but these two had eluded him. The slow, familiar burn of anger began to simmer in his belly.

Robert White obviously had a lot of experience performing and took the question in stride. “Sheer luck, determination and a great deal of courage, but just because they were present for those horrific events doesn’t imply any knowledge of the suspect’s identity.”

Didn’t it? Why would the lawyer keep pointing that out unless they did know something? His massive brow furrowed at the implications.

The throng of journalists shouted questions, but one woman was particularly insistent and was heard above the others.

“Sources inside the police department have told us Ms. Donovan and Ms. Tierney saw the killer and were able to provide a description. If that’s true, wouldn’t the suspect see them as a threat?”

Were they a threat? Did they know what he was doing and why? He hadn’t considered it before, but now that the question had been asked, he wondered. Were the women absent from the press conference because they were planning how to stop him? Were they one step ahead, or was he?

“My dear, providing a description and actually knowing who the man is are two very different things. By implying otherwise, it is the media who are endangering these women. Now, if you’ll excuse me? No more questions.”

The reporters continued to shout questions, but the attorney stepped away from the microphone and allowed Ed Gilbert to take his place. Gilbert held his hands up for silence and waited until the crowd had quieted somewhat.

“The Chicago Tribune prides itself on accurate and unbiased reporting. On behalf of the paper, I apologize to Ms. Donovan and Ms. Tierney, and I assure you that the reporter responsible for that piece of tabloid journalism will be censured. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. That’s all.”

But was it all?

He turned off the television and lay back on the dusty motel mattress to think. There was no question that finding them inside the office building had been coincidental, just as there was no question that he would have killed them. He had thought their continued existence was unimportant, but the reporter’s questions made him reconsider.

The small woman, Donovan, had been there from the beginning. He remembered how she walked through the crowd of protestors when the original suit had been brought against the research company. Someone said Marsters wanted the lady attorney to represent them, and he watched her.

At the time, his heart had been breaking with the knowledge of Mary's illness, but Mary still insisted on being there. She sat in a wheelchair in front of him. Her long, golden hair was gone because of the radiation treatments, and her bald head was covered by a scarf, but she was there.

Erin Donovan walked right in front of them, and would have kept going if Mary hadn't dropped her purse.

He remembered the sympathy on the small face, and the compassion in her eyes when she knelt to help Mary retrieve her belongings. Even then, he was confused that such a person would consider helping the enemy.

Shortly after that, Donovan disappeared from view and he forgot her. Now she had surfaced again and been present in the Holcomb Building. His appearance had changed in five years, with the beard and the longer, bushy hair, but what if she recognized him? If she did then her companion, the Tierney woman, would also know.

He didn't care if they caught him. His fate was unimportant. But it must not happen until his work was finished. Before they got him, he would bring Marsters to its knees. He regretted it, but they would have to be eliminated.

Tomorrow, he decided. Tonight he had work to do in Columbus. Marsters had a lab along the Hoover Reservoir that would soon no longer pose a threat, but he had to wait until dark.

ERIN SAT BACK on the sofa pleasantly stuffed. Her father sat adjacent to her in the armchair while Carson sat next to Erin on the sofa, but at a discreet distance.

"That was wonderful," Erin pronounced. "I can't remember the last time I had pizza."

"You eat at the RL too much. I knew that was going to happen when you took over the penthouse. You have to take more time for the simpler pleasures of life."

"Like pizza and beer," Erin teased her father.

"Like pizza and beer."

It had been a pleasantly quiet day after the press conference. Erin wanted to celebrate after the workday was complete, and her father had suggested Malnati's Pizza. Carson had been a

little reluctant to join them, concerned that she would intrude on father-daughter time, but Erin had insisted. After several pitchers of beer, and two deep-dish supreme pizza pies Erin thought that Carson and her father were becoming fast friends.

“Oh, by the way Erin, I found out something you might be interested in.” When Sean Donovan had their attention he said, “I spoke with Josh Keyes today about the Marsters case.”

The name was familiar, and Erin was suddenly very interested. Even Carson sat forward, though she continued to insist that they leave the detective work to the police.

“Keyes? Wasn’t he one of the backers for the Dickson and Dickson law firm?”

Sean nodded. “Yes, the same firm that ended up representing Marsters five years ago. He had some very interesting things to say.”

“What about client-attorney privilege?”

The question was valid, but Erin knew that Carson didn’t understand all of the legal parameters to such a relationship, so she allowed her father to explain.

“The case was settled a long time ago, and is now a matter of public record. Josh did save me a lot of time digging, though. He said that the families were extremely upset by the court’s decision, and that one man in particular was very vocal. Apparently, this guy made a lot of threats against the company and the CEO in general.”

“Did he remember who this guy was,” Erin asked.

“No, but he promised to look through the records to see if he could find out. The man sent several letters to the firm, but everyone just thought he was justifiably angry about the impending death of a family member.”

“So they blew it off,” Carson guessed.

“It’s reasonable,” Sean pointed out. “If I had been in his position, I might have said some things I didn’t mean, too.”

“Or he may have meant them.”

Sean agreed with Erin. “Or it may not have anything to do with it.

Marsters is a chemical research plant, and they even have some defense contracts. I’m sure they’ve made more than one enemy along the way. Unfortunately, that’s the price of doing business.”

“How long will it take for him to get the information to you?”

Erin was glad Carson hadn't pointed out that she had said the same thing, and merely asked a question. She just knew all of this had something to do with the old case.

"A few days. The file was sent to archives a long time ago, and it will take time to track it down."

When no one said anything else, Sean stood up. "Well, it's getting late and I should get going."

Erin and Carson stood up with him. "Aren't you staying here," Erin asked.

Sean shook his head. "No, I'm going to stay at the club tonight. I'm supposed to meet some of my buddies down there and spend some time catching up, but I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow."

Erin hugged her father goodnight, and walked him to the door. When she returned, Carson was leaning back against the sofa with her eyes closed. Erin slipped close up against her side, and wrapped her arms around Carson's waist.

Without opening her eyes, Carson returned the embrace and sighed softly.

"Tired," Erin asked gently.

"Hmm, a little."

"Are you ready for bed?" Erin hoped the answer was yes. She adored curling up in bed with Carson's warmth next to her.

"Yes, unfortunately I have to go home."

"Why?"

"I have some drafts at home that I need for a meeting tomorrow."

"That's too bad." Erin tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice, but Carson heard anyway.

"I'm sorry, darling. I wasn't really thinking that far ahead when I decided to stay here."

"Could you come back? After you picked up whatever it is you need?"

Carson was quiet for a minute while she considered the question. "It'll be awfully late."

"That's all right," Erin smiled, and hugged Carson a little tighter. "I'll just give you the key, and you can let yourself in when you get back."

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

Erin leaned away and looked up at Carson. “Of course not. That is, if you don’t mind driving back here? If you prefer to get more sleep, I’ll understand.”

“I think I’d rather sleep here,” Carson said, and then she leaned down to kiss Erin very softly.

Erin was tempted to deepen the contact, but Carson abruptly pulled away and stood up. “I guess I’d better be going then.”

They walked to the door and while Carson put on her coat, Erin grabbed her keys. They spent a few minutes kissing at the door before Carson finally left, key in hand.

Chapter Eighteen

THE TEMPERATURE HOVERED around minus seven degrees, and Carson tried not to shiver while she waited for the heater to warm up. Her breath plumed from her with each exhalation and fogged the windshield while she rubbed her hands together vigorously for warmth. Without the threat of more snow, the sky was painfully clear and the stars shone brightly overhead. Thoughts of Erin occupied Carson’s mind as she drove toward her home.

Carson sensed that Erin was finally ready to consummate their relationship, and bitterly regretted having to leave her, but she had no choice. Tomorrow she had to meet with the defense secretary’s aide again to finalize their contract. There were details of the contract that bothered her, and she wanted to discuss them with Erin, but Carson hated to admit that she was having trouble with all the legal double talk.

Technically Erin was her attorney now, and there was no reason why Carson shouldn’t be able to talk with her.

No reason except that a lot of the contract is top secret.

Carson frowned as she tried to work through the legal conundrum. She was a mathematician, not a lawyer, but if she and Erin shared client-attorney privilege, there shouldn’t be a problem. Carson wondered if she should clear that with the government aide first, and then snorted at her foolishness. If the government were trying to use her for their own purposes, Colonel Anderson would hardly encourage her to seek legal advice.

From what Carson understood, which she hoped was a great deal, Delphi would create encryption algorithms for government communications traffic as well as their supercomputers. The algorithms easily could be used for military applications, and if Carson went through with this, the government's scientists could take the string of code apart, and put it back together for their own purposes.

But not for at least twenty years, Carson thought. That was one condition she had insisted on, that Delphi would have exclusive control for that amount of time. After that, the contract would terminate, and the government could do as they liked with the information. Computer information technology was expanding so quickly that by then, the data would be obsolete anyway. It was the only way Carson could think of to limit the military.

She realized that her imagination might be getting the best of her and that she was seeing government conspiracies everywhere. The technology could be extremely important if the United States were drawn into a conflict anywhere and the encryption data could save thousands of lives. Carson was reminded of World War II and how the government had used the Navajo language because the enemy hadn't been able to translate it. Carson didn't know if her abilities were on par with that but she liked to think so. She liked to think that her work had the potential to save lives, otherwise what was the point of a defense contract anyway?

Carson reached her decision just as she got ready to turn off onto her lane. She would show the contract, all of the details of the contract, to Erin and get her opinion. If there was a loophole, Carson wanted to know it.

Her heart rate picked up a little as she neared her home, and her thoughts turned from work to more pleasant things. She would run in and get the documents, her suit for the meeting, and then get back into the city as quickly as possible. Thoughts of a sultry redhead alone in a queen-sized bed occupied her fantasies.

The SUV's headlights illuminated the snowy lane before her. Trees cast shadows across the white landscape, making it appear as though holes to infinity marred her path. Carson drove confidently over the smooth track with her thoughts centered on Erin's compact form. She wasn't really paying attention to anything until she got to the security gate that barred entrance onto her property.

Carson slowed down, and pressed the button on her visor to open the gate. It took a few seconds for her to register that it hadn't started to move, and Carson had to slam the brakes on to avoid running into the bars. She reached up and pressed the button on the visor again, but this time she held it down. The red light clearly showed that the device worked, but the gate stubbornly refused to open.

Carson heaved a frustrated sigh before she reached down and put the SUV in park. Then she shoved open the door and hopped out into two inches of packed snow. Carson employed someone to keep the lane clear, and it had been plowed earlier in the day. She left fresh tracks all the way to the gate where she checked out the wires that lead into the solar panel. Everything looked to be in working order until she noticed the top of the panel. It was crusted in ice and

snow, and Carson thought it likely that the panel had been unable to recharge, and with all the construction going on it hadn't been hard-wired into the house for a back-up power supply yet.

It hadn't bothered her that the security system wasn't all it could be when she moved in, but after what happened inside the Holcomb Building things were different.

"That's just great."

Carson raised a gloved hand to swipe the snow from the panel. It wouldn't do a lot of good now, but it would give the batteries a chance to recharge the next day. What she couldn't figure out was why the heating unit had stopped working. When the fence company had installed the panel, they had discussed how harsh the winter storms could be. Carson specifically remembered that they had agreed to install a heating element to keep the panel clear of ice. Somehow, it must have malfunctioned.

She reached down and pulled out the bolt that would manually release the gate. It swung open easily, and when it reached its apex Carson propped it open with a rock. The rock wasn't very heavy, but she thought it would hold long enough for her to drive through.

Carson retrieved her package from beside the front door, noticing along the way that footprints from the delivery driver led from the gate to the house. Apparently, the delivery driver had been serious about his duty, even climbing across an ornamental fence to drop off her package. She was as pleased by that as she was to be returning to Erin's side.

The return drive to The Bernardin was quiet, but it was still past midnight before she pulled into the parking structure. No doubt Erin was already asleep and Carson had started to feel very tired as well.

Very few people were out at this time of the night, and Carson quietly rode the elevator to the twenty-sixth floor grateful that Erin had given her the key. She had left the folder and the box of microprocessors in the Lexus, but still felt exhausted before the lift finally stopped. It had been a very long day since meeting Erin's father, the press conference, and then dinner in the evening. After the excitement at home and the resulting adrenaline rush, she was completely worn out.

She stifled a yawn and slipped the key into the penthouse lock. The apartment was dark and quiet, though Erin had thoughtfully left the kitchen light on. Carson's clothes were in the guestroom so she took a minor detour to put her suit in the closet, shower and change into pajamas before she walked back through the apartment toward Erin's bedroom. Carson slipped beneath the sheets, and was surprised when Erin rolled over to put a sleepy arm around her waist.

Erin snuggled into her shoulder, but slipped easily back into slumber. With Erin's head tucked under her chin Carson joined her there a few moments later.

CARSON AWAKENED WARM, comfortable, and completely aroused. A small hand covered her breast possessively, and idly played with the hard little bump that formed beneath the pajama top. Carson gasped, and her eyes snapped open to look down into Erin's peaceful features. Apparently, Erin was still asleep, and didn't realize what she was doing.

Gently, Carson rolled on her side and encouraged the smaller woman onto her back. Erin mumbled something and her hand flopped limply back to the mattress. Carson smiled as she looked down, and thought that two could be awakened in such a delightful manner.

She lowered her head, and slowly drew the tip of her tongue up the cords of Erin's neck. The pressure was gentle, almost nonexistent, just enough to get Erin used to the contact without waking her. Erin's breathing remained steady as she slumbered on, but she was completely still. Carson wondered if the woman was subconsciously waiting for something more.

She smiled again and laid a hand on Erin's ribs before she tenderly began to explore the warm body still hidden beneath a silken emerald gown. At the same time, Carson's full lips closed on an ear lobe. Carson felt the gasp of Erin's breath against her neck as the smaller woman came fully awake.

"Carson!"

Carson didn't respond, but her caresses became more concentrated as her hand finally covered the small, silk covered breast. Erin's body responded immediately, and Carson could feel the hard bump jab suddenly into the palm of her hand. Carson pulled away from the shell of Erin's ear to claim her lips in a tender kiss.

Erin responded avidly, but Carson kept the contact gentle. The kiss was slow, and agonizingly sweet, and Erin was pulled from restful sleep into a loving assault on her senses. Her arms instinctively rose to twine around Carson's lean form, and hold onto her tightly.

When Carson finally pulled away to look into her eyes, Erin was compelled to slow things down a little. The alarm hadn't gone off yet, but no doubt soon would, and they both had a busy day ahead of them.

"Carson, shouldn't we..."

"Shh, loving you will not change my feelings. I will not run away."

Carson placed a finger against Erin's lips to silence her, and this time Erin knew there was no stopping what was going to happen. This was inevitable, just as that first meeting in her office had been. From the time they first spoke, they had been heading for this time, and place. Carson interrupted her thoughts.

"Don't talk...love me."

What little resistance Erin might have had crumbled when Carson leaned down to capture her lips in another tender kiss. Large hands avidly caressed Erin before they slid under her to cup her hips and Carson pressed herself tight against Erin.

Erin groaned aloud at the sensation that shot through her body while fireworks went off behind her closed eyes. Tongues tangled and danced sweetly as she eagerly explored the inside of Carson's mouth to learn the curve of bone and teeth before she slid away to explore the sensitive skin of her throat.

The pulse under her lips pounded in excitement. Erin sucked more avidly on the tender flesh and forced a groan of arousal from her lover's throat. Erin relished the loving kisses, and held tightly to Carson. She was more aroused than she could ever remember being.

"I need to feel you," Erin rasped thickly, and smiled when Carson quickly sat up and began removing her nightclothes.

Alabaster skin was revealed slowly to loving eyes. When Carson was almost finished undressing, Erin realized she was still covered with a nightgown. She had just flipped back the blankets and started to remove the garment when Carson stopped her.

"No," she whispered. "Let me,"

Carson rested her hand over Erin's thundering heart and watched in fascination as her nipples hardened even more under the silken material. Then she held Erin's gaze, and slid her hand down the slender frame until she reached the hem, before she slid her hand underneath to caress the soft skin of Erin's inner thigh.

"Please," Erin groaned.

Carson pushed the gown up until she could pull it over Erin's head before she dropped it negligently to the floor. Then she lay down against her side, and kissed her again and began slowly to touch the soft skin.

Erin could feel Carson's controlled urgency but she had waited far too long to rush this incredible event. She pulled away for only a moment and whispered, "Relax, trust me...I will take care of you."

Even while Erin spoke, her fingers moved to the juncture between Carson's legs, and dipped into the heat and wetness she found there. At the first touch, Carson cried out and buried her face against Erin's neck. Erin slid into the creamy wetness, barely entering between Carson's folds before she brought the moisture up to swirl over swollen hardness. She pushed Carson onto her back before she lowered her head to take a hard nipple into her mouth, and swirled her tongue on it with the same maddening pattern as her fingers.

Carson clutched Erin's shoulders as her body arched against Erin's touch. She writhed and trembled, but Erin was relentless as Carson shuddered in her arms. Then Carson cried out again

as she climaxed unexpectedly, the sound tore from her throat as she shook. Erin continued to caress her, and glanced up to see Carson's eyes closed tight against the excruciating pleasure.

Gradually, Erin slowed her pace as the tremors eased. When Carson could only rest against the mattress in a boneless mass, Erin finally moved up her body to kiss her gently. To her surprise, Carson immediately captured her lips in a fierce kiss, and her body tensed again.

Erin cradled Carson's face, and kissed her possessively. Her own need burned, but Carson needed more and Erin was ready to give it to her. She slid a hand down across Carson's ribcage, and belly, stroking gently until she parted Carson's trembling legs.

Erin caught the gasp from the aroused woman in her own mouth and slowly penetrated her with one long, slender finger. Carson's hips lifted off the mattress as she tried to encourage Erin to move deeper.

Carson tore her mouth away from the soft lips and pleaded. "Please...more...deeper,"

Her fingers dug painfully into Erin's shoulders in urgency, but Erin

wanted to move slowly since it was Carson's first time. She didn't want to hurt her. Slowly and carefully, Erin moved inside Carson. At the same time, she kissed her deeply until Carson relaxed against her. As she relaxed, Erin felt another flood of moisture and moved easier inside Carson's body until she felt her start to tremble.

"Please," Carson begged again. She whimpered in need and arched against Erin's fingers. "More."

Erin was long past coherent thought by now. She slid another finger into Carson and began to push into her slowly. Carson's arms were around Erin's shoulders as she held on tightly, and countered the gentle rhythm.

Carson's pulsing body gripped the two fingers that pushed strongly into her. Her hips undulated as Erin matched her movements and sped up the pace. Their lovemaking became frenzied as each unleashed the passion they had held back for days.

Reflexively, Erin began to rub herself against Carson's muscled thigh, gratified when she raised her leg to press firmly against Erin's heated center.

Erin suddenly arched and cried out as she was gripped and shaken by the strength of the orgasm that claimed her. The sensation was all-consuming and drowned out all coherent thought as she clung to Carson.

The rapture on Erin's face as she peaked, along with the feel of warm flesh that skidded deliciously against her swollen clitoris, triggered Carson's own release. It carried her along on a tide of pleasure until she lay limp and completely unable move.

Finally, Erin felt Carson stir beneath her, and reluctantly pulled her fingers free. She smiled when Carson immediately snuggled against her with tears shining in her eyes. “My God, that was incredible!”

“Tell me again why you wanted to wait.”

Carson looked at Erin in astonished outrage before she saw the mischief on her face. Then both of them started to laugh.

Erin’s breath caught in her throat. She looked down at Carson with her hair tangled and spread across the pillow and desire ignited again.

“I hope you’re not tired,” Erin said huskily.

Carson easily read her intent and shuddered at the feral look in Erin’s eyes. It was early morning, and Carson knew she should still be tired, but sleep was the last thing on her mind. All she could think about, at the moment, was all of the pleasures Erin could introduce her to.

“Not at all.”

“Good.”

Erin moved closer very slowly. Carefully she brushed her lips across Carson’s, teasing, and stoking the fires of passion. She pulled away until she could look into Carson’s eyes that looked black in the low light.

“I...want you,” Erin whispered into Carson’s mouth. She had almost admitted her true feelings and just barely caught herself. She wasn’t ready for that admission yet.

“I want you, too,” Carson said and kissed her fully. Carson rose up to turn Erin onto her back. “But this time I want to touch you.”

“Oh, yes, my darling. Anything you want.”

Chapter Nineteen

SOMETIMES THE SHARP edge of fury felt as though it had always been with him, harsh and insistent like the grief that pervaded his soul. It was the one constant in his life now just as

the love and tenderness had been when Mary lived. He resolutely pushed any gentle emotions away. Tenderness now would weaken his resolve, and he couldn't do that to Mary's memory.

The sky was overcast and the full face of the moon barely shone through the darkness to illuminate the frozen white tundra. Anyone else would have been virtually blinded by the lack of light, but he had been born into darkness. His eyes easily discerned the hulking monstrosity that jutted like a gigantic sore from the earth around the reservoir. Marsters claimed that being near a large body of water was necessary in case of a meltdown from all of the chemicals housed in the research labs, but he was sure the true reason was much more insidious.

He had come to believe that Marsters deliberately poured their toxic waste into the large bodies of water around their labs in addition to what the smoke stacks poured into the air. It was no secret that they maintained defense contracts with the government, and it was very little stretch from there to believe that the research company tested their results on the surrounding populace. In time he came to believe that the cancer that claimed Mary and the others had been caused from a botched experiment of deliberately released biochemical compounds, and had probably surprised Marsters as much as anyone else.

But, surprised or not, their ignorance was no excuse and he wouldn't let them continue their experiments. Even if he were only one man, he would bring them down.

It was easy to get blueprints of the Krycheck Research and Development plant along the Hoover Reservoir in Columbus, Ohio. Even if what they did there was classified, the building plans were not. A quick stop by City Hall late on a Friday night yielded the plans on microfiche. The library was almost empty, and no one had any interest in a lone man working diligently away in an obscure and little used corner. A baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, and a thick trench coat helped him maintain anonymity.

With the layout carefully studied and memorized, he finally set his plan in motion. He stumbled on the uneven bank of the Hoover Reservoir as he approached the research lab from the riverside. There was a high, electrified chain link fence around the perimeter of the secure lab so he had to find an alternate route. The drainage pipes that fed waste into the water would be the perfect place to find a way in. It wasn't hard to find the entrance with the light of a full moon. Three cavernous openings were visible as huge dark shadows.

The wind off the bay chapped his face even through the protection of the heavy beard, but he ignored it as he fumbled with gloved hands to find the flashlight in the bottom of his coat pocket. A bulky backpack gave him a hunched appearance, but it was necessary since it carried all of the supplies he would need to carry out his self-appointed task.

Humidity dampened his skin and began to crystallize in the frigid air, but finally he found the light and entered the central shaft. With one hand on the curved wall for support, he stumbled into total blackness. He couldn't risk turning the light on yet for fear that it would be seen by one of the security guards who patrolled the research lab.

Detritus filled the mouth of the drainage pipe and proved that they hadn't been flushed in quite some time. It was just more proof of shoddy safety precautions, as far as he was concerned. Ignoring the urge to retch from the cloying stench, he stepped over the pile and into something that squished heavily underfoot. His face twisted in disgust and he finally fumbled for the flashlight switch. Still concerned with being seen before he could carry out his objective he cupped his hand over the light and picked his way carefully forward.

Rats scurried away from the flashlight, skittering and chittering in fright at the human intrusion into their domain. He ignored the vermin and traveled deep under the research lab until he came to an intersection where the mouth of the three tunnels began. There was a raised platform where workers could come into the tunnels in case maintenance was needed, but at this time of night, the area was deserted. Up there somewhere was an access point into the basement of the research facility.

Determination settled within him as he thought again of Mary. Sweet Mary had never harmed another, and even after she got sick, refused to be angry at those responsible. She didn't deserve what happened to her, and even if she could never have blamed them, he could.

Crossing the trisection of corridors, he saw a tiny set of steps in the far left corner. He was up the steps in no time and moved along the raised walkway until he found a metal door set almost seamlessly into the concrete wall. As he suspected, it was locked, but he had come prepared for almost any problem. He sat the heavy backpack down on the concrete walkway as quietly as possible. Metal items inside shifted and clanked together, but the noise was so slight no one could have heard through the door.

A quick glance through a small inset window assured him no one was nearby. He fished a crowbar out of the backpack and made quick work of the low-tech deadbolt. He pulled a can of WD-40 from the pack and sprayed the hinges to reduce the noise from what was to come next. Then he used the crowbar again to open the door.

Images of those he had killed in the Holcomb Building suddenly came to mind and he froze at the realization that he hadn't minded the bloody work. Snapping the woman guard's neck had been as easy as breaking dry kindling. The fear in the other's eyes had made him feel strong, invincible. Could it be that by taking the life of everyone that had any part in Mary's death made him stronger? Was that why every move he made to destroy Marsters was undetected by the police, and why he had come so far? Maybe this was fate's way of making things up to him. But even if he brought Marsters to its knees it would never be enough to make up for his loss.

That thought made him angrier than ever, and his hands shook a little when he put the crowbar back into the pack. No, it would never be enough.

Silently he passed through the doorway and into a low-lit maintenance access way. He didn't need the flashlight now, and put it into his pocket before he walked confidently down a path that would take him directly underneath the facility. There he would plant C-4 in copious amounts all around the subterranean structure. Liberal amounts of explosive in the corners and on all support beams would bring the facility down around the nightshift worker's ears. Secondary and tertiary

explosions from the chemicals would do the rest of the work for him. A smile completely devoid of humor settled on his dark features as he began to shape the charges.

“IT LOOKS FINE to me. It’s just standard legal mumbo jumbo, but essentially it meets all of the points of agreement that you mentioned to me.”

Carson sat in Erin’s office being assured there was nothing out of the ordinary in the government contract. Her meeting with Colonel Anderson wasn’t for another half hour, but Erin had gone over the documents far enough ahead of schedule for them to discuss the details. Before she checked the documents, Erin assured her that it was perfectly fine for her legal counsel to do so even considering the top secret nature of the details.

Carson knew she should be listening to Erin’s take on the contract, but memories from last night and early this morning crowded her thoughts. All she could see was the movement of wine shaded lips as Erin spoke and remembered how sweet those lips felt on her skin. Sharp desire surged through her, and she tingled at the remembered sensations Erin had introduced her to. Her breath quickened slightly as her world narrowed down to those lips. Erin was looking down at the documents while she spoke and didn’t see Carson’s silent gasp when her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

That tongue had stroked Carson into ecstasy only a few hours ago, and Carson’s body clenched in unconscious anticipation of a repeat performance.

Suddenly Erin looked up, concerned that Carson hadn’t answered her question. Carson’s blue eyes were dark and half lidded with desire. Her lips were parted slightly as her breath rushed past them. Erin felt an answering charge through her own body and stared deeply into her lover’s eyes.

After a moment, she said, “If you keep looking at me like that my behavior toward my client might become...unprofessional.”

“If we were not here, I would already have you beneath me.”

Erin sucked in a surprised breath and held it briefly. Then she let it out with a rush. All of her ideas on office etiquette came back to haunt her in that instant. Erin remembered how she was about office affairs, and how uncomfortable she had been with the idea that Amy might figure out something was going on between her and Carson. Then she remembered last night, and how easily Carson had gotten past all of her defenses in such a short amount of time. She still didn’t want to be caught in a compromising position at work, but speaking like this would hardly bring the corporate world crashing down around her ears.

A little flirtation was harmless, but Erin wouldn’t let it go any farther than that right now.

“Hold on to that thought,” Erin told her in her sexiest growl. Secretly she delighted in the visible shudder that went through Carson’s lean frame before she concentrated again on the contract in her hands. “I was asking if there was something in particular that bothered you about the contract.”

“No, I just don’t want to overlook anything vital and give the government control of our research because of some loophole.”

Erin shook her head. “I don’t see anything here that would do that.”

“That’s a relief. Well, I suppose I should let you get some other work done,” Carson said and stood up. “I need to see Joyce for a moment before the colonel arrives for our meeting. Will you be there?”

“Of course. I am representing your company now, remember?”

Erin stood and walked to the door with Carson. For some reason she wasn’t ready for Carson to leave and searched for a more personal topic to get Erin to stay for a moment longer.

“My father called earlier. He really enjoyed meeting you.”

Carson looked down at Erin and smiled. They had stopped just before the closed door and were well within one another’s personal space. She saw the golden flecks in Erin’s brown eyes and resisted the urge to take Erin into her arms.

“I enjoyed meeting him as well. He seems to be a very caring man. It’s no wonder the two of you are so close. Perhaps when the weather warms up we could all go fishing together?”

The words were said gently and while Carson referred to a story Erin had told her, the silent message was something else altogether. The sexual tension was palpable and the look in Carson’s eyes suggestive. Erin suddenly wondered if Carson was going to kiss her and realized that she had unknowingly leaned into the anticipated contact. Then Carson took a deep breath and closed her eyes briefly to break the spell.

“I have to go before I do something that you’ll regret.”

Carson’s voice was lower than Erin had heard from her before, a testament to how deeply she was affected by Erin’s proximity.

Erin swallowed. “I think that’s a good idea.”

Carson left quickly and it wasn’t until after the door closed that Erin realized what she had said. Carson said she had to leave before she did something that Erin would regret. Obviously, it wouldn’t have bothered Carson in the slightest to kiss her while they were both at work. For the first time Erin wished she didn’t have such strict ideas concerning proper office behavior. Sighing deeply, she turned away from the door to get some work done before the meeting.

Thirty minutes later, familiar with the details of Delphi Technologies' newest contract, Erin walked into the conference room a few minutes before the meeting with Colonel Anderson was to begin. Per her instructions, pitchers of ice water and glassware had already been placed on the table. Carson and Joyce walked in a moment later and for an instant the room seemed to narrow down to the blue of Carson's eyes. Then Joyce broke the spell by thrusting her hand forward in greeting.

"Hi, it's good to see you again."

As usual, Erin grinned in automatic response to Joyce's enthusiasm. She took Joyce's hand. "Ms. Collins, I'm glad you could join us."

Erin was thrilled that Carson had someone she could bring along if only for moral support, but it was the silver glint from her wrist that caught Erin's attention.

"Nice watch."

"Thanks. Carson gave it to me for Christmas." Joyce flashed her friend a smile and then held the watch up so that Erin could see it properly. Erin was astonished to see that it was a Rolex and was startled by the unpleasant sensation that started in the pit of her stomach. It was an awfully expensive gift between friends and made Erin wonder.

"It's beautiful," she said with difficulty. "Carson has good taste."

"Yeah, I was really surprised when she gave it to me."

I bet!

Movement near the doorway interrupted the conversation and Erin looked and saw two men in black three-piece suits walk in. The man in front was near Carson's height with dark hair that had just started to gray at the temples. His swarthy complexion said that he spent a great deal of time outdoors, and the lines on his slightly bored features belied his age. The man behind him was equally well dressed, but much younger. Erin judged him to be in his early thirties. He followed two steps behind the other man that Erin guessed to be Colonel Anderson and carried a clipboard. Apparently, the aide had an aide.

Anderson walked up to the table and stood at what Erin assumed was supposed to be an intimidating stance and glared briefly around the room. His eyes passed over Carson and Joyce negligently before they rested briefly on Erin.

"Colonel Anderson, this is my attorney, Erin Donovan," Carson said politely.

Although her tones were courteous, Erin could detect that Carson was a little uncomfortable with the man, and she could see why. As an attorney, she had learned to read people quickly. This man hadn't even opened his mouth yet, and she didn't like him.

“Ladies, I suggest we begin. I have another meeting in an hour and I’d like to get this over with quickly.”

Erin felt her hackles rise. So, pompous, and arrogant, she thought.

“Have a seat, Colonel,” Erin said in her best diplomatic tone.

Anderson looked as if he would resist and Erin wondered if he had expected to walk in and have the signed documents handed to him. Reluctantly, the man sat and sent his companion a harsh look. The other man flinched and reached for the pitcher of water. He poured the liquid and sat the glass in front of his superior. Erin noticed that Anderson hadn’t even bothered to introduce the other man.

“I’m sorry. What did you say your name was?”

The aide opened his mouth to answer and was interrupted by Anderson. “He didn’t. I’ll get right down to it. This contract, as it is currently written, is unacceptable.”

From the corner of her eye, Erin noticed Carson’s expression tighten. Now she understood what was so intimidating about the man, and why Carson had initially been reluctant to bring the details of the contract to her attention. No doubt, Anderson had somehow convinced Carson that the top-secret details couldn’t be seen by anyone else. The fact that he had taken one look around the room and then made such a pronouncement led her to believe that he expected to run right over Erin as well as Carson. Was he just a sexist pig who didn’t expect a woman to stand up to him, or did he conduct all of his business in the same crude fashion?

Joyce was the first one to respond before Carson could silence her with a touch on the forearm. “What? It took us a month to hash out the details...”

She looked at Carson when the blonde touched her arm, and quieted when she saw the slight shake of Carson’s head. Joyce gritted her teeth and cast a ferocious look at Erin. Carson must have told her beforehand that since Erin was their attorney she was the one expected to speak for them. She had needed the brief contact on her arm to remind her of that, and Erin smoothly moved to fill in the silence.

“Colonel Anderson, I have gone over the details of the contract extensively. As Ms. Tierney’s attorney, I’m sure you understand that any information in those documents has complete client-attorney confidentiality. The details seem very straightforward so could you tell us exactly what you find unacceptable?”

“The whole thing,” he said as though it should be apparent. “As the contract is currently outlined, military scientists would be precluded from any alterations to the programs. Given the state of international affairs, the military must be given complete autonomy to upgrade the algorithms where needed to meet defensive conditions should we encounter foreign threats.”

It took Erin a second to work through that one, and again she thought the Colonel spoke as he did to convince everyone he was smarter than he really was.

“What you’re saying is that you want Carson to turn over the patent of the software to the government.”

“That is what I just said.”

Erin didn’t like being talked to as though she was stupid and started to get angry. She hid it well as she looked at Carson to gauge her reaction. Carson looked horrified and Erin understood why. The software was supposed to help encrypt government communications to keep more sensitive information from falling into the wrong hands.

That also took into account the need for secrecy should the United States be drawn into an international conflict. If that software were simply given to the military to alter at will, it could be used for aggressive purposes as well. From what Erin understood, the software was advanced enough that the U. S. military could fool foreign missiles into attacking their own countries.

She didn’t want to think that her own government would become involved in such a thing, but she would be naïve to think it wasn’t a possibility. That was something she considered unacceptable.

“Colonel, I’m sorry, but Delphi Technologies has the patent on this software. They will freely lease it to the government, but absolutely will not simply hand it to you. I have been involved with defense contracts many times and am fully aware of proper procedures. Perhaps you should have familiarized yourself with those procedures as well before this meeting because I would never ask a client to sign away her rights in the manner you’ve just suggested.”

Anderson smiled and Erin got the impression of a snake ready to strike. “That’s fine. You don’t have to give up anything. I’m sure our scientists will be able to break down the code without your input.”

Erin couldn’t believe her ears. Had Anderson done any research on cryptanalysis before this meeting?

“Colonel Anderson, do you understand how cryptanalysis works?”

“Sure. It’s just a string of numbers that translate into words.”

Erin stared aghast at the man and for a moment had trouble even trying to formulate a reply to his ignorance. Carson wasn’t quite so speechless and immediately jumped into the discussion.

“We are not talking about Morse code, which by the way, was developed using the original method of steganography called the Bacon cipher, where a message was concealed in the presentation of text. To encode a message then, a group of five letters using ‘a’ and ‘b’ replaced

each letter of text. Because any message of the right length could be used to carry the encoding, it was easy to hide the secret message in plain sight.

“Things have become much more complex since then. Cryptanalysis has changed drastically throughout history with machines such as Enigma in World War II to computer-based schemes of the present. It is no longer possible to have unlimited success in code breaking and it involves solving the developer’s digital signature. Our contract gives the government authorization to utilize the process, but you will not be able to provide authentication to change any of the data without that digital signature.”

Anderson was flabbergasted that they wouldn’t be able to take the code apart on their own. He sputtered angrily for a moment and then declared, “But we won’t be able to make any adjustments if a conflict should break out. What if an enemy is able to hack into the system? The military must have the capacity to alter the parameters of the software should it become necessary.”

Erin spoke again at that point. “Delphi Technologies will make any adjustments that become necessary.”

“And if those adjustments need to be made in the middle of the night, what then? Will one of the programmers be on call twenty four hours a day for the next ten years,” Anderson asked sarcastically.

“If necessary,” Erin assured him in a steely voice.

“Well, it would appear that we have wasted our time.” Colonel Anderson stood up slowly and seemed to be waiting for something. With a flash of insight, Erin realized he was trying to intimidate them into giving him what he wanted.

Erin also stood and spoke calmly. “Good luck. I assume you people came to Delphi Technologies because they are the best at what they do. If you want to settle for second best that’s your decision, but no one worth their salt is simply going to hand over a patent. Now if you’ll excuse us, I’m sure we’ll have better luck negotiating with the British for Ms. Tierney’s software.”

Anderson pinned Carson with a scathing look. “The British? Does she always speak for you, or don’t you have any say in this?”

Carson and Joyce stood up. “Why else would I employ an attorney if not to listen to her counsel,” Carson asked.

Erin started toward the door with Joyce and Carson close behind her. When she passed Colonel Anderson, she stopped briefly. “When you want to make a reasonable offer, feel free to contact us.”

They started to leave, but Joyce had to have one final shot at the man. “Better hurry or you’ll be late for your next meeting.”

Silently the three walked back toward Erin’s office, but she could feel the fumes coming off Joyce. When they neared the elevator, Joyce said she was going to go get some coffee and blow off a little steam before she met Carson back upstairs. Before she left, Joyce turned to see that Colonel Anderson and his aide were still in the conference room. No doubt, the other man was getting an earful, and she felt sorry for the aide.

“I didn’t know the British were interested in the software,” Joyce said quietly.

“Neither did I,” Erin returned mischievously. She cast a look down the hall over Joyce’s shoulder and spoke in a low voice. “I just sense that this man is trying to further his career, and I don’t get paid for that.”

They chuckled quietly together then Joyce turned to Carson. “You didn’t tell me she was this clever.”

The elevator doors opened and Joyce stepped onto the lift. She looked at Erin appreciatively and waved before the doors closed and Erin thought she had given Carson a completely new insight to her character.

Carson and Erin walked through the outer office and into her private sanctuary without comment. There were a few things they wanted to talk about concerning the contract, but neither cared to be overheard.

“That went well,” Carson said softly, after Erin closed her door. “I didn’t expect this. I knew there was something Colonel Anderson was thinking during our last meeting, but I never thought he would expect me to hand them the patent,” Carson added.

Erin settled behind her desk while Carson sat in the visitor’s chair. “Carson, I know this contract is important to you, but it’s not worth handing the digital signature over. You know better than anyone how this software could be used in the wrong hands.”

“The contract is worth a lot of money,” Carson admitted slowly. “But it’s not a money issue. It’s the credibility and reputation issue for producing encryption software for the government that is more important to my company.”

Before Erin could respond, Amy buzzed her from the outer office.

“Colonel Anderson is out here to see you, Ms. Donovan. He insists that it’s quite important.”

Erin simply raised an eyebrow at Carson before she replied. “Send him in.”

A few seconds later Colonel Anderson entered the room and quietly closed the door. A small frown creased his brows and Erin thought he looked worried. Maybe his superiors had ordered

him not to return without that contract and he was worried he had blown it. His next words seemed to confirm Erin's suspicions.

"Ladies, I believe we may have gotten off on the wrong foot."

Carson had her back to the colonel so he couldn't see her expression, but Erin could clearly see the brief look of amusement on her face.

"Can we come to an agreement?"

Erin knew when she was soon to win a major victory for a client and the familiar surge of exhilaration flooded through her, but she carefully kept her expression neutral. She found it interesting that although he was trying to smooth things out, he was still a swaggering ass.

"You could have had an agreement fifteen minutes ago. I'm sorry, Colonel, but you know our conditions. You can either agree with them or take your business elsewhere." Erin stood to her own meager height and unflinchingly met his gaze. She was gratified to watch him shift uncomfortably.

"We are talking about millions of dollars. Shouldn't we have the right to be able to make changes if we want?"

"To expect anyone to hand over their patent is rather naïve, Colonel. Don't you think?"

For a moment it looked as though he was about to argue again. Finally, he huffed. "You know we need the contract."

"Yes, and it's here, but we're not changing the terms."

"Fine. I'll sign it."

Erin pressed the button on her intercom and called Amy into the office. "Amy, we need a witness for the contract."

She opened the folder and pushed the documents toward the colonel. Wordlessly he signed everywhere that she indicated and then laid the pen on the desk.

The secretary waited quietly for the colonel to sign where Erin indicated he should on the contract. As a legal secretary, Amy was used to this, and often acted as a witness for her employer.

Erin glanced up at Anderson's smarmy features while he signed and thought if he could have bulldozed them into doing things his way, he would have. The colonel didn't fool her for a second. She believed that no matter what happened, his orders were to procure the agreement. Still, it was the end result that counted, and Carson really wanted this contract to help strengthen

her company's reputation. After Anderson signed the contract, they wouldn't have to deal with the pompous man again.

He waited while Carson signed where necessary. Then Amy signed as a witness and Colonel Anderson received a copy of the documents.

"The contract will go into effect on the first of January," Erin told him needlessly, but she just couldn't resist the urge to needle him a little.

Amy walked to the door with the colonel and opened the door. She paused to wait for the man when Anderson turned to the women and spoke again. "Ms. Donovan, Ms. Tierney. Captain Davis, my aide, will

be in touch with you next week to arrange the installation." "Thank you, Colonel. Oh, and Colonel? Any other dealings with Ms. Tierney will go through me." The colonel merely looked at Erin before he dipped his head and walked out with Amy right behind him. For a moment, there was stunned silence and then both women burst into relieved laughter. "I can't believe it," Carson exclaimed. "He actually signed it." Deeply impressed by how Erin had handled the insufferable man,

Carson gained a new appreciation for her replacement attorney. It was no wonder Erin's clients insisted that she was the only one to handle their business affairs. Erin was even more protective of her client's interests than Carson had realized.

"I knew he'd be back," Erin assured her. "How about I buy you a coffee to celebrate?"

Carson nodded and followed Erin through the back entrance into the break room. Carson could smell a fresh pot of coffee when they walked through the door, but was a little surprised to see Erin's secretary staring dumbfounded at the small television mounted on the wall. Erin was similarly curious about Amy's presence and they both went to see what had her so captivated.

A breaking news story filled the television screen, and Carson saw what looked like a major structural fire in the background. Then the reporter spoke and Carson suddenly forgot contracts, coffee or celebrations.

Krycheck Research and Development warehouse in Columbus, Ohio exploded at approximately four-thirty this morning. The blast triggered several smaller explosions from the chemicals housed in the structure, and the Office of Emergency Management has issued an evacuation order for everyone in Dayton County until the crisis has passed.

'Authorities insist the evacuation is a precautionary measure until the danger of chemical contamination has passed. Thirteen workers on the graveyard shift were killed in the blast, but their identities have been withheld until the families are notified.

'Krycheck Research and Development is a subsidiary of Marsters Research Corporation and many are wondering about the rash of bad luck the corporation has fallen victim to of late. We'll keep you informed as the situation develops.

'John, back to you in the studio.

Chapter Twenty

THE MEETING WITH Colonel Anderson went much longer than Carson had expected. As a result, she had to fend for herself, as far as lunch was concerned. Erin needed to make up for lost time after that encounter and had a great deal of work to get finished before she could quit for the day. Joyce and Mike were deeply involved with getting the security systems in place on the tenth floor and Jeremy was working on quarterly reports for Delphi Technologies. Carson could have gotten involved with installing the security interface, but she was busy with a new program of her own and didn't like her attention divided between projects.

When she finally decided she couldn't stand another minute without something to eat or throwing up, Carson decided to go to lunch by herself.

Carson pulled her jacket closer around her as she stepped out of the Holcomb Building and onto the front walk. The wind was blowing out of the north and she tucked her chin into her overcoat. With her hands deep in her pockets, she ignored the sting of tears that the icy breeze caused and strode down the block toward a small café.

The Chicago Department of Transportation was out in full force, and orange cones blocked off part of one roadway lane. Men in insulated orange jumpsuits worked to fill potholes, shoveling asphalt while someone else came along and tamped it down into the holes. During the breaks in winter storms, the repairs were only temporary, and would be filled properly when warmer weather arrived. Carson wrinkled her nose against the bitter stench of melted tar.

She wasn't really paying attention to the workers, more intent on getting to the café and out of the wind. One of the workers had his back to her as he shoveled loose asphalt into a pothole near the curb. He backed up just as Carson walked by him and they collided. Carson bounced off

the man's back and slipped on the icy walk. She would have fallen into the frozen grass if he hadn't grabbed her arm at the last minute to help steady her.

"Thank you," Carson said a little breathlessly and looked up into the man's face. An orange muffler covered his features and he'd pulled a hood over his head for warmth. Carson noticed he had dark brown eyes, and they seemed filled with an expression of concern.

The transit worker was a big man and towered above Carson. She had to crane her head back to look into his dark eyes. Then she glanced down where his hand curled around her upper arm. His hand easily circled her bicep until his fingers met. Instead of answering, the worker dipped his head toward her in a courteous manner and then released her before he turned back to his work.

The café was only half a block away and Carson concentrated on reaching it without smashing into anyone else. The overheated air inside the café felt like a vacation in the tropics after exposure to the blustery day and Carson sighed in relief. She blinked as she adjusted to the change in temperature and then headed for an empty booth in the corner. She sat near a large window to the side to try to balance the stifling heat inside the building with the cold from outside. While she waited for a server, Carson idly looked out the window at the transit workers. The man who had steadied her against a fall systematically shoveled the road fill and worked his way down the block toward the café.

"Can I get you something, honey?"

Carson looked up at her red haired waitress, and tried to ignore the way the woman popped her chewing gum. "Coffee, please. Do you have a menu?"

The woman scribbled something on her order pad and then said, "Sure." She whipped out a paper menu from her apron and plopped it onto the table before she left to get Carson's coffee. Food stains and grease spotted the cover of the menu and Carson held it carefully by the edges.

After Carson placed her order for a club sandwich, she sipped her coffee. She always carried a small notebook in her pocket and started to work on some calculations while she waited for her food. Numbers and symbols flowed from her with ease and in minutes, the pad was filled with impossibly long equations. She barely noticed when the server dropped off her sandwich, but by rote, Carson picked up one of the sections and took a bite while she continued to scribble.

She had finished the sandwich and held a crumpled napkin in her right fist as she concentrated on adding to her equations when a long shadow fell across her table. Annoyed with the inconsiderate person who had interrupted her work, Carson looked up with a sharp comment on her tongue. It froze on her lips when she recognized Colonel Anderson standing next to her. What could he possibly want?

"Colonel Anderson, you're blocking my light."

The boardroom session was still fresh in Carson's mind and she didn't feel like being polite. Like Erin, she believed Colonel Anderson would do anything, ethical or not, to get exactly what he wanted.

"Ms. Tierney. Do you mind if I join you?"

Anderson didn't wait for an answer but plopped down in the seat across from her. The waitress saw him from across the café and was almost to them when he practically shouted that he would have coffee.

Carson frowned. There were few people she interacted with on a personal level, and even fewer clients that she would deal with one on one. It was one of the many details Joyce took on so that Carson wouldn't have to. For this man to so casually invite himself to her lunch was annoying, to say the least.

"Colonel Anderson, I'm very busy and as my attorney has stated, anything you have to say you may discuss with her."

The colonel ignored the caustic remark and craned his neck sideways to read Carson's pad. "Yeah, that looks very...involved. I'm sure it's all very mind consuming."

Carson resisted the urge to snort at him. Anderson didn't have a clue what her equations meant.

"What do you want?"

Anderson looked up at Carson and stifled a bored yawn. The server dropped off the coffee and Anderson sipped slowly while Carson fumed. Carson had just decided she had enough and was going to leave when he finally broke the silence.

"I have a proposal for you."

"As I have said my attorney..."

"Now, hear me out," Anderson said and held up a hand to silence her. "I didn't bring this up with your attorney because I didn't want your decision to be influenced by anything she might say."

"It will be influenced anyway since whatever you have to say I shall repeat to her."

Anderson acted as if he was carefully weighing her words, but Carson had the feeling it was all an act. Did this man even know how to be sincere?

"That's your choice, but please hear what I have to say first."

Carson settled back in her chair and quietly indicated for him to continue. She had to admit to a certain amount of curiosity. Just the fact that Anderson was here without his aide told her he was up to something that might not be completely above board.

“The government has been trying for years to crack Russian and Chinese encryption. From what we have been able to determine, you would be our best choice to lead a research team to do exactly that. Of course, you would have to undergo a rigorous screening process, but after that you would be given top level clearance and all of the resources you need would be at your disposal.”

Carson felt as though she had just fallen into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. She wasn't a government spy, and all of this sounded completely outrageous, not to mention unexpected.

“And my own company?”

“You would continue to operate Delphi Technologies. After all, we want to keep up appearances. The contract we have now would remain in effect, at least on paper, but you understand that certain...currency would be required from your end.”

“In other words I would have to give up the digital signature so that government scientists could crack my cipher?”

Anderson smiled, but there was little warmth in the expression. “In so many words.”

Carson felt anger rise across her like a tide. Her hands were shaking when she slipped the notepad into her pocket and laid a bill on the table for her lunch. Slowly she stood up and gritted her teeth in an effort not to throttle the man who sat so smugly across from her.

“And to show my good faith, I would have to relinquish the patent first,” Carson guessed.

“Of course.”

“Colonel Anderson, we already have a contract, and I don't intend to alter the nature of our affiliation. In truth, the more I get to know you, the more I am sorry to have signed the initial deal at all. Had I known all of this in advance I would not have developed the Tierney Cipher. Nor do I believe that you really are here to offer me a job as a government spy. I intend to let my attorney know everything you have said to me and I am sure she will be in touch.”

Calmly Anderson reached into a pocket and then passed a card across the table to her. “This is where you can reach me should you change your mind, and regardless what your attorney has to say, we do have a contract. You don't have to like me, Ms. Tierney, but the contract is unbreakable.”

When Carson didn't take the card, Anderson slipped it into the front pocket of her overcoat. He also stood and dropped a few coins onto the table for his coffee and then turned to leave. Suddenly Carson wondered something and simply had to ask.

“Anderson, is there really a research team to crack Russian and Chinese cryptology?”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “Maybe. But one thing you should know. If Ray Eldridge were still your attorney, you would have given up the digital signature.” From his answer, Carson knew that any such team was a figment of his imagination. Anderson had been trying, once again, to trick her into giving up the key to her algorithm. The remark concerning Eldridge was troublesome as well. What was Anderson trying to imply? Did he mean that the elder attorney was not as good as Erin was or that he was on the government’s side? Carson had never been comfortable with Ray, but she didn’t think he was underhanded.

She had a lot to speak with Erin about, and no matter what happened, she would not meet with Anderson again. The man could not be trusted.

As much as Carson wanted to talk with Erin now it just wasn’t possible. Erin had other clients and Carson could hardly barge in every time a thought or problem occurred. Reluctant to intrude on Erin’s work schedule, Carson decided to find out how her own people were doing.

Carson didn’t see any signs of the C.D.O.T. workers as she walked quickly back to the Holcomb Building and decided they must have quit for the day. She could hardly blame them since the temperature seemed to have dropped five degrees while she ate lunch. She wasn’t aware of another storm coming in but the drop in temperature could have more to do with the time of day than an impending blow.

Few people were around during the pre-New Year’s week and Carson didn’t need to wait for an elevator to the tenth floor. She stood patiently while the lift carried her to Delphi Technologies’ floor and thought again of Erin. The woman was absolutely amazing. In her mind, Carson saw the brown eyes flash as Erin dealt with the annoying Colonel Anderson and a shudder traveled through her. She inhaled quietly in surprise when she realized that she was aroused just thinking of Erin’s forcefulness, and studiously ignored the other two people on the elevator.

Honestly, Carson thought. One night of lovemaking and I can’t keep my mind off her!

Of course, it was more than that. What Carson felt for Erin involved a lot more than just the physical, even if she couldn’t deny the explosive heat of desire every time the woman invaded her thoughts. Erin was everything Carson could have dreamed of. She was forceful, protective, commanding and shrewd as an attorney. Yet, as a lover, Erin was tender, passionate and consummately skilled. Just one look into those expressive eyes, or a crooked smile at just the right time could make Carson melt.

Throughout the day, she found herself reliving memories of last night in Erin’s arms and counting the minutes until they were alone together again.

The elevator doors opened onto the tenth floor and roused Carson from her pleasant thoughts. She stepped out into the hall just in time to see Joyce disappear into the lab, and wondered if they

were finished with the security equipment. She walked toward the lab. Joyce chose that same moment to walk back out of the lab and the women almost ran smack into one another.

“Whoa,” Joyce said and put her hands up automatically to grasp Carson’s shoulders. She released her an instant later. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“I just wanted to see if you were finished with the security systems yet. Do you need any help?”

“Nah, we’re done. It didn’t take long. Besides, if you had helped us we’d still be working on it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Stung by the implied insult, Carson wondered if Joyce suddenly thought her incompetent.

“It’s just that you’re so detail oriented that every line would have to be checked individually, and every string of code gone through with a fine tooth comb before you plugged it in.”

“And you didn’t do that?”

“What for? Plug it in and if it works we’re happy.”

Carson opened her mouth to respond, hesitated and then closed it again. There was no way that Joyce was serious. She might not spend as much time as Carson would in checking the systems, but she was no fool. Perfectly accustomed to Joyce’s casual approach by now, Carson simply accepted that her best friend had taken care of the assignment and was satisfied with the results.

“Okay then. How about you get the guys together? I’d prefer to have our quarterly meeting in our new boardroom.”

“Wow, we actually have a boardroom now. It’s hard to believe after all this time.”

For six years, the two ran Delphi Technologies out of a warehouse in a bad neighborhood. The sight of the homeless and the prostitutes looking for their next trick was a common occurrence during the daily trek to work, and suddenly all of that had changed. Carson was just as awed as Joyce was with their new environment, and couldn’t help the proud smirk that lifted the corners of her mouth.

“Pretty great, isn’t it?”

“You bet it is, boss.” Joyce cleared the sudden lump out of her throat. “I’ll get the guys.”

Joyce never called her boss unless deeply affected by something. It was such a rarity, that whenever she did, Carson felt wonderful that she could make her friend so happy. Joyce was

truly the sister she never had, but in a strange way she was even closer than family. At least, she was closer than any family Carson ever knew.

Carson went by her office to drop off her overcoat. There weren't any messages from Erin so she assumed she was still busy. No doubt Erin skipped lunch altogether. Carson wondered how she could get Erin to leave work early. Maybe she would invite her to dinner. With thoughts of laughing dark brown eyes dancing in her head, Carson grabbed a cup of coffee and headed off to the conference room.

She was the last to arrive and took a moment to look around the table at her intimate circle of friends. Joyce took the seat next to where Carson would be while Jeremy sat next to her and Mike sat on the other side of Carson's place. All of them looked a little smug and she understood completely since she felt that way, too. They had reason to be proud. All of them had been with her since the beginning, and gone through hard times to get an unknown, untried company on its feet from the ground floor.

Not only were they all exceptional computer specialists, but they also each possessed a unique talent that allowed Delphi Technologies to operate with a minimum of employees. Joyce Collins was an idea woman, and often came up with what Carson considered cockamamie schemes. Invariably Carson would give in to the woman, and the idea would become a feather in Delphi's cap. Joyce could see the finished product, while Carson was the one to concentrate on the process.

Jeremy Parks served as Delphi's financial director, and was as gifted with money management and investment banking as he was security protocols. Jeremy was also a good friend, although he was little on the shy side and didn't usually have a lot to say unless called on.

Then there was Mike. Dear Michael Ackerman, gifted mathematician and lover of all things Albert Einstein. Logic was Mike's friend, and if the problem couldn't be solved through scientific reasoning then it didn't need to be solved at all. He wasn't much for great leaps of intuition, but once a goal was set, he would stop at nothing to achieve it.

One thing all of them shared was unwavering trust in their employer. Carson thought that, in a way, each one of them might be a little demented as well. Who in their right mind would have trusted a twenty-year-old girl with no practical experience and back her completely to get her company off the ground? The fact that Delphi Technologies was listed in the top five computer software research companies in the United States was a testament to their devotion and willingness to work impossibly long hours.

"Okay," Carson said as she settled down in her chair. She needed to blink back some moisture in her eyes before she finally continued. "Jeremy, why don't you get us started?"

Jeremy nodded his head and his shoulder length brown hair slipped forward into his face. He had a stack of printed quarterly financial reports that he passed around, and Carson saw there were at least a dozen more that he kept in reserve, at least one of which he would be required to file with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

With one hand, he absently pushed the errant strands of hair away before he spoke. “This is a quarterly meeting, but since it’s the end of the year I thought I might as well get that report out of the way as well. Figures show Delphi Technologies not only to be in the black, but we show a twelve percent profit above last year’s earnings.”

“Is that even with us moving into Holcomb,” Joyce asked playfully.

Everyone laughed but there was an edge of seriousness to the question. For years, Carson strenuously argued that they simply couldn’t afford to move to a better location. It was only after the company grew to the point where there was no other choice that she had agreed to relocate.

“I told you we should have done this sooner,” Jeremy said by way of answer. “The move into the Holcomb Building didn’t affect our earnings one iota. From the rumors I’m hearing our standing as a company to be reckoned with has gone up as a direct result of the move.”

Jeremy’s gossip circle usually included investors from Wall Street, and was considered reliable.

“How is that possible,” Carson wondered aloud. “Why would a simple move affect our reputation?”

“It’s a matter of appearance,” Mike answered, speaking for the first time. “It’s a good thing to worry about Delphi’s reputation for quality software and research development, but image is just as important. The way people see it, the better the business location, the better the product. It doesn’t make sense, but that’s the way it is.”

“Yeah, look at Microsoft. Do you think that if they operated out of a rundown shack, they would do half the amount of successful work they do,” Joyce argued. “Even if they put out the same exact product, no one would want to deal with them.”

Carson nodded her head slowly. She could accept that. It was the same reason she drove a Lexus instead of an old Chevy pickup with mismatched tires. Appearance was everything.

“Anything else,” she redirected to Jeremy.

Jeremy shifted in his seat and looked suddenly uncomfortable. Clearly, there was something else, but Carson didn’t know if she wanted to hear it.

“Um, it’s this business with the Tierney Cipher?”

“The cipher? I don’t really see what that has to do with our finances.”

“Well, it doesn’t,” Jeremy said. “At least not directly.”

“But?”

“I’m concerned that Delphi is getting into government contracting. While it is a huge step for the company as a whole and puts us on solid ground reputation-wise, I’m worried that we’ll forget research and development for civilian use and move into strictly military applications.”

“That is not going to happen. I fully intend that the contract we signed with Colonel Anderson today will be the last time Delphi Technologies agrees to anything related to the military.”

“Boy, you can say that again,” Joyce interjected. Just the thought of Anderson made Joyce look as though she had sucked on a lemon. “What a pri....”

“Moving on. Mike, anything from the software side of the house?”

The four quickly moved through the items on the agenda until there was only one piece of business left. Carson had saved this bit of information for last because she wanted to surprise her crew and the import of her announcement had far-reaching implications for the company.

“Yesterday I got a phone call from Lord Weatherby....”

“Lord?” Joyce said incredulously.

“From Britain. He’s getting ready to start a commodities business and wants us to design the software for his company. I think it’s a great idea and I’ve already tentatively accepted the job. This would be a difficult assignment for us since whatever we come up with has to be developed to fit the British monetary system and government regulatory system.”

“I like it,” Michael voted. “It’s a great way to start getting us known in other countries.”

Jeremy sat back in his chair and let out a huge breath while he stared at the table. For a moment he sat there in what Carson thought was stunned silence.

“Jeremy? Is something wrong?”

“I have to admit I feel a little overwhelmed. That’s great news. After everything that’s happened in the past few months, and now this, I can’t help but feel that it’s just the tip of the iceberg. I think Delphi Technologies is going to break wide open, and from an accounting point of view I think we’re at the point where we need a general counsel.”

“You really think we’re at that point?”

“Yeah. The way we’re going, Delphi is going to grow quickly. We may outgrow Holcomb sooner than you think, and we’re going to need someone to watch our corporate backsides, someone who can dedicate themselves solely to our interests.”

Immediate thoughts of Erin crowded Carson’s head. There was no one Carson would rather have as committed counsel than Erin Donovan. But would Erin agree to such a thing? Erin

would be required to give up her partnership in her firm to make such a move, and Carson just didn't know if she was ready for that. Erin loved being a corporate attorney. Would she be happy if she moved away from where she was now?

Joyce seemed to read her mind. "I was really impressed with Ms. Donovan and how she handled Colonel Anderson. She seems a lot more defensive of her client's interests than that Eldridge guy. Do you think she might be interested in the job?"

"I don't know," Carson said softly.

"I know, I know. You have to think about it."

They talked at great length about the success of Delphi during the past year, and discussed various ideas on what kind of computer game to develop. Joyce wanted it to be a simple seek and find game with different levels of difficulty, but Carson thought something a little more challenging would be better. In the end, Jeremy and Mike agreed with Carson. They thought something along the lines of a haunted mansion with different puzzles to unlock each room would be better. Joyce finally relented in the name of democracy and with nothing decided, suggested it was time to end the meeting.

"On that note, why don't we wrap up here? It's almost four and I think we should celebrate."

Everyone grinned and looked at Joyce after she made the statement, but it fell to Carson to ask the question.

"Exactly what did you have in mind?"

"Oh, nothing much. How about some drinks and snacks at the pub you like so much? First round is on me."

Carson nodded in full agreement. Delphi had done very well for itself and looked as though it really was going to launch to the top of the Fortune 500 list. They had earned the right to celebrate.

"All right. I'll meet you guys at Grace O'Malley's in twenty minutes."

Excited and with a lot to think about, Carson needed a few minutes to herself. She sat at her desk and simply looked around her new office with details from the meeting fresh in her mind. When she started Delphi, she never dreamed it would rise to this level. Her company was on firm footing, and there was an incredible new love in her life. Could things possibly get any better?

Carson reached out and grabbed the phone. She punched in the number to Erin's private line and listened as the call was answered on the second ring.

"Erin Donovan,"

“Hi,” she said softly. “It’s me. Can you talk?”

“I have a few minutes. Why do you sound so happy, actually euphoric is probably a better word.”

“Oh, I just came from the quarterly meeting with my people.”

“I take it you had a good meeting?”

Carson hesitated briefly before she confirmed it. “You could say that. I’d like to fill you in on the details, but we’re all knocking off a little early to celebrate. Any chance you could join us at Grace O’Malley’s?”

“I would love to, but I still have a lot to get finished here. I’ve got a seminar coming up at the end of January for the bar association, and I haven’t even started writing my presentation yet.”

“You’re going to be one of the speakers?”

Carson was truly impressed that Erin was asked to speak at the seminar, but when she responded, she didn’t sound as though it was that big a deal.

“Unfortunately, yes. The board tagged me this year to update everyone on the changes in corporate tax law, but it sounds like you got some great news and I want to hear all about it. Maybe later?”

Erin sounded like she sincerely regretted the necessity to work, and Carson was also disappointed. Realistically, Carson knew Erin had other concerns besides what was happening with Delphi Technologies, and decided not to press the issue. It was probably better this way since Carson still needed to think on how to approach Erin on the general counsel issue.

“Definitely. I’ll call you when I get home if it’s not too late.”

“I look forward to it.”

Carson was going to hang up when Erin spoke again in a softer voice. “Carson? I really am sorry that I can’t join you.”

“Me too. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye.”

Carson dreamily hung up the phone and with Erin’s gravelly tones in her head, picked up her overcoat and purse. She made sure all the lights were out, and then carefully set the alarm in the lab since she was the last one out. She felt as though she could conquer the world as she stepped onto the lift that would take her to the parking garage. Just before the doors closed, she heard Mike shout down the hall to hold the elevator.

“I thought I was the last one here,” she said as he hustled onto the lift.

“I got a last minute call. Joyce and Jeremy already left. She suggested I could get a ride with you.”

Mike usually took public transportation and Carson assumed that’s what he intended to do when they were ready to leave the pub. Although she didn’t like to drink very much, she knew her three friends were likely to overindulge a bit, and thought it a good idea that he wouldn’t be behind the wheel.

“No problem.”

A few minutes later, they drove out from under the parking garage and pulled smoothly into traffic. Carson drove slowly on the slippery streets and kept her eyes on the road, but Mike didn’t seem overly concerned about her abilities.

“Do you really think Delphi is about to take off like Jeremy suggests?”

“I don’t know,” Carson answered truthfully. “In a way it’s a little scary. Of course, I always hoped the company would do well, but I never expected it to happen so quickly. It’s as though I can see us progressing in leaps and bounds, but at the same time I’m in denial.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Who would have thought in six years we’d be one of the major companies in the business.”

Carson stopped for a red light, and noticed Mike glance down at the gauges on the Lexus. When the light changed and she drove forward he finally said, “It’s a good thing I decided to ride with you.”

“Why is that?”

Mike looked into her eyes and said dryly, “So that when you run out of gas I can help push.”

“Hey! It’ll make it.”

The needle of the fuel gauge was well below the empty mark and even as Carson looked down, the red light came on. Fortunately, there was a gas station at the end of the block. Twenty minutes later and right on time, they drove into the lot at Grace O’Malley’s.

The celebration lasted for hours. Much laughter, beer, and conversation later, Carson decided it was time to call it a night. The boys distracted her from that decision when they suggested the company might want to diversify by branching off into video games, but Carson didn’t seriously consider the idea. Finally, when Joyce began to tease her about her relationship with Erin, Carson changed the subject by reminding each of them not to be late for work the next day.

She was exhausted when the evening finally ended. She stood on the street and watched Joyce and Jeremy walk down the street toward her car, and hoped that the pair would be all right. At least they didn't have far to drive since both lived within a few blocks of the bar. The public transport bus arrived and Michael stumbled a little as he climbed aboard. Carson waved one final time, and headed for her own vehicle.

Carson drove carefully. The streets were clear at the moment and dry for the first time in weeks, but she had been drinking. She was well aware that even a small amount of alcohol could slow her reaction time if something happened. While she drove, she thought about how exciting things were with her life. The company was really taking off and she'd met someone special. It all was too good to be true.

Twenty minutes later, she made it home safely. Her gate opened obediently and she let out a relieved sigh. It had been a few days since she'd been at the house, and the last time the gate had malfunctioned. Since it was working properly now she assumed the phone call she made to the security company had been productive. Now if only she could call Erin to say goodnight.

Unfortunately, that was impossible. The celebration with her colleagues had gone on much longer than she expected it to, and it was almost one in the morning. Since she couldn't call Erin tonight, she would have to try to make up for it by bringing her a coffee early in the morning.

Comforted by that thought Carson parked in the garage, and went into the house. Immediately surrounded by the familiar sights and scents of her home, she sighed as she let the tension drain from her. It didn't take long for her to shower and fall exhausted into bed.

Chapter Twenty-One

SEAN DONOVAN WALKED briskly toward his room at the Chicago Athletic Club with a spring in his step. An early game of tennis with an old friend was just what he needed to get his blood pumping, but it was the look of consternation on his former partner's face when Sean beat him in straight sets that put him in such a good mood. He was in better shape than ever since the move to Arizona and he thought the dry desert air was the reason why.

Away from the cold Chicago climate, Sean was able to work out on a daily basis, and his asthma hadn't bothered him in years. He was lean, tanned, and fit, and definitely didn't feel his age. On the other hand, Jim Abernathy was overweight and pale, and the three packs of cigarettes he smoked a day certainly didn't help.

With thoughts of a shower and breakfast dancing in his head, Sean slipped the key card from his shorts and into the card reader just as the telephone inside his room rang. He snatched the receiver up just as it rang a second time.

“Hello?”

“Sean? Josh Keyes here.”

“Josh, good to hear from you. Were you able to find anything out?”

Sean had contacted Josh two days ago to discuss Erin’s concerns with the previous Marsters case. He kept busy after that visiting old friends to keep his mind occupied, but now that Josh finally decided to call, he was surprised how eager he was to have some answers.

Keyes hesitated for a moment before he finally replied. “Sean, that was a long time ago and people often say things they don’t mean when emotions are high. I can’t imagine anything worse than losing someone like these people did. Are you sure you want to bring this all up again?”

“You’re right, and I could be barking up the wrong tree. But Erin is my daughter and even if it’s only for my own piece of mind, I need to know.”

“Oh, all right. I don’t know how you get me into these things.”

“Come on, Josh.”

“Fine. You wanted me to check on some person who was sending threatening letters to Marsters and their attorney. There were two people sending love notes to Marsters. One had a sick child and the other’s wife came down with a virulent form of the same type of cancer.”

“Are both the wife and child deceased now?”

“Ah, just the child. Eric Jacobs lost his son six months ago, but there’s no record of the woman’s death.”

“What about the people who sent the letters? Can you tell me about them?”

Josh paused for the moment and Sean could hear papers rustling in the background before he finally answered.

“I mentioned Eric Jacobs. His nine year old boy came down with the illness almost a year after the initial reported cases. He was sick four years when he finally passed away six months ago. Mr. Jacobs was extremely angry when his son got sick and sent several letters to Marsters. Some of the threats he made could curl your hair, but he has no criminal record and by all accounts is a peaceful man who lived through a very traumatic time.”

“And the other guy?”

“Ronald Adams. He worked for the Chicago Department of Transportation until two years ago. He was apparently fired for being late to work all the time, but I can’t say I blame the man. His wife, Mary, needed constant care. Like Jacobs, Ron Adams doesn’t have a criminal record either. Not as much as a speeding ticket.”

“And since there’s no record of his wife’s death Adams would have little reason to set out on a vendetta.”

“You guessed it.”

“Well, it was a shot in the dark anyway,” Sean said. He was disappointed that Josh hadn’t found anything, but was realistic enough to know that anyone could be trying to get even with Marsters for any number of reasons. “Thanks for looking into it for me.”

“Anytime. And Sean, we should get together before you leave town.”

“I’d love to. I’ll give you a call.”

Sean ended the call and sat thinking quietly. Erin had been so sure the old case was tied to what was happening now, but neither of the men Keyes mentioned seemed like a viable suspect. By all accounts, both men were law abiding, and peaceful. It was difficult to think they could make the leap to serial killer because of the death of a family member. Even though rage and loss could be motivating factors, it was still a stretch.

Yet he trusted Erin’s instincts just as he trusted his own. That instinct was what made him a great attorney and he believed Erin had inherited that gift from him. For that reason, he wouldn’t drop this until he knew for sure.

There was one way to find out. If the people tied to the old wrongful death case were innocent, he would find out and allow Erin to let it go. This really was something the police should be looking into, but Sean had given his word that he would help Erin find out information on the old case. He would stick with this until he satisfied that promise.

Sean grabbed the phone again and dialed a number from memory. It was fifteen years ago since he last called that number, and he hoped it didn’t belong to a pizza parlor now. Someone answered the call before the first ring stopped.

“Thomas Detective Agency.”

Sean recognized the voice immediately and his heart leapt. “Jim! This is Sean Donovan.”

“Sean, you old dog! How long has it been?”

“Oh, only about fifteen years!” Sean grinned.

“Really? Wow. It’s been a while, but it didn’t feel like that long ago.”

Jim Thomas sounded disconcerted, and Sean wondered if he suddenly faced his own mortality. Sean understood completely. After his wife died, he realized how quickly the years could slip away. Thoughts of Rita threatened to close his throat with sorrow so he rushed ahead into the silence.

“Yeah, it’s been a while, but that’s not why I called.”

“I thought you retired. Are you telling me you have a case for me?”

“Don’t sound so surprised, and yes, I did retire. I do have a case for you, but it’s really for my daughter Erin.”

“Oh yeah, I heard Erin is a senior partner now. You must be very proud of her.”

Sean wondered if he was getting old when the tears threatened again. He cleared his throat and replied, “You have no idea. So, do you have the time to take on another case?”

“You’re in luck. I just finished a case so I have some time open. Do you need me to handle this one myself?”

“I’d prefer it,” Sean admitted. “At least until we know if there’s anything to go on.”

“You want to explain that one?”

Sean took quite some time detailing all of the events in the Holcomb Building, and led up to Erin’s idea that it was all somehow tied into the old case. He explained the two suspects, one a grieving father and one a man who was going to lose his wife.

“Both men are clean,” he finally said, “but if I had to pick one I’d go with Eric Jacobs. I can’t imagine anything more painful than the loss of a child. It’s just human nature to feel that a parent shouldn’t outlive their offspring. On top of that, it looks as though Mary Adams might still be alive.”

“And until she is dead there’s little incentive for her husband to go on a rampage. I get it. But, Sean, I don’t have to tell you how careful I’ll have to be here. These guys have been through a lot, and if the press were to get wind of any kind of investigation there could be hell to pay.”

“True. It’s very likely they’re both innocent, and I don’t want to bring them any more grief. You’ll have to be discreet, but I need you to get back to me as soon as you find out anything.”

“I will, but I have to warn you that my fees have gone up a little in fifteen years. It’s five hundred a day plus expenses.”

“Done,” Sean said. “Let me know what you find out.”

Sean sat back on the bed and considered whether he had covered all the bases. There was one more call he needed to make before he could enjoy a leisurely breakfast. He needed to speak to Erin to find out if either of the men was familiar to her.

Erin's secretary answered the phone. She said Erin was in a meeting, but she would be happy to take a message. Just then, he heard Erin's voice in the background.

"Oh, hold on a moment please."

Sean waited a few moments before Erin breathlessly picked up the extension.

"Dad?"

"I'm here, honey."

"Is everything all right?"

"Of course. I just spoke with Josh Keyes and wanted to let you know what he found out. Do you have a minute?"

"Actually, I have twenty," Erin teased. "After that I have to meet with a client."

"Great. He found out there were two guys that sent letters to Marsters, but I've got to tell you they don't sound very promising."

Sean quickly outlined what he learned from Josh. He deliberately downplayed the details so he wouldn't get Erin's hopes up that they had a lead. If he learned differently from Thomas, they would go from there.

"Does either of them sound familiar to you?"

"No, I can't say they do," Erin answered slowly. "I don't suppose you know what they look like."

Sean realized that a description of the right man would be all Erin needed. Details of their lives would be meaningless compared to that. He should have asked Josh for their profile, but he hadn't thought of it.

"No, sorry."

"It's all right. Frankly, I doubt it's one of them anyway. The man who came after us would have to have a criminal record. No one could kill so easily without having some kind of violent background. It sounds like that idea was a bust."

"I agree. It is a long shot." Sean chose not to mention the private investigator.

Erin easily changed the subject, not eager to dwell on the feeling of disappointment. “How much longer are you staying in town?”

“A few more days. I want to get home before the New Year so I’ll probably leave on Saturday.”

Intrigued at the way her father phrased the sentence Erin suddenly had the feeling he might be dating someone special. Since her mother passed away, Sean Donovan hadn’t dated, and Erin secretly worried that he would spend the rest of his life alone. At the same time, she had worried that she might feel jealous of someone taking her mother’s place. To her surprise, Erin didn’t feel that way at all. Instead, she was delighted by the prospect that he might be involved.

“Oh,” Erin teased. “Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“Well...I really didn’t want to say anything. We haven’t been seeing each other very long, and it’s too early to know how serious it is.”

“Still, you should have told me. Now I understand your sudden interest in my love life. What’s her name?”

“Cheryl.”

“That’s it? Just Cheryl?” Erin was amused by the deliberate lack of detail, but wasn’t going to let him off that easily. “Fine, I’ll let it go for now. But I insist on taking you to dinner before you leave, and I’ll want to know all about Cheryl then.”

“Let me guess...The RL?”

“Of course.”

“Will Carson be joining us?”

Impressed with how he turned the subject back to her, Erin chuckled. “I don’t think so. I think I’d like to spend some time alone with my father before he goes back to Arizona.”

The truth was, Erin still experienced a twinge of jealousy when she thought of Carson. An image of Joyce’s obviously expensive watch flashed in her mind again, and she didn’t want to spend a lot of time with Carson until she managed to work through her feelings. Carson was new to romance, and Erin didn’t want to come across as the jealous lover.

“How about Friday night,” Sean asked.

“Friday’s great. Six-thirty at the RL?”

“Sounds good. And speaking of food, I’m starving. I need to get a shower before I head down to breakfast.”

“I’ll let you go then. Thanks for letting me know what you found out. I’m a little disappointed with the results, but strangely, I feel a little relieved as well.”

“I know, but it’s a matter for the police, Erin. You’ll just have to trust them to do their jobs.”

“Right. Well, my client will be here in a few minutes so I should go.”

“All right. I’ll see you Friday. Bye, honey.”

“Bye, Dad.”

ERIN SAT FOR a few minutes thinking about what her father had learned. It wasn’t much, but it had pretty much shot her theories out of the water. Now it really was up to the police to find the suspect, and unfortunately, she didn’t have much faith in them. She knew enough to know that if a case went unsolved for more than forty-eight hours, the trail usually went cold. It had been considerably longer than that, and with no other ideas to go on, there wasn’t much else she could do. At least Carson would be happy. She never wanted Erin messing around in this in the first place.

A knock sounded on the door and Erin automatically invited the person in. She expected Amy, and was surprised when Carson walked in. Inside Erin could feel her personal walls of protection slam into place and fought not to pull away from the woman she was starting to love. Another image of Joyce and Carson laughing together flashed through her mind and she inhaled slowly against the stab of pain in her midsection.

“Hi,” Carson smiled from where she peeked around the door.

“Hi yourself. Come on in.”

Carson held a large cup with the Starbucks logo in one hand and placed it in front of Erin.

“I thought you’d be due for a pick-me-up.”

“Bless you,” Erin said and reached for the cup. She took a careful sip before she looked at her visitor. Carson had settled into the visitor’s chair, and looked a little ragged around the edges.

“Long night?”

Carson smiled tiredly. “You have no idea. Those three kept me out until almost two. I’m lucky I didn’t fall asleep driving home. Fortunately, I didn’t have that much to drink or I might not have been so lucky.”

Erin remembered Carson told her something about good news, and wondered just what had prompted such a late night out. "I take it you had a lot to celebrate?"

"Yes. You remember Jeremy? Well, he's in charge of Delphi's finances. He reported that we've had a twelve percent increase in profit since last year, and apparently our move into Holcomb has raised the company's reputation considerably in only a few weeks."

"That's great news," Erin said, sincerely impressed. "The next thing you know *Business Weekly* will be knocking on your door."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

CARSON HATED SOUNDING so unsure, but Erin's opinion of the company was important to her. That was especially true considering Carson's idea to bring Erin into the fold, so to speak. Would Erin agree to become their exclusive legal representative? There was always the question of legal ethics. Technically Ray Eldridge still represented Delphi Technologies, and it was only assigned temporarily to Erin during his leave of absence. No doubt, Erin would feel she should decline the offer even if she was tempted to take it. If that happened, Carson would have to make sure Erin knew that no matter what, she would not continue to work with Ray.

She had hoped to broach the subject this morning, but Erin seemed a little out of sorts. Carson didn't think now was the time, and instead, brought up another topic from last night.

"Joyce thinks Delphi should develop a game...a computer game."

"Really? I think that's a great idea."

For the first time since she entered the room Carson thought Erin was genuinely enthusiastic, and began to describe the idea.

"Of course I won't sign off on anything cheesy," Carson said. "It has to be a real mindbender, but not something so hard that people just throw their hands up at it and walk away."

"That's true, but I'm sure you'll figure it out. I still think it's a good idea. Games are very popular, and a good source of income, not to mention the publicity they generate for the company."

"I think so, too," Carson said. "At any rate I just wanted to drop off the coffee. I'll let you get back to work."

Erin glanced quickly at her watch. “That’s probably a good idea. I have to meet a client in a few minutes.”

Carson walked to the door with Erin only a step behind her. “Will I see you tonight,” she asked at the door.

“No, I have to work on that speech I told you about. Time has caught up with me faster than I thought it would, and I need to get serious about it. Oh, while I’m thinking of it, I’m having dinner with my father Friday night. He’s leaving on Saturday and I’d like to spend some time with him before he goes.”

“I understand,” Carson said lightly. “What about Saturday? Are you still coming over for the New Year’s weekend?”

Erin hesitated slightly, and Carson was sure she was going to make up another excuse. Something was going on that Erin wasn’t telling her, but Carson wasn’t sure she should push the issue. When Erin finally did respond she surprised Carson.

“I’d love to. In fact, if it’s not too late on Friday when I finish with my father, I’ll drive over. Would that be all right?”

“Perfect,” Carson said with a smile.

Carson took the elevator back to her floor not really paying attention to the people around her. Quietly she tried to work through the confused jumble of her emotions after seeing Erin. Carson expected to start the day with a quiet moment with her lover. Instead, it was as though Erin really hadn’t wanted to see her. Erin felt distant, and uninterested. Even when Carson asked if Erin was still coming for the weekend, she thought that Erin didn’t really want to. She had been happily surprised when Erin said yes.

Carson considered that she was just being sensitive. Chances were that Erin was just busy and had a lot on her mind. All of the undercurrents of a relationship were still new to her, and she had no frame of reference.

The doors opened onto the tenth floor and Carson decided to let it go. It was very possible that she was just imagining things and that Erin really wasn’t trying to avoid her. If Erin had a speech to write and

wanted to spend time alone with her father, she certainly didn’t need to ask Carson’s permission.

Still, all that day she waited for Erin to call. Her phone remained stubbornly silent, and at the end of a long but productive day, Carson went home with no contact from her lover.

RONALD LINDEN ADAMS drove his battered old sedan into the driveway and switched off the engine. Then he sat with his head in his hands and inhaled through the pain that threatened to split his skull. For almost ten minutes he sat motionless, except for the deep even breaths he took. When he first closed his eyes, it seemed as though his body swayed, but it was only his imagination. Nausea gripped him briefly and he clenched his teeth as starbursts of light went off behind his closed eyes.

Eventually the nausea passed and so did the bright lights. Ron pinched the bridge of his nose to try to alleviate the headache somewhat before he finally opened his eyes. The pain was still there but not as intense. It was expected since he hadn't really slept in three days, but he had been busy. There was still a lot of work to do, but now, rest was more important. If he didn't take the time to rest now, the migraine would worsen and he would start to make mistakes.

This close to reaching his objective, Ron couldn't afford to get sloppy. There were only two more tasks to accomplish before he could join Mary, and they were crucial. First, he had to eliminate the two women who could identify him, and then he would finally destroy the original chemical research plant that had caused Mary's illness in the first place.

Mary, he thought, and a smile graced his cracked lips. He suddenly needed to see her and climbed unsteadily out of the sedan. He hitched his trousers up and realized that he had lost a lot of weight recently, and needed to take better care of himself. Mary wouldn't like it if he got sick.

Ron wasn't delusional. He knew Mary was gone. It just made things a little easier to think of her as still alive. He also knew she wouldn't be happy with the actions he had taken lately, but that was something they would have to discuss when they were together again. For now, his mission was the only thing that kept him going.

Carrying out that mission kept Ron away for days at a time. Each time he left he made sure Mary was in her favorite chair, and each time he returned anticipation would gladden his heart because Mary would always be there waiting for him by the window. Even if she didn't speak when he came home, Ron could still feel the connection that had always been between them.

Maybe after a nap he would wash her hair. Mary had such blonde hair and he loved the scent of her strawberry shampoo.

Out of habit, Ron checked the mailbox before he went in the house. Overdue bills and junk mail was crammed into the small box so tightly the mail carrier finally gave up and left the door open. When he finally had the mailbox cleaned out, Ron glanced across the street.

Old Mrs. Fisher was bundled up against the cold and stood in her front yard waiting for her poodle to do its business. She waved at Ron in a friendly gesture. He smiled and waved back, but

he wasn't fooled by her behavior. The old busybody had always been terrified of him, and the only reason she looked at him now was to see what he was doing.

Suddenly angry he slammed the lid on the mailbox and turned to go up the walk. Three steps up and then across the front porch and Ron was inside. As soon as he flung open the front door, the putrid stench of death assaulted him.

The odor was made even worse by the heat blasting from the furnace, and Ron frowned. He couldn't have the neighbors getting suspicious because of the smell, but he wasn't overly concerned. With the cold weather outside, all of the windows were closed, and there wasn't any reason for anyone to be snooping around. Still, he would have to bathe Mary before he took his nap.

Ron couldn't say why he hadn't buried Mary yet. It just didn't feel right. He'd always thought they should be buried together, and nothing had happened to change his mind. Sometimes he thought after all of this was done, he would lie down beside Mary on the bed and call her brother just before he did something so that he would join her. David would know what to do.

He just couldn't decide how he would do it. Poison?

That was the best answer because it wouldn't disfigure him, and he had heard it was painless.

Ron walked into the bedroom and found Mary just as he had left her. The throw had fallen from her knees and he reached down to tuck it back in place.

Squatted beside her, Ron looked up and smiled. "Hello, darling. You look beautiful."

Mary's eyes were sunken back and glazed while trapped bodily gasses gave her a bloated appearance, but he meant every word. He gently cupped her face before he rose up to kiss her cheek.

"You're cold sitting here. I think a warm bath is just the thing. I'll be back in a few minutes."

While he ran Mary's bath, Ron thought about his next objective, to take care of the executives. The first one, the Tierney woman, had it coming. Even face to face with him outside the Holcomb Building, she acted as if she didn't recognize him. He wore the orange jumpsuit with his face covered as a test, and she had failed bitterly. The gasp of fear when their eyes first met gave her away, and he knew he would have to kill her even if he didn't really want to.

At first that was the only reason he finally decided to kill her, but then he saw whom she met for lunch and his regret turned to conviction.

Ron recognized Anderson right away. The man had been there from the beginning, speaking up for Marsters and insisting that the company had followed all mandatory safety protocols. Anderson said that if people got cancer it was an act of God, and hardly anything to blame the

company for. Anderson was arrogant, self-assured, uncaring of the suffering families, and a willing pawn for the war machine that condoned biochemical weapons regardless of the fall-out.

When he sat down at Tierney's table to have lunch with her, it was clear they were involved. Ron left as soon as Anderson sat down, but he saw all he needed to.

He was still regretful about the lady attorney because she was nice to Mary, but things seemed to have changed since then. Maybe the blonde woman persuaded her that money was more important than people's lives. Whatever the reason for her switching sides, Donovan had left him without a choice.

This coming weekend was New Years, and he had followed Tierney around enough to know that she always left the city at the end of the week. Even if she stayed in the city at The Bernardin during the week, which wasn't often, she always went home on the weekend. Her house was secluded, and a snowstorm was predicted to start early Saturday morning. No one would be out, and there would be little threat of being interrupted. He would do it then.

As for the attorney, Ron thought it would be easy to get into her building. He would wear the orange jumpsuit and say he was checking for a gas leak in the penthouse towers.

In his mind, he could hear the conversation with the concierge. No sir, I'm afraid we can't tell where the leak is coming from. We just know it's on the twenty-sixth floor. Yes, sir. I'd be happy to take a passkey and check it myself. I'm sure you're very busy, and you don't need to send anyone with me.

The gas company worked twenty-four hours a day, especially in winter, and everyone trusted utility workers. They would give him the key, and thank him for his time.

Ron grinned and shut off the water. He would have four days to rest and make sure everything was in place. He wouldn't leave anything to chance, and there would be no mistakes. Until then he would rest, research The Bernardin blueprints, and be with Mary.

Chapter Chapter Twenty-Two

AT SEVEN THIRTY Thursday evening, private investigator Jim Thomas smothered a huge yawn behind his hand as he sat in a nondescript gray sedan outside the Jacobs home. For almost twenty-four hours he had followed Eric Jacobs around and found absolutely nothing out of the

ordinary. He had watched Jacobs every day since Tuesday and was relieved during the night shift by one of his assistants, but he was back early every morning to take control.

Jim got his first impression Tuesday night when Jacobs arrived home from work. He got out of a neatly polished low cost SUV in a three-pieced pinstriped suit. His hair was slicked back and neatly barbered and nothing about him screamed ‘killer’ to the private investigator. Grief had left lines around the thirty-six year old man’s eyes, but when his wife met him at the door, a sincere smile curled his lips.

Jacobs kissed his wife hello and swept a small girl up into his arms. The child squealed in delight and latched onto her father’s neck before the trio stepped inside their modest home.

Since then nothing worth mentioning had occurred. Jacobs left for work Wednesday morning and Jim followed him. He went straight to work, to lunch with his colleagues, and then straight home afterward. The routine was the same as the day before, and the lights were out in the Jacobs home by ten.

Now he was convinced that Jacobs was just another regular guy who had lived through a horrific event and was trying to get on with his life. Chances were that both of the people Sean Donovan wanted checked out were a waste of time, but it was an easy job and Jim didn’t mind the extra cash.

He made a sudden decision and pulled out his cell phone. He pressed the redial button and waited for a second before the call was picked up on the other end.

“Willie? Hey, it’s me, Jim. This Jacobs thing is a bust.”

“I figured as much,” Willie Pruitt answered. “It was a real snoozefest the past few nights, too. What do you want to do?”

“Are you up for taking over? I think I’ll head home and get a few hours’ sleep before I head out to the Adams place. Maybe something a little more interesting will be happening there.”

“At night?”

“Well, you know what they say, wolves prowl at night. If one of these guys is a psycho he’d be running around at night, not during the day when people could spot him.”

“Okay,” Willie said but sounded unconvinced. “I can be there in twenty minutes. Will that work?”

“Great, oh, and bring lots of coffee. You’re going to need it.”

After a nap and something to eat, Jim pulled up in front of the Adams house. The neighborhood was quiet and the ground frozen hard just like the rest of Chicago. The house was a small bungalow style with a long front porch and at first glance was unremarkable in all

respects. The inside of the house was completely dark but Jim didn't think that was unusual since it was almost midnight.

Jim noticed a beat up looking Chevy Lumina parked in the driveway and figured Adams and his wife were already in bed. He got out of his car and was careful not to slam the door. He didn't want anyone to see what he was going to do and the sound of a car door this late in such a quiet neighborhood might attract unwanted attention.

Jim cast a quick look around before he crossed the street and disappeared into the shadows around the Adams house. Ice crunched softly underfoot and he shivered at the contrast of the chilly night air compared to the heated car interior. Jim tucked his chin into the collar of his jacket and was just glad he had thought to wear gloves.

He made a brief, careful circuit of the house, but didn't notice anything unusual. It was too dark to see inside any windows and with his luck, if he tried it, he'd be caught. Just as he reached the back of the house and decided to head back to the car he noticed something. Jim was surprised to see how close the bay was to the back of the house. You couldn't throw a stone to it, but the water was clearly visible in the moonlight. Jim estimated that it was less than a mile away, and he could see the twin smokestacks from the Marsters Research Plant.

Taken alone that didn't really mean anything, and the Jacobs house wasn't far from here. Both of the families had contended that Marsters was responsible for their loved ones' illnesses, and seeing the plant this close up, Jim understood how they could come to that conclusion. He shrugged and fought off another shiver as he walked back to the car. Right now, all he could think about was getting warm.

The P.I. spent the rest of the night sipping lukewarm coffee, and dozing lightly in the front seat of the car. When the sun began to try to break through the clouds, he roused himself and climbed back out of the car. With the sun up, he would be able to see more, and the trees were fairly thick around the side of the house. He would be able to find good concealment and wait to see if anything interesting happened in the next few hours.

After watching Jacobs for two days, he seriously doubted it. The most exciting thing he would see would be Ron Adams getting ready for work. Or would he? Didn't Sean say Adams had been fired?

Oh, well. Surely the man wouldn't sleep all day, and Jim could get an idea if this was another dead end. If he got that impression at all, he would call the whole thing off and let Sean know it was a waste of time.

If it was summer, Jim might have stayed with the case just for the money, but there was really no reason to freeze his butt off if he didn't have to.

He found a good spot between a few trees where he could easily see into a window. The shades were open, and Jim guessed they weren't worried anyone would try to peek in. It was just another sign that they had nothing to hide, as far as he was concerned.

Around nine-thirty Jim finally noticed movement inside the house. He sat up and peered intently inside, the cold momentarily forgotten.

A huge man with dark bushy hair and a thick beard came into view. Jim assumed this was Ronald Adams and shivered at the sight of him. Adams was shirtless and his arms looked like they were chiseled from stone. Although he was a little thick in the waist, it was obvious that most of him was pure muscle. Adams turned his back and bent. At first, Jim was confused, but then Adams straightened and turned back toward the window.

Jim swallowed thickly when he saw that Adams held his wife tenderly in his arms. He carefully placed the woman in a chair by the window and adjusted a blanket over her knees. Then he bent down and whispered in her ear before he placed a lingering kiss on one cheek. Even through the condensation on the glass, Jim saw the tenderness in the gesture and the unmitigated love on the big man's face.

Touched by the sentimentality displayed by the big oaf, Jim decided he'd been right the first time. Both of these men were victims and just trying to get on with their lives in the best way they could. For Eric Jacobs, the tragedy had already happened and all he had left was the recovery, if that was possible. Ron Adams still lived with the tragedy occurring right in front of him. His days probably were spent talking to his wife, and attending her every need. Until she finally passed away, he couldn't even begin the grieving process.

Jim decided he would wait a few more hours. If all he saw was a man patiently attending to an invalid wife, he would pack it in. He was surprised a few minutes later when he glimpsed Adams again in the window.

The man was now dressed in a heavy black overcoat. A scarf wrapped around his neck and he had on thick leather gloves. He definitely looked as though he was going out.

Probably just needs a few supplies from the grocery store, Jim thought. But I'd still better follow. Don't want Sean to think I didn't do a thorough job.

Jim stayed low as he moved back to the car. He would have been conspicuous if the sun had been shining brightly, but the day was overcast like most winter days in Chicago. For once, he was happy for the gray cast that helped conceal him as he made it back to the car just in time. He had just pulled the door closed when Adams stepped onto the front. Thomas hunkered down in the car and watched Adams glance around before he left the porch and got into the Chevy.

The car headed for the interstate with Jim trailing behind. Traffic was thick at this time of the morning so Jim wasn't worried about Adams seeing him. He was still careful to stay in another lane, or when the traffic slowed sufficiently that he might lose his quarry, he would follow directly behind the Lumina for a short time. Then the unthinkable happened.

An eighteen-wheeler cut right in front of Jim, almost smashing into the front fender of his car to change lanes. Jim had to slam on his breaks to avoid a collision with the monster truck, and by the time he was sorted out, Adams was nowhere in sight.

Jim stayed on the interstate craning his neck and changing lanes, but Adams was gone. He must have taken an exit, but which one? Jim looked for the battered sedan for another ten minutes before the twenty-mile an hour traffic forced him to give up. Cursing, he took an exit and turned around.

Jim stopped for a bag of donuts and coffee before he drove back and parked in a different location on the same side of the street as the Adams house. He figured his quarry wouldn't be gone for very long with an invalid wife home alone, and he would wait for Adams to return.

Two hours later, he didn't know what to think. Where was Adams going? He didn't work, and Sean said no one else cared for his wife so why would he leave her alone for so long? It didn't make sense unless Adams had a new job they didn't know about and a neighbor was supposed to look in on Mary.

Impatient he decided to check in with Willie. Jim dialed the number while he kept an eye on the street.

"Pruitt."

"Hey Willie, what's going on?"

Across the thin connection, Jim could hear his assistant sigh before he answered. "More of the same...nothing. He left for work this morning and now I'm sitting outside his office. How much longer are we going to follow this guy?"

Willie was right. Jacobs was clean and there was no sense following him around, but he didn't want to give up so quickly.

"We'll give it another twenty-four hours. Have Marty relieve you at six, and you can take over again in the morning. If we don't have anything by the time he leaves work tomorrow we'll pack it in."

"All right," Willie complained. "At least the end is in sight."

"What's the matter," Jim teased, "You'd rather be following cheating wives around snapping dirty pictures for their husbands?"

"It beats this. At least then something would be happening."

"I hear you. It's pretty boring on this end, too. Call me if anything develops."

"You got it, boss."

Another hour passed with no sign of Adams. Finally, too curious to wait any longer, Jim got out of the car and feigned stretching his legs. He looked carefully around at the other houses, but if anyone was at home, he couldn't tell. Most of the window curtains were drawn against the

cold, and no one was out on the street with the exception of a few cars that passed every now and then.

Jim turned and walked down the sidewalk away from the Adams house. He went twenty feet before he stepped off the sidewalk and into the trees. Then he doubled back toward the house. He approached the back of the house obliquely just in case someone besides Mrs. Adams was inside, but he didn't notice any movement. Someone had placed Mrs. Adams in a chair at one of the windows so Jim carefully avoided that side of the house and started peeking in windows on the back.

He was struck immediately by how clean the interior of the house was. Living room, kitchen, and bathroom...everything was immaculate. It was almost too clean. Speaking from experience Jim knew that most men were slobs. He'd expected to see empty pizza boxes and beer cans scattered around, not this almost Spartan environment.

He went all the way around the house, careful to stay low behind the hedges on the front porch to avoid detection, until he was back to the side where the wife sat in front of the window. Jim stepped onto that side of the house without thinking and jerked back when he caught a glimpse of Mary Adams. She sat in the same spot where her husband had placed her, and Jim could have sworn she hadn't moved a muscle. But that was impossible.

Frowning, he glanced down at his watch. Where the hell was Adams? Why would he leave his wife alone for so long? Maybe he missed someone checking on the woman when he'd gone after Adams. Maybe Adams had been involved in a car accident.

At four in the afternoon, it started to get dark and Jim decided that his bladder just couldn't take it anymore. He needed to go to the bathroom and get something to eat, and hoped that Adams would return before he got back. Jim started the car and pulled out onto the lane. A few cars moved slowly back and forth down the street, but none of them was Adams.

After dinner, Jim drove straight back to the house, but Adams still hadn't returned. By seven-thirty, he was growing concerned about Mrs. Adams. Even if the woman had a catheter, she couldn't be comfortable after sitting in the same spot for so long.

Jim Thomas had spent twenty years as a beat cop on the Chicago Police Department before he started his own detective agency. In that time, and since then, he had seen many things that would take the humanity out of a person if they let it, and even lost his marriage because of it. Nevertheless, as street hardened as he was, he still possessed a compassionate heart. He just couldn't leave the Adams woman alone for another minute without making sure she was all right.

This time he didn't care that he slammed the car door. He was trying to announce himself and hopefully not frighten the poor woman any more than she undoubtedly was. After all, in her condition, who wouldn't be scared after being left home alone all day?

Jim stepped as heavily as he could onto the wooden steps of the front porch and even took the time to stomp some of the ice from his shoes. Then he walked across the porch and knocked loudly on the front door. When there was no answer, he knocked again with the same result.

He noticed a doorbell and reached to press it repeatedly. There was still no answer, and he wondered if he should call the authorities.

And tell them what? That I'm staking out someone's house and I don't like it because they haven't been home all day? I don't even know if anything is wrong. Maybe the woman can walk just fine, and I've only seen her when she was sitting in the chair.

Instinct told him that wasn't the case, but Jim couldn't call anyone based on a hunch. That same instinct made him reach down and grasp the doorknob. He almost gasped in surprised when the door swung open without any resistance. Adams hadn't even locked the door.

Something is wrong.

Jim stepped carefully into the house and pushed the door closed. The first thing he noticed was an odd smell. It was sour and caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand on end, but it wasn't overpowering. The smell reminded him of milk that had spoiled. He ignored the odor for the moment and moved quietly through the house without any idea why he didn't simply walk into Mrs. Adams room and announce himself.

From room to room nothing stirred, and there was no sight of Mrs. Adams. Common sense told him the room where she sat was on his right, but something deep in his subconscious made him check out the other rooms first.

There were no lights on inside, and Jim had only the moonlight to navigate by. The layout of the house was unfamiliar to him, so he had to move carefully, but he got the impression the majority of the house was open and inviting.

There was only one closed door, and it stood out as an oddity in Jim's mind because of the sheer inconsistency. It was the last doorway before the room where he knew he would find Mary Adams, and Jim was curious what he would find.

The room was almost pitch-black without any windows. Jim knew he was going to have to turn a light on this time and was thankful for the small flashlight he always carried in his overcoat. He would have to close the door first, though so that no light would escape to draw attention to his presence.

Something hard touched the edge of his shoe as he turned to close the door, and Jim was careful not to step on anything. He turned back around after he shut the door and fished the light out of his pocket. As soon as he snapped it on, he froze in shock.

The room turned out to be a very large closet that had been converted into a nightmarish workroom. There was space to maneuver in the small area, but a desk had been wedged in

toward the back, liberally covered in newspaper clippings about Marsters. Jim stepped farther into the walk-in closet to see some wire clippings, small gray bricks of what had to be C-4 and a backpack were against one wall, and building blueprints were thrown carelessly to one side.

Just that brief glance was enough to let Jim know they had found the killer, but when he looked closer at the desktop his blood ran cold. More recent articles of the Holcomb incident sat on top. Erin Donovan and another woman Jim didn't know featured in the article and someone had circled their pictures before both their faces were exed out with a back marker.

The intent was clear, and Jim forgot Mary Adams as he fumbled for his cell phone. He stepped backward and tripped on the hard object that his shoe had touched earlier. Tired and disoriented in the unfamiliar space Jim lost his balance and fell. If the room had been smaller he probably would have bounced off the wall, but it was large enough that when he fell there was nothing to catch him. His head struck the corner of a protruding shelf as he went down, and just before he lost consciousness, he saw what it was he had tripped on.

It was a massive climbing axe covered in dried blood and human hair.

CARSON CONCENTRATED ON the roadway as she steered through traffic on the way home. It was only quarter to five, but it was already dark and it was also rush hour traffic. Headlights reflected off cars in front of them from close range since the relative speed was around forty miles per hour. She didn't mind though. The week was done and she had a few hours to prepare for a long weekend with Erin.

Right now Erin would be leaving work to get ready for dinner with her father. Carson smiled and thought how easy Erin's relationship was with her father. On one hand, it was something she envied, but on the other, she was happy for Erin. Thoughts of Erin inevitably led back to her own family, and the smile faded.

Carson's stomach twisted at half-remembered images of her own father. Derek Tierney was a tall man with hawkish features, light brown hair, and sunburned skin. Instead of the cologne Erin's father wore, her father put off the perpetual scent of alcohol. It was no secret he blamed her for his wife's death, and he made sure Carson blamed herself.

She had just turned age five when she was left suddenly without a mother or a father.

Carson pushed the unwanted images away, and her thoughts naturally migrated back to Erin. For the first time in her life, she felt as though she had something...someone that really cared for her on an emotional level and not just for what she could do for them. Along with the warm and fuzzy feelings associated with Erin came another unexpected twinge.

There had hardly been any contact with Erin all week long except for a few brief phone calls here and there. Even with the brief contact it was obvious something was bothering Erin. Maybe tonight she would get a chance to find out what the problem was, and it would turn out to be something minor. Carson was just afraid Erin was having second thoughts on being involved with her.

Carson glanced in the rearview mirror and noticed a red sports car right behind her. If she had to slam on her breaks, the driver would slam right into the back of her Lexus. Annoyed Carson tapped on the brakes to remind the driver to back off a little. Instead of merely backing off the driver swung into the other lane and caused several other cars to swerve to avoid him. Horns blared in outrage and Carson shook her head when the young driver roared past her.

Scary, she thought. Some people really had no idea how to drive in heavy traffic.

Carson's cell phone rang and she jumped a little in startled surprise. Only Erin called her on the cell, but she hadn't been expecting to hear from her. She smiled as she reached for the phone and checked the call display.

"Hello?"

"Hi. It's me. I just wanted to hear your voice before I met with my dad."

"I'm glad you did," Carson admitted. "I don't feel we've hardly spoken all week."

"I know. I'm sorry about that, but I really have been busy getting ready for the seminar at the end of January. It's amazing how much work one little speech can be."

"Did you get it finished?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll go through it again in a few days just to make sure, but for the most part it's finished."

"Good."

Carson must have sounded a little too excited because Erin chuckled. "Why? What did you have in mind?"

"I just want to have you to myself all weekend with no distractions. So, are you getting ready to meet your dad?"

"Yeah, in about forty minutes, but I'll pack my bag before I meet Dad so that I can just drive out there when we're finished. Will that be all right?"

Carson's smile turned into a huge grin. "That would be wonderful, but do me a favor? Bring a swimsuit."

“A swimsuit? It’s the middle of winter!”

“Just trust me, will you?”

“Okay,” Erin laughed. “Now I’d better run or I’ll be late.”

“All right. Have fun with your dad.”

“I will.”

Carson started to hang up, but Erin stopped her.

“Carson? I just wanted to say...I miss you.”

Those were the three words Carson had wanted to say all week, but didn’t know if it would sound too juvenile for the sophisticated Erin Donovan. Now that Erin said it first, the words sounded like poetry.

“I miss you, too.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Carson thought dreamily of Erin the rest of the way home until her headlights illuminated the private lane leading up to her home.

She was so distracted by the call from Erin that she still wasn’t really paying attention when she parked in the garage and shut off the engine. Carson bent across the seat to pull her briefcase from the passenger side floorboard, naturally lifting her left leg for balance. When she straightened back up, Carson’s pant leg snagged on the hood release lever. It took a moment to extricate herself from the lever, but then she was free to get ready for her weekend.

After a lengthy shower to rinse away the week and chase away the chill of winter, Carson dressed in jeans and an old sweater before she laid a fire in the fireplace. She would light it after Erin arrived. Then she began to lay the plans for a romantic evening.

Erin had been complaining of the harsh Chicago winters since Carson met her so the hot tub definitely figured in on her plans, along with the fireplace.

She dug through her dresser and came up with a little used bikini. It was a thin wisp of a thing, colored a pale silver blue that she hoped Erin would think complimented her eyes. Carson smiled and laid the bikini across the bed. If everything went as planned, she wouldn’t need any other clothes after they got out of the hot tub. She put a bottle of Erin’s favorite brandy, Remy Martin, on a table beside the hot tub along with two glasses.

Carson wanted everything to be perfect and took one last look around the spa area. She was grateful that the hot tub was in an enclosed room and they wouldn't have to brave the elements, but something was still missing. Candles.

Ten minutes later, she was finally satisfied. Huge, fluffy towels lay next to the brandy along with a couple of terry cloth robes just in case.

Satisfied with her preparations, Carson wandered barefoot into the kitchen. It was just a little after eight and Erin would no doubt be deeply engrossed in conversation with her father as they enjoyed dinner. When her own stomach growled in response, Carson pulled out a chopping board, butcher knife and some vegetables from the refrigerator. However, before she could begin to cut up broccoli, carrots, and celery, the quiet started to get to her.

A little music would be very nice right now, maybe something soothing like jazz. Carson wasn't in the mood to hear voices so decided on an instrumental selection.

She put the knife down on the cabinet and turned to walk into the living room when she heard a thump come from the direction of the garage. For a moment, she thought she imagined the sound, but then she heard it again. It was too early for Erin to arrive, and she didn't have access to the garage anyway.

Carson frowned and walked to the inside garage door. She hesitated for only a second with her hand on the knob before she threw the door open. The garage lights automatically came on when the door opened to chase away any lingering shadows, but there was nothing immediately out of place. She couldn't have imagined the noise, could she? Certainly not twice, Carson thought and stepped into the massive garage to take a closer look.

The roll-up doors and the window on the far side of the room were both firmly in place, and locked. Carson looked out the window for an explanation for the noise she had heard. A tree sat next to the house and one of the branches had snapped. When the branch fell, it must have hit the side of the garage. It wasn't the first broken branch she had seen during a high wind and from the way the trees were swaying it wouldn't be the last.

She was still barefoot and the concrete was cold, but at least the garage was heated. Still, it was cooler than it should be an hour after the doors were closed and Carson thought she needed to check the thermostat later. Right now, it wasn't really important. After all, it was just a garage and she had other things on her mind.

That was when she noticed the hood of the Lexus was ajar.

Carson remembered snagging her pant leg on the hood release earlier, and snorted at her paranoid behavior. She must have barely tripped the lever earlier and the hood had only just now come open.

Live alone for too long and look what happens, she thought. You get paranoid.

Carson closed the hood and went back into the house to finish her snack.

ACROSS TOWN, ERIN was spending quality time with her father, but her thoughts were definitely on a young woman waiting on her with the promise of a romantic weekend ahead.

Erin shivered minutely at the sensual images in her head and almost missed the fact that her father had just asked her a question.

“Sorry, what was that?”

Sean Donovan smiled and looked at his daughter with an indulgent expression. “I asked what your plans were for this weekend.”

“Oh. Carson invited me to spend time with her at her place.”

Suddenly her father looked far more interested and Erin groaned internally. When he got that expression, she could usually count on a skilled interrogation that could leave her sweaty and shaking. At least it had been that way when she was a more adventurous teenager.

“Do I sense some developments?”

“You’re the one who said she was a ‘nice girl’,” Erin reminded him as she tried to deflect the inquisition, but her father knew her better than that. Her evasive answer was all of the confirmation he needed.

“So why didn’t you tell me you were already seeing each other? Don’t you trust me?”

Erin heaved a resigned sigh at the hurt tone he adopted. “Of course I trust you. I also knew you would enjoy the chance to tease me about her.”

“Okay,” Sean said and held up a hand in surrender. “I won’t tease you about Carson if you won’t tease me about Cheryl. Deal?”

“Deal. Oh, and speaking of which, you promised to tell me all about her. Out with it. What does she do? How old is she? Where did you meet her?”

“One question at a time.” Sean laughed then gathered his thoughts for a moment. “I met her about six months ago, but we didn’t really get along at first. I was on the tennis court and here comes this little redhead telling me that my time is finished, and I need to leave. After all, the courts are booked in advance and I was already ten minutes into her scheduled hour.”

“That must have gone over well!”

“You have no idea. I looked at my watch and told her it was more like ten seconds, and that she could show a little patience.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” Erin joked.

Sean smiled and to Erin’s surprise, his ears turned a little red. “The next time I saw her was a week later. I was in the bar at the country club having drinks with some friends.”

“What happened?”

“She walked right to the table, interrupted our conversation, and laid a gift wrapped box in front of me. Then she said, ‘This is so that you won’t be late. Meet me here in two hours and be prepared to treat me to a fantastic dinner.’”

“What was in the box?”

Sean held up his wrist by way of explanation so Erin could see a shiny gold watch.

“Is that all,” Erin asked flabbergasted. “Some bossy woman plunks a watch down in front of you and demands that you take her to dinner, and that’s all it takes?”

“What can I say? I like bossy women.”

Erin and Sean both laughed. It was no secret Erin had inherited her stubborn streak from her mother.

“It turns out she was just as nervous as I was,” Sean finally said. “Dropping that watch on me and making demands was the only way she could get up the nerve to ask me out. She didn’t think I would ask her, so she decided to take matters into her own hands.”

“That’s priceless, but I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, honey, but what about you? Seriously, why didn’t you tell me about Carson? You know, I’m not some backward Neanderthal who thinks love should be reserved for those who follow the status quo.”

Erin shrugged delicately. “Nerves, I guess. I’ve only been seeing Carson since the incident at the Holcomb Building. That was what? Two weeks ago?”

“It’s not about the length of time; it’s about the feeling. How does she make you feel?”

“Confused,” Erin answered immediately. At her father’s look, she tried to answer more fully. “Half the time I’m scared out of my wits like I’m on my first date and afraid to drop soup in my lap. The other half of the time, I’m so excited just to be around her that I think my bones are going to vibrate through my skin. She’s so smart it’s intimidating, yet so sweet and naïve that I want to fold her away in my arms and protect her from the rest of the world.”

“And the sex?”

“Dad!”

Sean laughed. “Well, we’re both adults here. I don’t need details, but how do you feel when you’re with her?”

If he could have taken a snapshot of the dreamy expression on Erin’s face then, he would have. But it was her answer that caused a sting in his eyes and reminded him of Rita.

“Amazing, for lack of a better word. When I’m with Carson the whole world just disappears. Nothing else matters, not work, or anything else. Only Carson. She’s all I can see, all I can breathe.”

Sean cleared his throat and said in a deliberately light tone. “Sounds like love to me.”

“Love? Yes, I suppose that’s what it is. But isn’t it too soon?”

“Only you can answer that. I knew the moment I looked into your mother’s eyes that I loved her. That feeling is a precious gift that too few people ever experience. If you love Carson, then you love her. It’s that simple.”

Erin smiled wryly and reached across the table to clasp her father’s hand. “When did you get to be so wise?”

“Oh, I was born this way. It’s a difficult burden to bear, but someone has to do it.”

His small joke had the effect he wanted and the serious moment drained away as they both laughed.

“Now, tell me, where does this wonder woman live?”

Erin took a sip of her coffee. “Carson called it the old Rockfort place. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t really place it. All I can tell you is it’s one of the older estates north of Rodger’s Park. Apparently, it was pretty rundown when she bought it, and she’s having the whole place renovated.”

Sean whistled appreciatively. “Not Jethro Rockfort, head of the largest oil refining business in the country? I knew he used to live around here, but I couldn’t imagine knowing someone who lived in his former mansion.”

“The inside of the mansion is already finished, and it’s pretty amazing.” Erin grinned at her father’s enthusiasm. “It sits right off Lake Michigan, and has a private lake and boat dock. That part’s still under construction, but she’s offered to take me fishing in the summer.”

“Sounds wonderful and rumor had it that the place was rather secluded. I heard it sits on ten acres and is situated at the furthest part from any of the other estates in the area.”

Sean wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and forced another laugh from his daughter. The bawdy behavior wasn't something Sean was especially inclined to do, but Erin was far too serious sometimes and he enjoyed hearing her laugh.

“Rumor is right,” Erin joked back. “Why do you think we're spending the weekend at her place?”

“Ah, that explains how you can forego the RL for more than one meal.”

“Now Dad, that's not funny. I don't eat here every night.”

“No, just most of them.”

Sean teased Erin for another twenty minutes about her eating habits before he looked regretfully at his watch, and commented how late it was. They settled the bill and he walked Erin to her car. Just before she drove away, he said, “I'm glad you're happy Erin, and I really do like Carson.”

“Thanks, Dad. That means a lot to me. Do you have a ride to the airport tomorrow?”

“I'm fine. Josh Keyes is going to drive me, and we're going to stop for lunch before the flight. He's been badgering me for a visit before I leave.”

“Will you call me when you get home, to let me know you've made it all right?”

“Yes, now will you stop worrying? Carson's going to wonder what happened to you.”

Sean abruptly leaned down through the window and kissed Erin on the cheek.

Finally convinced that her father had everything under control, Erin waved at him and pulled into traffic.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ERIN DROVE TO Carson's house with a mixture of anticipation and nerves that caused a massive uprising of butterflies in her stomach. She thought about the advice her father had given her and the jealousy she had experienced all week that made her deliberately distance herself from Carson. She knew she had no right to be resentful of Carson's friendship with Joyce. She certainly was allowed to have friends, but didn't Carson realize what giving expensive jewelry to someone meant?

From the sound of things, Carson shared a long history with her friend, and Erin worried that it went further than that. Logically she realized that if Carson was going to be involved with Joyce, it would have happened a long time ago, but that didn't make her feel any better. Maybe Carson was uncertain about what she felt. It was possible she had feelings for Erin and Joyce.

Neither Erin nor Carson had ever mentioned any kind of commitment or even spoken of love, even though they were sleeping together. Maybe Carson didn't feel the same way Erin did.

Then she remembered the look in Carson's eyes when they were together and realized she was being unfair. It was clear Carson cared deeply for her, and Erin suddenly wondered if she was making up excuses in her head for why things wouldn't work out between them.

Not for the first time, she reminded herself that Carson wasn't Rose. Carson wasn't experienced in intimate relationships, and would never deliberately toy with Erin. If she said all she shared with Joyce was friendship, then that was it, and if Erin wanted this thing to work out with Carson, she was going to have to trust her. That meant Erin would have to talk with Carson. She would have to let Carson know of her fears and insecurities, and hope they could work through it.

Erin pulled through the open gate into Carson's driveway. The garage was closed, so Erin stopped in front of it and shut off the engine of her car. She grabbed her overnight bag from the seat, and walked toward the front door with doubts and worries still swirling through her head. Then the front door opened and she looked up into Carson's open, smiling face.

The look of tenderness in Carson's blue eyes made all of her insecurities melt away instantly.

If you love her, you love her. Her father's words were all she could think in that moment and she knew it was true. I do love her. I do trust her. And I am the luckiest woman in the world to have found her.

All else forgotten, Erin stepped up and slipped her free hand around Carson's neck. When their lips touched, Erin was jolted by the remembered softness, and reveled in it for an endless amount of time until Carson pulled breathlessly away. Her pale features had a rosy hue, and she smiled as she pulled Erin inside.

"Hi," Carson said simply and closed the door behind them.

Erin dropped her bag on the floor and slid her other arm around Carson's neck. "Hi yourself. You look wonderful."

Carson stepped back with a perplexed look on her face. "It's just an old sweater."

Erin didn't bother to correct Carson's assumption that she was commenting on her clothing when she glanced down to notice the bare feet. "It looks nice on you."

"Thanks."

Carson took Erin's bag and they walked into the living room.

"How was dinner with your dad?"

"It was fun. I found out he's seeing someone and he seems happy."

"He hasn't dated before?"

Carson sounded surprised and Erin understood why. Her father was a good-looking, intelligent man with a lot to offer. It would probably seem a little unusual to most people that he didn't really date.

"Not since my mom passed away."

"How do you feel about that," Carson asked carefully.

"Fine." Erin sat on the sofa and rubbed her arms to relieve the chill from the weather. "I could see how someone would be a little uncomfortable to know that their parent was dating, but I don't feel that way. I'm glad he has someone."

Carson noticed how Erin shivered and offered to get her some coffee. "I figured you'd want some and I made a fresh pot about ten minutes ago."

"That sounds lovely. Do you need some help?"

"With coffee?" Carson looked amused. "I can manage, but if you want to go with me that would be okay."

Erin smiled back and followed Carson into the kitchen. She leaned one hip against the counter while Carson poured the hot liquid and handed her the cup. Erin took a small sip, and thought about how she had been acting all week. It was time to come clean with Carson and clear the air a little.

"Carson, there's something I have to tell you."

From the way her face tightened, Erin knew Carson misunderstood her intent. Carson thought Erin was about to call things to a halt. Immediately, she reached out and put a hand on Carson's arm. "It's not that. I have a confession to make, that's all."

Carson let out a relieved breath. "I'm glad you brought it up. I got the feeling all week that something was going on. It's nice to know I wasn't imagining things."

"Let's sit down first."

Carson frowned but walked back to the living room. Erin sat beside her and put her cup on the table. Then she turned toward Carson and took both her hands. She stared down at their clasped hands for a moment to organize her thoughts before she began.

"I've been having problems...with Joyce."

Whatever Carson had expected her to say this clearly wasn't it. Carson blinked in surprise, opened her mouth, closed it again, and settled on looking confused.

"It's the watch you gave her for Christmas."

"What about it?"

"Carson, don't you think it's a little strange that you would give a friend, even a good friend, an expensive piece of jewelry like that?"

"No."

Erin tried again. "Most of the time when someone gives another person something like that it means something."

"It does mean something. Joyce is my friend."

"Carson, something like that usually implies more than friendship. It means you are involved intimately with them, or at least want to be."

"It does?"

From the baffled look on her face, Erin knew she had completely misjudged things. Apparently, all the watch meant to Carson was a gift for a good friend and nothing more.

Suddenly the lights went on with Carson and her eyes widened in shock. "You were jealous of the watch?"

Erin chuckled self-consciously, and shrugged. "I guess so."

Erin had difficulty looking Carson in the eye now. It was like she was the one who was inexperienced with relationships, and was embarrassed that she had leapt to conclusions. Nevertheless, Carson didn't let her get away with it. She gently cupped Erin's chin and urged her to look up.

“Erin, it’s just a watch. You’re right that it means more than friendship, but it’s not what you think. Joyce is all the family I have known since I was five years old. Even though she isn’t a blood relative, she is closer than any sister I could have. My own father didn’t want me after my mother died, but Joyce has been there for me since I met her, no matter what. If an expensive piece of jewelry makes her happy then she will have it.”

It was the second time Carson had said her father didn’t want her, but this time Erin realized how much more Joyce’s friendship would mean to Carson for that reason.

“I was being insecure,” Erin admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. If I haven’t made it clear how much...you mean to me, then I am the one who needs to apologize.”

Carson leaned down and gently brushed her lips against Erin’s. When she pulled away, Erin could only look up at her with shining eyes. “How could he not want you? You are so wonderful.”

Erin was surprised when Carson suddenly flushed and pulled away. Carson looked down at her tightly clasped hands. “He had a reason. I’m not as perfect as you think. But I don’t want to talk about him.” She looked back up. “While we are making confessions there is something I have to ask you.”

“All right.”

Erin was curious about Carson’s reaction and made a mental not to ask again later, but she allowed the change of conversation for the moment.

“I told you how well Delphi is doing and about the idea for developing a game.”

“Yes?”

Carson cleared her throat nervously. “We believe, that is my team and I, believe it is time we hired a dedicated attorney for the company.”

“I thought you already had that. Isn’t that what I am?”

“No.” Carson shook her head. “At the moment, you’re filling in for Mr. Eldridge. When he comes back Delphi will be represented by him again.”

“True.”

“We don’t want that. Let me finish,” Carson said when Erin would have interrupted.

“Before you say anything I want you to know that even when Mr. Eldridge comes back I don’t want him representing my company. It’s nothing personal. I’m sure he’s a fine attorney. I just don’t think he’s right for Delphi.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Erin thought she had an idea where this was going and thoughts of impropriety were already dancing around in her mind.

“We want you to represent Delphi...exclusively.”

Erin was shocked by the unexpected offer. She knew Carson didn’t care for Ray’s representation, but never expected this. Right away, she knew if she accepted the offer there would be potential problems. The first was Ray. He would be furious, and rightly so. Carson was initially his client and there could be ethical problems if Erin took charge. Of course, Ray’s hurt feelings wouldn’t affect her job since she would no longer be a partner of Eldridge, Donovan, and White if she accepted.

Then there was the problem of her current clients. What about them? Who would represent them? What about her relationship with Carson? Would it be a conflict of interest?

At least it would solve one problem, Erin thought. If someone did find out about her relationship with Carson, it wouldn’t matter, and she didn’t like having to hide how she felt about Carson. Overall, it was a lot to take in all at once.

“There would be a lot of problems if I did that.”

“Is that a yes?”

Carson looked so excited and hopeful that Erin couldn’t help smiling back at her, but she had to answer honestly. “No. It means I’ll think about it. Now, I believe you said something about a bathing suit.

Want to tell me why I brought a bathing suit in the middle of winter?”

“Ah!”

Carson stood abruptly and held out her hand. Erin took the offered hand and stood when Carson tugged gently. “Remember how cold you were only a short time ago?”

“Yes?”

“Well, I thought a dip in the spa would be just thing to warm you up.”

“You did, did you?”

“Yes. You do remember where the hot tub is?”

“How could I forget that huge tub?”

Erin remembered the whirlwind tour Carson had given her the first time she visited. She envisioned the hot tub Carson had thoughtfully arranged to have on the inside of the house rather than the deck, like most people would have, and suddenly couldn't wait to get into the hot water.

“Five minutes,” she asked excitedly.

“Five minutes.” Carson leaned down and playfully kissed Erin on the nose.

They parted company at the bedroom doorways. Erin used the guestroom she had previously occupied to change into her suit before she left to meet Carson at the hot tub. When she arrived, it was just in time to see Carson lower herself into the bubbly water. Full curves filled out the cups of the blue bikini and Erin suddenly didn't know how to breathe. Her heart thudded painfully against her chest before it settled into a normal, albeit slightly faster, rhythm.

Erin swallowed against a dry throat and stepped barefoot up to the edge of the spa. Her own suit was a modest black one-piece that she thought couldn't even compare to what Carson wore. She couldn't help but stare at the vision in front of her.

Candles burned all around the spa but Carson had extinguished the overhead lights. Only the lights from the hallway backlit the room enough to define the liquor bottle and two glasses that sat on a nearby table. Erin's blood overheated without ever stepping a foot into the hot tub, and she considered that spontaneous combustion was a very real possibility.

“Are you going to come in or would you rather watch,” Carson asked in a smoky voice that sent tingles down Erin's spine.

“Oh, I'm definitely coming in.”

Erin slid into the water barely stifling a gasp as the sudden heat enveloped her. Even still, she only had eyes for Carson.

Carson's eyes darkened in mutual desire as Erin loomed above her. Long arms came up to grasp Erin's hips and then their limbs were sliding together. Erin reached up and slid her fingers into Carson's hair, her fingers tangling in the silken strands. Slowly she pulled Carson's face toward her until she could brush their lips together, the overwhelming feelings that rushed through her making the kiss almost hesitant.

Erin gasped as she felt the fullness of Carson's soft lips. She groaned and closed her eyes, and pressed in a little more until Carson's lips parted under hers. Her tongue eased inside and Carson stroked against it with her own. Carson's arms were around her waist, holding Erin tight against her amidst the dance of the bubbling hot water, which served only to inflame Erin further.

She pulled away gasping for breath and looked down at Carson's flushed features.

"Suddenly a dip in the hot tub isn't really what I want."

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

Carson's voice was light and teasing, but Erin decided she wanted Carson to know the truth...how she truly felt. "No. I want to make love to you."

She saw the knowledge register in Carson's eyes, heard it in her voice when she gasped, "Erin!"

Erin pulled away and Carson followed. They got out of the hot tub and simultaneously grabbed for towels to absorb the majority of the water flowing down their bodies, but their destination was paramount in both their minds.

Carson started blowing out candles when a loud boom of thunder sounded overhead. Erin was startled for a moment when the lights went out.

"Looks as though we've lost power," Carson said softly.

Erin looked up into Carson's face in the warm glow of moonlight. "That's all right. We won't need the lights."

Carson turned toward her bedroom with Erin close behind her. Towels and wet bathing suits fell negligently to the floor next to the bed, but Erin stopped Carson from closing the small distance between them. "Wait, I want to look at you."

Small droplets of water still clung to Carson's skin and outlined her lean frame. One small pearl clung to a coral colored nipple before it dropped and rolled down her flat stomach. Six feet of perfection stood displayed before Erin, a curious mix of timeless womanhood and shy innocence, and she was humbled by the vision.

"You're so beautiful," Erin breathed.

Carson didn't answer, but she smiled and pulled the covers back on the bed. She lay down and held them back for Erin much as she had the first time Erin spent the night. Erin gladly climbed onto the mattress and up next to Carson. She gasped at the dual sensation of warm, feminine flesh pressed against her front and cold toes against her feet. Then she dipped her head down and captured Carson's lips with her own. It began as a tender exploration, but quickly changed to a passionate embrace.

Carson put her arms around Erin and began to caress up and down her back. Erin trailed one hand down Carson's neck, to her shoulder, and then down to one voluptuous breast. She gently circled the tender skin, stopping just short of the nipple for long agonizing moments before she finally took the hardened flesh between her fingers.

Carson gasped and cried out into Erin's mouth. Erin pulled back and tweaked the nipple gently. "You feel so good," she groaned. Carson only gasped and began to rock her hips against Erin.

Erin bent her head and licked the swollen nipple before she finally took it into her mouth. Then she started to suck, gently. She tortured Carson by alternating between both breasts until she was fairly crying out in frustrated need. Then she kissed her way back up to Carson's mouth, gently kissing the corner of the lips before Carson managed to seize her lips in a kiss.

Suddenly Erin couldn't take any more. She had to touch Carson.

She slid her hand away from Carson's breast and down her stomach. "Spread your legs, darling."

When Carson whimpered and immediately parted her legs, Erin gently slid her middle finger into her. Hot flesh grasped her tightly, and Erin groaned. "Oh, Carson!"

She began to stroke in and out, first slowly, then more firmly as Carson responded to her, thrusting against her. Erin bent her head to suck at a taut nipple, pulling it between her teeth, flicking it with her tongue. Carson's movements became more insistent and Erin thrust harder, quicker, until Carson was crying out as warm walls began to tighten convulsively, almost painfully around her finger.

Even after the spasms subsided, Carson's body was tense, quivering. Erin took that as an invitation and slid down to take her lover in her mouth. She licked insistently against the hardened ridge of flesh even as she began to thrust inside again. Carson came again almost immediately. The sounds Carson made coupled with her taste were finally too much for Erin. She cried out as her body surrendered to its own release.

When it was done, they both collapsed against the mattress panting for breath. When Erin finally found the strength, she crawled back up the length of Carson's body until she could be held in strong arms. But if Carson thought Erin was finished with confessions for the night, she was wrong.

Erin snuggled against Carson and placed a small kiss on the shell of her ear. "I love you," she whispered. "You don't have to say anything. I just wanted you to know."

Carson pulled back to look into Erin's eyes, but when she opened her mouth to speak Erin laid a finger across her lips. "Shh. Go to sleep." She kissed Carson gently and then snuggled into her shoulder.

Carson's strong arms tightened around Erin, but she was quiet. Erin's declaration had surprised her, but also elated her. She wanted to tell Erin that she returned her love, but clearly, she didn't expect to hear the words. Maybe it was too soon for Erin to hear it, or she would feel Carson was only saying it because she thought she should and if that was the case Carson was willing to be silent for now.

Content now that she knew Erin returned her feelings, Carson decided to sleep for now. Later she would make sure Erin understood that there was nothing to fear. Carson did love her in return. Tucked happily into Erin's arms Carson fell asleep very quickly.

JIM THOMAS OPENED his eyes and then promptly slammed them closed against a blinding headache. He was momentarily confused about where he was, but then everything came rushing back. He was on the floor of a psycho killer's closet with a murder weapon directly in front of him. That was enough to make him force his eyes open again. He reached up and touched the large bump on his temple, and his fingers came away sticky.

The goose egg was tender to the touch, but at least the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

The flashlight still shone on the bloody axe, but the beam of light had weakened. He guessed that he had been unconscious long enough for the battery to weaken, and he needed to get out of here before Adams came back.

Jim reached for the light and stood up on shaky legs. The clippings of Erin and another woman came back into view and Jim inherently knew they were in danger. All day he had wondered where Adams went. From the marks drawn through the newspaper photos, he guessed he had the answer.

However, if this man was the killer, and there was no question of that, then Erin and her friend weren't the only ones in trouble. What of Mary Adams? Even if he would never hurt his own wife, Adams had clearly left her untended to for hours. He needed to check on Mrs. Adams and call Sean so that he could warn his daughter.

Jim reached into his coat pocket for the cell phone and used the lighted display to call Sean Donovan. Thank God he had saved the number into memory after the last time he talked to the man since Jim didn't think he could see clearly enough to dial the numbers right now. As he waited for his friend to answer, Jim walked toward the bedroom where Mary Adams still sat in a chair.

He assumed she was still in the chair since he was still alive. That meant Adams hadn't returned yet.

Sean answered sleepily in the middle of the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Sean this is Jim. You've got to call Erin and let her know she's in danger."

Suddenly Donovan was completely awake on the other end of the connection. “What do you mean?”

“I’m in the Adams house. I found a bunch of newspaper clippings about Marsters and a bloody axe. Sean, there are also some clippings with Erin’s picture circled. I think Adams is after her.”

“But why? The wife is still alive!”

Sean was clearly in denial, but now was not the time. “I know. I’m checking on her now.”

Jim opened the door and stepped into the bedroom. The unmistakable smell of death slapped him hard across the face. He was intimately familiar with it because of his former employment and it wasn’t something he was likely to mistake for anything else.

“Oh, God!”

“What is it,” Sean asked frantically.

Jim didn’t answer. He walked up behind Mary Adams and looked over her shoulder. What he saw made him retch and turn away.

“Oh God, man. She’s dead! From the looks of her, I’d say she has been for days, maybe weeks. You’ve got to get hold of Erin. I’ll call the police.”

“Look, Jim, I need your help. Erin is out at the old Rockfort place for the weekend. Do you know where it is?”

“Yeah, I did some work for the old man a long time ago. Why?”

“Tell the police that’s where they need to go, and then stop by here to get me. With this storm I don’t know if I’ll be able to get hold of her on the cell phone.”

“All right. I’m on my way.”

Jim hung up and immediately dialed the police. He ran to the car as he gave the dispatcher the Adams address and told them what he’d found. Later he would worry about breaking and entering charges, but he impressed on them the importance of getting a unit out to where Erin was.

Sean’s club was only ten minutes by expressway, and Jim was already halfway there before he could get the dispatcher to take him seriously.

CARSON OPENED HER eyes and looked around groggily in the darkness. She had been sound asleep when something woke her up. At first, she couldn't figure out what it was, but then heard the sound again.

The sound of a ringing phone seemed to come from a great distance. Carson struggled up through a fog of sleep confused by the incongruous sound. She looked at the phone on the bedside table that remained silent, and wondered where the sound came from. It must be Erin's cell phone since Carson's was still in the car.

Carson gently nudged Erin awake.

"Huh, what is it," Erin asked huskily.

"Your cell is ringing."

"My cell? What time is it?"

Carson looked at the alarm clock while Erin sat up on the edge of the bed. The numerals that normally glowed red were completely dark.

"I don't know. The power's still out, but it must be important. No one would call this late unless it was."

Erin's cell stopped ringing and she thought it must have gone to voicemail. Whoever it was would show on caller I.D., and she would call them back after she put some clothes on.

It had grown cold in the house with the power out for so long, and they were still naked from their earlier lovemaking. Erin was quite content wrapped in the cocoon of shared body heat, but running through the cold house naked wasn't her idea of fun.

"Do you have something I can put on?"

Carson got up. "If you insist, but I was sort of enjoying the view."

"Ha, that'll be some view when I turn into a block of ice."

Carson handed her a pair of sweats and then grabbed another set for herself. "There's no telling how long this storm is going to last, so I guess I'd better start the generator."

"While you're doing that, I'll find out who called."

A crash from downstairs made them freeze and look at one another in sudden fright.

"That was the cup I left on the coffee table," Erin whispered. "Someone's in the house."

Carson's eyes widened even more. "I forgot to set the alarm."

Worse, there was nothing upstairs that they could use as a weapon.

“My phone!”

Erin ran barefoot across the hall to the guestroom with Carson right behind her. Erin had left the cell phone on the nightstand, but it wasn't there anymore. The phone was set to vibrate before it rang and she thought it must have fallen to the floor.

Erin dropped to her hands and knees to look for the phone, but she couldn't find it right off.

“Hurry!”

Erin could hear heavy footsteps downstairs and almost cried out in frustration. Carson's phones were all cordless, and with the power out the cell phone was the only way to get help.

Just then, the cell phone started to vibrate. The light display came on and Erin snatched the phone up from under the edge of the bed. She flipped it open before it could ring at the same time that Carson grabbed her under the arm and pulled her into the hall.

“We have to get in the attic.”

Erin willingly followed Carson, but frantically answered the phone at the same time. “Hello, who is this?”

“Erin, it's Dad. We know who the killer is. It's Ron Adams. We think he's going to come after you and Carson.”

Carson stopped at the front of the hall near the stairs, and reached up to pull on a cord that hooked into the ceiling. Erin never really noticed it before, but when Carson pulled on the string, a trap door dropped into view. There was a fold out ladder attached to the door and Erin realized what Carson had in mind.

“He's already here,” Erin said in a loud, frightened voice.

“We're on our way, the police are on the way! Erin, hide!”

Heavy footsteps pounded on the stairs, and Erin forgot about the phone. Carson grabbed her and pushed her toward the ladder.

“Go!”

Erin stumbled up the ladder as fast as she could go. Carson was close behind her, but the sound of the man running toward them was louder. The whole world narrowed down until all Erin could see was the opening into the attic.

She lunged through the opening and swung around to look back down at Carson.

Carson's head was just below the attic entry when the killer suddenly came into view. Erin gasped at the familiar sight of bushy black hair, dark beard, and beady eyes, but she recognized his rapid deterioration since their last encounter.

His right hand raised high and she saw a glint of moonlight flash off a large, wicked-looking blade.

“Carson, look out!”

Erin saw Carson look over her shoulder and how close Adams was to her. She seemed to realize at the same moment as Erin that there was no time for her to escape into the attic. She turned half way on the ladder and drew her left leg up. Then she kicked out as hard as she could.

Carson's bare foot connected directly with the man's forehead, and Adams lost his balance as he jerked back. He slashed at Carson with the knife before he lost his balance and fell. He fell a few steps down the landing before he managed to grab the railing.

Carson cried out in pain and Erin started to go back through the entryway to help her. She stopped when Carson shouted, “No!” and started back up the steps.

Adams was on the move again just as Carson got through the opening. She jerked on the rope from above to pull the trap door up just before Adams could grab the ladder.

Erin expected the man to pull the cord to open the door again, but Carson was way ahead of him. As soon as the door closed, she pushed a heavy metal bar through two rings mounted on either side of the trap door.

“Help me with this!”

Carson limped to a trunk sitting against the wall. Even in the scant moonlight through a small attic window Erin saw the trail of blood.

“You're hurt!”

“No time. Help me push this over the door.”

Erin helped push the heavy trunk across the entry, but Adams didn't give up simply because they were out of sight. She could hear him moving around downstairs, and then something thudded against the wall.

Carson groaned and slumped against the wall, and Erin was beside her in an instant.

“Here. Sit down.” Erin grasped Carson by the shoulders and helped her sit on the floor. “We're safe right now, he can't get in. That was Dad on the phone. The police are on the way.”

Erin pushed Carson's pants leg out of the way to have a look at the wound. The cloth was already saturated with blood, but she needed to see how badly Carson was hurt. The fact that Carson didn't try to stop her told Erin it was bad.

The noise below them stopped abruptly and captured Erin's attention as completely as a gunshot would have. She turned to look at the attic door when Adams began to pound on it from below.

"He must have dragged something over to stand on," Carson mumbled.

"It doesn't matter. He can't get in."

"He won't give up."

"Good. He doesn't know the police are coming either. They'll get him."

Below them, Adams cursed and pounded on the attic door. For a while, he seemed to be trying to break in by sawing through the wood with his knife. Erin listened to him, but concentrated on checking Carson's leg.

The sharp blade had neatly sliced the calf muscle, but she didn't think any major arteries were severed. Carson's quick thinking when she kicked Adams in the head had probably saved her life. Erin shuddered in horror at the thought, but hid her reaction from Carson.

"I don't think it's too bad, but we need to get the bleeding stopped."

Carson licked dry lips and looked around the room for something they could use. That was when Erin got her first look at the attic. Cobwebs and dust hadn't taken control, like in most attics, and the hardwood floors were polished to a brilliant shine.

"This wasn't on the tour."

Carson smiled at the small joke. "You know me, I like to be prepared. There's a small desk there in the corner. I think I left some shop towels on it."

Erin left her side for only a moment and walked toward the corner Carson indicated. The table was small and would have been easy to miss in the darkness, but it was there. Erin felt around and found a folded cloth. It smelled like furniture polish, but at least it was something. It went quiet again downstairs, but Erin knew Adams would be back.

She returned to Carson's side immediately, but she already looked like she was about to nod off. Surely she couldn't have lost that much blood so quickly.

"Oh no, you don't. Stay awake. Talk to me."

Carson forced her eyes open. "There is something I want to tell you. Just in case we..."

“No! Don’t talk like that. We’re going to be fine.”

“Please, Erin. Let me finish.” Carson gently cupped Erin’s cheek. “I just wanted to tell you that I love you, too. I think I loved you before we met. Didn’t you notice how I used to hang around your firm, and how we were always accidentally bumping into each other?”

“I never really...”

Erin’s eyes widened when she realized what Carson was saying. “You mean you were stalking me?”

When Carson blushed and looked away Erin’s heart melted a little more. All this time she thought of Carson as the self-assured, always in control executive. Carson secretly pining for Erin’s affection didn’t fit that image, but it was so touching that for a moment Erin didn’t know what to say.

“You certainly didn’t sound that way the first time we met in my office,” Erin said gently.

“I was afraid.”

Something suddenly struck the attic door from below with explosive force. Erin heard the wooden door splinter under the onslaught and looked fearfully toward the noise.

“He must have found the sledgehammer in the garage.”

“What are you doing with a sledgehammer?”

The question was reflex. All of Erin’s attention was riveted on the attic door. She didn’t really expect Carson to answer.

“I used it to break through some concrete when I remodeled the basement. The construction workers were positively livid that I wouldn’t get out of the way, but you know me. I had to be in on it to make sure they got everything exactly how I wanted it.”

Carson’s voice trailed away and Erin looked up from the wound. Carson’s eyes were closed, and Erin thought she might be about to lose consciousness.

“Carson.” Erin grasped her chin with thumb and forefinger, and lifted Carson’s face to get her to open her eyes. “I need you to talk to me, honey.”

Thinking furiously for a topic that would keep Carson with her, Erin asked a question. “Your father, you said he blamed you for your mother’s death. What did you mean by that?” It wasn’t a tactful question by any means, but it seemed to do the trick.

Carson sat up a little more and took a deep breath. “When I turned five, I got a soccer ball for my birthday. I was outside playing with it and it...got away from me.”

Carson took another breath. "I didn't think. I just went after it. It rolled into the street."

Erin closed her eyes suddenly, sure where this story was going.

"My mother saw the truck coming. She grabbed me from behind and tossed me onto the curb. The driver couldn't stop in time, and she couldn't get out of the way."

"Oh, Carson. I am so sorry." A part of Erin understood that not only did Carson's father blame her for the accident, but Carson blamed herself, as well. "Honey, it's not your fault. You were five years old."

They were interrupted when the wood suddenly cracked again under Adams' attack, and the large trunk on top shifted to an abrupt downward angle.

"He's coming through!"

Erin grabbed Carson by the shoulders and started to pull her across the floor toward the dark corner. Her phone started to ring again and Erin dove into the pocket of the sweatpants.

"Erin, it's us. We're coming up the driveway," her father said urgently.

"Hurry, Dad! We're in the attic. He's trying to get in!"

Erin's phone went dead and a moment later, she heard the front door being broken in. Men shouted, and the noise below the attic stopped. An instant later Erin heard Adams shout in rage, and then the cannon-like crack of several gunshots at close range.

All was silent for a few stunned seconds until Erin heard her father shouting for her.

"Erin! Erin, honey, where are you?"

"Dad! We're up here, in the attic."

Erin rushed to push the heavy trunk off the attic door, but with the splintered wood, it was hard to move. Carson crawled to her and lent her strength to the effort and they managed to get the trunk out of the way. Carson threw open the bolt and Erin's father rushed through the opening.

A second later her father's arms were wrapped tightly around her. To her surprise, he was shaking and Erin saw tears in his eyes when she looked at his face.

"Are you all right," he asked gruffly.

"I'm all right, but Carson's hurt."

Sean sniffed and let go of his daughter. He turned to Carson and saw the blood-soaked rag tied around her calf.

“I think we need an ambulance,” he shouted downstairs.

“No, I’m all right. I can make it to the hospital on my own.”

“At least let us drive you,” he said.

Carson nodded, and Erin reached to take her hand.

“You saved my life, again. If you hadn’t thought to get us up here, he would have killed us.”

“You don’t have to worry about him anymore,” Sean said. “He tried to stab one of the officers when we got upstairs. They had to shoot him.”

Erin wanted to be sorry for Adams. No one deserved what he had suffered. But Adams hadn’t confined his revenge to Marsters for the death of a loved one. He had deliberately killed innocent people in his quest for vengeance, and targeted Erin and Carson for seemingly no reason. She was just glad the threat was finished.

“Let’s get you to the hospital, love.”

Epilogue

ERIN AND CARSON sat close together on the sofa. Carson’s head lay tucked under Erin’s chin as they relaxed in front of the fireplace.

Carson’s wound turned out to be moderately severe, needing thirty-seven stitches, and she had to stay in the hospital overnight. Chicago’s homicide division had taped off Carson’s and the Adams’ homes so they could conduct a formal investigation. Thus, the women were at Erin’s apartment in The Bernardin until everything was sorted through.

She held Carson tenderly and thought how sad it all was.

Ron Adams had been a victim. He lost everything when his wife died, and she could only imagine how she would have felt if it had been Carson. Erin knew in the same circumstances anyone could snap, and try to take matters into their own hands.

Even though the events of the past few weeks had been terrifying at times, Erin was strangely grateful. If it weren't for everything that happened, she wouldn't be sitting with Carson now. It was far more likely they would still be dancing around one another at work, both of them too afraid to admit to an attraction.

"What are you smiling at," Carson asked.

"How did you know I was smiling?"

"I could feel your face move."

"I was just thinking how lucky I am to be here with you like this."

"Because of Adams?"

"No, not really. I think we would eventually have found our way here. All Adams did was force us together a little sooner than it would have normally happened."

"You think so, huh?"

Erin smiled and kissed the top of Carson's head. "I know so. However, I have to admit, I'm glad Dad hired that private investigator. I don't think the police would have figured out everything in time to save us."

Carson sighed and nodded her head. She snuggled against Erin's chest. "When's your dad leaving?"

"Monday. After everything that happened, he decided to hang around a few more days. He's flying Cheryl in for the New Year."

"The girlfriend?"

"Yes, now enough about them. I have a question for you."

Carson pulled away to look up at Erin. "Yes?"

"How soon did you want me to start as Delphi's attorney?"

Erin grinned at the mixture of surprise, and pleasure on Carson's face.

"Really?"

"Well, I have always wanted to run my own practice. Of course, I would have to have other clients. I can't live solely on what Delphi would pay me, but yes. I think it would be fun."

“That’s wonderful!” Carson reached up for a quick kiss before she pulled back. “Immediately would be great, and of course you would have other clients. You won’t be busy with Delphi all the time.”

Erin laughed. “Sorry. You’ll have to wait until Ray comes back. I owe him that at least. In addition, I still have the seminar at the end of the month. How does mid-February sound?”

“Perfect, and of course you would start at whatever you’re making now. Now, I have a question for you.”

“Oh?”

“I like your apartment, and I like my house so I was wondering...?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think we should live here during the week, and keep my house for the weekends?”

Erin was thrown by the question until she realized what Carson was asking. “Are you asking me to move in with you?”

“It does seem like the next logical step.”

Leave it to Carson to point out the logic of an issue, Erin thought. Looking into the hopeful, loving face of the woman she would give her life to protect, Erin had to agree.

“That sounds like a fabulous idea.”

About the Author

Born in California but raised in Texas, S. Y. joined the United States Marine Corps straight out of high school. After ten years and a lot of travel, she left the military and became a San Diego Deputy Sheriff. Retired from an on the job injury, S. Y. returned to Texas and began writing Star Trek Voyager fan fiction in 2002, but her imagination insisted on creating scenarios outside that genre. Today she still resides in North Texas with her two dogs and the four stray cats that adopted her. S. Y. is an active member of a Homeland Security Emergency Response

Team and attends school full time at Texas A& M University. One day, she hopes to have enough time to have a partner. Her previous fan fiction works, all seventy-two stories, can be found on her website, www.J7astrometrics.com.

Another S.Y. Thompson Book

Under the Midnight Cloak

Lee Grayson is a nature photographer whose father is a senator in New York. She's never felt close to him and her faith in people as a whole is lacking. She moves to the town of Harmon deep in the Adirondack Mountains after inheriting her great aunt's estate, but the local townspeople seem a little...off. Then she meets Ranger Jamison Kessler and learns there's a killer running rampant around the area. Jamison seems to be hiding things from her and Lee is starting to become suspicious.

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.

Other Quest Books You Might Also Enjoy

Hearts, Dead and Alive

by Kate McLachlan

When fifth grade teacher Kimberly Wayland finds a human heart in the middle school dumpster, she has some explaining to do. Like why she was in the dumpster in the first place, and why she didn't tell the police about her gruesome find. But after giving the police a fake alibi, explaining is the last thing Kim wants to do. Instead, with the help of her friends—hot "best friend" Becca, coworker "lesbian wanna-be" Annie, and lawyer "stickler-for-rules" Lucy—Kim sets out to solve the mystery of the missing heart. Along the way, she unexpectedly solves another mystery, the mystery of her own heart.

Seminal Murder

by Mary Vermillion

When Dr. Grace Everest is murdered in her own sperm bank, Mara Gilgannon attempts to find the killer and to protect a beloved ex who is desperately seeking motherhood. So what if Mara herself has 858 reasons (and counting) never to have children? She didn't let that stop her when she and Grace launched a radio series on artificial insemination. And she won't let anyone stop her from completing the series and discovering the truth about her friend's murder. Not the thief who trashes her office. Not her flamboyant housemate who invites a top suspect to crash with them. Not the 15-year-old who wants Mara to help find her donor dad. And especially not conservative Christian activist Reverend Leo Spires. As he heightens his campaign against the radio station where Mara works and the sperm bank where the murder occurred, Mara discovers a new mystery at the bank itself—an unusually low pregnancy rate for lesbians.

A Very Public Eye

by Lori L. Lake

Greed? Hatred? Retaliation? Or a Cover-up

Winter has not yet set in, but young Eddie Bolton will never see another snowfall in his hometown of Duluth, Minnesota. Someone has diabolically killed him in what should have been a secure juvenile detox ward at the Benton Dowling Center. Leona Reese, a state investigator of fraud and licensing infractions, has been out of commission for three weeks due to surgery. On her first day back on the job, she is faced with the aftermath of the 17-year-old's death and is shocked by the brutality. Working with the local police, Leona discovers far too many people with motives for the killing, but precious little evidence. As she uncovers long-buried secrets, someone else is murdered, and now Leona realizes that she, too, is in danger. In the midst of her own emotional turmoil, is Leona strong enough and smart enough to confront and catch a clever and ruthless murderer?

This is Book 2 in The Very Public Eye Mystery Series that began with *Buyer's Remorse*.

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